

FLIPSIDE:
A FUTURE STORY OF A LIFE GONE STRANGE

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ABSTRACT

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by Jonathan Bourgault

The project of this creative thesis revises drafts of Parts One and Two (70-90 pages) of a draft of a 250-page novel. The revisions will establish substantial philosophical and psychological foundations for two moral versions of the novel's protagonist, Paul Wyatt, a process that will add foundational childhood events and expositional scenes set in the "present" of the story. These additions will also reveal a more complex relationship between Paul and the supporting characters, many of whom will play substantial roles in Part Three of the novel, including Ameenah and her revolutionary Shinning Sun allies, and antagonists such as Mitsuo Takahashi and Jonathan Lanard. The thesis project will also focus on providing a more robust scientific and historical background for the universes from which the two versions of Paul originate. These will include more elaborated descriptions of the future technologies and societies that the novel depicts. Finally, an introduction will review 1) the literary influences on the author, 2) the author's theory of fiction, which will include 3) an elaborated summary of the author's "poetics" for fiction—especially for 4) the fiction of this particular thesis. A short epilogue will summarize the major events of Part Three, which, although written, was not included in the scope of the creative thesis project.

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FLIPSIDE

INTRODUCTION

Science fiction is philosophical due in large part to the genre's ability to provide social commentary from a futuristic or near-future perspective. Such critique results in many science fiction works being limited by the respective philosophies each propagates. Few works truly embrace the more troubling societal problems they intend to critique, instead suggesting a rather simplistic idealism filtered through a veil of speculative technology and hypothetical social arrangements. Even worse, many works suffer from a tendency toward closure, despite writers' attempts to reflect post-modern influences. This is true of both "soft" and "hard" sci-fi, excluding alternate history-based narratives, which have rapidly emerged as an intriguing, highly literary sub-genre. Some examples of "space opera," which rely much more heavily on fantasy tropes than their more strictly-defined genre counterparts, occasionally engage in social commentary although their goal is often more limited to entertainment than their more reality-based counterparts. While science fiction from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century should be excused for its status as a relic of its respective time period, the genre's continued growth and literary integrity depends on works that confront present society in relevant ways. This does not mean simply avoiding social commentary, however.

The best science fiction of the late twentieth-and early twenty-first century should interrogate society while avoiding vague spiritual answers or heavy-handed idealistic solutions to complex problems that have defined and limited human progress for millennia. Rather than instructing the reader in "how things should be," many of the best science fiction works pose such troubling questions as "Can we really do things any other

way? And if not, what does this mean for our existence?” In the last three decades, many authors have successfully deconstructed their target genres—Cormac McCarthy’s treatment of the American Western (*Blood Meridian*, 1985), Toni Morrison’s historical narrative (*Beloved*, 1987), and Don DeLillo’s reinvention of the Great American Novel (*Underworld*, 1997) are just a few. Science fiction must undergo a similar transformation. One way to do this is to go beyond the domestic genre and incorporate elements of comedy and the absurd, a strategy that has worked well yet must remain at the forefront of science fiction as authors begin to tackle uniquely twenty-first century problems. Furthermore, these new works of science fiction must retain their entertainment value and readability, two traditional attractions of the genre that will ensure a more deeply engaged audience and a wider demographic of readers.

My novel, *Flipside*, is an action-heavy yet character-centric, dystopian work of science fiction insinuated with post-modern sensibilities. It is intended to be dangerous and disturbing; it is also meant to be funny and cathartic—a manic, diction-damaged expression of frustration for a jilted generation of over-educated, socially apathetic, consumer-driven progeny of broken homes. Despite its rather traditional narrative structure, *Flipside* is thoroughly postmodern in its poetics. The catharsis comes not from a slavish devotion to Aristotelian genre convention, but rather in the account of the destruction of an alienating reality delivered via the righteous hand of a fallen hero. The novel takes care to employ and appropriate its genre influences, for it is these influences that provide the literary prototype for its parody. Thematically, *Flipside* follows in the tradition of dystopian science fiction works of political and sociological critique such as Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We* (1921), Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), George

Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), Steven King's *The Running Man* (1982) and Joe Haldeman's *Forever Peace* (1997) while retaining many of the settings and themes found in more technologically inspired sci-fi such as Robert Heinlein's *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* (1966), William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1985), Geoffrey A. Landis' *Mars Crossing* (2000), Kim Stanley Roberson's *Mars Trilogy* (1992-1996) and perhaps most directly Ben Bova's "Grand Tour" series (1993-2008). Philosophically, *Flipside* can be seen as a twenty-first century update to Phillip K. Dick's *Ubik* (1969) and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), Douglas J. Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979) and Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano* (1952), each of which complicates traditional dystopian legacy by adding elements of absurdism and black comedy. Like all socially relevant works of science fiction, *Flipside* is a product of its time period—early twenty-first century America. From its inception, the novel was intended as much more than a simplistic futurist update of Plautus's *The Brothers Menaechmus* comedy-of-errors formula, but rather a deconstruction and re-sectioning of dystopian sci-fi themes and tropes—an endeavor that revises the genre while still critiquing contemporary American society. The genre still needs a truly transformative successor to these early twentieth century dystopian works, for much of the dystopian fiction produced in the last 25 years remains rooted in modernist concepts of social transformation and revolution, or based on clichéd tropes established by older works of dystopian fiction. Although *Flipside* features very familiar although exaggerated political and social commentary on such topics as terrorism, consumerism, religious extremism and environmentalism, the protagonists'

journeys follow a much more morally ambiguous path than many of its genre counterparts.

In many aspects, *Flipside*'s narrative tone owes just as much to non-genre contemporary authors such as David Foster Wallace (*Infinite Jest*, 1996, *Oblivion*, 2004), Christopher Moore (*Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff*, 2002, *Fool*, 2009) and Chuck Palahniuk (*Fight Club*, 1996, *Choke*, 2001), authors whose works often enact the absurdity of human existence, eschewing contrived resolutions in favor of focusing more on the complex, shifting relationships among characters. *Flipside* also often embraces the absurd as an escape from the narrow rationality of a venal bureaucratic, economic and political system. However, rather than producing a shifting constellation of multiple characters who struggle to make sense of their world, *Flipside* focuses on the journey of one individual as he finds himself adrift in and outside the framework of his reality—an existentially irreconcilable situation made describable only by the unique perspective enabled by familiar science fiction tropes.

Characterization and Conflict

Although *Flipside* features many aspects of more traditional, adventure-driven science fiction, particularly in Part Three, the novel's most crucial conflict remains fundamentally rooted in the internal struggle of Pauls A and B. The primary goal of Parts One and Two, aside from establishing the two parallel universes, lies in presenting the two distinct versions of the novel's protagonist. Both versions are products of their environments, the personalities of each determined—and limited—largely by the cultural signifiers that constitute the referential framework of each version's reality. The Paul of Part One (Paul A), who grows up in a violent, polluted, socially Darwinistic industrial

wasteland, presents a personality who is entitled, petty and narcissistic to the extreme. These character traits are the legacy of his troubled relationship with his emotionally distant father, John Wyatt, an Oedipal figure on whom Paul has unconsciously based most of his life even as Paul's hatred for the world his father helped create maddens him. While Paul may at first appear to be a reluctant anti-hero in the mold of genre counterparts such as Joe Haldeman's William Mandella (*The Forever War*, 1974) or Dan Simmons' Raul Endymion (*Endymion*, 1996), or perhaps even a soon-to-be-enlightened follower such as Bradbury's Montag (*Fahrenheit 451*, 1953), he lacks the capacity for the kind of psychological growth with which these characters are invested. Throughout the story, Paul A operates more along the lines of William Gibson's Henry Case (*Neuromancer*, 1985) although at no point in Part One do Paul A's actions produce societal change. Despite Paul A's attempts (which are feeble) to rebel in a morally traditional manner against the system that created him, there never comes a point of transformation or spiritual deliverance in Part One, nor can such profound growth plausibly occur given the circumstances of his upbringing. Paul A is incapable of escaping his reality. Instead he is literally whisked away to a "better" universe and replaced by Paul B, his morally and ethically superior counterpart, who soon finds his more nourished world view also insufficient to making sense of Paul A's reality. In many ways, Paul A is a twenty-second century adult version of Holden Caulfield—angry and rebellious, yet having neither the will nor the gumption to do much about it. Paul A's earlier resolution to change the course of his life soon gives way to cynicism and apathy, both of which serve as psychological defense mechanisms that fool him into thinking there is still a chance he may lead a more emotionally satisfying and socially rewarding

life. When opportunities to get back into the political arena do arise in the form of oppositional groups such as the “Greens” and “Shining Sun,” however, Paul A quickly recognizes them as part of the same system he attempted to rebel against in the first few chapters. Paul A sees through the revolutionary bravado of such groups, recognizing that they present an opportunity to merely replace one power structure with another, perhaps even more oppressive and morally corrupt. It is only through the intervention of Dave that Paul A is moved to get out of his green chair and take a chance with his life. This is because Paul A views Dave as a genuine individual who managed to overcome his own oppressive upbringing and make the system work to further his own goals. Upon reaching Mars, however, Paul A discovers that Dave, too, is driven by ulterior motives, a revelation that confirms Paul A’s earlier, cynical assessments that all human relationships are contrived and untrustworthy. When Kenji Takahashi’s forces descend upon the crashed spaceship on Mars, Paul A makes no serious attempt to save Dave, Susan or any of his other comrades. To do so would be a selfless choice that would override the self-absorbed survival instinct that seems to govern the actions of characters in his reality. In fact, it is not until the very end of the novel, after Paul A returns from Paul B’s reality, that he is able to show compassion, albeit in his own self-destructive, narrow-minded way.

Paul B exists as the antithesis to Paul A, possessing the psychological foundation necessary to value others who are not himself. In contrast to Paul A’s oppressive narcissism, the product of his expectation-filled yet emotionally hollow family upbringing, Paul B’s parents remain supportive and loving throughout his life, a behavior that Paul B must reproduce with his own wife and child. Part Two inventories Paul B’s

close personal relationships and his concern for others. The flashback sequences involving Paul B's parents further establish his emotionally supportive upbringing, a foundation of his reality that endures into his adulthood as he consults his parents—alive and married in this reality—prior to traveling to the site of the crashed ship where he will “jump” to Paul A's reality. While from a postmodern standpoint, Paul B's universe is no more authentic than that of Paul A, in it Paul B does not experience the feelings of existential emptiness and longing of his alternate reality counterpart. Paul B is content in his illusion of meaning up until the point where he enters Paul A's universe. Despite the obvious qualitative differences in universes, however, Paul B's reality is not intended to provide practical political or societal solutions for Paul A's world. In fact, the outcomes of Paul B's universe cannot be a possibility for Paul A's world, as each universe constitutes just one of the endless possible universes that would exist in one of the multi-universe or open universe models proposed by some branches of quantum physics.

Under the “many-worlds” interpretation initially postulated by physicist Hugh Everett (1957) and popularized by Bryce Seligman DeWitt (*The Many-Worlds Interpretation of Quantum Physics*, 1973), every possible circumstance is played out in an infinite number of universes. Like Paul A, Paul B can remain sane only in the framework that constitutes his native reality. Following the switch that occurs on Mars, however, Paul B is able to gain some measure of existential freedom by recognizing the arbitrary, inauthentic nature of his new reality, thus allowing him to undertake actions that his socialization process would normally prevent him from considering. In effect, he has stepped outside of his referential framework, inhabiting an alternate reality in which familiar cultural signifiers have lost their systemic influence. It is at this point that Paul B

begins to operate as a sociopath in his new reality, as he does not view his new surroundings as morally or emotionally binding. This process begins as soon as he enters the mirror reality, and it accelerates following the death of Dave and the failed reunion with Julia. With the notable exception of Rachel, and to a lesser extent, Ameenah, Paul B does not even feel a connection to other human beings in Paul A's reality, as they are merely bastardized versions of people he was familiar with in his native reality. Despite Paul B's descent into sociopathic behavior, however, the reader is meant to sympathize with Paul B, as he originates from a reality grounded in a morally sympathetic, humane universe. When he lashes out against Paul A's enemies, he is striking out against the inhuman absurdity that Part One illustrates. Paul B also lashes out against traditional science fiction tropes, when the prototypical science fiction "good guys" reveal themselves to be just as petty and dangerous as the stereotypical "evil" corporate / industrial complex they seek to overthrow. In Paul B's new reality (Paul A's), the environmentalists and oppressed ethnic minorities pose just as much of a threat as Takahashi and his goons. In this world, there is no moral order. Furthermore, unlike his alternate reality counterpart, Paul B's supportive, stable upbringing has instilled in him the courage and moral agency to take action even at the risk of his personal safety, a step that Paul A repeatedly avoids. By the time Paul B joins the cause of Shining Sun, however, the memories of his former reality seem almost dream-like, yet he pushes onward, determined to regain his former life at any cost, even if it means destroying himself and those around him. In almost every conceivable way, Paul B becomes Paul A throughout the course of Part Three. Eventually, he nearly surpasses his counterpart in moral failure and selfish drive. Ironically, this transformation occurs because Paul B is a

better man than Paul A, for it is Paul B's moral and ethical superiority that ultimately creates the psychological factors necessary to give his fall from grace meaning.

Like many science fiction characters, including such post-modern icons as Phillip Dick's Rick Deckard (*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, 1968) and William Gibson's Henry Case (*Neuromancer*, 1985), Paul A and Paul B engage in a hopeless quest to reconcile the apparent randomness and Darwinian attributes of Paul A's universe. However, as in the post-modern prospect, this search for meaning and authenticity leads to frustration, as the desire for authentic experience originates in the idealism that remains at odds with the laws of their physical existence. Even worse, this self-absorbed quest for meaning further isolates both versions of Paul from potential avenues of psychological healing, as they turn their search inward—a shift in perspective that further adds to their feelings of existential shallowness. Indeed, Paul A's and Paul B's human relationships provide perhaps the most authentic aspect of their lives, despite their refusal to recognize the importance of these relationships in their quest to find meaning and authenticity in the reality of Paul A. Paul A's inability to adapt to Paul B's reality reinforces this behavior, as he finds it impossible to tolerate a loving family and supportive friends despite his desire for them while in his native reality. Furthermore, Paul A's refusal to embrace Paul B's reality motivates him to his return to his own world in the latter chapters of Part Three, just in time to assist Paul B in his own bid to return home.

Supporting Characters

In particular, the female relationships introduced in Part One offer Paul A his best chance at finding some semblance of existential comfort during his journey, although

Paul A remains quick to dismiss the females in his life with the misogynistic bravado propagated by his father and his corporate cronies. Paul A is much more willing to trust in his male companions, even Bill, who is perhaps even shallower and more self-absorbed. Paul A characterizes his male relationships with Bill and Dave as a form of camaraderie. From Paul A's viewpoint, only they can understand his suffering—this despite his male friends' ability to get him into trouble. He is simply unwilling to see the value in his female relationships even though they seem to understand Paul A better than he understands himself. Early flashbacks reveal Paul A's mother as driven by the same existential quandaries as her son, a spiritual quest that leads her away from John Wyatt, toward the Greens and radicals living at the fringes of society. Despite her attempts to influence Paul A, however, she succeeds only in distancing herself from her son, as he remains driven by a desire to please his father above all else. Following Paul A's exodus from political power, Ameenah emerges as yet another potential bastion of spirituality and some measure of humanity. Unlike Julia, whom Paul A identifies as "a cold, heartless bitch" who readily accepts the Darwinian brutality of her world, Ameenah offers love and compassion, even when Paul A flatly refuses to join Anwar Haandi's political and religious crusade. Paul A regards Ameenah as crazy since she does not share the ideals of his father, an ironic and hypocritical stance considering that Paul A himself recognizes the severe existential limitations of such a world outlook. Rachel, who is more distant and sexually off-limits prior to Dave's death in Part Three, also exhibits more understanding and compassion, traits that she displays in both realities. She is the only other character from Paul A's reality whom Paul B shows actual concern for by the end of the novel. This is the reason why he insists that she accompany him to his native

reality, despite the fact that this will result in two versions of Rachel living in the same reality.

The repeated appearances of Jesus in Paul A's and Paul B's dreams serves to connect the two realities and perhaps suggest the existence of a meta-universe in which events proceed according to a physical and chronological model. However, it remains (intentionally) unclear whether the appearance of Jesus indicates the presence a higher power, a problem complicated by the fact that the novel's Jesus appears only as a hippie-like, profanity-spewing, fast food worker of the Jesus Burger variety. Clearly, this Jesus originates in Paul A's reality. His appearance in Paul B's reality could merely suggest an underlying psychic connection between the two realities. However, the possibility remains that the presence of Jesus indicates that there is a higher power at work in the universe, and that this higher power has indeed "fucked up" in its handling of Paul A's reality, which is where Paul B's job comes into play. Jesus appears at key points in the narrative to ensure that Pauls A and B switch places, an event that leads to the destruction of Paul A's world and to his possible redemption at the end of the novel.

The characters portrayed in Paul B's reality do not receive the same detail and attention as their A universe counterparts since they occupy comparatively small parts of *Flipside's* narrative. Ultimately, the supporting characters of Part Two function as foils to those in Parts One and Three, serving to provide a contrast between the two worlds. Indeed, by the end of the novel, Paul B's friends and loved ones appear as little more than a fleeting memory amid the violence of his new reality. Of all the characters in Part Two, Julia and Bill provide perhaps the most stunning contrasts between the two worlds. Whereas Paul A essentially defines Julia as a female version of his father, Paul B's Julia

is a caring wife and mother, providing Paul B with a child that does not exist in Paul A's reality. Similar to Paul B's loving parents, his daughter Anna ensures that Paul B remains psychologically grounded in his native reality, instilling in him a sense of purpose and meaning that Paul A lacks. On the other hand, the presence of Bill in Paul B's reality simply serves to demonstrate what Paul A's friend could be in a world not governed by political and economic brutality. By removing Anna from the narrative altogether, and by placing Paul B amidst drastically altered versions of friends and loved ones such as Bill and Julia, Paul B loses the most crucial component of his referential framework, setting him adrift in a chaotic reality he must find devoid of meaning or purpose.

Setting

The settings of Paul A's and Paul B's realities borrow liberally from other science fiction works. The universe of Paul A is purposely modeled on familiar works of dystopian science fiction, chiefly the environmentally-ravaged industrial wastelands of Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) and Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1985). Paul A's world does not feature a monolithic power structure or police state as in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) or Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), but a more chaotic, individualized tyranny brought about by social inequity and an overly ravenous capitalistic system that fully embraces the social Darwinism of America's Gilded Age. Historically, *Flipside's* twenty-second-century Chicago can be viewed as a more extreme, futuristic version of 1890s New York, complete with corrupt social and political institutions, sprawling slums, and brewing social unrest. Outside of the city, we see a more apocalyptic setting, falling somewhere on the literary spectrum between David Brin's *The Postman* (1985) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006).

The universe of Paul B on the other hand can be described as somewhat utopian—although not to the extent of Aldous Huxley’s *Island* (1962). Paul B’s society is driven by a desire to better the human condition without submerging human identity. The closest genre comparisons can be made to the technological wonderlands of Arthur C. Clarke’s *The Fountains of Paradise* (1979) and Isaac Asimov’s *Foundation Series* (1951 – 1993) although the deus ex machina that could lead to such drastic technological and social advances remains unnamed in the universe of Paul B. While it is by no means free of danger, Paul B’s reality features a world in which the economic, social and environmental problems of the twenty-first century have largely been solved, thus creating a more functional society in which people enjoy access to resources without having to forcibly fight for them. This balance is reflected in Paul A’s descriptions of New York City, which reveal an environmentally-sustainable metropolis that coincides with the natural beauty of Central Park and other organic landmarks.

Mars remains largely the same in both works, its surface relatively untouched thanks to the early stages of colonization in both realities. However, the character of human involvement with the planet differs between the two realities. The structures and operations in Paul A’s world reflect a more industrial-minded goal, with Takahashi’s mining operations threatening to push the Greens off planet. In contrast, the Martian colony governed by Paul B suggests a more long-term plan for scientific study and colonization. Much of the technology and physical descriptions of the landscape bear resemblance to Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Mars* trilogy (1992 -1996) and Geoffrey Landis’ *Mars Crossing* (2000), both of which feature a high degree of scientific verisimilitude.

Plot Structure

Structurally, *Flipside*'s first two parts exist largely to contextualize and facilitate the action in Part Three, which narrates the moral corruption and eventual rebellion of Paul B. The narrative intentionally telegraphs crucial plot points with the goal of highlighting the process that creates and modifies both versions of Paul. This narrative tactic is quasi-tragic in a classical sense, since the audience knows the outcome ahead of time and subsequently watches how the character gets from point A to point B, or in this case, Paul A to Paul B. Kurt Vonnegut uses this method quite effectively in *Cat's Cradle* (1963), *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969), and *Breakfast of Champions* (1973). Without its colliding narratives, *Flipside* would remain yet another "disenchanted-protagonist-rebels-against-faceless-monolithic-corporate-power-structure-of-the future story" in which said protagonists inevitably finds meaning in life while bringing positive change to a beleaguered world. Following Part Two, the narrative returns to Paul A's reality for the rest of the novel, with Paul A reappearing at the end of Part Three following several months spent in Paul B's reality; therefore, Part One, which introduces the reality that is featured in Part Three, comprises a robust portion of the book in comparison to Part Two, which is relatively short by comparison. The majority of the characters and conflicts encountered by Paul B in Part Three first appear in Part One. This parallelism allows the reader to directly contrast the actions of Paul A and B, thus highlighting the differences in character between the two. Ultimately, the novel's narrative effectiveness in Part Three relies on Paul B's reaction to the frustrations that plague Paul A in Part One, a conflict that can only provide catharsis if Paul A's reality is sufficiently outlined in the initial chapters. Part One introduces all of the main characters and conflicts: Paul A's corporate

and political enemies, his dysfunctional family and personal relationships, the societal conflicts, even seemingly minor and ridiculous aspects of his world such as the cybernetic monkeys, Jesus Burger franchises, and Julia's sexual deviance. When Paul B wanders blindly into these potential conflicts in Part Three, the reader is already well aware of the looming disasters that await—knowledge that helps build suspense and adds to the darkly comedic tone of Part Three. To keep these things a mystery until Part Three would be to experience Paul A's world more through Paul B's eyes, which is not the intent. Although Paul B narrates Part Three, the reader is already socialized in Paul A's world, which makes Paul B's exasperation funnier and more entertaining.

Narrative Voice and Style

The manipulation of narrative voice constitutes another important tool for charting the psychological processes that result in the two versions of Paul. Far from the detached, clinical narrators of Fitzgerald and Hemingway, Paul A's manic first person narrative reveals that from his perspective, there is no world outside of Paul. He is a narcissistically-absorbed reality unto himself. Paul A's incessant attempts to define and deconstruct his life throughout the course of Part One underscores his need to make sense of his reality, which from his standpoint should facilitate his psychological and physical needs better than it does. The narrative voice and style of Part One serve to underscore Paul A's obsessive, conflicted personality. Unlike Paul A, Paul B's narrative in Part Two remains extrinsic and measured, his focus staying on his family and those around him rather than himself. As a result of Paul B's rather orthodox narrative voice, Part Two reads like more of a traditional science fiction novel than the post-modern influenced narratives of Part One and especially the latter chapters of Part Three. This is intentional

and conveys the inevitable changes that occur in Paul B over the course of the novel. As Part Three unfolds, the narrative voice of Paul B gradually begins to assume the traits of Paul A's narrative. These similarities include everything from his tone, to his syntax and diction, all of which assume the characteristics—colorful profanity and intense preoccupation with his current mindset included—of his Part One counterpart. By the time Paul B re-enters the city to contact Julia, his narrative voice has become almost indistinguishable from Paul A's, a fact that demonstrates he has psychologically become the same person as Paul A. Paul B's narrative voice continues to change in the final chapters until it is even more profane, cynical and self-absorbed than Paul A's. Even after Paul B returns to his native reality, the epilogue suggests that the changes in Paul B have long-lasting effects on his world.

Message

Flipside ends with the physical destruction of Paul A's world. By the time the narrative reaches its conclusion, Paul B has come full circle as a character, ending in the same psychological state that his predecessor inhabits at the beginning of the novel. One of the core psychological and philosophical issues at stake in *Flipside* is the issue of nature versus nurture, with the book ultimately backing the nurture viewpoint. Despite the return of each Paul to his native reality, it is clear that the experience of living in each other's world has fundamentally changed both. Ultimately, the fact that both versions of Paul can change suggests that changing the human condition remains possible, despite the strongly deterministic tone of the narrative. Given a certain set of circumstances, the novel suggests that Paul A could become a better man; however, his native reality makes it extremely difficult for him to accomplish this because it continually reinforces his

selfish behavior. It is only after he experiences Paul B's reality that Paul A is able to see outside himself, although he clearly disdains his counterpart's world. Ultimately, Paul B has to switch worlds to facilitate the action that Paul A cannot, while Paul A has to switch worlds to learn the meaning of sacrifice in preparation for his role as the story's martyr. Clearly, both personality outcomes potentially exist since Paul A and Paul B are biologically identical. From a theoretical standpoint, there should be an infinite number of variations of Paul Wyatt running around the multi-universe construct, each displaying varying degrees of the tendencies exhibited by the two versions depicted by the narrative. By presenting two personalities that differ so greatly, however, the novel better exposes how drastically environmental effects can shape the human condition.

Flipside: A Future Story of a Life Gone Strange

by Jonathan Bourgault

CHAPTER I

NOT THE FIRST FAILURE

My plan materializes as I watch the battle unfold. The vicious little primates shriek wildly as they struggle to keep their heads above the rising flood of excrement. A familiar feeling of shame hits me as I remind myself that I too am an angry, shit-throwing primate. The only difference is that I've run out of shit to throw. This realization doesn't make me feel better. It just makes me hate myself a little more.

During the election we called 2142 the "Year of Change," like that line actually meant something. Fifty million people packed into a living space good for half that number—a rat's nest of grimy neon and decay. It's like something out of a bad sci-fi novel. If I went back in time and wrote a book about this shit, they'd call it clichéd. Too bad it's our world. Terrorism, civil unrest, pollution: Chicago's candidate Paul Wyatt has the solutions.

What a fucking load of shit.

All the important people know that the men seated around me win the elections, both for the city council members and for the mayors. My father understood this system and exploited it in his favor. I on the other hand am not my father, and I foolishly vowed long ago to commit political suicide rather than follow in his footsteps—which makes it especially fucked up that I turned into a half-assed version of my old man. Too bad it took me this long to realize that my entire career has been focused on trying to eclipse a man that I hate by pretending to care about a city that nobody loves.

Now I know why Mom gave up.

I stare down at the swirling patterns in the oak table we're seated around. In some cultures, the oak tree was actually a symbol of wisdom and strength, which means the one in this room died for nothing. I wonder for a moment how fast it would burn.

"Wyatt!" I hear, as I finally look up. It's Reverend Jonathan Lanard, the head of the Covenant church, the largest religious sect in the nation. He began his church with the billions made from his fast food chain Jesus Burger. The Divinity Dog, Salvation Shake, Crucifixion Crunchwrap, and the Messiah Malt—all Lanard's heavenly creations. I quickly look down at my own half-devoured lunch and read: "Enjoy your Prophet's Popcorn Chicken: Jesus loves you!" It's fucking ingenious. No wonder Lanard has more money than God.

Today the Reverend is pissed because a bunch of fanatics blew up one of his churches down by the Old Waterfront. He thinks it's one of the jihadist Muslim sects that infest this city, which is definitely possible. Lanard's been trying to push into the Muslim neighborhoods for years, mostly by building Jesus Burger franchises close to the Mosques. Fucking can't blame the response.

I'd like to kill Lanard, too.

Better to reign in Hell than eat at Jesus Burger, or something like that. Here I've been trying to keep this city together, and all the Reverend can do is spread his own apocalyptic bullshit via combo meals. "I can't just roll the security forces in there and start shooting," I say. "It'll only make the problem worse."

To illustrate my point, I reach into my Jesus Burger bag and pull out my dessert: Angel Bites—colored chocolate candies shit from the blessed rectums of God's holy minions. I open the small box and dump the rainbow of treats onto the table, a move that

earns me strange stares, even from the augmented simian unit whose task it is to take notes for this meeting. The monkey in the corner stops typing for a moment as it senses the confusion, his shiny metal brain-cap no doubt feverishly trying to formulate some sort of rationale for my odd display. To think, they used to pay humans for that kind of job.

“Look,” I say. “I’ll make this simple. See the green candies?”

Lanard looks puzzled. “Yeah.”

“Well, they’re fucking up this box of Angel Bites, so we want to get rid of them. Now, if I take my time and pluck them out one by one, eventually, I’ll get them all. But, if I try getting them like this,” I say, abruptly slamming my fist down into the pile. “What happens? Sure I got a green one, but I smashed all of the other candies around it. Now the brown ones and red ones are pissed too. Get it?”

I lean back and toss one of the smashed bites into my mouth, hoping that candy can convey the complexities of counterterrorism to a fucking imbecile.

Lanard seems to snap out of some confused trance. “Wha-? What the fuck are you talking about, Wyatt? We’re talking about terrorists here. Eat dessert on your own time. If you would have just implemented that proposal I sent you last month, we could have avoided this problem.”

Apparently, the division of security forces I sent to the Old Waterfront wasn’t proactive enough for the Reverend. He wants bodies.

“Wyatt, it just doesn’t seem like you can handle your responsibilities,” Mitsuo Takahashi adds. Takahashi owns most of the manufacturing plants in the city, not to mention several key mining facilities on the Moon and Mars. Out of all the men seated at the table, he may be the worst, because unlike the others, he delivers his disapproval in a

calm, malice-free tone that lulls you just long enough to let him tear your nuts off. I've fallen for this trick before and am ready for him. He should be nicer to me. After all, it's my job to make sure that no do-gooders decide to prosecute him for the dozens of crimes his company commits in this city every day. The worst part of this arrangement is that Takahashi controls most of my father's former corporate empire, which begs the question: how the fuck did I end up being his bitch?

One problem is that I've always tried to save my ass in the past, and yet here we sit again. It's time I choose a different route. "I don't know how you really expect me take any of this shit seriously."

"What?" Lanard asks.

A small voice in my mind tells me to stop now. I like my expensive cars and suits. If it wasn't for my whore of a wife, I'd probably like my expensive house, too. But I say it anyway: "Maybe if you got the hell off my ass for a week or two and let me just run my city, I could fix things, but right now we're effectively fucked. That's how you boys like it, right? Effectively fucked?"

"So it's our fault that you can't manage the security situation?" Lanard asks. I can tell the other CEOs and government bureaucrats want to throw some verbal feces across the table, but the Reverend usually throws enough for the whole group.

"Right now I can't manage shit. Not with our current budget and over a hundred registered terror groups to watch. We've made cuts to every major public service in the city, and we still can't find most of the terror cells. Ever since the city council slashed the corporate tax again, we've been bleeding money."

“We pay enough,” Takahashi chimes in. “We provide the jobs and most of the private security in the business sectors. We’ve spent millions this quarter alone making up for the deficiencies of the police. My companies are not charities, and I’m sure my colleagues at this table would agree.”

They all nod.

“Well, I just had to shut down the last public school this week—not that you care.”

“Good riddance,” Lanard says. “Inefficient and poorly run from the start.”

“Really? Well, I guess we can just send all the kids down to Jesus Burger to get them some Bible-learnin’ while the size of their fat asses grows in proportion to their stupidity,” I say.

“Look, you know who’s causing the problems in this city, you fucking idiot!” the Reverend yells, his fat form almost tipping the chair. “Things are getting worse because you don’t have the balls to make examples. Don’t you know they’re working together now? The Greens. The ICLF. Shining Sun. The ARP. They’re building an army, and all you can do is bitch about cutting public services and trampling on the rights of a bunch of dirty terrorists. I don’t know whether your father would laugh or fucking cry.”

That’s it. He brought up daddy Wyatt. I’m sick of talking. It would be easier just to punch Lanard in the face, but I know this may get me permanently banned from Jesus Burger. Instead, I ask myself what Jesus would do. In a flash of divine inspiration, I quickly pluck a popcorn nugget out of the half empty container on the table and fling it at him. The greasy, sauce-coated soy chicken plops harmlessly off his fat gut and makes a sickening splat sound on his end of the table. “Let he who is without sin cast the first

nugget,” I say. “If you’ve got all the answers, why don’t you try running this fucking city?”

Nobody says a word. Thanks for the idea, Jesus.

After several seconds of shocked silence, I hear a stirring in the corner of the room. It’s Bill Collins, my chief aide and best friend. Bill too loves the lavish life my position grants, only he doesn’t have to sit at this table with these sadistic fucks. I wouldn’t be surprised if he hurls himself on the table at this point and offers an organ in an attempt to appease these dark, corporate gods. I won’t let him. If he does, I’ll finish him off with a quick pen jab to the head, which may be for the best. Bill is even more pathetic than I’ve been these past few months. It’s likely he won’t survive what I’m about to do to our political careers.

The Reverend, who is obviously still enraged as evidenced by his tomato-red face, breathes loudly through his nose and waddles over to the large window overlooking the city. “Come here, Mr. Wyatt,” he finally says, motioning with a chunky arm.

I look nervously at the guards posted on either side of the far door. Here’s where I get shot. I wouldn’t be the first rebellious mayor who mysteriously disappeared. In the past year alone, the mayors of Pittsburg and Houston took extended leaves of absence, which basically means they are lying face down in a ditch somewhere. I stand up anyway, intent on showing them that I’m not afraid. After all, I am the son of the Great John Wyatt, the heartless bastard who perfected this corporate-controlled mess we call a government.

These fucks should build a monument in my honor.

I walk over and take my place next to the Reverend, aware that the rest of the room is watching our backs. Outside sprawls my adopted home of Chicago, a pulsing monstrosity shimmering with lights, wrapped with elevated transport rails, and choking from the toxic fumes spewing from the forest of smokestacks that rise above the surrounding metal wilderness. The veiled sun is setting, and the deep golds and pinks almost make the twisted wreckage of civilization look pretty. In one generation, we've had two armed revolutions, three economic meltdowns and one long drought that killed off what was left of the North American ecosystem—not to mention small town America. And then there's New York, which is now a radioactive crater. For all its corruption and squalor, Chicago is a bastion of civilization in this shithole world. All we need now is a good flood or plague, and the Reverend will have his fucking apocalypse.

I notice that my portly prophet is now motioning with his head, down toward the streets I haven't walked on for months. "Window. Magnify by four," he orders the smart glass. I know what I'll see before the room even has time to adjust the window's settings: a large crowd of angry protesters who are here to pay me a visit courtesy of their portly spiritual leader. I know these sheep have been here all day—Bill told me this morning. They want something done about the Muslim problem.

"They demand decisive action," he says in a low, confident voice that jolts me out of my thoughts. "Are you the man to provide it, or were we mistaken in putting our faith in you?"

He's sermonizing, the dick.

“I’ve got decisive action,” I say. “Let’s just shoot those assholes down there and send some of the bodies to the Waterfront. That should keep the bombers happy for at least a week, don’t you think?”

No smile on his face.

No surprise on my part.

All I can think about right now is how badly I want a Blessed Burger with a side of Faithful Fries. I’d definitely go for the Savior Supersize combo, too. I need to start saving my money now that I’m going to be out of a job.

Suddenly, Takahashi motions for the guards to drag me out of the room. I won’t even have the chance to make a scene or fire off one of the million wonderful comebacks that have been brewing in my mind since this goddamn meeting started.

Fuck it. It’s not the first thing I’ve failed to do while in office.

The last thing I hear from the boardroom is the augmented simian typing my final words to my former bosses. I wonder if he bothered to include how they manhandled me. I’m sure he’ll leave out the part about my self-respect finally getting the better of me.

CHAPTER II

EXODUS OF AN ASSHOLE

My eyes scan Bill's stoic features as he enters the elevator and silently takes his place next to me. He's pissed. I think he wants to hit me. If he weren't such a pussy, he probably would. In an instant, I recklessly destroyed both of our careers without even consulting my oldest and most trusted friend. At least I could have resigned peacefully and maybe allowed him a chance to work for whatever jackass they replace me with by the end of the day.

I quickly conclude that Bill's opinion doesn't really matter anymore. He has always hidden behind me, afraid to face the consequences of his actions. I had a right to end his career. Like Reverend Lanard's God, I had a right to kick my creation out of Eden. The only problem is that I kicked myself out in the process.

I look down at my recycled cardboard box and wonder how many Jesus Burger containers died to hold my personal belongings. Ten, I decide. It's a small box. I never saw much need for dragging my personal life into the office. Maybe if I had kids it would be different, but I don't. *We* don't. A picture of a young Julia stares back up at me, her smile hiding the vengeful bitch that emerged in the last few years. Come to think of it, I don't think I have any recent pictures of her. It's embarrassment more than anything else—the way the genuine, loving smile gradually gave way to the robotic contortion of lips that replaced it. I reach into the box and turn the picture over. One failure at a time.

“She'll leave you,” Bill states coldly, kicking me while I'm down.

“So?” I laugh. This isn't a front. I really don't give a shit. If I return home to find a smoldering house and a dead carcass, it probably wouldn't faze me at this point. I used

to have this fantasy where aliens replaced Julia with some evil bitch android version, and that my real wife was locked somewhere aboard their spaceship awaiting rescue. These dreams were squashed one day when I returned home to find her screwing some other guy in her bed (That's right, we don't sleep together). I didn't break down or yell. I just walked into that sweaty, dank bedroom of lust, stared for a moment before turning around, and went for a walk around the block in a vain attempt to formulate another comforting fantasy about the woman I used to love.

Most people would divorce their cheating spouse, but not me. I've still got a little money to lose. Julia just published a book a couple months ago about how to maintain a marriage while being a successful career woman. It's sold a couple million copies. I've benefited from this profit and enjoy the money it provides: the basis of every successful marriage. To jeopardize the book's success with a divorce would be a stupid move, so instead I've been looking for another woman. Not some cheap affair, but someone who cares about the important shit. So far I haven't had any luck in the search.

Julia will probably leave me now anyway, regardless of the damage to her domestic credibility with her readers. Maybe she'll even become some sort of fucking messiah for every woman in the world who feels shortchanged by her husband. To think that she was raised with the notion that she would marry into the great Wyatt fortune only to witness it swept away in a series of bad choices—more my father's doing than mine.

Poor Julia.

“Kelli will leave you too. Needs money to support her habit and everything,” I add, paying Bill back for his unwelcome observation.

To my surprise, he gives the same beleaguered laugh that I do. I feel a sudden sense of camaraderie and remember why I've kept him around for so many years. He's the only one who's desperate enough to follow me. "Either way, I'll still be broke," he mutters.

I'm about to say something positive to Bill, something grateful about our friendship, when the elevator doors open, revealing two armed guards standing ready to escort us out of the building. "Let's go," the bigger one barks from beneath his black helmet. Before we have a chance to comply, both guards reach in and grab us by the arms.

"Hey," Bill manages to squeal as his free shoulder bumps against the open door. I remain quiet, strangely embarrassed by the many faces pretending not to stare at us as we're being dragged across the cold floor of the building's echoing main lobby. Most of these people probably know I'm the mayor, or at least was the mayor, and if they didn't they will once we're gone and the gossip begins. Tonight they'll all go home to their shitty apartments and tell the story of how the incompetent idiot Paul Wyatt made an ass out of himself while being kicked out of the building.

I see the giant glass doors rapidly approaching and decide to show a trace of backbone before being unceremoniously deposited into the unwashed masses. I know these guards have a hard-on for this type of situation, and it pisses me off.

"Get the fuck off of me!" I yell, spinning around so fast that I break my guard's grip. Unfortunately, the box I'm holding flies out of my hand too, spilling most of the contents onto the floor. Once again, Julia is looking up at me.

Neither guard says anything. They simply raise their assault rifles and take aim at my head. I now see guards on my periphery doing the same. No wonder none of the crazies ever busts in through the front door—they wouldn't make it ten feet. The civilians in the lobby watch, hoping to see me and Bill get splattered. Can't let that happen. These fuckers would love to mow us down and put their annual two weeks of weapons training to use.

Instead of pressing a physical attack, I angrily kick my box across the floor, figuring it's the best I can do without getting killed. The picture of Julia skates pretty far on the smooth, marble surface, striking a young, dumb-looking intern in the foot. I can tell he's an intern because of his suit. Mine costs twenty times what his does. I begin to back through the revolving glass, aware that the guards don't need much more provocation.

"What are you staring at?" I yell at a nice-looking young woman whose wide open eyes blink as she flinches and drops her briefcase. My childish sense of accomplishment immediately fades as the doors seal and the outside air fills my lungs. Shit—I realize my respirator was in the box. It's going to be a long walk to terminal. I bend over, close my eyes, and put my hands on my knees, hoping desperately that I can adjust to the change in atmosphere. The overwhelming comparison that comes to my mind is airborne piss—a warm, acrid fog that bathes everything in yellow.

I open my burning eyes to find Bill staring down at me, his black respirator covering the lower half of his face. He motions with callous eyes to a point behind me, so I stand up and follow his gaze. About ten feet away two more guards are approaching, their weapons pointed. Behind them stands a wall of black, holding back a sea of teeming

protestors. I remember that these people—these zealot bastards—are here for me, and I realize that my newfound freedom is going to get me killed before I have time to enjoy it. I try to dig my feet into the pavement as the guards drag us toward the screaming entanglement of people, and I brace myself for the coming blows. To my surprise, we are softly enveloped into their ranks. “Let go of them!” I hear several voices yell to the guards as friendly hands pat us down.

Bill begins to complain as he throws up his arms in defense.

“Wait,” I say, closing the gap between our faces. “They don’t know it’s us.”

Bill looks down as he processes this info. Suddenly, he thrusts his fist into the air toward the building behind us and screams “Burn in Hell, Wyatt!” He’s got the idea, but I don’t like how eagerly he calls for my eternal damnation. Maybe he’s still a little angry.

We dig a hole through the tangled mass of screaming zealots and poorly drawn posters— most of which do depict me in some state of eternal torture— and stumble into the torrent of people eddying down the street away from my former place of employment. It’s almost four. The additional flood of lower class workers who must travel home from work using the streets will make our journey difficult, and that’s assuming we don’t get robbed.

I stop and push myself up against the closest building. “Are we on Park?” I yell to Bill, who huddles beside me against the concrete wall. My eyes still burn, and it’s hard to read the corner street sign only a few meters away. Bill, who looks like he’s been traumatized from making physical contact with so many of what my father called “lowlings” quickly nods that we are indeed on Park.

“We should travel to the 37th street terminal,” I suggest. Aside from being the closest place where we can catch the skytram out of this hole, its location to the south of our position means that we won’t have to fight the current of people heading in the same direction. Bill understands and doesn’t hesitate to follow as I take a step into the moving crowd.

It’s not long before a steady rain starts to fall. This is good, since it’ll cool things off and clear the air. Unfortunately, it also makes the crowd I’m trying to keep pace with walk faster. It isn’t long before my small bubble of personal space gets penetrated from all sides as I turn into a human pinball.

My instinct is to push back against my countless assailants, but I stop myself. This is how most of my fellow citizens get home from work—alone and oblivious to the thousands of wet, tired bodies smacking stupidly together. A city full of lost souls just trying to get home from work so they can enjoy an hour or two of solace before going to bed and repeating the same sad cycle. I’d almost feel sorry for them if I didn’t feel so sorry for myself right now.

I look behind me and see that Bill doesn’t realize the need for this perpetual forward motion, chaotic as it may be. The frustration on his face is apparent, even under the outline of his breathing mask.

This isn’t going to end well.

Before I even have a chance to calm him down, Bill pushes a large figure in a long, dark trench coat. Unlike the two women he pushed before, Bill can't move this guy, this wall of a man almost twice his size. Without even looking at my friend, the dark figure quickly brandishes a collapsible baton and bashes Bill on the side of the head. I turn and try to fight the tide as I struggle to close the distance, but the attacker is gone in seconds, lost in an anonymous forest of wet trench coats and plastic umbrellas. The crowd parts slightly around Bill, who now lies like a rock in swirling rapids. For a moment I worry he's dead or unconscious, but as I reach him I see movement and hear a low moan.

Fitting—now Bill's physically broken as well as mentally. I pick up his small body and start dragging him through the crowd toward our destination. No sense in stopping here to check his wounds. We're more likely to get clubbed by another commuter just for being in the way.

After another hour or so of dragging Bill's carcass out of the city center, the crowds finally begin to break up and melt away into its darkening recesses. Out here the steel and glass superstructures give way to old buildings of brick and stone. Here, the city's personality hasn't yet been erased by the steel wool brush of my friends back in city hall. Before us lies a cultural mosaic pieced together by generations of struggle and pride. Too bad it's also a dangerous shithole where a wandering tourist is more likely to get shanked than inspired. I remember how often I had to send troops to this sector and regret not burning the damn place down before I had to walk through it at night. Now it's too late. Now I'm just another tourist, so I need to make sure I don't get knifed by some product of cultural and economic struggle.

Bill moans again about how far we're walking. I ignore him, instead swerving to avoid stepping in a puddle of acidic muck that collected on the sidewalk during the rain. I survey every dark alley, awaiting an attack. Too bad I'm not walking Julia down these streets. I could just throw her to the wolves and make my getaway.

"Paul, how much longer?" Bill whines again.

I'm still ignoring him. Maybe it would be better for him to just put his face down in that puddle and take a deep breath. Sometimes it's best to leave a wounded member of the herd behind. Bill's been wounded for quite a while now—like ten whole years. I'm just about to tell my best friend to shut the fuck up when my eyes catch the pale glow of the skytram station a couple of blocks down the street. I throw Bill against the wall of the nearest building, which appears to be some sort of ethnic restaurant, and clean him up enough to pass inspection with the skytram guards.

Minutes later I shiver uncontrollably as the station pummels me with clean, cool air. I'm still wet, not to mention tired and pissed off. Thankfully, the guards are too busy dealing with some obnoxious woman with a litter of screaming kids to take much notice of us. The weapon alarms didn't go off when we passed—that was enough for them.

The tram system in this city, like in most cities, is tiered according to class. The best neighborhoods, the ones located farthest from the city in pressure-controlled domes, are serviced from the highest trams, while the lower tiers service the shithole suburbs. The geniuses who designed city hall made sure to install a top-tier station in the building

to prevent gods like myself from having to dirty themselves among the mortals. The prototype system had been installed in New York by one of my father's companies, a way for the city's pantheon to fortify its ivory tower.

Understanding that there is no place for fallen gods in Chicago's pantheon, I contemplate bending down, putting my tongue on one of the tracks, and making a mess for the guards to clean up. Extra crispy, please. Instead, I forgo suicide via electrocution and grab a Savior Supersize combo before finding a nice seat on our designated car. It's empty, of course. Nobody who lives in my area would ever come to this place, not even to grab a day old burger. I look outward at the glittering city as it passes by and take a delicious grease-laden bite. At last I feel content.

Thanks again, Jesus.

CHAPTER III

PATHETIC LUMPS OF FLESH

When I was younger, I'd rarely dream about anything significant—just a jumble of images strung together by nonsensical transitions. In the last few months, I've started dreaming more about my past—vivid memories dredged from the depths of my subconscious. Maybe it's my mind's attempt to formulate a semi-coherent narrative that actually makes sense of my life.

Too bad I'm still confused as shit.

It looks like I'm about twelve years old, two years before my dad got himself elected mayor of New York and a decade before he and that city died their fiery death. I'm walking through Central Park with my mom and Julia, on our way to the Millennium Exhibition Center next to the old Belvedere Castle. The city built the Center a couple of decades before in an attempt to market the Park as a viable tourist draw, but it did little to prevent the new construction projects that at this point had whittled the strip of green down to its last pathetic 20 acres between The Lake and the Turtle Pond. Of course, we live in a nice penthouse overlooking what is left of the park, but on this night, my father's great power seems temporarily diminished by the magic of the Exhibition Center's spectacle: The last living whitetail deer.

As we move along with the throngs of spectators, I'm aware that my father would have a fit if he knew that we were out here with the *lowlings* inhabiting his city. Already, one of his companies is hard at work on New York's version of the skytram, and even at this young age I know that the system's completion will further separate royalty such as ourselves from those around us. Maybe this is why Mom makes a point to take me to

these kinds of events even though it pisses Dad off, or maybe it's simply her way of exerting some influence in a family ruled by a titan of industry. These are my adult thoughts, however, and in my dream I know only the childish exhilaration of the moment. I realize it's not the deer that excites me most, but rather the small hand that keeps tugging at my own as we wade through the masses.

Julia's hand.

I don't yet recognize this friendship for the arranged marriage that it is, but I do have a strong sense that we belong together—kindred spirits raised in a cold world of steel and concrete. The fact that her father is one of my father's closest business partners and political allies doesn't diminish my boyish love for her, nor will it when I come to realize why we've been paired together during every family outing. Right now all I care about is her beautiful brown hair and her deep soulful eyes that always seem to comfort me. No wonder Mom's gone along with this plan for my romantic future: she loves Julia, too.

We take our place in line as darkness envelopes what is left of the park. The pond reflects the millions of lights from the surrounding high-rises, creating a scintillating canvas of stars for those who can never see in the sky on account of the perpetual blanket of smog. The din of surrounding conversations creates an odd intimacy that allows us to enjoy the moment, free of the expectations or notoriety that will define our teenage and adult lives. At this point, Dad is becoming a household name, although we still have a few months of anonymity before our faces will be plastered across every viewscreen in the country during the coming mayoral race. Ever since the U.S. government in D.C. was dissolved, the New York mayor has widely been considered one of the most powerful

positions in the world, at least publically. The reality is that my father gained this power long before his election, as soon as he began buying and bullying politicians from Houston to Hong Kong.

“Isn’t this great?” Mom says in her soft voice.

“Yeah,” Julia and I both say, aware that she’s referring more to our temporary freedom than waiting in line. There’s an electric energy in the air that doesn’t exist in our indoor lives, where temperature and light are always controlled along with every other aspect of existence.

“Now just remember, even if you see something in there that doesn’t live up to your expectations, it’s important that you see it and remember it,” she adds.

“Ok,” Julia and I say, a bit confused.

“This will be the last deer ever—for all time, kids.”

“What about cloning? My dad says we’ll be able to make all kinds of animals whenever we want,” Julia says.

“It’s not the same, honey,” Mom says sadly.

“They’ll be real deer, though,” I say, eager to support Julia.

Mom bends down and looks me in the eye. Her face gets serious. “It’s important to understand that there’s a world out there that is separate from us, Paul. This deer comes from a world that wasn’t built or bought. It’s real—a genuine creature with a will of its own.”

“Ok,” I murmur. Mom’s always getting philosophical. Dad calls her a hopeless romantic, which I will soon learn is a dirty word in our household. The strange tone in her voice kills any further conversation for a few minutes, but by the time we reach the

bustling entrance to the Exhibition Center, Julia and I are back to laughing and joking about our small group of friends at Renaissance Prep academy, the most prestigious school in the city. I'm amazed by how quickly the stress of school fades as we stand in line and laugh at each other's stupid jokes. I also wonder how I got so lucky to have a companion like Julia all to myself.

Mom still seems distant, though, and after another two hours of waiting I see what she meant by things not living up to our expectations: through the thick glass enclosure we finally see the deer.

What a fucking joke.

Contrary to my wild fantasies conjured from a childhood full of shitty animal cartoons, this fat, bloated creature evokes nothing but disgust. It's simply lying there with its ass-end pointed at us while it stares emptily at the wall. No frolicking in the meadow. No twinkling eyes.

Few visible signs of life.

The only movement I can see is a constant shaking of the animal's head, like it's hooked up to an electrical current. Upon seeing this pathetic lump of flesh, Julia's smile abruptly fades and tears begin to run down her face. Despite a strong desire to turn away from the horrific sight, I force myself to look as my mom instructed. Around me, faces crowd the glass, struggling to get a better glimpse of the spectacle.

Outside the Center we stop for a moment as Mom gets her bearings and calls for a cab to pick us up. Julia is still crying, so I lean in and give her what is to become our first kiss. It's the awkward gesture of a prepubescent boy—another venture that doesn't live up to the expectations built by a media-saturated existence, and yet, Julia's pained face

suddenly turns into a smile, and for the first time I see what my mother meant when she said there were things in life that were genuine.

The scene shifts to later that night while I'm getting ready for bed. Julia went home over an hour before, and now I'm left alone to reflect upon the depressing scene at the Center. Despite the excitement of kissing Julia, everything feels wrong. Life seems wrong. Mom's words about things being genuine haunt me, and I wonder if I'm living a life that's real—if I'm a real creature like the deer or just an artificial creation controlled by another human's will. As if to answer my question, my father's deep voice suddenly reverberates through the ceiling. He's on the phone again, probably telling somebody in Asia that they're going to find themselves out of a job if they don't turn around their profit margins. I can't hear the details of the conversation, but I'm painfully aware of my father's predictable nature. Feeling the need to answer my burning existential questions, I decide to venture upstairs and get my father's take on the night's events, even if it means incurring his typical indifference or perhaps even his wrath. Already I have a good understanding of the man, and despite my occasional hatred for him, I find myself driven by an intense desire to succeed in his eyes.

I pass Mom's room on the way to the grand staircase leading up to my father's level of the penthouse. I wonder for a moment if she's lying in the dark, maybe crying about the state of her life. I'm not sure—Mom's become increasingly difficult to figure out. At times, she can be even more distant than my father, as if she's trying to nudge me

out of the nurtured, overly protected cocoon of youth. There are no sobs coming through the heavy wooden door to her room, however, so I trudge onward in search of answers, silently vowing never to repeat the mistakes of my parents.

My father is just shutting off the view screen as I stick my head into his cavernous office. Apart from the ever-present glow of computer screens and the city outside, the room is dark. I slip in quietly, watching as my father looks out at his city before abruptly slumping down into the chair behind his desk.

“D-Dad?” I sputter, gingerly entering the room.

“Yeah?” He looks up, obviously surprised. “Oh—Paul. Aren’t you supposed to be in bed?”

“Yeah.” I’m shuffling toward his desk, not quite sure how to voice my concerns in a way that won’t make me sound weak or foolish.

“Having trouble sleeping?”

I nod.

“Have a seat, son. What’s on your mind?”

“Well, we went down to the Exhibition Center ton-“

“I’m aware,” he cuts me off. “And I’m not happy with your mother right now. Do you know how many crazies are out in this city? I can think of a dozen terror groups that would love to hold you for ransom.”

I try to ignore his annoyed tone and continue my story. I tell him about what we saw at the Exhibition Center and about what Mom said before we went in.”

Dad sits back in his chair and listens for a couple of minutes, quietly parting his hands and bringing them back together in a rhythmic motion that tells me he’s listening.

“I-I guess I just felt sorry for the deer,” I finish awkwardly, hoping that I’ve made my point.

My dad chuckles and lets out a big sigh. “Well, son. I wouldn’t worry too much about what your mother said. She’s always had a different viewpoint on life than us.”

Us? My dad always says this when he’s talking to me, like we are in our own exclusive club of two. It’s an effective tactic for making me feel like we’ve got a close relationship, even if that has never been the case. “Yeah, but are we good people?” I ask.

“Paul, we’re the only kind of people that matter. Without us, there wouldn’t be a city out there or a deer you could feel sorry for. Those people down in that park would tear that deer to shreds if they could get through the glass, just to get a piece of it to sell on the black market. I think your mother sometimes feels guilty about the life we lead, but would you really want it to be different? Would you really want to be one of those mindless drones down there?”

I quickly realize that I don’t know any other kind of life than this, so I guess he’s got a point. The people we stood in line with certainly didn’t seem bad, but I also knew that I wasn’t one of them.

Dad continues: “Look, Paul. That other world that your mom referred to, the one that’s separate from us? It’s governed by survival of the fittest. You know that concept from school, right?”

I nod.

“Good, because whether your mother knows it or not, we are an extension of that law. You can either be the one on top calling the shots, or you can be just like everyone

else—just struggling to get by from day to day, unaware of the world around you.

Wouldn't you like to be the one controlling things? One of the people who matters?"

I nod again. I'm too young to work out all of the contradictions in his speech, not to mention the contradictions inherent to my existence as John Wyatt's son, but I'm filled with an overwhelming desire to avoid a fate in which somebody else controls my life.

Dad stands up, walks around the desk, and slaps me on the shoulder. Before I know it, he's gently herding me out of the room. "Besides, I wouldn't feel too sorry for that deer, Paul. The thing died a week ago. They just stuck a bunch of electrodes up its ass to finish out the exhibition. I'm surprised a kid as smart as you couldn't tell that. It's a good idea, really—keeping up the appearance that the thing is alive. Gotta give the masses something to hope for; even that stupid bastard Jonathan Lanard has that one figured out."

With that, the heavy doors close behind me, leaving me to wrestle with the horrors of reality in the darkness of the hallway.

CHAPTER IV

BURN THE FUCKER DOWN

“Honey, I’m home,” I whisper. The words drip out of my mouth like liquid malice.

I get into my house without a problem, meaning she hasn’t changed the locks yet. Maybe by some chance she hasn’t seen the news today.

The cold, granite mausoleum of our foyer is dark, but I can see a faint glow of light coming from the top of the stairs—most likely Julia’s room. She’s probably packing or maybe calling one of her lovers to arrange a place to stay. She knows I’ll refuse to leave this house purely out of a sick desire to spite her, at least until she wins the court decision to have me forcibly removed. She *is* a lawyer and a fucking good one at that.

I wish Bill were here with me, anyone to act as my human shield. I parted ways with him while we were walking down the street from our neighborhood’s skytram station, leaving him to deal with his own mess, alone. That’s probably why we’ve remained such close friends over the years—a mutual fear of being alone.

It’s certainly not fear that’s driving my feet up these steps toward Julia. Normally, I would just quickly run past her door and slip into my own room, but today is different. Today I intend to become my own man, even if it means saying goodbye to the woman I used to love. I should have left Julia years ago, but my naïve resolution not to end up like my parents has stubbornly kept me here long after I started hating her.

As I near the door of her room, I feel nervous. This is a stupid feeling to have—there’s nothing terrifying about her room, besides maybe those pink designer sheets and matched curtains, both of which cost a small fortune. I can hear Julia packing things in her bathroom, unaware or uncaring that her husband has returned. I take note of the

suitcases lying partially filled on the bed, awaiting the last few essentials that she can't bear to leave in her closet. My eyes fall on her prized fur: whitetail deer—pre-clone, of course. I remember how excited she was when she came home wearing it one day, proudly proclaiming that it was the last real animal fur of any kind for sale in Chicago. For a moment, I consider grabbing a lighter from the kitchen and torching the fur and all of Julia's clothes. As I imagine the wonderful conflagration, however, I feel a sense of pity. Maybe it's just the memory of the deer getting to me, but I think I may actually feel sorry for Julia. Unlike me she's trapped, bound to the life she's built for herself. I hear the sounds of pill bottles being thrown into a bag, and I turn my gaze toward the bathroom mirror. Beneath her long brown hair—the one thing that's stayed the same about her—I can see she's crying.

I walk toward the bathroom. What the hell am I doing? Trying to comfort her? I really have grown weak these last few years. Maybe things can change now. Maybe we can move and start over.

Just as I get to the door, Julia exits, bumping right into my chest. "Holy shit!" she yells, reeling back against the sink.

"Sorry," I respond in a robotic tone. I'm about to ask her how she's doing when she regains her composure and roughly pushes past me.

"Where are you going, dear?" I ask. The malice is back.

"Like you care," she mutters, throwing the deer skin into the bag.

"So that's it?"

Silence again. I've become used to this. Still, I can't let things end this way. I need closure, or revenge—or maybe they're the same thing. I'm confused right now.

“My legal team will be contacting you,” she spits as she grabs the final bags and hurries out of the room.

I’m being bullied again. Part of me would like to rip those fucking curtains down and strangle her, but instead I lunge at her, ripping the largest bag from her tiny hand. She lets out a surprised scream, dropping the other bags and backing against the railing. This reaction makes me feel good. I take the confiscated bag and whirl it around my head like a sling a couple of times before letting it loose over the railing. The bag makes a wonderful crashing sound as it impacts the hard floor fifteen feet below. I think I heard some things break, which is a bonus.

“Whoops! Sorry, dear.”

It only takes a few short seconds for android Julia to reemerge.

“Pick it up,” she orders sternly.

“Why don’t you call Pablo over here and he can get it for you?” I shoot back.

“Because he’s already waiting for me at the skytram station,” she laughs, skipping down the stairs, past the ruined bag, and out the front door.

I run down after her, intent on getting the last word. “There’s no way you’re getting this house!” I yell from the doorway. “I’ll burn the fucker down before I let you have it!”

“That’s fine,” she chimes from the sidewalk. “I’ll take our penthouse at Takahashi Towers. For some strange reason, I don’t think management will let you near that place. Something about a problem down at City Hall?” With that, she turns and walks toward the skytram station, out of my life for what I assume is the last time.

I walk back in and look at the ruined bag lying on my floor. There's a strange tendril-looking thing sticking out, so I bend down and pick it up. It's a leather flail with little beads on the end. Most husbands would be surprised if they found out their wives enjoyed a little sadomasochism on the side, but not me. I've suspected this for awhile—Julia's had the occasional bruise here and there, probably a lot more underneath her clothing. The last few times we had sex I remember how rough she wanted it. I guess I just didn't have it in me. I had nightmares for weeks about continually grinding an old-style pencil all the way down to the eraser.

I sigh and drop the toy, realizing there are probably worse things hiding in that black bag. I kick it out of my way and go make myself a drink.

A few hours later Bill and I are taking a nice evening stroll down our street. He's in just as poor shape as I am—worse from the looks of the cuts and bruises on his face. This makes me feel slightly better. The ornate, nineteenth-century style lamps illuminate the calm sidewalks and placid gardens adorning the mansions of our neighborhood. It's quite beautiful here—too bad I won't be able to stay for more than a few months. With no source of income, and Julia's legal team no doubt scheming to bleed me dry, I'll be broke before I know it. Maybe I can get a job at Jesus Burger. I hear they go through Noahs about once a week at the drive-thru.

I try to vocalize what I'm feeling to Bill, to figure out how I got here or where I'm going to go now. Everything seemed so clear earlier in that boardroom. Now I just feel like I fucked myself.

I did fuck myself.

I look skyward in a vain attempt to find some answer in the heavens. This is stupid since the stars can never be seen anymore, especially not so close to one of the cities. Fucking smog. More immediate problems fill my mind. It's going to suck having to leave this pristine fishbowl in search of a home in the city. Maybe I should just lie down on the pavement and give up, like the deer did so many years ago. I wonder if anyone would pity me like Julia had. Probably not—they're too busy standing in line, waiting to see the pathetic show.

Special Exhibit: Paul Wyatt. Endangered Species.

CHAPTER V
BLOWN TO HELL

I'm dreaming again. This time I'm in college, lying in bed with Julia. It's nearly the end of my last semester, and we're celebrating her acceptance into Harvard Law with a bottle of 2120 Merlot and some sloppy sex. I sit back against the headboard and admire her naked body in the dimmed lights of our loft—a modest home given our prestigious pedigree. The year before when I had casually informed Dad that I'd be finishing out my M.B.A. at Harvard with Julia, he had coldly declared that he wouldn't pay for anything more elaborate unless I went to the family's Alma Mater, Columbia. I envisioned the ostentatious Upper West Side palace that I had given up in New York and figured the sacrifice was a small price to pay for the past year of happiness. Soon I'll be telling him that I'm taking a year off and waiting here in Boston until she's done with school, a declaration that will surely result in yet another minor power struggle.

The irony is that I fully intend to follow in my father's footsteps, working first at his Flagship Company, Wyatt Industries. Then after a few years of running things, I'll enter politics and become twice the mayor that he could ever be, which is what I think he expects of me anyway. For now, it just feels good to stick it to him.

Julia abruptly jumps forward onto the bed, laughing hysterically as she drops her glass. I lean forward and kiss her, positioning myself for yet another round. We haven't had much time for this lately, with the final projects and deadlines, and all I could think about during our dinner date was getting her back to our place. Julia's been incredibly stressed out these past few weeks, which hasn't exactly done wonders for our sex life.

I've actually been concerned that she's been too distant, like she's not happy with her life choices. Tonight she seems back to normal though, which gives me hope for the future.

"Do me again, babe," she whispers, straddling me. I eagerly comply, sitting back and pulling her close. "Yes," she sighs.

And then the phone rings.

We both stop, silently contemplating whether the interruption merits our attention. I decide not and kiss her hard.

"Ah, fuck," she groans, pulling away and stumbling across the room to her phone. "Hold that thought."

"It's probably just Kelli," I say, referring to Bill's girlfriend and future wife. It's too late for somebody to call on official business. Frustrated, I sit on the edge of the bed and look out at the city. It's at this point that I notice a strange orange glow to the south, a fiery aurora made more intense as the city's power suddenly cuts out. I hear my phone ring and am instantly hit by an overwhelming feeling of dread. I quickly put my underwear on and walk out into the kitchen where I find Julia cowering against the counter, her phone on the floor.

John Wyatt's biggest fear—apart from his son being a failure—was that some extremist asshole with a vision from God would nuke his beloved New York City, and that's exactly what happened on January 15, 2130. Our parents and 35 million others—gone.

The worse part comes next, as my father's political opponents move in and attack his financial holdings, many of which have prospered due to blatantly illegal business practices. Monopolies. Bribery. Paid mercenaries in Asia, Africa and the Americas. All

of these are good investments in the twenty-second century business world, but not if you don't cover your ass on the legal end. Takahashi even got a chunk of Dad's lunar mining project, paying a fraction of the cost it took to get the venture up and running. Of course, the billion dollars that Mom took in the divorce and then promptly gave to the Green colony at Chryse Planitia on Mars didn't exactly help matters, nor did the two billion of my father's personal fortune that he spent on his last campaign. All told, I was an American royal whose financial power was greatly diminished, although I still had a prestigious name and the woman I loved.

The scene shifts again to yet another memorable night—my first victory in the U.S. House of Representatives, although by this point the government in D.C. was viewed only as a training ground for each city's up-and-comers. My staffers had all gone home at this point, leaving Julia and I alone in my Chicago office.

“Your father would be proud,” Julia says flatly as she reclines in a chair with a scotch and water. The lack of emotion in her voice has become familiar these last five years—the changes I had first noticed in college now having fully taken effect, perhaps even speeding up following our marriage.

“I don't know what would have made him proud,” I say, annoyed that she brought him up on an otherwise happy night. There haven't been many lately, our lives having been consumed by the stress of running a campaign in a city long-known for its political brutality. In fact, our relationship has seemed more like a business than a marriage for

quite some time, to the point where I've begun to accept the inevitability that one of us will probably soon have an affair.

"I'm not going to become my father," I declare awkwardly, maybe to convince myself more than her.

"I wouldn't say that's such a bad fate, Paul. You can fault the man for some of his mistakes, but if New York hadn't happened he'd still be the most powerful man in the country—if not the world."

I'm struck by a sudden notion, an idea that's been floating through my head for weeks without materializing into words. "Do you ever want to give all of this up and just settle down? You know, have a family and a normal life—something...genuine."

Julia chokes mid-drink. When her breath returns she's laughing. "Is that a serious question? Are you fucking kidding me? You sound like your mother."

"I don't think it'd be that bad," I say. "You could make partner within a few years, and I could easily find a job running one of Takahashi's or Rodriguez's operations."

"Like middle management?"

"Sure." This is the most passionate I've seen Julia in months, perhaps even years. The fact that she's dismissing the idea so vehemently kind of pisses me off. "What's so bad about living a life that we actually enjoy?"

She stands up from her chair and puts her hands on the large desk that I'm sitting behind. "Listen to me closely, Paul."

"Listening, dear."

“There are two types of people in this world: those who decide things, and those who have things decided for them. I’ll be damned if I’m going to be one of the latter, one of those *lowling* fucks that I see scurrying around these streets like their pathetic lives matter. I will *not* be one of those people.”

I’m stunned. Julia’s eyes are welling up with tears, but I detect more resentment in her voice than sadness. “What about being happy? Does that matter as long as we’re happy?” I say, almost in a pleading tone.

“Nobody’s happy, Paul. Just look around you. The only thing we’ve got is this,” she says, motioning to the office with her arms. “And if we’re lucky, we can turn *this* into something special—something that even your father couldn’t build.”

“What if that doesn’t happen?”

“Let’s just hope it doesn’t come to that, Paul—for our sake.”

It’s at this point that I know I’ve lost her. Somewhere along the line Julia came to the conclusion that nothing in this world really matters; therefore, why not simply play the game and hope to come out ahead? Even worse than becoming like my parents, I quickly realize that Julia and I have *both* become my father.

Two months later I’m in D.C., honing my negotiating skills while my wife is back in Chicago fucking one of my male secretaries.

CHAPTER VI

CRAZY SOUNDS ABOUT RIGHT

It's seven o'clock in the evening, and I'm sitting in my beloved green chair while talking on the phone. I love this chair—the only relic scavenged from my former home. After marrying Julia this recycled vinyl masterpiece was exiled to the basement, but now it occupies a central location in my shitty, two-room apartment near the Old Waterfront. She insisted for years that I throw it out—that it was either her or the chair. I guess I made my choice. Bill and I may have found the chair half rotting in a dumpster back during college, but it was something that was truly ours. When it came time to leave my mansion in the glass fishbowl, I made sure to bring it with me. Bill likes the chair too, so much that he found a red one just like it when he moved in with me.

That was over six months ago, but it seems like longer.

I sit here every day when I come home from work. I'm a waste management specialist, meaning I help clean up shit off the lakebed. Not actual shit, mind you, but the massive amount of scrap metal and trash that accumulated at the bottom of Lake Michigan during the last few hundred years of its life. Now that the lake's totally gone, the city has zoned this desert for new housing. "Old Waterfront" is just a mind-fuck name my friends back in city hall made up to lull the two million people who have to live on a barren, unstable patch of contaminated ground.

At least the rent is cheap.

Despite the ever-present risks of cancer and severe bodily harm, my waste management job pays well for unskilled labor, not that I really had a choice. After some brief attempts to contact some old "friends" in the other cities, Bill and I realized that

we're a political liability for any legitimate employer—a cautionary tale that will be recounted to countless political interns in the coming generations.

The only remotely interesting offers we received were from some of the fringe Green Groups, who mistakenly thought that my rebellion against Takahashi and Lanard somehow meant I'd be sympathetic to their "Eco Crusade," or whatever the hell they call their futile attempts to save the environment. Little do the Greens know, I had placed them at the top of my list of "terrorist groups to watch" while I was still in office, right alongside some of the Muslims who now live in my building. At one point, Bill actually wanted me to consider a job as spokesperson for The Animal Reclamation Project, but I think it was more out of desperation than anything else. The last thing I want is to get arrested while trying to fight for some chimpanzee's right to vote.

Speaking of primates, the monkey on the other end of the phone is starting to annoy me. Bill and I received a message from our landlord yesterday stating that we failed to pay last month's rent. Of course, I did pay, and I have the digital receipt to prove it. The problem is that our landlord is the Miller Real Estate Corporation, a multi-trillion dollar housing conglomerate that serves almost a billion residents in North America alone. Needless to say, resolving a dispute over rent payment takes awhile, especially when there are no actual humans to take customer service calls. How is this possible? Easy: use genetically modified clone monkeys bred by the millions to handle all incoming calls. Most businesses rely on this method of customer service, ever since the suicide rate for human customer service representatives hit 90 percent about twenty years ago. At first the monkeys started killing themselves too, I think by refusing to eat, but

that was quickly fixed by installing small nanochips in their cerebral cortexes to control their higher brain functions. Problem solved—at least for the monkeys.

“I said I fucking paid it on the 25th!” I yell into the phone. There is silence on the other end as the creature determines the correct response from a prepared list.

“Please calm yourself...sir...or ma’am. There is no...need...to raise your voice,” the monkey replies using its digitized voice amplifier, a device which makes all of these little fuckers sound like retarded children. “No record of payment was received on...date of...twenty-fifth. If you would like to file an appeal please answer...yes...when prompted. You will have a choice of a...563B form...or...a 448A. Charge for form processing is...half of monthly rent.”

“How long does this take?” There’s a long pause after this question.

“Average process time...ten to...eighteen months. Delinquent rent due with late fee by...fifteenth of current month.”

“I still have to pay last month’s rent?” I know what the answer to this question will be as soon as I ask. Suddenly, I wish I had used the viewscreen with this call so I could better imagine shoving an unpeeled banana down the throat of my helpless CSR while his thousands of his furry companions watch in horror from their workstations.

“Correct...excess rent will be credited...to your...account if appeal is granted. Estimated time....twenty...six..mon-”

“Ah, bullshit!” I yell, throwing the phone across the apartment and almost hitting Bill as he enters our front door. He is just getting home from work. Unlike me, Bill isn’t barred for life from working at the closest Jesus Burger. I can’t even get a Blessed Burger now that Lanard put my name on the “DO NOT SERVE” list.

I keep telling Bill that it's a bad idea to work for Jesus in this neighborhood, that he's going to get bombed one of these days by some extremist, but Bill insists that it's as safe as any place in this city. He's probably right—and besides, sometimes he brings me home leftovers from the grill if I've been nice to him.

“Christ, Paul!” Bill gasps, jumping back from the impact of cheap plastic on concrete. “I hope you know we don't have enough money to replace that shit if it's broken.”

“Doesn't matter,” I reassure him. “Some monkey just told me we had to pay double rent, which basically means we'll be homeless again in a couple of weeks anyway.”

Surprisingly, Bill doesn't seem worried. Contrary to my earlier expectations, he's managed to build up quite a hefty emotional callous during these last few months together. After hearing about his wife's overdose, he remained level-headed, even remembering to serve her with the divorce papers while she was still in recovery at the city medical center. Bill's smart like that, which is why he married a dumbass like Kelli—easier to take advantage of her should things go bad. He's provided more money to our little nest than I have, which is why I wish I had paid him more for all of those years of loyal service. Then again, it was only after his divorce that I found out about his outstanding debts, mostly from gambling and frequent business to high priced whores. He lost his house around the same time I lost mine.

Most of my remaining money went toward providing my wonderful ex-wife with one of the most expensive penthouses in Chicago. True to my predictions, she raped me financially, arguing in court that most of the money we put toward winning my last

campaign came from her earnings, which is partially true. By the time the judge made his decision, Julia had successfully proven that I was a financial liability who willingly and knowingly violated my business obligations as her husband.

Poor Julia.

Bill fetches a beer from our small fridge in the kitchen / dining room / foyer / common area, and sits down in his red seat next to mine. I see that he didn't bring me home anything today—the fucker. His silly little work hat sits tilted over one ear, its grease-soaked stench penetrating my personal bubble of hatred. We spend most of our time like this—together, in front of the viewscreen. What a lovely couple.

After a few seconds, I realize that Bill's not going to address our impending eviction. Instead, he focuses on the red flashing light on our viewscreen, which means we have a message. "Didn't you notice this?" he asks, letting out a tortured sigh as he lifts himself out of his chair and flicks the play button. Our voice activation system is broken in this apartment, along with most of our other shitty appliances.

"I've been a little busy. Didn't you hear anything I said about the rent and the monkey?" I try to remind him. Sometimes it's like he doesn't even fucking listen to me. Jesus, it's like we're married. For the hundredth time in the past week I consider how best to end my life.

"Holy shit, Paul!" Bill exclaims, reading the brief line of text that flashes across the screen. "It's from Mars."

This gets my attention. Mars is dominated by a huge mining operation that supplies trillions in raw minerals every quarter to Mitsuo Takahashi's factories. The operation has grown considerably in the last few years, and every day a new ship is built

for Takahashi Corporation's already massive fleet of ore haulers and barges. Before I got fired from being Mayor, I was planning on going with Takahashi on an inspection, mostly to see what my father's business empire would have looked like had he survived. I also wanted to pay a trip to the small colony of ecophile new age Greens that live not too far from the mine—the colony to which Mom donated most of her money from the divorce. Last I heard, the colony wasn't doing too well. Apparently, the Greens' plan to turn Mars into an environmentally-friendly, utopian society needed more help than public money and private donations could afford. I also heard that Takahashi was offering them a large sum of money to pack up and leave his side of the planet, which the Greens promptly rejected with their typical zealotry.

After a few seconds of fiddling, Bill stands back and an image flickers on the screen. It's a familiar face: Dave Escobar, my personal hero. Dave was one of our closest friends back in college. Like most in our small group, he came from an extremely wealthy family. The Escobars had owned most of the remaining oil fields in western Brazil prior to the civil war there. Before moving to America, Dave's grandfather invested heavily in the company that makes the domes that cover the wealthy neighborhoods outside the cities. Dave was supposed to add to his family's wealth and prestige by entering politics, but instead he dropped out of law school and got himself a PH.D in planetary geology. Most parents would be proud that their kid's a genius, but Dave's daddy pretty much disowned him for his act of family disloyalty. The irony is that even though Dave ended up making a fortune helping Takahashi develop the mining operations on Mars, he's never come home to actually enjoy his wealth. In fact, the last time I saw him was right after Julia and I got married.

The man in front of me looks a bit older than I remember, but not much. The aura of confidence that always defined his personality still radiates from his warm, brown eyes and half smile. His dark skin stretches taught across his angular cheeks, giving him a youthful appeal that I lost years ago. There's also an athletic vitality to his posture, a hint of excitement behind each word that indicates he's been keeping himself busy. Damn, I've missed him—Dave's just the kind of person I need right now. Somebody who's managed to be successful doing what he loves. Fuck. I don't even know what I love, much less how to be successful at it.

Although there are a million questions I want to ask him, I sit back and try to relax, realizing that there's a ten minute delay on this message that prevents us from immediately responding. Besides, we don't have the money to send a reply anyway.

“Don't worry guys, I already paid the processing charges on this call,” Dave laughs.

“Ha, ha, Escobar,” Bill sneers. “Fucking smartass.”

Being almost 50 million miles away, Dave continues unabated: “It took awhile, but I heard the news about you two jokers a few days ago. Seems like you've had a change in career plans. I hate to say I told you so, but...I did. Since you've got some time on your hands now, I figured I'd throw you boys a little proposition.”

Bill and I lean toward the viewscreen. To our surprise, Dave leans in too as his mood instantly transforms. He shoots a nervous glance off-screen before continuing. “I found something out here last week while on a survey mission with two of the other geologists. It's big— as in super, fucking important.”

We lean in a bit closer as Dave's voice fades to a whisper. "I want you guys to come out here and see it, before anyone else from Takahashi finds it. My colleagues here have sworn to keep it a secret, but it's not going to stay that way for long. This has the potential to change everything."

"What the fuck is it, Dave?" Bill hisses at the viewscreen. I'm thinking the same thing. Dave has access to some of the best scientists in the world. What does he need from us?

Dave seems to anticipate this question. "Look, you two are some of the only people I trust, and I know you've got nothing to lose by helping me out. There are two boarding passes waiting for you at a storage locker in Obama International, as well as a couple of passports and some money. My friend Susan from Northwestern will meet you there at 6 p.m. on Friday if you decide to come. Please, you guys. I need you on this one. I promise it'll be worth it."

The transmission cuts off, leaving us to stare at our own idiotic expressions reflected in the black screen.

"I think he's lost his mind out there," Bill mutters with an indignant snort. "What the fuck has he found, some new kind of rock? Besides, we'd probably get shot on sight if we got caught at one of Takahashi's facilities."

I ignore Bill as I try to imagine the trip that Dave has planned for us. Mars is a long way. I struggle to conjure up an image of the Red Planet in my mind: Red rocks, deadly radiation, a dearth of attractive women, much less the green, three-tit variety of my science fiction fantasies.

I sit back in my chair and let out a sigh. “Like he said, we don’t exactly have a lot to lose, Bill.”

“No way. This is crazy!”

“That sounds about right for us. We’re going.”

“Fuck you! I’d rather stay here and work at Jesus Burger for the rest of my life. Mars is a shithole—just look at how the Greens there have fared. I hear they had to resort to cannibalism last year when their supply ship fell behind schedule.”

“Yeah, but you forget that Dave will take care of us. And besides, maybe this Susan’s hot and horny.” I’m desperate at this point, trying anything I can to get my friend to follow me on an adventure that will probably get us killed. I figure sex is as good an incentive as any. There’s no way Dave’s friend is three-tit, green Martian chick hot, but anything’s better than Bill’s current state of involuntary celibacy.

I’ll be giving up an interesting little fling I’ve been having with this Palestinian girl down the hall. She’s this freaky artist named Ameenah, who thinks I’m some sort of muse, some deep well of brooding emotion that fuels her creative inspiration. The sex is good, better than Julia, but it’s just a time killer. I’ve got a whole planet waiting for me now. Leaving Earth won’t be a problem. It will be more tortuous finding a suitable home for my green chair. Maybe I’ll just give it to Ameenah, a final symbol of my perpetual suffering.

Later that night I have a dream about the monkey I hung up on. I see him staring into space for several seconds with a confused look on his face as he struggles to determine whether he’s really been disconnected from his customer. The scene shifts to him as he retires to his tiny wire cage for the night after dining on some paste, which he

doesn't know is really just recycled monkey. In the last few seconds of the dream my excitement about Mars fades, and I feel an intense wave of sadness—real, genuine sadness.

Or maybe it's just guilt.

CHAPTER VII

A BREATH OF FRESH VIOLENCE

Today is my last day of work, and it's going about as well as all the rest have: shitty. When I first came to the Old Waterfront district, I thought I'd be nice to work with my hands and experience life as an anonymous face in the crowd. What a fucking idiot I was. At least I didn't have to complete any paperwork with my employer—one of Takahashi's cousins runs this operation. Most of my co-workers are day laborers, undocumented refugees from Miami and Boston, both of which are drowning in seawater and raw sewage. They aren't a bad lot, really. Uneducated and underpaid *lowlings*: the kind of men that can disappear without anyone asking too many questions, an occurrence that happens more than most of my old corporate buddies would publically admit.

Most of my days as a waste management specialist have been spent shoveling toxic sludge from the old lake bottom or cutting up the veritable forest of rusting metal that was dumped to the bottom of Lake Michigan in its final century of existence—all with the goal of clearing the land for future slums and low-rent apartment blocks, not unlike the one we're getting booted from. Not that it matters. In less than 48 hours, Bill and I will be on our way to Mars, which is why I'm trying to make a couple of last minute bucks.

They brought us deep into the lakebed today, far enough that the city has disappeared over the dark horizon of the wastes. The intense yellow glow still lights the clouds to the south, reminding us that civilization is not far. A few planes shoot up through the low cloud deck, reminding me that our time here is short. The rest of the scene is darkness and desolation. It's relatively clear today, the recent storms having

moved some of the pollution out toward what used to be the eastern shore. A funneling mass of murky clouds move swiftly to the north, carrying the last of the intense lighting storms that typically don't make their way into the city proper. There are even hints of daylight to the southwest although it's hard to separate the sun's glow from that of the city, which is typical. I guess how long it's been since I've seen anything more of the sun than a hazy orange blotch and conclude that it's been years. Even in the glass fishbowl I never saw a good sunset. Suddenly, I miss the ones Ameenah likes to paint, the same paintings I'd criticize for being gaudy.

“Wyatt!”

The scream jolts me. It's Thaddeus Dickinson, my foreman. He's one of the largest men I've ever seen, his hulking mass made all the more ridiculous in his tight, yellow, clean-up suit. With his mask off, his brown, shaved head looks like something that burst from an overwrapped sausage casing, a comparison that makes him no less terrifying when he yells.

“Sorry, sir,” I say, waving at him nervously. Last week he hit one the other workers over the head for sleeping behind one of the shipwrecks we were cutting up, and I'm pretty sure he at least knocked the guy out. I adjust my own mask, deciding that it's not worth wearing the damn thing in such heat. One day without wearing it probably won't be enough to kill me anyway. I place it on one of the old utility trucks that ferried us out here, which now appears to be stuck in the mud only a foot from the crude gravel road that cuts through the wastes and disappears into the oblivion to the north. I pick up a small plasma torch from the truck and begin work on our objective: an old oil tanker with a massive gash split along its bottom.

As I'm cutting into the hull, I find my mind drifting into the shadow cast by the storm. There are countless groups of terrorists, raiders and social derelicts out there. If intelligence was correct during my short term in office, hundreds of small communities dot the wasteland, most of them with little or no connections to Chicago or any city. How they survive is a mystery to my kind. I've heard rumors of cannibals and mutants for years, but I suppose it's just propaganda to bring in more refugees.

Still fucking beats seeing Lanard's face on a regular basis.

Thaddeus tells us that they're going to have to bring us back in shifts since two of the trucks are now stuck in the mud. Most of the men jockey to get a place on one of the functioning trucks, but I decide to wait it out. There's something about this place that I like, probably because it doesn't remind me of the city. I reach into my backpack and pull out what's left of my lunch: a soggy baggie of Faith Fries brought home by Bill the night before. Along with Tom and Hassan, two of my fellow crew members, I sit on one of the tanker's overturned lifeboats and take in the scenery. We don't talk much, mostly due to the fact that neither of them speaks English very well, and I'm not motivated enough to speak anything else. Nobody really gives a shit about personal details on a job like this anyway; nobody, not even Thaddeus, knows that their fellow crewmember Paul is in fact their beloved former mayor.

The rest of the twenty or so men from the work detail pace around nervously as if nobody's going to bother coming back for us. Normally, that would be a concern of mine as well, but I figure as long as Thaddeus stayed behind with us, we won't be stranded by the company. I also notice that our lone security guard stayed with us, which admittedly

won't do shit if we're attacked out here. Judging by how isolated we are I'm guessing the likelihood of that happening is high.

I hate it when I'm right.

About twenty minutes after the first wave of trucks leaves for the city, we hear a low, droning sound from the north. At first I think it's more thunder, but as the sound grows I make out the distinct whirling sound of engines. Several shadows emerge from the darkness to the north, armored buggies from the look of it. I spit out my last couple of fries and dive behind the cover of an old aluminum lifeboat, waiting for the spray of bullets that's about to hit.

“Get that fucker started!” yells Thaddeus as he frantically pushes several of the men toward the closest immobilized truck. The engine starts immediately, but the more they gun it, the deeper into the mud it sinks. They should realize that it won't matter anyway.

The raiders are already here.

Several sharp sounds cut above the whirling noise of the engines as the buggies drive through our midst at full speed. The bullets blow out the tires on both trucks, ensuring that no last second miracles will provide escape. Our hapless security guard fires off a couple of panicked shots before he throws down his rifle and runs in the general direction of the city. He only gets a few feet before the bullets get him.

The buggies stop in a semi-circle, blocking our view of the city's glow. The men packing the buggies are heavily armed, their faces covered with cowls and breathing masks. This is what I would expect these fucks to look like—something out of my post-

apocalyptic nightmares. Aware that there's nowhere to run, I stand up from behind the boat.

"You have nothing to fear from us," I hear a deep voice call from the buggy parked at the apex of the formation. I can't tell who is speaking on account of the breathing masks, but the tall guy standing up in the passenger seat seems to be in charge. The hot wind whips his robes around, making him look even more imposing against the glowing horizon.

"What do you want?" one of my co-workers asks in a shaky voice.

"Yeah, we don't have shit!"

"We're just out here to work!"

The robed figure holds a hand up, which quiets everyone. "I am Tariq Helal, Anwar Haandi's second-in-command."

The work detail lets out a collective gasp. I seem to be the only one who isn't surprised. I know all about Tariq from the numerous intelligence reports on Shining Sun. Like Haandi, he's intelligent and well-educated—a lawyer who went to Harvard a couple of years before Julia did. Tariq first met Haandi when they were working together for a non-profit created to help Muslim refugees find jobs in the city. After The Prophet's Hand blew up New York, and cities began passing more laws restricting the movement of Muslims of Middle-Eastern descent, Haandi and Tariq left the Chicago, only to come back as Larnard's worst nightmare: religious nut-jobs driven more by ideology than money. As much as I wanted to take down Shining Sun while I was in office, I'm struck by a strange feeling of admiration as I witness the power Tariq now commands. He's a god of the wastes, somebody who doesn't bow down to lesser men.

“I’ve come to make you an offer,” he says, pointing to our frazzled group. “Leave this meager existence and join us in our fight. Together we will bring down the tyrants who control the city and usher in a new era of peace and justice.”

“I ain’t an Islamic,” somebody at the front of the group says. “And I ain’t converting.”

“Neither am I!” somebody else yells.

“You don’t have to be,” says Tariq. “We have many brothers and sisters who don’t follow The Prophet. Unlike the whores who bleed this city dry, we accept other beliefs so long as you allow us to practice our own. Now, who is with me?”

Tariq’s outstretched hand is met with silence. I worry for a moment that the lack of enthusiasm will be our demise.

Suddenly, I see a thick arm shoot up from the crowd. It’s Thaddeus. “Fuck, it’s better than this shit job,” he says, moving toward the buggy. Several other men follow suit, and they are quickly hoisted into the buggies by their new comrades in arms.

Most of the men who stay with me have families, people who keep them anchored to life in the city. I have something even more compelling: an invitation to another planet. Tariq makes one last plea for our souls, then motions with his hand to head back into the depths of the wastes. As the engines roar to life, and the buggies speed away, I meet Tariq’s goggled eyes. He nods to me as he passes, ignorant of the fact that I know things that could help bring this city to its knees.

As we watch the buggies disappear into the landscape, I hear another sound coming from the south. Before I have time to react, two attack choppers buzz overhead, speeding after our recent visitors. Bright flashes and explosions light up the darkness as a

company truck arrives to pick us up. As we ride back, I wonder if Tariq, Thaddeus and the others survived the chopper assault.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PRICE OF A DECENT FUCK

I'm busy packing for Mars when our doorbell rings. I look up at the clock and see it's past midnight, which means somebody is probably here to kill or evict us. Bill is already asleep, so I throw one last shirt into my carry-on and walk to the door. Through the flickering viewscreen, I see a petite, dark-haired, olive-skinned girl.

It's Ameenah.

"Hey, I'm kinda tired," I say through the speaker. "Can't we just talk about this tomorrow?" It's been about a week since I last spoke to her, and she's probably aware that I'm trying to blow her off. I haven't even bothered to tell her that I'm leaving for Mars.

"It's important, Paul," she says. Her face looks puffy, like she's been crying. Maybe she's taking this harder than I expected. For a moment, I feel a pang of guilt for not telling her that I'm leaving.

"Come in," I say, opening the door. The second I do, I'm aware that there are others standing in the hallway. Ameenah forces her way past me.

"What the fuck?" I say, jumping back from the door. I expect the strange man and woman in the hallway to force their way in as well, but they just stand there, looking at me.

Ameenah doesn't bother to introduce them. "What the fuck, Paul? I could ask you the same thing!" she yells in her heavy accent. I can see streaks of green and red paint on her bare arms. Ameenah usually paints when she's upset. "Four months of sleeping together, and you can't even call me?"

“You know where I live. I’m on your floor.”

“Really? You’re going to be like this? I expected more from you.” She’s always saying things like this, usually in bed. I’m getting sick of her high aspirations for my soul. It’s time to remind her that I couldn’t care less about any of that shit.

“I’ve been busy. Bill and I are going on a trip,” I say, slamming the door in the surprised faces of the man and woman. “And who are they? Some of your jihadist friends? I told you to stop hanging around those Shining Sun fucks; they’re gonna get you killed.”

Ameenah sighs and puts her hands on her hips. “Unbelievable.”

“What is?”

“You. You’re a regular knight in shining armor.”

“You don’t have to be a bitch about it. I didn’t know you thought we were serious. I don’t even know when Bill and I are coming back.”

“To Mars?”

“What?”

“I know you’re going to Mars, Paul.”

“Who are those two?”

“Dana Rodriguez and Marcus Miller.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I hadn’t recognized them in the darkness of the hallway. They’re two of the most vocal leaders of the opposition groups in the city. Dana’s been acting as the public mouthpiece of the Greens for the past couple of years, while Marcus has been bitching about the plight of the poor since long before I moved to Chicago. Last I heard he’s also running the Inter-City Liberation Front, a bunch of

unemployed social activists who think that they're going to create some kind of nation-wide people's army. Both of them are fucking crazy. Neither group is ever going to get a candidate into office, nor would I be willing to put my ass on the line if they ever managed to get some political traction. Fuck, I'd rather join Shining Sun. At least then I'd get a crack at slaughtering Lanard's fat ass.

"I'm trying to keep a low profile. Are you working for them or something?"

"I know Dana and Marcus, but I don't work for them," she says. "Ten minutes ago they came to my apartment and told me you were leaving for Mars. I came here to find out why."

"So they've been spying on me?"

"Dana said she had sources. She wouldn't say much else."

"Well, I'm not telling you shit. Rodriguez needs to look elsewhere for recruits. I've made enough bad decisions lately."

"My brother said you'd be a tough sell."

"Sounds like a smart guy."

"Anwar is a good judge of character. He always thought you had potential. Maybe that's why Dana and Marcus think you'd be a valuable asset."

I stop pacing and look at her. I think about all of the conversations we've had these last few weeks and try to remember the names of her brothers. I'm certain that this is the first time I've heard about Anwar, and this realization scares the shit out of me.

"Haandi. Anwar Haandi is your brother." I nod, finally determining the true identity of the woman I've been fucking. "The Anwar Haandi of Shining Sun?"

She nods, apparently pleased with herself for catching me off-guard.

“Bullshit. We—they’ve been looking for his ass for years.”

“Not anymore. They caught him two nights ago. They’ve already moved him to a secure location at Traverse Bay.”

Bill suddenly emerges from his room. “What the hell is all of this yelling? We need to get out of here early tomorrow morning”

“Go the fuck to sleep. We’re talking!”

“Just keep it down,” he says, shuffling back to his room.

I turn back and look into Ameenah’s intense green eyes. She’s beautiful in an exotic way that my father would have hated. The way she talks and smells—the newness of her. No wonder I couldn’t see through her bullshit. “Get the fuck out,” I say, motioning toward the door. “And tell Rodriguez to keep her fucking mouth shut about Mars. Spying on me isn’t going to get her anywhere.”

“Paul, I’m sorry you had to find out this way. This wasn’t planned.”

“The fucking me part? Of course not.”

“Anwar told me to find out what I could about your intentions. He thought you might help him take down the government. I never thought I’d care about you like this.”

I laugh. To think that she’d be in love with a has-been, trust fund, daddy’s boy politician seems even more ridiculous than the rest of this shit show. “What’s not to love, right? You can tell Anwar that even if I had something to offer him, I wouldn’t join Shining Sun for all of the virgins in Paradise. Got it? I spent most of my time in office trying to figure out how to legally kill you fucks.”

She seems hurt by this comment. “I don’t want you to join him or anybody else, Paul. I came up here because I want you to be safe. You’re going to get yourself killed on

Mars if you're not careful. The fact that Dana knows about the trip means that others do as well."

"I suppose you want me to stay here and help you get your brother out of jail. You're a little late for that. I don't exactly have a lot of pull with the powers that be right now."

"That's not what I'm asking. I know you don't trust me, but I mean it when I say I'm worried about you."

"I trust Dave Escobar more than anyone else. If he thinks it's important, I'll follow him to Mars. Besides, I don't have a lot of options right now."

"You'd have me if you gave a damn," she says, "but I know that's not enough for you."

"Is that enough for you? Fucking me and painting a tree afterward? Sounds like a great life."

"It could be, Paul. You just refuse to see it."

Jesus, she sounds like my fucking mother. I imagine the two of them having coffee together, going over my baby pictures and discussing how to change the world. Thank God Mom's dead.

Ameenah closes the gap between us and puts her small hands on my face. "Please stay here. I'm not asking you to join my brother's cause. We can figure out what you want—together."

"Ameenah, listen to me very carefully," I say, leaning close. "Get. The. Fuck. Out."

Her emerald eyes bore into mine for a moment, tearing up as she realizes I mean what I say. She quickly breaks away and heads for the door.

Confident that my other uninvited guests won't make a second attempt to persuade me, I throw myself into my green chair and try to calm down. I'm exhausted. Maybe I care about Ameenah more than I thought. The apartment seems especially quiet in the absence of yelling, the steady hum of our small refrigerator soothing my frayed nerves. I stare blankly at the dark viewscreen, wishing that I could simply call Dave and talk to him about what I just learned. I remind myself that it's not too late to back out of this trip. Then I remember how much I hate my job, my apartment and everything else about this life. Even if I wanted to stay with Ameenah, I'm sure that my pride will prevent me from simply ignoring the fact that I was her pet project, a scouting objective for a man that my former bosses spent billions trying to kill.

Anwar Haandi. You've got to be fucking kidding me. Even if word has gotten out that I'm headed to Mars, it can't be any more dangerous than fucking the sister of the most dangerous mass murderer in all of Chicago. Two years ago, Shining Sun blew up Judgment Day, the biggest roller coaster at Lanard's Jesus World. Haandi said it was in retaliation for my predecessor's crackdown on the Muslim sectors around the Old Waterfront, which admittedly put some innocent people in jail. The only reason why I didn't conduct a similar operation during my short term was that we were too busy trying to find Shining Sun's secret base in the wasteland outside the city. Why he took an

interest in conscripting me for his cause is beyond me. Keeping the security forces on a leash in the slums doesn't mean that I sympathize with its inhabitants. Apparently, the Haandi siblings have a knack for seeing things that don't exist, which is probably why they believe in that Neo-Islamic, apocalyptic shit that's been spreading through the city these last few years.

I look down at the small crumbled Jesus Burger hat on the floor and silently thank Bill for bringing me home one last burger before our trip. If only Haandi had Lanard's food, I might have joined him on his crusade. Too bad.

CHAPTER IX

FUZZ-A-BEAR THE TERRIBLE

Leaving Earth isn't quite as easy as Dave made it sound, which doesn't bode well for the rest of this adventure. Our first mistake was choosing Obama International, the most likely airport in the world to have a high-jacking. As soon we enter the cold, steel and glass terminal, I'm struck by a feeling of dread. There are armed security guards everywhere—a private army hired by Tim Reznik, one of my former corporate bosses back at city hall. I remember his face on the day I got myself fired, how the spineless bastard just sat at that board table and let Lanard and Takahashi do the talking.

Reznik's holdings include most of the remaining airlines, only one of which provides service to Orbital Station One, our disembarking point for Mars. He'd probably love to put me in a holding cell for questioning—any chance to impress his richer colleagues. I remind myself that we need to get on that plane and get the fuck out of this city as soon as possible. We give most of the guards a wide berth as we work our way through the busy terminal, trying to follow a crude map that Bill drew based on Dave's directions.

We find Susan waiting for us at the locker. She's a statuesque blonde who looks like she should be on a billboard selling cosmetics. "Wyatt and Collins?"

"Are you Susan?"

"Susan Nordstrom"

I eagerly extend my hand, thankful that we'll have some eye candy on this trip. "I already know who you are," she says, ignoring the hand. Now that I'm close up, I can see the cold, blue eyes, a stare that suggests Susan could give Julia a run for her money in the

world's biggest bitch contest. "Since you two are running late, we'll have to skip the pleasantries and get to the plane as fast as possible."

"We're not late," Bill protests, looking down at his watch.

Susan doesn't bother to argue. She pulls a small packet out of the locker and hands me and Bill our fake IDs and boarding passes.

"How do we know we can trust you?" I say, partly to show her I'm not going to be pushed around. "Word on the street is that our little trips isn't the secret we thought it was. You know anything about that?"

Susan rolls her eyes. "Look, I don't give a shit what you goons think. I'm not sure why David is even bothering to go through the trouble of bringing you to Mars. As far as I'm concerned, you two are a liability. We may as well have big fucking targets on our foreheads."

"Well, I guess you'll just have to trust what *David* wants is best," I say.

"What makes you so special?" Bill asks, scanning her with a leering grin.

Susan sticks a long, well-manicured finger in his face and seems to grow in height over my diminutive friend. "First off, quit staring at my tits. Even if I liked men, I'd rather fuck an augmented simian unit. Second, I'm a geologist heading for the largest off-planet mining facility. I'm not some dumb-shit politician who happens to be an old drinking buddy of David Escobar. I belong here."

Bill is stunned. Based on what I've seen so far, I'm certain Susan could kick his tiny balls into his big mouth. I sense the anger beginning to build in his eyes as he debates whether he can win a screaming match with our new friend. "Let's worry about

this later. We're going to have the next few months to get this worked out on the way to Mars," I suggest, stepping in between the two of them.

"First thing you've said that makes sense, Wyatt. Follow me," she says, turning around and almost sprinting in the direction of our waiting plane.

"Woman of my dreams," says Bill, shaking his head and scurrying after her.

Unlike the conventional jets that load directly into the terminal, the large rocket systems on our plane prevent it from taxiing close to the facility. We have to exit onto the tarmac and make our way nearly a quarter of a mile to where our shuttle is waiting. Several passengers ride with us on a small, open-air, robotic tram, obviously annoyed that they have to commute outside on an especially smog-choked, rainy day. I contemplate grabbing my respirator from my bag but figure that I may as well enjoy the pea soup atmosphere for what may be the last time in months.

When we climb the stairs and enter the plane's cabin, I'm surprised that it's nearly full. Few people can afford to fly between cities, much less travel to one of the three major space stations in orbit. I look around and reason that most of the passengers are company employees bound for the massive lunar mining installations or perhaps even Mars. There are even a couple of families with small children, probably going on some two-year rotation that will result in their kids undergoing months of painful bone and muscle rehabilitation when they return to Earth, all for a mediocre paycheck and the promise of moving up the ranks in Takahashi's corporate empire.

The lone attendant checks our tickets and leads us to a separate row from Susan, which is fine by me. Within ten minutes, the captain's voice comes over the intercom, informing us that we should be in orbit in less than any hour. I look over at Bill, who is

obviously terrified that we're going to be blasting off with a fifty-ton rocket strapped to our fuselage. I remember that he's afraid to fly, a weakness that typically kept him in Chicago during my occasional trips to the other cities throughout my rather short career.

I'm about to tell Bill to relax when a young, nice-looking, middle-eastern chick stands up and starts yelling maniacally. At first I think it's Ameenah, maybe professing her undying love for me in her native language or something like that, but when the girl starts chanting about Allah, I realize two things: 1. It's not Ameenah, and 2. We're all in deep shit. I quickly see the source of the commotion: somebody in a giant stuffed bear costume is waving an assault rifle around, screaming in Arabic and pointing to a large belt of explosives strapped to his furry chest. Leaning over Bill, I look out the window and see the hi-jacked tour bus parked sloppily next to the tram we road on. The windows are blown out, and I can see some blood splattering its clean, white interior. Our tram's robot brain is obviously confused since it keeps trying to back up into the empty tour bus, its calm, male voice asking the other vehicle to please clear its rearward path.

I turn from the window and face our attacker. Ladies and gentlemen, meet Fuzz-a-Bear: the sugar-coated, slap-happy mascot of Reznik's Friendly Skies Airlines. Unfortunately, this one doesn't seem to have completed the mandatory two-day Fuzz-a-Bear training course. Come to think of it, that Fuzz-a-Bear back in the terminal was acting kind of strange. No candy, songs or ballons—just that dumb-fuck goofy smile and red derby hat cocked to one side of his furry, brown head.

I should have known he was going to kill us all.

The other passengers start chanting just as loudly as our high-jacker. What a fucking mad house. The woman on my left in the aisle seat is praying to Jesus. The guy

across the aisle puts his hands together and starts mumbling an unintelligible prayer to some god with multiple appendages. It's like a religion-filled piñata just exploded in the plane's cabin, showering us with sweet morsels of false hope. Bill just sits there in his window seat, looking like he's going to throw up. His skin is snow. In the midst of all this mania is Fuzz-a-Bear, screaming his fucking head off while flashing his giant white buckteeth.

This scene doesn't change for the next several minutes. Fuzz-a-Bear just keeps yelling, unaware or uncaring of the fact that nobody else onboard—apart from the terrified bitch up front—seems understand a word. I conclude that the airport officials are trying to come up with a game plan, as the pilots have no doubt phoned in the disturbance from the safe confines of their sealed cabin. Meanwhile, I'm sitting on this plane, watching an asshole in a bear costume throw a tantrum with a belt of explosives swinging around his chest. So much for all of that money I allocated for homeland security while I was in office.

Annoyed with our delay, my imagination begins to substitute our high-jacker's shrill bitching for the Fuzz-a-Bear voice from the commercials. Friendly Skies Airlines has used him for years, even back when I was a kid. Now he's going to blow us all to hell. I'm terrified, but the sheer ridiculousness of it all makes me let out a stifled, snorting giggle—a reaction that instantly quiets everyone in the cabin. Suddenly, everyone is staring at me like I'm the crazy one. Yes, on this plane, I'm the crazy one. Fuzz-a-Bear lowers his rifle slightly as his big cartoon eyes seem to bore into my soul.

Too bad he won't find anything left in there.

As those large blank cartoon eyes fixate on me, my brief pang of amusement unexpectedly turns to hate. What right does this motherfucker have to stomp on one of my childhood icons? Why should I have to sit here and listen to his mindless ranting, or anyone else's for that matter? Lanard, Takahashi, Reznik, and even my father enter my mind as I once again feel an overwhelming desire to lash out at those who have determined my destiny. I'm sure as fuck not going to curl up and die in some sick spectacle orchestrated by an extremist who doesn't even know that Anwar Haandi himself took an interest in recruiting me prior to me telling his sister—whom I nailed—to go fuck herself. Even if this guy's not Shining Sun, he should respect the fact that his extremist friends came to me for help. If only I had a gun, I'd send this Fuzz-a-Bear imposter back to the candy-coated rainbow hell from which he sprang. Instead, I settle for harsh language. "If you don't shut to fuck up I'm going to shove that gun up your sorry ass and pull the trigger!" I say, standing up in the middle of the aisle.

This makes everyone cry even more. Fuzz-a-Bear actually looks at the petrified flight attendant, maybe to check if he heard me right. I think Bill just pissed his pants. Suddenly, before Fuzz-a-Bear has time to process my hollow threat, we hear a whooshing sound as the front access door of the plane opens. It's Reznik's security. Ever since New York met its demise, these guys don't fuck around. They start shooting immediately. I jump to my right, into Bill, who is trying frantically to press himself down under the seat. This is fortunate for me, since the bullets that hit Fuzz-a-Bear pass right through his body and hit the woman next to my assigned seat—the one who was praying to Jesus. I guess she got her deliverance. I just get lucky, since my empty seat is perforated. Two people in the row in front of us also take a couple of stray rounds—acceptable losses given our

situation. The bomb doesn't even go off, which means this will go down as one of the most poorly-executed terrorist attacks this city has seen since that bastard ran through a Home Interiors, slashing every mattress he could before security filled him full of holes.

In the aftermath, I tell myself that my verbal assault stalled Fuzz-a-Bear long enough for security to enter the plane, but this is only because I lie to myself on a regular basis now. The truth is that I was just angry—that's it. For all I knew, he could have blown us all up. Good thing I wasn't thinking that far ahead. I would have definitely stayed in my seat and waited for the end to come.

We sit around for hours while the authorities clean up the mess. Thankfully, Reznik doesn't make an appearance on the plane, and nobody bothers to interview any of the passengers, probably out of fear of being sued for the collateral damage. The flight attendant says I have to sit in my torn up, blood-spattered seat for the rest of the trip, which isn't nearly as bad as the shitty in-flight meal they pass out to keep us occupied. Security doesn't even bother removing the gunman's body until right before takeoff.

“Wake up Fuzz-a-Bear. Wake up,” a little girl sobs as the blood pools under his bulbous mask-covered head. Since nobody seems to have the presence of mind to tell the girl that this is not in fact the real Fuzz-a-Bear, I consider explaining to her that it's just some extremist asshole wearing a costume. Then I think better of the idea, reasoning that if I can't maintain the integrity of my childhood icons, then nobody else should either. I look at her traumatized parents and wonder whether their bundle of joy was an accident or an intentional fuck-up. Only the former makes sense given the circumstances.

It's night by the time we're cleared for take-off. The plane finally roars to life, circling over the brilliant sea of lights a couple of times before heading out over the pitch-black wastes. We quickly hit the low cloud deck, which obscures any further hope of a view. A few minutes later the auto-shutters activate, sealing the plane for its entry into low orbit.

In the ensuing silence, I quickly nod off, hoping that any further terrorist attacks simply blow us up while I'm asleep. The steady hum of the engines and hushed voices merge together in a steady din, which puts me under quickly.

I wake with a start, struck by a feeling that something is very wrong. As my eyes adjust to the dimmed light of the cabin, I realize with horror that all of the other passengers—Bill included—have disappeared.

“Hello? Hello?” I'm frantic. I jump out of my seat and pace up and down the aisle, wondering why nobody bothered to wake me once we reached Orbital Station One. I pull open one of the window shades, expecting to see the station's hanger, but instead I see that the outer shutters are still down, which means we're probably in space. Something must have happened that caused everyone to abandon ship. How the hell did I sleep through that? Why can I walk around like normal in zero gravity? More importantly, who the *fuck* is flying this plane? I walk over to the small computer terminal at the flight attendant's station, intent on checking the plane's status. To my relief, the

menu comes up. I scroll down the options, choosing “flight schedule.” Before the trip status screen can load, however, the display flickers and goes black.

“Fuck!” I yell, hitting the display with an open palm. “Where the fuck am I?”

The screen suddenly comes back to life, displaying a single message: PLEASE DON’T HIT ME PAUL.

I slowly back away from the terminal. “What the fuck?”

The screen flickers again as the message changes. CALM DOWN AND TURN AROUND.

I’m suddenly gripped by fear as I sense that somebody is standing behind me. I whirl around, prepared to defend myself from whomever or whatever is playing this game. At first I don’t see anyone, my gaze focused toward the back of the plane. It’s then that I look down and meet the small black eyes of an augmented simian unit dressed in a pilot’s uniform, his small braincap covered by a ridiculous pilot’s hat.

“Who are you?” I ask.

The monkey cocks its head and bounds past me, its tail in the air. I think it wants me to follow it. As I stand there debating what to do, the silence of the cabin is broken:

“Paul Wyatt, please report to the cabin,” a calm male voice says over the intercom. It’s definitely not our captain’s gravelly voice. This one is soothing and hypnotic. As I follow the monkey toward the cockpit, my fear melts away.

I open the cockpit door and see a long-haired, bearded man sitting with his back to me. He’s wearing a pilot suit just like the monkey, which has now taken its seat at the navigator’s station. Another augmented simian unit—not unlike the CSR I rudely hung

up on a few weeks ago—sits in the co-pilot seat, his shiny metal braincap bobbing back and forth as he merrily goes about his work.

“Look, man, no hands,” the bearded man says, looking back at me with a smile. He looks to be about my age, maybe in his early thirties. “Why don’t you have a seat, Paul. I’d offer one of my burgers, but Peter here took more than his share.”

The co-pilot monkey looks back at me and bares its teeth.

“Bad Peter! No bite!” The long haired man shoos the monkey off the seat, patting the cushion invitingly.

“Jesus?” I ask.

“That would be me,” he says matter-of-factly. He turns his attention back to flying the plane. I take a couple of steps forward, but I’m too confused to sit.

I can tell it’s the real Jesus because he doesn’t look like some blonde, sixteenth-century child molester. Actually, he looks a lot like Haandi’s wanted pictures—a bearded Middle Eastern guy who wouldn’t make it through airport security if his ass depended on it; the kind of shifty-eyed asshole who I would expect to hijack a plane while dressed in a bear costume—if I didn’t know better. “What’s going on?” I ask.

“What do you mean, Paul? We’re flying you to your destination. Mars, right?”

I look ahead through the large cockpit window and see a dense field of stars—definitely not the view from Earth orbit. “This is a dream,” I say.

“Ha, ha. Whatever makes you feel better, man,” Jesus says, motioning again for me to sit, which I do.

“I suppose you’re going to tell me the meaning of life or something,” I say.

“Not exactly.”

“Then what?”

“Well, I figured I’d pull you aside and make sure that you’re not going to let these little setbacks stop you from going to Mars.”

“Hasn’t stopped me yet.”

“Maybe not, but I know what you’re thinking,” Jesus says. “You’re considering buying a return ticket to Chicago the minute this plane lands at the station.”

“I am?” I think about it for a moment and realize that Jesus is right. I am going to try to talk myself out of this trip. “Why Mars? Why does it matter?”

“Let’s just say that things can’t proceed as planned unless you go.”

“God’s plan?” I laugh at the idea. To my surprise, Jesus laughs, too.

“I know, it’s pretty fucking ridiculous,” he says, his eyes drifting off into the abyss outside. “It’d be a lot easier if we just knew the Goddamn plan ahead of time, right?”

“That’s true,” I say, wondering if even my pilot knows where the fuck he’s headed. “So what am I supposed to do once I get there?” I ask.

Jesus squints for a moment, like he’s thinking about how to word the answer. “Just...do what comes naturally for you, Paul.”

“Easier said than done. I’ve been trying to figure out what comes naturally for years.”

“Yeah, those daddy issues are a bitch,” Jesus says with a smile. “God knows I have a few of my own.”

I want to stay and talk with Jesus more, but I suddenly feel a sinking sensation and realize that I’m getting pulled back to consciousness. As the red dot of Mars begins

to materialize outside the window, the scene fades, and I hear Jesus whistling some old tune from twentieth century that my mother used to like: “What a Wonderful World,” I think it was. Peter and Thomas chime in with their odd little monkey screeches right before everything goes black.

I wake to the droning sound of the landing alarm. I’m struck by a feeling of lightness, which tells me that we are indeed on the orbital station, which has only a fourth of Earth’s surface gravity. We collect our carry-ons and quickly make our way through the crowded, dirty hanger bay of the station.

Things go pretty smoothly in customs. At least none of us gets shot at by a crazed mascot. Nobody on the station, not even Takahashi’s security forces, gives me or Bill a second look. The crew of the ore hauler we board doesn’t seem to care about us either. Most of them are too busy eyeing Susan to care about who Bill and I are. In the weeks following our departure from Earth orbit, she has at least a dozen guys from the crew ask her point blank for a quick fuck in the engine room, which results in the inevitable rolling of the eyes that has become her most defining feature in my mind.

CHAPTER X

A MARTIAN STORM OF SHIT

My first impression of Mars is that it's really red, just like the movies. I've heard that everyone says that when they come here. At this point, I'm just glad this trip's coming to an end in a few hours. Almost three months on a tin can with thirty male crew members who haul ore through space for a living. It's as exciting as it sounds.

Not surprisingly, Susan never warmed up to my attempts to get to know her. She's still pissed at the fact that Bill and I are coming along—two dumb-shit politicians taking up space that should be reserved for actual scientists. I gave up trying to make conversation after the first few days of the trip. Maybe this boredom hasn't been all bad, though. It's been good to have some time to detoxify after leaving Earth. I've been spending some time reading up on Mars, trying to educate myself as much as possible to show Dave that I can indeed help him with whatever he needs. It's been awhile since I studied anything that actually interested me. Most of college was spent studying economics and public administration, two fields that don't mean shit when it's easier to just kiss the asses of the right people on your way up through the political ranks. Bill on the other hand took a different route, spending most of his time exercising in the ore hauler's cramped workout room, a ridiculous endeavor considering the fact that we're already traveling in gravity that is a fraction of One G. Maybe he's just trying to purge the demons. Or maybe he's planning to leave me and join Shining Sun when he gets back to Earth. I was surprised by how disappointed he seemed when I told him that I rebuffed our invitation to join the opposition groups.

So here we are—several weeks later, docking with Takahashi station in Martian orbit. I watch the station through our cabin’s small viewport as the ship pulls in. The station itself is ugly, at least from what I can see—a modular network of large capsules that looks like a crude model of an ethanol molecule, which I can now identify thanks to my new-found interest in science.

I can’t see much of the planet from where I’m standing, just a thin slice of red off to the far right behind the station, however, I am struck by the added weight of the station’s gravity. It must be much higher than that of the ship, maybe even comparable to the surface of Mars. Maybe Bill was the smart one for working out during the trip; I feel the need to sit after only a few steps through the docking umbilicus. I walk slowly as we disembark, trying to keep my footing. I struggle with my luggage in the thin docking port, trying to draw as little attention as possible. I look up and see our welcoming committee. Instead of a smiling Dave, we’re greeted by armed security guards dressed like the assholes who escorted us out of city hall a few months ago. These guys look much more hardcore, though—Takahashi doesn’t take chances with any of his mining operations, especially not one that cost him trillions of dollars to build. We thought customs in Earth orbit was going to be our biggest hurdle in this covert venture, but clearly the security situation here is more serious than we expected. Bill stops in mid-stride once he sees the armed men standing at the end of the service hatch that connects the station to the docked ship.

“Just keep moving,” Susan mutters under her breath. “Don’t give them a reason to be suspicious.”

Bill complies, but I can tell he's nervous. I'm nervous, too. Apart from a brief view screen conversation between Susan and Dave a couple of weeks ago, we haven't received any other instructions about what to do once we get here. Hopefully, our documentation is still good.

Hopefully, Dave's not lying face down in a Martian ditch.

Susan dashes forward, meeting the guards before they can even enter the umbilicus. "I'm Doctor Nordstrom. These are my colleagues Doctors Torrance and Davidson. We were told Dr. Escobar would be waiting for us here on the station," she states in a commanding tone, her identification held outstretched in the faces of the men.

"Sorry ma'am, just a precaution," the guard who seems to be in charge apologizes from beneath his helmet. "We're operating on Code Orange right now—all incoming ships must be searched, and all crew members must be verified before entering the station."

Bill and I stand back like little kids as one of the guards scans Susan's passport. The crew of the ship waits behind us, obviously impatient to leave their flying metal coffin. Despite the guard's initially threatening posture, they get through us quickly, failing to give me or Bill a second look.

Once through security, we're told that Dave is waiting for us in the observation lounge. Susan, having been here before, leads the way several feet in front of us. As we struggle to keep up, I try to take in our new surroundings. The interior of the station is almost as ugly as the outside. Everything is dirty metal, illuminated only by blinking computer terminals and the occasional florescent light.

As promised, Dave is waiting for us in the observation lounge, the only part of the station that looks like it was designed with even a remote interest in creature aesthetics. The large central sitting area is ringed by panoramic observation windows. To our left, I can see a rapidly shrinking canvas of stars that is being devoured by the arc of red mass dominating most of the scene. I hadn't realized the station needed to turn this fast to maintain artificial gravity. I look away from the windows, worried I'll get sick. The few potted plants placed around the sitting area do add a nice touch.

"It's about time!" he calls out, shooting out of his chair and embracing Susan. She hugs him back, the first sign of affection I've seen her grant to anyone. Just as I'm about to feel jealous, he lets go of her and turns his attention to us. "I can't believe you sons-of-bitches are actually standing here," he laughs, bypassing my outstretched hand and hugging me. "Let me do most of the talking here," he quickly whispers into my ear before pulling back and flashing us his trademark smile. Bill too gets a quick hug along with the instructions about talking. This makes me nervous again.

"Thanks, Jimmy," Dave calls to the young guard at the door. The tall man doesn't budge, only nods like an extinct giant redwood swaying in the breeze. "Thank you," Dave says more forcefully. This time the kid gets it and leaves the room. As soon as the door closes, Susan starts her barrage of questions. "What the hell is this, Dave? It's like there's a goddamn war going on."

"We're about at that point," Dave sighs heavily, motioning for us to sit down. "A few weeks ago we found some kind of rock lichen living about seven hundred meters down in one of those caverns. You know, the caves with the lakes?" This information is obviously for Susan, since I don't know shit about any rock lichens. Most of the holo-

books I read on the trip were written during the early days of colonization. I nod anyway, intrigued by the information. Dave continues: “Well, management ordered to have them destroyed or removed from the caverns prior to us drilling there—apparently there was a concern from the exobiologists about contamination of the facility. Before we even had a chance to do anything about it, word got out to the colony.”

“You mean the Chryse Planitia colony?” I ask.

Dave nods. “Yep. Sure enough, within a week we’ve got hundreds of colonial Greens swamping our facility, demanding that we leave the aliens alone. I knew building this facility so close to that damned colony was going to cause a problem. Thing is, the richest deposits of titanium and uranium are all located within a hundred miles of the colony, and they’ve refused Takahashi’s offers to buy them out.”

“That doesn’t sound like the kind of thing that would stop Takahashi,” Bill mutters.

“Mitsuo’s been hoping for a situation like this,” Dave continues. “The extremists in the colony are making it easy for him, too. I tried to talk both sides down. Most of the Greens respect me, even if they don’t agree with my employer. Governor Rousseau was actually a friend of mine back in grad school. We were just about to work out a compromise, when one of the Greens made an aggressive move against the colony—a small bomb, I think. It didn’t do much damage—just a large tractor parked out back. Anyway, within hours of the bombing Takahashi ordered a full security lockdown. All of the colonists who were protesting near the mines were either killed or arrested by our security forces. Finally, I convinced the colonials to just give up on the fucking rock lichens, but that hasn’t changed our security status at the mines. Takahashi knows

Rousseau doesn't have a good handle on his own people, so he's just looking for an excuse to roll over to the colony and finish off every last one of them."

Hearing Dave refer to Takahashi's men as "our" people makes me a little uneasy, but I try to ignore it. It's hard to tell how much of this conversation he's making up just because we're probably being watched by security cameras. It's best if I just continue to play dumb, which isn't too much of a stretch. Maybe Susan was right about Bill and I being superfluous baggage. "I haven't heard about any of this on the news, and nobody on the ship brought it up," I say.

"What do you expect?" Dave huffs. "This place is crucial to the world economy. Do you really think anyone's going to complain if Takahashi offs a few crazy Greens on another planet?"

"That's terrible," Susan hisses.

"That's life, dear," Dave answers. "Hate to sound like a cynic, but the only reason I'm pissed is that our little discovery occurred in the midst of this shit storm. Last week Kenji Takahashi arrived to head-up the security operations around the facility. You know what that means."

I think I feel the floor shake a bit as both my legs and Bill's stiffen. Kenji is the resident fucking psychopath of the Takahashi family. Mitsuo uses him as an enforcer, since Kenji is too stupid and unstable to do anything else. He may not know what Bill and I look like, but we still need to watch our asses. Maybe this trip wasn't worth the risk.

I miss my green chair.

"What is this thing you brought us out here to see, Dave?" I ask.

Dave rolls his eyes a bit, but doesn't break cover. "The ROCK SAMPLES I told you about?" he asks, while motioning with his eyes toward the ceiling. Cameras? Who knows in this place.

"Uh, yeah."

"We'll go see them tomorrow, but first we need to get you down to the planet and get you registered."

A few hours later we're on a shuttle, descending toward Mars. My body is still trying to adapt to the changing gravity and the gradually increasing motion sickness only gets worse as the crazy-ass Pakistani pilot banks so hard it feels like my eyeballs are going to pop out of my skull. Sure enough, Bill pukes during this little maneuver, his airsickness bag doing only a partial job of catching the vomit. As we break the thin clouds of carbon dioxide and water vapor, I get my first view of the planet. It's barren, but beautiful—the volcanic mountains, twice as tall as anything on Earth, tower into the stratosphere. I'm about to comment on how surprisingly blue the sky is this time of day, but then I smell the puke and lose it.

CHAPTER XI

THE STRINGS ATTACHED TO FAVORS

A monkey in a spacesuit? You've got to be fucking kidding me. At first I think I'm still dreaming, but as my bed starts to shake more violently, I realize that yes, I'm really seeing a monkey dressed up as an astronaut. I don't know what's more ridiculous, the realization that someone actually took the time to zip this little guy's miniature white suit up to his fuzzy chin, or the fact that somebody made a suit for a monkey in the first place. And here I thought I came to Mars to escape the insanity of Earth.

"Wake up, Paul!" Wake up!"

Holy shit, it talks. I guess I should have expected this. "I'm up," I mutter, hoping this pacifies the hyperactive primate. It shuts up for a minute but continues to watch me with its dark little monkey eyes. Now I'm annoyed. My new friend's voice sounds less robotic than the augmented simian unit I talked to back on Earth about my rent check, but I actually think this makes it creepier, like the brown-eyed child I never wanted is speaking to me.

"Can I help you get ready, Paul?" It asks impatiently. I ignore the offer and look over to my right where Bill's bunk is situated. He's gone—apparently he already received his simian wakeup call.

I'm just about to swat my furry new friend away when Dave bursts into the room with a huge smile on his face. "I can see you've met Athena," he notes cheerfully, plucking the creature off my bed and holding it like a child.

"If you're the father, I don't want to see what the mother looks like," I mutter, finally rolling out of bed.

“Nice, smartass. I’ll have you know this little lady is a state-of-the-art augmented simian reconnaissance unit,” Dave states proudly. “An I.Q. of 65, not to mention enhanced coordination and muscular control.”

“More than I can say for most humans,” I mutter, throwing on my shirt.

“Using chimps instead of monkeys provides a much better baseline to work with. She’s probably the last of her kind, though,” Dave says in a sad voice. “I hear Takahashi’s new Mark VII augmented simian units are finally going into production next month, which means no more of these cute little guys running around.”

I stop my slow shuffle toward the door for a moment as I think about what this means. I can already see the endless fields of dead, discarded chimp carcasses soon to be filling up the dry lakebed landfills back home. I look over at the brown, child-like eyes for a moment and almost apologize for being a dick, but then I remember all of the endless hours I’ve spent on the phone talking in circles to these things. Good riddance. “What’s for breakfast?”

As Bill and I eat with the rest of the small science staff, I realize that Dave has managed to carve out a nice little kingdom here on Mars. The science sectors are set off from the rest of the mining facility, closed to everyone except those with the highest security clearance. Unlike the functionally gritty space station and mining operations, the research labs are white and pristine, featuring all of the best amenities of Earth—certainly better than the crazy neighbors, crumbling walls, and simian landlords of the Old Waterfront.

Holographic displays and sleek furniture dominate the living quarters, while the labs themselves feature panoramic views of the Martian landscape through the large,

flawless windows overlooking the edge of Ares Vallis. Despite my anxious fear of Kenji Takahashi bursting into my room and cutting off my balls, I managed to get a pretty good night's sleep here. The science facility is situated nearly a kilometer from the main administration building, which gives us a good buffer. Maybe if I actually had some scientific skills to offer these people I could stay indefinitely, but I understand that Dave probably has a specific role for me to play in this discovery. Once again, I question why Dave was so adamant that Bill and I come to Mars. If there's one thing that my time in office taught me, though, it's that friendships rest upon the strings attached to favors.

There are only seven of us in the science lab galley, all seated around a large, central table. I didn't have much time to talk with the other three scientists last night, but I know they're all geologists working under Dave. There are two men named Robert and Michael, both middle-aged. Neither seems personable, although maybe that's understandable considering that Bill and I are outsiders. At least I can't detect any obvious disdain as in the case of Susan. The third scientist is a woman named Rachel, a cute dark-skinned girl with an accent—maybe Australian. She's the youngest of the crowd, and from what I gather, Dave's lover. She's definitely more outgoing than most of her colleagues.

Too bad she's taken.

Although we're leaving in about an hour to go examine Dave's discovery, nobody at the table mentions anything about the trip. Instead, they talk about rock strata and dig sites. I turn my gaze out the window facing the main mining facility several hundred meters away. There's quite a bit of activity over there this morning—thousands of workers on every shift from what Dave tells me. The scale of the operation is impressive

despite the ugliness of the facility's exterior. The multitude of rovers and hovercraft look like a huge swarm of flies circling a massive metal turd. The only interesting architectural feature of the complex is the administrative tower that soars into the pink morning sky. Of course, we stayed far away from this spire of death last night. Dave made sure to get us from the shuttle bay to the science labs as quickly as possible, even though it was pretty late. From what he told us, Kenji wanders the facility at all hours, often with a samurai sword hanging at his side.

Following our meal, Dave and the others begin prepping the equipment needed for the expedition in the Martian wastes. I use the time to log onto Dave's computer and quickly scroll through the headlines from Chicago. Aside from the usual bombings and air quality alerts, I notice that Mayor Reynolds has implemented the proposal Lanard sent me about registering the city's Muslims and moving more security forces into the Old Waterfront District. I stare for a moment at an image of my female replacement. On the surface, she's tall, confident and hot as hell. Unfortunately, she's also a mega-bitch who will do whatever it takes to further her career. Granted, I didn't give a shit about the city either during my last days in office, but she sells herself as the next prom queen, saint-in-the-making politician who cares. Translation: she eats at Jesus Burger and talks about cleaning up the city. What a fucking humanitarian. Like many city council members, Reynolds is one of Lanard's Bible-banging apostles.

Depressed by how little these deficiencies matter to her adoring public, I decide to check my personal messages. I need something to occupy my mind. Even as the information loads onto the screen, I know what I'm going to find: buried beneath a mountain of late fee notices and creditor threats, I see several messages from Ameenah.

As I read over her attempts to contact her muse-in-absentia, I begin to feel sorry for kicking her out that last night on Earth. Unlike Mayor Reynolds, or my wonderful whore of an ex-wife for that matter, Ameenah is genuine—a real person. Despite my growing tired of her radical Leftist political stance on almost every issue, I admire her passion, a quality that seems about as foreign to me now as a successful career.

I picture Ameenah sitting alone in her apartment in the early morning hours, waiting for a sunrise that will never happen. Maybe when this little adventure is all over, I can return and apologize—that is, if she’s not locked up in Traverse Bay with her brother by the time I get back. For all I know, she could take over Shining Sun and blow up twice as many roller coasters and Jesus Burgers as her brother ever did.

Then again, this is all assuming I’ll be going home at all. Dave hasn’t given many details concerning his big discovery, which tells me this may have been a one way trip.

I find the others in the small airlock, packing the last bit of equipment. Robert and Michael stay behind, which is fine by me. Rachel is coming with us, along with Susan, Dave and Athena. Once we climb aboard the giant dildo on wheels, Dave contacts the mining facility on the radio to signal our departure and abruptly cuts the transmission. “Finally, we can fucking talk,” he sighs.

“If you were worried that the science lab was bugged, why the hell didn’t you tell us?” I ask.

“It’s probably not, but I don’t want Takahashi finding out about the crash site. It’s bigger than any of us.”

“Nothing’s more important than protecting my ass,” says Bill. “Cut the shit, Dave. Where the hell are we going in this thing? I’m sick of being jerked around. This better not

be like that time you called me and said the hookers we bought tested positive,” he barks. I smile, thinking how ironic it is that Bill always made such a shrewd political advisor and all-around kiss-ass. Outside the office, he can be the most tactless son-of-a-bitch alive.

Dave gives a nervous laugh as he shoots a quick glance over at Rachel, who is sitting shotgun with Athena in her lap. She doesn't seem upset by the hooker comment, which is good for Dave. Maybe she already knows about his wilder college days. He begins carefully: “Well, we were out on the northern end of Ares Vallis, scanning one of the deeper valleys for more deposits. We were on the canyon floor when I noticed a fissure in the cliff face. As we drove past, I caught a glimpse of something metal, which was odd considering the fact that none of the scanners registered anything.”

Dave pauses for a second, like he's trying to figure out how to tell us the rest of the story. The rover is silent, apart from the steady whirling of the engine. “We sent Athena in with a remote camera to check it out, and that's when we saw it—the ship.”

“What, somebody crashed out here? Big fucking deal,” Bill laughs. He obviously doesn't get the significance of what Dave's saying.

“How old?” I ask, understanding where the story is going.

“That's the strange part,” Dave says, once again sounding a bit hesitant to share his information. “The ship looks brand new, but it's partially embedded in the rock. Couldn't even get a sensor hit at point blank range.”

“Did you find any bodies?” I ask.

“Nothing outside. No humans. No little green men.”

A puzzled expression crosses Bill's face. "You're saying this thing's not one of ours?"

"No way," Dave says. "Not unless somebody's flying around in a ship that uses technology far more advanced than anything we know about. We would have explored the wreck more, but we were expected back at the colony. We never actually entered the ship and haven't returned to the site since."

"It could change everything we know about physics, especially if it really is alien in design," Susan says. "Its propulsion system alone could generate power for billions. Based on the fact that it seems to have phased through the planet's crust, I'd guess there's something exotic in that reactor."

"Yeah, exotic enough to crash the fucker and kill the crew," Bill mutters. "I'm not buying this."

"We don't know what went wrong," Susan says. "One thing is for certain, if Takahashi gets his hands on advanced alien technology, the average person will never see any benefits from it. He and his execs may find some way to reverse engineer the tech and release it in small improvements, ensuring market dominance for the next several centuries."

"On the other hand, if we can get it to the right people, we can turn the tables on those bastards and hopefully make a real difference. This could lead to cheap, unlimited power for everyone back on Earth, or maybe even allow us to colonize other star systems," Dave adds.

"Or it could just be a giant pile of shit," adds Bill.

I see the mad glimmer in Dave's eyes and suddenly feel like an idiot. When Susan had introduced herself a few weeks back, she mentioned being a physicist. That should have given us a clue about what was waiting out here in the Martian desert. "How are you going to get anything from the ship off planet?" I ask, painfully aware that I'm now involved in some sort of clandestine plan to fuck over the powers that be.

"We have some friends at the Chryse Vallis colony with important connections back on Earth."

"To the Greens? Are you fucking kidding me?" Bill blurts out. The news worries me, too. I didn't realize Dave had aligned himself with such a crazy group of radicals. The Greens want to change everything back on Earth, from helping the average man to saving the entire planet, to building a better tomorrow and all of that utopian shit that I've heard promised a million times. Fucking great. The problem is, none of the Greens understands just how dangerous men like Takahashi and Lanard can be when threatened. Bill and I should know—we were members of their club not too long ago.

"So you want us the help you recover this thing, even though we don't know where it's from or how it got here," I say.

"No, Paul," Dave says. He looks serious. "I brought you here to take over as governor of Chryse Vallis. Rousseau's going to step down as soon as we drop you off there."

"You what?"

"They need a real leader, Wyatt," Susan says. "Since we started working with the opposition, we've been sending extra shipments of supplies and weapons to the colony. Once we safely recover the ship, we can attack Takahashi's facility and commandeer the

mines for our own use. Maybe we'll manage to save some of the Martian organisms as well."

"Now that we have the additional support of the ICLF and Shining Sun, we have enough supplies and people to win this thing. Takahashi doesn't even know that we've been running extra transports to the far side of the planet for the past six months, using false transponder codes to mask the landings from his satellites. All we need is somebody like you, Paul. A figurehead—someone who can keep the factions together long enough to take down the companies and install a real government."

I look at Bill, who sits there looking as stupefied as I feel. "What if I say no?"

Dave laughs. "The way I see it old buddy, you don't have a lot of options right now. Mars is the key. It all starts here."

As we near the sloping ridge that leads down into the depths of Ares Vallis, we pass the burned-out wreckage of a colonial rover. Several bodies litter the ground surrounding the vehicle, victims of Kenji Takahashi's security forces. Dave speeds by as he makes the turn, but I still manage to see the bullet holes that perforated the suits of the dead Green colonists seconds before the near-vacuum of Mars killed them. I turn my head back toward Bill and see he's looking at the same thing. It's at this point that I realize we've been recruited for a misguided crusade to change the world—two out-of-work politicians who Dave probably hopes can lead a bunch of science geeks to greatness. I remember the phone calls from the Greens a few months ago, and how we basically told them to go to hell. I guess Dave knew he had to get us to Mars before we'd go along with the plan. If things go his way, we'll probably be heading up a people's revolution within a week of returning to Earth. My bet is that we're all going to die in one

of Kenji's torture chambers. Imagining our fate, I frantically search for the emergency exit door of the rover, intent on jumping out without my suit on. It'll be easier that way. Unfortunately, Susan's sitting in front of the door, and there's no way I'm getting past that cold bitch. May as well just sit back and enjoy the ride, since these will probably be the last few peaceful hours of my life.

CHAPTER XII

LOST IN THE SHUFFLE

Looking at the section of the ship that's actually sticking out of the rock, I can see why Dave was confused about its origin. It looks long and sleek, not like the bulky freighters that dominate the shipping lanes between Earth and Mars. On the other hand, it doesn't look like the prototypical flying saucer, so I'm pretty much at a loss.

"How long is the whole thing?" Bill asks.

"Almost a hundred meters," Rachel says, running her hand along the surface.

"Don't touch it," Susan orders sternly. "If it's in a state of quantum flux, your hand might fuse to the hull." Rachel jumps back instinctively from the ship and gives Susan a puzzled expression. Susan doesn't look up from her scanner, an indication that she isn't joking about the potential danger.

Bill and I don't need directions about staying back from the ship. Despite my curiosity, part of me wants to piss my pants and run in the opposite direction. I stand near the entrance to the cavern, shining my light toward what looks like the vessel's front. Bill stands next to the entrance against the rocky wall, Athena sitting at his feet while she waits for Dave's next order.

"What's the story, Susan?" Dave asks impatiently. I can tell this wait is killing him because he hasn't stayed in one spot since we arrived more than an hour ago.

"I don't like this," she answers, shaking her head.

"What?"

"I'm still having trouble reading the ship. Sometimes I get a faint positive feedback on the hull, sometimes I get rock, like the ship's not even there."

“Bullshit, Rachel just touched it,” Dave notes. “Maybe your equipment isn’t calibrated to properly detect the alloys in the hull.”

Susan gives a frustrated sigh. I heard this a few times back on the ore hauler whenever she was approached by one of the crew members looking for sex. “Or maybe, Dave, this thing somehow traveled right through this rock and is still in a state of quantum flux. Who knows. There’s definitely some kind of exotic propulsion system powering this thing. Could be anti-matter, or some kind of singularity technology. My scanners aren’t designed for this type of inspection. We should go back to the colony and run some of this data through the mainframe.”

I’m kind of relieved to hear this. Maybe we won’t be going into this thing after all. Staring at it, I can feel menace, like this giant piece of metal is just waiting to fuck me up. The lone break in the hull looks like an entrance hatch, a small door just large enough to let us in, only to trap us forever in an alien chamber of horrors. I look back outside and see it’s getting a bit darker out. Suddenly, I want to be back in the warm confines of the science labs, away from this thing.

I miss my green chair.

“Let’s send the monkey in,” Bill suggests. “I’m getting tired of standing around in here.”

Dave looks down at Athena for a moment as she joins his side. She looks back up at him, like she’s waiting for permission. I can tell he doesn’t want her to go in, but the scientist in him, the impatient adventurer who gave the proverbial finger to his parents’ wishes, wants to risk it.

“That’s her job, right?” Bill asks. “To go where you guys shouldn’t?”

“For the last time, Bill, she’s a chimp, not a fucking monkey. Besides, I’m not just going to send her into danger for the hell of it,” Dave says sternly as he bends down and picks up Athena. “We’ll run a few more scans and head back to base. We can come back tomorrow after we’ve analyzed some of Susan’s data.”

I’m surprised by Bill’s insistence to see inside the ship. I guess from his point of view, it’s a waste of time to come all the way out here and not find out where it came from. Another part of me just wants to see what will happen if Athena goes through the hatch, if she’ll really fuse with the hull or get sucked into another dimension or some crazy shit like that.

“Send her in, Dave,” I say.

Dave looks at Susan, who shrugs her shoulders. “Our friends at Chryse Planitia should know if this thing’s going to be of any use as soon as possible. Otherwise, it would be best for us to get on the next ore hauler out of here. We can’t afford to stay on Mars for long, Dave, not with Kenji snooping around the facility,” she says. “From what I can tell, most of the interior of the ship is still intact, so she’ll have lots of room to move around in there.”

“Ah, fuck,” Dave moans, letting Athena down. He leans over and adjusts the camera on her helmet. “Be careful, understand? If Rachel tugs on your safety line, you come running back as fast as you can.” Athena nods in understanding and quickly bounds over to Rachel, who releases the line coiled up in the primate’s little backpack.

Dave pulls out a small video monitor from his own backpack and synchs it to the camera. Bill and I peer over his shoulder, just waiting for the potential carnage that may follow if our simian friend meets her end.

As Athena saunters toward the hull with her odd little chimp walk, I begin to focus on a portion of the hull near the top of the cavern. I instinctively shine my light on the section, moving closer to get a good look. I can read something.

“Careful, Paul, not too close,” says Dave.

I shoot him an annoyed glance. If he were really worried about my personal safety, he would have left me on Earth. “There are letters,” I murmur.

“Where?” The others crowd the entrance to the fissure, blocking out the light.

“Jesus Burger?”

“Now’s not the time to be thinking about food, Wyatt,” Susan scolds.

“No, it says Jesus Burger. It’s a fucking advertisement.”

“Bullshit, Dave says incredulously, pushing past me. Quit crowding the entrance. I can’t see shit!”

“It’s not me, it’s just getting dark outside,” Bill says in his defense. I turn around, expecting to see the fading afternoon light outside. That’s when I notice the real source of the dimming light.

“Holy fuck!”

There’s a dark figure standing in the opening to the crevice; I can’t see the face through the visor, but the outline of the large rifle is impossible to miss. Behind the figure are more shadows, quickly swallowing up the remaining light. Looks like our little secret’s out. Here come Kenji’s security forces.

I review my pathetic list of options in the span of a millisecond. None of them looks good. I should stand up and fight like a man. After all, what else do I have to live for at this point? That’s why it’s strange that I choose to run. Maybe it’s just because

dying seems like it would hurt or maybe it's because my frantic animal mind doesn't give a shit about honor or bravery. Regardless, my flight from the entrance lasts a whole ten meters before I come up against the hull of the ship. In my peripheral vision I see the swarm of security forces streaming into the cavern, firing stun charges as they enter. They probably want us alive for information. As I grab what looks to be the release for the ship's hatch, I think it may be best to just surrender. Maybe they'll just question us and send us back to Earth on the next freighter. Then I remember how large Kenji's sword is and make my decision.

I pull the handle.

My visor hits the metal floor so hard I worry for a second that it's cracked. The entrance to the ship didn't open so much as disappear, sucking me into a pitch black corridor. "Fuck, fuck, fuck!" I scream as my balls suck up into my abdomen. I scramble to my feet and back up against the wall, swinging my headlamp around in a pathetic attempt to get a sense of my surroundings. The hatch is closed again. I'm shut in. Bill had been behind right me, but he must not have made it to the hatch. Nobody else did either. I'm alone. All I see are some dust grains drifting through the beam, ghostly indicators that this ship has been sitting here for a while. This doesn't make me feel better. I know a tomb when I see one.

"Paul, Paul," I hear from the blackness.

"Jesus!" I yell, half climbing up the wall. It's Athena. She somehow made it in here too. "Jesus!" I scream again, looking into the face of Our Lord And Savior. There's another advertisement for Jesus Burger in here, complete with a stupid picture of a smiling bearded asshole handing out Crucifixion Crunch-wraps. "Where the fuck I am?"

I listen for my companions on the suit's com system. Although I don't expect to hear any gunshots from beyond the ship's hull, the radio silence bothers me. Apart from the initial seconds of confused yelling, I haven't heard anyone's voice since the attack started. What bothers me even more is how much of a pussy I am for leaving them. Dave may have made it in here if I hadn't almost knocked him down while running toward the ship. I should just walk outside now and take one in the face.

I look down at Athena, who seems confused about the whole situation. Maybe she's just disappointed about getting stuck with me. "Time to get back out there," I say, moving toward the hatch I came in through. Maybe it's my guilt driving me, but going outside doesn't seem so bad. Anything is better than staying in this ship. Suddenly, my radio crackles and I hear a strange laugh. "Well, well. Mr. Wyatt. Aren't you quite the rebel, traveling all the way out to Mars to get back at my brother. I'm afraid the trip ends here."

Kenji? It's got to be. There's no way anyone else has a voice that cold. He sounds just like his brother. I step back from the hatch and wait for a moment in the blackness. Maybe he's just fishing. Maybe if I just stay quiet he'll go away.

"Go ahead and hide, Wyatt. My men are coming in, which means you've got about five more seconds to live. I'll make sure I get some good pictures of you dying—Mitsuo will love them!"

That's all the motivation I need. I turn to my left and move down the corridor toward what I think is the bridge. Athena starts yelling at me as she runs at my heels, probably wondering what the hell I think I'm going to find that's going to save us. I turn to shoo her away, but trip over something soft and mushy. Once again I'm flat on the

metal grating, but this time there's somebody or something lying next to me. I know it's a body even before my lamp hits the leg in front of my face. I can't breathe, not even to muster a girly scream or childish shriek. What comes out sounds more like a gasp than anything, an exhalation squeezed out by the iron claws of terror. I swat away at the leg and roll away from the body. I'm so determined to get away from the carcass that I don't even check to see who it is.

As I pass the hatch I came in through, I notice it's opening a bit. Here come Kenji's men. I keep moving down the hall until I get to a large, circular room about thirty or forty meters in diameter. The rock wall's coming in here, but most of the ship interior is still intact. At the center of the room sits a giant black ball that looks like a gyroscope. Blue flashing lights shoot around the contraption so fast I almost have a seizure. In the flickering madness, I can see the carnage around me—more bodies. They look smaller than they should, but it's hard to tell. I'm having a hard time getting my bearings in here. I can feel Athena tugging on my leg again, but not much else. My radio is hissing, fading in and out with the flashing light in front of me. I feel dizzy, sick. I also feel surprised that my fear is gone. As I stagger and drop to the floor for the final time, I think how strange it is that this seems natural. Maybe this is how it's supposed to end.

Or maybe it's just time to die.

CHAPTER XIII
SAYING GOODBYE

Anna laughs hysterically as she runs in circles around my office. She's growing fast, looking more like her mother with each passing year. Her dark hair whips wildly as she flies in front of my desk, sticking her arms out like a bird. I consider telling her to stop before she destroys the place, but I reason that it's best that she gets this out of her system before the long trip to Mars. Not sure how much room there will be onboard for running around.

"Got all of your things packed, Anna?" I finally ask, hoping this shifts her attention.

"My bag's stuffed!" she sighs, plopping down in dramatic fashion onto the pile of luggage. "Mom had to help me carry it!"

"Well, we're going to be gone for two years," I say.

"I know," she says quietly, getting up and walking over to the large window overlooking City Hall Park.

Anna looks a bit worried. She seems to realize her new home will look quite different from the one below. I swivel my chair around to face the window. It's summer, and the deep green mass below seems to be swallowing up the shimmering buildings beyond. Flowing streamers of vegetation cascade down the pristine walls of glass and gather in broad swaths along the streets. I'll definitely miss New York City. "See how blue the sky is today?" I point out.

"It's really bright," Anna nods, squirming a bit.

I let her down and kneel next to her in front of the window. “Well, on Mars the air is much thinner. Sometimes the sky even turns bright red or pink after a big dust storm.”

“Do they have trees there?” she asks, obviously looking at the park. Her favorite playground is down there. It’s also the place where I gave my big speech today, the one in which I thanked the people of New York for letting me be their mayor.

“No trees yet,” I laugh. “Maybe your great grandkids will plant them.” She gazes out the window as I turn around and grab the holopad from my desk, the one with the other ten speeches on it—the ones I have to give at pretty much every stage of this trip. Never been much for public relations, even though speaking has always been one of my talents.

A sharp trilling sound suddenly fills the room, jolting Anna and me out of our reflective moment. “Is it mommy?” she asks, climbing up onto my chair to get a better look at the display.

“Not yet,” I say, accepting the transmission. A face pops up. It’s Bill. “Well, if it isn’t the president,” I say.

“Nice speech, Paul. Sorry I couldn’t be there.”

“You can give the next one if you want,” I laugh.

“Small price to pay for making history,” he says. “All I do now is travel around and dedicate buildings and kiss babies.”

“People seem pretty happy with the job you’re doing.”

“I hear Space Command is scouting out locations on Ganymede. Won’t be long before there’s a colony there, too,” Bill says.

“Why, you thinking of taking the job?”

“Not sure Kelli would want to live on a frozen rock a billion kilometers away, but we’ll see in time,” he laughs.

I realize that Bill would give up his office in a second to switch places with me. Although the Mars colony has been going for about a decade, I will be arriving with the first group of civilian colonists. Now that the installation is self-sufficient, and the terraformers are up and running, I have a feeling we’ll see thousands of colonists within a few years. The Next Great Migration. And I’m in charge. No pressure.

“Well, buddy, I’ve got to be in Tokyo in an hour for that summit on Nanotech. I’ll see you at the first mission briefing in a few days. Of course, that 10 second delay makes it kind of tough to carry on much of a conversation.”

“You could always just retire to Mars. The gravity’s great for the elderly.”

“Hey, watch it. I’m not there yet. Tell Julia and Anna to have a good trip.”

“Sure thing,” I say as Anna jumps back up on my lap. “Bye, Uncle Bill,” she waves.

“Bye, honey,” he smiles as the transmission cuts off.

I think about my retirement comment for a few seconds. I was only half-kidding. If this Nanotech thing continues to develop, Mars really will become a second home for humanity. Although population growth stabilized more than a century ago, we’ll be faced with a new boom if people start living forever.

“Mommy!” Anna suddenly squeals, jumping off my lap and bounding across the room to Julia.

A familiar smile crosses my wife’s face. She bends down and tickle’s Anna’s stomach, which results in a typical barrage of maniacal giggles.

“Feel free to tire her out,” I say. “There’s going to be a lot of waiting around today.”

“She’ll be fine,” Julia says as she whisks Anna off the ground and carries her over to me. “Nice speech, sweetie,” she says, kissing me.

“Thanks.”

“It was a little hard saying goodbye to everyone back at the office, but Celina assured me she’d keep things running smoothly,” she notes with a sigh. “She’s personally taken over my caseload, too. I don’t think anyone can beat her in the courtroom.”

I can tell Julia’s going to miss her job terribly. That bad feeling is coming back, the one I’ve had several times over the past few months, ever since I accepted Bill’s offer to serve as the Martian governor. Julia said to take it as soon as I mentioned the offer even though she knew it meant leaving behind her law firm and our lives here on Earth. I couldn’t seem to talk her out of it although I still worry about wrenching her and Anna away from their lives.

“Honey, we’ve gone over this before,” she says. “I’m excited too, so don’t doubt yourself.”

“It’s not too late to say no. There’s a pretty long line of people willing to go in our place,” I point out.

“That’s just it,” she whispers, kissing me again. “This will be the trip of a lifetime. Now quit worrying, and let’s get on that shuttle.”

A couple hours later we’re blasting off from the spaceport on Staten Island. I look out the window over Anna’s tiny head, which is pressed up against the glass in

amazement. I barely remember my first trip to space with my own parents, way back when my father led the dedication ceremony for Orbital Station Serenity. Since then, I've been back many times, but the view still amazes me. Within seconds we're gliding over the shimmering white city that sits atop the deep blue waters of the Atlantic like a pearl affixed to a lapis crown. A sea of green floods the view as we head back over the mainland. Just before we hit the first cloud, I spot one of the countless small communities that dot the landscape. I wonder how many people in that town were watching the ceremony today, hoping to one day travel to Mars, or perhaps even beyond. It's strange that anyone who lives on such a beautiful planet wishes to leave it, but I suppose it's just our nature to push ourselves—that is certainly my reasoning. In any case, we'll be back in two years, watching others blast off toward the future.

CHAPTER XIV

ALL PART OF THE PLAN

Everything goes smoothly the first two weeks of the trip. *The Pride of Ares* leaves Orbital Station Three amid a sea of reporters and tourists, all struggling to get in one last word with the hundred or so colonists. After being treated to a wonderful view of the moon, we rapidly accelerate to our maximum speed, and soon Earth becomes little more than another glimmering speck on the black canvas. The ship does seem a bit cramped at first, but we adapt pretty quickly to our surroundings. Anna even has some room to run around in the cargo hold with the half dozen other children onboard.

The Pride of Ares is state-of-the-art, offering the best in simulated gravity, food processing, and communications equipment. The new anti-matter propulsion system is pretty amazing too, cutting our trip down to just a month—a good thing considering the potential boredom that comes with spaceflight in the twenty-second century. Every day I conduct video conferences with the mission directors in New York, updating them on our progress. They generally turn me over to a classroom full of children within a few minutes. The farther we travel from Earth, the longer the delay times, which eventually take longer than the conversations themselves. I'm not complaining, though—these interviews keep me busy during the long days spent cruising through interplanetary space. Most of the colonists, including Julia and Anna, have little to do besides indulge in the holo-novel archives. Julia told me that in one day she and Anna made it through *Peter Pan*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *Tales from Robotron*.

If only things had stayed this boring.

Late one night, just a few thousand miles from our halfway point, we awake to the violent sounds of breaking fuselage as if the ship had smashed into a space dock. Flashing red lights bathe our cabin in a menacing glow, an indication that something terrible has indeed happened. I look out our small viewport but can see nothing besides stars. Julia, who tries in vain to comfort a screaming Anna, insists on coming with me as I leave our cabin. Somehow I convince her to stay put. I figure that even if the hull has been breached she can at least seal herself in the room and survive until the crew gets things under control. Of course, if the hull is too badly damaged, we'll have to abandon ship and hope that a rescue vessel arrives in time.

I pass several colonists on the way toward the bridge. Nobody knows what is going on. Just as I reach my destination, the lights and sirens stop. "What's our status? Was it a collision?" I yell, partially deaf from the racket. The captain of the ship, one of the few military officers left in the space fleet, looks at me with tired eyes and shakes his head. "Ah, a damn meteor strike—pretty big. Probably several tons."

"The shields?"

"The shields did their job, but we still took some damage in the back passenger compartments. I've got men down there now trying to put out a fire."

"Anyone hurt?"

"Only a few reports of minor injuries so far, but we're more concerned about the passengers trapped in those damaged compartments. Communications are down, and we've got at least twenty people who may still be in that section." The Captain looks about ready to tell me to go back to my cabin, but I leave before he can even finish his

sentence. It may be the crew's responsibility to keep everyone aboard safe, but these are my colonists. I need to help in whatever way I can.

I stop by our cabin and tell Julia that she and Anna will be safe. Anna looks a little better, but I don't stay to comfort her. They are safe, and that's what matters. It only takes me another minute to make my way through the tight, twisting corridors in the passenger cabins before I smell smoke. I arrive to find several crewmembers frantically trying to wedge open a broken door, which is preventing them from getting to the fire. A young lieutenant who appears to be in charge stops long enough to fill me in on the situation. "We can't open it enough to get in there! We would just seal it and purge the air, but we've still got a couple people in those cabins."

I nod and approach the crack between the door and the bulkhead. I can feel the heat. I can also hear what sounds like yelling from deep within the smoke-filled darkness. "Grab that bar," I say to the crewmembers at the door. "Let's try again." The door opens a few inches, giving me just enough room to slide through. I stumble into the smoke-filled corridor and immediately try to locate the source of the yelling. The lieutenant calls back and squeezes a self-contained respirator unit through the small opening. "Don't worry. We'll have this door open by the time you get back," he insists as the safety mechanism once again closes it shut, sealing me inside with the fire. I begin to make my way through the smoke.

The fire seems to be at the far end of the hallway next to the outer hull access hatch, beyond the passenger cabins. I press myself down on the warm metal floor grating and crawl toward the flame, which has already climbed up the walls onto the ceiling. The first room I check is empty, but it takes a minute or so to search every corner in the thick

smoke. By the time I reemerge into the hallway, the fire has spread past the farthest door. I stop in front of the wall of flames for a moment, trying to decide whether it's worth jumping through into a room that might be empty. Above the crackling sound of flame, I can hear a faint voice.

I shield my face and jump through.

The room itself isn't on fire, which allows me a moment to check my own singed clothes for flames. Two small hands suddenly reach though the darkness and grab my cargo jacket. I kneel down below the worst of the smoke and find three people: two adults and a child. "My husband's hurt!" the woman screams. I feel the weight of his large, lifeless body and realize it will be too much to carry him through the flames. "Here, put this on," I say, transferring my mask to her son's face. I reach over and grab a blanket from the nearest bed, throwing it over them.

"We can't leave him!" she yells.

"I'll get you outside," I cough, dazed by the shock of the smoke hitting my lungs. "Then I'll get him." Before she has time to argue, I grab her shirt and drag her up and through the burning doorway, so hard that I fall down on the grating. "Go!" I yell, struggling to pull myself up.

"Rick!" she screams.

"Go, I'll get him!" I yell again, searching frantically for the extinguisher that I know is in the hallway. It should have been the first thing I looked for. Now it's too late. After a few more seconds of coughing and blind groping, I give up and decide to go back into the room. As I struggle to drag the unconscious man, I feel a sharp pain in my legs and realize my pants are on fire. I roll around in the darkness as my own state of

consciousness begins to slip. The last thing I remember is thinking about Julia and Anna back in our cabin—safe.

I look down at the remnants of the burns on my left hand, the one that's now resting on the top of Anna's strawberry blonde head as she stands next to my bed in sick bay. I was lucky to make it out that fire alive. It's only been a couple of days since the fire, and the doctors say I'll be in sick bay for another week of treatment. Luckily, most of the burns were on my arms and back, areas that are easily repaired by the stem cell sequencing unit. With the antibiotics and painkillers they have me on, it's difficult to stay awake for long, but I've managed to piece together most of what happened after I lost consciousness. Apparently, only seconds after I passed out from smoke inhalation, Lieutenant Green and his men burst into the room and doused everything—including me—with fire suppressant. Richard Martinez, the unconscious man from the cabin, took a little longer to recover, but he's fine now. Needless to say, my heroics earned me messiah-like status among the colonists, although I have to say that I'm not too crazy about the added attention. Good thing the news media is nearly 100 million miles away, otherwise I'd have to give even more interviews.

Julia and Anna say goodnight, leaving me to rest in the low lights of sick bay. The nurse administers another dose of medication and bids me goodnight as well. My mind drifts off as I stare out the viewport at the brilliant field of stars. Sleep comes fast.

I'm startled by a rattling sound next to my head. I open my eyes to find somebody in a lab coat loudly sorting pills on a dosage tray. "How long have I been asleep?" I ask, finding myself disoriented. I have the distinct feeling that a lot of time has passed.

"Oh, you've been sleeping for quite a long time, my friend," says a strange voice.

I shoot up in bed, surprised that it's not one of the ship's doctors. "Who are you?"

The man swivels around in his metal chair and faces me. He certainly doesn't look like a doctor with his shaggy beard and long hair. I look at the nametag and read "J.C.," which doesn't ring a bell. Even more puzzling is his ridiculous-looking paper hat, which reads "Burgers Brought to You by Heaven."

The man seems to think about how to respond for a moment. "Just think of me as your best friend, Paul."

"Bill Collins is my best friend."

"Ok, well how about the best friend you didn't know that you had."

"Who are you?"

"Paul, I'm concerned that you're not taking good care of yourself lately," he says. It's clear that he's not going to answer my questions, and seeing as how I'm immobilized, I decide to hear him out. It's at this moment that I see we're not alone in the room. On the bed adjacent to mine, two pairs of beady black eyes stare back at me. Monkeys. There are monkeys in sick bay, and they're wearing metal helmets and little lab coats.

"I'm dreaming."

"Sure. Whatever makes you feel better," J.C. says with a laugh. "That doesn't change the fact that you need to take better care of yourself. You're an important guy. We have big plans for you."

“They needed my help. I’m not going to sit by and refuse to help people. That’s why I’m in charge of these people. They need me.”

“Oh, Paul. You’re thinking small-scale. I’ve got a job for you that’s more important than anything you can possibly imagine.”

“Like what? Does this have something to do with Mars?” I ask.

“This has something to do with everything.”

“Everything?”

“Let’s call it one of Daddy’s little fuck-ups. Can’t get things perfect every time, can we?” He says, laughing again.

“I-I don’t understand,” I say.

“Don’t worry, you will,” J.C. says. “Just keep yourself alive until the time comes.” He motions back toward one of the monkeys. “Peter is going to give you something for the pain.”

“I don’t feel any pain right now.”

“Trust me, you’ll need it.”

CHAPTER XV

A WARM WELCOME

“There it is,” I whisper. We’re all standing in front of the large viewport looking out toward Mars, struck by the contrast between the deep red orb and the infinite blackness beyond. Anna squirms at my feet, struggling to angle herself, so she can see the docking station to our right. From my vantage point, I can see most of the Mars Orbital Platform. The station is smaller than most in Earth orbit, about the size of Orbital Station One, which is over thirty years old. This will change, however, as one of our primary missions during the next year will be to assist the crew with expanding the station’s size and capabilities. Eventually, we’ll use the station as a base to construct an even larger orbital platform, one built primarily from materials extracted from Mars itself.

As the ship nears the station, the crimson mass continues to grow until it dominates our view. I can just make out some faint clouds and what I think may be the edge of Vallis Marinaris, but it’s hard to tell from this distance. The scene is beautiful but alien. Maybe that’s why I feel a little apprehensive now that our trip is coming to an end. In just a few hours, we’ll be on the surface, trying to adapt to our new lives under an unfamiliar sky.

After grabbing our bags and bidding farewell to the crew, we disembark from the ship via the orbital platform’s main docking tube. The inner doors to the station open, revealing a small crowd of station crewmembers standing in the reception area. They swarm us in a generous attempt to personally greet every one of the colonists. I wave off several attempts to get our bags. Right now I’m more interested in talking with the Director of Martian Operations, who should be here, waiting to take me through the

registration and safety procedures. Looking around, I'm struck by how new everything looks on this station. Anything it lacks in size this place more than makes up for in cutting-edge technology. From the pristinely polished bulkheads, to the banks of colorful computer displays, this station is the future. And standing in the middle of it all is the person I'm looking for—Dave Escobar.

I can see that three years of hard living on the Martian surface hasn't changed his good nature. "Well, this is quite the greeting!" I yell over the surrounding commotion, as he moves in and gives his typical bear hug.

"You should see the domes on the surface. We're already growing enough crops for several thousand."

I'm amazed by the news. The reports Dave sends to Earth are usually pretty conservative, but I've suspected that he's just playing it safe with the numbers.

"Hey, Julia," Dave says as he leans in and gives her a quick kiss on the cheek. "And this must be Anna!"

It's obvious that Anna's not quite sure what to make of Dave's exuberance, but she manages not to cringe too much behind her mother's leg. It's at this point that I see the young woman standing just behind Dave.

"Is this who I think it is?" I say.

"This is she," Dave says, putting his arm around her. "I'd like you to meet Rachel."

I'm instantly struck by how great of a match this girl seems. Even as she's introducing herself, I can sense the same intense personality and curiosity that defines Dave.

“Wow. How’s it feel to be the first people to get married on another planet?” Julia asks as she shakes Rachel’s hand.

“I know. What are the odds we’d meet out here?” Rachel laughs.

“Luck? Forget that,” Dave huffs. “It was destiny, right dear?”

“Destiny that I came out here to save your butt when the terraforming generators were acting up,” she chides. “Somebody’s got to keep this place together.”

“Yeah right, Mrs. Escobar,” Dave says as he playfully rolls his eyes. “Well, if you guys are ready, we’ll get you processed and down to the planet. The sooner we get everyone to their assigned housing and work stations, the sooner we can go out and do some real exploring. So far we’ve only scratched the surface of the area around Chryse Planitia. If everything goes well the next couple of weeks, I’d love to take a science party over to Ares Vallis. The satellites have detected some anomalous readings in the canyon floor—strong enough to give the sensors some problems. It might be something worth looking into.

CHAPTER XVI
THE CURRENT'S PULL

I spend my first night on the Martian surface dreaming of childhood memories. As I stare out across the deep blue expanse, I realize that I'm back at our family retreat in northwest Michigan, not far from the Sleeping Bear Dunes. The Wyatts have owned this place for three generations— Dad insisted that it stay in the family even after he and Mom moved to New York a couple years before I was born. He made good on his resolution to use the place, and even during his terms as Senator we've made it back for at least a couple of weeks during the summer.

I shiver as a small wave laps over my waist. I'm probably eleven or twelve, the awkward insecurity of puberty still a ways off. Julia's giggling a few steps behind me as she threatens to splash me from behind with another spray of cold water. I turn and splash her first, a move that sends her scurrying out of the water. I see her parents and mine at the edge of the beach near the house, no doubt enjoying their time away from the city. The presence of our lone secret service agent up on the cottage deck is the only reminder that there is a world separate from this paradise. The security is a holdover from the days when things were more dangerous for politicians—an anachronism in this idyllic setting.

Confident of my invulnerability, I throw myself back, letting the clear, cold water embrace me. I turn over, fighting the urge to break to the surface in search of warmth. After a few biting seconds, my body adjusts, and I triumphantly come up for air, looking to see if Julia has witnessed my small display of toughness. Unfortunately, she is absorbed with her little cousins, who are attempting to build a sand castle too close to the water.

I pull my swim goggles down over my eyes and plunge beneath another wave. In the shimmering world below, I make out the ghostly outlines of an ancient wooden pier that Dad says was built during the old logging days. I resolve to explore the structure, having never had the courage in summers past to venture out too far over my head. The day before, Julia's dad had taken us snorkeling off his boat near South Manitou Island, so I'm filled with a new curiosity to explore the lake's secrets.

The massive wooden pylons grow in size and complexity as the depth increases, and I can see that the structure must have been toppled on its side at some point—perhaps by a winter storm. Invited by the water's stunning clarity, I hold my breath and venture down to touch the relic. I'm surprised by the drop-off—at least ten feet at this point. I'm struck by a pang of fear, realizing that I'm farther out than I thought I was. I quickly surface and look back at the beach.

Both families are now standing on the beach, looking in my direction. Dad is making an emphatic gesture with his hand, probably waving me back in. Rather than comply, however, I suddenly feel the foolish urge to swim out further, to show them, and more importantly, show Julia, that I can handle myself.

I get about twenty more yards out before I realize that I've made a mistake. Just as Dad cautioned hundreds of times over the summers, the strong currents beyond the outer sandbars start tugging at my legs. The waves seem bigger too, and I am overcome by the sensation that the lake has overtaken me. A quick look underwater makes things worse, as I am greeted by an endless blue-green void that tells me I'm in at least fifty feet of water, if not more. I turn and frantically start paddling back, ignoring every swimming lesson I've ever taken. To my horror, I find myself pulled out further into the lake and to

the north of my family's beach. I paddle harder, tiring myself out within minutes. Recalling basic survival swimming, I gain enough composure to flip over on my back and tread water, hoping that I can drift out of the current. In the brief second I had glanced at shore, it looked like help was impossibly far away. If I am lucky, maybe Julia's dad can get his boat out to me before I drown.

I roll over to get my bearings. I'm already past the point where I can see our cottage, the towering dunes to the north seeming like small bumps on a vast blue world. Panic overtakes me again, and I start fighting, pushing myself toward the shore even as I use my last stores of energy. My frazzled mind suddenly shifts to Stephen Crane's "Open Boat"—how I absolutely hated reading it in school that year. Now I understand the terror of the open water, a compassionless entity. Like Crane's characters, I pray for deliverance; in this case, the sound of a motor. However, it's a splashing sound that breaks me out of my strangely contemplative state.

"Paul!" I hear as the splashing nears.

"Dad?" I sputter, swallowing some more water.

"Hold on," he says. I feel his arm wrap around my chest.

It seems to take him hours to pull us in—a seemingly god-like feat given my feeble attempts to save myself. Even when we get to waist-deep water, I'm too weak to stand, and he pulls me up onto the wonderfully warm sand. I lie on my back and look up at the concerned faces, none more welcome than Julia's. Amid the cacophony of voices, I can hear her scolding me, trying to mask the shakiness in her voice. I'm struck by a strange mixture of embarrassment and relief. I'm also sure at the point that I love her although it's difficult to separate the boyish emotions of the memory from my adult

perspective. After a few minutes, Dad says I'll be fine, and we begin the long walk back to the cottage.

It's now night, only a few short hours after the swimming debacle—if memory serves me right. Dad and I are sitting alone on the deck, taking in the glowing band of pinkish orange that separates the dark water from the stars above. The clamor of voices inside the cottage occasionally rises above the steady sound of surf, reminding me that there's a fresh pizza waiting for us. We continue to sit, though—Dad and I. We spend lots of nights like this, watching the stars and talking about life and philosophy and anything else that my kid mind can comprehend at this point. Tonight is no different, and my near-death experience only makes the discussion seem more profound.

“Do you think this house will be here in 100 years? Or maybe even 200?” I ask.

“Guess some of that depends on if it stays in the family.”

“I wouldn't get rid of it.”

“Well, you may change your mind some day. Maybe you'll find that it's too hard to make it back here.”

“I'll find the time, even if I'm living on Mars,” I say, smiling wryly. I look up at the reddish dot hovering above the dark trees to the south and think about the small group of men and women exploring its surface. Living there still seems like fantasy although I know that long-term colonization plans are already in the works. “It's too bad they're so far away,” I add, referring to the stars.

“We’ll get there, Paul. Maybe you’ll go a lot farther than Mars some day. There’s a universe out there just waiting for you to explore, if that’s what you want to do.”

“Yeah,” I say, wistfully. “It would be fun, but I like it here, too.”

“Your mother and I have had a good life doing what we love. My biggest piece of advice is to just find something that makes you happy, whether it’s exploring the solar system or sweeping the floors of your mom’s research lab.”

“Sweeping the floors?” I laugh.

“You get the point. Just don’t compromise your dreams because you think I have rigid expectations of what you’re supposed to become.”

“Except when it comes to swimming out too far?”

“Except when it comes to swimming out too far. I do admire your courage, though. Just think about the consequences first next time.”

“Did you?”

“When?”

“When you jumped in to save me. Did you worry that we’d both drown?”

Dad thinks about it for a moment. “No, I didn’t worry. I knew that was a possibility. The important thing is that I saw myself succeeding and didn’t quit until that happened.” He turns to me in the darkness. “Some people shape reality while others simply respond to it. Whatever happens in the future, just make sure that you are the person shaping his own reality and not the other way around. I guess that’s my wish for you.”

“And to be happy?”

“Paul, that’s the only way to be happy.”

CHAPTER XVII
THE DISCOVERY

Fire. It's a fire, I think as I'm awakened by another alarm. In my frantic thrashing, my hand hits Julia in the side. "Ow, Paul!" she groans. "What's the matter?"

I shoot out of bed and look around the dark room for a moment, struggling to make sense of my surroundings. The alarm sounds again, but this time I recognize it as the doorbell. I quickly throw some pants on, hoping I can get there before it rings again. Anna's been having trouble sleeping the last week or so, and I don't want her to wake up in the middle of the night. I look at the clock and wonder why somebody is at my door at this late hour.

The anxiety returns.

As I shuffle to the door, I quickly review the possible catastrophes that could have befallen the colony. Power outage, reactor breach, dust storm, meteorite impact, invasion by little green men—none seems likely. Since arriving on Mars several weeks ago, everything has gone according to plan. Everyone who came with us on the *Pride of Ares* seems to be adjusting to life pretty well here. With the additional technicians we brought, Dave's crew has been able to finish many of the engineering projects that had been scheduled to take more than six months. The terraformers, expansion domes, and new communications towers have been completed, and the new spaceport should be done in just a couple of months. Even Mars itself has been pretty accommodating. So far, we've had exceptional weather—one of the calmest summers in years. Even the midday skies have started to clear a bit, revealing a deep indigo sky that seems almost Earth-like.

And then there's the most exciting development of all: Martian life. A couple of weeks ago some crews were surveying one of the deeper water deposits near the colony when they found an entire ecosystem of exotic bacteria and lichens. While the fear of contamination has complicated our water-gathering efforts, the excitement of this discovery has already spread through the colony and back to Earth. I even got to make another one of my little speeches on the subject, although I'm afraid it was far from sounding poignant or historical.

I think about all of this in the confusing darkness. Maybe things have just been too easy. A nagging sense of apprehension has been with me since our arrival although this could be attributed to my longing for our home world.

The door slides open in front of me, revealing a wild-eyed Dave. He looks as if he hasn't slept in days, but the expression on his face suggests more boyish excitement than fear or concern. "Is everything ok?" I ask nervously. Dave ignores my questions and quickly pushes by me into our living room. Julia emerges from the bedroom, hastily fastening her robe.

"It's fine. Everything's fine," Dave blurts out as he paces back and forth across the room. He seems to float, as if suspended by the manic energy that's gripping his voice.

"But?" I ask, trying to lead him somewhere.

"We were down in the Ares Valles region, remember?"

"Yeah, you called me from the rover earlier in the day, Dave," I say.

“Well, we were looking in one of the deep canyons near the eastern edge of the valley. There were some strange readings, things that just didn’t make sense on the scanner.”

“What kind of readings?” Julia asks, finally coaxing him to sit on our couch.

“The sensors registered a major disturbance at the quantum level. At first we just thought it was a malfunction since it wasn’t constant—there’s no way we’d get that kind of intermittent sensor hit on a natural deposit. After checking over our equipment, we decided to go down to get a look since the satellites were having trouble getting through the ore deposits. We sent one of the ROV’s in there to get a look, and that’s when we saw it.”

At this point I’m leaning toward Dave so far I almost fall out of the chair.

“What?” I say, impatient to pry the answer out of him. This isn’t an intentional dramatic pause, however. I can see Dave’s having trouble spitting out the information, like he’s scared of my reaction. Julia gives me a sideways look, one that I recognize as worry.

“Dave, what did you find?”

“A ship. It was a ship of some kind.”

“Some kind? Like one of ours?” I already know that answer to my question.

During the past two hundred years of exploration, there’s never been a ship out here that simply went missing. Even some of the early unmanned probes have all been tracked down or recovered. I know what Dave’s telling me, and it’s going to be a lot more important than lichens.

“We made the decision to head back to the colony before we touched anything,” he says. “We didn’t even want to radio back the news. Not sure who’d hear over the com.”

I think about it for a moment. This kind of a thing could cause hysteria among the colonists, perhaps even among people back on Earth. On the other hand, it’s the biggest news in human history, even bigger than the Rhea discovery was ten years ago. It will be decades before our probes start sending back information on that tantalizing blue and white marble circling Alpha Centauri B. This ship, however, is immediate and tangible. People should know about it. They have to know about it. I look at Dave and then at Julia, both of whom seem to be waiting for a decision. “Head over to the relay station, Dave. I want your best people ready to depart for the site at sunrise. I’ll contact Earth and update the president.”

Before contacting Bill, I quickly send out an encoded message to my parents, aware that it will take nearly a half hour for them to reply. Although Dad’s been retired from the Senate for a few years now, I still rely on him for good political advice—advice that could come in handy if this discovery turns into a hysteria among the colonists. More importantly, I want to get Mom’s scientific opinion of the craft, like whether it could pose a danger to the colony. As much as I trust the abilities of our science team on Mars, she’s still one of the best theoretical physicists in the world, particularly when it comes to exotic means of energy generation. Mom served as the Director of the Prometheus

Project, the program that basically made the Mark X fusion reactors the standard in international power generation for the past two decades. Even without hands-on data, her scientific intuition could give us important insight into whatever we find in that canyon.

Julia and I don't say much as we sit in the darkened apartment and wait for the return message. I can tell she's nervous, no doubt waiting for me to announce that I'm heading out to the site to investigate. Anna on the other hand is draped across her mother's lap, quietly sleeping, unaware of the monumental discovery buried just a few kilometers away.

"Just don't let Dave charge in without taking precautions," she says, implying that I should lead by showing restraint.

"Don't worry. Our safety is the most important thing. We may even have to evacuate it if looks like there's some kind of threat, but I'm guessing that the ship or whatever it is has been down there a long time."

Julia is just about to say something else when the com system beeps, signaling that my parents have responded. I open the video feed and see my parents' excited yet concerned faces. It's only been a couple of weeks since I watched their last video message although I note that their age is finally beginning to show, perhaps because it's the middle of the night in Michigan as well as Chryse Planitia.

"Hi, Paul," Mom says, smiling. "So it sounds like there are some exciting things going on out there."

"Hey son, you had some concerns?" Dad cuts in.

"A few," I whisper to myself.

“Listen, make sure that Dave’s science team runs radiation scans in both the gamma and x-ray range. Also look for any neutrino emissions—that could mean some kind of leak from the ship’s reactor, if it even has a reactor. It may even help to place some automated sensor pods around the entire area to pick up trace radiation over the next few days,” Mom says.

I assume that Dave’s team knows this, but I quickly type the suggestions on a small data pad.

“If it’s really an alien ship, it could have technology so advanced that we won’t know the potential dangers for years, so just be careful. You have some of the best scientists in the country out there, but just make sure that they do things by the book. There’s going to be a lot of excitement, which could lead to mistakes. Oh, and don’t forget to run full biological contamination protocol. There are plenty of organisms that can survive on those suits, even in near vacuum,” she adds.

Dad gives his input: “I doubt it will take long for Bill to make a decision. He’ll run it through the U.N. first, but this has been the kind of discovery that the International Space Council has been dreaming about since they first got the funding for the colony. Like your mother said, just be careful and think about the consequences of everything you do.”

“I received the message. Thanks for the advice, guys. I’ll keep you posted as things develop,” I say into the com before cutting off the transmission.

The screen goes black, once again leaving us in relative darkness. I lean forward to key in the code for Bill’s private channel.

“Good advice,” Julia says. “Like I would expect from your parents.”

“Yep,” I say, knowing that she’s referring mostly to my father’s admonishment to think before I act.

CHAPTER XVIII

VOYAGE OF THE DAMNED

Several hours later, we're loading up the transport to head back out to the site. Word is back from Bill himself: The International Space Council released the information to the press—and to the world. By now, everyone on the colony knows as well. I want to get out of here before we get a flood of colonists down here in the garage, all begging for a ride. As it is, it's going to be cramped with ten scientists and all of their equipment. We could bring more transport rovers, but I don't want a lot of people congregating around the excavation site before we know it's safe.

Julia's looking at me with those eyes—the ones that silently scream at me to be careful. “Don't worry,” I say, throwing the last crate into the belly of the transport. “I'll probably only be gone a few hours. You and I will both go out there as soon as we get everything checked out.”

“I don't want you to go,” she insists, her eyes suddenly filling with tears.

A knot instantly forms in my gut. Julia's not normally the clingy type. Her demand scares me a bit, like a bad omen or something. I grab her around the waist. “Why are you so worried?”

“I know it's stupid.”

“I'm nervous too, but that doesn't mean anything bad is going to happen,” I say, kissing her on the lips. Not wanting to exacerbate the situation any further, I quickly turn and jump up into the passenger compartment of the rover, shutting the door quickly behind me.

Minutes later a pale grey sky greets us as we speed across the cold, Martian desert. This is always the strangest time of day, when it seems as if the sun will break the horizon at any moment and produce a brilliant but familiar sapphire canvas. A low red band reminds me where I am, but I don't feel the usual sense of homesickness that has punctuated many of my mornings here on the Red Planet. Today I feel something else: a sense of satisfaction that continues to fuel my euphoria, long after the initial shock of Dave's news hit me. Things have gone extremely well on Mars—an unqualified success. But until now I haven't felt certain about my decision to come here. I've definitely questioned bringing Julia and Anna, great family adventure or not. But now I know it's been my destiny all along. I feel like somebody who can lead people in a new direction—somebody who shapes their reality, just like Dad explained all of those years ago at the lake. I think back to Julia and Anna and smile, knowing this world—not to mention our place in the universe—has changed forever. Our future lies on Mars. It makes sense that they'd be here, sharing in this experience.

I shift in my seat as Dave takes a sharp turn. My neat horizon line disappears as the red rock wall of the canyon fills my window. He turns the headlights up, flooding the narrow path that cuts into the depths of Ares Vallis. Darkness envelopes the cabin again, prompting me to sit back and close my eyes for a few minutes. I feel the steep incline we're traveling and press back into my seat. Despite the low Martian gravity, I've never felt safe taking the rovers into the deep chasms that cut across the surface of the planet like giant scars. One mistake at the wheel could send us off a sheer rocky cliff into the void below. I remember that we're traveling into one of the deepest and narrowest sections of the massive canyon system of Ares Vallis, a mostly unexplored region, as

evidenced by the ship that awaits us. I wonder who built it—whether they were just passing through our system or actually intending to stop at Mars. In any case, I assume that they, whoever *they* were, never left this planet again. The realization that we're visiting a crash site intensifies the somber mood that has gripped the cabin. My excitement turns to apprehension.

Thankfully, my worries don't have too much time to fully manifest themselves. The sharp fissure that marks the location of the ship appears outside my window almost as soon as we reach the canyon floor. Our small team jumps out. My eyes follow the enormous crack up the canyon toward the bright sliver of pink high above. "We're really far down," I note, pointing out the obvious.

"That's what makes this so strange," Dave says, clicking on his main headlamp.

"What's that?"

"Well, this thing's sitting down here half embedded in the rock. Not exactly what I would call a typical crash landing."

Dave's description of the ship is difficult for me to visualize, so I skip the questions and follow the others inside.

The opening in the cliff wall isn't as deep as I expected. I can immediately see the bright side of the ship being illuminated by the headlamps of the science team. Rachel, who is farthest out in front, turns to address me: "Sir, the section of hull we're seeing here is the largest exposed area of the ship," she explains. Despite my early protests, the entire science team, including Rachel, insists on calling me "sir" or "governor." At this point, I'm pretty used to it, so I don't bother to correct her. I simply nod, realizing that I'm a bit out of my element. The other members of the team don't need to be filled in on

the basics of the find, so they go about running scans and setting up the equipment they'll need for analysis.

“Lucky for us, there seems to be an accessible docking hatch in this section,” Dave says, pointing to an indentation behind Rachel. “At first I was worried we'd have to dig or blast through rock, but a small thermal charge should get through the door.”

I look up and down the lighted portion of the ship. It definitely looks inert, but I'm still a bit wary of charging in. “Is it safe?”

“Ramirez, any power signatures?” Dave asks.

“Absolutely nothing. Just some readings from the alloys in the hull,” the young man answers.

“We can send Betty in to be safe,” Dave says, shrugging his shoulders. I can tell he just wants to get inside, but he knows it's best to send the android in first. That's my top priority on this mission as well: making sure nobody does anything stupid in the excitement of the moment.

I walk over next to Rachel and run my gloved hand over the smooth hull, perhaps to prove to myself that the thing is actually real. Maybe it's also to prove to myself that I'm not afraid of it. That nagging feeling that I had coming down here hasn't fully gone away, even though new waves of excitement rise as I imagine what lies beyond the door.

“Here she is,” Dave says, his voice crackling a bit over the radio. Behind him stammers Betty, a two-legged Mark XVI android unit that packs up neatly into the back of the rover. Unlike many of the more specialized robotic personnel back at the colony, Betty has been designed to move like a human, even if she lacks many of the speech and

personality patterns of her more advanced cousins. This is probably a design feature meant to make us care less about her should she end up seriously damaged.

I step back from the ship and watch as two of the male scientists unload the charges from Rachel's backpack and place them on the door. We quickly exit the cave and watch as the small flash fills the fissure. The charges are small, and in the near vacuum of Mars I hear and feel nothing from the explosion.

Betty is the first to re-enter the fissure. We watch her journey on a small display screen in the safety of the rover. Her progress is painfully deliberate and by the time she actually reaches the blown hatch I feel ready to charge in right past her.

"Check both directions," Dave orders Betty. The android complies, sticking her round head through the door and looking both ways down a dark, narrow corridor.

"Proceed right," Dave orders.

Like us, Betty has a small headlamp. Every step she takes reveals a bit more of the ghostly interior of the ship. Any second I expect to see a body, the remains of a dead crewmember who will give us our first glance at some long-lost interstellar cousin of humanity. The seconds drag by.

"Wait!" Rachel suddenly yells, making everyone in the rover jump. "Betty, back up and look down to your right," she orders. The robot stops and focuses in on the rather mundane-looking deck plating that extends part way up the wall.

"Holy shit," Dave mutters, voicing what we all are thinking. On the wall in big yellow letters are the words: "Brought to you by Jesus Burger."

“This is a ship from Earth,” I note dumbly. We let out a collective sigh of disappointment, a reaction that merely intensifies once Betty conducts her sweep of the ship and fails to turn up a single body.

“Green and Ramirez should be able rig up some sort of interface with the ship’s computer, as long as it’s not too badly damaged” Dave says. “We’ll send Betty through again, but it looks like we can go inside.”

I take a step forward as my mind wanders back to the dream I had in the *Pride of Ares*’ sick bay, the one with that strange man in the paper fast food hat and lab coat. I’m not a believer in prophecy or destiny, but I get the distinct feeling that the man in the hat and this ship are somehow related.

“Just be careful, Dave.”

Two hours later most of us are sitting in the engineering section of the ship, a spherical room dominated by a huge gyroscope-like ball in the center. Like everything else onboard it’s a mystery, one big dead enigma out of many. Thompson, our chief computer engineer, called a minute or two earlier and said they were still trying to wire up the main computer, but until that happens, we decide it’s best to sit here and try to keep our hands off the ship’s systems.

“I bet you this thing can jump from one point in space to another, instantaneously” Dave says, nodding toward the ball.

We're on a private channel, so I don't mind professing my ignorance. "I have no idea. I just want to know where it came from."

"The future or maybe even another dimension."

"Seriously?"

"Only something extreme like quantum fluctuations or inter-dimensional travel could explain how this thing got itself embedded in a canyon wall 100 million miles from Earth with no other apparent damage and no trace of a crew. Both my physicists agree that it relies on singularity technology, but it's not clear how all of that energy is actually contained by this mechanism. The strangest part is that if it wasn't sitting where it is, I'd actually guess that it was something that had built right now back on Earth. It almost looks like some of the preliminary proposals for the experimental reactors I've seen at your mother's company. Of course, none of those reactor designs is even close to being built, and I doubt anyone else is currently at even a conceptual stage, much less an actual test stage."

My eyes bore into the ball as I think about the possibilities. If we could harness this propulsion technology, it could take us light years in a matter of minutes, perhaps even to Alpha Centauri B. It would make Mom's fusion reactors look like children's toys in comparison. "I'll show the data to my mother. I should call back to the colo—" I begin to say, as my eye catches a tiny line of light shooting up the middle of the ball. "Did you see that?" I ask.

"What?"

“There it is again,” I point, jumping up and approaching the contraption. Now I can see several lines zipping across the dark, smooth metallic surface. Somehow, it’s coming alive.

“We should get out right now, Paul,” Dave says nervously. “If this thing is active, we need to seal off the area.”

I hear the tension in his voice, and I feel him tugging on my suit from behind, but I can’t help but be mesmerized by the swirling patterns of light taking shape on the now-turning ball.

“Right now!” Dave yells, snapping me out of my trance. I look around and see the others heading toward the door, away from the object that now seems alive with energy. A female scientist named Sarah trips and falls in the shifting light of the room. I run over to the far side of the ball and help her to her feet. I’m just about to start following her when I’m hit by what feels like a wave. My mind drifts back to my childhood spent at Lake Michigan, on those days in early September when I would stand out in the roaring surf, trying to hold my ground. No matter how solid my footing, the waves would always knock me down, which is what is happening now in the engine room of this strange ship.

I pull myself off the floor and close my eyes in an attempt to get my bearings. At this point, I’m confident that everyone’s made it out of the room, so I concentrate on getting some distance from the swirling, angry ball. I start making my way toward the door, one step at a time, but in the flickering disorientation I suddenly see bodies and stop. They look smaller than they should, but it’s hard to tell—the carnage is everywhere. I’m having a hard time getting my footing again. My radio is hissing, fading in and out with the flashing light in front of me. I feel dizzy, sick. I also feel surprised that my fear

is gone. As I stagger and drop to the floor for the final time, I think how strange it is that this seems natural. It's almost like this is how it's supposed to end. Maybe I'm going insane. Maybe Julia was right about that bad feeling.

Maybe I'm about to die.

CONCLUSION

THE REST OF PAUL'S JOURNEY

Upon arriving in Paul A's world, Paul B (Part Two Paul) is promptly arrested and interrogated by Kenji Takahashi. Despite Paul B's professions of ignorance, he is sent back to Earth with his companions and sentenced to ten years in a maximum security prison at Traverse Bay. Paul B begins to piece together what happened to him onboard the crashed spaceship although he finds his supposed friends disbelieving of his story. Even worse, Paul B suspects that his counterpart's former political enemies have engineered his assassination at the hands of the other prisoners.

Following several near-death experiences in the prison, Paul B is approached by Anwar Haandi, who personally offers him protection and a position in Shining Sun. Paul B accepts the offer despite his misgivings about Haandi, and together they plan an escape from the facility. A week later, Paul, Bill and Dave are summoned by the warden, an old political enemy who has been paid by Paul A's former employers to finish him off. However, before Paul B is killed, Haandi's forces attack the facility, which results in a bloody prison riot. Paul B and his friends escape, although Dave is killed in the struggle.

Paul B, Bill, Susan and Rachel escape with Haandi's forces to Shining Sun's secret base in the wastes of Lake Michigan, where they meet the other opposition leaders. Following Dave's brief funeral, the opposition leaders inform Paul B that they want him to assume a leadership position in the impending revolution. Paul B agrees, but he escapes as soon as he gets the chance, stealing a buggy and driving it to Chicago in search of Julia. Paul B hopes that his wife, this universe's version of the woman he loves, can somehow help him return to his reality.

When Paul B arrives in Chicago, he finds the city already engulfed in riots. He makes his way through the violence to Julia's penthouse, where he takes a hostage to get past the security guards. Paul B's reunion with Julia predictably goes awry, and he is forced to kill her lover in self defense. After a brief conversation with her, Paul B abandons his plans and makes his escape into the city. Paul B makes the mistake of taking refuge from the riots in a Jesus Burger, where management promptly informs the authorities of his presence. Paul B runs from the police, only to be kidnapped by unknown assailants in the alleyway, which turn out to be men from Ameenah's Shining Sun cell.

Ameenah nurses Paul B's wounds and attempts to rekindle their romance. When Paul B learns that Takahashi has brought the crashed starship back to Earth for study, he demands that Ameenah take him back to Haandi so that they may stage an assault on the Takahashi Labs facility. Ameenah reluctantly agrees, having no idea that Paul B intends to steal back the ship and use it to return to his native reality. When he returns to Haandi and the other opposition leaders, Paul B concocts a plan to use the facility's weapons of mass destruction in the bid to gain control of the city. As the revolution begins in full, Paul B, Bill, Susan and Rachel accompany a small force led by Haandi in an attempt to secure the labs.

After spearheading the brutal assault on the labs, Paul B finds Paul A imprisoned along with the crashed ship. Paul A informs Paul B that he couldn't stand the other reality and used the ship's quantum singularity generator to send him back to this world. Paul B also finds that there is an intact ship in the hanger, which is actually the original ship before it crashed into Mars during its first test flight. The two Pauls plan to send Paul B

back to his native reality, but not before Takahashi's security forces attack the facility and kill most of Haandi's forces. Takahashi reveals that the revolution has already failed, largely due to infighting among the opposition groups.

In the final battle, most of the main characters are killed, including Bill, Susan and Haandi. Paul A manages to help Paul B and Rachel escape aboard the intact ship. With Takahashi's forces moving in, and his counterpart on the way home, Paul A's final act is to destroy his reality using a full-scale version of the quantum singularity generator. Despite his inability to adapt to Paul B's world, Paul A confesses that he feels comforted by its existence. Then he pushes the shiny red button.

The epilogue, which is narrated by an adult version of Anna Wyatt, reveals that Paul B did indeed return to his native reality, although it is clear from her colorful language that her father's experiences in Paul A's world forever transformed his native reality, perhaps for the worse.

