

CHAPTER 1

The stillness of Earth's moon was interrupted by a figure who appeared suddenly on the surface. The man walked carefully along the dusty terrain in his spacesuit, one that was exactly like the AZL suits worn on the Apollo 11 lunar walk. In contrast to his outfit, by his side was a different creature, humanoid and completely silver, without a single identifying characteristic. Unlike the man in the suit, the automaton had no need to fear the vacuum of space. The robot bent his arm out in front of his face and a holographic image appeared above his wrist. It displayed a variety of information that flashed in rapid succession, far too quick for the human eye to discern, but for the robot, it was a simple matter to observe and analyze every last bit of data as if casually reading a magazine. Strangely, without even the benefit of eyesight.

The display vanished and he lowered his arm. "Transport was successful." His voice had a definite tinny quality to it. "In the parlance of this era, the date is December Twenty-First, Two Thousand and Twelve."

From behind the visor of his helmet, the man smiled. "Of course it was successful. Was there ever any doubt?"

"If I may query, what is the purpose of this garb?"

"Oh this?" He moved about in the suit, looking down at it. "This, my dear Progenitor, is a classic. While wearing this, mankind took his first steps onto a world other than their own. It was a milestone in human evolution, and it serves as fitting a point as any for what comes next."

They continued to walk along the surface, the astronaut enjoying the feel of the moon's low gravity as he jumped from one point to the next.

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Progenitor, however, simply followed along as normal, not comprehending his companion's merriment.

Just over the horizon, they found a four-wheeled vehicle, left abandoned for decades. And not far from it was a pole; attached to the top was a plain, white flag. The astronaut approached the flag, touching its fabric between his gloved fingers.

"A place of historical significance. And from here, we can bring mankind into another turning point." He faced his robotic companion. "Are we ready?"

Progenitor nodded. "Are you certain of this? Unleashing such a force on this species could have disastrous consequences."

"We've both seen the future, my friend. If humanity is to survive, this action must be taken."

"Why this date?"

The astronaut smiled again beneath his helmet. "There's a long-standing myth that this particular day will mark the beginning of a new era. I'm partial to that kind of symmetry. Do you understand?"

"I comprehend your words, yet the meaning escapes me."

"Then let's just say I'm sentimental," said the astronaut. "You can begin."

"Acknowledged."

The Progenitor held his arms out and stared up at the stars. He brought his legs together and slowly rose above the surface and remained there for several moments, seemingly doing nothing. His silver body began to pulse with a golden glow from within. Within moments, the Progenitor's entire body was glowing, expanding ever-outward. A brilliant burst of energy shot forth from him, forming into a ball and growing larger as it traversed the distance from the Earth to the moon. Upon reaching the planet, the ball exploded into millions of small streaks of light, fading away as they pierced the Earth's atmosphere.

The Progenitor lowered back to the surface, facing the astronaut. "It is done. The energy will linger in the atmosphere and over time, will be absorbed by the human genome and encoded into the DNA."

"How long?" asked the astronaut.

"This depends upon the individual. Some will develop new traits im-

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mediately. For others, it may take months or years. But for many, the transformation will remain dormant in their genetic code, perhaps for generations.”

The astronaut frowned. “I suppose we can only work with what we’ve got. The important thing is that the new age has begun.”

CHAPTER 2

Erin! *Erin!*

The teenage girl picked up the remote for her digital speakers, pausing the hip hop music reverberating through her room. She shouted back through the closed door at her mother, “What?”

“It’s almost half past, hurry up or you’ll be late!”

“I’ll be down in a minute!”

Hitting play on the remote, she stood in front of the full-length mirror, singing along with the music. As she ran a brush through her long, blond hair, she examined her features, and was generally pleased with the make-up application. She set down the brush and stopped singing just long enough to touch up her lip gloss. One last smile of appreciation and she took the MP3 player off the mount for the speakers, cutting the music off. She picked up her backpack, glancing at the poster of the female rapper she’d been singing along to, and rushed out the door.

Erin ran down the stairs and into the kitchen. Her mother stood bent over the kitchen counter with an open newspaper spread out in front of her, a steaming cup of coffee in one hand. “You’re gonna be late...”

“I’ve got plenty of time.” Erin opened the refrigerator and searched through the contents.

“Traffic picks up around this time.”

“I’ll take the side streets, stop worrying so much.” She took a bottled water and closed the door.

“Okay, well—” Her mother gasped and the cup slipped from her fingers, breaking against the counter and drenching the newspaper in coffee.

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“Geez, Mom!” Erin glanced down at her blouse to make she didn’t get any coffee on it. She furrowed her brow as she noticed her hands suddenly appeared much darker than usual.

Her mother’s mouth hung open, eyes fixed on her daughter. “E-Er-in...?”

“What? What’s wrong?” The difference in her voice now became noticeable. She swung her bag off her shoulder and reached inside, frantically grasping for her compact. She opened it and looked in the mirror, then—like mother, like daughter—dropped it with a startled gasp.

Her appearance had inexplicably changed. No longer was she the blond-haired, blue-eyed high school student from the suburbs of Madison, Wisconsin. The hair color remained, but her skin had inexplicably become a light brown, and her facial features and body now resembled that of the pop star she’d just been singing along to. Her gaze was fixed on her hands, and they shifted again, reverting to their normal pigment. Picking up the compact from the floor, she inspected her features again—she was Erin Hastings once more. But the fear was still etched in her face.

“Mom...what’s happening?”

The expectation of many would be that a Hawaiian resident would spend his day off on the pristine beaches of the Aloha State. But for Koji Asano, employed as a surfing instructor for the Hilton Hawaiian Village Resort, the beach simply reminded him of work. Although he enjoyed his job, and Japanese visitors allowed him to maintain a degree of speaking proficiency in his parents’ native language, on his time off, he preferred to stay away from the beaches.

Seated at the bar of a Mexican restaurant slightly off-the-beaten-path in Waikiki, he sipped his beer and tapped his fingers against the wooden counter while he waited for his burrito. Mariachi music played through the restaurant’s speakers, and Koji unconsciously matched the rhythm with his tapping.

He could feel his stomach growling as he waited for his lunch. The smell of the seasoned meat being cooked in the back was stronger than it had been a moment ago, and his mouth started watering in response. Koji

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suddenly flinched, a screeching sound like nails on a chalkboard from outside. He stood from the barstool and glanced out the window overlooking the street, a taxi had skidded to a stop and the driver was screaming obscenities at the driver in front of him, who had stopped at a green light. Oddly enough, Koji could clearly make out every word as if he were standing right next to them.

Koji cringed once more, hands going up to cover his ears. There were so many sounds from all over, and he felt like he was drowning in them. Accidentally scratching his face when he brought his hands to his ears, he could feel a trickle on his cheek, and he saw a speck of blood on the tip of his nail. More than that, the nail itself had grown. To call it a nail wasn't even accurate, what was more accurate was to call it a claw.

His nostrils were now being violated in the same manner as his ears. The scents from not only the kitchen, but also from the Korean restaurant next door, and the Hawaiian seafood restaurant across the street. All those scents intermingled and he lost his footing under the pressure, curling into a ball while his senses were rocked into overdrive.

“Step away from the shop with your hands behind your head—slowly!”

Dominic Vaughn heard the voice come from beyond the car headlights that blinded him and he knew he was finished. The forty-something divorced manager he seduced must have awoken sooner than he thought, realized he'd taken her shop key, and called the police. Now he had to try and figure out how he would escape—if escape were even possible.

“I repeat, walk towards me with your hands behind your head!”

Dominic did as he was ordered, trying to take quick stock of his surroundings. This alley was a dead end and neither building had a fire escape he could scale. The blinding lights meant he had no idea how many officers were on the scene, but chances were high they'd just send one car to investigate. That meant two officers, and he could probably get away from them.

As he approached, he saw he was right. Two officers, one car. The alley ended at a sidewalk and they were stopped just past that sidewalk on the asphalt. He would have enough space to get past them and hopefully manage to clear out quickly.

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“Thought you were pretty smart, huh?” asked one of the officers. He was middle-aged and a bit soft around the stomach, so he wouldn’t pose too much of a problem. The other guy, though, he was tall and broad-shouldered, probably played varsity football in high school. If Dominic Vaughn made a run for it, he’d need an escape route quickly, because this guy looked more than capable of running him down.

The linebacker stepped behind Dominic and grabbed one of his hands, twisting it behind his back. Dominic cringed. He slapped one handcuff around Dominic’s wrist while the donut-muncher got right in the thief’s face with a cocky grin. He wanted to gloat, and Dominic took advantage of his lack of foresight, head-butting him.

His partner reacted slowly, but Dominic twisted free from his grasp and darted down the street. The linebacker’s footsteps echoed behind him, increasing in volume—he was gaining. Dominic needed to take a chance down one of these alleys, but there was the risk of another dead end. If he didn’t though, the linebacker would definitely run him down within a matter of seconds.

Dominic made his decision and took a sharp right, darting into the alley. The linebacker nearly stumbled to slow down. Dominic cursed when he saw that it was, indeed a dead end. Worse, he heard a familiar *click* from behind him. The linebacker now had his weapon drawn.

“On your knees with your hands behind your head!”

Dominic slowly dropped to his knees and muttered, “Well, this is just perfect.” He closed his eyes and waited for the linebacker to restrain him. The ground suddenly felt different. And he couldn’t hear the cop’s footsteps any more, and he was certainly not being restrained.

Dominic opened his eyes. Wherever he was, it definitely was not the alley in the storefront plaza. He was in a park, kneeling on the grass. Dominic pulled off his mask, shaking out his chin-length, black hair. And the only thing he could say was, “What the hell just happened?”

The Cleveland Fire Department rushed to put out the blaze that had consumed the small townhouse. The call came in around eight o’clock at night, and they responded within a few minutes. The high-pressure hose

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was brought out to quell the flames stretching out above the roof. Neighbors vacated their homes and gathered around. Lieutenant Delgado was fortunately assisted in that by members of the Cleveland Police, who arrived to assist with forming a perimeter.

“Tony!” Greg Nash of the police force ran up to him as Delgado’s men worked on the fire, quickly unfurling the hose and turning their water tanks on the blazing building. “Any idea what caused this?”

Delgado shook his head. “Blaze grew so fast. We responded in record time, but it was an inferno out here.”

“Any survivors?”

Delgado motioned to the charred, smoking house. There were still flames inside. “In *that*? I don’t think—”

The twenty-year veteran firefighter was silenced as he saw a silhouette against the flames, running through the front door. It was a man, completely naked and hairless. His entire body was coated in carbon, making him nearly pitch black. He stumbled from the home, collapsing on the front lawn, coughing. One of the firefighters helped him up, getting him over to the ambulance. He was immediately covered with a blanket and given oxygen. A female paramedic examined his body while Delgado and Nash approached.

“How is he?” asked Delgado.

“Not a mark, sir. Some smoke inhalation, but that’s it.”

Nash crinkled his nose. “What’s that smell?”

“Burnt hair,” said Delgado without missing a beat, then to the man. “Are you alright? Any pains? Loss of sensation?”

The man breathed from the oxygen tank while shaking his head. He took another few breaths and pulled the mask from his face. “Wh-what happened?”

“We were hoping you could tell us, sir,” said Nash. “What’s your name?”

“Clarence. Clarence Black.”

Neither Delgado nor Nash felt the need to comment on how appropriate the surname presently was. “What’s the last thing you remember, Mr. Black?”

“Just...watching the game. Cavaliers were g—” His speech was interrupted by a coughing fit. Clarence covered his mouth and then took an-

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other breath from the tank. “They were gettin’ the shit kicked out of them. I was yelling at the TV and then...”

He trailed off and both Delgado and Nash watched him, waiting for him to continue. “Then *what?*” Delgado pressed.

Clarence looked up at them and for the first time, both men noticed that not only was Clarence Black bald, but he had no eyebrows or lashes. “I got...hot.”

A “back to school” party at one of the University of Central Florida’s fraternity houses seemed like a good idea at the time to freshman Nina Murillo, but now she got the feeling that she had a bit too much to drink. Standing at around five-foot-two, the nineteen-year-old girl didn’t exactly have a body built for a high alcohol tolerance. And the guy she’d been talking to for the past hour was “nice” enough to keep refilling her cup whenever she got close to the bottom. He was a junior, she thought, but couldn’t remember his name. When the strawberry-blond frat boy handed her a fresh cup, she backed away while shaking her head.

“Sorry, think I better go back to the dorm...” Her words slurred a bit as she spoke.

“Already? C’mon, it’s still early,” he said.

She closed her eyes and shook her head. “Uh-uh. Definitely time to go sleep...” She opened her eyes and looked up, then amended her statement. “Make that...throw up...*then* sleep.”

“One more drink.” He pushed the red, plastic cup towards her.

Nina looked at the foamy head of the beer and reached for the cup, but then stood and said, “Nope, can’t. Had way too much already.”

He stood as well, shrugging a bit. “What’s one more gonna hurt?”

“No thanks.”

He was exasperated when he said, “It’s just one. Christ’s sake...”

Nina had grown irritated by his persistence. “I. Said. NO!” She placed her hands against his chest and pushed, just intending to put some distance between the two of them. But instead, the blond junior was knocked back so forcefully, he was thrown against the keg...on the *other* side of the room. The house went silent and Nina’s hands covered her mouth in shock. All

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eyes turned to her and once she noticed this, she ran out the front door. People easily parted for her, granting her a wide berth.

One boy with a patchy beard and bloodshot eyes looked up from the couch, a rolled joint between his fingers. He stared at the knocked-over keg, which had begun leaking beer. “Dude...party foul.”