

# A THOUSAND NIGHTS TILL MORNING

Will McIntosh

**Will McIntosh can be found on Twitter @willmcintoshSF and online at [www.willmcintosh.net](http://www.willmcintosh.net). His latest novel, *Defenders* (Orbit Books), has been optioned by Warner Brothers for a feature film. His previous novel, *Love Minus Eighty*, was named the best science fiction book of 2013 by the American Library Association, while his debut novel, *Soft Apocalypse*, was a finalist for a *Locus* Award, the John W. Campbell Memorial Award, and the Compton Crook Award. He has published short stories in *Asimov's*, where his fiction has picked up two Readers' Awards and a Hugo (for "Bridesicle," January 2009), *Lightspeed*, *Science Fiction and Fantasy: Best of the Year*, and elsewhere. Up next is a Young Adult novel, *Burning Midnight*, to be published by Penguin Random House. Will lives in Williamsburg, Virginia, with his wife and their twins. His thrilling new novella depicts the consequences for what's left of humanity after a brutal alien invasion.**

## Chapter 1

Shakia slid a thick folder across the table to Aiden while the rest of the colony leadership sat hollow-eyed and silent.

"What is this?"

No one answered.

Aiden flipped the folder open, wishing he could have a shot of scotch—or what passed for scotch on Mars Colony—before he read it. He knew it must be bad, but with two plagues currently tearing through Earth's population, killing billions, he couldn't imagine how things could get any worse.

He took a deep breath and leaned in toward the printout.

They weren't direct communications—they were intercepted radio communications,

both civilian and military. A buzzing numbness, like a full-body shot of Novocain, settled over Aiden as he flipped through the pages.

*Transparent beings, releasing biological weapons that collapsed lungs, dissolved tissue, interrupted neurological function.*

*Two-legged, four-legged, eight-legged; insect-like, yet humanoid.*

*Overwhelming force. Staggering losses.*

*Attempts at surrender unsuccessful.*

*No response from Moscow.*

*No response from Shanghai.*

*No response.*

*No response.*

Aiden pushed the printout across the table and lurched to his feet. He'd just been thinking about Chicago, pining for a slice of deep-dish pizza, missing his sister, his friends.

They were all gone. All dead. He had no home to return to. He was trapped in these tunnels.

Commander Manes looked up at him. "You have to tell them."

"What? *Who?*"

"Everyone who's not in this room. You have to find a way to break this to them that won't send half the colony racing for the airlocks without pressure suits."

"I can't do that." No way. There was no way.

Manes raised his chin until Aiden could see into his hairy, flaring nostrils. "You're the only mental health professional on this mission. You need to take care of the emotional side of things while we take care of everything else, including figuring out how we're going to stay alive with a poisonous environment outside and no one coming with fresh supplies." Manes stood. "I've called an assembly. You have thirty minutes to figure out how to deliver this news."

\* \* \*

## Chapter 2

Staring at himself in the bathroom mirror, shirt already damp under the armpits, Aiden took another shot of scotch. He'd already taken a hundred milligrams of Xanax washed down with his first shot.

He'd prefer to face this feeling sharp-witted and clear-minded, but that was out of the question. There was no way he could do this in an unmedicated state.

Everyone was probably already in the common room, or one of the other two largish rooms in this hellish habitrail, waiting for Aiden to perform a psychiatric miracle. The thing was, depression and suicide were perfectly rational responses to their situation. Everyone they'd ever known, everyone they'd ever loved, was dead. His sister Eva, his godson Calvin, were dead.

Aiden unscrewed the top and took another shot of scotch, then rinsed with mouthwash.

The insane part of this was, objectively speaking, he'd been just as anxious on his first date with Penelope Lassaly as he was at the thought of conducting this intervention. His heart was *always* racing, his colon always cramping.

Even the despair of losing everyone he'd ever loved couldn't drown out the relentless anxiety. It made his anxiety worse, in fact. Knowing he'd never again sit in Eva's kitchen drinking coffee, laughing, drawing courage from each other . . . that made it much worse.

\* \* \*

The room was packed, yet utterly silent. Aiden's footsteps were audible as he climbed to the raised platform assembled in the corner of the commons room and stood behind a folding table.

Aiden looked into the hollow-eyed faces of the surviving members of the human race. Gage and Shakia were at the front. He knew they thought seeing friendly faces would help him get through this, but the truth was, having his closest friends watching only made his anxiety worse.

Heart racing, he cleared his throat. "Good morning. I'm not sure—" His mouth was so dry he had to stop to take a drink. Only, when he lifted the glass the water in it sloshed so violently that he set it back down immediately. He would spill the water all over himself if he tried to drink.

Licking his parched lips, he cleared his throat again. "I've been trying to think of how to say what I have to—"

Aiden unbuttoned the top button of his shirt. He couldn't breathe. There wasn't enough oxygen in these tiny rooms.

"We've suffered a loss of such magnitude . . ."

A bead of sweat dripped from his eyebrow onto the table. He looked at the camera, which was transmitting this to the other two large rooms.

Only they weren't large rooms. There were no truly large rooms in the entire settlement. He watched as the beige walls around him seemed to squeeze in, in, before releasing back to their original position, as if the room itself was struggling to breathe.

Aiden bolted down the steps, jogged to the door.

"Aiden?" Shakia called after him as he headed down the cramped hallway.

When he got to his room he locked the door behind him, fell on his bed face-first. He wanted to go home. He wanted to go home to Chicago.

\* \* \*

### Chapter 3

"There he is."

Aiden turned. Gage was heading toward him, eyes bright, arms swinging like he didn't have a care in the world.

"Dinner? Assuming you have any appetite."

Aiden made a face. "I haven't had an appetite since I got here."

Gage clapped him on the shoulder. "Hang in there, my friend. We'll get through this."

"There's no getting through this." Aiden winced at the whiny tone of his own voice.

A dozen people were milling around the cafeteria when they arrived, including Shakia. The kitchen staff was missing. No dinner was prepared. Aiden wasn't surprised.

They foraged, grabbed a loaf of bread, olive oil, raw carrots, and a scoop of vat meat.

Shakia and Gage sat across the table from him, so close their shoulders were almost touching. Aiden suspected their newfound friendship was of the "with benefits" variety. It would be Gage's second affair since leaving his wife and two-year-old daughter eight months earlier, although at this point it was no longer infidelity, because his wife and daughter were dead. Still, the affair stung Aiden. It would be so much easier to get through this with someone to lean on, someone to hold, and Aiden had met Shakia first.

Gage bit into a Mars-grown carrot. "Well, thank God for this mission. If it wasn't for TV-188—"

Aiden raised his fork. "Before you say it: I doubt there are anywhere near enough people here to stave off the extinction of the human race."

Gage stopped chewing. "What do you mean? Why not?"

Shakia didn't look surprised. She chewed slowly, and swallowing looked like an effort. Setting down her fork, she said, "Less than three hundred people? We'd have to be awfully lucky. One bad flu season, or a war, could wipe us out." She was so obviously brilliant. A security expert who could converse about genetics, sociology, psychology. She was also beautiful. Her skin was incredibly, strikingly dark, her cheekbones sharp, her eyes catlike.

Gage looked skeptical. "A war?"

"We weren't far from a war a couple months ago, when the pub was getting too crowded, and the scientists and meteor cowboys wanted to make it professionals only." Aiden still got chills, remembering the first time he'd come across protest graffiti scrawled in black spray paint down the length of a hallway: *No Fucking Country Club on Mars*.

Graffiti. On a life or death mission to Mars. The sort of people willing to sign on to four years in a hamster run weren't necessarily the most highly functioning and psychologically healthy individuals.

"We're trapped on a planet with a hostile environment," Aiden went on. "Not exactly optimum conditions. On top of that, the risk of passing on genetic mutations skyrockets in such a tiny population."

"Paula Peavy would be the one to ask about the numbers," Shakia said.

Aiden pointed his fork at Shakia. "That's true." Paula could come up with an estimated range. Aiden would bet anything her magic number for species survival would be higher than three hundred under these conditions.

Gage looked like he was going to vomit. That made two of them. Three, probably.

"It's still ironic, though. We volunteered to risk our lives, came all this way to deflect an asteroid so it wouldn't wipe out the human race, and we're the ones who end up alive." Gage covered his eyes. "And have you heard the cherry on top yet?" He looked at Shakia. "Have you told him?"

"I haven't gotten a chance yet." Shakia turned to Aiden. "TV-188 is going to miss Earth. At least, the odds of a hit plunged on the last assessment."

Aiden barked a dry, bitter laugh. "So we came all this way for nothing. If there was a human race to return to, we wouldn't have returned as heroes, only as an insurance policy that turned out to be unnecessary." People would have started going home now. Not everyone, but some. If not for the Nunki. That was the star system the invaders apparently came from, so that's what people were calling them.

"It's a shame the asteroid is going to miss Earth, actually," Aiden said. "Not that I'd want to see nearly every plant and animal on the planet wiped out, but it would sure ruin the Nunki's day." He raised a finger. "Wait, I know! We could deflect it *into* Earth, instead of away from it." Aiden laughed, but Gage and Shakia didn't laugh along, so he stopped. Maybe the joke was in bad taste. He'd thought it was funny, if in a dark, gallows humor sort of way.

"That's a marvelous idea," Gage said.

"I—wait, what?"

Gage was staring at the ceiling, nodding ponderously. He looked at Shakia. "Don't you think?"

Shakia, who was sitting very still, just stared down at her hands.

Aiden leaned forward. "I was *joking*. If we did that, the Nunki would immediately know we're here. They'd come and kill us all."

"It would be worth it." Gage leaned in, lowered his voice. "And maybe they wouldn't come after us. What if the impact brought them to their knees? I mean, they'd be in darkness, dealing with freezing temperatures, their food supply drying up whether they eat animals or plants—"

“Maybe they eat dirt,” Shakia said.

“Maybe they do. And if they do, they wipe us out.” He gestured at Aiden. “You said it yourself: we’re going to die anyway. Let’s go out fighting.”

“Our *species* is going to die. That doesn’t mean we won’t live another forty years, and our children another sixty after that, and their children—”

Gage folded his arms. “Sixty years? With no antibiotics? No *aspirin*?” He shook his head. “Not a chance.”

Gage was right about that, at least. They had seeds, could grow vat meat. Their crops provided oxygen. But they’d quickly be living in painfully primitive conditions. How would they make shoes, or toothbrushes?

Jesus. There’d be no more Xanax.

Gage stood. “I’m going to suggest it to leadership.”

“Go ahead,” Aiden said. “They’re not going to get behind something that amounts to mass suicide.”

\* \* \*

## Chapter 4

Aiden knocked on the door to Commander Manes’ office.

“Yep,” the commander called through the door.

Aiden had to walk around Manes’ desk to see him. Manes was sitting on the floor with a book, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, open beside him. He was looking out the window at gunmetal gray stones scattered across a rust-colored desert. It looked as if he hadn’t shaved in about three days, but as he turned, his eyes were alert. The unfocused stare and stunned, haunted look was gone.

“You’re not seriously going through with this,” Aiden said.

Manes smiled. “From what I understand, it was your idea.”

“I was joking.”

“Well, some of the best ideas and the meanest insults come disguised as jokes.”

Aiden leaned against the edge of Manes’ desk. “If you let them do this, it’s not only us who’ll die. What about elephants, and dogs? Trees. Grasshoppers. We’re going to wipe them all out, along with ourselves, for revenge?”

Manes picked up the book, opened it at random. “I found this in Kaisa Puhakkah’s room, after we cut her down. It’s helped me make sense of things.” He thumbed through a few pages. “One thing it taught me is that nothing is not a bad thing. Sometimes nothing is better than something.”

“No it isn’t. Art is better than a blank wall. Music is better than silence.” Aiden pointed at the book in Manes’ hands. “That philosophy you’re quoting isn’t nothing, it’s *something*.”

It was predictable for people to seek meaning when faced with despair. Manes was simply finding a way to cope. But his coping mechanism was leading them all toward oblivion. Of course if he’d picked up a Bible instead of a Zen primer he’d be saying everything was fine, because they were all going to heaven.

“The Universe will survive without us.” Manes pointed at the Martian landscape outside the window. “There’s art right out there.”

And poisonous air.

Aiden envied his peace. He wished he could find serenity in this stifling habitrail. He wasn’t capable of that degree of self-delusion, though.

“If you want something more concrete, let me offer you this: Even if I wanted to stop this, I couldn’t.”

That didn’t surprise Aiden. Alliances were forming; there were rumors that some of the asteroid cowboys wanted to take charge and force every woman in the colony

to pair up with a man and discontinue birth control. Regardless of her wishes, or sexual orientation.

Maybe he should work on the scientists first. The asteroid wouldn't pass Mars for another two months. Still time to talk them out of it.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 5

The pub was packed. It was always packed. The floor was awash in spilled beer, and people were sitting under and on top of tables. The stink of unwashed bodies in seldom-washed clothes was gag-inducing. Normally it would have been impossible for Aiden to tolerate such claustrophobic conditions, but because it was a bar he could compensate by drinking heavily, and thus dampen his anxiety. Somewhat.

He took a swig of scotch and wondered how long it would be before the Nunki came for them, after the asteroid hit. Twenty-four hours? Less? Some people thought the Nunki might not even notice the nuclear explosion that would nudge the asteroid's path. That seemed wildly optimistic to Aiden. A species capable of interstellar travel would have noticed the asteroid and calculated its trajectory to the inch. When it suddenly changed course and hit them, they'd notice.

How would they be killed, Aiden wondered? Nunki technology was heavily biological in nature. They'd engineered and released two separate plagues, allowing them to devastate the world's population, bringing Earth to its knees before humanity even knew they existed. Everyone had thought the plagues were the work of some rogue nation, or heavily financed terrorist group. But that had never made sense, really. The plagues were too perfect to be the work of humans.

If he was going to die, he so wished he could die on Earth, in Chicago. He missed his city, his friends, the smell of auto exhaust mingled with hot dogs and soft pretzels from sidewalk vendors' carts. But mostly he missed Eva, and his godson Calvin. Calvin had been more than a nephew to Aiden. More like a son.

Aiden looked across at Gage and Shakia, who were making out like teenagers. If he wasn't so drunk, he would be jealous, but all he felt now was a melancholy affection for his two doomed friends.

"You know, Gage," he shouted over the din, "I've never thanked you for talking me into volunteering for this. If not for you I'd be dead right now."

Gage raised an eyebrow, his head weaving drunkenly. "Don't thank me, thank Penelope Lassaly."

The name startled Aiden. "What are you talking about?"

Gage looked at him as if he was an idiot. "In a million years I couldn't have talked you into signing up. You were dead-set against it until Penelope dumped you, then suddenly you had a change of heart."

Shakia reached across the table, stroked Aiden's head. "Aw. Did someone break your heart?"

Aiden jerked his head out of her reach. "You're suggesting I signed up for a five-year mission, to *Mars*, because a woman dumped me? How neurotic and insecure would I have to be to make that enormous a decision based on something so trivial?"

Gage burst out laughing. "Pretty damned neurotic and insecure."

Aiden stood, his chair bumping to a stop against someone standing behind it. "Fuck you, Gage. Where did you get your psychiatry degree again?"

Aiden turned to leave.

"Aiden." Gage jumped up, grabbed his shoulder. "Come on, don't get mad." He spread his hands. "I'm drunk. I say dumb things when I'm drunk."

Aiden sat, mostly because he didn't want to look like a giant baby in front of Shakia. But he was still fuming. Of course it had been Gage. Gage had painted such a glorious picture. He could still see Gage's eyes shining with excitement, could hear the crack of emotion in his voice. *Carpe diem, buddy. Let's save the world. They'll carve our faces on Mount Rushmore. All three hundred and six of us.*

Gage hadn't talked him into this? Bullshit. Gage had always been able to talk Aiden into things, ever since they were kids. They were best friends until seventh grade, when Gage became too cool for Aiden. When just about everyone became too cool for Aiden. He didn't speak to Gage again until they were almost thirty, when they bumped into each other at the dentist's office, of all places, and dusted off their atrophied friendship. Hard to believe that had been almost ten years ago.

"So who was this woman?" Shakia leaned forward, rested her chin on folded hands.

"Oh, just one of many women who couldn't handle my disorder."

"How do you know it was your disorder?" Gage asked. "Has it occurred to you that some women may not be interested in you because you're short and hairy?"

"Oh, I *know* a lot of women aren't interested in me because of my physical appearance. But those are easily observable features, so if they're the issue a woman will reject me on the spot."

Gage reached up, feigned wrapping his hands around Aiden's throat. "Jeeze, would you lighten up? I'm *joking*. What I'm trying to say is, you have no idea why Penelope broke up with you."

Either Gage was trying to make him feel better, or he was incredibly naïve when it came to human motivation. Probably a little of both.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 6

For some reason Aiden noticed how filthy the floors in the hallways were. A thick layer of dust lay along the edges, where people didn't walk. He passed a tray, dirty dishes, and utensils strewn in a corner. Small things like cleanliness understandably fell away when you were committing mass suicide by dropping a ten-kilometer-wide rock on an aggressive, highly advanced species.

It would be a relief, in many ways, to be dead. He would be truly at peace for the first time in his life, feeling not the slightest twinge of anxiety. What he was most afraid of was that dying would hurt. If the Nunki blasted a hole in their habitat, the air would rush out, and the moisture in Aiden's eyes, mouth, and most importantly the alveoli of his lungs, would boil away. It would take one to two excruciating minutes for him to die.

If he could time it right, he could kill himself with the last of his Xanax before the Nunki got him. He'd need some warning that they were coming for that to work, though.

As he passed across Main Street—the central tunnel in the habitat—music and laughter drifted down the tube from the pub. Another party, in celebration of a direct hit. In celebration of the death of their planet. Every night, a new party. It seemed as if everyone had been drunk for the past eight days.

As Aiden passed the closed door to the command room, he heard talking inside. Bursts of static accentuated the speaker's S's, as if it were a radio transmission instead of a live person. There was no one to send radio transmissions now, though. Unless the Nunki were sending a message to say they were on their way.

The door was unlocked, the room dark except for the red and white lights on the radio.

A woman's voice was coming from the radio.

*"We've had no contact with the Nunki since the impact event. No idea how it's affecting them. All we know is, they're no longer sending food in through the wall. The wall appears to be dying, in fact.*

*"Before the impact we didn't dare contact you. We didn't want to give you away, and anyway there wasn't much point. But if anyone is still alive up there: there are survivors in Chicago—"*

Aiden grasped the doorframe to keep from falling down.

Chicago?

He looked out the door as the transmission went on. A couple, arm-in-arm, was weaving down the hall.

*"Hey."*

They kept walking.

He ran into the hall. *"Hey!"*

The couple stopped, turned.

*"Get the commander, or Mahajan. Anyone you can. There's a transmission coming in from Earth."*

The couple took off running. Aiden turned back to the transmission. He should be recording it, but he didn't know how to turn on the recorder. Hopefully whoever had sent it was standing by for a reply.

*"—some way, any way, to transport survivors there? Otherwise, I don't think we'll live much longer."*

A rescue mission? That's what they were hoping for? Aiden couldn't imagine how Mars colony could support more than a handful of additional people. If they did send a mission down, though, Aiden was going. Eva and Calvin were in Chicago. Plus, friends. Even if it hadn't been Chicago, he would want to go. He bore some responsibility for what they were going through.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 7

Even at age eight, Aiden's godson Calvin had been an athlete, the star of his little league baseball team. It had astonished Aiden to watch someone who shared his genetic material excelling in a sport, because he, Eva, and their parents had all been alarmingly uncoordinated. Once when Calvin hit a triple down the line, Aiden had felt such a rush of exhilaration watching Calvin sprint around the bases he'd begun to hyperventilate, and had to find a plastic bag. In a day or two Aiden would know if that little athlete was still alive.

When *Red Two* touched down, Aiden unstrapped himself and hurried into the hall to a view screen. All he could see was the silhouette of a row of buildings in the darkness. If they'd landed in Grant Park, on the edge of Lake Michigan as planned, that would be South Michigan Avenue. As dark and uninformative as the scene was, he preferred it to the views they'd been getting on their voyage, of Earth as a hazy grayish beach ball, the swirling blue and white all but obscured by the dust cloud.

How many Chicagoans had died since the asteroid strike, he wondered? Each of those deaths was on his head, or, more accurately, on his big mouth.

*"There he is."*

Aiden turned. Gage was heading down the hall. *"I've been looking for you."* Gage clapped Aiden on the shoulder, considered the view screen. *"Ready?"*

Would the survivors be grateful to Mars Colony for crashing an asteroid into Earth, or hate them for it? The strike had snuffed out 99.9 percent of life on Earth. Maybe they'd brought the Nunki to their knees, but they'd also wiped out every tree,

every flower, every turtle and giraffe and chipmunk, to say nothing of a large percentage of the surviving human population.

"You ready?" Gage repeated.

"No."

Gage's brow clenched. "Me, neither."

Somehow Aiden had forgotten for a moment. Gage's family lived in Chicago. Hiro-mi, and his daughter Lilly. During the year they were on Mars, Gage hadn't *acted* as if he had a wife and child at home, but that didn't mean he didn't care about them.

\* \* \*

Aiden had known there would be no stars or moon visible; what he hadn't expected was how *low* the sky felt. It was as if they were in a freezing-cold cave, the roof just out of sight. It was so damned dark. If not for the spotlights, Aiden would have to hold his arms in front of him to keep from walking into things. If Mark Adlerberg was right, daytime would be slightly better, but not much.

The silence was startling as well. No birds, no crickets, no distant *whoosh* of traffic or hum of streetlights.

Someone turned a spotlight toward the tree line that bordered the snow-covered ball field they'd landed on. The ground was covered in a layer of black dust, particulate matter kicked up by TV-188, settling to the ground. The trees were branchless skeletons, knobby exclamation points. The sight made Aiden sick.

Dead. Almost everything was dead. Their climatologists and biologists suspected rats were hanging on, and small numbers of hay-eating animals that could dig through the snow to reach dead grass and vegetation, but not much else. It was going to take time to adjust to that reality.

"Captain?" Anatoly Belikovsy called.

Captain Mahajan, who looked like she'd been in a trance, turned to Anatoly, who was pointing toward South Michigan Avenue.

Three people were approaching out of the darkness. They were gawking at the ship, which always reminded Aiden of a giant red water bug.

"You're from the Mars colony?" a woman asked. She had long black hair, brown skin.

Dozens of crewmembers converged on the trio, everyone asking questions at once. Captain Mahajan pushed her way through, calling for everyone to quiet down.

"We are, yes. Are we safe from the Nunki here?"

"Do you have food?" the man asked. He had a thick gray beard, a pocked nose.

The captain turned. "Someone get them food." When no one moved, the captain scanned the faces around her. "Joshua, get some rations, please."

Sighing audibly, Joshua headed toward the ship. When he was clear of the crowd he began to jog. Aiden couldn't blame him—no one wanted to miss this moment. They were about to find out whether there was any chance the human race could survive.

"Come on, tell us what's happening," Gage called from the periphery.

"The Nunki are a mess," the dark haired woman said. "The wall is dead. All of their buildings are dead—"

"Hold on," the Captain said in her clipped Indo-British accent. "What do you mean, dead?" The original transmission had mentioned a dying wall as well. None of them had been sure what to make of that, and they hadn't received any more transmissions.

The woman pushed the end of the scarf she was wearing over her shoulder. "Dead. Everything they build is alive. The wall was alive, and now it's not."

Mahajan frowned, waited for her to go on.

"A lot of the Nunki headed south where it's a little warmer, but there are still some around. Mostly they stay away from the city. When they catch people foraging out there, they kill them as likely as not, or drag them off and do who knows what to them, but there isn't much food left inside the city, so what choice do we have?"

Some of the crewmembers had peeled the other woman away and were speaking with her in low voices a few yards from the main group. Aiden sidled over to listen.

"No. They killed everyone, except they left Chicago alone for some reason."

"Why Chicago?" Mark Adlerberg asked. He was standing closest to the woman, looked to have initiated the splinter group.

"I don't know." She was a tall, big-boned white woman. "Chicago was hit hard by the first super-virus, but half or more of us were still alive before the asteroid hit." She raised her eyebrows. "Some people thought you did it on purpose."

"We did," Aiden said. "Did it help, do you think?"

The woman's lips were cracked and pitted. "It didn't make things any easier, if that's what you're asking. It hurt the Nunkis bad, though. I guess it depends on your point of view." She looked up. "Is the Sun ever coming out again?"

Mark nodded. "The debris should start clearing in another two to three years."

The woman inhaled raggedly, let her head sag. "I'd give anything to see the Sun. Just for an hour. I hate the dark." As Aiden turned to return to the larger group, she added, "I used to be such a carefree person. I used to joke and laugh all the time."

A hand rested on Aiden's shoulder. It was Gage.

"I'm going to look for Hiromi and Lilly. Come with me?"

The idea startled Aiden. "Mahajan isn't going to let us wander off. She'll want to organize teams."

"Fuck the teams." Gage looked off into the blackness. "If my family is out there, I want to reach them as soon as I can. There are plenty of rifles for everyone." He clapped Aiden's shoulder. "Come with me. We'll look for your sister, too."

He wanted to find Eva and Calvin as soon as he could, but the idea of venturing into that freezing darkness with just him and Gage opened a pit of dread in his stomach. There were aliens out there who, "as likely as not," would kill him and Gage if they crossed paths.

Gage jerked a thumb toward the ship. "You think you're safer here, hanging around a ship that just landed on an alien-occupied planet? Or maybe you'd rather join one of the larger exploration teams, which are bound to draw attention if they encounter Nunki."

Aiden eyed the survivor they'd been listening to. She was still alive after all this time. Maybe appearing to be one of them was a better strategy than appearing to be part of the colony that knocked an asteroid into Earth.

A gust of wind kicked up, cutting right through Aiden as he nodded. "Okay. We find your family, then we find mine." It was hard to form the words; his mouth was stiff from the cold.

"I'll get some rifles and supplies. You tell the captain."

Aiden barked a laugh. "Oh, I tell the captain."

Although she'd never admit it, Captain Mahajan had treated Aiden with an undercurrent of disdain since the day Aiden had fled the stage in the middle of that colony-wide intervention. Aiden flinched with embarrassment recalling it.

Mahajan was still talking with the dark haired woman as a small crowd listened. The woman was wolfing trail mix from a plastic container while she talked.

"They do even worse in the cold than we do. Someone on the short wave said it's because everything they do is built around the Sun, around solar. They don't *build* nothing—they grow it. Their buildings and such need Sun, and food and water, so it all died."

The words brought joy to Aiden's heart. They'd hurt the fuckers. They'd really hurt the monsters responsible for wiping out seven billion souls. Good.

As he marinated in the moment, Aiden realized he still didn't know what the Nunki *looked* like. Maybe the captain had already asked? The transmissions they'd

received before they stopped altogether said some were fifteen feet tall, others four, that some walked on two legs, some on ten. Also, you could see inside them, and sometimes they glowed in the dark. None of that was terribly helpful in drawing a mental picture. Aiden wanted to be prepared for the sight of them, if he did in fact ever see one. Any concrete picture would be better than the nightmare images his imagination conjured in this dark, dead place.

“What sort of weapons do they have?” Captain Mahajan asked.

The woman stuffed a handful of nuts and raisins into her mouth with trembling fingers. “Most don’t have any. Those that do got rifles, mostly.”

Exclamations of surprise rang out from the crowd.

“Rifles?” the captain asked.

The woman nodded. “They didn’t bring weapons; they brought diseases. Flesh-eating bacteria. Spores that suffocate you. Shooting, they learned from watching us. They’re not very good at it.”

Aiden turned away. There was no way he could interrupt the captain to tell her he and Gage were leaving, and while he needed to know everything he could about the Nunki if he was going to stay alive, hearing how everyone on Earth had died was making him queasy. It conjured images of Eva and Calvin dying horribly.

Nunki technology was *all* biologically based. They’d known some of it was, even most of it, but it had seemed inconceivable that they had no hard technology whatsoever. What an incredible stroke of luck. The asteroid had completely neutralized them.

He spotted Shakia, supervising people unloading supplies. He could tell Shakia where he and Gage were going, and she could tell the captain later. That way Aiden could avoid the inevitable confrontation with the captain.

Aiden called Shakia’s name.

She headed over. “Welcome home.” She was wearing knee-high black boots, a big black and white checkered scarf that reminded Aiden of the floor of a diner. How she’d fit her wardrobe into the draconian weight restrictions of the Mars mission baffled him.

Aiden jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “When you have a chance, can you tell the captain Gage and I went to look for his . . .” He choked on the last word, realizing what a dumb thing he’d just done, given Shakia’s relationship with Gage.

“I’m coming with you.” Shakia turned. “Let me get some things.”

“You want to come *with* us?” Aiden couldn’t keep the astonishment out of his tone.

Shakia turned back. “I want to take a look around anyway, why not go with you and Gage?”

Aiden shrugged. “Okay.” He was glad to have her company. Plus she’d fired a rifle before. Aiden wished he could say the same.

Not knowing what else to do, Aiden headed back toward one of the crowds interrogating the survivors. The snow under the thin layer of soot was mostly frozen solid, so they were able to walk on top of it instead of slogging through it, but despite two pairs of socks and heavy lined boots, his toes were already freezing. What were they going to feel like after a few hours of hiking through the city? He wondered if he should go back and change into new socks, maybe put on a third pair.

As he turned back, he spotted Gage heading toward him.

“Give me a hand, will you?” He was carrying two huge packs.

“What the hell did you put in there?” Aiden grabbed a pack from Gage, his biceps flexing under the weight.

“Food, cookware, first aid kit. I figure we can pilfer bedding—”

“*Bedding?*” A surge of adrenaline shot through Aiden. “No. Absolutely not. I can’t camp out. I *hate* camping out.” He’d learned from an early age that he absolutely

could not sleep outdoors. The outdoors just felt *foreign* at night. There were no familiar touchstones to draw comfort from.

Gage spread his open palms. "We're not going to make much progress if we scurry back to the ship each night. And we won't be camping out. There are plenty of empty houses."

Aiden didn't do well sleeping in unfamiliar environments of any sort. He didn't do well *sleeping*, period, but away from his own bed it became all but impossible.

"Ready?" Shakia came up behind him, a pack on her shoulders.

Aiden panicked. He didn't want to sleep in some poor dead family's home, but he also didn't want to admit to Shakia that he was afraid. It shouldn't have mattered what Shakia thought of him, but it did.

Aiden took a big, huffing breath. "I need to get some things first."

"What?" Gage patted his pack. "It's all in here."

Except for Aiden's medications, his alcohol, the ancient iPhone he used to listen to big band music to calm him while he tried to sleep. His special tube-shaped pillow, extra underwear. "I just need to grab a few things." Aiden took off before they could insist on specifics.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 8

Aiden's toes ached with cold before they'd gone a mile. Cold mimicked the physical symptoms of anxiety—clenched muscles, trembling, shortness of breath—and while consciously he knew it was the cold piling on those symptoms, the darker corners of his mind were unimpressed by logic. So cold magnified his anxiety.

A woman, hunched against the frigid wind, one hand pressed to her chest, passed on the other side of the street. She was carrying a makeshift torch—a two-by-four burning at one end. They'd seen a few people with flashlights, but mostly it was torches. The woman didn't give Aiden, Gage, and Shakia a second look. There was nothing to mark them as Mars mission personnel. If the light was better, or she came closer, she might notice how clean they were, how well fed.

A high, yipping bark startled Aiden. He turned, watched the woman hurry around a corner. "She must have a little dog in her coat."

"Well, at least we know dogs aren't extinct." Gage sounded almost flip.

Aiden studied his profile as they walked. "Don't you feel at all guilty about this?"

Gage glanced at him, his face half-buried by scarves and the hood of his coat. "Why should I feel guilty? We made the right decision."

"You should feel guilty because people died from that decision. We turned Earth into a *moon*. Even if you think we did the right thing, it doesn't absolve you. You're still responsible. In fact, you're more responsible for this than I am."

Gage shrugged. "I'm not asking to be absolved. I'll gladly accept my share of the responsibility. I'm not going to wallow in guilt, though."

Aiden looked at Shakia, waiting for her to weigh in, but she kept her eyes on the ash-covered ground.

Maybe they'd done the right thing in deflecting that asteroid—it was a complex ethical question with no simple answer—but even if they had, the cost had been staggering. It had been knee-buckling. Aiden felt like he was carrying the weight of every life that had blinked out because of their action, and that was how it should be. Gage, on the other hand, didn't look to be carrying any weight except the pack on his back.

As they turned left on West Harrison Street, past the financial district, Shakia's walkie-talkie beeped. She unhooked the silver slab from her belt. "Go ahead."

It was the captain. "Where are you?"

"Taking a walk with Gage and Aiden. Gage wants to find his family."

"I need you back here."

Shakia looked toward the sky. In the darkness Aiden couldn't see her eyes roll, but he didn't have to. "Whatever it is, get Mark to do it."

"It's not one thing. More survivors are showing up. They all want food, and if we feed everyone we won't have enough for the return trip."

Gage put a hand on Shakia's shoulder, whispered, "Let me talk to her." She handed him the walkie-talkie.

"Look, Sangita, someone's got to do some deep reconnaissance. It might as well be us. We need at least one person with us who can shoot straight."

The captain argued, but really, her authority was limited. Since the quiet, bloodless coup that ousted Manes as leader of the colony, orders had become more advisory than compulsory. In the end Mahajan relented rather than suffer the embarrassment of having her order defied.

Once they crossed over to the Eisenhower Expressway, Gage picked up the pace. Aiden and Shakia struggled to keep up.

"Tell me you can't hear them," Shakia said.

Shivering uncontrollably, Aiden lifted his face, strained to pick up some sound beyond the crunch of their feet on the snow. "What?"

Shakia sighed. "You're so adept at tuning in to the thoughts of the living. You could hear them, if you listened properly."

"Ah, the dead." Aiden was fascinated by people who could so effortlessly straddle the worlds of science and mysticism. He could never hold both views simultaneously. Somehow, though, he had no problem simultaneously admiring Shakia's tangled belief system and thinking her belief in the mystical was nonsense.

"The air is thick with them." She pressed her palm against the center of her chest. "You can hear them here."

"I'm afraid I'm never going to hear them. You'll have to tell me what they're saying." Although honestly, he didn't want to know what they were saying.

\* \* \*

Aiden wondered what Gage must be feeling, minutes from knowing whether his family was alive or dead. Based on the number of people they'd seen, the fireplaces glowing through windows, Aiden guessed 80 or 90 percent of the population was dead. The odds were not in Gage's favor. Or Aiden's, for that matter.

He glanced at Shakia, wondered what *she* was feeling. Deep down, did she hope Gage's wife was dead? Did she love Gage, or was he just convenient companionship?

Aiden would have walked right past Gage's house, with the trees naked poles, all the ground a uniform gray-black.

Through the living room window, a soft red glow danced among the shadows.

Gage took off running, his feet breaking through the frozen crust, sinking to his shins with each step. "Hiromi? *Lilly?*"

Aiden might have seen disappointment cross Shakia's face, but it might have been the shadows. She trotted after Gage, moving more slowly. Aiden trailed behind her.

Angry shouts erupted inside. "Shit." Aiden drew his pistol, rushed through the open front door on Shakia's heels.

"Chill. Right now. Chill," a scraggly-looking kid with a patchy brown beard shouted at Gage, who couldn't decide where to point his handgun, because six or seven people were pointing weapons at him. A few of those weapons now shifted to point at Aiden. They had pistols, a nail gun. One held what looked like a flamethrower.

"What are you doing in my house?" Gage shouted.

"I said, *chill*," the scraggly kid said. "What the hell is wrong with you? It was *vacant*. It had a *fireplace*. So we crashed."

"Gage, put it away." Shakia put a hand on Gage's extended arm. Gage lowered his gun. The band of what Aiden could now see were all teenagers lowered their weapons as well.

"Well. That was exciting," a girl, maybe fifteen, said.

Gage ignored the comment. "You said the house was vacant. Did you find a note, maybe pinned to the front door? On the kitchen table?"

The scraggly kid shook his head. "No note."

Holstering his handgun, Aiden stepped forward, offered the kid his hand. "Aiden."

"Zeus."

They were beyond filthy, like a band of chimney sweeps. A tall, skinny, pimply kid introduced himself as Monty. He was wearing a knitted cap that had two long tassels, like tails dangling at his ears.

The girl who'd made the wiseass remark, her bleached-blonde hair cut short and uneven, was Beltane. Even before she offered her hand and he saw cuts along her forearm, Aiden was instinctively thinking borderline personality disorder.

As Aiden studied her, Beltane turned to Gage. "So, if your wife and kid were here, where've you been, Dad?"

"Mars."

A few of the kids chuckled.

"Mars," Gage repeated. He disappeared into another room, evidently to search for a note from Hiromi.

Aiden pulled his laminated colony ID card from his front pocket, showed it to each of the kids in turn.

"Holy shit," Beltane said as he showed her the card. "Mind. Blown. You're seriously from the colony?"

"I can't believe I'm here, either," Aiden said.

Gage reappeared. "I'm going to see if any of the neighbors are still around. They might know where Hiromi is."

That was an optimistic way to put it.

"Are you here to take us back to Mars?" Zeus asked.

"At this point we're trying to figure out what's the best course of action," Shakia said. It would be impossible to transport thousands of refugees to Mars, and there wasn't enough space in the colony anyway. Their plan was to cherry-pick people with valuable skills (plus Gage and Aiden's relatives, if they were still alive) and bring back crucial technology and supplies.

Shakia went to the fire, pulled off her gloves and held them toward the flames.

"How are you surviving?"

"We're not," Zeus said. "There used to be sixteen of us." Aiden counted seven.

"I'm sorry," Shakia said.

Zeus nodded.

Aiden joined Shakia by the fire. Heat had never felt so good; he wanted to climb right into the flames.

"We keep moving to find food," a lanky Asian boy who'd introduced himself as Good Boy said. "You have to do the scavenger thing, find new neighborhoods outside the wall, try to avoid the Nunkis."

"What's this wall?" This was the third time Aiden had heard it mentioned.

"It's not a wall any more, just a perimeter," Good Boy said.

"It used to run all the way around the city, forty feet high. It died after the asteroid hit," Zeus said.

"How did you get food, if there was a wall around you?" Shakia asked.

"The Nunkis sent it in. Every morning."

“They were *feeding* you?” Shakia said. Aiden recalled hearing that on the transmission they’d received, so he wasn’t surprised.

Zeus nodded. “The best anyone could figure, we were pets. They’d come and watch us. Otherwise they left us alone.” He squinted. “You really are from Mars?”

Before Aiden could answer, the front door banged open and Gage appeared, looking shaken. “Aiden, Shakia, can I speak to you?”

Aiden followed him into the kitchen, where the firelight provided only a deep red gloom.

“They’re alive. They left with some man named Warren about two months ago.” He made the name *Warren* sound like a particularly severe venereal disease.

“Do you know where they went?” Shakia asked.

Gage shook his head. “Outside the city. Maybe north.” As Aiden digested this, he added, “I have to go after them.”

For a moment, Aiden thought he’d misunderstood. “Outside the city? That’s where the Nunki are. Plus, the captain isn’t going to wait for us. Three days, tops, then we head back.”

“I know. I’m not asking either of you to come with me.”

It was a terrible idea. How was he going to find three people in the dark when all he knew was they’d headed *north*? Maybe more to the point, how would he stay alive out there, alone among the Nunki?

He wouldn’t. He’d be dead in a matter of days.

“You said you’d help me find my sister after we went to your house—”

Gage glared at him. “I said I’d help you after I found my family. I haven’t found them yet.”

“Jesus, Gage, they’ve been gone for two months.” Aiden paused, summoned his calm, soothing therapist voice. “Take a breath. Think it through before you go charging off.”

“It’s my *family*. I don’t need to think it through.”

Gage seemed almost panicked. Some of that emotion was probably about Hiromi going off with some man. That was understandable, if somewhat ironic.

“If you go out there unprepared and get yourself killed, that’s not going to help them.” Shakia sounded like someone who had no stake in the outcome.

“Let’s do a little more reconnaissance, at least. Get the lay of the land,” Aiden said. “You need to know what’s out there before you go.”

Gage sighed through his nose. “Fine. I’ll leave tomorrow morning.” He looked out the window, into the blackness. “Do you even call it morning any more?”

In the living room, the kids watched as Aiden, Gage, and Shakia gathered their packs.

“We’re going to move on,” Gage said. “Aiden and I lived in Chicago before the mission, and there are people we want to find.”

Zeus hopped out of a stuffed chair. “We’re coming.”

Gage did a double take. “What? No, you can’t come with us.”

“We can go wherever the hell we want,” Beltane said.

Traveling with survivors seemed like a great idea to Aiden. They could learn how to avoid making stupid blunders that might get them killed.

“Why do you want to come with us?” Shakia asked.

“You’re from *Mars*,” Zeus said. “You’re the closest thing to a rescue party we’re going to see. Of course we want to stick close.”

*Red Two* was the cavalry. What a depressing thought.

“So where are we headed?” Beltane asked.

Gage looked at Aiden, eyebrows raised. “Where does your sister live again?”

Everyone turned to look at Aiden. “West Madison.”

Zeus nodded. "That's inside the perimeter, at least. If it was outside, there'd be no chance."

Aiden closed his eyes. A little good luck. Finally.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 9

Monty, the skinny kid, was walking beside Aiden. Despite being a clinical psychologist whose job purportedly included knowing how to put people at ease, Aiden had never been adept at initiating conversations with strangers. At the same time, it felt awkward to walk beside this kid in silence.

"Is your name really Monty?" he ventured.

The kid looked up. "We all picked new ones. Except Beltane, who had a good one to begin with."

"Why Monty?"

Monty shrugged. "I love *The Holy Grail*."

Aiden couldn't argue with that. *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* had kept him company through many sleepless nights.

Up ahead, Zeus opened the door of a huge SUV and slipped into the driver's seat. He started it, rolled down the window as others climbed into the back. "It's going to be a tight fit."

Aiden had assumed they would walk. He was thrilled at the prospect of avoiding a three or four mile slog through the cold dark. On the other hand, the van was horribly crowded.

He ducked his head and climbed in. "Where do you get gas for this?"

Beltane got out of her seat, patted it. "Here you go."

"Oh, I don't want to take your seat." He squatted between the two middle seats, Shakia's knees pressing his lower back.

"You're not taking it. We're gonna share." She took Aiden's wrist, pulled him into the seat, then sat in his lap. "You can still find gas if you go far enough away from the city. Sucks getting it out of the storage tanks, though."

A few of her companions chuckled at this.

"Why does it suck?" Aiden cleared his throat. His voice was an octave too high. He was getting an erection, could feel his face burning.

"You have to suck it out, a hoseful at a time." Beltane wriggled in his lap, her butt rubbing against his crotch. "You like that?"

One of the classic symptoms of borderline personality disorder was sexual promiscuity, so Beltane's behavior wasn't surprising, but this wasn't his office and she wasn't his client, so he was at a loss for how to respond. His heart was racing with embarrassment, yet his erection hung on doggedly as they drove. How many times had he *wanted* to maintain an erection, only to have anxiety deflate it?

His bowels were roiling, a gastro-intestinal storm brewing. It was just a few miles; he only had to hold on for, what, ten minutes? Zeus was flying down the pitch-black road.

"Wait. Why don't you have the headlights on?" Aiden tried not to sound breathless. They were driving by the light of a flashlight Good Boy was pointing through the windshield.

"Headlights are a great way to attract Nunki. Make a note of that," Zeus said.

They passed signs for a strip mall: Office Depot, Wendy's, Verizon. They were on Desplaines Avenue, Aiden realized. Penelope had lived right around the corner.

A pang of wistful sadness penetrated the metallic dread of his anxiety. He ran with it, summoning images of Penelope. If he could get lost in his head until the ride was over, he might stave off the panic attack.

She'd been exactly the kind of woman he'd always dreamed of meeting. Funky and free-spirited, but not so funky and free-spirited that she was unemployed, heavily into illegal substances, or suffering from borderline personality disorder. She'd worn bright outfits put together from thrift store finds, but still shaved her legs. She was an outlaw who behaved, just what Aiden aspired to be if he ever got his anxiety under control. Even her name was perfect. Penelope. Whimsical and musical, yet if you wanted to bring it down to Earth, temporarily remove some of the whimsy, just shorten it to Penny. They'd only been seeing each other for a few months, but he'd fallen for her hard.

Aiden had thought things were going well, then the day after he'd had an epic panic attack in her kitchen, he'd gotten the text. He still remembered her words verbatim.

I HAVE TO SAY GOODBYE. I'M HAVING ISSUES I NEED TO SORT OUT. I'M SO SORRY. PLEASE DON'T CALL.

Issues she needed to sort out. It was an ironic way to tell a clinical psychologist that he was way too fucked up for you.

Was she in her apartment at this very moment? It was hard to imagine Penelope alive in this black world. Maybe he would have time to look for her, once he found Eva and Calvin. Would that be cruel, though? He only had permission to bring back his two blood relatives. He doubted there was room for negotiation on that front.

"There's what's left of the fence," Good Boy called from the front. He diverted the flashlight to the right, at a towering, gargantuan white pillar that disappeared up into the darkness. The base was almost as wide around as the Wendy's restaurant beside it.

"What *is* that?" Gage asked from the back.

"A bone," Monty said. "That's all that's left of the wall. A ring of bones around the city."

"Take the next left," Good Boy said to Zeus. He had an old fold-out map in his lap. Zeus barely slowed.

"The transmission we received mentioned the Nunki laying down rules," Aiden said. "You're able to communicate with them?"

Beltane formed an L with her arms. "Sign language. Everyone was required to learn it."

They pulled to a stop. "Here we are," Zeus said.

Aiden fumbled with the door handle, feeling as if every second in reaching Eva was suddenly crucial.

"Don't get your hopes up," Zeus called as Aiden climbed out. "If they're alive, chances are they moved."

He drew a flashlight from his pack. The front door to the complex was unlocked, the expansive lobby dark. He found the stairwell leading up.

"Aiden, wait for me," Gage called as the door clicked shut behind Aiden. He started climbing. He needed to do this himself, alone.

Winded, he reached the seventh floor and jogged down the hall to Eva's door.

"Eva." Aiden pounded on the door, then waited.

Nothing.

He pounded once more, then tried the door. It was unlocked.

"Eva? Calvin?" There were dirty dishes in the sink, empty food wrappers and boxes piled on the kitchen table.

"Calvin?" It was difficult to shout, because he was breathless.

Aiden shined the flashlight into Calvin's bedroom, glimpsed two faces in the bed, above a hill of blankets. He cried out, rushed toward them, hoping against hope that they were only sleeping.

They weren't sleeping.

Of course they weren't; his pounding on the door and shouting their names would have waked them if they'd been sleeping. Their faces were ghostly white in the flashlight's harsh light.

Aiden pulled off his glove, touched Calvin's cold forehead, still hoping he would open his eyes, irrational as that hope was. They'd died after the cold set in. Otherwise there would be signs of decomposition.

He spotted a half-empty glass of bright purple liquid on the nightstand. A white film caked the frozen surface.

"Oh, no." Aiden picked up the glass, studied the white film before pointing the flashlight into the adjoining bathroom. A prescription bottle sat open on the counter, which was smeared with white powder. "I was coming for you. You just needed to hold on a little longer."

They'd made it through the plagues, the invasion. The asteroid had killed them. Aiden's stupid attempt at humor had killed them.

Aiden kissed Calvin's cheek, then went around and kissed his sister's cheek.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

\* \* \*

Gage and Shakia were waiting in the lobby.

"The captain called. We have to get back to Grant Park right away," Shakia said. "People just keep coming. It's getting tense."

Aiden nodded.

When they climbed back into the van Beltane took up her spot on Aiden's lap, and Zeus pulled out and hung a U-turn.

"Hurry," Shakia said.

Beltane patted his knee. "Not there?"

It took Aiden a moment to realize she was asking about Eva and Calvin.

"They were there."

"Shit. Sorry."

All Aiden could manage was a nod, which was useless because it was dark, and Beltane was facing the other way.

"Good Boy, how about some music?" Beltane said. A moment later the silence was broken by a shrieking guitar. Aiden didn't recognize the song, although the odds that these kids would possess any music Aiden might recognize was minuscule.

He was glad to be heading back to *Red Two*, eager to be back among familiar faces, away from these Lord of the Flies cast members. He knew that characterization was wildly unfair, but he was tired, and stressed. He could still feel Calvin's cold forehead on his fingertips.

"Look out," Good Boy shouted.

The brakes screeched.

The van slammed into something. Aiden was hurled into the seat back in front of him.

\* \* \*

When Aiden came back to the world, he was on the floor with his cheek pressed to the carpet. Someone was on top of him. With each ragged in-breath it felt as if knives were being shoved into his ribcage.

"Good Boy? Where's Good Boy?" Beltane stepped on Aiden's leg, climbed into the front seat. Whoever was on top of him struggled to get up, slipped, landed on him again. Fresh, blinding pain lanced his ribcage.

Warm fluid was dribbling onto the back of his head. Blood.

"What did we hit?" someone asked.

The door rolled open; a blast of icy air and snow flurries hit Aiden. The pressure on his back eased; Shakia rolled off of him, to one side. She groaned, semi-conscious.

Aiden got his knees under him.

Beltane was in the front passenger seat staring through the wrecked, mostly missing windshield. Good Boy had gone through it with the flashlight, which was casting a tight beam of light across the road.

A deep, mournful, rolling bass filled the air. Aiden felt it as a vibration deep in his belly.

Suddenly everyone was scrambling.

“Nunki,” Zeus said. “Jesus, we hit a bus full of Nunki.”

A bus of Nunki? Aiden grabbed Shakia’s shoulders and dragged her out of the van. He fell backward, dropped to the road, gritted his teeth to keep from crying out. He lifted Shakia as people rushed past.

Figures loomed in the periphery, outside the school bus they’d collided with. Aiden did not look at them.

A body landed a dozen feet away and lay motionless. Aiden couldn’t tell who it was. He stumbled blindly into the darkness, carrying Shakia, his ribs in agony as that terrible booming went on, a tuba from hell. The Nunki were making the sound; he had no doubt. He stumbled across a dozen yards of snow, then reached a raised surface. Probably a sidewalk.

Behind him, someone screamed. It went on in sharp staccato bursts—the sound of someone in agony—as Aiden dropped off a curb and fell, landing on Shakia, scraping his knees on the ice and sending a fresh stab into his ribs. The darkness was just about complete, the only light coming from the flashlight Good Boy had taken through the windshield, now a hundred feet behind them.

He bumped into a smooth concrete wall. A building. Probably a store. Turning, he ran an elbow along the wall to guide him until he reached an open space. His elbow brushed the sharp edge of a broken-out store window. He ducked, stepped through, walked forward until Shakia bumped the counter of one of the registers. He ducked into the cashier’s station, laid Shakia on the floor and collapsed beside her.

The screaming had stopped. Only the deep metallic boom of the Nunki broke the silence.

Orange light flashed outside, illuminating the street. Suddenly Aiden could make out the front of the store, the parking lot, abandoned vehicles . . .

The temperature seemed to drop twenty degrees as five Nunki carrying torches stepped into view. Aiden clenched his teeth to stifle a moan.

They were so close together it was difficult to tell where one ended and another began. They were angular, barbed; some of the firelight passed right through, refracting, casting beams into the air. Some walked upright, others on all fours, or sixes. One seemed to have a dozen limbs. They wore haphazard layers of human clothes—coats, shirts, swatches of fabric draped across their narrow frames. Only their faces and limbs were similar from one to the next, with deep-set eyes and two long teeth like tusks, limbs that were mostly blade-shaped bone and rough skin.

The sight made the Nunki real to Aiden in a way they had not been before. Knowing they were all over the planet, while humans occupied this one tiny spot, filled him with such black despair that he wanted to put a gun to his head and end this sickening story right then and there. If the handgun he’d been issued hadn’t been in his pack in the wrecked van, he would have done it, and fuck his responsibility to keep the human race going. The sooner they were all gone, the sooner this nightmare would end for them.

“Aiden.”

He helped Shakia sit up. The blood on her forehead and ringing her mouth looked black in the dim light. She’d broken her nose, had a deep gash above one eye.

“What happened?” she asked, far too loud.

Aiden shushed her. "We hit a bus full of Nunki."

Outside, the light grew suddenly brighter. Aiden rose just high enough to see over the counter.

A Nunki holding a torch passed in front of the store. Aiden froze as it turned in their direction. The sleeve torn from a heavy winter parka covered the alien's right arm, but its shoulder and part of its chest were bare. Aiden could see blood vessels, a beating heart, three bones running horizontally under rough skin.

It moved on.

The Nunki in the street were bent over something. Aiden squinted, trying to make out what it was.

One reached down and lifted a can, examining it. It was a can of fruit. Peaches, or maybe apricots. They were opening it with a knife. Another was rifling through a backpack, no doubt from the van. It pulled out a tube-shaped cellophane package. Ritz crackers.

"We have to get out of here," Shakia said.

Aiden nodded, transfixed by the scene. They were eating Ritz crackers and fruit from a can. He even recognized the brand from the label. Del Monte. They'd been driving a school bus.

Shakia touched his shoulder. "Out the back." Her voice was shaky, slurry, like someone drifting off to sleep.

He followed her, the two of them crawling down an aisle toward the back of what looked to be a Walgreens or CVS drug store. His side screamed with each forward slide of his right knee. They pushed through a door, into the total darkness of the employees-only area.

Shakia took his clammy hand. "Do you know the way back to *Red Two*?"

"In theory." It would be difficult to navigate in pitch dark.

They felt their way along the wall to the exit, opened the fire door as quietly as possible.

The Nunki must still be having their meal; ambient light from their torches allowed Aiden to make out a dumpster, and beyond it a paved lot that tilted and rolled, because Aiden was suddenly dizzy.

He couldn't catch his breath; his heart was racing. He dropped to his knees. "I need a minute. Just let me . . ."

Shakia touched his shoulder. "Are you hurt?"

"I think I broke some ribs." If he took shallow breaths it hurt less, but right now taking shallow breaths made him feel like he was suffocating. He lay on his side in the ash-covered snow, curled his knees up and hugged them.

"I'm sorry. Just give me a minute."

Shakia put her hand on his back. "We're okay now. We're safe."

Even if they'd really been safe, even if he were back in his room on Mars, it wouldn't matter.

"A panic attack. Right?" Shakia asked. Her voice had grown clearer, less slurry.

He looked up at her. It was hard to concentrate, hard to speak. "You sound like you know them."

"My son used to get them. Acute anxiety disorder."

Aiden nodded. It went without saying that her son was dead.

"Even as a child," Shakia said. "Anxiety, all the time. It was so hard for him."

Aiden felt grateful for her words. It made him feel less foolish, less weak. "It's like crawling through broken glass, every moment of your life."

"You hide it well."

"Do I?" The attack was dissipating a bit, his chest loosening. "I think I'm okay to walk now. Thanks for talking me through it." He got unsteadily to his feet.

“Thanks for pulling me out of that van. That’s how I got out, isn’t it? You carried me?”

“Yeah.”

Aiden snapped a branch off a dead shrub on the edge of the parking lot, and when it grew too dark to see he tapped it in front of them the way people who were blind used canes. He doubled back onto Desplaines a half mile beyond the Nunki picnic.

“Do you have a headache?” he asked.

“Big time.”

“Dizziness? Nausea?”

“A little.” Shakia said. “You’re thinking I have a concussion.”

“I can evaluate you when we get back.”

They leaned on each other like drunken buddies stumbling home from a bar.

The silence of the world was startling. Between the darkness, the silence, the limited palette of scents to pick up on the freezing wind, it was as if this world had closed down Aiden’s senses.

Would someone else have come up with the idea to divert TV-188 if he hadn’t? It would be nice to believe that. Maybe he’d just thought of it first.

“Did you see that?” Shakia asked.

Aiden scanned the wall of blackness surrounding them. “More of the dead?”

Shakia swatted his forearm. “Don’t be smart. A light. Just a flash, straight ahead.”

Aiden didn’t see anything, but he picked up his pace.

“How far ahead?”

“Hard to say. Maybe a quarter of a mile?”

Aiden squinted into the darkness, but there was nothing. It was possible the flash Shakia had seen was a symptom of her head injury.

“Why don’t you talk a little louder,” a voice to their left said. “I’m not sure the Nunki can hear you.”

White light flashed, revealing Beltane, Gage, and Monty. An instant later Beltane flicked off the flashlight she was pointing at the ground, and they were in darkness again.

Aiden felt a hand on him, then Gage was hugging him. “I thought you were dead.”

“So did I.” He raised his voice. “What about your companions?”

“Good Boy and Magdalene are dead,” Monty said. “We don’t know about the rest of them.”

“They were driving a school bus,” Shakia said. “Why were they driving a school bus?”

“Because they had somewhere to go, I would imagine,” Beltane shot back.

“They had mind-blowing technology—stuff from out of your nightmares,” Monty said. “There used to be these tubes around, like big veins. The Nunki squeezed right into them. There were no openings—they just pushed through like they were stepping inside a soap bubble, and then they would shoot off.”

Veins as transportation. Aiden was so grateful he hadn’t been here to see it.

“The wall was so bizarre,” Monty went on. “See-through, just like the Nunki; the same barbs. Zeus thought all of their technology was based on their own DNA.”

“We were surrounded by a wall of Nunki flesh and bone,” Beltane said. “That sounds about right.”

\* \* \*

As they crossed the bridge on West Lake and headed downtown, fires warming people inside houses gave the darkness a softer hue, more grey than black. Aiden could make out silhouettes of buildings and light poles. The occasional figure hurried past, hunched against the bitter cold.

The ambient glow grew stronger as they approached Grant Park. Someone ran past carrying a cardboard box.

"What's that smell?" Beltane asked as they headed down Lakeshore Drive toward Grant Park.

"Smoke," Aiden said. The smoke had an undertone of something else. Something bitter, acrid, like burned rubber.

In the direction of the park, the air glowed dark red. A thick plume of black smoke rose.

"Oh, no." Aiden had forgotten about the captain's call. Despite the pain, he jogged, praying the smell was not coming from *Red Two*.

Hundreds of people were milling around the park. Smoke poured from the open main hatch of *Red Two*. Around it, the red carbon fiber hull was singed black.

A man and woman standing with two children were watching nearby.

"What happened?" Aiden asked.

Scowling, the man gestured toward *Red Two*. "A bunch of idiots stormed the ship to get the food in there. Something inside must have caught fire from their torches." He stared at *Red Two*, his eyes flat. "Half an hour ago flames were all up the sides of it."

Bodies lay scattered around the main hatch, people *Red Two* security must have shot trying to protect the ship, in the process bringing them all a few baby steps closer to extinction. Personnel were hurrying in and out, hauling salvage from *Red Two*.

Aiden limped toward the ship, following Gage and Shakia, wanting and not wanting to know the status of the ship.

Captain Mahajan was standing amid salvaged equipment. When she saw them her shoulders slumped, and she started to turn away. Then Shakia's bloodied face registered and she turned back.

"We were on our way," Shakia said. "We were in an accident."

"What's the ship's status?" Gage asked.

Captain Mahajan looked up at him. "The status is, it's fucked."

\* \* \*

## Chapter 10

Aiden nudged the charred skeleton of his suitcase with his foot. There was no need to touch it; everything that had been inside was ash. Everything that had been in his room was ash, including his supply of Xanax and Paxil. The walls were singed charcoal gray, the smoke stench overwhelming, even through the towel he was holding over his nose and mouth.

There were situations that reliably threw Aiden into a state of icy panic. Public speaking. First dates. Other situations were less predictable. Traveling. Performance evaluations. Aiden would have bet his life that becoming stranded in a perpetually dark city surrounded by hostile aliens with no pharmaceuticals belonged in the former category, but there he stood, his overriding emotion despair rather than terror. Maybe he was in shock, and the real onslaught of anxiety would come later.

Or maybe his adrenal glands had finally given up.

He headed back outside.

Half a dozen bonfires burned around the perimeter of *Red Two*, keeping the darkness at bay, providing the illusion that this was an organized operation, distinct from the anarchy and starvation surrounding it. Aiden knew better. They had no food, little energy. Soon they would be indistinguishable from the desperate souls looking to them for salvation.

"Aiden." Mark Adlerberg was coming toward him. "Someone was looking for you." Mark looked around, pointed out beyond the bonfires. "There she is."

She was a frail-looking woman in jeans, a heavy blanket draped over her shoulders. Short hair, sharp cheekbones. It wasn't until she spotted Aiden and smiled that he recognized her.

“Penelope?”

She rushed toward him. “Aiden? Oh, my God, I can’t believe it.” Penelope hugged him until his broken ribs shrieked. She took a step back and looked at him. “In a million years, I never would have guessed I’d see you again.”

She’d lost thirty pounds and an incisor, but her eyes were still bright, expressive, her smile a big, enthusiastic rectangle.

“Wow. I was beginning to think everyone I knew was dead.”

Penelope raised her arms like she was showing off a new dress. “Here I am. Can’t say it’s been a blast. Want to know what *rat* tastes like?”

“Well, I’ll be reopening my practice in a couple of days, if you want to make an appointment.”

She folded her arms, looked off into the dark. “No, I’ll be all right.”

He put a hand on her shoulder. “Penny, I’m *joking*.”

“No, you should go back to work. People can use your kind of help.”

*I can’t help these people*, he wanted to say. The thought of sitting in an office across from one of these survivors trying to process everything that had happened made him queasy. No one was going to ask him to do that, though. They were too focused on finding enough to eat, gathering fuel for fires, to worry about their broken minds. No, Aiden was sure he was off the hook on that front. His days would be filled with healing people’s bodies, using what he could recall from his time in med school.

Over Penelope’s shoulder, Aiden spotted Shakia, head down, heading for him. The gash in her forehead had been stitched, an ice pack lashed over her broken nose.

She stepped close, kept her voice low, although there were far fewer people in the park than there’d been a few hours earlier. “A reconnaissance team spotted Nunki in vehicles heading this way.”

Penelope gasped. “They never come into the city.”

“That’s what we keep hearing,” Shakia said. “We’re setting up a defense, in case—”

The squeal of brakes stopped her cold. On South Michigan a school bus came to a stop. Its doors folded open.

A Nunki stepped out.

Aiden, Penelope, and Shakia ran for *Red Two*.

Two more buses followed, one a city bus. Aiden wondered if the school bus they’d collided with had been heading for *Red Two* as well.

The Nunki fanned out, disappearing into the darkness. Aiden couldn’t see them, but he could hear them. Aiden and the rest of them were pinned, their backs to the frozen lake.

“What do we do? What do we do?” someone was shouting.

“Set up a perimeter,” Captain Mahajan shouted. “Pile equipment every thirty feet for cover. If you don’t have a firearm, get one.”

They met Gage, with Monty and Beltane, while running to get weapons. The six of them got to work piling electronics components until they had built a low wall.

“They’re so hard to kill,” Monty said. “They have, like, six hearts, no vital organs except their heads. If you take off one of their limbs the bleeding just *stops* after a couple of seconds.”

“I’ve never shot a gun.” Penelope stared down at the rifle in her hands.

“I haven’t either,” Aiden said. “Just do your best.”

He was about to die. This moment, this was the moment of his death. The relentless flurry of his thoughts and worries would stop spinning, and everything would go black. He felt strangely ambivalent about it.

“Someone should try to talk to them,” Beltane said. She stayed behind the barricade. Talking to them would require standing clear, an easy target.

The baritone bass rumble grew louder, a war cry, an obituary.

Aiden guessed this was about revenge. The Nunki had to know the people who'd arrived on *Red Two* were responsible for the asteroid. Why else would they suddenly gather to attack the ship after leaving Chicago alone for so long?

Gage was staring at him, his teeth chattering despite the bonfires.

"What?"

Gage shook his head. "Nothing."

Beside him, Beltane was hopping from foot to foot like she needed to pee.

The buses lurched forward, swung around and rolled across the frozen ground toward *Red Two*, spreading out as they approached. Aiden felt a dread that superseded fear, drilling into his spine like black poison, freezing him solid.

"They're using the buses for cover," someone shouted. Aiden could hear footfalls behind the buses.

"Shoot the tires," Gage shouted.

Aiden closed one eye and opened fire as gunfire filled the air, the rattle of automatic weapons accompanied by the crack of handguns. Windshields shattered as some shot at the drivers, although Aiden didn't see drivers.

The buses kept coming. Unless someone hit the tires and that actually stopped the buses, the Nunki would ram right through their pathetic cover.

Suddenly someone was running toward the buses. Beltane—it was Beltane in her jeans and filthy ski jacket. Aiden hadn't seen her go, but she was in the open, her arms waving like a signaler directing a jet to its gate.

"Stop shooting," Aiden screamed.

Behind him, Mahajan was shouting, "Cease fire."

Beltane ran right at the closest bus, waving her arms in the same pattern over and over.

It looked as if the bus was going to run right over her; then it slowed, rolled to a stop. Beltane went on signing. The pattern shifted to a new message.

A lone Nunki appeared from behind the bus—a big one with six limbs, holding what looked like a human-made RPG. The Nunki waved its free limbs.

Monty muttered under his breath. "Ship. Ice."

"What?" Aiden looked at Monty. "What's it saying?"

Monty shook his head violently, signaling Aiden to shut up as he went on mumbling. "Leave. Ice." Monty inhaled sharply, shouted, "They want the ship. All they want is the ship." He stepped into the open. "If we walk away, out onto the ice and away, they say they won't kill us."

The ship? The ship was scrap.

How would the Nunki know that, though? They must have seen it land, and the smoke had stopped billowing from it three or four hours ago. They probably didn't know about the fire.

Aiden chuckled to himself. They wanted off this frozen rock as badly as he. Though even operational, *Red Two* wouldn't get them out of the neighborhood. Maybe they thought they could improve it.

"Tell them we agree," Mahajan called to Beltane. "Tell them we'll leave."

Beltane waved her arms. The Nunki signaled back.

"They want two people to stay behind to show them how to operate it," Monty called to the captain.

"Shit," Gage hissed.

The captain glanced around. "Welch. Will you stay behind with me?"

After a long pause, Welch called, "No. I'm sorry, no." Allen Welch was their chief engineer, so he made sense. Aiden couldn't blame him for balking, though. Who wanted to tell these Nunki they'd taken possession of junk?

Beltane looked back at the captain, hands on her hips. "Get a clue, lady. You need someone who knows how to talk to them." She signed something to the Nunki, took a few steps back. "I'll stay."

People began breaking ranks, jogging toward the frozen lake. Shakia stepped out from behind their makeshift wall. "I'll be the second. You go on, Captain."

Startled, Aiden said, "You're not an engineer."

"What's to know?" Shakia looked the ship up and down. "It doesn't work." She turned to the captain. "Get everyone out of here before they change their minds."

Mahajan nodded. "Thank you, Shakia." She raised her voice. "Let's go." Half the crew were already a hundred yards out on the lake and heading along the shoreline.

Aiden watched people hurry past. He desperately wanted to join them, but his feet wouldn't budge.

What would he say to Shakia as he left? *Bye. Good luck. I'm out of here?*

No one would be surprised. At one time or another they'd all seen him curled in the fetal position, shaking. Certainly Penelope wouldn't be surprised.

He turned to Penelope, who was looking at him expectantly, and put a hand on her shoulder. "You go on. I'm going to stay." His own words shocked him.

Maybe unconsciously he really did want to die, to escape this hellish place. Or maybe he thought he deserved to die, for the part he played in making it this way.

Penelope opened her mouth to say something, but Aiden nudged her. "Go on. Get out of here."

He watched her for a second, to make sure she went. Gage was standing, rifle in hand, halfway between *Red Two* and the lake, looking uncertain. Aiden waved for him to go, then turned to catch up to Shakia, who was walking through the well-trampled snow, out to where Beltane waited.

Aiden wasn't sure he could make it. His legs were rubbery, and he needed a bathroom.

Four Nunki came out from behind the buses, three more clambered out through the doors. No wonder they'd agreed to the armistice so quickly. It wasn't much of a force.

Their black, sclera-less eyes were ringed by a ridge of bone or muscle that made them appear deeply inset. One turned at just the right angle, and Aiden caught a glimpse of red flames from the bonfire, right through the center of its chest.

As they led the Nunki toward the ship, Beltane began signing.

"What are you saying?" Shakia asked.

"I'm telling them about the ship." She went on signing.

"What *exactly* are you saying?" Shakia said.

Beltane cursed. "Ship burned." Her words dripped impatience, contempt. "Hungry people. Torches. Accident. Now let me do this. They'll kill us in a second if I upset them. They'll probably kill us anyway once they realize we fucked them over."

The big Nunki replied.

"They want to see for themselves," Beltane said.

As they stepped into the dark, burned-out interior, one of the smaller Nunki began to glow. Aiden watched their faces by the Nunki's bluish light. The thick muscles around their eyes stretched into a ridge, but he had no idea what that meant. They could be sad, or furious; it could even be a means of communication.

They walked the Nunki through the bridge and the propulsion room.

The big Nunki signed again.

"Big rock sky," Beltane translated.

Somehow, Aiden's heart found a higher gear.

More signing from the Nunki.

"You pushed big rock."

"Tell it, we were trying to deflect it *away*, but weren't able to," Shakia said.

Beltane gave her a poisonous glare. "I have a couple hundred really basic words to work with." She took a deep, whooshing breath. "Should I tell them, no? Just, no?"

"Tell them yes," Aiden said.

Shakia and Beltane turned.

"They're not stupid. They made the same calculations we did and figured out it was going to miss. By the time we deflected it, it was too late for them to react, but they *know* what happened."

"I didn't do it, though," Beltane said. "You did. Only, I don't know how to tell them that, so they're going to kill me too."

"How do I sign 'me'?" Aiden asked. "'I did it'?"

Beltane's mouth fell open. "You just make an 'L' with your forearms for 'me.'"

"Hang on," Shakia said, grasping Aiden's upper arm. "You didn't do it."

Aiden turned to the Nunki and made an L. Then he shit his pants. If anyone noticed, they didn't say anything.

The Nunki stared at the L, then raised its eyes to meet Aiden's. Aiden kept his arms in position, waited for it to raise the rifle clutched in one of its seven or eight-fingered limbs.

It signed something.

"What did it say?" Aiden asked.

"Bad," Beltane said.

Aiden wiped sweat from his eyes with the back of his hand. "What's the sign for 'yes'?"

"Press your fists together."

Aiden pressed his fists together and held them there. There were a lot of other things he'd like to add—that it had been bad of the Nunki to slaughter humanity, for instance—but given the constraints of this system of communication, "yes" seemed sufficient.

The Nunki signed again.

"Give me food," Beltane translated.

"Christ, does anyone have any food?" Shakia asked, patting her pockets.

"Here." Aiden dug into a pocket of his coat, pulled out a bag.

"It's not meat, is it?" Beltane asked. "They get angry if you try to give them meat."

"Trail mix." Aiden approached the Nunki, set the bag in its open hand.

"No more," Beltane said as she signed.

The Nunki with the trail mix headed for the door. Its companions followed.

Aiden, Shakia, and Beltane stood perfectly still. The glow of the Nunki receded until they were standing in darkness. The cabin reeked from Aiden's shit, but for once Aiden was beyond embarrassment. All he felt was relief.

Nunki were pragmatic. Aiden thought he could conclude that much. They weren't interested in revenge, only survival. They'd avoided a fight when offered the opportunity. Even with their enemy right in front of them, they'd walked away because there was nothing to gain from killing them.

Of course, all of that could be completely wrong. They had, after all, killed people after the bus crash.

"Come on." Shakia took Aiden's hand. Aiden reached out and found Beltane's. Slowly, carefully, they inched their way outside, where the fires had become embers and the darkness was pushing down from above.

"Aiden." It was Penelope, her low call coming from the direction of the lake.

Aiden followed her voice, stepping gingerly because of the crap in his pants. He raised a hand when he spotted her coming out of the darkness. As she drew close she stopped, folded her arms and considered him. "Wow. Never in a million years would I have pegged you as the hero type."

Maybe she meant it purely as a compliment, but there was a backhanded insult embedded in her praise. “Penelope, I have a disorder. A disease. It cranks up the volume on my fear. Sometimes that volume is so loud I can’t hear myself think, but that doesn’t mean I don’t have a spine.”

Penelope looked surprised. “Where did that come from? Who said you had no spine?” “You called it off between us after I had a panic attack in your apartment. You didn’t have to say it.”

Penelope threw back her head and shrieked with laughter, startling Aiden.

“What?” Aiden could feel his face turning red. “What part of that is funny to you?”

She covered her mouth, crippled with laughter, a tear trailing down her cheek. The others, who’d moved away to give them some privacy, looked back, unused to the sound of laughter.

“I don’t understand what’s so funny.”

Penelope struggled to control herself. She straightened to face him. “I have *cancer*. I dumped you when I found out. We’d only known each other a few weeks, and I didn’t have the energy for someone new. I wanted to be with my friends and family.”

Aiden’s pounding heart felt as if it suddenly stopped beating altogether. He put a hand over his mouth, feeling like such a jackass, like a self-centered, self-absorbed, narcissistic jackass.

“Are you all right now?” he asked.

Penelope folded her arms, looked at the ground. “No, Aiden, I’m not all right. I was supposed to get all of these fancy treatments, stem-cell this and chemo that, and then the Nunki came and that was that.” She shrugged, lifting her shoulders nearly to her ears before letting them drop. It was one of her little mannerisms Aiden had so cherished during their brief time together.

“I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah, well, odds are the Nunki will get me before the cancer does. Or the cold, or starvation.” She gave him a deadpan look. “I may outlive you, given your penchant for heroics.”

This time the words made him flush. His penchant for heroics. The phrase was the sweetest music coming from Penelope. That goodbye text from her really had been a tipping point, he realized. It had been the last straw, the indignation that pushed him over the edge. He’d built her up as some sort of in-absentia arbiter of his worth as a human being.

She’d been the reason he volunteered to go to Mars, hadn’t she? He wanted to prove to her, and consequently himself, that he wasn’t a coward. Gage had said as much.

How had he not seen it before?

“What?” Penelope was watching his face.

“I’m just now realizing that I volunteered to go to Mars to prove to you I wasn’t a coward. I signed up for a mission to outer space, all because of my own insecure, neurotic interpretation of why you ended our very brief relationship. How fucked up is that?”

Penny nodded. “That’s pretty fucked up. Although whatever the reason, you were lucky to get out of here. You have no idea.”

Aiden considered. It was possible his anxiety had saved his life. That seemed strangely appropriate. It owed him.

Penny looked up at the dark sky. “Do you know how long it’s going to be before the Sun comes out?”

“Two or three more years. Figure a thousand days.” Right now that seemed an eternity, like a thousand foot high wall Aiden would have to scale if he was going to survive. When had his life not felt that way, though?

\* \* \*

Chapter 11

Penelope was buried under so many blankets it was difficult to tell for certain that she was breathing. Not that Aiden thought she was at risk of respiratory failure or cardiac arrest at this point; it just seemed if you went to check on someone you should make sure she was breathing.

Penelope rolled to face him. He pointed the little flashlight away so it wouldn't hurt her eyes.

"Hey." Her voice was blurry with sleep.

"Just checking on you."

"You're sweet. I'm okay. Just tired."

She'd been sleeping for twelve hours straight. Every day she seemed more fatigued. Aiden wasn't an oncologist, but without treatment he didn't think she had more than a few months.

"You need more water?" He lifted her cup; it was almost empty.

"My guardian angel. What an idiot I was for breaking up with you. Worst mistake of my life."

The words felt good. He'd never had someone to take care of before, unless you counted Wilhelm, the basset hound he owned in his twenties. It took the focus off his own fear, to worry about Penelope.

By the time he refilled the water cup on her night table from the pitcher, she was asleep again. He closed the door behind him as gently as he could.

In the living room the fire was roaring, rendering the room toasty-warm. Aiden sat on the floor in front of the fire while Beltane talked about being assaulted by Nunki before the invasion began. Aiden had heard the condensed version a couple of days earlier: the Nunki had grabbed her in the woods when she snuck out of a drug rehab facility to get drunk, took blood and tissue samples, then released her. No one believed her outlandish story until the invasion started.

"I found seven other people online who had the same thing happen to them," Beltane was saying. "No one believed them, either."

The Nunki had obviously used the blood and tissue samples to create the plagues they released—one viral, the other prion-based, both efficient enough to kill billions. The Nunki were centuries ahead of humans in terms of biotechnology. They could probably cure Penelope in a few minutes if they wanted.

Aiden inhaled sharply. They could, couldn't they? They could restore her to the spark plug she'd been when he first met her at Gage's party.

They wouldn't, though. They'd wiped out 99.9 percent of the human race; why would they make the slightest effort to save one person?

Gage settled on the floor next to him. It was amazing how well groomed he looked—clean-shaven, hair combed. Hell, his hair looked freshly trimmed.

"I'm leaving tomorrow, seven A.M. Shakia's coming with me. We could use your help—"

"With what? Fighting off Nunki?" Aiden pointed at Beltane. "It's *her* help you need."

"I'm going to ask her next, but right now I'm asking you." Gage shifted so he was facing Aiden more directly. "The thing is, I want to see my daughter again. I don't know if you can truly understand what it feels like, to know my little girl is out there in the dark. I have to find her."

Aiden stood. Yes, how could he possibly understand what it felt like to love someone? "Well, good luck." He went into the library that adjoined the living room. He studied book spines on the built-in bookshelf by the orange light filtering in from

the living room, pulled out a book at random, took it to a leather chair and opened it.

He kept reading the first sentence over and over, unable to make it stick. He couldn't shake the idea that the Nunki could cure Penelope, if they chose.

A hand settled on the armrest. Aiden looked up to find Shakia standing over him. "How is Penelope?"

Aiden considered how best to answer. "I'd say she's a month or two away from becoming very sick, when she'll need morphine, assuming there's any to be found."

Shakia pressed her hand to his cheek. "Are you in love with her?"

The question startled Aiden. "I don't know her well enough to know if I'm in love with her or not. I'm caring for her because I'm a doctor, and she needs my care."

Shakia gave him an impatient look. "Of course you *know*. Do you love her, or don't you?"

Aiden shook his head. "I'm not going to let myself go there. Falling in love with her would only make it harder to lose—"

Shakia smacked him in the side of the head, just above his ear.

"Ow." He pressed his hand over the spot. "That hurt."

"You're tied up in knots. Your heart is so good, but you're tied up in knots. Do you love her? Yes or no."

"Yes." The word burst out without Aiden knowing it was coming, but it felt right. He loved her. Yes. Fine. That was accurate, or at least as accurate as emotions got.

"Say it."

It was hard to get the words out. He felt oddly ashamed forming them, letting them reach his lips. Why was that? If he felt it, why did he feel ashamed to say it aloud?

Because he felt unworthy. Not just unworthy of Penelope's love, but also unworthy to love *her*, whether she loved him back or not. He felt unworthy to love someone.

Aiden closed his eyes, and forced the words out. "I love her. I love Penelope."

Shakia nodded. "Good. I know she's dying, and I know you believe there won't be anything left of her after she dies, but love her while you can. That's a gift you can give her. And yourself."

Aiden's chest hitched, his throat clenched. She was right. Of course she was right.

Shakia pointed at his nose and, more gently, said, "And let those tears come if they want to. You're all tied up in knots."

As his tears flowed, Shakia held him. He thought he could feel just a few of the knots untangling.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 12

As soon as he closed his eyes, images of Nunki loomed. He never wanted to see one again. He wanted to stay by this fire and eat canned pork and beans until the Sun came out.

If he did, though, Penny would die. She had one chance, and that involved Aiden walking up to one of those monsters and asking for help.

Why would they help him, though? Could he offer a trade? Food in exchange for healing her? He didn't know for sure they could heal her in their current post-apocalyptic state, didn't know if they were so advanced that any one of them would know what to do, or if he needed to find the Nunki equivalent of an MD. Or a vet.

Nunki loomed in the corners of his vision. He saw them tearing Beltane and Monty's friends apart after the bus accident, heard the *thud* of a body landing in the black snow.

He was exhausted from thinking about this, but the train of thought was locked in now; he couldn't stop it. There was a chance he could save Penelope, but it involved doing something he could not, in a million years, do. It was the ultimate approach-avoidance conflict, and it had him paralyzed.

Penelope appeared in her doorway, looking pale but rested.

Aiden's heart fluttered. The feeling was familiar in a nostalgic way, from a thousand unrequited teenage crushes. It had been so long since he'd allowed himself to feel such unfettered love for another human being.

He loved her. He did. She didn't have to love him back; he didn't even have to tell her, but he was allowed to feel it.

"How are you?" he asked as she sank onto the couch beside him.

"Better. Normal, almost." Her eyes grew comically wide. "Want to go dancing? I know this great club."

Aiden laughed. "I've got a better idea. You up for a road trip?"

Penelope tilted her head. "Where to?" She thought he was joking, like her.

"Straight to hell, actually."

He explained his idea, the words rushing out in panicked breaths as he realized he was giving himself no chance to back out.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 13

Aiden kept his eyes on the tight tunnel of light cutting through the blackness. He was clutching the armrest in a death grip as the road flew by. Who in God's name had decided Beltane should take a turn driving?

Beside him, Penelope was leaning her head back on the headrest, her eyes closed. She wasn't well; the last time he'd checked she had a fever of one hundred point five. He was worried she might have developed an infection in her compromised state.

"I've been thinking about this movie I saw when I was a kid," Beltane said, one hand on the wheel. "I don't remember the name. Billy Bob Thornton was in it. He played a guy who built his own rocket ship from scrap metal and flew to the Moon."

"I saw that," Penelope said without opening her eyes. "I don't remember the name, either. The government tried to stop him."

"That's the one. So, I get that the ship you guys flew in is fucked. What I don't get is why you can't build another."

Gage chuckled from the back. "Because this ain't a movie."

"No, but in the movie one guy did it, and we have a hundred. And we wouldn't have to pay for anything. We can take what we want. We can't make *one* rocket out of everything in Chicago?"

Aiden couldn't see anything out the side window. It was a solid wall of black.

"I guess *theoretically* you could do it, but without a trillion dollars' worth of quality control and technical support, you're going to make a dozen mistakes. It would just be a matter of which killed you first."

"So what you're saying is, better to sit tight and wait till the Sun comes out and the Nunki rebuild the wall," Beltane said.

"You heard the population estimate from the census team, didn't you?" Shakia said. "Four to five thousand. That's a lot of ships, unless we're only looking to save ourselves."

"Hell, yes, I'm looking to save myself," Beltane shot back.

Four to five thousand. Even if they combined the surviving population on Earth with the population on Mars, it was barely enough to have an outside chance at saving the human species, based on Paula Peavy's analysis. And dozens of people were dying in Chicago every day.

He glanced at Penelope. It wasn't only about the species, though; individuals mattered, too.

Penelope noticed him looking at her. She reached over, laced her fingers with his and squeezed. Aiden squeezed back. A warm shiver ran through him. It was the first sign Penny had given that there was something between them, that perhaps she loved him, too.

The van slowed. Beltane leaned forward, peered into the darkness. "We need to find gas pretty soon."

Monty pointed the flashlight to one side, painting light across apartment buildings set on a snow-covered rise.

They found a station a few miles on. Monty got the hose and ice pick out of the back and got to work filling the tank.

Aiden watched as he chipped away frozen snow, exposing the circular hatch leading to the underground tank. He began feeding the hose into the tank. Once it was in place he'd have to suck the gasoline up the hose.

A moment later he was reeling the hose back out, double-time. He hurried back to the van.

"Flashes of blue light up the street. Nunki."

It was the opportunity Aiden had been waiting for, but the news made him feel as if he was falling into a black pit. He squeezed Penelope's hand, then let it go and opened the door. "Here we go."

"Guys, I know you're sick of hearing me say this, but this is a terrible idea," Gage said. "These are monsters. They're not going to play doctor, they're going to cut you both down in your tracks."

"I agree with Gage," Shakia said. "Bad, bad idea. Just get in. We'll make a run for it."

Head down, Aiden went around and swung open the rear hatch. "Somebody help me with this, please."

Sighing, Gage helped him lift down the laundry basket filled with food. It seemed like a meager offering in exchange for someone's life, but it was all they could afford.

As they set it down, Penny strained to lift it. "I told you: you don't have to come. Either they'll help or they won't; there's no point in you risking your life as well."

Aiden pulled his pack out of the back, shrugged it on. "You ready?"

Shakia gave him a fierce hug, then Gage offered a hand. "We'll swing back around tomorrow." He pointed into the dark. "There's a Holiday Inn over there. Try to find that, and wait inside."

If they made it. That went without saying.

Monty handed Aiden a flashlight. They set off toward the approaching sound of Nunki, each carrying one handle of the basket. Aiden aimed the flashlight high, creating a beacon the Nunki couldn't miss. His heart was racing, his stomach a sick knot.

The mournful bellow of a Nunki was met by a second, joining almost in harmony.

"I'm so scared," Penny said.

Aiden spotted a diffuse blue glow ahead and to their left.

"There they are. I'll carry the basket, you sign 'food' and 'sick.'"

As Penelope handed over the basket and began signing, the blue glow was joined by two others—one to their right, the other straight ahead. They'd fanned out.

A Nunki appeared from behind a Ruby Tuesday restaurant, moving on all four of its limbs, half a thrift shop's worth of clothes hanging from it. At one moment it seemed to Aiden like a giant insect, the next it appeared startlingly humanoid. It raised up on its hind legs and signed. Penny and Monty had taught Aiden a few hundred signs, but his mind was a blank.

"It says to stop," Penelope said.

Aiden set the basket down and raised his hands.

He managed not to cry out when the crunch of footsteps in the snow was suddenly right behind them. He turned, arms still raised.

A huge Nunki—ten feet tall at least—loomed over him. It lashed out with one of its eight limbs, grabbed Aiden by the forearm and lifted him into the air. It grabbed Penny as well, then carried them off.

Even if Aiden could remember a single sign, he only had one free hand, so he gritted his teeth against the lancing pain radiating from his forearm and waited. It hadn't killed them on the spot. That seemed a good sign. It made little sense for it to carry them away just to kill them somewhere else.

It took them to the Ruby Tuesday's, entered through a broken-out section of the front windows and set them down among upended tables and chairs, where three more Nunki waited.

As soon as her arms were free, Penelope began signing.

*Sick*, Aiden recognized. Then another word, then *me*. *Help*—the second word was *help*.

The smallest Nunki responded, the ridge around its eyes flexing as it did so. Aiden couldn't follow; he looked to Penny.

"Fix machines?" It wants to know if we know how to fix machines." Penny signed, *No*.

It signed again.

"Question mark.' I think it wants to know what we *can* do. Like, 'What good are you? Tell us why we shouldn't kill you.'" She signed again. "I'm telling them I do 'computer talk.' Though I don't know what good that is to them."

With trembling hands, Aiden tried to sign himself. *Fix people*.

The Nunki signed at him. He looked at Penny. "What did it say?"

"You fix people?"

Aiden signed, *Yes. No fix her. You fix her?*

*Go vehicle*, it signed.

The big one grasped his arm, turned him around and led him toward a Hummer parked beside the restaurant. They directed Aiden to the driver's seat, and Penelope into the back. A four-limbed Nunki climbed into the passenger seat, a six-legged one squeezed into the back, crowding Penny into a corner of her seat. Their limbs were bony, with hooked spurs at the joints that looked sharp. Flaps of parchment-like skin stretched between their limbs and torsos like webbing.

"They want you to drive," Penny said. "Turn left out of the parking lot."

Aiden started the Hummer, put it in drive. He could barely feel his fingers, partly because of the cold but mostly because he was terrified. He was in a vehicle with Nunki; it felt like being in a vehicle full of spiders and snakes.

As he turned he risked the slightest glance at the Nunki in the passenger seat. It didn't look comfortable—both sets of joints in its lower limbs bent the opposite way, so it couldn't sit and have what passed for its legs on the floor at the same time.

He'd driven about a mile before he mustered the courage to turn on the heat.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 14

At first Aiden thought he might be hallucinating the glow of light in the distance. He felt like he'd been driving for days, although based on the ebb and flow from grey skies to black it had been more like twenty-four hours. As they cleared a rise, street-lights shone white in a vast, empty parking lot surrounding a long, modern-looking orange-brown building.

“Turn right.” Penny sounded exhausted. She’d slept some, but sleeping upright in an SUV was hardly the kind of rest a cancer patient needed, especially one who had a secondary infection. And she did. Aiden hoped it was just a cold, or something else innocuous.

They came to an open gate, passed a sign that drew Aiden fully alert.

J. CRAIG VENTER INSTITUTE FOR GENOMIC RESEARCH.

Finally, he knew where they’d been heading, although he still didn’t understand why. *Unless*. His flagging hopes soared. Unless they needed instruments here to heal Penelope? Would they go to all this trouble to help a human? Aiden had no idea.

They were led inside, through dark hallways, up a flight of steps, to a clean, well-lit lab where wheeled stools had been stacked in a corner and Nunki of all shapes and sizes moved about with purpose.

Aiden spotted a human—a woman in her sixties or seventies wearing a white lab coat, bent over a printout.

“Hello,” Aiden called.

The woman flinched in surprise.

Her name was Valerie Hearst—she’d been a physiologist at the University of Chicago. As she shook Aiden’s hand, she looked from Aiden to Penelope, who was feverish, her forehead damp. “Are either of you geneticists?”

“No. I’m an M.D. A psychiatrist. Penelope is a web designer. She has cancer—late-stage non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma.”

“I’m sorry to hear it.”

Aiden looked around. “What’s going on here?”

Valerie followed his gaze. “I’ll tell you what I know, or what I think I know. The Nunki aren’t exactly chatty.” She gave him a tight, humorless smile. “I think they were struggling to survive in this environment even before the asteroid hit. I’m not sure if it’s the temperature alone, the composition of our atmosphere, or what. They were working on incorporating human DNA into their physiology. That’s why they let everyone in Chicago live—to serve as a gene pool. Then the asteroid hit, and killed off most of their technology. It knocked them back a thousand years. They have the knowledge, but not the equipment to adapt themselves. So now they’re trying to adapt human technology.”

“They’d introduce an alien race’s DNA into their own bodies?” Aiden tried to imagine how he’d react if someone suggested introducing Nunki DNA into his genome. Nothing was more *him* than his DNA.

“They alter their DNA routinely.” She gestured toward the Nunki hard at work around the lab. “That’s why they’re all so different from one other. Their children choose their own morphology when they reach a certain age, as a rite of passage. At least they did until the asteroid hit.”

They altered their own structure at the DNA level. It was remarkable, and repulsive.

He glanced at Penelope. Her eyes were glassy. Whatever she had, it was getting worse. “If they can do all that, surely they can help Penelope.”

Aiden’s words seemed to startle Valerie. “How exactly did you end up here? They took you from Chicago, right? Someone told the Nunki you were a doctor?”

Aiden shook his head. “We went to them. They’re Penny’s only chance.”

Valerie raised one eyebrow. “You’ve got iron balls, Doctor. I’ll give you that. As far as I can tell, the Nunki aren’t in the healing business.” She shrugged. “But you can ask.”

Aiden looked around. “Who would I ask?”

She chuckled dryly. “I’ve been here for three months and I still have no idea who’s in charge.”

Swallowing, Aiden chose a Nunki at random, walked up to it, pointed at Penelope and signed, *Her sick. You fix?*

The Nunki signed, *No*.

*Who fix?* He signed back.

The Nunki came toward him. Aiden raised his hands defensively, sure it was going to attack, but it brushed past and went to Valerie, signing furiously. Aiden couldn't follow it.

"It wants me to give you work to do. You're going to have to get up to speed on sign language, then you'll be translating journal articles and locating medical equipment."  
"What about Penny?"

Valerie fixed him with a hard stare. "It said no. Don't ask again, at least for a few days. They *will* kill you if you get under their skin. Believe me. They killed my husband."

\* \* \*

By the next morning, Penelope's breathing was labored, her fever high. Aiden and Valerie had set her up on a couch in an administrative office, and Aiden found IV bags in one of the unused labs and set one up. Valerie offered a packet of Amoxicillin; he gave Penelope two tablets.

Then he went to work, learning Nunki sign language. Valerie taught him while simultaneously working on her primary project, whatever it was. Aiden didn't really care.

He watched the Nunki out of the corner of his eye, trying to figure out which seemed to know what was going on, and which were workers taking directions. The problem was, he didn't even know how they communicated. His guess was it had to do with those ridges around their eyes.

They moved around a great deal, but most of them, regardless of their size or the number of limbs they possessed, seemed to have one lab station they kept returning to. Except one, who seemed to spend a more or less equal amount of time at each station. It was large, with eight limbs. Aiden figured it must be either higher status than the others, or lower.

It took Aiden about an hour to muster the courage to approach it.

When the Nunki moved close to his station, Aiden went up to it and signed, *Person sick. Will die soon. You fix person?* He'd learned a few new key words from Valerie.

The Nunki turned away. Heart pounding, Aiden followed. He positioned himself in the Nunki's field of vision and repeated the message.

*No*, it signed.

Aiden had learned another crucial word from Valerie. He signed it now.

*Why?*

*Fix Nunki*, the Nunki signed back, and turned away.

"Aiden," Valerie called. She waved him over emphatically. "It won't give you any warning. You see the barb on its limb, between the wrist and the elbow?"

Aiden nodded.

"It will shove that barb into your throat, as casually as you would pick a daisy."

Aiden watched the Nunki, hope draining from him, like his blood would if he persisted.

Fix Nunki. Those two words spoke volumes to Aiden.

"I'm going to check on Penelope."

"Don't be long." As Aiden turned away, she added, "I'm sorry, Aiden."

Penelope was awake. Her breathing was labored, her temperature over 103. She wasn't responding to the antibiotics.

"Am I dying?" she asked as he checked her pulse.

"It's just a respiratory infection." He fiddled with her IV line, although it was working perfectly.

Penelope reached out, took his hand and drew it to her. He stopped fiddling.

"I do want the truth. You know, in case you're being kind."

Aiden nodded. If she wanted the truth, she had the right to hear it. “You could still beat this, but . . .”

She nodded, her eyes shining with tears. “But I probably won’t. That’s what I figured.”

“I’m working on the Nunki. I’m going to ask again as soon as I leave here. They could still come through.”

Penelope reached up and pressed her hand to Aiden’s cheek. “Just stay with me, as much as you can. That’s all I want. I feel so much better when you’re here. Almost not afraid at all.”

Aiden wiped tears from his cheek with the back of his sleeve. “Let me try once more. I’ll be right back, and I’ll stay unless they drag me away.”

He ran down the hallway, up the stairs to the lab, spotted the eight-limbed Nunki by the bank of windows. Aiden stepped right in front of him, signed, *Fix person*.

*No.*

If there was a sign for “please,” Aiden didn’t know it, so he kept signing, *Fix person, Fix person, Fix person*—

The Nunki clubbed Aiden in the side of the head, knocking him into a table. His legs buckled and he dropped to the floor.

Aiden tried to climb to his hands and knees, but his arms kept giving out. His ears were ringing, and blood was dripping onto the white tile floor.

The ringing in his ears receded. Aiden managed to rise to his hands and knees and crawl away, leaving a trail of blood.

“Are you all right?”

Aiden crawled right past Valerie, into the hall. A Nunki passed him without a glance.

When it was gone, Aiden struggled to his feet, using the wall for support. He touched the side of his head, found a deep gash above his ear, a few inches long.

In the medical supply room, where he’d found the IV bags, he located pressure bandages. After washing the cut in a basin of dishwater left in the hall, he bandaged the wound.

When he got back to the room Penelope was either sleeping or unconscious. Her breathing was shallow, ragged. He wondered if there was a respirator in the building somewhere. This was a research facility, though, not a hospital.

When he dabbed her forehead with a damp hand towel, her eyes fluttered open.

“Good,” she whispered. She reached up, took his hand.

Aiden expected a Nunki to show up at the door any moment, but he stayed.

She had to pause every few words when she spoke. “I overheard you talking about big band music. That’s why I came up and introduced myself. In case you were wondering.”

It took Aiden a moment to follow what she was talking about. Gage’s party, where they’d met. Penelope had come up to him out of the blue.

“You don’t like big band music, though. Do you?”

Penelope shook her head. “But I knew you’d be interesting. Different. A guy your age, going on about Brazilian big band and Marlene Dietrich.”

“Most people don’t see those interests as a plus.”

“Yeah, well, most people are dufuses.” She closed her eyes. “I’m going to sleep now. Love you.”

“I love you, too,” he said, but Penelope was already asleep, and Aiden wasn’t sure if she heard him.

Her breathing grew shallow, more labored.

Aiden watched her sleep. She sank to a point where Aiden knew if he tried to wake her, he wouldn’t be able to. He dabbed her face with the towel, spoke to her softly so she’d know he was still there.

She took one last breath, big and full like a gasp, then exhaled slowly and was still. Aiden held her hand as numbness enveloped him.

What was there left to worry about? He'd lost Eva and Calvin. Now Penelope. Chicago's population had dwindled well below the threshold where there was any hope of the species surviving, so even his personal survival meant nothing in the end. So what was there now?

He kissed Penelope's cheek and drew the sheet over her head.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 15

The eight-legged Nunki signed to him:

*Centrifuge broken. We find another.*

Which meant Aiden find another, while OctoNunki watched him. Aiden didn't understand why the Nunki didn't send a lackey to guard Aiden when he left the premises to locate equipment. Maybe his buddy Octo wanted to learn how to salvage without relying on Aiden.

Aiden signed Yes, and followed the Nunki into the parking lot, trying to think of the nearest hospital that would have a full-sized centrifuge, while simultaneously seething with hatred for this creature. For this creature in particular, who'd had the power to save Penelope's life.

It was an effort to climb down the three flights of steps, even more of an effort to think about centrifuges. For the first time in his life, his anxiety had serious competition: depression. It was as if the darkness of the world had poured in and filled his heart and soul.

He burned with guilt for helping Nunki survive in exchange for his own life. The Nunki would solve their own problems and bask in the Sun's return, while the human race died out.

The Nunki stowed a duffel bag of tools in the back seat as it squeezed into the Hummer's passenger seat. Aiden was certain the Nunki had the knowledge to save humanity from extinction even now, past their natural population tipping point, if they chose. Aiden's eight-legged chaperone might know enough to do it single-handedly. But it wouldn't. *Fix Nunki.* That was all that mattered to them. If they'd placed any value on human life they wouldn't have invaded in the first place.

They could rewrite their own genome, add limbs and hearts, make themselves luminescent, and not just in the womb but *after*. It was astonishing. If humans could do the same, they could engineer their physiology to survive in Mars' atmosphere and be free of those damned suffocating habitrails. Now *that* would increase their chances of survival. Hell, theoretically they could engineer themselves to photosynthesize sunlight rather than eat.

What if Aiden could somehow get a message back to Gage and Shakia, and convince them to muster a small force and attack the Venter Institute? They could take hostages back to Chicago and force them to help humans, just as the Nunki were forcing Aiden to help them. They could send tutorials up to Mars. Of course, the Mars mission wouldn't have the equipment necessary to carry out such incredibly advanced genetic engineering. Maybe they could ship equipment to Mars on a small, unmanned ship.

He tried to imagine a handful of humans storming the Venter Institute and overpowering the Nunki. It felt like a fantasy, something out of a Hollywood film. And it rested on the assumption that Aiden could somehow contact his friends in Chicago. As far as he knew there was no short-wave radio at the Venter Institute, and he was never allowed to leave without a chaperone.

Aiden glanced at the Nunki, crammed into the space beside him. The only vaguely realistic plan would be for Aiden to bring a Nunki genetic engineer to Chicago himself. And how realistic was that? He tried to imagine overpowering this creature looming beside him.

Maybe he could inject it with an elephant-sized dose of Haloperidol? If he could locate Haloperidol. If a syringe could penetrate the Nunki's thick skin.

This line of thought got Aiden's heart pumping, giving his anxiety an edge in its wrestling match with his depression. He preferred anxiety. It was familiar, and it energized rather than sapped energy, if in a sickening way.

He tried to calm himself by acknowledging that he would never actually carry out such a plan. Despite what Penelope thought, he was no hero. He wasn't a coward either, but there was a lot of space between a coward and a hero. He fit neatly into that middle ground.

As they passed under an overpass, Aiden eyed the massive concrete pillars supporting the road above. Could he drive the right side of the Hummer into one of those, slamming it into the Nunki, while leaving himself relatively unharmed? He'd buckled his seatbelt out of habit, while it wouldn't have been possible for the Nunki to do so even if it wanted to. Of course the Nunki was a genetically engineered biological super-species. The thing would probably walk away from the impact.

After filleting Aiden, of course.

Another way to look at it was that this was humanity's last chance for survival. All the centuries of history, from ancient Mesopotamia to the Roman Empire, the Renaissance to the industrial revolution, all the art, music, literature that was humanity, funneled down to this one moment in time, to whether one short, hairy, anxious man had the guts to steer his vehicle into a concrete pillar.

Aiden wasn't sure he liked looking at it from that perspective. Placing the weight of human history on his shoulders did nothing to help his nerves. It could lead right into a panic attack.

He nudged the accelerator, picking up speed.

Was he really contemplating this?

Evidently he was. But if he thought about it too carefully, he'd lose his nerve.

If he did it, he'd have to accelerate quickly, in the last few hundred yards, so the Nunki didn't have time to stab him in the throat with that transparent barb on what passed for its forearm. It was telling, that a species creating their own appearance would put barbs all over themselves.

An overpass appeared a quarter of a mile ahead, just visible in their headlights. Heart hammering wildly, Aiden nudged the accelerator up to forty, wondering if he could gain enough speed, driving in snow.

Was he really going to do this?

It felt as if someone else was clutching the steering wheel, and he was watching to see what those hands would do. Aiden eased the Hummer toward the shoulder. Snow mixed with black dust pelted the windshield.

The Nunki signed something as they picked up speed. Aiden stared straight ahead, as if he didn't see it.

The Hummer barreled toward the overpass.

Was he really going to do this? Suddenly he felt violently nauseous. He was going to vomit.

He floored the Hummer, aiming to shear it in half.

Yes, evidently he was really going to do this.

The Nunki grabbed the steering wheel. Aiden struggled to steady it.

\* \* \*

He was in Penny's apartment, eating shepherd's pie with lamb and a glass of Pinot. Penny was wearing a brightly colored shift with ruffles that had a Mexican, or South American, flair. Her eyes were bright, and she was speaking between bites, but Aiden couldn't hear what she was saying. Her words were drowned out by a deafening hum. Aiden wanted to hear what she was saying, because even though she was here with him, he knew she was dead, so it was important that he hear these words no matter how trivial they might be. The humming drowned out everything, though. Even the pain.

Aiden opened his eyes. The white balloon of the airbag partially blocked his vision. To his right was the concrete pillar, close enough that he could touch it.

Gradually he became aware of pain radiating from his nose and mouth. When he lifted his head, the world tilted wildly before settling down. He was tempted to touch his nose to see how bad it was, but wasn't sure he wanted to know. Exploring with his tongue, he discovered one of his front teeth was loose.

The Nunki stirred, back and to his right. It was still alive. Slowly, carefully, Aiden turned.

It was jammed between the concrete piling and the passenger seat, which was now more like a back seat. It was straining to free itself.

He tried to remember what his plan had been, to restrain the Nunki so he could take it prisoner and bring it to Chicago. Bind its limbs? Had he even had a plan? He couldn't remember.

Aiden so wished he could go back to that dinner with Penelope. It was cold and dark here, so warm and bright in Penelope's apartment. Plus there was a monster here.

It was going to free itself soon. He wondered if he should kill it and go back to Chicago alone.

Yes. Kill it.

Except he had no weapon. He looked around for something sharp or heavy, maybe a piece of shrapnel from the wrecked Hummer.

He spotted the duffel bag. The Nunki's tools. There was a fire axe in that bag, which the Nunki used to break through locked doors. As Aiden reached for it, agony shot through his hip. He gritted his teeth, which triggered shooting pain in his mouth. Dragging the duffel to him, he reached inside. His fingers brushed the handle of the axe.

Aiden couldn't see the Nunki's face, but based on its redoubled efforts to break free, it could see that he had an axe. Only the thought of hacking the Nunki to death had him hyperventilating. The Nunki deserved it, but how could Aiden possibly carry out such a grisly act?

The Nunki jerked partially free. Now Aiden could see its face. He knelt on his seat facing backward, lifted the axe to the ceiling, aimed to bring it down in the center of the Nunki's torso. Monty had said it was hard to kill a Nunki, because it had duplicates of vital organs, and could staunch its own bleeding at will—

He hesitated.

Could it survive the amputation of its limbs? If it had no limbs it wasn't a threat. He could take it back to Chicago alive.

The thought horrified Aiden. It would be bad enough to kill it, but hacking its limbs off? He was so close, though. If he backed off now, he'd never forgive himself. Humanity would never forgive him.

The Nunki redoubled its efforts to break free as Aiden raised the axe. His eyes squeezed almost shut, Aiden brought the axe down on the nearest limb.

The Nunki let out a deep, deafening foghorn bellow.

Aiden pulled the axe free. He chopped again. The limb bent at a horrible angle; thick blood poured from the wound. In the dim light it looked greenish-black.

Suddenly, the bleeding stopped, as abruptly as a shut faucet.

The Nunki lashed out, speared Aiden's forearm, digging deep. Shouting in pain, Aiden swung the axe awkwardly with his other hand, drove the limb against the concrete piling, leaving a deep wound in it. He hit it again. The limb *cracked*, bent at a sharp angle as the Nunki bellowed. Aiden shifted his attention to another, swinging the axe frantically.

\* \* \*

He could reach only five limbs. At that point he had no choice but to go outside and try to cut the Nunki free of the Hummer using the axe and a crowbar. The steel toward the rear of the Hummer was mostly intact, and Aiden was able to slowly hack and pry the rear door out of the frame. His hip was in agony; blood from the wound in his left forearm soaked his sleeve from wrist to shoulder.

Once the door was out he worked on the roof, taking care not to hit the Nunki, who was tensing and relaxing the stumps of its severed limbs, maybe in the Nunki version of shock.

He cut through a section of the steel roof support. The Nunki came rolling out so abruptly Aiden had to jump out of the way.

The Nunki scrambled, raised itself onto two of its three remaining limbs. It lunged at Aiden, slashed him across his stomach with the barbs on its free limb, shredding his shirt.

Aiden swung the axe wildly, striking the free limb down low, opening a deep wound just below its fingers. Before it could recover Aiden hit the limb farther up. He kept swinging, hitting it again and again, slashing the limb open in half a dozen places. Finally the Nunki couldn't hold the limb up any more and it sagged to the snow. Aiden stomped on the end and hacked it off with four swings of the axe.

The Nunki collapsed, its two remaining limbs splayed. Aiden eyed those limbs. It would be easy to remove them now, but without them the Nunki couldn't communicate with him.

Breathless, puffs of mist spewing from his mouth, Aiden looked around, tried to get his bearings. He needed transportation.

He opened the Hummer's rear hatch, pulled out the portable battery charger the Nunki kept back there in case of a breakdown, retrieved a flashlight from the duffel bag and limped up the steep incline that led to the road above.

Once there, he shone the flashlight on the Nunki. It was writhing in the snow, in obvious pain. It wasn't going anywhere on two limbs. There were no vehicles in sight, so Aiden set out walking.

He was fairly sure his hip was fractured. His entire face was throbbing, and the gouge in his forearm was deep and wide, like a second mouth. He thought he could see bone, and looked away.

He limped along, head down, one hand clamped on the neck of his coat to keep the wind out.

After what seemed an eternity of walking, he spotted a house with an SUV in the driveway. The SUV was unlocked. While the battery was charging he broke into the house using the axe, and found a ring of keys laying on the kitchen counter. He also found matches, and a needle and thread.

The Nunki watched from the ground as Aiden pulled the SUV behind the wrecked Hummer. Doubled over, Aiden approached the creature, shone the flashlight at its face.

*Why?* it signed with its remaining limbs.

*Fix humans,* Aiden signed back. He turned away before the Nunki could answer, if it intended to, and backed the SUV as close to it as he could.

Aiden opened the hatch, then backed away.

*Get in,* he signed. No way was he going near the thing.

While the Nunki dragged itself into the back, Aiden stitched the wound in his forearm. He hadn't stitched a wound since med school, and had never stitched with one hand while dealing with the pain of being stitched without anesthesia. He was exhausted. His mind roiled with worries of the Nunki attacking him while he drove, of getting lost, of breaking down.

As he drove he watched the rear view mirror more than the road, but either the Nunki was too incapacitated to reach him, or it was wary of the axe propped against the passenger seat.

\* \* \*

The SUV idling in the middle of I90, Aiden tossed a bag of Snyder's sourdough pretzels into the back. The Nunki retrieved them, opened the bag, and began to eat them one at a time.

His head pounding, wounds throbbing, Aiden signed to the Nunki. *Sun comes out. Nunki go to*—Aiden paused. There was no sign for Mars.—*Not Earth, kill humans? Why?* The Nunki replied.

There was also no sign for revenge. *We pushed big rock.*

The Nunki didn't reply.

Aiden repeated the question.

*No*, the Nunki signed.

It was possible it was lying, but it was also possible they had a different way of reasoning than humans. If revenge was part of their psyche, they would have killed Aiden in *Red Two*, when he admitted to diverting the asteroid.

*Sleep picture bad*, the Nunki signed.

Aiden didn't understand. *Sleep picture?*

Then, with a jolt, he got it. *Sleep picture. Dream.* The Nunki had had a nightmare. Not surprising, given the trauma it had experienced.

Aiden wasn't sure how to respond. The Nunki deserved nightmares, after what it and its kind had done. Yet Aiden couldn't help feeling sympathy for it, because of what Aiden had done to it. If it were a human client he would ask it to describe the dream, and Aiden would help peel back the layers, to understand the message behind the dream.

*What sleep picture?* he signed.

*Darkness.*

The universal boogeyman. Only darkness was probably more terrifying to Nunki than to humans, because Nunki relied on the Sun for everything.

By the light of his flashlight, Aiden could see two of the Nunki's hearts, beating away. Were they racing faster than usual? Did it feel alone, and afraid?

\* \* \*

## Chapter 16

When his headlights painted their house in Chicago with light, Aiden cried out in relief. He slumped across the steering wheel, his chest sounding the SUV's horn in one continuous, deafening honk.

Seconds later, Shakia opened his door. "Oh, my God. Aiden." She raised her voice. "*Hurry. It's Aiden. He's a mess.*"

She tried to ease him out of the SUV. Aiden clutched her hand. "There's a Nunki in the back. Whatever you do, don't let anyone hurt it."

Eyes wide, Shakia lifted her head, peered into the back of the SUV.

"It's incapacitated," Aiden whispered.

"Whatever you say." She brushed Aiden's face with her fingertips. "You look like you've been through a war."

“Oh, jeeze.” Gage reached across Shakia and rested a hand on Aiden’s shoulder. “I got him.”

Shakia stepped aside. Gage slid one hand under Aiden’s knees, the other behind his back, and lifted him out.

As they headed toward the house, Aiden heard Shakia call out, “I need help here. There’s a live Nunki back here.” Then she gasped. Aiden guessed she’d just noticed the amputated limbs.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 17

The fireplace was heaven. The warmth on his face, his fingertips, his bare toes, was ecstasy.

Gage appeared holding a steaming bowl. “Soup. Chicken noodle. Progresso—not that weak-ass Campbell’s crap.”

Aiden sat up, accepted the bowl.

“How you feeling today?” Gage asked. Aiden was fairly sure it had been three days since his return, but it was easy to get confused with all the darkness. Plus he’d been high on OxyContin and sleeping most of the time.

“Better. I may try laying some groundwork with the Nunki in a while.”

“I’m still trying to wrap my head around what you’re suggesting,” Gage said. “You’re proposing we let a Nunki turn us into Martians?”

“That’s exactly what I’m proposing.” Turn some of them into Martians, anyway, and not all at once, but Aiden wasn’t in the mood to equivocate. “If we’re going to survive, we have to adapt.”

Gage looked skeptical. It wasn’t going to be up to Gage, though, so let him be skeptical.

“Has anyone communicated with the Nunki? Does it seem at all open to cooperating?” Aiden asked. The alternative would be to torture it, and it seemed unlikely they could torture it into providing the elaborate tutorial they needed.

Gage nodded. “They’re pragmatic bastards, I’ll give them that. Unless it’s lying, it’s willing to help in exchange for food and a decent quality of life. It said helping people live on Mars won’t hurt Nunki on Earth.”

That was encouraging. Aiden wanted to get started right away, but it could wait until he finished his soup.

“You think you can handle more good news?” Gage asked. “It’s been so long since we’ve had any, I don’t want you to overdose.”

“No, I’m definitely suffering from a good news deficiency.” He thought of Penelope. “Go ahead, shoot.”

Gage grinned. “Remember Beltane’s idea, to build a ship from scratch?”

Aiden nodded. That seemed like a hundred years ago.

Gage waited a beat. “We have three under construction.”

Aiden nearly dumped his soup. If even one was functional, they could take the Nunki to Mars, along with the necessary equipment. Assuming the Nunki really would cooperate. It was a chance, though.

“We haven’t been sitting around on our asses while you were out playing Batman.”

“That’s great news. Fantastic.”

As Aiden ate his soup, Gage studied his face, frowning in concentration. Aiden realized it was the same look Gage had given him in Grant Park as the Nunki were bearing down on *Red Two*.

Aiden paused, spoon hovering halfway between bowl and mouth. “What?”

Gage sat on the arm of the couch. "You crap your pants when you have to speak in front of eight people. You can't sleep without your big band recordings to settle your nerves, even when all you've got to worry about is *absolutely nothing*. How the hell did you hold it together and do what you did out there?"

Aiden shook his head. "You still don't get me. I didn't hold it together. Most of the time I felt like I was having a heart attack. But I'm used to being terrified at the prospect of doing something, then plowing ahead and doing it anyway. It's the only way I can ever do *anything*." He could have added that death was far down the list of things he feared. Death had an upside. Living terrified him much more than dying.

Gage nodded, still studying him. "I guess I get what you're saying. A little, anyway." He squeezed Aiden's shoulder before heading off.

Aiden wondered if the trauma of the past few days might recalibrate what his brain considered terrifying. Maybe speaking in front of eight people would no longer set off his anxiety now that he'd vanquished a monster with nothing but an SUV and an axe. He doubted it, but it was nice to dream. More likely he'd go back to dosing himself with Xanax and booze to get through the days.

Shakia joined him on the couch, examined his face as a doctor might before nodding, satisfied. Shakia and Gage were keeping their distance from each other since their unsuccessful journey in search of Gage's family. Maybe Beltane was the one to ask, if he wanted to find out what had happened out there.

Her gaze on the flickering flames, Shakia patted Aiden's knee. "You're a remarkable man, Aiden. You're still all tied up in knots, but you're remarkable."

"That means a lot coming from you." And it did, it truly did.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 18

Gage followed the arc of the bottle of Highland Park Islay scotch as Aiden took a swig, then set it back down beside his reclined, cushioned liftoff chair.

"What?" Aiden had trouble forming the word, because he was soused.

"Let me have some of that."

Aiden walked the bottle over to Gage. The other eight people in the ship's cabin—and even the Nunki—watched as Gage, who was about to pilot their home-made ship to Mars, took a long pull from the bottle.

Letting out a satisfied gasp, Gage handed the bottle back to Aiden. "We might as well strap in and get on the road. Man, are we gonna be sick of each other by the time we get there."

As Aiden strapped in, he reminded himself that the first two ships had launched successfully, and were on their way. If a ship was going to fail, odds were it would be the first, not the third. Yet as Gage went through preflight checks, Aiden's bowels were roiling.

"You all right?" Shakia asked.

"Of course not. When am I ever all right?"

Shakia gave him a reassuring smile. "We'll be fine."

Aiden watched the Nunki as it strapped itself into its custom-made seat with its two remaining appendages. They still had a long way to go, but maybe they would be fine, after all.

Aiden took one more swig from the bottle to calm his bitter enemy, his old friend.