

Chapter 1

(Mars 2154: Ambassador Yi Min's visit to Station 9)

The Martian Bloom

A space ship, its hull the color and shape of a fine-cut crystal, appeared in the Martian sky followed by five other enormous ships solid and white, covered with logos, insignia and windows. Two dozen Mars children looked up through a clear glass dome and cheered. It was the Final Republic's ambassador! The children danced and sang because the pilot was the most famous woman in the colonies.

The ships had no engines, no stabilizing burners or propulsion of any visible kind. They moved along hidden currents of Urja energy, like a raft on a dark-energy river. The surface of the vehicles interacted with the Urja in occasional pops and fizzles, like intermittent white fireworks.

The spaceships slowed their descent and found the top of an opaque dome, two miles from the children's dome. It opened, and the ships lowered inside.

It was a great day for the Martian colony. Colony Nine was being visited by a legend known for destroying Iugan Soul of Fire, and for inspiring the political system that created a utopia so prosperous and peaceful there would never be another war on Earth or between the fifty colonies in the solar system.

##

The hull of the ambassador's spacecraft was foggy-clear, like a frosted bathroom window. It hovered three feet above a flat, oval-shaped landing pad that had no wires, dials, or

lights. The bottom of the ship was lined with polished silver, reflecting the Martian sand like a mirror.

The ship's interior was more like a living room than an interplanetary spacecraft. The flooring was made from wood, as were the ergonomic chairs and plush couch. A dozen plants were cradled in wall pockets, and art pieces hung on the crystalline walls.

A woman with straight, jet-black hair sat at the control panel, a large holographic array of dials and buttons. She was a Korean American, but hadn't even set foot on Earth in over thirty years. She traveled most of her days, visiting friends from all over the colonies. She had so many contacts, the travel time in her space ship became her only personal time. Quiet reflection allowed her to enjoy her work and the often-overbearing popularity.

She stood, took a deep breath and straightened her white gown, running her fingers over the gold flowers and leaves embroidered around the bodice and neckline. She needed to make a quick speech and shake some hands before meeting the children, which was her favorite duty.

Her eyes lingered on a photograph pinned to the side of the crystal wall. Jack Morrison, her best friend growing up, was hugging her in front of his childhood home. She was playfully punching him in the gut. Yi Min and Jack were fourteen in the photo, forever fourteen. He was a foot taller than she was, lanky and with hair so naturally red, he turned heads everywhere he went. Jack would be the only one she would allow into her quiet time because hanging with him was as natural as breathing. If only he were alive now. Yi Min touched the faded print for good luck, like she always does.

Ambassador Yi Min negotiated the interior of the ship to the exterior door similarly made of crystal. Seams widened along angular edges, and the door opened outward, followed by a bamboo ramp unrolling to the Martian sand.

She stepped from the craft, her dress flowing behind her, billowing because of a small spell designed to add mystique to her movements. A dozen eyes from the landing crew locked on her. The light reflected off her silky black hair as though imbued by a thousand diamonds. Her age hardly showed in her smooth, pale skin.

The ambassador glided down the ramp like she had no feet at all, until her spaceship door closed too early. It snagged her dress, lurching her to a sudden halt.

“Ugh,” she huffed.

The workers remained still, their eyes wide under the lip of their helmets, not sure what was happening.

The ambassador’s cheeks reddened from embarrassment and a touch of anger. She turned and pulled on the dress, but the door held it tight. The door was, after all, made to seal off interstellar space during flight. “Let go of my dress,” Yi Min hissed toward the door. “You’re supposed to be an intelligent ship, the best of its class.” She waved her hand over the sensor on the middle of the door, but it didn’t open.

The ship answered in a cool, warm voice. “I’m sorry. All ship functions are now controlled by landing protocol.”

A growl came from deep in Yi Min’s chest. She whispered a spell into her hand until a tiny blue light formed in her palm. It grew round and perfect like an ornament, translucent and energetic like a tiny sun. Her fingers flittered, and the orb spat toward the door. It hit the crystalline composite and exploded. Large chunks fell from space ship hull and the door released her dress. Yi Min stumbled back, her graceful entrance obliterated by one not-so-smart smart door.

Behind the diamond ship were the others, filling the enormous dome. Their doors hissed open and others filed out, handling work orders, transfers, deliveries and other trade details.

Mrs. Hilton, the colony administrator, stood at the bottom of Ambassador Yi Min's landing pad, wearing a colorful, pattern-filled dress and an embroidered white top. A holographic screen hovered at chest level, displaying charts and graphs. She swiped her hand across the hologram, shutting off the display. "Are you all right, Ambassador?" Mrs. Hilton said, without using her voice, instead transmitting the question through thoughts along with the emotion [sincere happiness].

The ambassador heard the greeting and felt the emotion, and her skin tingled. "You can still transmit your emotions, but can we use our tongues? I prefer to hear voices," she said in her mind, transmitting a [pleasant, respectful] emotion.

"Yes, thank you my ambassador. I, too, enjoy hearing my own voice," Mrs. Hilton replied, nodding her head. "The kids today don't, but they've never known a world where our thoughts weren't transferable."

"That's the problem with today's youth," Yi Min said, half joking. She brushed a loose hair from her face and descended the ramp, straight and composed. Yi Min nodded to Mrs. Hilton and her assistants.

Two assistants, wearing drab gray suits, flanked Mrs. Hilton. Each communicating with their own tablets that projected in front of them. They transmitted emotions to Yi Min, [nervousness and admiration].

"We welcome you to our city, Ambassador Yi Min," Mrs. Hilton said with her voice. She bowed her head low.

Two men, wearing orange jumpsuits, black helmets, and visors with electronic displays and headphones, guided five large, overstuffed suitcases from the belly of the ship. They floated them to the ambassador's side. Yi Min opened the top compartment of the largest bag and pulled out a small plant, its roots bundled in burlap fabric. Mrs. Hilton smiled and accepted the gift, grateful for receiving the most respectful gift an off-world colonist can receive.

"I'm glad to be here. This is my most favorite duty as the founder of the Final Republic," Yi Min said as she strolled onto the sands of Mars. She took off her sandals and strode through the soft sand, relaxing as the cold, red silt pushed between her toes. She picked up her pace. "We must get this started. I've fifteen more colonies to meet with." Behind her were four cabinet assistants, the Deputy of Communication and the Vice Chair of Colony Trade. They chatted to themselves, coordinating and comparing their own hologram screens.

"This way, please, Ambassador."

Yi Min glanced at one of the men in orange. "Take my bags to my quarters and fix my spaceship door."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And don't call me ma'am. I'm only one hundred and five," the ambassador said with a fixed stare, but transmitted a [jovial] emotion. She was old, but her body and mind were kept young by stem cell treatments. Sometimes, it was her thoughts that stalled. She'd fought wars, fell in love and became very powerful but what was there to look forward to? It was why she loved watching children grow up. They change so rapidly. Adults seem to find their routines and stick, like barnacles to sea rocks. She would remind herself that her future was in her hands. She needed goals, plans and other adventures to look forward to.

One of Mrs. Hilton's assistants leaned close to the ambassador. "Is it true? There is an alien ship approaching our solar system?"

Mrs. Hilton pushed the assistant away from Yi Min. "You will learn your place. Go back to my office, now."

"It's quite all right," Yi Min answered. She could look forward to this bit of news. How amazing will it be to meet another intelligent species. "It is true. In five years' time, an enormous spaceship will arrive near Jupiter. It originated from a planet called Illissis in the Tau Ceti system. It will be a historic day for sure. I can hardly wait the five years; I know you all must feel the same." Yi Min placed a hand on Mrs. Hilton's shoulder. "Let's talk of your colonists and your economy." The Deputy of Communication and the Vice Chair of Colony Trade stepped up to join the conversation. The Deputy was a friendly man, fifty years old with a beard that hung to his chest, the Vice Chair a young woman with red hair and wearing a hemp tunic covered in geometric stitching.

Mrs. Hilton flattened her hand and swiped a vertical line in front of her, and her holographic tablet flicked on. She opened a brightly colored chart with a push of a translucent button. "Happiness is as high as it has ever been. Production too. We have a strong economy with one hundred percent employment. Everyone has healthcare and with oppas conjures taking care of people, there are no lines and no shortages at all. It's so wonderful.

"This morning we wrapped up our plans for the next Parade of Engineers, which celebrates our creative problem solvers and our enjinia conjures. It will be so wonderful; the children will love it. Next month we'll host our Day of Astronomy. People really appreciate the added holidays that celebrate achievements. And the conjures are so magnificently helpful and

selfless,” Mrs. Hilton said. She swiped her screen outward and transferred her data to the other hologram screens so everyone had a copy.

“Good. This is what I’m hearing from all over the system,” Yi Min said, glancing at the charts. “Don’t you love conjures? They’re so eager and wonderful beings. How did humanity ever get along without them?”

“No, it’s better than good. What you and the other leaders have done is truly amazing. You’ve created a utopia.”

“There were so many who said we couldn’t do it.”

“They were wrong.”

“It is all about voluntary cooperation, not coercion. Everyone has a choice. Remember that,” Yi Min said, her expression as solid as granite. “Oh, and robot and conjure help. We couldn’t have eliminated the turbulent laws of supply and demand without them.”

The ambassador, Mrs. Hilton and the surrounding crowd passed from the landing dome, which was barren of plants but clustered with pipes and cables and panels, and into an airlock where machines checked for unwanted bacteria and viruses that would contaminate the fragile Martian ecosystem. When the green lights lit up, the door to the main habitat opened, making an audible swish, releasing in a sweet smell and a cool breeze.

The group walked a wide path between huge trees, bushes, and flowers, most of which were fruit- or nut-bearing plants genetically designed to grow in Martian soil. Beyond the plants, inside the Main-Hall, the largest dome on Mars, was a crowd of a thousand colonists and conjures of every type. They were held back by floating red ribbons. Cheers erupted, children squealed, people clapped, some whistled. Conjures were everywhere, just as eager as the humans. Conjures were creatures of different shapes and types but had glowing skin of various

colors. Mars had a lot of shakhter conjures—they had muscular torsos, short legs, and arms that extended to their feet. The thick pads on their fingers were fine-tuned to seek out metals deep in the ground. Mars had a lot of metal resources that were easier mined and less environmentally destructive to remove than Earth metals.

There were also a lot of fairies. They were the size of a dolls, with translucent wings and ribbon-like tails instead of feet. Fairies were conjures created to be emissaries to the human world, back when conjures could not be seen or heard by people without magic abilities. There were many other types of conjures that lived on Mars. Some helped farm, raise children or take care of the sick. They were devoted, smart and friendly. It was amazing to Yi Min that at one time, they'd been exiled from Earth.

Behind the crowd were thousands of vehicles that doubled as homes.

It looked like a huge mobile home park, but the vehicles were all custom-built spaceships—everything was custom these days. Some were long and oval, with huge engines mounted to the sides along with small, round windows. Other vehicles looked more like boomerangs, but their bellies were tall and wide with plenty of living space. Most builders preferred solid walls, metallic or a variety of glossy colors, but there were a few crystal ships. One resembled an amethyst gem cut in a shape called the Rose Egg. Another crystal ship was in the shape of the Hope Diamond.

Most of the ships were designed to house eight people or fewer. They had staterooms, multiple common areas, storage areas, and cockpits. Every engine compartment was capped with red hoods, and protective sheets covered the cockpit windows. They were, due to the uncertainty of off-world living, ready to fly at a moment's notice.

White fences, metal gates, and red rock, knee-high walls enclosed small areas around front doors. Every yard had dozens of potted plants of every shape and size.

Ambassador stepped up a few hover-steps to a podium—bare of any microphone and waited for the crowd to quiet. She transmitted her thoughts to everyone in the crowd. “Thank you all for the warm welcome. [humility] I’ve brought fresh Swiss Chocolate for everyone. The freshest in all of Europe.” There was loud clapping. “You all deserve thanks and appreciation for the work you do. Whether you research, build, farm, pray, paint or sing, you are all a part of the happiness that is overtaking our culture. Our society protects life, liberty and property like no other culture and it is all possible through your hard work and commitment.”

The ambassador spoke for a half hour, eager brains picking up every word. When she was finished, the chocolate was distributed. Yi Min and her entourage continued through the Main-Hall. She waved and smiled and accepted [appreciation] from everyone she passed.

The crowd dispersed. Some flew off on floating plankboards. Others left on airborne seats or jumped on hoverbikes. Not a wheel could be seen—it was an outdated technology.

Ambassador Yi Min strolled down Main Street. Colony Nine was huge. Six skyscrapers towers clustered at the center of the massive, clear dome—gardens overflowed every balcony and on all rooftops. The colony was nestled in the Valles Marineris; a section five miles wide with canyon walls almost a mile high. The walls were far from the domes, but still dwarfed the colony’s skyscrapers.

After passing by hundreds of people and conjures drawn to Yi Min like magnets to iron, Yi Min and Mrs. Hilton split off from Yi Min’s group and headed to a different airlock. The two passed through without hesitation and into one of the five school domes. There were lots of plants and trees too, but not a single building or ship. Play equipment, tables, and storage

containers were set in strategic learning zones, and the floor was covered in the same red Martian sand.

One child with wild hair, nearest the door, levitated a large blue ball two feet off the ground, containing a laughing classmate. He turned, saw the ambassador, and ran to her, abandoning his friend. Another child played with fire as if it were a bouncy ball, and the play structure was a nest of squealing children climbing over bars and geodesic shapes like bees on a hive.

The teacher, Mrs. Lilac, released the floating child and pulled the wild-haired boy aside. “Never leave your friends trapped in bubbles. It’s bad manners!”

“Sorry, Mrs. Lilac,” the boy replied.

Yi Min glided over the soft Martian sand with practiced ease. She met with children often and loved their high spirits and naturally curious ideas. Would Jack have wanted children? Yi Min would have liked to think so. But since losing him, she focused on her work and the social cohesion of the Final Republic.

Yi Min passed a couple of taller girls skipping rope. It warmed her heart to see the classic pastime still alive and well. The girls jumped higher in the lower Martian gravity, so their challenge was to see how many times the rope could pass under their feet in a single leap. It was amusing until she heard the rhyme they sung.

Deep Ones are the most brutal ones,

They ruled all the seas,

They’ll eat you up,

Enslave your pup,

And throw away the keys.

*The Ammonite,
Has all the might,
And made the Deep Ones leave.
To take its power
Is to cower,
The Deep Ones will be pleased.
They'll collect our tongues,
Fry our lungs,
Stack us up on dinner plates,
And leave only the crumbs.*

The girl spat out the rhyme as fast as she could the rope spinning under her jump multiple times. It would be impressive but for the dark warning the lyric spoke about. Ambassador Yi Min frowned. Why were the children singing about the Deep Ones?

Yi Min touched the shoulder of the girl. "What is that rhyme?" she said with her thoughts, accompanying the question with an [urgent] emotion.

The girl's eyes widened and her lips closed tightly.

One of the girls holding the rope answered with mind-speak. "My dad said the spaceship that's coming isn't amazing. He says that they're the Deep Ones and they're coming to start a war with us."

The ambassador laughed, her thought receiver reducing the girl's worry emotion automatically. "That is truly silly, young one. It's strange to think that an advanced civilization is coming to do us harm and that they are the fabled Deep Ones. Did you know that there are no such creatures? It's a story to explain the odd powers of the Ammonite King, and that is all.

There is no truth in it.” Yi Min added [confidence] to the thought. The girl received it, instantly relaxing and responding with [warmth].

Yi Min continued to the small stage.

“But my dad says they’re so big, they could eat a hundred humans and still be hungry,” an older girl spat out eagerly, using her voice.

The ambassador cut her off. “Tss. That’s enough doom and gloom.”

Awareness of the ambassador’s presence spread through the children, as though they were all one neurological network. They had been eagerly awaiting Yi Min’s arrival for weeks, and they all ran to her, surrounding her like hungry puppies. They all wore grass-green tunic uniforms, with yellow hems—the colony’s flag colors—white belts and baggy leggings. She forced herself to smile. Her show was about to begin.

“Hello, children,” she said in mind-speak, transmitting [overwhelming joy] and laughing out loud at their eager absorption. “Yes, yes. I know you’ve been waiting for me.” Yi Min took a coiled sweetie-rope from a bag and broke off bite-sized chunks, giving one to each child. “Now while you’re satisfying your sweet tooth, come and sit.”

The children sat in a half circle and Yi Min on a floating stool, the lavender sky a backdrop for her long-awaited speech.

“I’m so glad to be sharing this story with you all,” Yi Min began. “This is the most important story of our lifetimes. We must all know it from heart, so we never forget.” She added [important] to the projected thought.

One child raised his hand but mind-spoke without hesitation, “Where does magic come from?” [excited curiosity]

Another girl, older and with bright red hair, called out, “Why don’t people use money anymore?” [confusion]

Yi Min held up her thin hands. “Now, now. All your questions will be answered. Most of your parents have been instructed not to tell you about these things for a reason. They are subjects for older minds.”

“We’re old enough! I’m eight!” a boy with black hair called out.

“My father knows how to create conjures!” sneered a girl in the back row.

“Show us your battle scars!” transmitted an older girl, the tallest of all the children. “My mother says you were a great warrior.”

Ambassador Yi Min chuckled, her hand unintentionally touching her knee and the thick scar that ran down her leg. “Calm now. It will all become clear.” She cleared her throat. “I’m going to tell you how magic changed the world for the better.

“Let’s start off with money. We did not become a monetary-free society by stealing the money of rich people, nor do we give the poor more than they work for. The people that join the Final Republic do so on their own. It is important to remember that our entire society is voluntary. People earn status, bonuses, a highlight in history books and parade days because of their actions. Those who do not work receive the base rations and live in dorms, but they are not forgotten or allowed to suffer.” [compassion and warmth]

“My brother calls them dorm dome dummies!” yells a boy of six years.

“Now that’s not nice. The point is, no matter what, all are taken care of and our communities continue to grow. We are the largest society on Earth, and now all the off-world colonies use our system.

“We have been able to achieve our level of enlightenment because we combine our vast knowledge of technology with the use of magic. We obtain our magic from Urja energy. It is the framework of all electromagnetic energy, or light. Scientists used to call it dark energy. We know it to be the reason the photon acts like a wave instead of a particle. The ancients knew of Urja, because they could see it with their eyes. Because of a King named Sedeze, humans lost this ability. We only recovered it when Jack Morrison rescued *The Stone of Palmea*. Jack rescued it from exile during the Last Conjure War. I’m going to tell you his story, but it is not limited to him. There are many characters throughout history that are involved. His sacrifice still helps us all to this day.”

“But Jack lived, like ninety years ago. How is his story helping us today?” [confusion and thoughtful interest] projected a girl in the back.

“Well, what are some of the things you love?” Ambassador Yi Min responded.

“Flying the cliffs of Marineris!” a redheaded boy said, referring to hang gliding off the Martian cliffs. It was a favorite pastime of all Martians because of how far the gliders could go and because it was relatively safe due to protection spells.

“The castle of Atun! It’s the biggest castle in the solar system.” a girl sang out. Atun was a castle built by conjures in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. It was a massive resort where families spent weeks at a time totally immersed in Middle Age fantasy, aided by magic spells and conjures.

“The underwater Speed Way,” [unadulterated excitement] said the curly-haired boy. A simple spell allowed anyone to breathe under water like a fish, but the raceway was where you could race sharks or dolphins or squid and be totally protected from them. Magic spells kept the animals engaged in the race and in positive moods.

“I love Mic Mic, my oppas conjure babysitter,” said a very small girl in the front row.

“Yes, we all know and love conjures of all types. Enjinia conjures helped build some of the most fantastic structures of our modern age. Bhaashaavid conjures help us to communicate across all languages, and bóndi conjures help us grow all our food. There are so many types of conjures that help make our lives better I can’t list them all.” [excitement and love]

The ambassador knew she was getting through to the children. They absorbed her thoughts and emotions and responded with gratitude and pure joy. “Our virtual worlds are fine-tuned by magic, and so is ship propulsion. This was all made possible by Jack Morrison’s courage.” She frowned. “He wasn’t always brave. At first, he was a real weenie. Sorry for my language, but it’s true. [honor] He found his courage deep inside and unleashed it! He made the ultimate sacrifice for all of us. Let’s find out how he did it. I want you to know how Jack saved the world.”

The children were silent, wide eyed, and eager. They sat still as Yi Min began the Great Story.

“I’m going to transmit the story to your thought-receivers so you may experience it as Jack did. He shared his mind-print with me before he died so that we may all see his sacrifice and feel his courage and know his intent. This way, his story will never die, his truth shall never be mistaken or misread.”

She swiped her hand near her waistline, turning on a holographic display in front of her. She pushed a button, transmitting the Great Story to the children in thoughts, in smells, in emotions. They would never forget.

“Ninety years ago, there was much sadness and pain and cruelty in the world. It had become a very dark place for many. It is true that there were happy people, compassionate actions, and good hearts, but at this moment in history, there was more selfishness and miscommunication, than anything else. It leads to distrust, anger and growing poverty.

“Jack Morrison was fourteen at that time and had known no other world.” [Discontent]

Chapter 2

(Ninety Years Ago, Earth 2052: The Great Story Begins)

The Evil Trick

Jack Morrison stared out his cracked window, through metal security bars, avoiding bed time. He'd been talking to his best friend, Mire for a half hour or so on chat. Displayed in the bottom corner of Jack's glasses was her profile pic. The two weren't saying much, but Jack didn't want her to go, not yet. She was fun to talk to, and she understood him.

It was mid-May and sunset occurred at nine. Soon, it wouldn't get dark until closer to ten and by then, he'd be sound asleep by the time the sky got dark enough to see the city lights and the stars and the ring of the Nexus Space Station. He loved to look at the lights before bed. It was his bedtime story to himself.

The skyscraper lights were a few miles away and dense as a star cluster, but orderly, like stacked blocks. At certain times of the year, this time of the year, a ring of bright stars rose from the horizon, looking like a ring of diamonds. It was the Nexus Space Station—built between the moon and the Earth at what was called the Lagrangian point, which is a stable place to orbit between the Earth and the moon. He envisioned himself blasting off into space, going to live on the Nexus.

“When will NASA let astronauts live on the space station?” Jack asked, staring, dough-eyed, at the lights.

“When they have the money. There are only robots up there now. Robots are cheap. They don't complain, they work twenty-four hours a day and they are smarter in some ways.” There was a pause. Mire continued. “It is pretty OP.”

“They made it to house, like, five thousand people. There are all these empty rooms and cold kitchens and quiet hallways. It’s like a ghost town. Probably freaky up there at night.” Jack smiled. He didn’t care, he’d live up there anyway. It would be better than living down here. There will soon be scientists, engineers and biologists up there. No criminals, no gangs.

“Don’t you gotta go to bed?” Mire said. “Your parents are on their way to tuck you in. They’re both like clockwork.”

“Yeah. They gave me ten more minutes.” He sighed.

Jack pushed a button on his thick-rimmed glasses—they had a communication computer embedded in the rims and would project a computer screen onto the glass, making it look like the screen was a holographic image in front of him, but it wasn’t; it only augmented his vision. Though it was dark around the Nexus lights, Jack’s com-glasses highlighted the shape in delicate vector lines. He could zoom in on the drawing and see the windows, ports and antenna and learn all about its functions.

“The sky is so clear, you can see the station really well,” Jack mumbled, his chin resting in his palm as he leaned on the desk.

“Yeah. It’s cool. Looks like a sparkly necklace in the sky.” Mire was distracted. “You really wanna live up there, huh?”

“That’d be slick. But I don’t think that’s gonna happen.”

“You never know. I’ll work on making Earth cool again instead of thinking about how to escape it. I’d like to visit Nexus, but to live there?” Mire was always talking about how messed up things were; how many go hungry at night, how many bombs were being dropped, how many ghettos kept popping up everywhere. She was similar to Jack’s dad in that way. Jack didn’t think Earth was savable. He just wanted to get off-world and start society fresh.

Jack sat up. He couldn't think of anything else to say. "I guess I gotta go."

"K. Get into your ancient P.J.'s. Don't move too fast or they'll disintegrate." Mire chuckled.

"They're not that old."

"Whatever, mine are just as worn out. Anyway, go and fly off to never-never land. I'll catch you tomorrow." Mire ended the call.

Jack stared at the diagram of the Nexus station a minute more. "One day, I'm gonna get up there. Leave all these villains behind." The display flickered as his Internet connection faltered. His glasses were cheap and old and always did this. He tapped them on the side. "Come on, piece of junk."

The glasses flicked off. He was about to reboot them when a small screen turned on, displaying a red phone icon. His com-glasses were calling 9-1-1! Jack sat up. "Call end," he said, ordering the glasses to disconnect. They did not respond. "End, end, end!" He pressed the power button.

There was a momentary blip on the phone line before the emergency dispatcher answered, "9-1-1, what's your emergency?" A woman's face filled Jack's screen, her own com-glasses so thin and light they were barely visible.

"Somebody's in the house!" a voice shouted. It sounded like Jack's voice, but it wasn't him. He hadn't said a thing or called 9-1-1.

"No, what? Wait!" Jack snapped, his glasses not picking up his own voice.

The fake Jack continued, "They have a gun. They locked me in my room . . . mom and dad . . . hostage." There was gunshot. "Help me!!" the voice cried.

The emergency dispatcher pressed a large red button in front of her. Lights lit up around her profile pic as emergency signals burst from the dispatch center, alerting police across the city. Her fingers shook nervously. “Stay calm.” She slammed her hand on the red button again.

“Stop! This isn’t my voice!” Jack cried out. He could see the panic and worry in her eyes.

The dispatcher steadied her voice and replied, “I’m here now. I’ll help you. Voice recognition has identified you as Jack Morrison. Is that correct?”

“You have to hurry—shot—my dad —can hear—mom screaming!!”

The phone call cut out. Jack jumped out of his desk chair, knocking it over. He turned to the door and paused, his heart racing. *Where did that voice come from?*

Was someone in his house?

His com-glasses turned on, this time displaying a man in a black hood, face obscured by shadow. “I’m coming for you. Trust me, I’ll get there long before the cops do,” the figure said, and the call ended.

Jack leaned to the window and scanned the night. How long would it take the police to get to his house? Who would do this to him? This was crazy!

Jack ran to his bedroom door and flung it open and sprinted to his parents’ bedroom. They weren’t in there; they were watching TV downstairs. He spun and raced to the stairs, but before he took one step down, the front window shattered. A tin can lobbed into the home, clanked on the tile and erupted, shooting smoke in every direction.

The front door crashed open followed by men in black ski masks and military gear.

Jack didn’t know what to do. Should he call out for his parents? Should he run? That was one thing Jack was good at, running. He ran down the hall, bolted through the doorway and

practically crashed into the balcony sliding door. He was so afraid, and confused. His parents were adults, they should be okay, wouldn't they be?

He turned and pulled open the heavy, iron-bar-laden door and escaped the home. The balcony was held up by iron trellises covered in vines. He jumped over the railing, scampered down to the ground, ignoring the crushing of the plant, and booked it across the yard.

One of the intruders burst onto the balcony. "He's left the home and on foot, traveling east."

Jack stopped at the front gate. The gaps in the wood slats highlighted an approaching figure, cutting off Jack's escape.

He turned and ran the other direction, past the huge oak tree that cradled his rickety tree-house and to the back fence. He jumped up and over the fence and charged it through the empty lot behind his house, where only a concrete foundation was left, shrouded by tall weeds.

His vision adjusted to the dark night. Stray dogs fought over food there was trash and litter everywhere and stained, broken couch. Jack didn't stop until he reached the road. He looked back and forth. *Where do I go?* His mind raced.

Mrs. Theodore. She had babysat him a lot when he was young and her home was a few houses away. Best to go around the block and sneak back to her house so he could call the police and figure out what to do. He ran.

As he approached the street corner, the streetlight flickered off, but he kept running. When it came on again there was a man right in front of him at the edge of the light. Jack screamed, tripped and tumbled on the cracked asphalt. His jeans tore at the knees and his hands were scrapped from the fall. The man fell back.

“I’m sorry, sorry!” Jack yelled, jumping to his feet. He clasped his hands together, knowing they were going to start bleeding and stinging.

The man grunted loudly and stood. “Boy! You need to watch where you’re going,” he growled. It was Mr. Carpenter, the archeologist who lived across the street in a very large, two-hundred-year-old house. “You nearly knocked my com-glasses off my face! They cost me two-thousand dollars. It has the latest metacore processor.” Mr. Carpenter dusted off his coat. “What are you doing running around at night? Causing trouble? Did you knock me over on purpose?” He snapped, massaging his wrist. Mr. Carpenter was older but not elderly. His hair and beard were gray and his skin tanned and wrinkled from too many days in the sun. He wasn’t very tall, but his stocky shape and irritable personality made him ominous.

A month ago, Jack had accidentally thrown his model glider into Carpenter’s yard. Carpenter retrieved it from a bush and handed it over. He didn’t say a word, didn’t smile his usual smile. He had dark circles under his eyes like he’d been punched, a red vein that crossed his left eye like a single lighting strike, and a faint dark spot that hovered over his pupils like the reflection of a phantom. Something was off with the neighbor. Maybe he had always been creepy and Jack never noticed. After all, he spawned the meanest teenager in all of Detroit, William. William bullied Jack to no end but always seemed to squirm out of any blame or repercussions.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Carpenter. I-I didn’t see you. These guys, they’re in my house. I—” Jack paused. Something in him told him to run from the man as fast as he’d run from the intruders. Even in the starlit darkness, the man’s shape seemed to be emanating a faint and wispy red glow? Jack backed up, wondering if his eyes were playing tricks. He couldn’t trust Mr. Carpenter any more than he could trust William, his son.

A police car turned onto the street, its spotlight finding the two. Jack ran to it. Mr. Carpenter slinked away, disappearing into the dark.

“Help me!” Jack cried out, his arms to either side. The cruiser was all black, except for a thin silver stripe and badge. Its tires were oversized so it could navigate pothole-laded streets and cut across empty lots.

The policeman stepped out, wearing all black and a ski mask just like the intruders.

Jack slid to a stop, confused. *Is this a real cop?*

The officer stripped off his mask and stepped away from the vehicle. He had no gun. “Stop right there, kid. Put your hands in the air.” He approached Jack carefully and slowly, a net gun pointed down, but ready. His full beard was red, and he was tall and strong. His badge gleamed in the flashing red-and-blue lights.

Jack’s tension released like the undoing of a tight belt, and he fell to his knees, gasping.

The officer grabbed Jack’s arm and pulled him off the ground. “Get up. I’m Officer Bailey, ID four-four-nine.” He shoved Jack toward the cop car. “You don’t run from the police, kid. Your parents ever teach you that?”

“My mom, my dad? What’s happening?” Jack said through heavy breaths.

“There’re fine. They were watching a movie when my men burst into your house.”

Jack was so confused. “Your men? Why were you all wearing ski masks?”

“Listen kid, when S.W.A.T. enters a home, it’s hard to know what we’re up against. Police have been identified by perps and gangsters, their families targeted. We have to protect ourselves. I still don’t know why you ran. You called us.”

“No I didn’t.”

“Save it,”

Jack got into the back of the police car and Bailey drive him home.

A couple of cruisers and a large S.W.A.T truck were parked in front of the home. The other officers had removed their ski masks and were leading Jack's dad, Mel, out of the home in his bathrobe, his hands cuffed.

"Dad!" Jack tried to exit the car, but the doors were locked.

"Cool it, kid," Bailey said. "We have protocol to work through. Something happened here, and we need to find out what. You'll see him in a minute." He parked and stepped out.

Jack's dad, Mel, was ushered into another car. Minutes later, Jack's mom, Kalsie, was led out of the home by a female police officer. She saw Jack in the back of the patrol car and ran to him, flung the door open, and hugged him, squeezing the air out of him.

"What is going on?" Kalsie asked her son, breathing rapidly. She had tea stains all over her nightshirt, and her hair was disheveled.

"I . . . I don't know." Jack stammered.

"You have to know something! Cops don't just burst into people's homes," Kalsie blurted. She folded her arms tight, as if trying to keep herself from exploding.

"I didn't do anything, I swear. My com-glasses turned on and called the cops all by themselves. Then this guy said he was coming to get me."

"Impossible! Com-glasses don't do things on their own."

"Mom, this was William. This is another one of his tricks!"

"I wish I could believe you." She grunted. "I mean, how is that possible?"

Jack lowered his head. "I don't know how he did it, but he did."

Kalsie turned to the large house across the street where William Carpenter lived. Jack wanted to reassure her but didn't know how. She was so angry.

A woman in a dark suit handed Kalsie a water bottle and gave one to Jack.

“Are you okay?” she asked. Her smile was warm, but her eyes looked worried. “Sorry, stupid question.” She had dark hair, light skin, and no com-glasses. “My name is Officer Ashlyn. I’m with Child Protective Services.”

Kalsie drank her water in large gulps. “What on Earth is going on?”

“At approximately nine thirty we received a call from Jack. He said there was someone with a gun. It wasn’t clear to dispatch who had the gun, but it was clear that Jack and you were in danger. We weren’t sure if it was your husband or an intruder. A gunshot was heard on the line before the phone went dead.”

“Oh, my god,” Kalsie replied. “Do you have the right Jack?” Kalsie looked around.

“Voice recognition clearly identified the caller as Jack Morrison.” The female officer looked at Jack. “And it came from your com-glasses. Your photo was there too.” Her smile flatlined.

Kalsie’s eyebrows lifted. “Fess up now if you did this. Just tell me if you were bored or thought it would be funny.”

“I didn’t . . . I didn’t call anyone,” Jack sat up straight. “I swear! My glasses did it all by themselves.”

All the officers came out of the house a moment later. The one with the red beard walked up to Ashlyn. “House is clear. No sign of an intruder. No weapon found.” He led Ashlyn out of earshot.

Neighbors stood on the sidewalks, pointing and whispering.

Ashlyn and Bailey returned to Jack. “We’re going to have to charge you, Jack,” Bailey said. “Your voice and image were clearly identified by our computer, so we know it was you. A

crank call of this nature is a very serious crime. You've wasted our time and possibly endangered someone who really needed our help. I have to charge you with at least two offenses here." He walked off.

Ashlyn knelt to Jack's level. "Why don't you tell me why you did this? Were you mad at your dad? Or mom?"

"No!" Jack cried out. "I didn't call anyone. I promise! William did this. He's the only one that would do this to me." He wondered if William's father helped set it up. Why else would the old man be walking around the neighborhood at night? Maybe the two were in it together.

"If it's worth anything, I believe you. They used to call it swatting. Kids pulled off this prank before voice recognition. It doesn't happen anymore, until now. If this wasn't you, then someone has a pretty clever computer program mimicking your voice and cloning your phone signature and your image. Whoever did this knows what they were doing, or maybe they used magic or something. At any rate, you've got an uphill battle ahead. The courts have mandatory rules for sentencing. Stay here, Jack. I need your mother and father to come with me," Ashlyn said. She turned to the red-bearded officer, "Officer Bailey, read Jack his rights." She moved away, jotting notes on a black tablet.

Officer Bailey made a hand gesture, and his com-glasses reacted. Jack could see the glow of light reflecting off the glass surface communicating to Bailey. The officer read him his rights. Afterward, Bailey stared hard at Jack. "This is my beat. I'm in this neighborhood every day. I got my eye on you. My suggestion, keep your nose clean from now on or I'm gonna lock you up with real hard criminals. This is a zero-tolerance zone."

Jack recoiled, pressing into the padded seat. He hadn't felt this bad in a long time. He looked over his shoulder to the Carpenters' mansion across the street. William was as devious as

it got. He picked on Jack every chance he got but was smart enough to keep his nose clean. He made Jack feel weak and stupid. It wasn't clear how William had the brains to pull this off, but there was no doubt it was him. This was the worst prank yet, and Jack was in a lot of trouble. He felt a hot burst of anger in his chest. "I hate you," Jack hissed, while staring at a single glowing window on the second floor of the huge Carpenter home. A dark shadow lurked in the corner of the window. It was William, looking down at his handiwork and no doubt patting himself on the back.