GALACTIC MANIFEST DESTINY

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In the beginning machines created the heavens and the dome. And Mars was without people, and desolate; and dust was upon the face of the land. And then came the ships.

I

Today is the last day I wear my education. A glass helmet filled with tiny purple wires glowing with electricity ready to stimulate my brain. I hold it between my hands, feeling its warmth, wondering what it might teach me.

“When you’re ready,” says Grandpa.

“What if I’m not good enough?” My hands shake. “What if I’m too… Sapien?”

He shakes his head. “Nonsense. You’re nearly seven feet now.” His eyes crinkle. “That’s tall, even for a Martian. And Isaac.” He holds my chin up. “Never be ashamed of who you are. Your mother was beautiful, kind and more intelligent than any being I have ever known.” He adjusts my chair, moving It backward so I face the ceiling mirror. “When you’re ready.”

I take a deep breath and slowly lower the helmet on my head. Wires attach, closing my eyes and opening my mind. Electricity flows into my brain, like rainwater finding its way into the cracks of a large rock face.

Stars dotted across the night, ships sailing across a vast ocean, dancing in the waves, and joining together to form galaxies. Closer, inside the beating heart of the oldest stars, carbon is born. But the heart stops, and the star goes supernova, painting the canvas with reds, blues, and greens. Elements which form planets, which form Earth. Where carbon interlinks into cells, creatures, conscious beings that climb down from the trees, walk across the hot sands, and find two sticks, rubbing them together to create fire. And in those flames, look at themselves, realise their flaws, and decide to create the perfect beings.

But the images become memories. My mother stood over my cradle, looking down at me with those kind blue earthly eyes and repeating softly “my mini martian.”

I struggle to reply, to form the sounds into the right patterns.

Father walks in, towering over her. “Stop it. He needs to learn not to cry. It’s too Sapien.”

She kisses my forehead and steps back, fading away and I know it’s over. The helmet melts back into a silvery liquid, moving down my body and to the floor where it melts away in ripples. My blue eyes shine back at me in its reflection, and I pretend they’re hers, saying her final goodbye. Exhaustion makes it hard to breathe as I wake but I feel a hot cup pressed against my lips.

“Drink. Isaac, drink.”

I sip it, tasting a sweet liquid that rolls down my throat. “What is it?”

“Tea. And this.” He replaces the rounded cup with a square glass of clear liquid that I recognise as my morning drink. I flinch away. “The tea will mask the flavour. Drink.”

“How long...” My face draws into disgust as I take difficult gulps. “Was I under?”

“Ten, twenty minutes. What was it today?”

“Evolution.” The room rearranges into Grandpa’s favourite arrangement. Worn leather sofas form at our backs, a small wooden table between us, and an ancient flat screen television. “Something different happened this time. Grandpa, I saw her.”

“It can’t be.” He quietens his voice. “Only the living can appear.”

“I know but it was her.” I frown. “If Mars is red, it was her.”

He takes off his glasses and cleans them with his sleeve, putting them back on and smiling as he sees me again. “I see her in you sometimes. It’s no wonder you do too.” He sighs. “Tomorrow you’ll graduate and have your own votes, white robes, ring and your own silo too.” He shakes his head. “If she could see you now. She would be so proud.”

I let his words sink in for a moment, hoping that maybe they might find some resting place in my mind. But the thought of tomorrow churns my stomach. “Can I have some more tea?”

“Of course.” He lays his palm flat against the table and whispers. “Tea.” As his hand rises, a cup forms with it and steam rises when it ends. The number on his ring changes, moving from 12972 to 12952.

“Grandpa.” I frown. “You shouldn’t have. I didn’t know it was a non-essential.”

“What better way to spend electricity?” He wiggles his fingers. “It’s hard to get rid of it these days. Almost everything is free.”

“I suppose.” Drinking still makes me feel guilty but the warmth calms me. “I just don’t know what the algorithm will see in *me*.”

“Your father was the same. Did I ever tell you about his graduation?” He stands up and fetches a frame from the mantlepiece, sitting down and holding it between us.

“Dad was an engineer?” I look at the tall Elysman, wearing newly white robes and a ceremonial hard hat with a prideful smile.

“Hard to imagine it now. But his first job was working on the silos. Trying to cram everything into one room.” He chuckles. “Hated it.”

“The algorithm made a mistake then?”

Grandpa’s chuckle turns into a laugh, before hardening his expression and looking at me. “Every failure was a step closer to success. One day he comes home happy, happier than I had seen him in years, and he tells me about his idea. Rather than trying to put everything into one room, you could put one room into everything.”

“I didn’t know Dad invented the omnia room.” I look around the room, thinking how hard it would be to fit a kitchen, bedroom, dining room all in one place and my piano would never fit.

“Your father was famous as an engineer long before he was our President. Because the algorithm chose him for a reason, Isaac, put him in the right place at the right time.” He lays an arm across my back. “Just as it will for you. Who knows, you might be an engineer, pilot or even a politician-”

The ground begins to shake. A few ornaments fall off the shelves and the lights hiccup off then on again until the house remembers stillness as quickly as it had forgotten. The floor swallows them up and places them back out where they were before, undamaged.

“What on Mars was that?”

“Hm?” He turns on the television. “Oh. The drilling. You know what they’re like. Always trying to reach the oceans.”

I nod and turn idly to watch the images on the screen from Earth. Space lorries land on thick launch pads, carrying transparent tanks of water. Cranes reach out, taking them and placing them on a conveyor belt that leads into the ground. At the edge of the dock, a thick crowd rattles the chain-link metal fence and throws smoke canisters over the walls.

Tall Elysian soldiers in black suits march toward them, their laser rifles making bright flashes in the smoke as they fire. The fence begins to retract into the ground, opening the battlefield, and the soldiers march to meet them in the open air. Lasers fly out, scorching and burning flesh as they pass through the backs of the rioters fleeing to the sandy hills.

Soldiers reach the foot of a hill, finding themselves alone and outside the range of help. Sapiens on horses appear above them, wearing an armour of mirrors tied together by loose bits of ripe, glittering like jagged jewels in the sunlight. Charging down the hill, some falling, but most continuing at increasing speed with lasers bouncing off their armour. But the signal cuts just before the meet.

Grandpa holds the remote in his hands. “It’s best you don’t see that. And it’s time for music.”

The room starts to change again. Curtains hang by the windows, paintings appear on the walls and where the table between us stood a moment ago, a white piano now rests with my sofa replaced by a stool. But I keep my hands still.

“Grandpa, tell me. I’m nearly unblued now. What are they fighting for?”

“Play,” he says. “Play with your eyes closed, and I’ll tell you.”

I nod my head, turning to the piano and reading the header of the scoresheet. Beethoven, Moonlight Sonata third movement. Should be easy. Closing my eyes and placing my fingers, I begin.

“The countries of Earth, what’s left of them, have begun a new World War for resources and for land. Thirty billion people live on that planet, in sea-cities, sub-cities-”

“But Grandpa those soldiers were ours.”

“Our soldiers guard the trade ships and stop them coming aboard. Nothing more.”

He looks at me with thoughtful eyes, holding words on his tongue and rubbing his chin.

“I’m sorry Grandpa. I didn’t mean it.”

“I think it’s time I showed you something.” He rises to his feet. “Or someone.”

“Are we going now?” I look around for my contact lenses, feeling about my robe pockets.

“You won’t need those.” He waits for me by the door. “Not where we’re going.”

We step out into the warm air. The street is busy with Elysians heading toward the city centre. Their faces share strong features, brown hues, and almond eyes that tell little of the souls beneath. Long white robes flow over their every step, opening at their necks, and belts of varying colours sit around their waists.

Silos stand on either side of the street, two story buildings with curved shapes of whites, blues, and blacks that interlock. Each boasts a minutely different configuration than the last, with a small garden in front complete with a mix of green and purple plants and trees.

Hyper trains glide above our heads, soaring through the tubes that connect to the mighty domescrapers. The tallest one sits beneath the round entrance at the top of the dome, where space lorries come and go in a constant stream. Either carrying large rectangular containers or transparent empty tanks waiting to be filled, I assume, with water.

“This way Isaac,” says Grandpa.

We walk away from the city. I keep my eyes trained to the ground, watching their shadows walk by us and point their heads toward us, toward me. My blue robes push heat up my body as if they were bellows on a fire.

Grandpa places his hand on my shoulder. “It’s not *you* they’re looking at.”

I hear a smile in his voice and raise a curious glance at him, noticing at once the sunglasses he’s wearing. “Grandpa, take them off! They’ll think you’re an Earthman.”

“I will if the forecast is right.” Grandpa holds his palmgram flat between us. “It says rain in three, two, one…” We stop and look up at the hazy sky. The sun hangs low over the western mountains beyond the dome, small breezes of dust shimmer in its rays and there is not a cloud to be seen for miles. “Hm.”

“Is it ever right?”

We laugh but prick our ears up as we hear a soft pitter patter above. Clouds have formed above the dome, quickly becoming dark and rain heavy, blotting out the son and casting a shadow over the city. The Hexagons of the dome become almost invisible, save for the occasional silhouette against the backdrop of distant thunder.

The street begins to glow in the dark, small crystals in the concrete twinkle like stars in the night, illuminating our path. Light bounces off the faces of the Elysians in the street who take little notice of the storm, as if they were attracted by some unseen force.

“And the heavens opened.” says Grandpa. “And the roofs too.” I follow his eyes and watch the solar panels rotating over and swapping with red-hot batteries that sizzle, creating columns of rising mist that trail up into the air.

“I’d never noticed that before.”

Children run past us with their toy spaceships, making engine noises and racing. One bumps into me and drops his to the floor, stopping and looking up at me, straight into my eyes. He stumbles back and lowers his gaze. Grandpa hands him his toy, and the boy giggles at his sunglasses, running off as we walk on.

“Do you see how they look at me?”

“I do.” He sighs. “But they know only what you are, Isaac. Not who you are. Their parents teach them to be afraid.”

We walk past tall, glass towers filled with vertically stacked crops. Green cloaked figures walk between the aisles, checking and reading each individual leaf as if they made up some great tale.

“How far is it to go? My feet ache.”

“We’re nearly there.”

The road runs out and we find ourselves walking across desolate plains. Small rocks chew at my sandals, my ankles ache, and the city noises dissolve into the background. Grandpa seems to stride

“I don’t see anything.”

The rain ceases, the clouds disperse, and blue from the sunset shines at our feet, lighting our journey to nowhere. I’m about to ask him again when he stops.

“Here we are.”

Nothing jumps out to me at first. But there is something, a vault door built into the face of a boulder with a sign covered in thick dust lit by a dim bulb that flickers above. Grandpa knocks on the door in a pattern and blows off the dust, revealing the word ‘storage’.

“Is this it?” I try to hide the disappointment in my voice.

“Have patience.”

Strange mechanical noises resonate from the door, which starts to creep open, inch by inch, until the gap is barely wide enough for him to enter. Following him inside, I find steps at my feet, but

it’s dark and the air humid. Water drips down the walls. Icy white dragons emerge from my breath, spreading their wings as we descend, and torchlight shines through their mouths like fiery breath.

“This is where the Originals lived whilst the machines built the city,” he explains, “afterwards it became a storage for abandoned or ancient things.”

Soon we reach another, smaller door made of wood. Grandpa pushes it gently, but it swings wide and bounces off the hinge, an echo roars through the darkness on the other side. A lone rat scuttles past our feet, but Grandpa’s expression is determined as he steps inside with a faint splash. I duck beneath the doorway and follow him.

He holds his torch to a strange rectangular button labelled ‘light switch’, pressing it down. Nothing happens and I begin to shiver, until a single light activates high above our heads with a great booming sound. More lights explode into life, chaining together, stretching across the ceiling, and becoming specks in the distance.

An enormous spaceship stands before us, with dark engine cones for feet and a tall, white cylindrical body that bears scorches and scars. There are flags on its side: purple for Mars, the blue phoenix of the Pacific states, white and gold stars of the Northern Coalition and the gold and white stripes of the Southern Coalition.

“The Landing Fleet.”

“Wow.” Whatever coldness I felt leaves my body as warmth spreads from my heart to each fingertip. “They’re beautiful. Why are they down here?”

“They haven’t moved an inch. Everything else moved around them.” He walks on ahead, between the ships, their colossal size becoming apparent as we near. “New Washington was built over the landing crater.”

I stare up at each of them as we pass, grazing my fingers across them and removing small amounts of dust. “Why aren’t they looked after?”

“The Originals were born in these ships and set sail for Mars the age of twelve.”

“Twelve?”

“They were ready by six, but their feet didn’t reach the pedals.” He chuckles whilst I pretend to know what pedals are. “They landed here at fourteen. Used them as temporary homes till eighteen, that’s when they moved above ground. By then, I’m sure they were happy to forget them. Abandon them. And they did.”

Distant music catches my ears. Faint piano, guitar, drums, and a human using his voice as an instrument. Martians don’t sing. But I find myself drawn to the unfamiliar noise, each syllable is the sound of emotion, some are great joy and others total despair.

“What music is this?”

“Classic, Sapien music.” A faint smile touches the corners of his lips. “They were called Queen I believe.”

“They named their songs?” I laugh but feel guilty. “I do like it.” I feel myself wanting to join in. “Their music was different.”

“Better.” Says a man from the shadows. “Micah? Is that you. I had not expected your visit here after so many years, friend.” He steps into the light before us.

His pupils are white, and grey hair comes tumbling to his knees with shoulders turned inward by age. But he is tall, even for an Elysian, and wears large, dirtied white robes that still bear an ancient symbol. The Greek symbol of mars, an arrow through a circle, worn by the fabled Originals.

“Silas.” Grandpa stares in disbelief. “You’re still down here?”

“Yes.” Silas grabs at the air. “I can’t find the damned way out!”

They laugh and embrace. Grandpa mutters into his ear and I make out my name, Silas seems to nod in agreement.

“Ah, boy. You’ve never met an Original?” Silas scoffs, clapping my arm and nearly knocking me over.

I remember to breathe. “No.”

“Good,” he roars. “Bunch of Council arse lickers. You’ll know an Original by their long tongue.”

“Silas.” Grandpa interrupts his strange tongue gestures. “His father is President Marcus.”

“Oh. Right,” he says in a much gentler tone. “Excuse my language, dear boy. What I meant was… Like the old bible, some Angels fall from Heaven.”

“Where are all the others?” Grandpa looks around. “I expected… more.”

“We will discuss later friend,” says Silas. “Follow me.”

He leads us past the ships and down corridors of boxes. The ceiling lights flicker, and some areas are completely unlit, but Silas takes no notice. He turns and weaves us through the labyrinth, knowing it better than any seeing man could.

“You know this place well,” says Micah.

“It’s a hobby.”

Silas stops us on the threshold of a giant hexagon. Shelves at either side reach to the ceiling and are filled by strange collections of bound and wrapped paper. Moving ladders sit dormant on rails at either side.

“What are these things, Grandpa?”

“It’s a library. Those things are called books.”

“Books?”

“Knowledge. You would read and decipher them, find meaning from the shapes and symbols within, patterns, an old thing, called language. Most of them were written before mindfulness.”

“You mean telepathy?” I open my mouth as if to speak, like babies do, but only strange noises come out of my throat. “It’s impossible.”

“Impractical,” says Grandpa. “But not impossible. Pay attention to my mouth, break the illusion that I am using it to speak, you’ll see why some didn’t think it would last.”

I follow the movements of his mouth, with a keen eye, and my mind recognises it’s hidden stillness. Like seeing your own nose, or hearing your heartbeat, the realisation is unnerving. And his voice in my head, with no source, feels unwelcome.

“Lip writing,” says Grandpa. I blink and his mouth is moving again. “Your brain taught itself to see and *hear* speech to help it separate your thoughts from others. Elysians were designed to be a species undivided. Language was seen as a barrier to the planetary expansion of the species.”

Silas roars in laughter. I look nervously at Micah who seems equally amused. “And how bloody well did that work? Boy, do you know how many planets we’ve settled since Mars?”

“None?”

“You ever wonder why that is boy?” He raises his voice. “Because humans, Elysian *and* Sapien, care more about that damned thing called money than they do about anything else. Tokens of power that we trade between ourselves. Never daring to look. Never daring to see our true purpose. It shouldn’t take a blind man to know.”

“There is renewed talk of Venus,” begins Micah, making his voice calm and low.

“Silas, what happened to your eyes?” I ask to my surprise and his. “If you don’t mind.”

“Three hundred bloody years happened,” he scoffs. “Our eyes were designed for the hot sun, not the cold caves. Darkness is blinding.” He looks at me, a faded iris moving in the milky waters. “You know, I was your age once, boy. Back when Mars was thought best abandoned. A waste of precious resources whilst the home planet was dying, coughing on the fumes of Sapien society. Winters turned to summers, water to acid, and peace became war.”

“Until they made us.” Silas laughs. “Sapiens have always needed slaves. They sent us to start this world for them, and when the time was right. They expected us to flood it, to make an atmosphere they could breathe, and then they expected us to die on the cross.”

“I think we had best be heading home, Isaac.” Grandpa pulls me away. “Till next time, Silas.”