

THE MOONS OF GEMINI

By Bert J. Miller

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*"To everyone who works for peace, social justice and
to preserve nature. We are brothers and sisters."*

CHAPTER ONE

Their lips met, finally, warm and wet. So focused was he on her beauty he scarcely noticed the tingle of brine awakening his nostrils to the presence of an ancient ocean whose surf lapped into foam upon the deserted beach, the grains of sand encrusting themselves upon the tingling flesh of their intertwined bodies.

The murmuring and muted moans seemed inadequate to express his feelings. For so many years, a lifetime really, she had been the woman he most desired – and had never known. He lifted himself slightly, just enough to see her perfect naked body under his, assuring his mind which still struggled with the reality he was now consummating that which he had so long dreamed of, but thought impossible.

Strange it was that he be distracted then by a single lonely green star shimmering in the graying sky overhead. With a moan, and a twist of bones inside flesh, she brought him back, demanding his full attention. He tightened his grip on the ribs of her sinewy back, their bodies delighting in the sensation of skin on skin. But his mind again drifted elsewhere.

“Odd that I can look directly into the sun now,” he thought, as the dirty red orb sunk below the simmering surface of the salt water. Earlier that afternoon its furnace heat drove all to seek cover and the piercing white light would have etched his retinas, had he stared into it, as he did now.

Her back arched. He gently kissed her neck. "This is true pleasure," he thought, "this making love." Yet the stark reality of it seemed peculiar, and not so unique as what he had expected or imagined all those years. With a groan, and then a purr, it was over for her.

At that instant everything surrounding him, the pastel green grass of the dunes, the sparkling tan granules of sand, the peeling paint on the hulks of half-submerged buildings – all began fading into hues of grey. He'd never really paid any attention to that before, how during the day people see in color but not in the darkness of night. "Yes, there must be some moment, an instant in which the eyes make the change over," he thought. Then it happened for him too, purposely, for his body knew the routine well, practiced with many others and now, almost incredulously, with her, several spasms of pure ecstasy and then, everything morphed into black and white.

They lay side by side for only a short while. "I've really got to go," she demurred unexpectedly and with a matter-of-factness hardly fitting the moment. What was it about that voice, so soft and alluring, yet deceptively submissive? It concealed an incredible feminine prowess and power. He smiled at the sound of it, then recoiled as if Ahab's glowing harpoon had been thrust into his mind's eye. Decades before that same voice had cruelly jilted him. A cheap hollow apartment door was all that had separated them when her sultry voice had stated, matter of fact and without pity, "Why don't you just go away Boyd?"

"Novel idea for a tryst. Now I can say I've done the submerged New York City beach scene, in addition to the mile high club," the voice laughed,

irresistibly this time. With a playful glance his way, she flipped open her transponder and summoned a hovercraft that appeared in timely manner from the darkness above. She wrapped a heavy Turkish beach towel round the luxurious curves of her body, struggling with a loose sandal strap as she boarded the shining, metallic craft. He gave her one last look, not a lustful look as one might imagine, but hearty and appreciative of the beauty and symmetry of nature.

Then he lay back on the soft sand, vaguely replaying the day's events. Yes, it had been an amazing experience, yet he was troubled somehow, wondering to himself if he had finally realized his dream of having her, or merely ridden the wave of social change that accompanied the precariously low rate of conception afflicting the human race. "Damn," he shouted out angrily, throwing a handful of sand as his scientific mind recounted the myriad of toxins saturating Level 1, any of which could disorder the intricate strands of a chromosome.

He would have eventually fallen asleep, right there, naked and alone on the sand, had it not been for the pinchers of a small crab. With a kick he sent the creature skittering sideways across the beach, as if to say, "No, I'm not some hulk of beached marine mammal flesh for your dining pleasure." But then, of course, there were no marine mammals left, only the mounted specimens he had studied in a museum on Level 2 as a boy.

Struggling to his feet he limped toward the ocean surf, catching himself from falling several times as the sinews in his rubbery knees revived themselves. Scrubbing now with his hands he covered every square inch of skin to remove the encrusted sand and

cleanse himself from lovemaking. But the memory returned, vividly burned into his mind's eye so long ago, the cheap veneer of the door and dirty Berber carpet of a poorly constructed apartment building in a college town, his hand gently knocking like Odysseus and her voice, that siren's voice and...a twinge of pain, of regret and overwhelming sorrow. He lowered his head under the marine surface, grimy as it was and smelling of petroleum, and then resurfaced, shaking the saltwater out of his longish thick hair.

He did feel better. Some primordial essence remaining in the ocean water that no amount of plastic and corruption could ruin revived him and he recognized that this had been "the night", the time of his life, the one best time of all...and just as he was internalizing that wonderful realization, a salty wave nonchalantly slapped against the side of his head. There was a strange pop, deep inside his ear and then a buzzing sound ensued, like a seashell held against a child's head, only louder and more disturbing, because it would not stop.

He tried smacking himself up side the head; a few jolts had always ejected the water before, but this time to no avail. His mind did not want to accept the unpleasant reality that he was injured somehow, but his body instinctively lunged for the shore. Unfortunately the sand shifted from underneath his feet and he struggled to right himself just as another wave crashed mercilessly against his unanchored body. The incredible suction produced by thousands of tons of salt water rushing back out to sea tore at his frame but he did not struggle, remembering from experience how powerful that hydraulic undertow could be, and how useless it was to resist.

"I need to get back on land and will just ride in on the next wave," he thought, controlling his emotions for the moment. But the bubbling swell surged all about and it worried him that he could no longer touch the bottom with his toes and he seemed to be floating farther and farther away from the beach.

This man could swim, not like an Olympian, but confidently enough for he had been a lifeguard as a robust teenager. So he was not yet too worried. That youthful memory of summers spent on the beach caused his unthinking eyes to sweep the distant shore for a lifeguard stand but he stopped immediately, angry with himself. He hated these little mental slips that had been occurring more frequently as he aged and now upbraided his own brain, "Why would there be a lifeguard stand in what had once been part of the metropolis of New York?"

He exhaled, trying to relax and clear his thoughts, knowing the last thing you want to do in a situation like this is panic. But it was dark now and he imagined the remnants of submerged buildings and automobiles, tons of twisted steel, cement and broken glass, that must underlie this whole expanse of wetness he found himself bobbing around in like a wine cork. It would not have been so bad really but he was aware of his steady drift outward, away from shore, and that sent a slight chill of horror down his spine.

He had heard of riptides before, one of those natural phenomena a person reads about, but only half believes, until they experience one. He was having a hard time accepting the present reality for this was not at all what he had planned for the evening and could scarcely believe it was happening. Mentally he pushed back against denial, knowing he

must take command of the situation and think things through quickly, and carefully, because this was rapidly becoming one of those critical junctures in life where things could go terribly wrong.

He just wanted to get back on land, to relax and have this uncomfortable episode over, a memory to be recounted at some future cocktail party, that “time I got caught up in a riptide after making love with Dannette on the beach”, to be followed with polite laughter. He wanted to get the water out of his ear, the wetness seemed to have penetrated much deeper inside his head than ever before and it was causing a sharp pain and making him somewhat dizzy – him, the guy who had never been seasick in his life and who passed gyroscope testing as a galactic pilot with ease while so many others had become wretchedly nauseated and washed out of the program.

He had lived a good long life, mostly on Level 3, but in the last years attaining Level 4, and this interlude in the drink was not in the cards, for he was a meticulous planner and did not relish deviations. He treaded in the oily black saltwater, illuminated only with the reflection of the stars above, arms and legs gently rotating, trying to relax and focus. He was striving to remember something about riptides from his lifeguard training. Failing at that, he tried to recall an ancient ivy-draped lecture hall and his grey-haired oceanography professor who, during a sidebar, had casually mentioned the course of action one should take if they ever found themselves caught up in a rip. But, like so many salient facts of late, it all escaped him.

His father, a hovercraft mechanic by trade, had warned him as a boy that college professors were generally eggheads who frequently lost their

transponders. He disagreed, but thinking of transponders made him cringe for an instant, until he remembered he had left his own safely in a backpack with a few other essentials on the shore and only needed to get back there as soon as possible to be quickly whisked off to the comfort of Level 4. Amazing how rapidly one could change their surroundings, and circumstances in life, with one of those gadgets.

But such thoughts were useless now as he found himself, against his wishes, moving out to sea, in a current filled with plastic flotsam and sewage debris. The side of his head ached, his stomach was queasy and he could no longer see the shore he so longed for. Frustrating as it is to be unable to remember some tidbit of information during a trivia game, imagine not being able to recall some gem about surviving a riptide that could save your life. But drowning soon became the least of his immediate worries because at that moment he felt the powerful hydraulic surge of a massive creature slide by underwater. Judging by the time it took to pass he reckoned the beast at least 20 foot long and from the sandpapery feel of its skin as it brushed against his thigh, he knew for certain it was ... a shark.

One caveat he did recall from oceanography class pertained to sharks and how when one nudged you like that it was usually the final test before consuming you. "Keep calm and don't make sudden movements, thrashing about will only entice the shark to attack," the old professor had warned. But the thought of floating there, his legs and torso dangling down exposed in the watery darkness below, like a sausage in a dog kennel, was more than he could take. Complete and total panic overcame his

brain and he no longer controlled his actions. Using every ounce of strength he thrashed his arms and legs wildly swimming like a character in fast motion from an old time movie, away from his last point of contact with the toothy behemoth.

With huge bulbous receptors in their snout a great white shark can smell prey a mile away, and that acute sense of smell probably explains why this primitive life form lasted millions of years. One of the few creatures still living in the now toxic ocean waters this particular 20-foot dame survived on rats, amputated limbs and other debris flowing out the sewage pipes from the sprawling inland megalopolis.

Under ordinary circumstances the cartilaginous beast could have easily located him by smell and the wild vibrations from his panic attack. But this particular specimen had numerous tumors surrounding its brain and, along with the foul smell of the water, the hungry creature was having difficulty tracking him down. The universe is ordered by numbers and laws of physics making it impossible to say the creepy interlude was luck, and not fate, for the shark encounter caused him to swim away in a direction parallel to the beach and miraculously he soon found himself being carried back toward shore on the white caps of breaking waves.

He had escaped both the riptide's powerful current and the razor-toothed jaws of the giant shark. Seeing the beach not far off now made him chuckle out loud, but then salt water ran into his nose and burned his sinuses, dampening any joy. The feeling of relief was further tempered by his extreme fatigue and he struggled to keep his head above water as each new wave submerged his haggard form. One can scarcely imagine his exhilaration when one foot

inadvertently scraped the sandy bottom. "Land," he croaked out loud, before getting another salty mouthful.

Unfortunately his rubbery legs had become useless and it felt as if his arms were hundred pound bags of cement. The largest waves broke closest to shore and heavy upon his hapless figure, sending him spinning like a rag doll in a washing machine. Completely disoriented he was unable to surface for air, and instead gasped the filthy brine deep into his lungs. "This can't be happening," he kept thinking ... but it was.

Terrified and angry he had made it this far, only to fail so close to land's salvation, he summoned the last of his strength, vainly grasping out in all directions with flailing arms and legs, but finding only dark, dirty liquid all about. He tried to guess which way was up and made one final lunge, but instead of bursting into the cool night air, he impacted the ocean's sandy floor and lay there gently swaying with the current lacking the strength to push off the bottom back upward to the surface. He tried to keep his mouth closed, but his starving lungs finally gasped uncontrollably for air, taking in a final salty drink.

The humming in his head grew louder and he saw stars again, not in the sky this time, but rather floating in the blackness before his eyes. The wafting lights sparkled brightly, green and white, all around him. He knew the reason, the same as when you stand up too quickly or bash your head, the blood flow to those thirsty retinas gets interrupted and they fire wildly.

He'd wondered many times before, at various odd moments in his life, when he would die. The moment

of death is uncertain. One never knows for sure when the end will come. He tried to resist the morbid thought, but it was becoming obvious the date and time for his rendezvous with the grim reaper had arrived. But this couldn't be happening, this watery grave. He was a thorough planner, a man of engineering and science, exceptionally competent, someone who left nothing up to chance, and besides, he was a top intergalactic pilot and former lifeguard! So it was unimaginably irritating for him to accept the terrifying reality now, being so unprepared for it, and uncharacteristic as it were to his past experience.

He could feel himself losing consciousness, that twilight zone just before sleep when odd impossible things muddle the mind and disjointed, unrelated words come and go. The stars disappeared, then reappeared as sparkling glass ornaments on a reindeer Christmas decoration adorning the wall of his parent's living room, the earliest recollection of his childhood. It was as if a mental movie of his life started playing on a silver screen inside his head, beginning with that first recollection of infant consciousness.

A sense of peace and contentment came over him then and he nearly relaxed going to the comfortable light before it dawned on him with a sudden start, that this was merely the effect of dimethyltryptamine being released by the pineal gland deep inside the brain – an evolutionary trick designed to ease mortality for sensitive, advanced organisms like mammals that can conceptualize the finality of death and experience pain so acutely – nature's way of providing a peaceful exit for terrified mice and voles caught up in raptors talons or canine's sharp teeth.

Back again, eyes wide open underwater, body full of terror he made a faint apology to God and plea for help. But with arms and legs paralyzed by fatigue, it was hopeless. Like a frozen mountain climber his extremities were numb and uncontrollable. He recalled the feeling as a young boy after playing too long in the dirty brown snow, being unable to move his fingers or toes as if they'd lost connection to his brain. Then remembering the horrifying childhood experience of waking up in a sleep paralysis, he scrunched up his nose, an awakening cure taught him by his loving mother, but to no avail. It was if he were imprisoned in his own lifeless body.

With the thought of his beloved mother, the sense of peace and contentment returned now, irresistibly this time, and he simply gave up. But oddly, instead of unconsciousness, he experienced complete mental clarity and watched curiously as his entire life passed before his eyes with vivid detail in a mere instant. In this extremely lucid state, death lost its sting and his already sharp mind, saturated now with end game neurotransmitters that permeated every synapse of his grey matter, became infinitely sharper. Great cosmic questions popped into his head and the answers seemed simple and juvenile.

Throughout the entire process of death he remained entirely awake. Though he was forgetting the details of who he was, the loss of personal identity did not erode the essence of life that remained. He had always wondered what it would be like to die and it cheered him to discover that we really are a bit of never ending consciousness afloat in the vast universe.

But no brain could function at this high level all the time; it would quickly burn itself out. The giga-

burst of RAM speed provoked by the massive release of neurotransmitters built into the mammalian CPU was designed only as a last ditch survival mechanism – not to be sustained as a perpetual state of consciousness and bliss.

Finally a myriad of diverse life forms, both plant and animal, filled his mind with wings and leaves and scales, for along with his personal identity he was also losing his sense of speciesism and prejudice for his own human kind. Just as the glorious brain crescendo reached its peak, and this profuse menagerie of croaking, chirping and hissing life forms encoded deeply in the human brain from the evolutionary past were overcome by the completely blissful knowledge of all things, he finally began to lose his mental facilities in what he thought was preparation for some grand finale culminating at death's door, where he would ultimately transition to some new life form.

Oddly thinking that the Hindus got it right, he reckoned he would now be reincarnated. His mind extemporaneously hoped he would not come back as a human or tortoise for those creatures lived so long and he wished to avoid the stress and turmoil of worrying over a lifetime about death and what happens after death, and not wanting to forget his current "post death" knowledge of the mysteries of the universe and the ethereal feelings of blissful consciousness, his goal was to be reborn as a gnat, that way he could live a few minutes, breed and get back to this magical state of nirvana again as quickly as possible.

Millions of complex equations and amino acid sequences effortlessly pinged through the convolutions of his neurotransmitter stoked

cerebrum, the primordial programming for the lacey wings and antennae he could feel forming on his back and protruding from his forehead. Or... was this entire near death experience just a surging hallucinogenic animation, another trick of the brain caused by the massive release of endogenous opioid neuropeptides?

We will never know, because at that moment, a particularly powerful wave lifted his waterlogged carcass like a coconut and deposited it upon the shore as the ocean eternally does seaweed, bottles and all other detritus that falls into its watery grasp. As chance, or fate, would have it he landed on the beach with his feet uphill and while gravity drained the water from his lungs, the brain's decoding process began with orderly equations and chemical formulas from eons of life's evolutionary past unraveling like a magnetic tape spilling off a reel in his soggy head.

His lifeless form lay unmoving on the beach all night whilst waves lapped the shore, save for several convulsions, and a spat of projectile vomiting, which voided the salt water from his innards. At morning's first pink light his salt and sand encrusted eyelids cracked open slightly, revealing neon-red orbs so bloodshot they lacked entirely any white or iris coloring. Occasionally his arms or legs would twitch, startling the vultures that contently waited nearby to peck out those delicious fiery eyeballs.

Owing only to the extraordinary athleticism and conditioning of an interstellar pilot he was gradually able to rise up upon abraded knees, but the vertigo and dry heaves kept him from standing yet. Feeling a hundred times worse than any hangover he could ever recall his mind became occupied with only one

thought – finding his clothes and back pack, and inside that pack, his deliverance – the transponder.

What a pitiful sight he was, vainly searching with prune-like fingers here and there amongst the sand and debris finding nothing. Of course he knew deep down the tide and surf that had so fortuitously deposited his backside upon dry land had no doubt also carried away the last of his earthly belongings. Noticing through blurry vision a driftwood-backed escarpment he recalled having been the backdrop for making love so passionately the night before, he rallied one last groping through handfuls of sand in the exact spot the pack should have been.

What's this? Yes, a metallic object and, yes, the right shape and, oh my God the transponder's found! Not to brag, but with a transponder in the year 2091 exquisite travel for high levelers, such as himself, was practically meteoric anywhere between the earth's ravaged surface and Lunar Base 217. A hoarse laugh emanated from his parched throat and, for the first time in what seemed an eternity, he felt somewhat confidently hopeful and relaxed.

He steadied himself there in the sand on his knees as the world spun uncomfortably about him, staring at the metallic object and taking inventory of himself – his lungs rattled and it was hard to catch his breath, like a prize fighter punched hard in the diaphragm. His sandpaper eyes burned like fire each time he blinked, his body ached everywhere while the world swam around him like a top making him nauseated and dizzy. Worst of all was the incessant ringing in his head and a piercing pain, like a red-hot, metal rod penetrating his right ear.

But right there in his hand was hope, that unnatural shining silver object that could whisk him

back to high society with a hearty rescue and recovery. Slowly and purposefully he gently opened the device. A bit of wet sand ran out and down his rash covered arm. There was an uncharacteristically faint, electronic beep. The connect light blinked, once, twice, slowly, and then stopped. “No!” a raspy cry erupted from cracked lips. But frantically opening and closing the device yielded no further response. Unlike him, the transponder had died.

With an angry scream he hurled the last link to his former life into the brine sea. The sophisticated device hit the water’s surface with a mundane plop and, for all we know, was incorporated into the sand and mud of the marine floor where it became just another fossil from the Anthropocene Epoch – unless by chance before reaching the bottom it found its way into the stomach of a rather large shark that cruised the shoreline searching in vain for that fresh, ham-scented meal it narrowly missed procuring the night before.

The anger and frustration that surged through every cell of his protoplasm provided the requisite strength to rise, and finally stand tall. He turned, naked and alone from Neptune’s deep sink. Squaring his broad, muscled shoulders he faced west, across the expansive American continent, a man with absolutely and completely nothing, save the skin on his back.

Standing there, quavering, it all came rushing back to him. The plan: To sell all his belongings, everything, save what he could comfortably carry on his own back. To walk, under the power of his own two feet, without any mechanical conveyance, across the entire country, symbolically dipping in the Atlantic first, and the Pacific last. To fathom what was

left of the once great nation he loved. To free him, yes, at last to be completely free of the material trappings and oppressive hierarchy of Level 4.

What a grand liberation it had been too. Sitting in his empty luxury apartment only days ago looking out upon the craggy lunar surface, recounting the sale of each and every article of his furniture and other belongings right down to the last trophy and saucer. Then, the incredibly careful selection of only the finest survival gear: the space tech water purifier, the titanium laser flashlight, the highly advanced, synthetically-grown genuine skin parka, only those things absolutely necessary for survival and, above all, light in weight – down to the fraction of an ounce so fanatically he had drilled holes in his toothbrush to reduce the load.

“You don’t own things, things own you,” he recalled thinking with a weak smile, for if there were anyone who was not owned by things... it was him now. He had not one single possession that had not been sold or washed away with the tide. The thought of selling all his belongings did however remind him of the one link he had been unwilling to sever, he had consolidated and deposited all his savings and sale proceeds into a single financial account electronically accessible from kiosks on any level.

As humiliating and embarrassing, and as dangerous as it might be, there was no other choice now with the coming of fiery daylight but to walk, completely naked and disheveled as he was, forward into the overcrowded inland megalopolis to the first financial terminal he could find, hopefully without being seen, the latter an impossible mission, and then, to access his account. For if he could secure currency authorization from a kiosk, he might

purchase clothing and a room in which to clean up and recover a bit before finding a way to communicate his predicament up to the monitors on Level 4.

So it was, with one deep rattling breath, followed by a painful cough, the forlorn, pathetic figure set off up the embankment and onward into the filthy, swampy boroughs of the Big Apple. With sand matted hair and rash covered skin he peered through the fog of red, glassy, bloodshot eyeballs searching for a camouflaged route down back alleys, using overflowing dumpsters as shelter and a folded newspaper as a fig leaf, like an animal seeking cover from its own nakedness.

Ramshackle boats plied the flooded streets like poor men's gondolas in a sunken Venice. Occasionally first levelers scurried by, mostly fortuneless street dwelling paupers, forced inland when the ice caps melted years ago. More than two billion persons existed now on the corrupted and polluted surface of America, squeezed inland by inundated coastlines. Victims of their own prolific fecundity, ever-consuming greed and inability to react intelligently to rising global temperatures – the world's population of humans had peaked and was now headed precariously in the other direction, shrinking from low fertility rates caused by pervasive toxic pollution and radiation.

Desperate to conceive amid an environment brimming with mutagenic substances, earthly society had reversed all moral restrictions on copulation. Sex had become the new lottery with the masses dreaming of procreation and a cheering media broadcasting perchance any pregnancy occurred. Even the church now encouraged its followers to

engage as many partners as possible making it a mortal sin to refrain from the wanton promiscuous debauchery occurring everywhere these days. "Be fruitful and multiply," cajoled the priests. He, having been an exceptionally fit and healthy specimen, had gotten used to the energetic advances and hearty propositions of nearly every woman he met.

But not today. Not any longer. Even an old decrepit bag lady he startled combing through a dumpster had turned up her nose at the wretched sight of him and he felt humiliated and reduced to nothing. Strange how losing one's ego and arrogant conceit can have a leveling effect on one's head though. He sucked up that spark of human dignity nothing can banish, lifted his square chin and walked erratically away. The bag lady shook her grey head judging him just another inebriated hobo fallen on hard times.

The sun was becoming the enemy now, burning down with a fierce white light from above. The only good thing he could fathom resulting from the relentlessly hot rays was a gradual disappearance of the hoards of mosquitoes that hounded his unprotected flesh. But small doses of poison can be medicine, and the itchy bites kept him alert. Swatting one of the annoying little pests caused him to inadvertently glance down an alleyway and spot a finance kiosk.

Stumbling along at a pathetic pace that was now the former sprinter's maximum speed, he arrived safely and un-noticed, closing the security door, exhaling and placing his prune-like thumb on the scanner. "Holy God I'm saved," he murmured ecstatically. But the machine responded with only a mundane, computer generated voice and matching

coded message on the flashing diode screen, “Unable to read ventral surface.” Several more tries yielded no different result. A glimpse at the shriveled condition of his wrinkled thumb revealed the problem. He glanced around frantically, thinking, and then relaxed. Not to worry, he simply rested his chin on the pad of the iris authenticator and looked straight ahead. “Unable to identify pigment match in fibro vascular stroma,” came the computer-generated reply.

One look at the bloodshot eyes of the monster staring back at him from the scanner’s reflective surface revealed his undeniable predicament. I’ll tell you right now, you can push a human being only so far before even the strongest and fittest will break. Coming so close, so many times, only to have his hopes repeatedly dashed was more than he could take in such a seriously infirm condition. His brilliant, scientifically organized mind rapidly calculated the statistical odds of his misfortunes and that unlikely percentage tipped him over the top. In ancient times such a man would have thought the gods were against him. Not believing in “the gods” left him only one reality-based explanation – he was a statistical outlier suffering an uncanny number of unlikely events. But, here he was and it was all real and happening to him.

Sometimes when things go bad, they really go bad, and if you have ever experienced this phenomena first hand you know that it can be very un-nerving. Dropping to the dirty, tiled floor he sunk his spinning head into his puckered hands and wept uncontrollably. He did not know how long the breakdown lasted but when he finally raised his pounding head and pried opened his crusty burning

eyes he could faintly make out a ragged band of street dwellers curiously studying him, like some natural oddity in a freak show. Two of the largest males, stood menacingly out front, one carried an ancient automatic rifle, the other was armed with one of the newer, space tech, phaser weapons.

Un-bathed women and children peered fearfully from behind the men, standing in their dirty rags and makeshift, tire-treaded shoes. It was a motley crew, but judging by the fact that there were children at all, a fairly viable collection of genetic material, although several of the unfortunate offspring bore grotesque birth defects. Those alpha males out front were obviously fit and ready to fight ferociously to defend their tribe. Wishing to appear nonthreatening Boyd instinctively tried to smile while holding his hands up, palms outward so they could see he was unarmed.

The largest alpha spat his way and then growled menacingly, "Looks like a 4-Leveler fallen on hard times to me, probably a hovercraft accident. Must have gone down in the sea by the looks of 'em. I say we cut off his finger and try to get some jack outa the meter. "

"Have we all come to that," piped up the smaller Alpha. "He ain't meant to do us no harm, whoever he is."

"Ain't meant ta do us na harm?" cackled the larger, "except by ignorin' us down here in the muck, whilst they live it up – up there." He thrust a crooked finger upward toward the burning sky, and then carefully aimed his gun at Boyd's head. But before the grotesque brute of a man could pull the trigger, the smaller launched into a rambling recitation:

“Who is my neighbour? The lord answering said, a certain man fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. By chance there came down a 4-leveler that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a 3-leveler and 2-leveler, when they was at that place, came and looked on him, and passed by. But a poor man from Level 1, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, had compassion on him, and went to him, and bound up his wounds, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the morrow when he departed, he took out two chips, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee. Which now of these, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell? He that shewed mercy on him. Then the lord said, Go, and do thou likewise.”

The larger alpha now hesitated; restrained as such common folk are by superstition and ancient myths. Peering intently at Boyd through feral eyes he grudgingly relented, “Awright, have the women folk see to ‘em. You can give ‘em some rags to cover up, but we ain’t got two chips ourselves.”

CHAPTER TWO

Placing his scratched and rash tormented arms upon their wiry shoulders, the street tribe's women half carried, and half dragged, the sickened and exhausted intergalactic pilot back to their humble abode, the dilapidated interior of a former street front electronics shop that served as a makeshift home for the dozen and a half squatters. Boyd starred up into the rusted pipes and disheveled wiring through gaping holes in the drop ceiling, as he lay semiconscious on an old mattress – the best his impoverished hosts had to offer.

Drifting in and out of a burning fever he faintly remembered seeing the menfolk return from hunting with a pair of large rats – some protein to augment the algae wafers that comprised the staple diet of Level 1. Growing the primary photoautotrophs at the base of the food chain in vast lakes of sewage outside overcrowded cities proved the only way to feed the burgeoning masses on the earth's surface during the bloom years of humanity.

The stark diet, along with some foul tasting water, provided the minimum sustenance necessary for a slow and painful recovery that lasted over a week. The women nursed his wounds with homemade remedies conjured from various fungi growing among the ruins to the point that Boyd found himself sitting up on the mattress one day lucid and thinking to himself how much he wished he had the space tech purifier from his backpack. The water here smelled and tasted so putrid.

This day the menfolk brought home a harvest of pigeons, a rare delicacy, and the cooks seemed so proud to serve him something new. Boyd felt humbled to tears by the sincere efforts at hospitality of the poor folk. Often at night while rubbing boiled water on his wounds the women would glare at him seductively, but he looked away trying desperately to deflect their advances, not wanting to arouse anger with the men of the tribe.

But these were different and unusual times and finally he relented, allowing one of the younger females to satisfy her lust for genetic diversity by gently stroking, and then sitting upon him, as the others slept. It was a bit of pleasure for his forlorn soul that had suffered so much torment and misfortune of late and for her, a ticket in the birth lottery. Of course she had about as much chance of getting pregnant, as winning a lottery.

The following morning Boyd awoke from a deep slumber, then groaned as his conscious brain booted up recalling his predicament. Feeling a bit better physically he yawned and moved toward the cracked glass door at the entryway to the city sidewalk. He had not gone outside since his arrival at the street urchins' den and the sun seemed to beckon, perhaps an instinctual yearning for Vitamin D.

The others had been up for hours already, women clamoring about sewing rags, cleaning dishes and chatting somewhat quieter than usual. He had noticed from the beginning that their movements resembled slow motion, not a lazy posture, but like they were working under some unseen and heavy load. It was definitely not the quick, confident stride of life found on Level 4 and it finally occurred to him that these

people were all to one degree or another, infirm and suffering from malnutrition.

Navigating his way through piles of looted paraphernalia to the doorway, he greeted several waifs and assured them he was well enough to step outside where he sat for a time on a crate soaking in the sun and whittling a small wooden hovercraft for the poor ragamuffins playing in the gutter. Looking up from his wood carving, he noticed the alpha male approaching with a dejected look, but then smiling a bit at the sight of the recovering space jockey outside the den. "Aw, ya feel'in man?" the Alpha inquired, then added, "on this sad and infamous day."

"Better, thanks," Boyd replied with a inquisitive look, "Why do you say a sad day? Has something happened?" His hearing was still not right and with the incessant ringing in his ear he feared he had misunderstood the man.

"Ah, you've forgotten the calendar owing to yer calamity and all. Tis' 5-29 ma friend, the warst day in da history of dis' country."

"Mmm," Boyd replied, lowering his head in agreement. His heart ached, "So it is."

He sat afterwards stoically recalling the shocking events of that monumental turning point in the nation's history while a miniature hovercraft artfully emerged from the block of wood held carefully in his hands. Then, much to Boyd's utter shock and amazement, out of the sky appeared nothing less than a real life, glimmering hovercraft that landed effortlessly near the overflowing garbage cans on the dirty sidewalk just a few meters in front of him. The children recoiled in shock and the alpha male let out a cry of alarm.

The craft's gullwing door opened immediately, beckoning his entry but Boyd sat frozen, his mouth agape. The dirt faced children and Alpha male slowly backed away, eyes full of fear. Stiff were the penalties for anyone of their status going anywhere near a hovercraft.

"For Chrissakes Boyd, get in!" came a determined voice from the craft's audio system. The intergalactic pilot instantly recognized the authority but still hesitated, thinking deeply. Again the stern voice bellowed from the on-board communications system, "Boyd!"

"No, wait," Boyd stalled for time, "I have something to do before I can leave." He then motioned to the frightened Alpha to follow him. The two walked fitfully along as Boyd led the way down the trash filled street, the spacecraft following above them in the sky, never letting them out of sight.

"We tried ta help ya," the Alpha moaned, fearing some ungodly punishment, his hands shaking uncontrollably, "Sorry I am, we didn't hit 'er off better at the start. I been plannin' ta invite ya to join our clan, really I was!"

"Don't sweat it 'bro," came Boyd's voice reassuringly, and he smiled as he opened the door to the Kiosk, "It's all good. Just wait here."

The space jockey stared at his thumb, which looked nearly normal compared to the last time he was here. Slowly and surely he brought his fingerprint down on the scanner, while he placed his chin in the iris authenticator. "Good morning Boyd. How may we assist you?" purred the female, computer-generated teller.

Pushing a series of buttons on the screen Boyd downloaded the entire contents of his hefty financial