

Last Launch

By Patrick S. Tomlinson

The skies over our last day on Earth were the grey overcast of an approaching storm, which was appropriate.

“Don’t make eye contact with them, Barbara.” I put my hand on my wife’s knee. “Don’t do anything to provoke them.”

Her head didn’t turn away from the ruins of Clearwater, or the retched sea of humanity frothing just centimeters away from her face. A beer bottle shattered against the window with a *Crack*, showering the side of the car in an amber liquid I was fairly sure wasn’t lager. Barbara flinched and pulled away.

“Can they get through?” she asked. She breathed shallowly and quickly.

“Don’t worry, dear.” I rapped a knuckle against the Class III ballistic window. “It’ll take a lot more than a piss-filled Bud Light bottle to get into this car.”

A resigned little sigh escaped from Barbara’s lips. “I almost wish they could.”

“Don’t be a fatalist. We need to focus on getting through the next hour alive.”

“Whatever you say, Maximillian.”

Ugh. She only used my full name when she was cross, but there wasn’t time for the little games that had been a hallmark of our marriage. Instead, I pressed the intercom button for the driver’s compartment.

“Reggie?”

“Yes, Mr. Benson?” The fidelity of the car speakers was almost too good. Reggie sounded like he was sitting right next to me. I was really going to miss the car.

“Can we move any faster?”

“I’m trying, sir, but these refugees keep blocking us.”

“Persuade them.”

Silence drew out on the intercom.

“Reggie?”

“Yes, sir. Of course.”

Reggie gave the rabble in his path a blast from the pair of LRAD sound cannons built into the bumper. That had been a seventy-thousand dollar upgrade, which definitively paid off as the crowd parted like the Red Sea. The Bentley surged forward on its four electric motors, clearing the deaf zone with no trouble.

Here the crowd turned ugly and lunged at the doors, but the Bentley had answers for them, too. A shirtless, heavily tattooed slab of beef in the rough outline of a man wrapped his fingers around the handle, and immediately regretted the decision. For his trouble, a hundred-thousand volts of rapidly-alternating current surged through his arm and down the rest of his body. He crumpled to the ground like a marionette with its strings cut.

I couldn’t help but chuckle.

“That’s funny to you?” Barbara asked.

“Not exactly, but you’ve got to admit it was impressive.”

Barbara looked appalled. “These are people, Max. But it’s like you don’t even see them.

They're desperate and terrified.”

“We're all desperate and terrified, Barbara. The only thing separating us from them is I had the resources to do something about it.”

She crossed her arms. “Resources you were born into. It's not like you earned them.”

My patience for her faux-righteousness wore thin. “And that's somehow less noble than marrying into them?”

Her mouth hung open in shocked fury, and for a moment I thought she'd make me regret the outburst, but she stayed silent.

“What do you want me to do, Barb? Take the time to look at all ten billion doomed people on this rock until I break? I'm sorry, but there's only fifty-thousand seats on that ship. That wasn't my call, okay? These people outside? I can't do anything for them. It's taken everything I had to keep us on this side of the glass. That's all the control I have left, so that's what I see.”

She didn't argue. Instead, she gazed out the window at the blurred faces streaming by and sank deeper into her budding survivor's guilt.

The risky car ride wouldn't have been necessary at all if it weren't for the No Fly Zone. The military had pulled back from the cities, but their drones still ruled the skies. After those Salafist idiots took out the Kuala Lumpur tether with a hijacked cargo plane, the U.N. shut down air traffic within a hundred miles of any of the tethers and launch-sites in a hurry.

Not for the first time, I absent-mindedly reached into my jacket pocket to rub the data disks tucked inside. I pulled them out: a pair of iridescent holographic memory disks little bigger than half-dollar coins encased in clear protective sleeves. They held our genomes, medical

histories, and heredity going back ten generations. They were our golden tickets off the dying Earth.

I'd traded every last red cent of our vast family fortune on the contents of those two small disks, and I hadn't even blinked. Money was meaningless now. Tickets aboard the Ark were the only currency that had any real meaning anymore. More valuable than any coin, piece of art, or bar of precious metal. The Ark represented the clearest line of delineation between the haves and the have-nots in the history of wealth. And yet, even with mere months left to live, the majority of humanity still fought over money like some instinctual cultural reflex it couldn't suppress. The fools.

Maybe it had always been that way. Generals had always fought the last war. The same was true in business. Companies failed by chasing the last fad instead of recognizing the next one. I'd seen the truth about money since I was a child. It was an illusion. A sleight of hand. With it, you could fool people into giving you what you really wanted. The only difference between the poor and the rich was who recognized real value. I pitied them all, but sentimentality wouldn't stop me from doing what must be done.

"Trouble coming up, Mr. Benson."

I couldn't see the windshield through the privacy screen, so instead I put the forward camera feed on the display. Some enterprising souls had set up a makeshift barricade of burned-out cars across the entrance to the Cortney Campbell Causeway. The swarms of refugees were thinner here, owing in no small measure to the motley crew of rednecks patrolling the barricade with automatic weapons.

Barbara grabbed my thigh and squeezed. "Max, they have machine guns."

“They’ve got squat. This car’s rated for a three thirty eight Lapua.”

“What does that even mean?”

“It’s a type of bullet, dear. A big one. These hillbillies don’t have anything bigger than a five point five—”

WHAM!

The car jumped three inches to the left with the force of the impact. At first, I was sure we’d hit an IED. The display automatically switched over to damage and threat assessment screens. The front passenger side drive motor was disabled, cutting the car’s acceleration by a quarter, and braking by almost a third.

“Reggie, back up!” I shouted into the intercom as I hit the icon to deploy smoke canisters. The threat assessment software matched the acoustic signature of the attack not to a bomb, but to a Barrett fifty caliber BMG sniper rifle. Somebody’s grandfather had passed down some heavy firepower. God bless America.

“What happened?” Barbara shrieked as Reggie floored it into reverse, pressing us into our seatbelts.

“We were shot.”

“I thought you said this car was safe against big bullets!”

“This one was bigger than that.”

Outside, bullets danced like hail across the hood, windshield, and roof as the militia opened up with their assault rifles. The car slid back to rest behind the cover of a fallen billboard. The shot to the wheel had been intentionally placed to disable us. Any normal car, it would have carried straight through both front wheels, drive motors, and their battery packs without so much

as slowing down. The reinforcements had been money well spent.

“Reggie, do you think you’ve got enough road to bust through that barricade?”

“I’m not sure, sir. Not with this wheel knocked out.”

“Do your best.”

“Wait,” Barbara gripped my arm tight with fear. “We’re not going back out there?”

“We don’t have a choice. This is the only open route since the National Guard pulled out.”

She stabbed a finger at the wrecked cars blocking the road. “But it’s not open, Max. We’ll crash.”

“Reggie can handle it.”

“But they’re shooting at us!”

“Shut! Up! Barbara!” I didn’t mean to raise my voice. I’d never shouted at her like that before, and I could see the words hit her like a one-two-hook combination. She shrank back into her seat. I’d smooth it over later. When we were safe.

“Reggie, floor it.”

All sixty-seven hundred pounds of Bentley took off like a scalded cat. Even wounded, it had acceleration that would be a match for many gasoline-powered sports cars of only a few decades ago. The lead hail continued to *tink* off the car’s armored paneling as the hicks manning the barricade tried ineffectually to stop it. Soon, the expanding cloud of smoke churning out of the canisters I’d dropped enveloped them.

A second sniper bullet the size of my thumb slammed into the car. Fortunately, he’d misjudged our speed. Instead of hitting the rear right drive motor, the bullet passed harmlessly

through the trunk. The damage it did to our luggage on its way through didn't bear thinking about at the moment.

One of the amateur-hour ambushers lost in the smoke met the Bentley's grill at seventy miles an hour. His broken body snapped off the hood ornament as it rolled over the top of the car before crashing back to the pavement behind us like a garbage-bag full of ground chuck.

"Brace yourselves." Reggie said calmly as the burned car shells filled the screen. On instinct, I threw my arms around Barbara and squeezed her tight just as the car smashed headlong into the barrier. With mighty *thump* and a cascade of sparks, the gutted cars spun out of the way like dreidels. The Bentley shook like it had been struck by a wrecking ball, but coasted onward regardless.

"Yeah!" I pumped a triumphant fist in the air, almost punching the roof liner in the process. "Good work, Reggie."

"Thank you, sir."

"Think it'll buff out?"

"I doubt it, sir."

I leaned back in my chair and let the hot rush of adrenaline suffuse through my body. The causeway on the other side of the barricade was empty. Two lanes and ten miles of vacant road. With the worst behind us, the rest of the drive to Tampa International would be peaceful.

Everything was coming apart. Frost clung to the fronds of the palm trees lining the road. In July. In Florida. The black hole coming to destroy mankind was already making its presence felt by stretching Earth's orbit into an egg shape, wreaking havoc with everything from weather patterns to the tides and tripping off earthquakes and volcanoes throughout the globe.

Between the unnaturally high tides and the damage we'd already done to the ice caps, Miami and the Kennedy Space Center were already underwater most of the time. Tampa fared a little better, which was why her commercial spaceport had been commandeered for the Ark project. The Earth's network of space elevators had been working overtime for years to move the millions of tons of material needed to build the grand ship, leaving traditional (and more dangerous) chemical rockets to act as passenger ferries.

From the crest of the Cortney Campbell's first bridge, I could just make out the gleaming white nose cone of our salvation. I nudged Barb, who hugged her knees to her chest and gently swayed in her seat. She'd never been in a gunfight before. Then again, neither had I, but we all dealt with stress differently.

"Barb, honey. Look south." I pointed towards the rocket standing on its pad, taller than all but the biggest buildings in Tampa's skyline. "That's our cab. We've made it, baby."

She followed my finger and locked eyes with the rocket, burning like a beacon in the pre-dawn darkness.

"It's over?" She relaxed a bit and unfolded her legs. "We're safe?"

"Yes, the U.N. controls the other side of the bridge, and as soon as we reach the checkpoint, we... will..."

Something was wrong. The car was slowing down. I pulled up the diagnostic screen, afraid the damage was more serious than I first thought, but it still showed only the front right motor down.

I keyed the intercom. "Reggie, why are we stopping?"

Nothing.

“Reggie? Can you hear me?”

The Bentley came to a stop at the side of the road. With growing alarm, I reached for the button to roll down the privacy screen, but it came down before I touched it. A chill ran through my body as I saw an older woman sitting in the front passenger seat beside Reggie.

“Reggie,” I said gently. “Why is your wife in the car?”

As an answer, Reggie turned around, rested a handgun on the dividing wall, and pointed the barrel at my left eye. My bullet-resistant suit wouldn’t do much good against a point-blank headshot.

“I’m sorry about this, Mr. Benson, but we’ll have your tickets now.” The safety clicked off for emphasis. “Please.”

It took my mind a few moments to accept what I was seeing. Reggie had been my driver for going on twenty years. He was my most trusted employee, and he was pointing a gun at me. I’d once heard a saying, ‘Every dog is two missed meals away from being a wolf.’ I never knew what it meant until that moment.

I eyed the button to raise the privacy screen, but it would take far too long to roll up. Funny, I’d spent a small fortune on armor to protect us from bad people with guns. It never once occurred to me that one of them would be inside the car.

“I can’t give them to you.”

“Then I’ll have to take them off your body, sir.”

“Reggie!” Barbara gasped. “What on earth are you doing?”

“Retiring,” he said flatly. “Consider this my letter of resignation.”

I put up my hands in a sign of submission. “They won’t work for you, Reggie. I’m sorry.”

“Oh don’t give me that bullshit, Maximillian. I’ve worked for your family for thirty years. I know you better than your own parents did, God rest their souls. I strapped you into a car seat. I dropped you off your first day at Princeton, the day you took over your father’s company. And I’ve been keeping your secrets the whole time, from your father, the police, your girlfriends.” He waved the gun in Barbara’s direction. “Even her.”

“From me? What secrets is he talking about, Max?” Barbara turned and stared the accusation into the side of my face, but I didn’t dare take my eyes off the muzzle of Reggie’s gun.

“Can we maybe table this conversation for now, dear?”

Reggie didn’t have time for our domestic squabble. “I’d threaten Mrs. Benson, but for that to work, you’d have to be capable of loving someone more than yourself, and I just don’t think you have that in you, Maximillian. I’ll count down from five. Five.”

“I can give them to you, but they’re coded for me and Barbara. They won’t work for anyone else.”

“Four.”

“Use your head, Reggie.” I struggled to keep my voice even and under control, not to let the desperation I felt creep in. So long as he believed I was in control, it didn’t matter who was holding the gun. “You won’t get past the first checkpoint.”

“I know they’re faked. So change them. Three.”

“Faked? What does he mean, faked?” Barbara broke in.

“Not now,” I said coldly before returning to Reggie. “The disks aren’t fakes, Reggie. Our genome profiles were altered to get us through the screening process, but the disks are genuine.

They have quantum guillotine encryption. If I so much as try to open the case without the right equipment, the entanglement breaks and they wipe themselves automatically. That's the point of the disks in the first place. They're physically impossible to tamper with."

"Three..." Reggie's voice wavered as his eyes started to mist over.

"Besides, the cut-off for the project was forty-five. You and Mrs. Palmer couldn't possibly pass for that age." I glanced at Reggie's wife. "Not that you don't look lovely, Mrs. Palmer."

"Two." Tears flowed freely down Reggie's cheeks now as his last, desperate plan fell apart before his eyes.

"C'mon, Reggie. You and Barbara are all the family I have left. If there had been any way, *any way at all* to save you and your wife, I would have. But I couldn't. If you do this, you're only going to be killing all four of us. There won't be anyone left to carry the legacy."

He finally broke down. The gun sagged in his hand as Reggie threw his arm around his wife and started sobbing. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I didn't know what else to do."

"It's okay, Reg." I forced soothing tones into my voice, as if I was talking to a child. "I understand. You're scared, but it's going to be alright. Just, give me the gun and everything will be alright."

Reggie looked down at the black pistol in his hand as though he'd already forgotten it was there. Still clutching his wife, he turned it around and held it out to me butt first.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Benson."

I reached for the gun and slipped my hand into the grips. The plastic was still warm and slick with sweat. "I forgive you."

I pulled the trigger.

The world exploded with noise as the overpressure echoed through the confines of the car's interior, deafening me instantly. Reggie's head snapped back from the bullet impact, then slumped against Mrs. Palmer's arm. Before she had time to scream, I put one in her head too. It was all over in less than a second.

It wasn't something I thought about, it just had to be done. I would have to drive the rest of the way. I turned around to get Barbara to help with the bodies, but she'd gone white as a sheet. Her eyes fixated on the gun, hypnotized by it.

"Barbara." I reached out to touch her shoulder to try and snap her out of it, but she started screaming like a banshee and tried to crawl backwards up the seat. When that didn't work, she ripped at the door handle trying to get out, breaking two of her nails in the process. But the doors were locked.

"Get away from me!" she shouted loud enough that I could hear it over the ringing in my ears.

I put the gun down on the floor and held up my hands. "Barbara, stop. I'm not going to hurt you."

"He gave up! He said he was sorry and you shot him!"

"I had to, honey. He didn't give me a choice. Now, we have to focus. We're running late already and we have to get to—"

"I'm not going anywhere with you. You're a killer!"

"Barbara!" I'd had enough, so I grabbed her shoulders and tried to shake some sense into the panicked little ingrate. "I didn't kill anyone. You see these two?" I pointed at the corpses

hunched over in the front seats. “They’re ghosts. Everyone who doesn’t have a ticket is already dead. Like zombies, okay? Reggie figured it out, I don’t know how, but he did. If I’d let him go, he might have told someone and we’d be caught and they wouldn’t let us on. And in a couple of months, we’d be just as dead as the rest of the zombies.”

“You’re a monster.”

“I can live with that. Now, we need to get the bodies out of the car so I can drive us the rest of the way. Will you help?”

“No.” She shook her head gravely. “I won’t help you.”

“Fine, then just stay in the car.” I grabbed the gun, then unlocked the door and got out into the chill of pre-dawn. With my college baseball arm, I pitched the gun into Old Tampa Bay. It took me three tries to get Reggie’s legs out from the foot well and past the steering wheel, and another three hard jerks to get his body out of the car. He hadn’t taken much time in the gym over the last ten years and it showed. His head, already hollowed out from the gunshot, hit the pavement with the sound of a dropped cantaloupe. I could see my breath in the air as I strained to drag the body to the side of the road. His wife’s body was much more accommodating by comparison. She’d been that way in life, too.

The driver’s compartment was coated in blood, little bits of hair and scalp, and... brain matter. I grabbed some cotton shirts from the trunk that had already fallen victim to the sniper’s bullet to use as rags. A few minutes later the interior was as clean as it was going to get. Should have gone with the merlot-colored leather. I threw the shirts in the water and rinsed the blood off my hands as best I could, but it left stains on my cuffs.

By the time I sat down in the driver’s seat, Barbara had already closed the privacy screen,

which was fine. It took me a minute to find the “START” button, then another to figure out how to put the car in drive, but we were moving again before long. As I brought the hobbled Bentley up to speed, it occurred to me that I hadn’t driven a car for myself in years, not since I wrecked that 458 Italia racing in the classics series. This would be the last time I drove anything.

“So you just left them on the side of the road for the seagulls?”

The question startled me, as if the accusatory voice had come from the sky. Then I realized it was just Barbara talking through the intercom.

“I forgot to pack a shovel.”

“You can joke right now? Don’t you have any remorse at all?” With the immediate shock of the ambush, Reggie’s betrayal, and my first double-homicide fading, her voice was drifting back towards normal.

“Maybe later I’ll make time for something else.”

“You didn’t have to shoot them. You could have made them promise not to tell.”

“I’m sorry, you want me to trust our lives to a man who pointed a gun at our heads?”

“They weren’t zombies, Max. They were living people. Your friends.”

“You think I don’t know that?”

“Obviously not!”

“What’s Mrs. Palmer’s first name?”

“I…”

“C’mon, Barb. You don’t know? It’s Irene. They have two nieces, Jennifer and Iris, and a godson named Chad. They were like grandparents to me, and they just tried to kill both of us. So don’t sit there pretending like they were more ‘real’ to you, okay?”

“But, you didn’t even hesitate. You just... killed them. They weren’t even armed.”

“Think, Barbara! Use that poli-sci degree and think this through. Getting on that ship is all that matters. When that’s done, then we can afford the privilege, the *luxury* of agonizing over what we had to do to get there.”

The intercom fell silent, the privacy screen an opaque wall between us. Maybe that was a good thing. It was helping Barbara compartmentalize, literally and figuratively.

“It’s not like I feel good about it,” I said quietly.

“What *do* you feel?”

“Nothing. Resolve, if that’s an emotion.”

“You said our genomes were altered. What did you mean?”

I took a deep breath, bracing myself for the plunge. I’d managed to keep the truth from her through the whole process. It was just easier to keep her in the dark. One fewer mouth to let it slip. But Reggie had screwed that up, damn him.

“I rigged the lottery to get our spots.”

“You what?”

“I paid people to purge our genome records of all the knockout disease markers, then bribed some key members of the selection committee. You didn’t really think that we both just happened to make it through the selection process, did you? Do you know what the odds against that would have been? They’re bottlenecking the human race from ten billion to fifty thousand people. We might be the only married couple to actually board the ship together.”

“Are you saying we didn’t earn our spots? That I’m stealing a spot from someone who deserves it?”

I snorted. “Deserves it? Christ, Barbara, people talk about the selection process like it was the fucking Rapture. But it’s not God bringing the faithful home, it’s a bunch of dweebs in lab coats and tweed jackets picking through mankind like they’re breeding horses. You, my dear, do you know why you don’t *deserve* to survive?”

“Why?” she asked in a small voice.

“Because you have the genetic markers for Addison’s disease. There’s a less than five percent chance our children might be born with it.”

“Well that won’t be a problem, because there’s no way I’m having children with you.”

“It’s not me, it’s you. The risk will be there no matter who you’re with. But you’ll have that choice, thanks to me.”

“My fucking hero,” she said viciously. “Cheater of the system and killer of the elderly.”

“You can always get out of the car if your conscience can’t take the strain. No really, I’ll pull over right now.”

The intercom fell silent again. *That’s what I thought.* I managed not to say it aloud.

Poor Barbara. She was a sheltered little girl who fancied herself an activist right up to the moment she might have to make real sacrifices. Maybe I was being too harsh, but since the black hole arrived in the Oort Cloud eighty years ago, the world had become a very harsh place indeed.

It had been named Nibiru, after a rouge planet some New Age conspiracy twit had predicted would destroy the Earth more than a hundred years ago in the early days of the internet. She’d been wrong about the type of object, the century, basically everything, but they still wanted to treat her like some kind of fucking prophet. Humans would go to any length to believe that somebody was in control or knew what the hell was going on. Too bad the Ark

committee hadn't selectively eliminated that stupid trait.

"It's not right." Barbara rejoined the conversation. "What we're doing. It's not right."

I noticed the pronoun usage, but didn't mention it. "No, what's not 'right' is the way my family was treated since this whole thing started. Ninety-percent income tax to fund construction? 'Renting' the lion's share of our elevator slots at half the market rate, crippling our business. Then when father complained, the government just nationalized the whole company. That damned ship wouldn't even exist if it wasn't for the heavy-lift capacity they stole from us, and they couldn't cough up waivers for two spots onboard? That isn't right."

"Ah, so you're just restoring some justice to the universe?"

"It's more than that."

"Why were you rejected?"

"Hmm?"

"You told me why I was rejected. Why were you? What was your knockout marker?"

I squeezed the soft Napa leather of the steering wheel, the memory of reading the email still fresh. "My psych eval. The shrink said I 'exhibited evidence of oppositional defiant disorder,' and 'lacked empathy.'"

"Ah, so they said you don't respect authority. So to prove them wrong you went around and broke all their rules." She actually laughed. "You sure showed them, honey."

"No." I clenched a fist and pounded the steering wheel. "That's not it at all. Don't you see? They're not just selecting for diseases, they're trying to reshape humanity to fit some arbitrary ideal. They think we're going to live in a crime-free fucking hippie commune in the sky where everyone's a vegan and holds hands around a damned drum circle. They're trying to select

assertiveness and individuality right out of us. Like, I don't know, a herd of cattle.”

“You just executed two people you've known your entire life without batting an eye. ‘Lacks empathy’ would seem to be the least of your problems. Can you honestly tell me rejecting you was bad idea?”

“Of course it's a bad idea! They're trying to pick the ‘right’ people to build a whole new world. But they're using the wrong paradigm. They're picking artists and poets and grief counselors and yoga instructors, but they're entirely wrong for the job. Artists and poets are a result of civilization, a side-effect of stability and prosperity. They don't create it. You need explorers and entrepreneurs and leaders and soldiers. They stake out the land, they take the risks, they make the hard calls that make the rest of it possible.”

“Now I see,” Barbara said, sarcasm dripping from every word. “You're not doing this to save your own skin. You're doing this for the betterment of the whole species. Who else can lead us poor little lambs but a big strong wolf? How philanthropic of you.”

“Don't mock me, Barbara. The people they've got up there now? How many of them would have had the balls to take the risks I did to get here, or make the tough decisions, not because I enjoyed them, but because they had to be made? No, they have this shit completely backwards. They shouldn't have been sifting through us. They should have let us all fight it out and grabbed the winners.”

“Sure, an entire starship filled with fifty-thousand testosterone-poisoned narcissists. What could go wrong?”

Another barricade approached as we reached the end of the causeway. But unlike the last one, this one was manned with professional soldiers wearing the light blue helmets of the UN,

along with a pair of marines in heavy combat exoskeletons. As soon as they saw our headlights, their recoilless anti-material rifles snapped into the ready position.

“I’d love to keep this conversation going, dear, but the checkpoint is coming up. If you want to leave, I won’t stop you. But now’s the time.”

She didn’t respond.

“Okay, I’m going to take that as you’re staying. But that means we can’t breathe a word of this to anyone. Not ever. In fact, we probably shouldn’t talk about it between ourselves in private. Who knows what kind of surveillance they’ve built into that ship.”

“Feeling a little paranoid, Maximillian?”

“Covering our bases. We’re about to cross the Rubicon, Barb. I’m sorry to drop all this in your lap at the eleventh hour, but I have to know if you’re in, or if you’re out.”

She sighed heavily. “In, God forgive me.”

“I don’t think God’s hanging around here anymore, my love.”

The UN soldiers manning the barricade signaled me to stop short of the gate. The enormous cannons the exos mounted weren’t pointed at us for the moment, but that could change in an instant if I didn’t handle the next few minutes right.

One of the uniformed soldiers walked purposefully up to my window. His sidearm remained in its holster, but his brothers had him well-covered. I rolled down my window to greet him. *Look friendly. Look like I belong here.*

“Good morning, soldier.”

“Will you please power down and exit the vehicle, hands where I can see them.”

“I have a passenger in the back. Should she get out, too?”

He nodded. "Yes, sir."

I pushed the intercom. "They want us to step out of the car. It's okay, just follow their orders." I shut down the Bentley and stepped out, hands at my sides. Act like I'm in charge, but not condescending. Soldiers obey orders. They respect status.

"Nice car," the soldier said.

"It was," I said bitterly.

"The lady's credentials, please," he said curtly.

"Our disks are in my jacket pocket. I'm going to reach for them, if that's okay."

His face tweaked in confusion. "You're not her driver?"

"No, I'm her husband," I answered, but the soldier was already looking past me into the driver's compartment. He signaled for more troops to approach.

"There's blood in here."

"Our driver was killed in an ambush. I took over."

He knocked on the windshield. "Windows are intact, care to explain that?"

"Yes, the old fool rolled down his window and they shot him." I shrugged my shoulders and let my voice ratchet up a few decibels. "Look, private?"

"Sergeant Lantz, sir."

"My apologies, Sergeant. We've been through absolute hell to get here. I just saw a man I've known for thirty years get shot in the face. I don't want to be out in the open any longer than necessary. The disks in my pocket have everything you need."

Lantz stepped up as two other soldiers with rifles took up positions behind me.

"Left or right?" he asked.

“Sorry?”

“Left or right pocket?”

“Ah, inside left.”

He grabbed the disks and gave them a cursory inspection. Satisfied for the moment, he handed them back to me and nodded to the two guards behind me. “Okay, Mister?”

“Benson,” I said.

“If you and your wife will follow me, we’ll escort you to the processing station.”

“Thank you, Sergeant. Oh, and we have some luggage in the trunk that—”

He shook his head. “Your personal items have to be searched for contraband before they can be transferred to processing. We’ll handle them from here.”

I handed over my keys and walked away from the car, indeed, away from the last remnants of my old life. Barbara walked beside me, but said nothing. The silence was anything but companionable. I couldn’t tell if the waves of cold I felt came from the bay or from her. Both, probably.

The soldiers led us into a staging area. The launch tower and rocket stack was still more than a mile away, but it already loomed large. Our candle was larger than the NASA Space Launch System that had taken the first humans to Mars. Today, it would take just under two hundred people up to the largest construct in history, and mankind’s home for the next two centuries.

The next few minutes would determine whether or not we were among them. I’d done everything I could to ensure our survival, made huge, mind-boggling sacrifices, done things I didn’t know I was capable of, and learned some things about myself that I wasn’t entirely

comfortable knowing. Now, I just had to trust that everything had been done right. There was no one else to bribe. No one else to kill. Nothing more I could do to affect the outcome. All that remained were all ways it could go wrong.

I'd never felt so helpless in my life.

"Just, be calm. Stay collected," I whispered to Barbara, pitching my voice low enough that our escorts couldn't eavesdrop. "There'll be plenty of time to break down later."

"Are you telling me, or yourself?" Her voice had taken on a hard edge, a reflection of the wall that had been built between us over the last half hour. I didn't know if I'd ever see the other side of it. I wasn't sure I cared.

"Just act like you belong here."

"I don't."

"Yes, you do. Maybe even more than me."

"Can't argue with *that*, at least."

I let it go. We arrived at a large tent shelter serving as a command post. A short queue stood off to one side. Under guard, I couldn't help but notice.

"What's up with them?" I asked Sergeant Lantz conversationally.

"Stand-by passengers," he said. "If one of you doesn't turn up, they're the replacements."

"Does that happen a lot?"

"More than you'd think."

A couple of the men in line shouted angrily as we passed, but most of them just sat in resigned silence as two more chances for survival evaporated. A fresh worry shot through me. It was easier to justify taking someone's spot when it was an abstract concept. But, faced with

living, breathing people? I looked over at Barbara, trying to gauge if her guilt was about to make her do something stupid, but her face was a mask. She wasn't looking at the alternates. Maybe that was a good sign.

"Your disk, please."

I'd been so distracted, I hadn't noticed the bald man sitting at a table. He appeared all the more short by the tall chair he sat in. Focus, Max. You belong here. No one will question it as long as you're confident.

"Of course." I offered the disk to him. He plugged it into a complicated device that looked like one of the eye-checkers at the DMV cross-bred with an espresso machine.

"Please look into the opening and place your right hand on the scanner."

I did so. Inside the little box there was a 3D picture of a small house.

"Focus on the house and try not to blink. There will be a flash in three..."

A white light like a camera flash burned into my retinas, leaving a glowing orb floating in my vision. At the same instant, something stabbed my middle finger. I pulled back from the scanner squinting and clutching my hand.

"Your fingerprint scanner stabbed me."

"I didn't say it was a fingerprint scanner," the humorless little man said dryly. An icon on his screen turned green. "Ah, here we are. Retina and DNA are both a match to the disk. Welcome aboard, Mr. Benson." He waved me through the turnstile deeper into the compound.

"Thanks, but I'd like to wait for my wife, if that's okay."

"Your wife?" The bald man took Barbara's disk and pulled up a passenger list. "Well, that's a first. Some people have all the luck, eh?"

“Yeah. Luck,” she mumbled. My jaw tensed, but I forced myself to relax. Nothing to see here. The statistically improbable happened a million times a day. She repeated the process then stood back to wait for the results, shivering like a mouse in a snake cage.

“Nervous, Mrs. Benson?” The little man asked her with a cocked eyebrow.

“I should’ve brought a coat is all.” Her answer sounded less than convincing. Not a great liar, my wife.

“We were in a firefight on the way over here,” I said. “We’re still pretty shaken up.”

“I can imagine,” he said, which was funny. I doubted the diminutive twerp had any imagination to speak of. A yellow icon popped up on his screen. He adjusted his glasses. “Well, that’s peculiar. Her retina scan is a match, but I’m seeing some discrepancies in the DNA profile.”

“Discrepancies?” I managed to say it without my voice cracking like an adolescent.

“There’s some small genome variance.”

“Maybe there’s contamination in the scanner. This isn’t exactly a clean-room out here.” I could feel my hands getting clammy with nervous sweat. I put them in my pockets, trying to look unconcerned.

“Maybe...”

Dread spread through my body like an electric shock, threatening to paralyze me where I stood. Somewhere along the line, somebody had fucked up. Our lives were in the hands of this paper-pushing pipsqueak, and it was all about to come flying apart. I wanted to scream, to run straight for the rocket, to grab Sergeant Lantz’s sidearm and fight our way to freedom, or go down in a blaze of glory.

Instead, I stood there, silent and immobile as a statue. Impotent.

Barbara stepped up to the table and leaned a hand on it. “I had a blood transfusion a couple months ago. Is that what you’re seeing?” I was surprised by her improvisation. Maybe she wasn’t such a bad liar after all.

“I don’t know. I guess it could be…”

“Is there a problem here?” Sergeant Lantz came forward with his palm not-so-discreetly resting on the handle of his pistol.

“No,” I said. “No problem. This man is just having some difficulty telling if my wife is really my wife.”

“Is she?” The question barely concealed the threat behind it.

“Of course.” I leaned in and whispered to him. “Honestly, I’d have swapped her out for a younger one if I could’ve gotten away with it.”

The threat hovered in the air until my heart was about to beat its way out of my chest. Finally, the tension in Lantz’s shoulders relaxed and his hand dropped away from his gun.

“I saw them come in together, Doc. What’s the issue with her disk?”

“Her disk is fine. It’s just a small variance in the DNA match that I can’t account for.”

“How small?”

“Point zero zero three five percent.”

Sergeant Lantz’s eyes rolled like bowling balls. “That’s it? C’mon, Doc. We’re on a tight schedule here, and we still have to process the alternates. Green out her screen and let’s go.”

The little man waved an arm dismissively. “Fine, fine. Who’s next?”

Behind us, four people were cut from the front of the stand-by line and brought forward.

Four people had won the lottery, but didn't survive long enough to collect their reward. I saw the two people left at the front of the line. The first losers. The two whose places we'd stolen. I'd live with those faces forever.

Barbara and I walked through the turnstiles together and didn't look back. And that was it. No fireworks. No trophy. No cooler full of Gatorade poured over my head in celebration of victory. I reached over to hold Barbara's hand as we walked, like we used to down by Clearwater beach late at night to watch the sunset, but she pulled away.

I knew I'd won, against the longest odds anyone had ever faced. But it sure didn't feel that way.

END