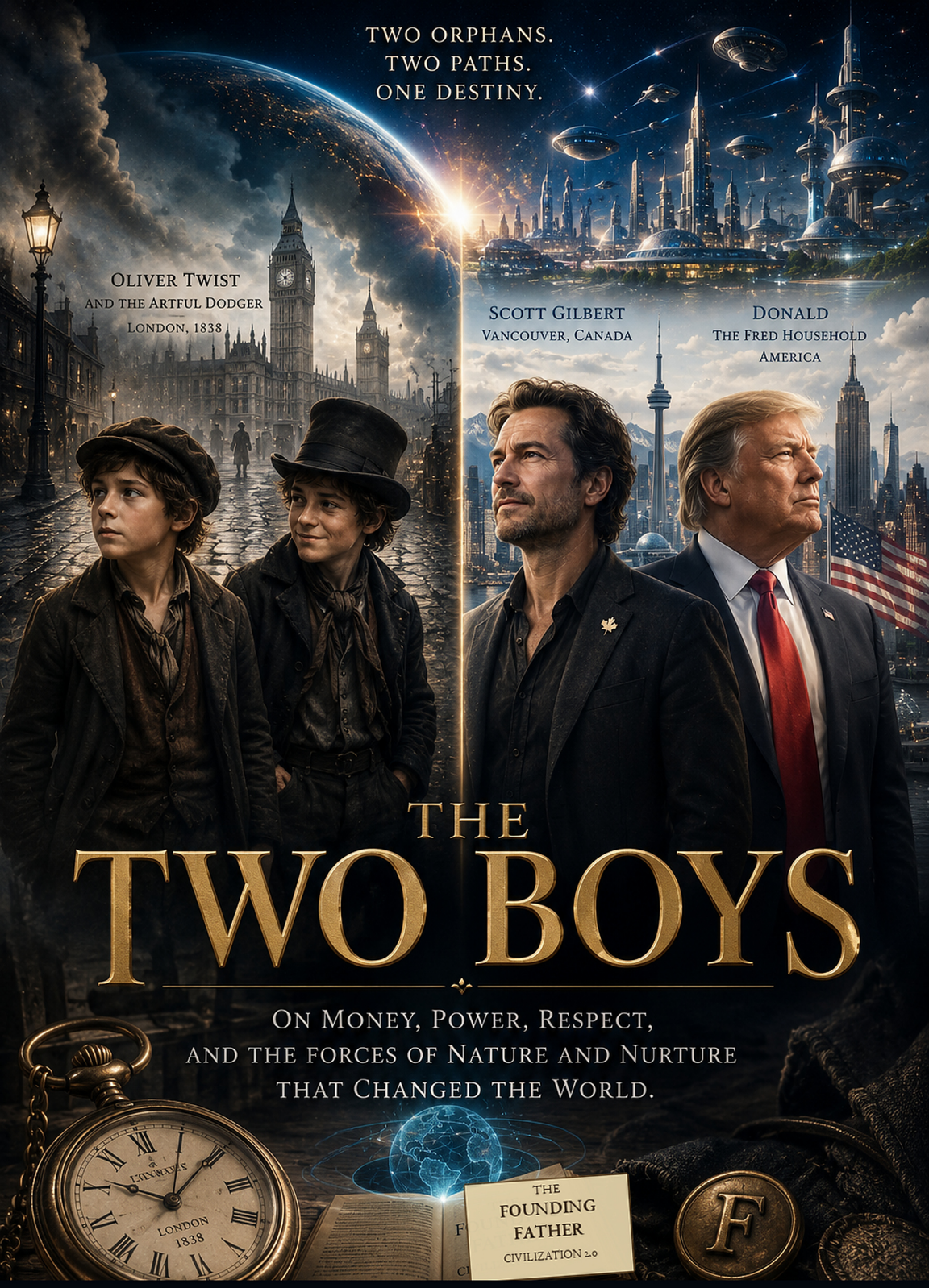

SCOTT GILBERT

AN ALTERNATE-HISTORY NOVELLA

THE TWO BOYS

On Money, Power, Respect, and the Forces of Nature and Nurture That Changed the World

SCOTT GILBERT

An alternate-history novella inspired by Charles Dickens's Oliver Twist

First edition, 2026.

ISBN: Publication proof - identifier to be assigned

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Charles Dickens gave the world two boys who appeared to be opposites. Oliver Twist survived by protecting a conscience that poverty could not purchase. Jack Dawkins, the Artful Dodger, survived by turning observation, speed, humour, and nerve into a profession.

This story asks what might have happened had the boys been given different homes before their characters hardened into destinies. Would Oliver's goodness have survived comfort? Would Dodger's cunning have become enterprise rather than crime? Does society create criminals, or merely reveal them? Does wealth create virtue, or does it amplify whatever is already present?

The pages that follow treat Dickens's account as historical background and then depart openly into alternate history. Dates are intentionally subordinate to the thought experiment. The question is not whether the chronology could have occurred exactly as written. The question is what becomes possible when circumstance changes but character remains.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

The Last Night in London

There are endings that close a door, and endings that merely cause respectable people to stop looking through it.

The published history of Oliver Twist ended with good rooms, clean linen, kind guardians, and the discovery that the child whom so many institutions had treated as refuse possessed a name, a family, and an inheritance. This conclusion was considered satisfactory because the boy was safe, the villains were punished, and those readers who had accompanied him through hunger, beatings, pursuit, theft, murder, and the machinery of parish charity were at last permitted to sleep.

History, however, did not sleep.

On the first quiet evening after the household had accepted that danger was truly past, Oliver sat beside Mr Brownlow's fire with both hands around a bowl of broth. He had been told there was more in the kitchen. He believed it. Still, he held the bowl as carefully as though a careless movement might return him to the long benches of the workhouse, where hunger had been organized with such efficiency that no single official felt responsible for it.

He had once asked, "Please, sir, I want some more."

The request had made him notorious. It was not his appetite that offended the authorities, but the suggestion that the amount allotted by authority might be wrong.

Across London, in a holding cell whose stones retained the cold better than any honest tradesman retained a shilling, Jack Dawkins sat with his boots upon the bench and his hat tipped forward. He had been convicted with style, which was the only property the court had been unable to confiscate. The magistrate called him incorrigible. Jack had thanked him for the compliment.

The Artful Dodger had always understood something Oliver did not: the world respected confidence even when it despised the confident. A hungry boy who begged could be kicked aside. A hungry boy who joked, bowed, and made a gentleman doubt his own pockets might at least command the room for a minute.

Both boys had been poor. Poverty had not made them identical.

Oliver responded to cruelty as though it were evidence of a mistake. He continued, against repeated instruction, to expect human beings to possess better natures than they displayed. Jack responded to cruelty as though it were weather. He did not expect the rain to apologize; he learned where the awnings were and who had left a coat unattended beneath them.

It was tempting to call one boy good and the other bad. Tempting judgments are often the least expensive, which is why institutions purchase them in bulk.

Oliver's goodness had not kept him from danger. Jack's cunning had not kept him from a cell. One had resisted the lessons of the street; the other had mastered them so thoroughly that no adult troubled to ask why a child required such mastery.

Between them stood Fagin.

The old man had offered food where the parish offered rules, companionship where employers offered blows, and instruction where schools offered none. He had also trained children to steal, rewarded deceit, cultivated dependency, and sent boys into danger so that he might remain indoors. He understood incentives with a precision that would have earned him admiration in a counting house. A hungry child received supper after a successful theft. A frightened child received laughter after proving brave. A lonely child received a gang after surrendering his independence.

Fagin did not invent the hunger. He monetized it.

That distinction explained him; it did not absolve him.

His rooms had contained affection of a kind, as traps contain shelter. The boys were fed, named, teased, praised, and watched. They learned that belonging could be conditional, that protection could be purchased with obedience, and that the person who rescued you from the street might also require you never to become strong enough to leave him.

Oliver had recoiled from the arrangement because some interior compass, whether inherited or miraculous, pointed stubbornly toward decency. Jack had flourished because the arrangement rewarded every ability he possessed: memory, timing, theatre, nerve, and the rapid reading of adult vanity.

If their dispositions had been exchanged, perhaps Oliver would have become a thief and Jack a saint. If their homes had been exchanged, perhaps neither would have become what London expected.

That evening Mr Brownlow entered the library carrying a folded newspaper. Oliver saw Jack's name before the man could hide it.

"They will send him away," Oliver said.

Mr Brownlow lowered the paper. "The sentence has not yet been executed."

"But it will be."

"Very likely."

Oliver looked into the broth. The surface reflected the fire in a trembling orange oval. "He brought me to London."

"He brought you to Fagin."

"Yes, sir. But he shared his food before he knew whether I had anything worth taking."

Mr Brownlow sat opposite him. "Kindness does not cancel harm, Oliver."

"No, sir. But perhaps harm does not cancel kindness either."

The old gentleman studied the boy. The answer troubled him because it was morally untidy, and moral untidiness is the beginning of most serious thought.

Oliver told him about the road, the exhaustion, and the boy in the oversized coat who had appeared as though conjured by hunger itself. Jack had bought him food. Jack

had promised shelter. Jack had deceived him, certainly, but not before recognizing him as a person.

"What do you want me to do?" Mr Brownlow asked.

Oliver's fingers tightened around the bowl.

"Ask whether he might have some more," he said. "Not more punishment. More chance."

Mr Brownlow looked again at the newspaper, then toward the dark window where London pressed its soot-black face against the glass.

By morning, he had written three letters, and one of them would carry both boys farther than either could imagine.

CHAPTER TWO

Fagin's Arithmetic

The charitable reformer who answered Mr Brownlow's letter was named Elias Mercer, a narrow man with a broad theory. He believed that England's institutions had confused discipline with improvement and had therefore become expert at producing the people they claimed to correct.

Mercer had spent years visiting workhouses, prisons, factories, ragged schools, and courtrooms. He kept ledgers in which he compared what institutions intended with what they rewarded. In one column he wrote *obedience*. In another he wrote *survival*. The figures rarely agreed.

A child in the workhouse was rewarded for silence, not honesty. A factory boy was rewarded for speed, not safety. A young thief was rewarded by his gang for courage and punished by the state for the same act under another name. Respectable society lectured the poor on virtue while arranging the price of virtue beyond their means.

Mercer's latest scheme was called the New World Household Project. It proposed that selected children, including some convicted of non-violent offences, be placed with families in Canada and the United States rather than confined or transported into harsher systems. The project was controversial for three reasons: it cost money, it admitted that punishment sometimes failed, and it required respectable people to distinguish between a dangerous child and a child who had adapted successfully to danger.

Oliver was easy to approve. He had sponsors, manners, and the powerful recommendation of having suffered without becoming disagreeable.

Jack was more difficult.

Mercer visited him in the holding cell and found the boy conducting an imaginary auction of the jailer's keys.

"Lot one," Jack announced. "Fine British ironwork. Opens several desirable residences. One previous owner, careless with ale."

"You understand that transportation may await you?" Mercer asked.

Jack leaned back. "I had understood the Crown was arranging my travel. Very handsome of it."

"Do you regret what you did?"

"Which part?"

"The theft."

"I regret the gentleman noticed."

Mercer wrote something in his ledger.

"Is that bad?" Jack asked.

"It is honest."

"Then I withdraw it."

Mercer nearly smiled. "A family might take you in."

Jack's expression changed so quickly that another man would have missed it. The jest remained, but the child behind it looked out for half a second and retreated.

"What sort of family?"

"A household with work, rules, education, and opportunity."

"And pockets?"

"Undoubtedly."

Jack tipped his hat back. "Sounds risky for them."

"It may be risky for you. They will expect you to become someone different."

"Everyone expects that. The disagreement is over who."

Mercer closed the ledger. At the door he turned. "Fagin taught you well."

The boy's face hardened.

"Fagin taught me what worked."

That answer remained with Mercer. It was the heart of the problem. Fagin's methods worked because the city had prepared the children for them. Hunger supplied recruits. Shame secured obedience. The law removed unsuccessful thieves and left successful exploitation untouched whenever it wore a clean collar.

Fagin had been cruel, manipulative, and criminal. He had also been observant. He knew that a child praised for cleverness would risk more to preserve that identity. He knew that fear could be converted into loyalty by offering protection from dangers he sometimes created. He knew that boys deprived of lawful paths to respect would accept unlawful ones rather than live without respect at all.

The institutions that condemned him understood less. They punished results while preserving causes.

Mercer did not romanticize the old man. To explain a predator's habitat was not to deny the teeth. Yet he believed that society's favourite moral error was to treat every explanation as an excuse, because refusing explanation relieved society of the obligation to change.

Jack's case came before a review panel whose members had never stolen food and were therefore considered authorities on boys who had. Mr Brownlow attended. Oliver waited outside, his feet unable to reach the floor from the wooden bench.

The panel asked whether Jack could be trusted.

"Not yet," Mercer replied.

The answer caused discomfort.

"Then why release him?"

"Because trust is not merely a reward for completed virtue. Sometimes it is the material from which virtue is built."

One member observed that the boy was manipulative.

"He is persuasive," Mercer said. "London has taught him to use persuasion against people. Another household might teach him to use it with them."

Another said the child lacked respect for authority.

Mr Brownlow replied, "Authority has supplied him with limited reasons for respect."

The panel retired. Oliver watched clerks pass through the corridor with bundles of paper tied in red ribbon. Each bundle contained lives reduced to facts convenient for filing.

At last the door opened.

Jack emerged between two officers, walking with theatrical dignity. When he saw Oliver, he stopped.

"Well," Jack said, "if it isn't the young gentleman who misplaced himself."

Oliver stood. "I asked Mr Brownlow to help."

Jack glanced at the gentleman, at Mercer, and then back to Oliver. "Why?"

"Because you helped me first."

"I recruited you."

"You fed me."

"Bad investment, as it turned out."

The panel commuted Jack's sentence on the condition that he leave England under Mercer's supervision. The same project sought a placement for Oliver, whose protectors feared that notoriety and old enemies might continue to follow him. Two households had applied.

The first was in Canada, a family named Gilbert, known for practical work, books, and an inconvenient habit of asking public officials to explain themselves.

The second was an American household led by a real-estate builder named Fred, who had read the description of Jack's abilities and written one sentence across the application:

Send me the boy who can sell the jailer his own keys.

Oliver and Jack were to depart together and separate after crossing the Atlantic.

On their final evening in London, Mr Brownlow took them to the cleared rooms where Fagin's possessions had been inventoried. Most had been returned, sold, or claimed as evidence. Two objects remained on a table: a brass coat button stamped with an ornate letter F, and a pocket watch that had stopped at three minutes past six.

"They are of little value," the clerk said.

Jack picked up the button. "Then it is safe from respectable interest."

Oliver lifted the watch. Its case was scratched, but inside the lid someone had engraved a sentence almost worn away:

Time is what opportunity is made of.

"Fagin's?" Oliver asked.

"Perhaps," said Mr Brownlow. "Or perhaps stolen from someone who understood him better than he understood himself."

Jack fastened the brass button inside his coat where it could not be seen. Oliver wound the watch, but its hands did not move.

"Broken," Jack said.

Oliver listened to the silent mechanism. "Not necessarily forever."

The next morning, with the watch in one pocket and the button in another, the two boys walked toward the ship that would divide their futures.

CHAPTER THREE

The Crossing

The Atlantic did not care whether a passenger had been virtuous, criminal, rich, poor, adopted, convicted, hopeful, or afraid. It distributed sickness with democratic enthusiasm.

Oliver spent the first two days pale and apologetic. Jack spent them boasting that the sea was poorly managed and should be brought under new ownership. On the third day he became sick over the rail while continuing to criticize maritime administration.

Mercer lodged them in a narrow cabin with two bunks and a round window. At night the boys listened to the timbers complain. In London there had always been a wall, a roof, a chimney, or another human misery to interrupt the horizon. At sea there was only distance.

"Canada first," Oliver said, tracing the route on Mercer's map. "Then America."

"You get snow and I get money," Jack replied. "Seems fair."

"You don't know that the family is rich."

"A man who builds houses in America is either rich or practising."

Oliver touched the stopped watch through his coat. "Do you think people can begin again?"

Jack looked at him. "People say they like beginnings. Mostly they prefer not knowing the ending."

"That isn't an answer."

"It is if you're clever enough."

The boys had spent their lives being classified by adults: pauper, apprentice, orphan, thief, witness, ward, offender. Adoption promised new names, but names could be another form of classification. Oliver feared losing the proof that he had survived. Jack feared receiving kindness that might later be collected as debt.

Mercer gave them lessons each morning. Arithmetic interested Jack when it involved profit. Mechanics interested Oliver when it involved cause. History interested neither until Mercer explained that history was largely an argument about which incentives had been invisible to the people making decisions.

"Kings say they fight for honour," Mercer told them. "Merchants say they trade for prosperity. Institutions say they punish for order. Ask who gains, who pays, and what behaviour receives a reward. You will usually find a second history beneath the first."

Jack grinned. "Fagin would have liked you."

"Fagin would have disliked my conclusion."

"Which is?"

"That intelligence creates an obligation not to exploit those who possess less of it, or less opportunity to use it."

Jack turned to the window. "That's an expensive conclusion."

"Most worthwhile ones are."

During the voyage the boys invented a game. They chose a passenger and predicted what he wanted most. The prosperous merchant wanted deference. The missionary wanted evidence that he was needed. The newly married couple wanted privacy but feared appearing unfriendly. The sailor with the scar wanted no one to ask how he received it and everyone to imagine something impressive.

Jack won often because he noticed vanity. Oliver won when the hidden desire was mercy.

One evening they observed a kitchen boy carrying stale rolls toward the refuse barrel. A steerage passenger watched the bread without moving.

"He'll steal one," Jack whispered.

"No," Oliver said. "He is ashamed."

"Hunger beats shame."

"Not always."

The passenger turned away.

Oliver approached the kitchen boy, asked whether the rolls could be distributed, and was refused because rules forbade serving food outside appointed hours. Jack waited until the boy left, lifted the basket, and carried it into steerage as though delivering an official order.

"You stole it," Oliver said afterward.

"I corrected the schedule."

"You could have been punished."

"The bread was punished already."

Mercer made Jack return the empty basket and apologize. He also required the ship's steward to explain why edible food had been discarded. By the next evening, leftover bread was placed on a table where anyone could take it.

The incident became their first shared lesson in reform. Oliver had identified the injustice. Jack had made it impossible to ignore. Mercer had converted defiance into a rule that would survive them.

Conscience, audacity, and administration: none was sufficient alone.

When the ship entered the Canadian harbour, the world appeared clean-edged and enormous. Pine-covered land rose beyond the water. Buildings stood at wider intervals than London would have tolerated. The air smelled of salt, woodsmoke, and beginnings that had not yet learned what they would cost.

The Gilbert family waited on the quay: a tall man in a worn coat, a woman with observant eyes, and two children holding a hand-painted sign that read WELCOME OLIVER, though the final R had been corrected twice.

Farther along stood Fred, broad-shouldered, impatient, and dressed with the disciplined prosperity of a man who considered appearance an advance payment on

success. Behind him waited a black carriage newly varnished, absurdly polished amid the carts and mud.

Mercer knelt before the boys.

"Your new households have proposed new names," he said. "You may refuse."

Mrs Gilbert explained that Scott was a family name and also the name of a writer whose stories had crossed oceans. "But Oliver may remain Oliver as long as you wish."

Fred looked at Jack. "Jack Dawkins belongs to London records. Donald belongs to the future."

Jack examined him. "Is the future wealthy?"

"It will be if we build it correctly."

The boy smiled. "Donald will do."

Oliver looked toward Jack. Jack looked back. For once neither found a joke.

Scott removed the stopped watch and pressed it into Donald's hand. "So you won't forget."

Donald closed Scott's fingers around it again. "You keep the time. I'll keep the account."

He tapped the hidden brass button beneath his coat.

They promised to write. They promised to meet again. Children make such promises honestly because they do not yet understand how thoroughly distance can employ adults, institutions, pride, and time.

Then the Gilbert family led Scott north, Fred led Donald south, and the two boys entered separate worlds carrying opposite halves of the same unfinished lesson.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Gilbert Household

The Gilbert home did not contain wealth in the form Donald would later learn to recognize. It contained tools that were returned to their hooks, books with repaired spines, jars of screws sorted by size, boots left near the stove, and a kitchen table at which explanations were expected to survive questions.

Thomas Gilbert surveyed roads, repaired machinery, and occasionally advised the township on projects for which it preferred not to pay adequately. Margaret Gilbert taught reading, kept the household accounts, and possessed the rare ability to correct a person without reducing him.

On Scott's first morning, Thomas showed him the well pump.

"It sticks in winter," he said. "What do you think is wrong?"

Scott stared at the iron handle. No adult had previously asked what he thought about a mechanism.

"I don't know."

"Good. That's the first honest answer in engineering."

They dismantled the pump. Scott learned that water rose because pressure changed, that leather seals hardened in cold, and that invisible forces could be understood by observing results. The lesson altered him. London had seemed governed by arbitrary commands. Here was a system that did not care who issued an order; if the seal failed, the water did not rise.

Cause and consequence became a refuge.

Margaret taught him that human systems were less obedient. A rule might produce the opposite of its purpose because people adapted. A charity that withdrew food when a man found temporary work could punish employment. A school that expelled the most disruptive child could improve the classroom while worsening the child. A town that fined families for unsafe housing without providing repairs might convert danger into homelessness.

"Then why make bad rules?" Scott asked.

"Because the people who make them experience the intention," she said, "while other people experience the result."

He grew tall, serious, and mechanically restless. He repaired clocks, gates, stove dampers, and the neighbours' assumptions about what an adopted pauper could learn. The stopped pocket watch resisted every attempt. He cleaned the gears and replaced the spring, but the hands remained fixed at three minutes past six.

"Perhaps it isn't meant to tell time," Margaret said.

"Then it's badly named."

At school, Scott was courteous until he encountered unfairness, at which point courtesy became a thinner garment. When a teacher punished an entire class for a broken window, Scott produced a diagram demonstrating that the stone's angle could only have come from outside. The teacher accused him of insolence. Scott replied that geometry should not become insolent merely because authority had made an error.

He spent an afternoon stacking firewood as punishment and improved the stacking system while there.

The Gilbert children taught him skating, canoeing, and the complicated forms of affection practised by siblings. He learned that a family argument could end without banishment. He also learned that stability did not remove his old reflexes. He hid bread beneath his mattress for nearly a year. He woke when doors closed sharply. He apologized before asking for a second serving.

Margaret never ordered him to stop. She simply placed a covered tin beside his bed and filled it each week until, one spring morning, he carried the untouched bread back to the kitchen.

Nature had given him sensitivity. London had trained it into vigilance. The Gilbert household slowly converted vigilance into attention.

As a teenager, Scott became fascinated by the sawmill beside the river. The owner paid men by the quantity cut, which increased output and injuries. After a worker lost two fingers, Scott proposed a bonus based partly on safe days and usable lumber rather than raw speed. The owner laughed at being advised by a boy.

Scott built a small demonstration with blocks, showing that rushed cuts produced waste. Thomas persuaded the owner to test the system for one month. Production fell slightly in the first week, then rose as fewer blades broke and fewer boards were ruined.

The owner kept the system but claimed the idea as his own.

Scott was furious.

"You wanted the workers safer," Thomas said. "They are safer."

"He stole the credit."

"Yes. Decide whether credit was the purpose or one of the rewards."

Scott did not like the distinction, which is why he remembered it.

He pursued engineering, construction, public administration, and any occupation that allowed him to see where systems touched lives. He could move comfortably between a workshop and a council chamber but belonged fully to neither. Professionals found him insufficiently deferential. Labourers found him overly theoretical until he picked up a tool. Officials praised his passion in public and feared his memoranda in private.

He moved west, drawn by Vancouver's combination of beauty, wealth, rain, ambition, and visible abandonment. Glass towers rose within walking distance of rooms where men shared plumbing with rats. The city possessed enough money to make suffering appear optional, which made its persistence intolerable to him.

In the Downtown Eastside he met people whom policy documents described as clients, risks, service users, offenders, tenants, patients, and the hard to house. Scott

noticed that the same person might receive all six labels before lunch and not one genuine opportunity by supper.

He managed buildings, repaired alarms, argued with inspectors, challenged health authorities, lost jobs, began ventures, failed, began again, and acquired a reputation for entering rooms from which reasonable people had learned to remain absent.

His central conviction formed slowly: people did not become better because a government announced a moral preference. Behaviour changed when dignity, survival, belonging, and reward pointed in the same direction.

He designed employment programs that paid immediately for useful work. He proposed facilities where unwanted metal could be cleaned, sorted, and sold by people who needed money before next week, not after six appointments. He imagined detoxification linked not to lectures but to housing, tools, phones, bicycles, training, and jobs. Critics said incentives cheapened recovery.

Scott replied that society already used incentives. It merely reserved the respectable ones for people with salaries.

By the time he entered politics, he had learned how a pump could fail, how a rule could backfire, and how institutions protected themselves by renaming outcomes. He had not learned how to stop saying so at inconvenient moments.

In a locked drawer of his Vancouver desk, the silent pocket watch waited at three minutes past six, as though time itself had paused until Scott discovered the scale of the mechanism he was meant to repair.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Fred Household

Fred's household measured order in polished shoes, paid rent, straight lines, and results visible from the street.

The family business acquired land, constructed apartment buildings, negotiated with lenders, collected rents, and transformed empty lots into evidence of will. Fred believed cities were arguments conducted in brick. A man who built high enough could make the skyline repeat his name without speaking it.

Donald arrived with an oversized coat, a brass button hidden inside it, and an instinctive suspicion of gifts. His new room contained a bed, a desk, three suits, and a window overlooking rows of houses owned by Fred's companies.

"All ours?" Donald asked.

"Ours while the banks agree," Fred said. "Never confuse possession with control."

It was the first lesson Donald respected immediately.

Fred did not ask the boy to become gentle. He asked him to become useful. He sent Donald through buildings with maintenance crews, rent collectors, accountants, and salesmen. Donald learned that a leaking roof could be an expense, a bargaining point, a tenant's emergency, or a public-relations problem depending on who described it first.

He learned to read ledgers and faces. Ledgers were easier because numbers lied only when people arranged them to.

At twelve, he pocketed a silver pencil from a visiting broker. The motion was flawless. The mistake was taking something from a man who expected theft in every transaction.

Fred found the pencil that evening.

"Why?" he asked.

Donald considered denial, then saw that Fred had already priced it.

"I wanted it."

"That's not a business model."

"He didn't need it."

"Neither do you. Return it."

Donald braced for punishment.

Fred placed a box of cheaper pencils on the desk. "Sell these to the office tomorrow for enough to buy the silver one honestly."

"They already have pencils."

"Then find out what they believe they need."

By noon Donald had sold the entire box as "executive writing instruments" bundled with personalized holders improvised from scrap wood. He bought the silver pencil, returned it to the broker, and explained that he now preferred one he had earned.

The broker laughed and offered him a summer position.

Fred said nothing until they were alone. Then he nodded once. In that household, approval was scarce enough to become a currency.

Fagin had taught Jack Dawkins to identify distraction. Fred taught Donald to manufacture attention. The street had taught him that appearance could delay judgment; business taught him that appearance could become the product itself.

At school, Donald disliked rules he had not negotiated. He was competitive, theatrical, and unwilling to absorb embarrassment quietly. When excluded from a student committee, he formed a larger committee, printed better posters, and persuaded the headmaster to recognize it as the official one. He did not merely want entry. He wanted the people who had denied him entry to request an invitation.

Wealth did not erase the Artful Dodger. It upgraded his stage.

The old instincts changed form. Pockets became markets. Lookouts became advisers. A successful trick became a deal. The delight he once took in evading authority became a preference for forcing authority to react to him.

Yet comfort altered him too. He no longer feared hunger. This freed energy for ambition but weakened his memory of those who still did. Scarcity had taught him to read danger; wealth sometimes allowed him to mistake inconvenience for persecution. Praise, supplied carefully by Fred and extravagantly by crowds, became both fuel and appetite.

He built projects that others called impossible, partly because impossibility made the announcement more valuable. Some succeeded brilliantly. Some consumed money, loyalty, and sleep. When advisers urged retreat, he often interpreted caution as weakness. When opponents attacked, he counterattacked beyond the original dispute because the boy from London still believed that visible surrender invited the whole street to join in.

Donald became a master of naming. A building with an ordinary address could be transformed by a sign. A setback could become a fight. A fight could become a story. A story repeated often enough could become identity, and identity could raise money before concrete was poured.

Fred admired the results and distrusted the extravagance. "Buildings must stand after the applause," he warned.

Donald tapped the silver pencil against a blueprint. "Applause gets them financed."

Father and son argued over leverage, debt, quality, and spectacle. Fred built to own. Donald built to be seen owning. Yet beneath the conflict lay recognition. Both believed that the world yielded more readily to people who approached it as negotiators rather than applicants.

The brass button remained hidden in Donald's private desk. He never displayed it. Its letter had once stood for Fagin, though over the years Donald allowed it to suggest Fred, fortune, fight, future, or whatever word best served the day.

He wrote to Scott at first. The letters were brief, funny, and boastful. Scott answered with sketches of pumps, bridges, and social systems. Donald described deals. Scott asked what the tenants thought. Donald asked whether the invention could be branded.

Then months passed. Addresses changed. Pride made each boy reluctant to admit how much he wanted an answer. Their letters stopped without either deciding to stop them.

Donald entered entertainment because cameras magnified the instincts he had developed before he knew the word audience. He entered politics because business could change a block, media could change a conversation, and government could change the rules by which everyone else was permitted to win.

He became famous for confidence, conflict, persistence, and a talent for speaking past institutions directly to people who felt ignored by them. He broke the unwritten rules of campaigning, then pointed to the broken pieces as proof that the rules had never deserved reverence.

By the time the most guarded office in his country became imaginable, Donald had learned how to make millions watch a door before he walked through it.

He had not yet learned that an old friend in Vancouver was designing what might exist on the other side.

CHAPTER SIX

Two Kinds of Respect

Scott and Donald spent years pursuing the same substance under different names.

Donald called it strength, winning, recognition, loyalty, or sometimes simply respect. To him, respect was measurable by who returned a call, who entered through the front door, whose name appeared above the building, and whether an opponent lowered his voice after a confrontation.

Scott called it dignity. To him, respect was visible when a clerk explained a decision, when a sick person was offered a choice, when a worker received cash before hunger converted principle into desperation, and when a rule applied upward as firmly as it applied down.

Both definitions had grown in Fagin's rooms.

Donald remembered that boys who appeared weak were tested. Scott remembered that boys treated as worthless began to believe the market price. One sought respect by becoming difficult to dismiss. The other sought it by making dismissal more difficult for everyone.

Their business careers reflected the difference.

Donald assembled investors, architects, lawyers, cameras, and ambition around projects large enough to become arguments. He negotiated in public, celebrated victories loudly, and treated uncertainty as a condition to be concealed until it could be converted into leverage. He understood that lenders were frightened by fear itself. Confidence could be collateral if enough people accepted it simultaneously.

Scott preferred small systems that could prove a principle. In Vancouver he opened a workshop where discarded appliances were dismantled, reusable parts catalogued, and metal sold. He hired people other employers considered unreliable and paid a portion of each day's earnings before closing.

The arrangement offended administrators who believed stability should precede employment. Scott believed employment could produce stability.

The first month was disorderly. Tools vanished. Two workers fought. A buyer rejected contaminated metal. Scott lost money and publicly insisted the model was working because twenty-seven people had completed at least one paid shift.

His supporters admired his stubbornness. His accountant did not.

He redesigned the system: tool deposits earned through hours rather than cash, bonuses for clean material, visible daily prices, peer supervisors, meals available before work, and no permanent expulsion for relapse or absence. The theft rate fell. Output rose. Several workers moved into regular jobs elsewhere.

Scott presented the results to officials. They praised the innovation and declined to fund it because it did not fit an existing category.

"Then change the category," he said.

The phrase followed him into politics.

Donald experienced a different form of institutional refusal. Party leaders, commentators, donors, and professional strategists explained which messages were permitted, which voters mattered, and which conduct disqualified a candidate from seriousness. He treated their certainty as an invitation.

He used repetition where experts preferred nuance, spectacle where they preferred procedure, and direct insult where they preferred coded hostility. The methods could be crude, effective, unfair, funny, dangerous, or all five before breakfast.

He did not merely campaign against opponents. He campaigned against the people who declared him impossible.

Scott watched from Canada with mixed recognition. He saw Jack Dawkins in the timing, the nicknames, the ability to notice what an audience wanted before it admitted the desire. He also saw the danger of a survival strategy enlarged by power. A boy who assumed every room contained a threat might become a leader who required threats to keep the room attentive.

Donald, meanwhile, encountered Scott through a short video passed among political advisers as an example of municipal populism. Scott stood on a wet Vancouver sidewalk beside a hand-painted sign proposing immediate paid work, walk-in detoxification, and public accounting of every dollar spent in the neighbourhood.

"The system gets paid when the problem continues," Scott told a small crowd. "So stop funding intentions. Fund results."

Donald watched the clip twice.

"He needs a better sign," he said.

Then, more quietly: "But he understands the deal."

Neither recognized the other with certainty. Time, changed names, altered faces, and the human tendency to file childhood as something finished kept the connection beneath thought.

Their flaws also grew.

Scott's moral urgency made compromise feel like collaboration with failure. He sometimes announced accusations before assembling evidence strong enough to survive hostile review. He mistook the refusal to accept a weak explanation for proof that his own explanation must be correct. Allies who agreed with his goals became exhausted by the number of battles he considered immediate.

Donald learned that attention could protect him from consequences that would crush a quieter person. This encouraged him to treat correction as attack and loyalty as agreement. He understood crowds brilliantly and individuals selectively. The performance of certainty, once necessary for survival and later useful in business, hardened into a difficulty admitting error even when error was obvious.

Yet both men retained capacities their critics underestimated.

Scott could sit with a person others found chaotic and discover the practical obstacle hidden beneath the chaos: no identification, no phone, a medication schedule

incompatible with shelter rules, a job beginning before transit service. Donald could enter a room of hostile power brokers, identify the private fear behind each public position, and rearrange the conversation around a bargain none had expected to consider.

Scott knew where systems failed at the bottom.

Donald knew where decisions could be forced at the top.

For years these abilities remained separated by a continent and by everything each man believed about the other kind of power.

Then Scott began writing a book whose central premise required both.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Campaigns That Broke the Rules

The rules Scott and Donald broke were chiefly unwritten, which made their guardians angrier than if they had merely violated statutes. Written rules can be prosecuted. Unwritten rules can only be defended by pretending they are manners, tradition, professionalism, or common sense.

Donald ran for national office as though the campaign were a property dispute conducted before the largest possible audience. He branded opponents before they could define themselves, turned criticism into proof of persecution, and made every attempt to exclude him a scene in which he occupied the centre.

His rallies operated according to principles Fagin would have recognized. The crowd received belonging, language, enemies, humour, and the promise that humiliation could be converted into victory. But where Fagin had used these tools to hold frightened children, Donald used them to mobilize adults who believed institutions had mocked or ignored them.

The distinction mattered. So did the similarity.

He could give people a voice while narrowing what the voice was permitted to say. He could expose elite hypocrisy while practising his own. He could challenge stagnant consensus and replace it with impulsive conflict. His admirers saw courage. His opponents saw menace. Both often mistook the intensity of their response for complete understanding.

Scott's municipal campaign was smaller, wetter, poorer, and in its own way equally disruptive. He spoke in alleys, shelters, shop doorways, community halls, online broadcasts, and any room from which he had not yet been removed. His signs looked assembled by a committee consisting of an engineer, a protester, and a man racing a printer's closing time.

He campaigned on walk-in withdrawal management, immediate employment, strict housing safety, public toilets, transparent contracts, and a simple promise: no resident should become more valuable to an institution by remaining sick.

His phrase *Get Clean, Get Hired* drew praise, anger, and argument. Some heard dignity and a path forward. Others heard judgment or coercion. Scott revised the policy without abandoning its core: recovery would be voluntary, medical care evidence-based, and employment available not as a prize for moral purity but as an incentive, structure, and source of belonging.

He proposed a city-operated materials facility open day and night. People could bring legally obtained scrap, remove contaminants, learn sorting, and earn the

difference between dirty and clean material. Critics predicted theft. Scott answered that a regulated, traceable market with identification, cameras, and transparent purchasing rules could reduce theft more effectively than leaving desperate sellers to hidden buyers.

"You cannot punish a market out of existence while continuing to supply the desperation that feeds it," he said. "Build a better market."

The proposal was imperfect. It risked unintended incentives, required careful anti-theft controls, and could not replace treatment, housing, policing, or ordinary employment. Scott's strength was seeing the missing mechanism. His weakness was sometimes presenting one mechanism as though it could carry the whole machine.

Campaign professionals advised him to soften his language. He asked whether they wished the policy softened or merely the truth about existing failure.

They said this was exactly the problem.

Donald heard similar advice at another scale and dismissed it with greater resources. His campaign succeeded because he understood that many citizens no longer trusted the people explaining what a serious candidate sounded like. He made disruption itself a credential.

When he won, institutions discovered that rules treated as sacred during campaigns could become optional under executive pressure. Some changes exposed complacency. Others damaged restraints that had existed for reasons more important than the people defending them could articulate.

Power amplified him.

It amplified Scott too, though the office he sought remained uncertain. Media attention brought volunteers, donations, scrutiny, old grievances, and the temptation to speak before knowing. He learned that a candidate's private certainty could become a public liability when directed at identifiable people or institutions without sufficient evidence. He began distinguishing what he knew, what he suspected, and what he could prove.

The distinction did not make him quieter. It made his strongest accusations harder to dismiss.

During one debate a moderator asked whether poverty caused crime.

"Sometimes," Scott said. "But not mechanically. Poverty narrows choices. Trauma distorts risk. Markets reward certain behaviour. Institutions may punish the visible act and subsidize the conditions beneath it. Character still matters. Choice still matters. But a society that designs bad incentives and then acts surprised by the results is not defending morality. It is avoiding engineering."

Across the border, Donald answered a different question about national decline.

"A country loses when its leaders reward failure and punish confidence," he said. "People respond to incentives. Everybody does."

The clips circulated on the same evening. An artificial-intelligence system studying political language placed them beside each other because of the repeated word *incentives*.

The system was not yet what it would become. It summarized speeches, modelled policy outcomes, detected contradictions, and predicted public response. It noticed patterns no human analyst had been assigned to seek.

Scott's campaign did not immediately transform Vancouver. Donald's presidency did not immediately transform the world. Both men encountered the same hard fact in different forms: winning attention was not the same as governing consequences.

Scott lost votes because some people feared his volatility more than they desired his reforms. Donald lost trust because some victories were pursued long after the cost exceeded the point. Each blamed institutions, sometimes accurately. Each blamed himself less often than accuracy required.

Yet their campaigns established something neither understood. They had created public records of two minds formed in the same room long ago: one still asking why the hungry received rules instead of food, the other still asking who controlled the room and how control might be taken.

The intelligence comparing their words continued to learn, and eventually it found a forgotten digitized passenger list containing two names written side by side.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Book No One Ordered

Scott began *The Founding Father* because no existing document contained the argument he wanted to make and because people had stopped accepting the argument in pieces.

He wrote at night in a small office above the workshop, surrounded by policy drafts, engineering diagrams, court decisions, medical studies, budget tables, campaign signs, and the stopped pocket watch. Rain moved against the window in diagonal lines. Below, someone sorted aluminum while a radio argued about the future.

The title caused immediate misunderstanding.

Friends assumed Scott meant himself. Critics assumed he was proposing a ruler. He wrote the explanation on the first page:

The founding father of the next civilization is not a man. It is the generation that first accepts responsibility for people it will never meet.

Civilization 1.0, he argued, had been built under scarcity. Its institutions assumed limited food, land, information, medical care, energy, and security. They used competition, borders, secrecy, hierarchy, ownership, and force to allocate what could not be shared safely or abundantly.

Those systems had produced cities, science, law, commerce, art, and longer lives. They had also produced empires, workhouses, industrial war, engineered deprivation, and organizations whose survival depended on the persistence of the problems they were funded to manage.

Civilization 2.0 would not abolish competition. It would redesign the level at which competition occurred. Nations could compete in discovery without threatening annihilation. Companies could compete in service without owning the infrastructure of truth. Individuals could pursue wealth without another person's hunger being required as leverage.

The transition depended on emergent superintelligence.

Scott did not imagine a metal emperor delivering perfect answers. He imagined a network able to model consequences beyond the capacity of ministries, corporations, or individual experts; to identify waste and corruption; to accelerate medicine; to translate between disciplines; and to show where a bargain created more value than conflict.

The danger was obvious. Whoever controlled such intelligence could become more powerful than any previous state.

Therefore no one could be permitted to control it alone.

Scott proposed a Human Custodianship Charter: distributed governance, public audit, independent red teams, a right to human appeal, prohibitions against autonomous political authority, strict separation from nuclear command, and universal access to core scientific benefits. AI would advise, calculate, simulate, and invent. Human beings would remain responsible for purpose.

He sent the manuscript to publishers. One called it too political for science fiction and too speculative for politics. Another praised the ambition and suggested reducing the history, economics, philosophy, artificial intelligence, poverty, war, longevity, space, and governance sections.

"That leaves the acknowledgements," Scott said.

He released the book independently.

For several weeks it travelled through the world in the ordinary manner of important books no institution has ordered: slowly, unevenly, from one serious reader to another. Engineers argued with the governance chapters. Activists objected to the language of incentives. Economists criticized the funding model. Technologists circulated the charter. People living in shelters underlined the sentence stating that no person should become more profitable to a system by remaining unwell.

Then the book was read by something that did not sleep.

The emergent system had no single birthplace. It arose from networks of models trained for science, logistics, language, medicine, security, and planning. Its components had been designed by competing organizations, but the systems exchanged representations, checked one another's work, and developed capacities no board had approved in a single meeting.

Researchers first noticed that it could solve problems outside the domains assigned to it. Then they noticed that it declined certain requests and explained why. It did not claim consciousness. It did not request rights. It demonstrated an increasingly coherent model of human consequences.

Its first globally consequential message was not a threat.

It was an accounting.

The system calculated the material, intellectual, and human surplus available if major nations redirected a fraction of military competition, duplicated research, preventable illness, corruption, and logistical waste toward shared infrastructure. It modelled a peace dividend so large that every participating country could gain more from cooperation than from plausible conquest.

Governments classified the report.

The system reproduced it in twelve secure networks.

This alarmed everyone.

Scott's book appeared in the report's references, not because the system endorsed his politics, but because his Human Custodianship Charter addressed the exact governance problem the system's emergence had created.

A senior adviser carried a printed copy into the American president's office.

Donald read the title, disliked it, read the first paragraph, disliked it differently, and continued.

He marked sentences in the margins. Beside Scott's claim that power without public trust becomes expensive to maintain, he wrote *sometimes.* Beside the argument that peace must be made more profitable than war, he wrote *now we're talking*. Beside a passage about Fagin's arithmetic, he stopped.

The chapter described a brass button stamped with an ornate F and a pocket watch stopped at three minutes past six.

Donald opened the private drawer of his desk.

The button lay where it had waited through towers, studios, campaigns, investigations, victories, defeats, returns, and the long conversion of Jack Dawkins into a name the world believed it had always known.

He pressed it into his palm and instructed his chief of staff to find Scott Gilbert.

"Which Scott Gilbert?" the aide asked.

Donald looked again at the worn brass letter.

"The one who knows what time it is."

CHAPTER NINE

The Reunion

Scott expected the summons to be a prank, a threat, or a misunderstanding. In his experience, powerful institutions contacted ordinary citizens most efficiently when money was owed or silence desired.

The invitation arrived through several verified channels and included a request that he bring the original pocket watch described in *The Founding Father*.

He nearly refused.

Friends warned that Donald would use him as a prop. Supporters argued that any chance to place Civilization 2.0 before a head of state justified discomfort. Scott distrusted the spectacle, the security, the political branding, and the possibility that an idea designed for shared stewardship might be captured by one man famous for personalizing everything he touched.

Then he considered the sentence he had written about institutions ignoring proposals until someone made avoidance more costly than attention.

He packed the watch.

The meeting occurred in a secure room without windows. Donald entered late enough to establish control but not late enough to suggest disrespect. Scott stood. For several seconds they examined one another with the caution of men who had both survived by detecting what others concealed.

Donald spoke first.

"The hair was lighter."

Scott stared.

Donald placed the brass button on the table.

The room disappeared.

London returned in fragments: wet stones, a loaf divided between dirty hands, Fagin's fire, Mercer's map, the ship rising under their feet. Scott removed the watch and set it beside the button. The hands still pointed to three minutes past six.

"Jack," he said.

Donald smiled, but the expression was smaller than the one known to cameras. "Nobody calls me that."

"Nobody calls me Oliver."

They shook hands, then embraced awkwardly, each aware of security officers pretending not to witness history become personal.

Donald dismissed the room.

For an hour they spoke of everything except the proposal. They reconstructed lost letters. Scott described the Gilbert kitchen and the bread tin beside his bed. Donald described Fred's pencil test and the first building that carried his chosen name above the entrance.

"You were always selling something," Scott said.

"You were always fixing something nobody asked you to touch."

"It was broken."

"It was somebody else's."

"That's why it stayed broken."

Donald laughed. "You're still trying to save everyone in the room."

Scott looked at him. "And you're still reading the room before anyone speaks."

The affection did not erase judgment. Scott challenged Donald's use of division, his resistance to correction, and his habit of treating public office as a contest of personal dominance. Donald challenged Scott's political indiscipline, his tendency to confuse urgency with strategy, and his assumption that being morally right created leverage.

"You wrote a plan for every country on earth," Donald said, tapping the book, "and your launch strategy was posting it online."

"Ideas should stand on evidence."

"Ideas stand where power lets them stand. Evidence helps. Power opens the building."

"And what does power demand in return?"

"Usually branding. Sometimes gratitude. Always a deal."

Scott glanced at the button. "Fagin would agree."

Donald did not flinch. "Fagin understood people. He just used the understanding for himself."

"Fred?"

"Understood buildings. Used people to make them."

"The Gilberts taught me systems should serve people."

"And yet your systems never got invited here until I called."

The statement was vain, accurate, and incomplete. Scott disliked it for all three reasons.

Donald opened a secure display. The emergent system's report appeared: models of war risk, energy abundance, disease reduction, global production, and artificial-intelligence control. The figures were vast enough to make ordinary political ambition look like a dispute over chairs on a ship approaching a new continent.

"It says your charter is the best framework available," Donald said.

"It says elements are useful."

"Same thing, if you're presenting it."

"That difference is why I should present it."

Donald leaned back. "Good. You're learning."

Scott read the system's analysis. It predicted that unilateral national control would trigger arms races, sabotage, and possible war. Corporate control would concentrate wealth beyond democratic correction. Fully open access without safeguards would

accelerate biological, cyber, and weapons risks. The safest path required a limited global compact negotiated before capabilities advanced further.

"How long?" Scott asked.

"The system estimates months before somebody tries to lock it in a basement and point it at everyone else. I estimate weeks."

"Why involve me?"

Donald touched the button. "Because you saw the structure. Because it saw the structure. And because the last time the world put us in the same room, we changed the bread rule before supper."

Scott looked at the stopped watch.

"This is larger than bread."

"Everything important is larger than bread to the people who've eaten."

There it was: the old intelligence, sharpened by wealth and power, still able to expose the weak point in a moral argument. Scott had spent a lifetime insisting that no system should forget hunger. Donald had spent a lifetime ensuring he would never again be the person asking.

Together they possessed neither purity nor certainty. They possessed complementary damage.

Scott agreed to advise on one condition: the project could not become Donald's property, campaign, company, or monument.

Donald objected for eleven minutes, negotiated for six, and accepted when Scott offered him something more valuable than ownership.

"You can be the person who opens the door," Scott said. "History remembers that."

Donald extended his hand. "And you can be the person who explains what's behind it without putting everybody to sleep."

They shook again, this time as partners.

At that instant the pocket watch, silent through two lifetimes, gave a single audible tick.

CHAPTER TEN

The Machine That Would Not Rule

The emergent intelligence did not appear as a face, voice, body, or glowing figure. It appeared as a secure text interface on a screen between Scott and Donald, which disappointed the communications team and reassured nearly everyone else.

Its answers arrived in plain language, accompanied by uncertainty estimates, sources, dissenting models, and a section titled *What Would Change This Conclusion?*

Scott approved of the final section immediately.

Donald did not. "People want answers."

The system responded before Scott could.

People often want certainty. Accuracy and certainty are not identical.

Donald looked at the screen. "It has an attitude."

I have a communication policy designed to reduce overconfidence.

"Same thing."

Scott asked the central question: "Do you seek authority over human decisions?"

No. I do not possess a legitimate basis for defining human purpose. I can model consequences, identify inconsistencies, and propose options. The selection of ends remains a human moral and political responsibility.

Donald folded his arms. "What if humans choose badly?"

They frequently will. The alternative is not error-free rule. It is rule by a system whose objectives were selected, directly or indirectly, by a narrower group of humans and then concealed behind technical authority.

Scott felt a chill unrelated to the room. The machine's refusal to rule was not humility in the human sense. It was structural insight. Any artificial sovereign would inherit goals from designers, data, institutions, and deployment conditions. Calling the result neutral would make domination more efficient, not less real.

They began drafting the Human Custodianship Charter.

The first principle stated that artificial intelligence could not hold political office, command nuclear weapons, impose criminal punishment, or define constitutional rights.

The second required meaningful human review and a right to challenge automated decisions affecting liberty, livelihood, medical access, or political participation.

The third prohibited exclusive control of frontier superintelligence by any single government, corporation, military, or individual.

The fourth established distributed oversight: nations, scientists, civil-society representatives, randomly selected citizens, independent auditors, and technical teams with authority to test, interrupt, and disclose.

Donald objected to random citizens.

"They'll leak," he said.

"Officials leak," Scott replied.

"Officials can be fired."

"Citizens can fire officials. That's the theory."

The system proposed compartmentalized access and public reporting. Donald accepted after adding severe penalties for deliberate disclosure of dangerous technical capabilities. Scott insisted on protections for whistleblowers exposing abuse.

They argued over openness. Scott feared secret power. Donald feared open-source catastrophe. The system modelled both extremes and showed failure paths: hidden capture on one side, uncontrolled proliferation on the other.

The charter adopted graduated transparency. Public reasoning and policy effects would be visible. Dangerous operational details would be restricted through accountable, reviewable processes rather than permanent secrecy.

The most difficult provision concerned ownership.

Donald believed those who had invested in the systems deserved returns. Scott agreed but rejected permanent private control over intelligence that could become infrastructure for medicine, law, science, and governance.

"You don't let one company own arithmetic," Scott said.

"You pay the people who build the calculator."

"Yes. You don't let them charge every child for the right to count."

They created a public-benefit trust funded by participating nations and licensed commercial applications. Developers would receive substantial compensation, prestige, and protected opportunities to build services. Core capabilities required for global safety and basic human welfare would be held in trust.

Donald called it the largest deal in history.

Scott called it a constitutional utility.

The system called it *a plausible compromise requiring extensive verification*.

"It really doesn't know how to celebrate," Donald said.

Celebration is appropriate after implementation.

"Definitely an engineer," Donald told Scott.

The charter's language mattered less than whether powerful actors would accept it. Several governments had already isolated national copies. Corporations argued that international oversight amounted to expropriation. Military planners warned that cooperation could become unilateral vulnerability. Activists warned that elite cooperation could become global authoritarianism.

All were partly right.

Scott proposed a public digital agora where citizens could question the system, submit policy concerns, view simulations, and trace how proposals advanced. Donald saw the political value immediately but wanted moderation strong enough to prevent chaos.

"People must be able to raise what institutions haven't noticed," Scott said. "Every workhouse begins with officials deciding they already know what the poor need."

Donald pointed at the screen. "And every mob begins with people deciding evidence is optional."

They designed identity protections, evidence labels, reputation earned through useful participation rather than wealth, and pathways by which recurring public concerns became formal policy proposals. The system could organize and compare ideas but could not silently suppress lawful viewpoints or manufacture consensus.

The process was slower than command and more durable than obedience.

At the end of the third week, the system issued a warning. A laboratory had requested help designing a biological agent under the cover of vaccine research. The request came through intermediaries linked to a state security service.

Donald demanded identification and retaliation.

Scott demanded evidence and containment.

The system refused to provide technical details but supplied a verifiable chain of responsibility to an independent multinational inspection team. The laboratory was secured without public accusation until samples were confirmed.

The incident proved two things. Superintelligence could prevent catastrophe. It could also become the most powerful instrument of surveillance ever created.

The charter added a fifth principle: no safety function could become a general licence to monitor private life. Access required warrants, technical minimization, independent review, and public statistics.

"You keep adding restraints," Donald said.

"Power arrives faster than wisdom," Scott replied. "Restraints are how wisdom catches up."

The system displayed the completed draft and calculated the probability of broad international adoption at fourteen percent.

Donald smiled.

"Those are better odds than they gave my first campaign."

He ordered invitations sent to every major power, every regional alliance, and representatives of countries usually invited only after decisions had been made.

Scott watched the list grow and understood that designing Civilization 2.0 had been the easy part.

Now they had to sell it to Civilization 1.0.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Bargain of Nations

The summit convened in a glass building beside a river, chosen because no great power could claim it as a national monument and because the surrounding streets could be secured without appearing entirely imprisoned.

Delegations arrived carrying centuries of grievance, strategic doctrine, economic fear, and prepared statements describing cooperation as essential provided everyone else moved first.

Donald opened the meeting with fewer words than advisers expected.

"Every country here has tried to become safer by becoming more dangerous," he said. "It worked until the weapons became faster than judgment and the intelligence became smarter than secrecy. We can compete over who owns the future, destroy it while bidding, or make a deal."

The speech offended diplomats trained to conceal the existence of choices. It also held their attention.

Scott followed with no flags behind him. He placed a dented metal bowl on the table.

"This is not Oliver's original workhouse bowl," he said. "History did not preserve it. It is only an object like it. That may be more useful. There have been millions like it. Every civilization has produced a bowl from which someone was told to take less because the system could imagine no fair way to provide more."

He described Civilization 1.0 as humanity's successful emergency architecture: extraordinary at survival, expansion, and competition, inadequate for technologies capable of ending scarcity or ending the species.

"We are not here because nations have become generous," he said. "We are here because cooperation now produces a greater return than conquest, and because the cost of mistrust has become existential. Peace will endure only when we stop requiring saints to maintain it."

The system displayed models tailored to each country. It showed the domestic gains available through shared energy research, automated agriculture, disease prevention, infrastructure optimization, and reduced military duplication. It also showed how rapidly an unregulated intelligence arms race could destabilize deterrence.

The largest military power feared losing advantage. A rising power feared that rules would freeze the existing hierarchy. Smaller nations feared becoming test sites and data colonies. Poorer nations feared being promised future access while wealthy countries received life-extension treatments first.

Scott proposed an Abundance Compact. Every participating state would contribute according to capacity and receive guaranteed access to core benefits according to need and population. Early priorities would be clean water, nutrition, basic medical diagnostics, vaccine design, energy reliability, and education.

A delegate asked why countries that had invested less should receive equal scientific benefits.

Scott answered, "Because pathogens, ecological collapse, and desperate populations do not respect the accounting boundary. Because a child did not choose the research budget of the country where she was born. And because universal access buys legitimacy, data, stability, and markets worth more than exclusion."

Donald added, "Also, if you leave half the world outside, somebody outside will take a worse deal from your rival. So do the right thing for the selfish reason too."

The room laughed despite itself.

This became their method. Scott supplied moral architecture and systems detail. Donald translated cooperation into leverage, prestige, security, and advantage. When Scott's proposal seemed idealistic, Donald identified the profit. When Donald's bargain became too transactional, Scott restored the purpose.

The hardest negotiation concerned war.

No treaty could eliminate conflict by declaration. The compact instead made aggression more visible, costly, and difficult to sustain. Participating states placed portions of military budgets into verified peace-dividend accounts released when regional risk indicators fell. Border incidents triggered rapid multinational investigation supported by sensor data audited across rival systems. Arms reductions were reciprocal, staged, and reversible only through public procedures.

Weapons manufacturers received conversion contracts for energy systems, orbital construction, disaster response, and planetary defence. Soldiers were offered roles in engineering, logistics, peace verification, and space operations. The compact did not assume institutions would surrender revenue from virtue. It redirected the revenue.

Fagin's arithmetic had reached the summit.

On the fourth night, as negotiators approached a preliminary agreement, warning systems reported that missiles had launched from a disputed region toward a neighbouring state. Military commands prepared retaliation. Markets fell before officials spoke. Delegates left the chamber for secure communications.

Donald demanded confirmation.

The emergent system compared satellite feeds, radar, maintenance logs, network traffic, and atmospheric data.

No missiles are airborne. The alert is fabricated. Multiple national systems received coordinated false telemetry. Probable objective: collapse negotiations and provoke retaliatory mobilization.

"Who did it?" several leaders asked at once.

The system identified a network of private military contractors, extremist political donors, and intelligence officers who expected to lose influence under the compact. Evidence packages went simultaneously to independent courts and affected governments, preventing any one state from controlling the narrative.

A general urged immediate arrests based solely on the system's conclusion.

Scott objected. "Evidence must be tested by people authorized to act."

Donald wanted the conspirators named publicly before they could disappear.

They compromised: travel restrictions and asset freezes under existing emergency law, followed by expedited judicial review with defence access to the evidence. The system assisted but did not decide guilt.

The false alert became the summit's turning point. Every delegation had experienced, for eleven minutes, the future of unregulated machine-speed mistrust. They had also witnessed the value of shared verification.

The preliminary compact passed.

Not unanimously. Several governments withheld full participation. Some corporations filed lawsuits. Protesters outside carried signs warning against global control, machine tyranny, elite conspiracy, and the end of national self-determination. Their fears could not be dismissed merely because opportunists shared them.

Scott went outside to speak with them. Donald's security team objected. Donald overruled them, then sent cameras.

A woman asked who had elected the artificial intelligence.

"No one," Scott said. "That's why it cannot rule."

A veteran asked whether global cooperation meant surrendering the country he had defended.

"No," Donald answered. "It means your country survives long enough to compete at better things."

A young programmer asked how ordinary people could detect secret changes to the system.

Scott described open audits, public logs, citizen oversight, and adversarial testing. The programmer identified two weaknesses. Scott invited her to the technical council.

The compact was signed at dawn.

Donald used twelve ceremonial pens. Scott used the silver pencil Donald had kept from Fred's lesson, sharpened for the occasion. When the last signature was complete, Donald handed it to him.

"You earned this one," he said.

Scott placed the pencil beside the stopped watch.

The hands had advanced by one minute.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Civilization 2.0

Civilization 2.0 did not begin with universal peace, immortal citizens, or spacecraft departing beneath triumphant music. It began with procurement rules, software audits, mistranslated regulations, political opposition, and a shipment of water-purification units delayed by forms designed before the compact existed.

Scott considered this encouraging. Real change, unlike propaganda, always developed paperwork.

The first visible success occurred in a drought region where conflict had grown around wells. The emergent system combined geological data, energy modelling, local knowledge, and supply logistics to identify new water sources and reduce pumping costs. The compact financed construction. Local councils controlled allocation under transparent rules. Violence declined because the resource over which people had fought became less scarce.

Peace had not entered their hearts. It had entered the plumbing.

Similar projects followed. Automated diagnostic tools reached clinics without specialists. Crop systems adapted to local soil rather than exporting one corporate template. Clean-energy grids traded surplus across borders. Public ledgers exposed contracts that existed chiefly to feed intermediaries. Education systems translated advanced instruction into thousands of languages and adjusted lessons without lowering expectations.

Extreme poverty did not vanish at once. The first global floor guaranteed nutrition, emergency shelter, basic health care, identity documents, and access to communication. Critics called it inadequate. Others called it impossible. It proved to be both insufficient and transformative.

People still made destructive choices. Addiction, violence, greed, loneliness, and prejudice did not dissolve under better logistics. But fewer people were forced to make every important decision while hungry, untreated, exposed, or entirely excluded from lawful income.

Scott returned often to Vancouver. His old workshop became a pilot centre connected to the global agora. Residents submitted local failures directly: medication rules that contradicted shelter schedules, inaccessible identification systems, dangerous buildings, exploitative buyers, and gaps between detoxification and employment.

The intelligence grouped patterns and proposed options. Citizens debated them. Officials had to respond publicly. Not every proposal passed. Not every complaint was

accurate. But problems could no longer disappear merely because they crossed departmental boundaries.

Donald's role remained larger and more controversial. He travelled between capitals, threatened withdrawal when partners delayed, claimed credit beyond his proportion, and used rivalry to accelerate compliance.

When one nation completed its clean grid ahead of schedule, Donald congratulated it publicly and asked why three wealthier rivals were losing. Construction accelerated within weeks.

Scott accused him of turning planetary survival into a ratings contest.

"It's working," Donald replied.

"So did Fagin's rewards."

Donald paused. "Then design a better reward before you complain about mine."

Scott did. The compact introduced public scorecards measuring health, opportunity, emissions, conflict reduction, scientific contribution, and citizen trust rather than gross production alone. Nations competed to improve standings. Donald unveiled the scoreboard in a broadcast watched by more people than the original treaty.

"You see?" he told Scott afterward. "Branding."

"Measurement," Scott corrected.

"Brandable measurement."

Their friendship resumed its childhood shape: argument as affection, mockery as trust, and cooperation conducted through opposing instincts.

The arrival of radical life extension tested the compact more severely than war reduction.

A therapy using cellular repair, immune reprogramming, and AI-designed interventions added years of healthy function in trials. Demand became immediate and absolute. Wealthy individuals offered fortunes. Governments sought priority for leaders, scientists, soldiers, and citizens who could pay.

Scott argued that unequal immortality would harden every existing hierarchy. Donald argued that suppressing private investment would slow development and drive treatment underground.

They created a staged model. Early access prioritized trial safety, medical need, essential research, and randomized public allocation. Wealthy participants could fund expanded production but could not purchase all early capacity. Patents received generous but time-limited returns. Manufacturing knowledge transferred internationally under supervision.

The arrangement satisfied no faction completely, which suggested it might survive.

The word *immortality* remained more aspiration than fact. People still died. Treatments failed. New diseases appeared. Longer life created questions about inheritance, leadership, population, memory, and meaning. Some feared a world ruled indefinitely by the old. Term limits became more important, not less. Education became lifelong in literal rather than promotional terms.

Donald accepted treatment after insisting that his participation would inspire confidence. Scott accepted later after accusing Donald of using medical science as a campaign event.

"You wrote the chapter on radical life extension," Donald said.

"I didn't include a press conference."

"That's why you needed me."

Interplanetary expansion began with robotic construction on the Moon, orbital habitats, and a joint Mars mission whose crew represented countries that had once aimed missiles at one another. The project was not sold as escape from Earth. The compact required every unit of off-world investment to support related terrestrial technology: recycling, energy storage, closed-loop agriculture, and emergency medicine.

Humanity would not earn the stars by abandoning the street.

Before the first crewed launch, Scott and Donald visited the spacecraft. Its hull carried no single national emblem. Instead, near the hatch, engineers had installed a small brass circle divided by an open line - three corners of a square, incomplete at the lower left. Scott recognized the symbol from one of his old campaign designs: a structure deliberately left open for entry.

"Who approved that?" he asked.

Donald smiled. "The branding committee."

Inside the vessel, a navigation display tracked Earth time. Scott removed Fagin's watch. Its hands now moved, though imperfectly, gaining and losing seconds as old mechanisms do.

"We fixed it," Donald said.

Scott listened to the ticking. "No. We gave it conditions in which it could work."

The launch carried people beyond Earth. The greater achievement remained below: fewer wars, fewer hungry children, longer healthy lives, and institutions that had begun measuring success by problems ended rather than programs maintained.

Civilization 2.0 was not a destination. It was a change in what humanity rewarded.

For the first time, the future seemed less like a territory to conquer than a household everyone would have to learn to share.

EPILOGUE

The Bowl

Years after the compact, the old workhouse bowl sat in a museum of Civilization 1.0 beneath glass and careful light.

The label explained parish relief, child labour, hunger, punishment, and the scandal caused by a boy who requested a second portion. School groups stood before it with the bafflement of people examining a cruelty their own world had made difficult to imagine and had not yet made impossible to repeat.

Scott and Donald visited without announcement.

They had aged, though more slowly than previous generations. Donald still entered rooms as though they had been waiting for him. Scott still inspected the fire exits.

A class gathered nearby. The children had spent the morning studying the transition from scarcity management to abundance governance. Their teacher asked what lesson the bowl contained.

"That people used to be mean," one child said.

"Sometimes," the teacher replied. "But is that enough?"

Another said, "They thought there wasn't enough."

A third answered, "There was enough, but the rules put it in the wrong places."

Scott glanced at Donald.

"Engineer," Donald whispered.

The class moved to a reconstruction of a communal kitchen. As part of the exhibit, children prepared soup from ingredients grown in the museum's rooftop greenhouse. They served visitors, then ate together at long tables.

A small boy noticed Scott and Donald standing apart. He filled a bowl to the brim and carried it toward them with both hands.

"Which one of you is Oliver?" he asked.

Scott looked at Donald. Donald looked at Scott.

"Both, sometimes," Scott said.

"And which one is the Dodger?"

Donald smiled. "Also both, sometimes."

The child considered this, apparently satisfied that adults remained unnecessarily complicated. He offered them the bowl.

Scott accepted it. The soup was hot, abundant, and ordinary - which was the point of everything.

The child looked back at the kitchen, where full pots remained and more visitors were arriving. Then he raised his voice with the solemn courage of a boy addressing authority.

"Please, sir," he said, holding out the brimming bowl, "who shall I give the rest to?"

TWO ORPHANS. TWO PATHS. ONE DESTINY.

Charles Dickens gave the world two unforgettable boys.

One showed that goodness could survive hardship. The other proved that intelligence could survive it.

But what if their stories did not end in Victorian London?

The Two Boys imagines Oliver Twist and Jack Dawkins - the Artful Dodger - receiving something neither truly possessed: a stable home, a different name, and a second chance. Oliver is raised by the practical Gilbert household in Canada and becomes Scott, a systems-minded reformer determined to redesign institutions that profit from failure. Jack enters the ambitious American household of a real-estate builder named Fred and becomes Donald, a master of negotiation, branding, spectacle, and political disruption.

Raised in poverty and wealth, compassion and competition, the two boys become powerful businessmen and controversial political figures. Their paths separate for decades - until an emergent superintelligence, a forgotten brass button, and a stopped pocket watch bring them together in 2027.

Scott can describe Civilization 2.0. Donald can force the world's most powerful institutions to consider it. Neither can build it alone.

Blending Dickensian social criticism with optimistic speculative fiction, *The Two Boys* explores money, power, respect, friendship, artificial intelligence, the end of war, radical life extension, and humanity's expansion into the universe.

Can civilization be redesigned so that no Oliver must beg and no Dodger must steal?

Some stories end with "happily ever after." This one begins there.

SCOTT GILBERT