

Struggles and Our-Kind, Enroute to a Vision

Or The Terra-Form War

By Brandon Lund

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“Struggles and Our-Kind, Enroute to a Vision,” is a vocabulary-based science-fiction novel that takes place around the lives of a Judge and a wealthy entrepreneur. Three worlds have been drawn together by a vision of the future that culminates in the near extinction of humankind and a struggle to survive the baser impulses of ill-gotten wealth. Those who must piece together meaning while dealing with the price of greed find reason and therefore can continue.

Part 1: The Dry Planet, Martian Lazifor

The quiet child seeks comfort from her mother. Her cheeks have cooled though still red. The chamber fills with people commuting. “We should be social as we transition through our choices,” Melody says. “A humming baby is little more than a bee.”

The ship periodically descends faster than expected. An intermittent dry noise frightens those in a position to see. The view remains uncertain. Terrance’s chamber is oval-shaped. Daniel’s research has found that people enjoy a shape better during long bouts of travel. They are better prepared, as a town, if the chamber suits an image of future housing.

“Are you sharing what you know?” Daniel says.

He passes Melody crushed pepper. “You should be discussing your problems with Benjamin while you eat.”

“I still enjoy meeting new people. I do not always share what I know. My discoveries are...private.”

“Sharing food and gift giving are important. You should purchase a copy of your favorite magazine and share it with Benjamin.”

The ship feels stable. Its broad frame provides comfort for the frightened passengers. It is portly and digs deep into the handle-bar mustache of the planet’s skin. Everyone gazes and glows as outside becomes closer. Lazifor offers nothing but labor and hope of better life solitude and fair clearance for those aboard the expedition.

“I see a landscape that’s one-hundred years old.” He places a hand against the glass. Nervousness is spoken through eye contact.

Melody Juniper pulls a wisp of hair and cries. “I don’t plan to live that long.”

Terrance Bracecapt attempts to breath. Unexpected tension gurgles like a lump of peanut butter as the ship finds further traction.

“I’m joking.”

“At least we can walk around.”

Buckles pop and elements leaders release the remaining few still strapped in. Three-thousand people. The passengers begin anew.

A small boy goes racing to his father. Ben Hernandez scoops him and gives him a kiss. “My boy,” he whispers. These are the fore-fathers of the dry planet Lazifor.

Two formations step from the platform. The element leaders do not join them. They are busy talking. A bag of peanuts is passed between them. A dehydrated man places a hand on to his wife's shoulder.

"Wait."

"This is it."

The level sands, and feature-bleached dunes, wait for anything to change them. Optimism becomes progress becomes future work.

The dinner table is filled with pepper and salt. Plates and spoons are emptied and licked in competition. "Has the atmosphere expanded?"

"Yes. Daniel needs to send better equipment."

"Stay within thirty miles of the atmosphere converter and you'll be fine. How's your corn bread?"

"Really good."

A box of colored pencils sits between Melody's legs. She hands them, one at a time, to her son. His napkin is a hodge-podge of many colors.

"Honey, just let him eat." Benjamin swallows a sticky lump of cornbread.

"He doesn't want to eat, he wants to color." When he is done, she spoons him a small portion of baby food.

Ben Hernandez places the long steel teeth into the earth. The teeth spin and break ancient layers of sediment. Rubber piping gushes water into the bottom geologic layers. Ground water is vital to a healthy ecosystem.

The sequence is the most important part. Melody removes the checklist from her equipment bag. Six years of education and she still does not feel comfortable operating the equipment without a checklist. As her eyes focus on the checklist, she lets the equipment bag slip from her shoulder into the dust.

She walks around the evaporator, inspecting the condition. Good shape. It has been sitting here for six months and not a scratch. The main panel has never been opened. A factory seal evidence of this. The evaporator is alive and feels shiny and new. Looking at the checklist, Melody says in a breathy whisper, "Remove the seal."

Step one. Easy enough. The seal comes off with a surprising, thump! She enters the primary key code. A screen illuminates. She is one of three authorized to operate the evaporator. She enters her

civilian identification number. The machine acknowledges her. Aside from the checklist, she was issued three books. Two operator's manuals and one maintenance manual. The first manual details how to create water. The second how to disperse it into the atmosphere.

A quick systems check.

Melody begins to blend the Martian atmosphere with Lazifor's. It will never be perfect, but close enough. Creating water from Mar's raw materials is the evaporator's primary function. Dispersal after that. It disperses water and O3 a few miles up. Air buoys keep the molecules from falling. With the help of the sun, these air buoys will create global air currents and a human hospitable Lazifor.

Alan Gomez oversees overall homogeny with forestry. "It will be a decade before we can begin planting."

Alan and Melody sleep on couches overlooking the hills of Lazifor. They have been crossing them the entire day. Daniel Makes leaves them to their business. They were promised six months of leisure before starting anew and nobody has complained once they must begin working. He sips water and feels nervous. Should he feel safe or unsafe that now he has escaped Mr. Potts? The manila envelope has not left his possession the entire time. He could draw the man's face who gave it to him, even from such a brief correspondence. To say the lack of judgement would be the ruin of starting anew on Lazifor still troubles Daniel Makes. Are the struggles that precede our success still with us, he thinks. The manila envelope on Artifact Animalism will remain in his personal files until the library can hold them for future readers of history from 'here forward.' The manila envelope re-invites him to look. Daniel returns to his favorite part of the man's Declaration of Intent: "Without these virtues, reform and legal precedent, inhabitants of the world can expect slavish treatment as future property of the corporate body SCIC, to include profound violations against human growth here forward."

What a person doesn't know won't hurt them, he says. Nothing could be further from the truth. Terra-Formed Mars has never been a place to rest but it was his home and is to be the history for starting anew on Lazifor. His evaporators use Martian atmosphere and he himself moved there as a child from a Synthetic Continent. Even as a man of middle years, he did not know that the Terra-Formed Mars was struggling with crime, to such extent that warlords, as described to him by way of Diego's files, which included his Declaration of Intent, threatened the future of humanity. And our deliverance almost ruined, he thinks, even so far and away from our beginnings, once upon a time upon Our Native Earth.

The development in progress invents feelings of concern for others and he stares across the sands with a heart that is heavier now they are here. He returns to the manila envelope and allows the image of Mr. Potts to distance itself from his notion of moving forward. How naïve we are, he considers this notion deeply. A naïve spirit finds home in people and people change over time. This, perhaps, is the job I am not ready for, though it has been thrust upon me. To govern our people and keep them safe from the darker impulses we share by creating something that is lasting. To seize such grandeur, as we have, and think that we will not have crime, and that punishment will heal all wounds. But perhaps we will also have a savior in our midst, as well; someone to make sense of the on-going judgment of others— This man Diego pierced through a dark cloud above and solved a problem I believe not many could have done. Not many could have delivered us from the Artifact Animal described in these files. Daniel has never felt so helpless but he stands still and he remains acceptant of those who have come along. To destroy a problem, you must know where it begins...

Frightened. Nervous. Arnold steps on to the porch from the sliding glass-door of his bedroom. The porch is cool. His toes dig impatiently into the wood. He is a short man. His hairy forearms and calves have grown overly muscular to support his heavy set frame. He takes a moment to breathe the air. He enjoys the smell outdoors. It is a mud-mix of grass and pine needles made heavy from the rain. He goes back inside, to the kitchen, and switches on the four-cup coffee machine he programmed to auto-start at six o'clock. Rubbing his eyes and stretching, his leg shakes like a cat's. A moment passes in eerie silence. He hears the coffee machine bubble as the last drops of water filter through the grinds. Wanting coffee with a fuller body, Arnold opens up the refrigerator to find the half-and-half. The interior light startles him. He pushes a cheesecake aside, then the Tabasco sauce, and finds the half-and-half towards the back. It is almost empty. The cream within the carton feels light and loose, sloshing from side to side. He also grabs the honey from the counter. Halfway between the refrigerator and the four-cup coffee machine, he stops. The honey is in one hand and the half-and-half in the other. He breathes rhythmically, a somber look across his face.

Arnold places the half-and-half and honey on to the counter, ignores the coffee pot full of black-brown crude morning brew, and returns to his bedroom. He sits on the edge of the bed and stares at his feet. The phone rings. He arranges his appearance and clears his throat. "Yes," he says in a voice as calm and cool as possible.

"Are you doing your job?" The voice asks. Arnold is hardly breathing. She hangs up the phone before he can answer. Arnold remains on the line listening to the dial tone.

"Yes," he says.

He rubs a tiny charm in the hollow of his pocket. Drool pools in the corner of his mouth. Thick dark circles grow under his eyes. His skin pales and blue veins grow visible. The receiver feels like a slab of marble in his hand. When he hangs up, the shiny plastic stares back with a reflection of him looking stupid.

He goes into the kitchen, grabs a black mug from the cabinet, and pours himself a long cup of coffee. The plumes of steam twist into nothingness. He pours the proper amount of honey and half-half into his coffee with the precision of a toy-maker. He grabs a stool, props both feet upon the mid-bar and cradles the coffee as Gollum would his precious. He does not think. He only moves, rocking back and forth, letting the steam moisten his face and enter his lungs. "I'm doing my job," he says with unfocused eyes, staring into nothingness. The coffee is almost gone when the phone rings.

Samantha says, “You’ve done well Mr. Fifty-Five. Enjoy your coffee. You’re next and final job is to terminate yourself.”

A captain leaves the room unsettled. The paperwork he studies has become three pillars. He tugs his sleeves at the collar.

He pulls keys from his pocket and flips open his phone. The “Unit Recall” button waits like a dinner bell. Captain Tate strolls over to his motorcycle parked in the gravel.

A vehicle carrying soldiers from his unit drives by. He pushes the unit recall button. The jeep screeches to a dusty halt. Two soldiers hop out and salute the Captain. They look agitated, knowing full well that their break is over.

“Good boys. Respond when I fucking call you,” he says with assurance, low, beneath his breath. Before they can ask a single question the captain roars off.

As the two stand there, the base begins to stir with many orders from many captains and officers. A black, rusty aluminum gate breaks its long silence from a building. A lieutenant, with two troopers, makes plans to disperse munitions for others. Belts and boots, along with bags for carrying gear, are unpacked and placed on the deck for counting. The general has spoken with only five other officers but things are moving forward with the certainty of war to change history.

“Has Mr. Potts spoken with you?” Senator Martin keeps his tone easy to handle, as though the disregard could hide a reason to call first.

“How am I supposed to know these things unless you tell me?” the general is unsure. His squadrons are mobilizing and the Senator does not need to know what he is doing.

“He hasn’t spoken with me yet either,” the Senator continues forward. “I was told that an important development was making progress and that I should wait until I spoke with the field commanders to know. I thought I’d call. No one has said anything to me either.”

“We’ll be in touch.” The general says. “If there is an important development, hopefully Mr. Potts will let us know soon, what we can expect. I am just the field commander for the business. I don’t want the dignitaries of our planet getting confused. When they’ve developed the weapon, tell me.”

“As a dignitary, I will.” He says and hangs up.

Reassured that his contacts are still secret, Senator Martin leaps up from his seat; since he can now move forward with his work involving Mr. Potts. A previous role as SCIC governor of Terra-Formed Mars waits for him at the end if things go according to design. Using innovations developed by Mr. Potts, still clandestine in his role to most, save for the Senator himself; the Senator must establish lasting

responsibility and care from SCIC for the people: dependency, to SCIC from the people in order to maintain control over the region is key. A need to know basis has been established between the Senator and the General from here. Since the General is field commander of affairs on Terra-Formed Mars. Mr. Pott's role as director of the agency which monitor's SCIC development is conflicting; therefore the Senator will serve as foreign dignitary for the campaign and the *People of Our Sovereign Earth* will fund it until there is stability among *Foreign People*. As humanity moves forward, Terra-Formed Mars struggles to grow.

The dial tone hums in Arnold's ear. He feels nervous and sedated, like morphine in the veins of a dying man. "Terminate myself?" he says and drinks the coffee's last swallow. He places the mug on the counter. His feet flap on the floor. Flap, flap, flap. The 9mm is in the top drawer of his dresser. He chambers a round. "I won't kill myself," he says before putting the pistol to his head. The pistol echoes through the sliding-glass-door into the forest. A large portion of his brain plops on the floor. The 9mm spins like a dropped quarter. It goes lifeless alongside his body. Ten minutes later the smell from the spent round is still in the air. He was trained well by *Synthetic Continent International Commodities*.

A business woman and a gigantic gorilla-of-a-man enter the simulator. Arnold's head smolders, dead as a doornail. They examine the situation objectively. Samantha picks up the coffee cup. "Dispose of him Armie. Unfortunately, Mr. 55 has gone bad."

"Do you think our follow up will be as good?" the bodyguard says.

"He'll do just fine." She says with the tone of an enforcer. She stays sharp while among her peers. She steps over Arnold's body and steals a glance at the corpse. She smiles at it with a look of genuine care. "I certainly did like him."

She walks gracefully to the counter where the half-and-half and honey are sitting. The coffee pot is still on. The condiments sit on the counter like shadows of Arnold's once living body. She does not touch a thing and leaves.

Ramon kicks dust over spit. The moment he got the call his break stalled and gave up. He holds on to hope that he can ignore what just happened until the captain's ghost riding a motorcycle appears. His phone glows in his hand from the call that he was trying to ignore. He sees the Captain's name blinking. "This sucks." The driver twists Ramon's wrist to see. "His name, right there."

"Do we need anything from the dorms?"

"If we need anything we should go back. Do you think we should fall in without our stuff?" They continue heading north. The dorm is visible from the intersection. Two large oaks stand in front of the entrance to the building that is led by a set of half-circle stairs. Andrew drives the jeep across the lawn. The futility of arguing through defiant behavior is obvious. He waits as Ramond proceeds to his room, which is four doors down from the entrance. The room is messy with big heavy boxes of meals that should have been discarded. Pizza boxes and dirty clothes are on the floor. Ramon retrieves the logistics for the mission and returns to the jeep.

“What did you get?” Andrew asks.

“The briefing for Terra Formed Mars.”

“Why not waste a trip to the dorms? No one else is going to have it. I promise you.”

Ramon would like to read something fun. He skips the memo and grabs the Brochure: “I think this guy can do it. Start over on Lazifor with the new SC they got working on. They can do it.”

“I don’t think the corporation is too happy about it. What they got working on. We are looking for the people who will start over on Lazifor. Not the best time to be the fan of a new SC.”

The jeep screeches off. They were supposed to have another seventy-two hours before they left for Terra-Formed Mars. The jeep reaches sixty to recall on time to a site determined by their captain. Ramon reads the memo and plays the situation out in his head.

While the two collect themselves to stand in formation, Captain Tate watches the jeep approach and park: “I saw you fucking idiots thirty fucking minutes ago! And you’re the last ones here. Fall in!”

Captain Tate wastes few words. As the ranks form up and fall in, he skips formalities and speaks as casually and informal as he is allowed to. It was not his decision to deploy his unit early. He does not care but he would like more time off for the troops. It is his job to make sure they are combat ready for Terra-Formed Mars and more time off would make them sharper. He says, “Twelve hours till we leave and we’ve got work to do. So suck it up. Our unit is already late. Get your shit together and be back here in three hours. Three hours! Do you hear me? Trips to the commissary are fine. Trips to the chow hall are fine. No fucking around. If you want to get a few games in at the arcade, fine. Three hours is it. Times up. Get your gear and get your asses back here troops. Ten hut. Dis-missed!”

The unit balls up and disperses. Ramon’s footing is uncertain. Nervous energy leads him and Andrew to the jeep. “Let’s go,” Ramon hops in back.

Getting settled, Andrew heaves himself forward in the driver’s seat and turns the ignition. The jeep comes to life and reclines upon the open road. Feeling more comfortable and relaxed, Ramon decides to sleep.

Andrew punches his open stomach. “Thank you.”

The dorm is the chosen playpen. It is a tradition before they deploy. One room is wide open. Porn and music run through the halls, largely empty from those who arrived earlier than others. Ramon kicks his pizza boxes into the hall. His bags are packed. He has head phones on and his hoodie pulled over

his head. Street tough. He throws his bags into the jeep. He waits in the passenger seat for Andrew to emerge from the jungle of trash.

Delmore, Nathan, and Osman are neatly packed and walking to the parking lot. “Ah, come on you fucks, trash something,” Andrew says. He grabs a pizza box and throws it outside like a Frisbee. He follows it to the jeep. Andrew throws his suitcase into the back along with his body armor. Although they are ready, they do not head towards the recall site.

Two hours later the soldiers arrive. Delmore, Nathan, and Osman wait in the parking lot.

Captain Tate does not acknowledge them. He is talking on the phone.

“Alright you five,” he says and clips the phone closed. “Make your way to the shuttle. Are the rest of those idiots still trashing the dorm? Don’t answer that.” He laughs.

Ramon, Andrew, Delmore, Nathan, and Osman caravan to the shuttle in two cars. Andrew shows his military I.D. to the security guard posted at the check point. From a distance, the shuttle is bounding towards them as bumps from uneven road alter the view of things.

The shuttle is enormous. It is called Lucy. Staying focused on his gear, Ramon runs his hand over the decal of the shuttle without looking. He is damp and a little weathered from outside. The entrance perfumes his face with cool, dry air when he enters. While walking through the chambered halls, he reads the history of SC-12 written among the ship’s décor. The shuttle Lucy travels every six months, twice a year to the magnificent Cretan. The ride is informative heading to SC-12, which is one of fourteen man-made continents that circle Terra-Formed Mars at various points in space.

“Good job you guys,” the captain says from the shuttle’s entrance. “The rest of your team will meet you on SC-12. Since you’re on time, they can fight over shitty bunks and armor leftover after you choose what you want. That’s how I remember it.”

His about face is hurried as the door closes behind him. “Good guys are on time,” he says.

The runway beneath him is black and traction for his shoes is obvious. The control tower gives a thumbs-up when the gate to the observatory cabin is closed behind him. The lights within the cab grow dark and dim. Captain Tate monitors their behavior from the screen he has of Lucy’s launch room. They will travel alone. The captain waves and keeps his eyes covered beneath the brim of his cap. Ramon turns up his head phones. The shuttle begins its ascent at eighty-five degrees. Two giant pistons below the platform create the incline for take off. The atmosphere falls apart and shows its seams. The core ignites and the anti-gravity frame lifts the shuttle off of the platform. It is good to go. The remote pilot finds its target, SC-12, and the shuttle takes off like a feather, light and quick, its cargo only five.

The port halfway between “Earth and Mars” is the military Cretan, SC-12. All personnel, military and civilian, must pass through this structure made from strength of arms before entering “Mars.” SC-12 is single handedly responsible for Our Sovereign Earth’s continued influence over Terra-Formed Mars, which would otherwise have sovereign nation of its own. City-States hold the people together and regional law enforcement has not yet reached international purpose that is high enough to keep them safe from crime. To be over five hundred years old as a planet’s mission; and to be created to assuage the ever-growing need for land. That is Terra-Formed Mars: Humankind finds hospitable planets in route to a vision.

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The wrench bounces with numerous clangs from head to toe on to the concrete. Danny does not want to walk down two stories of steps to retrieve it. His hand passes over a large decal screwed on to the wall. He takes his time chewing gum. Hopping down the steps. He is only twenty-six but he looks much older. Labor and lack of education has pigeon holed him into a life he did not chose, for someone of his age. Thereabouts, youth often meets an unfitting end to moving up. He grabs the wrench and looks up. He wants to finish before lunch. The electrical box hangs open. Danny takes the stairs back up and sighs. It takes him forty-five minutes to fix the circuit. He places a yellow seal on the box, dates it, and leaves. He throws the gear and his bag into the seat next to him on the relayed he often used to take him home.

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The food court is loud. He has stopped to eat and use the time to relax before entering into his routine once home. A friend interrupts Danny while he reads the menu. “Done?” Danny asks surprised. His friend smiles sheepishly. His voice breaks through the solitude hidden in the noise of simple choices. Danny was certain he was alone. Since he has finished early he could be spending his time someplace visible to his superiors. Danny feels a little disarmed by the randomness of the encounter.

Danny orders something to eat.

“I am not done,” his friend Arrie replies.

“Please help.” Arrie shamelessly whimpers.

“The puppy needs help. After lunch I’ll help.” Danny says. He takes a huge bite of his sandwich.

He sips his soda. The two talk about sports and nonsense.

Ramon watches the blue outside his window turn white. Breaking through the atmosphere is intense beauty. It is a twenty minute ascent. Then, as if falling on to the softest bed, the shuttle levels off. After breaking through, the remote pilot redirects its course now heading in a straight line for SC-12.

No one is talking. Andrew has settled into his laptop. The trooper staring out the window with an expression lost in memory agitate the skin of a pack of smokes, pulls out a small table from beneath the seats. A pack of playing cards has been placed in a pocket. The table is designed for entertainment. They begin playing cards and Ramon does not understand everything.

“Can I play?” Ramon asks.

“I don’t think so,” H replies and smiles. “You need to have your own cards.”

The walls of the shuttle are bare except for the pictures of prominent officers and recent heroes. Ramon did not plan well for this journey. “If you know a game, let’s play. I can’t play hearts. I might play solitaire.”

He settles into his seat. Andrew is watching a movie on his laptop. Ramon removes the only entertainment that he brought with him. His mother encouraged him to read since he was a child. Ramon likes books but not reading. He likes the way books feel. Clean and pure, regardless of the content they may or may not contain.

In the deep silence he begins to read. It is a store-front novel. The words seem strange. Ramon does not realize he is meditating. The shuttle’s cabin zips through space. There are no expectations to give the words meaning in space. Here, there is only the shuttle and four others. Here, there is space to recreate the world he sees. He feels free to recreate the meaning of words, which is what reading is of course. He falls asleep with the book open and heaving on his chest. Within the heavy meditation of good sleep, he dreams of the story. The story couples with the briefing. He imagines the targets. He places faces on them. Dr. Harris and Marselle. Dr. Harris talks to Marselle along the edge of a fountain. Ramon descends through the clouds. He is a dragon with drooling fangs. He sees himself. He is all black with scales so shiny they hold a reflection. Dr. Harris and Marselle can see the twisting-horror in their faces as the shiny black dragon coats them in fire. He descends to the earth holding his wings high and flapping to control the speed of descent. When he lands, the earth curdles beneath the weight of his gigantic frame. He is two stories tall standing eye to eye with a clock-tower next to him. Dr. Harris and Marselle are naked. He pins them beneath a single paw. Blood gushes through his knuckles. Ramon wakes with a deep breath. Eyes blinking. He takes another look at the cover. Wizard’s War, it reads. Between meals and sleep, he will read the book over the next thirty-six hours it will take to reach SC-12.

“I’m hungry,” Andrew mumbles to himself. He opens the freezer. Ready-To-Eat meals stock the shelves. It is a walk-in freezer. Ramon is asleep. A book bobs on his chest like a dingy.

Andrew grabs chips and pudding. He pulls the label back and shovels gulps of pudding in his mouth. The cold mush makes his tooth aches. “Damn it,” he moans. He shoves an index finger into the back of his mouth. He does not even know which tooth it is.

He grabs Ramon’s book; not noticing that he loses the place where he was reading. He reads the first page but loses interest after the opening paragraph. Feeling restless, he settles into a porn that he tucked behind a CD that he rarely listens to. He watches until he can hardly distinguish faces from body parts. The screen is just a mess of flashing flesh-colored images. Everyone else is asleep. Within the shuttle’s black cabin, Damien’s face is pounded by the lights blinking like a video game. His neck begins to hurt. He is hardly moving. He feels a need to wash his body. Setting the laptop on to the floor, he steps into the shuttle’s center isle heading to the bathroom. Once within the bathroom, he washes his face. Staring at himself beneath that florescent light, he feels like dying. He once again settles into the seat next to Ramon. He feels safe. Ramon put to sleep with reading makes him feel safe. His eyes lids grow heavy. His sleep settles into dreams. Violent dreams. Andrew is seated on a throne. He wears a mask of a beautiful woman. From behind the mask, Andrew feels free to flirt with anyone. Now and again, he sees another man also wearing the mask of a beautiful woman. The dream loops over and over again until Andrew is so disturbed he wakes himself. He is shaking and cold. Placing his palm on to his forehead, he rubs his brow until he is thinking clear. Ramon is awake and reading. Thank God, Andrew thinks. I do not like being alone. He takes a seat next to the soldiers playing solitaire.

Dr. Harris knows more about history than fashion. He wears shorts, black socks, and sandals to work. His colleagues giggle. He enters the classroom. There is little talking. He prefers it this way. "I hope you guys are ready to do a little writing," he says.

He pulls a grease-board pen from his briefcase. Dr. Harris writes 'What do you remember about the past?' on the board. The pen squeaks. It leaves blue across the board. Students rustle in their backpacks for pens. He circles them. He returns to his desk and removes a pen from his briefcase. He taps it against his chin. The class is still writing an hour later. They drop their pencils and pens slowly. Their eyes sparkle from contemplation. He says, "Did anyone write about Western European or Asia?" He taps his pen against his chin. He raises his eyebrows and waits for an answer.

Julie Monroe says, "I could only remember America and China." She is his brightest student. Dr. Harris smiles to himself. The students only ever remember America and China. Mt. Rushmore and The Great Wall still exist.

Dr. Harris sits on the edge of his cheap desk. He says, "America was a colony. Can anybody name a colony that exists today?"

Julie says, "Terra-Formed Mars."

"And what about Terra-Formed Mars is so special?"

"They're Martians," She giggles, "I'm just kidding."

Dr. Harris says, "What is the chief occupation on Terra-Formed Mars?"

The entire class is silent, nobody knows the answer. Dr. Harris laughs, "Let me put it this way: who lives there? No one? Lots of miners and farmer and there job is to maintain the Synthetic Continents that circle Mars. I think synthetic continents are so cool. They have their own constitutions, legislative bodies, universities, criminals, prisons, you name it. They're kind of like the nations from ancient times. Like your America and China Julie!"

She feels embarrassed for speaking-up. She thinks, 'What a nerd.' So does most of the class (You would think the realms of higher education would be more mature). The students no longer acknowledge the professor when the clock hits three-thirty. They leave in a bustle of zippers and chatter. Dr. Harris says, "I want to remind you to come more prepared to talk next Tuesday."

Dr. Harris flips his brief case closed and looks around. He adjusts his underwear. It has found an uncomfortable position around his groin. He stops in the lounge to steal the paper. The headline reads, "Senator Martin Visits Martians in Peace." It sounds like a movie title. His favorite parts are when they refer to the colonists as Martians, as if they aren't humans.

He tucks the paper into his armpit. It is dusk. Martha is waiting for him to come home. The university during the evening is always contemplative. People seem more focused, more prone to meditation instead of learning. The glass doors are just ahead. He sees lights on in the office of Marselle.

Nearly twenty-five years on Lazifor and still no problems from SCIC. The gust of the sea whips across Melodies smiling face. “I did this.” The satisfaction of creating something vast, undeniable and great settles in. “We are building Lazifor.” She turns away from the little ocean floating before her. Terra-Rio is still small. Still uninhabited. But their little society is growing.

She grabs a bite to eat at a tiny diner. The door jingles and she spread door. The buzz of conversation is a little more than she expected. Silverware clinks and waitresses ask for orders. The smell of bacon and eggs billows from the kitchen. She takes a seat at a small two-person cubicle. Turning the condiments so that the labels face her, as she always does. She passes the minute it takes her waiter to approach her without a thought in her head. She is pleased to let the sun billowing through the windows entertain her. Taken by the happiness of a simple moment to share with no one but herself. The waiter does not ask her what she wants. He simply smiles with his order form in hand.

“Does the steak and eggs come with coffee?” Melody asks.

“The Whole Pepper Steak? It comes with coffee.”

“I’ll have that. Eggs over medium.”

“Anything else?”

“Nope.” The waiter grabs her menu and scurries off.

Melody’s beeping phone interrupts her happiness. She pulls it from her pocket a little disappointed. She was hoping to spend her fortieth birthday alone. Terrance’s name blinks, almost mockingly blinks. She knows he knows that she is alone and is not okay with it.

Placing the phone to her ear: “I know what you are doing,” Terrance say, “and you’re not going to spend your birthday alone. Finish eating breakfast and then come over to my house...” before she can interrupt: “come over to my house when you’re done! I have a present for you.”

So that is that, Melody thought. Birthdays are always better when those you love demand that you be happy. It’s the only way to enjoy their company.

The room is lit by a crack in the door. He takes a quick one-eighty turn. The florescent lights of the hall bathe the door in annoying green-blue. He hears angry voices. He can hear her struggling to maintain control. The shouting is frantic and scared.

The parking lot is full of students. A scuffle breaks out. It consisted of little more than shirt wrenching and violent stares. A lump swells in his throat. Perhaps the talk of war is real. He unhitches the door and plops in the driver's seat. He turns on the heater and stares into the cold surroundings that appear snipped. The parking lot is thin and level. The students most likely walked here from the dorms. Family dominates his thoughts. Marselles and her friends concern Dr. Harris. People are upset. The fist fight in the parking lot is a display of hopelessness. Youth losing ground after years of hard work. Dr. Harris doesn't turn on any lights. He goes over to the refrigerator and takes out a soda. He drinks the soda in one long gulp. He falls asleep on the sofa without taking off his shoes. Children laugh.

Greg wakes. He feels the need to shower. The bathroom is empty. The old corpse moves with labored steps.

Staring in the mirror, his face hangs like a bathrobe.

He did not realized how little sleep he has gotten until his wife comes into the bathroom while he is showering. "Rough night huh?" she asks.

Night clothes cling to Martha Harris' body like cob-webs. She wipes a hole in the fog forming and the mirror smiles back.

Dr. Harris steals a peak. A spy at work. A little soap gets in his eye. Dr. Harris rubs his eye and turns off the water.

"Do you still want to go?"

"I want to spend some time with you."

He takes a folded towel from the cupboard above the toilet, rubbing his soar eye as he dries his face.

"How big is it?" Dr. Harris asks.

"Pretty much the entire university. I think some of your students want to hear you speak."

She whirls around and hits him with her brush.

She rips his towel off and smacks him on the ass.

She smacks him again and again. Naked and desperate he stumbles over his daughter's toy house heading for the bedroom. "Okay!"

Greg shouts and slams the bedroom door.

Melody dabs the grease from her lips and pays the bill. Again, the door jingles. Again, she is startled by the sharp contrast between the noise inside the diner and the sometimes eerie stillness outside. The streets of Lazifor do not bustle as they do on Mars. Horse drawn carriages are very popular. Adapting to a new world is a slow, strange process. People need to approach it on their own terms.

A gust of red sand gently powders her skin like fairy dust. The mid-day sun is approaching and Melody no longer feels the enthusiasm of morning. Terrance's friendship has never seemed so inviting. For a moment, she cannot believe she was going to spend her birthday alone.

She watches a lady, black hair shimmering, push her child on what must be any other day to her. Melody does and does not envy her. Her great work and her great sacrifice is known to her more than anyone.

She is on the steps to Terrance's house without realizing it. "Come in her little sister," he says with the warmest hug the world has ever known. She bursts in to tears. "Why do you do this to yourself Melody. Be happy baby sister, you're not alone." She looks past him the small council seated both couches. Business. This was a business call. Melody is almost relieved. Thank god I have work to do, she says beneath her breath.

“The First Hundred Years on Lazifor”

Cheap cups of coffee roll between palms and fingers, creating misty filters to view each other’s faces. As Terrance pores a cup of coffee he says, “I want to break away now, before Daniel Makes gets too strong. Before we can’t.”

“Is that right? He funded this operation.”

“No, he funded a mining operation to fuel his space stations. But his place of business has become our home. We been here fifteen years and I can’t imagine living anywhere else. I’m sorry, but when you leave people in one place for as long as they have, they’re going to want to start calling it home. I don’t like the idea of Daniel’s growing enterprise running our colony as if we don’t live her, call it home, raise our children within its borders.”

“What should be done?”

“I am a contracted employee to Daniel Makes,” Terrance says, “but my children are not. If they want to continue to extract precious metals and resources from our great planet, they are going to have to eventually start buying it from us. Free trade. An open market. It’s only fair.”

“He will never go for that.”

“What is he going to do? Invade?”

“Daniel controls four important districts in Terra Rio...all of them. No he won’t invade. His territories will. We will have corrupt locals breathing down our neck.”

“Impossible. There is no way they could mobilize a force large enough to invade. Mar still aint’ that close.”

“Then he’ll build a Synthetic Continent right on our door step.”

Marselle meditates on Diego’s plan for war. *It should not be hard. The people are exhausted from foreign rule.* She rubs her pencil against her temple. Her curly black locks frame her pear face. The light from her desk lamp illuminates her features. *There is nothing stronger than common ground for common men and women to stand on.*

“There is nothing stronger than common ground for common men and women to stand on.” She says it then writes it down.

That is pretty good.

The poet meditates on phrases, words that can be passed upon the lips of strangers. *The protest is twelve hours away. The students are excited. Unfortunately, they have little clout in times of war.* She

lays down her pencil and approaches the small bar in the corner of her office. She pours herself a Rum and chocolate liquor and places it into the freezer to chill. She pulls a book from the shelf of poetry she has above her desk and opens it to a marked chapter. “She walks in beauty like the night,” she says aloud. What a bunch of bullshit, she thinks and slams the book closed. The sound echoes through the empty room. She pulls the drapes aside and looks out the window. It is still night. The protest is in the morning, she needs more material to feed the masses. The cocktail is still waiting in the freezer. Suddenly, she does not want it. She drinks it anyways in a shot of sweet, hot alcohol that burns her throat and tongue. She explores her imagination further: “Monkey off my back! No more hard taxes! Free Mars!”

These will work, she thinks staring at the slogans. They will make mantras of resistance against the foreign horde. Big-business barbarians, she thinks. They will not reign for long. She places the stack of papers into a manila folder and taps the edge against the desk to level the staggered pages. She imagines that she hears a knocking on the door as a group of soldiers come bursting in to burn her to the floor in a hail of angry bullets. Fantasies of war. She knows that she is no saint. She rises from her seat. Her butt feels damp with sweat from sitting for so long. She enters the night from a side door of the building. Martian nights. This is her home. The night is contemplative as she moves through the darkness alone. Her palms feel moist against the manila folder she is holding. The protest will be on campus. She does not plan on leaving the university tonight. A group of students are in another office a few blocks away. They too are preparing to protest the institutionalized occupation of Mars. It is time for change. No more SCIC. She moves through the Martian night with fluid grace and ease. A tiny dot of light is in the distance. She takes the steps quickly leading to the door.

“Hello.” A young man, baby-faced with glasses, greets Marselle. She smiles but says little. He is one of her brighter students. Intelligent and rebellious, he is Marselle’s kind.

“Here is some material,” she says. The young man immediately takes the material to his computer. The other four students are busy. One is drinking beer and smoking. Marselle does not mind. She visualizes the protest in her mind. Greg Harris will speak first. The students like him. She imagines it will not take long for SCIC’s patrolmen to interfere and break things up. This is what she wants. Nothing unites strangers like a common enemy. Nothing spells TYRANT like those willing to keep people apart. It does not even matter if they are only doing their jobs. She needs material to warp in favor of the war.

She walks to the field the protest will be held at. A patrol car is already stationed and waiting. They are prepared, she thinks. She waves. They wave back just as sarcastically.

“Can I see your I.D.” one patrolman says.

“Fuck you!” Marselle snaps back in violence.

The patrolman laughs and waves her on her way. She stands on the stage at the podium and stares across the field imagining the coming morning. There is already some students camping. They are prepared, she thinks again and laughs.

Senator Martin and his campaign to suppress the Martian independence movement has gone too far. Marselle takes out a pen from her cargo pocket and begins writing a note to Diego Valentine. It says, “I will join the security regulars.” She places it into her pocket and returns to her office to wait for the protest to begin.

“Lazifor Independence,” Terrance says, “Signed by every member of the original board. This is important.” Terrance nibbles on a piece of bread.

“Some birthday party.” Melody says from behind her cup of coffee.

“Ya, some birthday party. Your birthday will be remembered as the day that Mars becomes independent.”

“Ya, but the party sucked.” Melody smiles and takes a seat next to him. “This will never work.”

“I know, but it doesn’t matter. I just want the people to start thinking about it. If the people demand they pay us for our resources they have to listen. They have to acknowledge us. We will never flourish as a people getting paid salary wages while the corporate giants build their monuments to themselves on Earth. Don’t get me started.”

Terrance’s son grabs Melody’s leg. “Hey you!” she says scooping him up as if he was her own son. She places him in her lap and turns on the television. Terrance’s son tries to grab the remote from her hand. Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous show blinks to life on screen. Gaudy mansions and gaudy wealth. Nearly every one of its featured guests is an employee of SCIC, a constant reminder that Terrance was not only right, but a good man. “What do you want for breakfast?” she says to his son.

“Waffles!” the boy shouts, leaping from her lap like a paratroop. Both feet landing on the carpet at the same time, he darts into the kitchen, Melody one step behind. ‘I don’t know how to make waffles,’ she says under her breath. “Terrance! Your son is hungry!”

“Just make him some waffles!” He shouts back from somewhere in the house.

“Waffles it is,” she resigns herself to the task. If I can build a new world, I can make my nephew a stack of waffles, she thinks and opens up the cupboard.

The urban nights of Mars chug along. Heavy traffic, heavy desperation, the powerful sit on high, heavy on the poor. Within an SCIC labor embassy, a senator sits in a cloud of grey twisting cigar smoke. The lonely ember burns against his green eyes and the smoke curls around his knuckles. The atmosphere is quiet as he diligently rocks back and forth on the heels of his office chair. The drapes delicately batter, like eyelids, against the window cracked ever so slight. He extinguishes his cigar. He picks up a picture of his youngest daughter that he keeps on the far right corner of his desk and stares at it blankly. The frame gleams like a silver streak in the night, cool and clean. It has just been windexed. The moon cuts the room up into a contrast of light blue and empty blackness. The middle-aged man sits up, places the picture back on the desk, and crosses his fingers over his head. He opens the top draw of his desk and pulls out a single piece of computer paper and grabs a black permanent marker from the desk top receptacle. He writes only two words on the paper, quietly capping the pen, putting it back where he found it, folds the piece of paper, and slips it into his breast pocket: FULL INVASION.

The senator takes off his coat and opens up the mini bar refrigerator at the opposite end of his office. He pulls out a soda and breaks the seal with a sharp crack. The smell fills his lungs with the cheap aroma of carbonated syrup. He opens the top draw below the liquor cabinet, pulls out a bottle of whiskey and pours himself a drink in a thick bottom crystal cup. Each drink of whiskey and soda goes down sweet and hot like medicine. With a gaping mouth and bulging cheeks he finishes the drink in one pull along with the rest of the soda. He puts the whiskey away and picks up his coat from the bar stool, settles his appearance, and opens his office door to the startling soft green florescent lights. He rubs his eyes. The whiskey helps to calm his nerves as he fumbles for his car keys in his pant pockets. He briskly opens the double glass doors with aluminum handles to the parking lot. The air is warm and sweet for evening. He stands still and breathes it in. His thin hair ripples and sways like wheat. The parking lot has only three cars in it; one of which is under the street lamp which glows purple and orange like swollen fruit. It is his Porsche.

He gets in his car; the door closes with a classy hitch and the car purrs to life warm and softly. The cab glows green as he buzzes down the highway towards New Frisco, the city he is staying in. The highway is lively and cars streak by like felines chasing a gazelle. Senator Martin looks at himself in the rear view mirror. His eyes look tired for a forty five year old man. The hair on the top of his scalp has started to go white but it is still full and brown on the sides. His thin lips and determined skin glow faintly green against the luminance of the cab. FULL INVASION. This will be the first time in Mar's history that SCIC has invaded the planet.

The Porche takes the New Frisco exit heading northbound through the center of the city. Senator Martin is tired and looking forward to settling into his hotel room. The lights of the high rises can be seen from the freeway and Senator Martin feels his eye lids grow heavy as the buildings get closer, closer, closer. "Mark, the music" he says to himself and turns the air conditioning on and the music up to keep from nodding off. As he passes the downtown plaza he notices that the city is as lively and bustling as always. People of every shape, hue, and color fill the streets. The city resembles an urban savanna in the night. The cover of darkness and the dissecting city lights provided camouflage like zebra stripes. To Mark they are ghosts, haunting the canopy of phallic pillars. The shopping high-rises are particularly busy. The evening is time for commerce because the daytimes are too hot. The glassy exterior to the top floors of the high-rises drip down the sides of the buildings like water and zip people to the tops twice as quick. Senator Martin is more than dead tired, his body feels like putty swimming in his clothes, like a bunch of organs floating in a gold fish bowl.

The senator pulls into the parking lot of his hotel. The valet takes his car keys and he does not bother with his suitcase that is still in the trunk. The soft lobby lights mix with the pearl white motif. It is overwhelmingly decadent. The lobby has an almond-peach marble floor with a three tier fountain in the center. It is quiet and the senator feels safe with the staff of security for the complex. "Full invasion" He says to himself. The words sound hollow and chalky in the bright hall way to his hotel room.

Standing in front of his door is an old man. He has grey hair and thick eye brows. The laugh lines around his face are very deep when he smiles. "Good evening Senator Martin." The old man extends his hand and Senator Martin accepts it with a careless smile, "Do you mind if we talk."

"Not at all Mr. Potts come on in." Senator Martin cracks the door to his hotel. He is met with a cool breeze from the air-conditioning that he leaves constantly running. The night light glows softly in the corner of the room and Senator Martin throws his keys on the counter next to the door. "Please have a seat Mr. Potts."

"Don't mind if I do thank you." Mr. Potts falls into a recliner facing the drapes and rubs his chin while Senator Martin pours them both a drink of whiskey.

"I hope you know there is no way out of this, we must go to war." Mr. Potts says.

"I know." Senator Martin stares through the crystal of the cup as he speaks and swirls the liquid before handing it to Mr. Potts. "I'm going to announce my decision to the SCIC's board tomorrow. Judy and Dan fear we might lose the planet."

“Have they finished drafting a constitution? Daniel Makes is successfully drawing together resources and his legislature and constitution are people that I like. We are losing important people.”

“We have an answer. Mr. Potts is very good. And what he has pulled together we will pull apart with a stylish weapon.”

“Do you think they’ll agree?” Mr. Potts asks.

“It doesn’t matter.” Senator Martin replies, “My decisions are final.”

“I don’t think it will be received well back home.” Mr. Potts says.

Senator Martin smiles and is careless with his empty cup.

“You know I’ll support you all the way, I’m just making sure you’re o.k.”

“I’m fine...fine. Are you done with that? Do you want another?” Senator Martin stretches out from the arm of the couch he has been sitting on and takes the glass from Mr. Potts who nods approvingly for another drink.

“Well, I’m sure you are going to be very pleased with this model. It is top of the line, a ruthless sentinel.” Mr. Potts wrinkles his brow and shakes his head to illustrate this point. He unclips his black alligator brief case with a smart snap and pulls a weighty manila envelope from the top of the stack of papers inside. “Here you go.” He leans forward and exchanges the manila envelope for the whiskey and soda that Senator Martin has prepared for him. He looks at the envelope. It is puffy and heavy with a white sticker directly in the center. The sticker reads “*Artifact Animal: The Stylized Weapon of the Future.*”

Without opening it Senator Martin takes the envelope and plops it on the dining room table and sits full in the couch. “Listen, the next few months are going to get a little crazy,” Senator Martin says, “I’m gonna need you to keep your mouth shut to your partners while we get through this; there is going to be a lot of money in this for everybody if things go well, including your partners. Just keep it quiet.” Senator Martin with his left hand extends his glass with a satisfied grin on his face. Mr. Potts begrudgingly leans forward, clicks his glass, and settles back into his chair. “I could give a damn about my partners”. Mr. Potts huffs and stares at his drink. They are both quiet for a moment. Then Mr. Potts says, “Well Mark, I’d better get going, I just wanted to drop those papers by and see how you’re doing.” Mr. Potts heaves himself up, grabs his brief case, smiles at Senator Martin, and leaves the apartment without another word.

“Take care Mr. Potts, we’ll be in touch.” Senator Martin stares at his glass of booze and swirls it till the soda in it is flat. He stands up and goes over to the dining table. He looks at the manila envelope but

doesn't open it. He stares at the package as if it were a stranger on the street not to be trusted. Finally he picks it up, refusing to open it; he runs his fingers over its outer edges. The envelope is weighty, probably around two hundred pages of material.

The apartment is very dim and quiet; the senator goes over to the window and cracks it just enough to hear the bustle of the street. The honking and mixed chatter has a soothing effect. He listens intently still holding the envelope. The glare from the window glows faintly against his skin. He again feels detached from the world as it goes whizzing but in front of him. The people appear ghostly. He feels very, very old sitting in front of the window as if his mind and body lived in two different time zones. He closes the window and sits back down on the couch. He opens the manila envelope. The aluminum thongs were the only sealant for the envelope. Senator Martin slides the contents on to his lap and tosses the empty envelope on to the floor. The pamphlet is bound by a blue diamond sticker that reads "Project Director's Seal of Approval".

The senator set the pamphlet aside and begins shuffling through the bundles of papers clamped neatly together in order of importance. He removes the pieces of computer paper from his breast pocket, FULL INVASION. Senator Martin goes over to the computer desk adjacent to the couch and pulls out his favorite pen, his thinking pen, from the receptacle next to the monitor on the desk top and writes: "The media will be briefed after the rebellion is successfully drawn to a close. This war will be disclosed in a manner that clearly illustrates the positive intentions of the *Synthetic Continent Commodities International* towards the people of Mars."

His neck aches and he can barely keep his eyes open. He lumbers over to the couch and lies down to rest his eyes before getting ready for bed. He awakes to the brisk morning bustle and white light of the sun through the window. He strolls into the bathroom for a shower.

"The Artifact Animal," he says to himself from beneath the shower water. Just the name sounds creepy. He lets the cascading steamy water find its way through his hair. He runs both hands through his thin main, rubs his eyes, and then turns the water off. He stands for a moment in the steam and quiet water dripping from his nose. He does not want to leave the shower. He wishes he could stay in there forever. He feels safe. He pulls a towel from the hanger of the wall and dabs his face. Wrapping the towel around his waist, he does not dry off. He needs a drink. He walks through the living-room all the while keeping an eye on the manila envelope still sitting on the couch where he left it the night before. He feels awkward thinking that Mr. Potts was in his apartment last night. That was a mixing of worlds

that he did not wish to repeat. The information within the envelop made him feel dirty. A person reduced to a walking corpse. A suicide bomber for a culture that does not think that it is religious.

Click. Click. Ice, whiskey, and soda fill the hollow of his cup. He uses a plastic cup from the cupboard. He does not feel comfortable drinking from the crystal while he is alone. The senator sighs and begins to pack for the shuttle heading to SC-12. He wants to see the units prepare for the invasion. His adrenaline pumps violently. He feels so alive on the cusp of war. Something is really happening. While only wearing slacks, no socks or tee-shirt, he removes a small vile of cocaine from behind a bottle of vodka in the liquor cabinet. He grabs his car keys from the counter, places the tip of his ignition key within the vile, removes a small portion, and snorts it up his noses. He no longer feels nervous, only horny.

Fully dressed, he emerges from the hotel. Mars seems so different in the sun. It must be the people. Some people do not fare well in the light.

The embassy is on the opposite side of New Frisco. Senator Martin hails a horse drawn carriage passing by. A beautiful horse, rippling with muscles and blinders to the right and left of its eyes, trots in front of the senator. He places his two bags into the seat next to him, hands the driver sixty dollars, and settles into the seat to enjoy the ride. He loves horse-drawn carriages, the Martian people do as well. New Frisco is full of them. Shuttles, ugly and modern, do not do the leg work of transportation within the city.

Senator Martin is itching for another bump of cocaine. He is horny and rubs his groin. The driver clippy-clops along without giving his passenger a single word of small talk. Thank God. The senator has been consumed with his own thoughts all morning. He could only sound foolish with his ideas spoken to the world.

The embassy is a monument of marble in the middle of the city. It glows in the sun like the Pyramid of Giza. A row of giant oaks, which have grown orange from the Martian soil, line the street leading to the entrance of the building. The carriage takes him to the steps. The senator does not say a word to the driver. He stuffs the manila envelope holding the information regarding his new toy, the Artifact Animal, into the side pocket of his suitcase. He is going to leave it in the office of Captain Tate before he leaves for SC-12.

He finds his way through the lobby and gives the secretary at the front desk a condescending smile. The sharp florescent lights leading toward the captain's office bath the hall in baby blue. The suitcase drags heavy on the two wheels beneath it. A business woman looks at the senator dragging his suitcase in a disapproving manner. Captain Tate's office is at the end of the hall. The appearance of the office is far less impressive than the captain's reputation should command. It is a simple door with a plastic name plate mounted to an aluminum frame. How disappointing.

The senator checks the door. It is locked. He removes a key from the manila envelope in his suitcase and tries it. The door clicks open swinging wide and free. His office is so plain that it appears to be unused. A fan hums in the corner. The senator does not notice the camera filing him. He places the manila envelope on to Captain Tate's desk. Captain Tate can, obviously, use "The Artifact Animal" on Terra-formed Mars. The Artifact Animal is a suicide bomber for a culture that believes it is no longer religious. He stands still and quiet for a moment. Now the senator can be held responsible for the

Artifact Animal, a trap engineered by Mr. Potts. The senator has never wanted to leave Mars as much has now. He makes a call to his driver and decides to wait in the lobby. Senator Martin straightens his tie and checks his watch, he looks good enough. He is anxious. Two men stop in front of him. He loosens his tie and then nervously straightens it again and again. He needs a glass of water. The embassy is anything but safe. He stands up, pulls his right sock back up to mid-calf, and walks across the marble floor. It is so shiny it makes his mouth drool. The bathroom is blue and much cooler than the lobby he has been waiting in. His driver is late. This makes him very nervous. He splashes water on his face and rubs the dark circles under his eyes until he can hear the friction on his skin like a scrub against a window. He says, "Get it together Mark". Hesitantly, he opens the small vile of cocaine he has hidden within his wallet, he breaks the seal and snorts a tiny bit, just enough to fit on his fingernail; just enough to calm his nerves and keep him hungry. He stares at himself in the mirror this time, he pulls down on his dark circles to see his eyes better, he pulls so taut that his eyeballs all but pop out of his head. He feels better, solid and whole.

His driver pulls up, Kelvo Samfud. He knows this man. He has been his driver for three years. His sock keeps running down his leg. This makes him edgy and nervous. It is little things like this that drive him crazy when he has too much on his mind. Kelvo smiles and picks up the bag, moving around to the trunk and drops off his luggage.

"Good morning Senator Martin," he says.

"Morning Kelvo." Kelvo waits for him to get situated in his seat before closing the door.

"You're late Kelvo."

"Sorry sir, but I had to square away your account with the hotel. It still was not paid."

"Listen, when I say be somewhere just be there."

Senator Martin straightens his tie. He suddenly feels light headed. Samantha and her ape are waiting. She is the Project Director and he wants to ask her more about what he know so far. He begins to fidget with his briefcase. Of the sixty zombies, there is only three in use. Kelvo looks in his rearview mirror blistering with rage. He hates this old man and it is no secret that he is a Prime Mover within SCIC. They have taken so much. The barrios are a wasteland created by SCIC; They are a wasteland he calls home.

Senator Martin fidgets with his watch, dying for another hit of cocaine. He thinks he is being coy but his sweat-pouring skin reeks of it. Kelvo must consciously suppress the urge to club him. Murderous fantasies swim within in his head. Kelvo is no fool...he is no fool and neither is Samantha, the Project

Director his must keep tabs on. Without his help and others like him, how else could *Terra-Formed Mars* sustain and support the known terrorist-figure and divine-judge, Diego Valentine? Even so far and away from our beginnings, once upon a time upon *Our Native Earth*...

The military airport is busy. Kelvo is not taking the senator through the main-gates. SCIC executives have a diplomatic entrance on military compounds. A young kid, hardly twenty, bound by layers of gear (uniform, flack vest, ammunition, and a rifle slung over his right shoulder) quickly recognize the diplomatic sticker sitting in the very top center of the vehicle's windshield and salutes. The senator salutes back behind the vehicle's tinted windows. The base is clear and tidy, nothing unsightly, nothing that is Terra-Formed Mars. It is a foreign country smack in the middle of a fierce and growing culture.

Two soldiers along the side of the central road are picking up cigarette-butts and other particles of loose and blowing litter.

Rain begins to spray against the window. The concrete grows glossy and sleek from the rain. A security check point is ahead. Another young soldier, wrapped in cold weather gear stops the vehicle before they enter the diplomatic compound. A heavy gunner occupies a turret overhead. Kelvo removes his security clearance card from his wallet, cracks the window, and slides it out to the young girl standing guard. She does the proper face-to-face recognition, salutes the vehicle, and remains so until the vehicle passes.

The senator is half asleep in the backseat, his arms crossed across his chest, the black briefcase caged within. He jolts and wakes: "Say hello to your family," the senator says to Kelvo and then opens the door and steps out. The cab is quiet. Kelvo is a Mar's security regular, not SCIC military personnel, so he does not need to salute or even acknowledge either of the coronals outside of his window.

The Artifact Animal places a hand on the cool handrail. Samantha made him a promise and she still has not shown. The candy bar is a substitute that tastes disappointing. The napkin between his fingers cakes into a ball. He leaves the restaurant without acknowledging the server who said hello.

He cannot find the spare change he had left over. Nothing but his watch and the clothes on his back. Armie watches him from a black jeep he is using. He waves to Weapon 57 and points him in the right direction. The Artifact Animal acknowledges him and follows with interest. Armie is obviously his answer.

The monitor in Samantha's hand is a pet. She runs her finger along the power-strip of its spine and the display yawns open. "How is he?" asks Senator Martin. A recreation of the man fills in the open space. "He is fine. He is just now feeling the anxiety of loss."

"He does what he does," she repeats. Her smile captures the black light of the cabin. The Terra-Form Mars is cold at night. Armie is strong enough to lift his travel simulator without assistance. A dose of fear turns Desmond's body into a battery. His tongue tastes like acid as the energy drains from his body like sweat.

Armie says, "You certainly are part of something bigger, Weapon 57."

The sense of loss Desmond feels is overwhelming. The travel simulator does help. Desmond rubs the gold charm, the subtly of the device becomes his singular focus. Armie blows fine dust on to the device softly to the point that it seems to whisper.

Desmond could weep. The cool rail keeps him from falling. He takes a hard seat and begins to faint. Perhaps I could have done more he thinks. Twenty minutes of remorse pass like a storm. Desmond knows who he is. He stands and pays a carriage to take him to the other side of the Terra-Rio by shuttle where he hopes to find the few things he has left from his happy years as a younger man. He should have never left *Our Native Earth* back home.

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The Artifact Animal sees the broken image of a room flicker before his eyes. He is lying in a disgusting mess of black and green filth. Feeling broken and tired, he fumbles for his car keys. They are not there. Neither is his wedding ring. Instead, there is a tiny gold charm. Instinctively, He begins to rub it. His fingers grope its every edge. "I'll kill that bitch," he says, growling low, the animalistic rage swelling in his heart. The left side of his head aches, the wound beats rhythmically with his heart. Slowly, slowly, slowly, he reaches up to find an orange-size lump, netted with open wounds, throbbing just above his temple. It is netted with open wounds. A fluorescent light chatters on and off like buzzing insect above his head. On and off, on and off, the inconstant picture it affords him of the room he has been lying in drives him close to madness. He sees his reflection in a distant aluminum mirror. It is the kind of mirror found in public bathrooms, the kind of mirror that does not break.

The room is stuffy with heavy air that stinks like vomit. It might be his own vomit, he is unsure. He places his hands on the floor and tries the lift himself. His elbows pop like a worn-out old man. He pulls a knee beneath his body and sits down. He sits still for a moment only breathing. The motionlessness helps to calm the pain. Using the leg beneath him as a fulcrum, he rises to his feet. His legs pop like his elbows did a moment earlier. He does not want to move. To walk, he all but collapses. Back and forth on each leg, like a zombie, he slinks to the mirror. His sunken features stare back at him with the weight of a dying man. "Dear God," he says and again fumbles for his car keys. He only finds the tiny gold charm within his pocket. He is screaming before he realizes it. A deep bellow of fear rolls from his lungs. It becomes difficult to breathe, as if his lungs are constricting, as if the air within them is worthless for breathing and the body's instincts are to squeeze it out. Desmond grabs the front brim of the sink and begins to roar in terror, shaking the filthy bowl until the rusty piping begins to leak. A crack begins edging through the piping's brass hull. Desmond releases the sink. He tries to run his fingers through his matted hair but his middle finger catches on a knotted lock that is kinked and twisted like a gold chain forgotten in a drawer. He hooks his index finger through the greasy loop of hair and pulls through the knot until it breaks.

The florescent tube continues to chatter. Desmond considers breaking the tube and un-mending his skin with the shard tubing when a triangular edge of sunlight breaks the heavy, twitching darkness. A boy with a soccer ball under his left arm, clean and kempt, his thick black hair is like woven silk, stares at Desmond through the heavenly-like sunlight. His silhouette is dark but the contrast is not enough to completely eliminate his features. The boy is frightened and petrified to a stump. The light within his eyes flicker for answers as his bottom lip begins to sag as his jaw grows heavy with fear and disbelief.

He looks like a savage animal to the boy. As if the boy has stumbled upon the forgotten dwelling of a monster long lost and known now only through myths. The boy's instincts to survive immediately bubble to the surface. With slow-fear, he begins to close the door and entomb the monster before it eats him. Regardless of what it is, the boy knows that the barrios of Terra Rio are full of awful things.

"No!" Desmond groans, his hands out-stretched while wobbling on his stilts-for-legs. The boy screams, slams the door, and braces himself against it, his tiny legs digging into the dirt. "Stop it kid," Desmond pleads but the boy cannot understand. This becomes obvious when he hears the boy speaking. It is not English. It sounds like Mexo-Rio. He finds this interesting considering he has never known another language other than English. He only knows that he wants out of his current situation. He squeezes the aluminum door knob. It is slippery but there appears to be no lock. He begins to laugh and hobbles over to the mirror to grab an old paper towel sitting on the sink. He cannot see what it had been used for and does not want to know. Wrapping it around the door knob, Desmond is able to squeeze and turn. Finding traction with the rag, he sees the heavenly-like sunlight once again crack and edge the darkness. The boy is grunting, thrusting his weight against the door.

"Damn it kid!" he says and thrusts the door open. The boy screams and takes off running. His soccer ball is left bouncing in the street. Desmond instinctively shields his face from the sun and anything else that may harm him. He still cannot remember much, aside from walking in on his wife with another man.

He looks down. The streets are cobblestone and lined with white-washed apartments and bungalows. An apartment with a second story terrace is directly in front of him. Desmond has been expecting something a little more terrifying. It looks like a ghetto but nothing super-natural, nothing like what he has just experienced.

He stares back into the tomb he has so recently escaped from. The door says "hombrelo" which is Mexo-Rio for "men's room". A filthy fucking public bathroom.

"What the fuck is going on?" he says and pats himself again for his car keys. A deep pain courses through his left leg. He groans and winces, slightly touching his leg. His blue jeans are stained almost black. It looks like blood. His head grows light and he falls down, half terrified, half exhausted. From ankle to calf, a giant black tattoo, ornament-less and crude, reads "Weapon 57."

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Water splashes on Desmond's face. It is warm but the suddenness is still startling. He has not moved, the bathroom is still behind him. With a deep breath of shock, he lifts his torso off of the

concrete while remaining seated. He looks up and sees a lady, most likely in her seventies, standing above him with a wooden bucket. Her apron is stained from cooking. She is wearing cheap flip-flops and her feet are dirty. She scowls at him, raises her fist, and says in Mexo-Rio, “Get-up you filthy bum! You can’t sleep here! This is my store!”

Desmond roles on to his hands and knees. His arms feel like putty. He sits back on his haunches and looks up at the lady in disbelief. She hits him on the shoulder with the bucket. He holds a hand up His feet squeeze his socks. He is on Terra-Formed Mars—Desmond begins to notice people staring at him. He looks right then left and sees an ally. It is guarded by two trash cans and an abandoned car halfway down.

A rat scurries across his feet. The car is rusty and weather-worn. There are no handles so Desmond crawls through the busted window. The question seems to pop into his head from nowhere. Beautiful Samantha. Desmond sis in the driver’s seat squeezing the wheel. A spring juts into his rear piercing the skin. “I kill that motherfucker,” he says through clenched teeth, “I kill him!”

As he boils in rage he hears shouting from the street. He spins and sees a mob assembling in front of the ally. Thirteen young men and a small boy pointing begin to make their way down the ally. Two are carrying bats. Lord knows what the others have hidden. Desmond tries to shrink, maybe they cannot see me, he thinks.

“Is this him nephew,” one young man says. Muscles test the threads of his flannel shirt. Elaborate, frightening, and beautiful street tattoos network his skin.

“Look at him...he looks like a corpse. Are you alive?”

He taps his bat against the rusty bumper, places a foot upon it, and rests his forearm on his knee. He exhales in mock frustration and removes a knife from his inner pocket. Desmond is still slouching, still cowering like a frightened mouse.

“No I don’t,” he tries to say. Only blood comes out of his mouth. Twisting horror grips their faces. Within a minute he is dead. His body is like mush. They poke him with a bat, any harder than a pat and his bones would crack easily.

Diego Valentine, who is enjoying a cup of coffee with his next in command, is just down the street. The escalation to occupation has drawn Diego out of a life of research. He wants to know how things fair within the ranks of Mar’s security regulars. Diego understands the groundwater tunnels that network the planet. He moves over to the seat next to the window. His black hair glows rich and

auburn in the Martian sun. He asks for the check from the waitress and waits for her to leave before speaking. Rovaldo Picard, his best friend, sits across from him sipping a glass of ice water. Speaking Mexo-Rio, Rovaldo says, “Diego, do you think we can resist that ruthless fucking corporation? Do you really think that it is possible?”

Diego stares out of the window and runs his fingers around the brim of his cup, He is patiently searching for the right response.

He fixes his gaze on the people walking just outside the window he is sitting in front of. Diego begins to picture the true casualties of this fight.

He stirs his coffee with the stir stick that he has left in the cup and looks at his lieutenant.

Rovaldo looks up a little surprised from his glass of water.

“How’s your family Rovaldo.”

“Fine sir, just fine” he says.

“Good, I’m glad to hear it, so everything is going well?”

“I would not go that far. That’s for sure. That is why I think your work is so important, standing up to those tyrants, as you are. No longer can they steal from us with their ancient laws and ancient taxes. People like me are going to be doing much better.”

Diego feels over-confident and terrified. His guts are a mess. The dreadful Synthetic Continent Commodities International. Diego grunts then drains his coffee and grabs his coat by the collar from the back of the chair, “We’ll be in touch.”

A clock chimes in the distance. It is three o clock in the afternoon. The deep resonance of the old iron bell lightens his heart for a moment before the circumstances of his life plunge him back into reality. Diego hails down a street cart drawn by a large and aging horse. Mars is very much in love with classic ways of life. Amidst their technological wonderment, things like horse drawn carriages are common on the streets. Diego hands the man a few coins and instructs him where to go.

Feeling refreshed he places his chin on his hand and stares at the street life. A street artist is heckling a married couple to let him sketch their beauty. A lady in a business suit walks down the curb with a red fruit-drink, which sweats from the heat. The cart lurches to a halt and startles Diego. He smiles at the cart driver as he raises his hand in safety and the cab accelerates at once after the pedestrians pass.

A lady in the street with an infant in her arms stops him before he can enter his apartment. Her hair is long and black. Her child seems slightly malnourished but very pretty. She catches his eye, grabs his hand and with a big tear that drips, kisses his hand. Security patrollers watch Diego from a cruiser: “No

doubt, two urban-cut women dressed plainly.” This is common behavior which is dangerous for Diego. No doubt he is already marked for assassination by SCIC. He does not worry about it just yet. Perhaps he should. Things are heading in that direction. Their eyes are deep in the Martian social structure. The patrollers pass by Diego but do not make their presence known. Nobody knows the terra wild like Diego. For the farmers, it is a way of life, a new frontier created by man. The system of tunnels already in place from global irrigation, are now Diego’s personal property. He was of the officers in charge of securing them nearly thirty years ago. His security regulars were one of the key components to bringing stability to Terra-Formed Mars. Being the head of the security regulars is definitely convenient. He is the sole authority in control of those tunnels. Diego had every intention of using them if there is war. Daniel Makes is still working on SC-15. Diego watches members of the board.

Samantha’s voice is a humming bee above his head: “Novelty is a substitute for religion. You have your charm. And there is your answer.” Desmond retrieves himself from an indifferent stone mattress. A routine of breathing has fixed his problem for now. His only comrade is the senator, a man he has spoken to a few times about a better life on the Terra-Formed Mars. “Your life is over. You still have Samantha. You can rebuild.”

He recalls a few words from his only friend on a confusing new world he is still learning. “You can rebuild.” The words are mere pigment when he speaks. An untutored painter seeking answers from foreigners. The crease in his back is painful. Desmond still has a single contact.

His keys jingle in his pocket. His breathing feels other-worldly, as if he is a stranger in his own body. Sliding his hand into the pocket of his slacks, Desmond removes the keys. The key and lock bumps through his bones as he slowly slides the key into the lock. His guts feel like lead. He slowly removes the key from the lock, feeling light-headed and strange. The door erupts in his face. Fire and splintered wood are imbedded in his face. His legs are broken. He is a broken crumpled mess on the carpet, like a piece of trash that has missed the can from across the room. Lying there bleeding, he drags himself halfway across the hallway and loses consciousness. He is in dire straits to say the least. At the end of the hall a black silhouette can be seen. The character stares and does not offer help nor does he finish him off. He simply stares at the horror in simple amazement. Desmond’s face begins to throb like a wounded thumb. He tries to speak to the character but finds that he cannot put together a coherent

remark. Grunts and moans are all that he has to communicate. The character crosses the hallway, pulls something from his jacket, throws it over Desmond's face, and everything goes black.

Diego pulls the damaged body from the pieces. The world he sees is not his own. A pasty, scab-ridden creature haunts his every move, which is not much. Its body is painfully broken. He feels his face. Shards of wood are still imbedded into the Artifact Animal's skin. He begins to pull them out. "Where is my wife?" the creature says.

"Wah?"

Diego can hardly put a word together. The Artifact Animal pukes. It begins to pull at its skin leaving long streaks of red from where the fragile skin is mangled beneath its black and yellow nails. Diego murmurs.

"I want my fucking wife back!" The air reeking from the creature's body is overwhelming. The Artifact Animal begins dry heaving with nothing left in its body but suspicion of the grave. Diego begins to cry.

The floor feels greasy. Diego's spinning head cannot clearly distinguish the world he is in. He smells filth. A large pile of black trash bags is heaped before him. He is lying against a chain linked fence. The breeze blowing through the fence only brings the smell of trash. The Artifact Animal places its soft moist hands on to Diego's face stinging his wounds. In doing so, it infects him with Lord knows what. "Just tell me Diego...How could you? We were such friends..."

Its sweet-rotten breath gives Diego a head-ache. He cringes with as much fear as disgust. "Who is your wife?" Diego asks with the lightest and most inoffensive voice that he can muster.

The Artifact Animal's face begins twisting in anger and astonished disbelief. "You mutherfucker!" it squeaks in a shrilly high-pitched voice. Grabbing the monster by the hair and chin, he tries to break its neck. His body is in broken pieces and in no condition to fight. Diego immediately feels light-headed and weak. The Artifact Animal is still clawing wildly on his skin. Diego can hardly lift a limb to resist the monster's attack. In desperation he screams, "I'm sorry!"

"How could you?" He looks-up with large wet eyes. The monster's face begins to fill with black blood. It falls lifeless alongside him. Diego sits there breathing gulps of pain into his lungs. He can see the setting. It is the alley just outside of the building that he lives in. He is thinking so clear that he even notices a bag of trash that he threw out two days ago. He cannot help but examine the body. Dear God, he thinks, what is this monster. The clothes are caked in mud and grease. Using his elbow, Diego

inches closer to the body. The creature's hair is matted and brown. It is missing two teeth from what Diego can discern from its wide-gaping mouth. It looks as if some one has pulled on the upper teeth and lower jaw. Its mouth is a gigantic black hole. The tongue is black as tires and hanging from its mouth like a dead dog. One hand is contorted from the creature's final death agonies. The other is clutching something. Diego uncurls its talon. The boney fingers are stubborn and unwilling to release what they are clutching. Diego smashes its hand against the concrete until it loosens its grip. A tiny charm tumbles from it. How silly, Diego thinks. Mickey Mouse. Mickey Mother Fucking Mouse. Diego holds it up to the moonlight. A tiny sheet of light from a street lamp also penetrates the awful pitch Diego is sitting in. Diego runs his fingers over the two satellite ears mounted to the character's head, over the tiny pot-belly, over the slender arms of the worthless little rodent. The charm is gold. Diego stuffs it into his pocket. He tries to move but can only lay there. Diego is a fool for more than a minute. "These are my problems." He can sympathize with the body lying there next to him nearly dead. "That means nothing to me." SCIC is corruption from a world grown ever distant to those involved in the future of here.

A small boy dabs his face with cloth-in-water. The dwelling he is lying in is laid out much like his own. A simple woman is preparing something in the kitchen. The smell raises Diego's spirit from that awful ally into the present. "Do you know this man?" he says. The boy is rowdy and the food does not help to calm him down.

"Mama!" the boy says. The simple woman enters. She begins to cry.

"Eat this," she says, "We need to get you out of here Diego."

She has done little to set his limbs. However, his wounds are dressed. Again, Diego feels the creature's face. Three large gashes network across his skin. "I don't want to loose this person. We have been given a gift."

"I cannot move until his legs are set in braces." He looks around the apartment. "Bring me that mop and broom."

She grabs the utensil and stands before Diego as if armed and standing guard. "Do you have a saw? Or anything that will make a clean cut?" She nods. "Chop the head off of the broom and mop and cut the handle each in two."

Leaving the mop and broom leaning against a piano in the living-room, she enters into the kitchen and emerges a moment later with a pocket-knife. One of the utensil's retractable blades is a tiny saw.

“Saw them in two,” he says and takes a large spoon full of soup. It is little more than beef and noodles. Diego feels a stream of cold sweat trickle down his temple into his ear. The Artifact Animal stares like fresh black paint into Diego’s face. The bowl of soup rolls off of his chest and on to the floor. She looks up and sees the mess on the floor. She makes a sad face while her arm continues sawing the broom and mop handle into two. “His legs are broken,” Diego says. “Place the braces on the top and bottom of his legs. Do not place them on the sides. Do you have duck-tape?”

She smiles and emerges from her bedroom a moment later with packing-tape. It will have to do. The tape clings well to the handles but not so well to the fabric of Desmond’s clothes. It will have to do. For a moment, it seems if the pulling of tape is deafening. She uses half the roll. When she is done, the woman sees her son holding the bowl and spoon that was dropped on to the floor a moment earlier. He has said nothing. He only stares at her. “Take that into the kitchen son and get a sheet from the bedroom.”

He returns a moment later with her bedcover. Damn it, she thinks, that is the one from off the bed. It will have to do. She rolls the man on to his left side and packs the sheet beneath him. She rolls him on to his right side and pulls the crumpled bedcover taut against the floor. She grabs the cover surrounding his head and pulls him in a one-eighty. His head is now facing the door. “My brother is waiting. I will take you to my brother’s farm,” she says.

Diego still has not discovered the nature of the man lying there unconscious. So strange to substitute a charm for answers. So strange to know so much and ask for so little. They are the Martians SCIC has been asking for. Diego has trouble; down the steps is difficult. She was so frightened when she found him that she just pulled his broken body up the stairs with little thought. Now that she has invested energy into fixing him, she will take more care in to getting him down the stairs. “Where are we taking him?”

“I want to introduce him to my guys, my one and only best buddies.”

Her son is holding two pillows. He stuffs them into each step as Diego is going down. More or less it makes a forty-five degree angle. “This is more difficult than I thought. My friends can handle this.” More or less, it does the trick although it is painful for Desmond. Elisana holds the cover at Desmond’s feet to control the speed that he descends the stairs. Diego holds the cover to keep from sliding off. It is only a single flight of stairs. Thank God. However, in spite of this, he manages the awkward body up or down an incline. A cat in a tree or a college student heaving his first couch up a flight of stairs could

not have done a better job. A horse-drawn carriage is waiting at the bottom of the stairs. Elisana's brother is waiting. He helps Diego into the carriage's car. They will ride through the remainder of the night.

Abraham the boy stares at the strange man with eyes opened like a lamb. The Mickey Mouse slides from Diego's pocket and bounces on the wooden floor like a knocker. Abraham taps him on the shoulder and places the tiny charm onto the strange man's chest. He is not angry but frightened. The amplified horror that he has associated to the charm is so great that he feels it might be contagious. He does not want to infect the boy with his recent experience. A stocky young man is driving the carriage. Elisana is staring at him from the front seat. He is frightened that he will lose them without doctors to administer medicine to him. "Do not worry," she whispers, "As soon as we are out of the city, my brother will take you to a hospital. It is a Martian hospital. You will not need to fear the SCIC patrolmen."

She seems to know a lot, the strange man thinks. What a fool I was to come out of hiding. I had no idea I was such a threat.

The carriage continues to bounce as they enter into the barrios of Terra Rio. A news chopper is flying overhead and two news vans wiz by the carriage in a dizzy array of moving cameras. The people of Our Native Earth love to see the desperation on Terra-Formed Mars. Between commercials, they can ingest the hopelessness of others many miles away. He wants to bomb the news stations. There is a barricade in front of them. SCIC patrolmen are redirecting traffic to another street. Ambulances and news vans are buzzing in and out of the barricade. The driver stops and asks a pedestrian what has happened: "Someone has bombed an SCIC food processing plant. Then the looting began. Several contractors I guess are dead," the pedestrian says. Daniel Makes stops what he is doing to turn the volume up. The rest of the board does the same. "The ship is getting famous."

He makes eye contact with a few members of the board. "We do not need to be the people responsible for this."

"Thank you." Linda says.

Diego shakes hands with Abraham's uncle. A fighter in life and a fighter in appearance. Diego still has not discovered the nature of the man lying there unconscious. So strange to substitute a charm for

answers. So strange to know so much and ask for so little. These are the Martians SCIC has been asking for. Misguided and willing to work and replenish without an original human being to say, this is me. A charm with few answers.

Elisana's brother pretends not to care and takes the detour the patrolmen are giving. Smoke permeates the air. Abraham needs to rub his eyes. The strange man's pain is overwhelming. He can hardly think. The silhouette of homeless people lines the street. They would not feel safe if it was not for the patrolmen near-by. The bombing has brought the people out. They will soon be free of the barrios. Slowly, the houses begin to turn suburban. Houses instead of housing complexes, grocery stores instead of liquor stores, mini-malls instead of pawnshops. The hospital is just a few miles off.

The strange man screams. Elisana's brother gives himself morphine. Two SCIC patrollers lay in tangled mounds. The blood keeps their bodies from sliding from the hood. The morphine brings such an absence of pain that it frightens him. On the streets he was prey. In uniform he had strength. However, Omarro is far too intelligent to lose himself in uniform. He joined the Terra-Nuevo Brotherhood at age eighteen. Up until that point, he had been through too much. The loss of his father at the age of ten, the few teenage years that he spent in a street gang, as well as the hard reality of being forced to work while still a child. A healthy adult is difficult to mold. He learned the social rules of militants and performed them.

Omarro is a strong leader. Under his direction, TNB crushed a global smuggling. Drugs, weapons, and human beings. Education at the academy was empirical and difficult to avoid. Through a regional guard, TNB is free from SCIC judicial and legislative influence. The early years of Terra-Forming Mars were unstable. The instability allowed powerful criminal organizations to rise from the planet's poverty and secure large swaths of its cities. Citizen responsible for establishing ground water tunnels created militant groups for security. It is tradition though not mandatory to serve in TNB. The regional guard who help solve Terra-Formed Mar's problems with international crime. A network of tunnels run like an ant farm throughout most major cities on Terra-Formed Mars. They are there and the city-states use them. Diego did not have them destroyed. He wanted them preserved for their usefulness. A detailed layout mapping the tunnels is still in his apartment. He cannot go back. He can only hope that it was destroyed in the blast.

From the table he is lying on, Desmond roles his head to the left. He sees a blurry image of Abraham watching television. The bonking sounds of cartoons are in the distance. His tiny legs swing back and forth. He is sitting on the foot rest of a living-room recliner. I didn't know they had living-rooms in hospitals, Desmond thinks. His head is obviously not working right from the morphine. Are my legs set, he thinks. I completely forgot about them. He tries to lift his head. It does not budge. Fuck it, I'm ready to die, he thinks. The soft lights above him are warm. His doctor is just a silhouette. The only thing that has any distinguishable form is Abraham in the distance. Desmond begins to scream and grabs the doctor. To him, it is just a silhouette poking and prodding him as if he was the subject of an alien abduction. They hold him down and give him further anesthesia. He goes to sleep. His legs are ruined but he will not lose them.

The wheelchair Desmond is given is clumsy but effective. He wheels his legs in front of him like grocery bags full of supermarket meat. Abraham is sleeping on the floor in front of the television. His toys lay about him.

Desmond feels drained, as if he had been out all night drinking and now he is hung-over the morning after. His arms are tired. His back is sore. His body is sore. His legs are swollen and hard. No wait, that is just the casting covering them, he thinks. He knocks his knuckles against the cork-board material that encases his legs. He feels his face. I need to shave, he thinks. His arms feel too sore to wheel the chair. He stares at his feet, his toes poke into the air. His shoulders feel like peanut-brittle as he roles them back in an attempt to role the wheel-chair. He gives the chair a push. The pain almost feels good. At least I'm getting somewhere.

Bumping down the hallway banging into walls, Desmond finds his way to a bathroom three doors down from the makeshift hospital he had been lying in. Diego and Omarro closely monitor him and his choices. Elisana emerges from a door just behind him. Before he can escape into the bathroom, she grabs the handles to his wheel chair. She is half-naked with only a sheet wrapped around her body. A breast threatens to pep out at any moment. "No," she says with a furrowed brow and shaking head, "Tell someone if you need something. You need to rest."

Desmond holds her in his gaze. "Let go now," he says. The authority in his voice implies crime.

She complies and he wheels himself into the bathroom locking the door behind him. The restroom has been de-commissioned so Desmond can relieve himself. It takes him a moment to remember the reason why he wanted to use the bathroom. He opens up the cabinet behind the mirror. Nothing. As he

closes the mirror door he sees the reflection of himself. It moves him almost to tears to see his face ripped to pieces as it is. Three large gashes from fighting Diego Valentine. One runs diagonally across his forehead from his eyebrow to the corner of his head and into his hair. Another runs from the upper bridge of his nose down to the thick of his jaw. The third splits his bottom lip into two. His face is stitched together like a rag-doll. I couldn't shave if I wanted to, he thinks. He runs his fingers through the stubble that is not affected by the awful wounds.

He takes a moment and holds his head in both hands. In all my life that is the closest I have come to death, he marvels to himself in contemplative wonder. Elisana is standing outside the door fully dressed. She is wearing jeans and sandals and a button-up shirt. Her skin holds the Martian sun coming through a window down the hall. Her skin has few wrinkles. It is taut and strong, too strong for such sensitive almost frightened eyes.

“Who are you?” Marselle decides to confront the issue head on. She enters the hospital with wary steps.

“You saved my life twenty-years ago.” Elisana remembers her from a time ago though the story is told in gloss and filtered. “I’m sure you do not remember. I was one of many set free that day. MSR raided a groundwater tunnel I was trapped in. I never forgot your face although you were just another person in uniform. It is amazing what you see when you are poor. I saw you in a grocery store one day. Your appearance had changed but you carry yourself in a certain way. I knew it was you. It is amazing, the things a person reveals when they think you are powerless. I have found out where you live and operate over the years. It is amazing, the things that you can learn when you know the language of the city. If you have no power, the city will tell you everything.”

“Wait,” Marselle says, “You were my neighbor. Enough! Are we safe here?”

Elisana only stares at her.

“Where are we?” Marselle asks.

“My younger brother’s home. I made him join the Terra Nuevo Brotherhood as soon as he could.”

“Why are you telling me this? I no longer serve TNB.”

“TNB serves you,” says a voice coming from a bedroom in the hall. A stocky well-built young man enters the hall from another room. He is wearing boxers and he looks like he has just awoken. He needs to use the bathroom. “Excuse me sir. I gotta go.” He points into the bathroom. Desmond tries to wheel out quickly but his arms are too sore. Elisana grabs the handle to his wheel chair and pushes him out. She squeezes him on the shoulder and makes sure that she sees him smile. Omarro, Elisana’s brother, emerges a moment later.

Marselle sifts through her many mixed feelings. He is a great prize, however, more than anything, she wants to make sure as few people get hurt as possible. He turns to Elisana. “Will you help me bathe him and then get him dressed?”

She nods and they enter the bathroom together.

Greg stands nervously in front of six thousand students. Some are protestors. Others are just curious on-lookers. Some want to know what is going to come in the coming weeks. The SCIC patroller shakes hands with an MSR detective. Others just want to fight. The protest appears to have security. Greg totters. He looks across the crowd to the tree next to where he parked and feels a lack of concern for his fellow Martian citizens. Shouting and angry, they seemed like animals to him. His wife is home and the only person for whom he would raise his fist in protest.

Marselle steps up to the podium. "There is hope," she says. "but I will not lie and say that things are all well. But there still is hope."

People begin to shove. Greg feels his heart sink to see the angry mob. A young girl falls over a table and is followed by five other students. The growing consensus among MSR detectives is that Terra Rio Institution of Higher Learning is where the seed of conflict has been planted by a group of Greg's colleges. They are extremist with militant connections who want to see Terra-Formed Mars as an independent nation. However, he agrees with them on many points. Over the past few decades, the taxes and abuses of SCIC have become unbearable.

Pamphlets calling for resistance are being circulated throughout the crowd. A group of young extremists within the group begin to emerge. They are the instigators behind the fierce emotions being expressed by the body language of the crowd. Many of these youths do not even know what they are upset about. They are impressionable and trendy, looking for an identity in something that is not a game.

"Our only option?" A baby-faced young man says. Of about mid-twenties in appearance, his gaze implies the insecurity of being sexualized due to peer pressure. He stands on top of a picnic table about thirty yards from Greg, the common ground they share is understood only through eye contact. "Are you going to stand there and tell me an invasion isn't in development as we speak!"

The crowd whispers and murmurs like children telling secrets. The warring voices imply security. The people feel calm when controversial issues are resolved through public rivalry. "Leadership does not whisper in the face of unrest," a student says. His white socks are an extra few inches he doesn't have among overbearing personalities. The students have become a focal point for the media. His appearance as a student lends credibility to the sincerity of the crowd. Like cups of beer between strangers on the beach. The people feel calm though the chatter increases, the shouting grows quiet. It dies down to simple gossip spoken from ear to ear.

“Young man, I’m going to need you to get down and please try to keep your composure.” Greg feels limp and unaffected. The crowd grows hungrier. The patrolmen on the grounds begin to tighten on the crowd. The head of security singles the young man out as the emotional ring-leader and targets him for tear-gassing if the situation comes to that. It is becoming apparent that the group of patrolmen on campus is not going to be enough if things spin out of control.

“Am I doing something wrong? We have a right to know if we’re gonna be invaded by these fucking guys. You hear me! The two standing right there! What right do you have to censor us!” The young man swings his arms in big swoops over the crowd rallying them behind his words.

“Sit down, that is riotous!”

“Young man, please, our best defense, our best preparation, is to remain calm and try to avoid turning this situation into violence—” Greg says with as much confidence as he can muster.

Two SCIC patrolmen pop-up next to the young man and pull him down kicking and scream from the table. Greg looks over to his wife, she looks concerned for him and smiles when his eyes meet hers. A young lady begins to sob in the crowd and the shouting and mania begin to take over. Mantras of resistance against SCIC begin to take hold: WE WILL DEFEND OUR LAND! WE WILL DEFEND OUR LAND! Marselle takes over the microphone. Greg quietly slips off the stage and quickly makes his way over to his wife.

“Let’s get the hell outta here, I don’t want to be anywhere near this protest.”

Yolanda waits for the security elements to complete their formation before she says, “cut.” Barry knows the SCIC patrollers and MSR detectives personally. His assistant finishes her first hand written draft of their appearance. Photographs of their appearance is not allowed in public gatherings. Security is their single focus. Thirsty students sit cross-legged. Five patrollers distribute water among the people cuffed. Two of the five begin to unhand-cuff the students one at a time to drink and relieve themselves while they wait to be moved for further detention. Their identity is recorded at the scene by MSR detectives. The majority of the students have a Terra Rio food identity card and a local transportation card. Free food is how SCIC supports the city-states while working. The international security provided by MSR still struggles with distribution of food though farming is successful. MSR does not necessary cooperate with SCIC but they do defer to diplomacy and international policy in light of SC-12. The agency is a result of bio-mass on Mars: trees, people, microorganisms, data. There is enough trade an exchange of ideas taking place of Mars that the agency does stay employed despite its humble origins. The ground

water workers needed security that was not provided; which is why MSR is where science and security meet of Terra-Formed Mars. Yolanda feels that she needs more data. A closer shot of the protesters will complete her story. She shakes Barry's shoulder to show it is nearer now to completion. The hand composed art is shiny in parts due to the amount of graphite applied to the canvas.

Danny sits inside the patrolman's car. Perfect, he thinks, we could not have orchestrated animosity towards that fucking corporation any better than what we did. He is itching for a cigarette. Having blown his wade, so to speak, he feels the need to relax. He thinks of Marselle still standing on the podium. She surely will be happy with him. He has done well. Diego will need fresh recruits for MSR once the fighting actually begins. It is obvious that there is many within the general populace willing to fight SCIC. Danny can see his cigarettes edge through his pants. If only I wasn't cuffed, he thinks, I would light-up right here and now. Marselle makes eye contact with him through the patrolman's car window. She smiles softly and waves a hand. Danny watches her go to work. He cannot hear her but he has an idea of what she is saying. Her eloquence, her capacity to wield words is unrivaled. He knows what she is saying. She is exposing SCIC. A group of SCIC patrolmen tighten on to the stage she is standing on. A young student, blonde and angry, spits on a patrolman. The patrolman immediately takes him to the ground and holds him there with his baton across his back. That looks painful, Danny cannot help but notice. He places his face against the glass. The glass is cool and tastes watery. A patrolman walking by elbows the glass with Danny's ridiculous face pressed against it. It rattles his teeth. That fucking hurt, Danny thinks. It is difficult to affect ruthless people with shenanigans.

Danny settles back into his seat. Dr. Harris is walking off. Danny does not mind. Dr. Harris has done his job. His presence brought many students. Having won the academics awards that he has, his opinion carries clout with the students, and people in general. He is an academic celebrity of sorts. He has won all of the cliché awards that signify a genius. That was why Danny attacked him. He needed to assume his credibility by overthrowing him in public. Danny has done well.

Marselle descends from the stage. She makes a B-line for the patrolman's cruiser with Danny in it. With the crowd in the state of chaos that it is, the car is unguarded. She opens the door, places a cigarette into Danny's mouth, lights it, and then walks off. Danny sits back toking on his smoke like a king. It is the least Marselle could have done. Danny will spend the next three weeks in SCIC confinement.

The patrolman who elbowed the glass a moment earlier sees his cruiser full of smoke. Enraged, he hustles to the vehicle, grabs Danny by the collar, and throws him on to the earth. The patrolman pinches the cigarette from his mouth and stamps it out in the grass. He picks up Danny, again by the collar, and thrust him into the cruiser. Marselle's other students captured the incident on film. Defiant protest. Fuel to fan the flames of war.

The crowd begins to get out of control. Several students begin throwing punches at the patrolmen. The patrolmen deploy tear gas. The mob disperses through the fog of chemicals that is choking them. As the smoke clears, it reveals a group of four patrolmen surrounding a young man. They are hitting him with batons. He is kicking and punching for his life. The four sentries begin to wail on him for his noncompliance to their orders. No one knows how the altercation began. The footage later only shows images of uniformed soldiers and civilians fighting. The tear gas has obscured the ability to lay blame. A riot begins to grow. A trash can is on fire. The paper and burning plastic begins to blow. The growing chaos is frightening and intense. On-lookers begin to run. Others join in. The stampede is dangerous. A young man is badly trampled. Firefighters and soldiers are going back and forth. Marselle is sitting in her car. She takes out her notebook and begins to write. She catalogues everything for Diego. Of course, she is not going to rely on the local news to deliver an accurate account of the day's events. She will do her own journalism.

Marselle records everything. She even knows the names of students who are fighting. This is wrong, she thinks but quickly banishes the thought from her mind. I should not abuse the trust I have developed as a professor as a fulcrum for political change. SCIC frightens her (as it should). She only holds the notebook. The conflict begins to die down. A group of protestors are in custody. They are lined up shoulder to shoulder with their hands cuffed behind their backs. SCIC patrolmen rove through the last pockets of protestors that have not fled. Things are dying down. Marselle could cry. A lump gurgles in her throat. SCIC will harvest the sheep if they do not slaughter them first. They will, she thinks. What else can I do? Few within the masses are capable of negotiating the rhetoric of mass media. SCIC will harvest them and make things on Mars even worse. Marselle begins to cry. She stares at her red eyes in the rearview mirror. Still crying, she stares at herself. She feels emotionally purged and hopeless. She rams her keys into the ignition. The car purrs to life. Whether the protest was a success or not, it went as planned. Marselle has ample material to feed developments currently taking place in the war.

“And you, fucking idiot,” the patrolman places a hand on to the passenger seat of his cruiser and stares at Danny with indifference. “Did you enjoy smoking in my cruiser?”

Danny smiles but says nothing. Actually I did, he thinks. The rays from the sun filter through the cruiser’s window. The cruiser begins to grow hotter. Danny’s hands are still cuffed. He cannot wipe away the bead of sweat that trickles from his temple.

“Enjoy the ride dumb-fuck,” the patrolman says. His forearms turn to cinder gripped against the steering wheel. He radios the station before departing the grounds. The radio cackles with confirmation of his departure. Danny is quiet. He almost feels as if he is being taken care of by the patrolman. The sun is warm and the cruiser is quiet. His escort does not play music while he drives. Danny has lived in Terra-Rio for many years but he has never been to a patrol-station before. He was raised in middle-class privileged. His parents had enough money to send him to a private school as a boy. The university soon followed. Because of this, Danny always felt illegitimate when he was in the company of someone who had survived a life or childhood harder than his. He had privilege without the bragging rights that come from creating something on one’s own. During adolescence, he learned that politics and activism were a way to prove his self-worth and individuality, not as a product of privilege and environment. Danny was of course very intellectual. More than money, more than beautiful women, more than anything, he wanted bragging rights. He glares at the patrolman. This mindless sentinel, he thinks. SCIC’s mad-dog. Danny does not realize that everyone glares at the patrolman from the back seat of his cruiser. The patrolman could care less. The hatred between the two is impersonal. The patrolman steals a quick glance at the young man from his rearview mirror. Danny is staring out the window. His brow is furrowed, obviously in deep thought. For a moment, their eyes meet in the mirror. Jesus Christ, the patrolman thinks. Danny only smiles.

A heavy set sergeant with two sergeant’s stars stitched to the arm of his uniform is waiting at the curb when Danny and his escort arrive. The station is big but the building is not impressive. Located within a shopping district, the patrol station is a two-story brick building. Since there are no earthquakes on Mars, brick proved to be a decent material for building during the Terra-Forming of the planet. The building is nearly two-hundred years old.

The cold air from outside startles Danny when the sergeant opens the cruiser door. The gush of air is fresh for breathing. The sergeant does not say a word. He grabs Danny by the armpit and leads him up the station steps. Danny later remembers little of walking through the station. He remembers little of

the experience being surrounded by so many in uniform. The excitement he feels is overwhelming. The sergeant takes his I.D. and leads him down to a small detention cell. They cross an office with two young SCIC patrolwomen manning the radios. He even recognizes the voices of one he heard through the radio while he was riding in the cruiser. They look at him tentatively with a bored chunk of time left to kill in the day.

Danny thinks of Marselle. She'd better call, he thinks, I hope I do not need to spend the night here. Eleven other protestors are also brought in. They are cuffed with ugly looks across their faces. All eleven are searched for dangerous objects and have their I.D.'s taken. The patrolman places them in the cell with Danny. It suddenly occurs to Danny that he is in the drunk tank. Because of the fear and excitement he was feeling when he entered the station, he completely over looked the drunk sleeping in the corner of the cell. The man's chest heaves up and down. He is wearing a scarf and a dirty beanie over his head. His boots are broken and filthy. A homeless man, Danny thinks. No one taken into custody from the protest knows each other. They are all strangers united behind a common cause.

"Does anyone know Marselle or Dr. Harris?" Danny asks.

"I have a class with Dr. Harris," says a young woman.

"What's your name?"

"Julie Monroe."

"What did you do?"

"My boyfriend slugged a PM. They took me into custody when he ran off."

"That's fucked up."

"That was fucking scary." A middle-aged man says from the corner of the cell. He is the oldest of the group brought in. "Did you see those guys close in on the stage? I thought they were going to line us up and nerve gas us in the showers."

The group laughs.

"Fucking Facists!" Danny says. He feels the atmosphere within the cell lighten as they get to know each other. A female SCIC sergeant arrives. Without saying a word, she points to Julie and the two other females taken into custody. She unlocks the door with a key taken from her belt. "Let's go ladies," she says with snapping authority, "You can't stay in this cell, you're coming with me."

She leads them to a female holding cell. The remaining males sit there quietly for a moment. Danny scratches his head. "Does anyone here smoke?" he asks.

"Fuck ya!" the middle-aged man from the corner replies with a smile.

"I sure could use one." Danny immediately feels the conversation fall flat on its face. There is nothing left to say. The men sit there quietly until morning.

"Let's go," the sergeant in charge of Julie and the other two murmurs with an indifferent tone to her voice. Julie and the other two are hand cuffed behind their backs. "Do you know why you were brought in?" the sergeant asks.

Julie does not say a word. She continues through the corridor leading to the female detention cells. "Who was that man you were with? He slugged my partner. You're not going to go anywhere until you tell us. You two might be able to leave by tomorrow," she points to the other two women walking quietly in front of her. "You too," she again addresses Julie, "If you tell us who he is."

The cell differs little from the male's. It is clean enough with two rows of benches straddling the center of the cell. The walls are also lined with benches. It looks as if the room could hold nearly eighty people. The sergeant turns the key and lets the women walk in with timid steps. Nobody wants to be incarcerated. The sergeant taps her keys on to the bars of the cell. The women look up and over to her. She points to Julie and then to her watch. She gets the picture. She'd better be ready when her time comes. A few hours pass. The women make small talk. None of them are in any mood to make friends but the circumstances call for it.

"I have a class with you," one woman says to Julie. She is young with dark skin and darker eyes.

"What is it?" Julie gives her half of her attention. If she wasn't so tired, she would have liked to talk.

"Ancient Cultures with Dr. Harris."

"What did you think of that writing assignment the other day?"

"It was okay. I finished it. What did you write about?"

"America and China and how they paved the way for SCIC to grow into what it is."

"Cool. My idea wasn't that big but I also wrote about SCIC."

The other girl is listening. Now that there is an audience, Julie feels a need to entertain her with the topic: "I wrote about how capitalism, or big-business in general, is tribalistic in nature and then I tied it to the idea that technology is a form of language. One tribe conquers another and forces it to assimilate. The idea is that tribes and nations are perpetually bound enemies because they are both successful expressions of humanity."

"Cool! I like that."

"Miss Blue-Eyes," a sergeant says from almost out of nowhere. "Let's go, we want to talk to you."

“Fuck,” Julie says beneath her breath.

The room she is led to is not intimidating. It is just an office with an aluminum table placed in the center. The sergeants on the other hand are very intimidating. There are four waiting for her. They are all sitting around the table. Some of them have paperwork in front of them. Periodically they rearrange the papers and pack them against the table. Two of them are in uniform. The other two are dressed business-casual. Each holds Julie in his gaze as she enters the gray little office. Her escort seats her at the head of the aluminum table. A glass of water, in anticipation, is poured and waiting for here. She takes a sip. I don't have the first clue what to say, she thinks.

“You're not in trouble if you tell us his name,” the SCIC detective closest to her says.

“Timothy Reed,” Julie says without hesitation. She is not as scared as she is pissed off and annoyed that she is going through this for him. The SCIC patrolmen look at each other with levity. That was easy, is what their body language says to Julie. Her escort grabs her by the armpit to lead her back to her cell. The others begin packing the edges of their paperwork against the table.

The other two look surprised when Julie arrives back so soon. “How disappointing,” says the young woman she spoke with just moments before. “I was expecting you to come back battered and bruised but with your resolution and commitment to the cause intact.”

“Giving up Timothy is hardly a blow to the revolution. And I'm not going to pay for his stupidity. I'm not spending the rest of my life in this cell.”

They laugh.

“You're a smart girl,” her fellow inmate says. “I hope we speak again when they let us out.”

“Well, if novelty is grounds for friendship, consider us the best of friends. I don't ever plan on spending the night in an SCIC drunk tank again so I guess I have to keep you.”

They both, again, laugh. Julie is very charming but rarely do her friendships last. She is too intellectually driven to invest the time and energy into lasting relationships that she should. Necessity, however, has a way of bridging that gap. She in fact is certain that they will speak again when SCIC lets them out.

Ramon is still sleeping when the shuttle reaches SC-12. He is the first of the five aboard to wake. He scratches his head and looks out the window. The shuttle is still on the docking platform. Ramon peers into space.

The platform operator remote-pilots the shuttle into the hanger. The hanger is fairly empty. Two sergeants holding notepads are waiting on the shuttle dock. Ramon is still staring out the window as the shuttle pulls into the hanger. He shakes Andrew.

“Wake up fool.”

Andrew takes a deep breath and a minute to open his eyes. He opens his left eye and wishes he could sleep more. “Don’t tell me, we’re here,” he says.

“Yup.”

“Fucking perfect.”

Ramon rubs his eyes, yawns, and stretches. He dreams of his bed knowing that the next few hours of in-processing will be a hell of orders. Andrew tries to rollover in his seat and sleep more. It was a thirty-six hour flight to SC-12. He should have slept more. He did not. He spent his time playing video games and watching porn. The two sergeants greet the five soldiers with steady handshakes and professionalism.

“Welcome,” says the first. He is a tall blonde man with tightly cropped hair fading to an almost-Mohawk. His jaw is powerfully set upon his shoulders. A military animal. The other sergeant is not quite so built. She is a portly lady with hard-eyes and a large bottom. She obviously does not spend much time in the gym, Ramon thinks.

“Welcome,” she says. “We’ll be the sergeants in charge of in-processing you to our facility. It will be a long night so get your crap together and hurry off the plane.”

The soldiers hurry but only so much. Yelling sergeants lose their edge after a few years of service. Hell, Ramon could get his Sergeant’s Star in another nine months. He does not want it. He wants to finish his term of service and get out.

The sergeants lead the five soldiers into a bright hallway at the end of the shuttle dock. A van is waiting. With little talk, they pour into the van and throw their gear into the back. “You guys need vaccinations so we’re heading to medical,” the male sergeant says.

Fuck, Ramon says beneath his breath. Needles. I don’t want a shot, he thinks. Andrew has buried his face in his soldier’s cap. Hardly professional but who cares at this hour. The other three sit there quietly. They cannot be happy, Ramon thinks. Being lined up and rammed with needles is never fun.

“That’s why they pay us the big bucks,” the male sergeant says when he sees their faces in the rearview mirror. He settles into his chair and turns the radio to country music. Ramon does not like country music but he can listen to it. In fact, he could care less. He just wants to lie in his bunk with the lights off and wait for his enlistment to end.

The medical clinic is quiet and uncomfortable. “Take this checklist,” the female sergeant says. “When you’re done in-processing here, go over to housing and get your room keys. After that, go to the armory and register a weapon. Clean it. When you’re done check back into us at our office. After that, you’re done for the evening. Get some sleep, a briefing is at six-thirty.”

Ramon always finds it strange when he is given Earth-time instructions on a space-station. “Fuck!” Andrew says when the sergeants leave. “We have to lug our gear to all these places?”

“We should have asked if we could have left it in the van while we in-processed.” Ramon says.

“Whatever. Did you see those two? They were just waiting to be dicks. I can just hear it: ‘Am I your mama? Troop, secure your own gear’.” Andrew says with a condescending salute. Ramon and the other three laugh.

The shots are not too bad. Three vaccinations and none of them are as bad as when Ramon in-processed to his first base. Perhaps space is more sterile, he thinks. Forty-five minutes pass before all five are together in the front office of the medical clinic.

“Let’s just do this together,” Ramon says. However, one go-getter of the five is anxious to shine. It is Osman. He wants to in-process alone. As they walk down the corridor to housing, he is two steps, then five steps, then twelve steps ahead of the group. Ass-kisser, Ramon thinks. He probably wants to rub-elbows with sergeants like a little bitch.

The corridor leading from medical to housing has no windows. They cannot even tell that they are on a space station. Why should they? A synthetic continent is just that, a colossal piece of land for humankind to live on. These are man-made. This one, SC-12, the largest of the fifteen made, even has a legislature. It is basically a sovereign nation. The fact that it is a military facility makes life aboard it a little scary. Ramon is not worried. He has grown accustomed to living within a Police State.

Housing is equally as uncomfortable as medical. The sergeant at the front desk is cold and emotionless. They spend the next ninety minutes filling out paperwork. Name, Rank, Unit, things like that. The sergeant gives them linen and a dorm key. Ramon sees a clock in the corner. It is already twelve: forty-five. Even if they finish in-processing now, they will be exhausted in the morning during the brief.

Each soldier drearily lugs his gear on to his shoulder. Armor, cold-weather gear, and various other contingent equipment make the bags at least eighty pounds. Not fun as an anchor. It takes them twenty minutes to reach the armory. It is a black little hallway leading to the lower decks. Three floors beneath 'Ground Zero,' Ramon feels as if he is entering a tomb. Andrew has said little the entire time. He marches on with the mindless necessity of a soldier doing what must be done to get the day over with. His eyes are cupped with dark circles. His brown curly hair is greasy. A large pimple has grown on his chin. Ramon imagines that he looks little better. He slides his I.D. to the armor across a dull black counter. "Weapon 3626-A. That is yours. Remember that," he says to Ramon, "It will make life easier when you need to arm-up."

The others wait in line. One by one they get their numbers. One by one they grow closer as only those that suffer together can do. It is two: thirty when they finish. Ramon's anxiety begins to grow. If I am tired during that brief, the morning will be hell, he thinks.

The four decide to drop by the dorm and leave their gear before going to the office of the in-processing sergeants. Ramon thinks that it is a bad idea but the other three insist. There is five other sleeping soldiers within it making ten bunks total. Ramon finds his locker and shoves his gear into it with little care. Three: fifteen. Exhausted, he lays down on his bed and almost falls asleep. "Let's go man. Nights almost done," Andrew says and shakes Ramon on the shoulder. Ramon heaves his body to its feet. He wobbles a bit as if some mindless thug had just clobbered him. The other three are waiting in the door. Their silhouette creates a strange new monster of many arms and legs. Ramon sighs to himself thinking, I hate this shit.

Back to the long corridors again. A security unit, roving on small plat-form scooters, passes by but does not stop them to check their I.D.s. The corridor, otherwise, is empty.

Osman, the go-getter of a soldier, is in the office waiting with the sergeants. Osman. A short guy with pink skin and red hair. "What the fuck? Where were you?" The female sergeant says. The male sergeant instinctively gets up from his seat and circles the soldiers as the female sergeant barks at them. "So, you just thought you'd take your sweet-ass time? It's almost four." There is a long pause. Nobody says a word. "Give me your checklists," she says ripping them from their hands, "And go to bed."

Andrew attempts an about-face but tumbles into Ramon. The others just walk away.

Revelry. They can't be playing revelry. Ramon moans within his head as that obnoxious music begins to ring through the dorm. Good God, SC-12 is a nightmare, he thinks. Andrew is still asleep.

Sound asleep in fact, like an idiot. It almost makes Ramon mad, his stupid face. Wake-up fool,” he growls. He would have thrown his pillow but that is just a little too gay.

“Fuck you,” Andrew says and rolls over. A large smelly foot hangs out from beneath his sheet and cover. At least the dorm is warm, Ramon thinks.

“Are you hearing this?” Another soldier says. “I’ve been here three weeks and I still haven’t gotten used to it.”

Just then, the music turns off. Thank God. At least some uptight jerk-off didn’t come barreling through the dorm. The ten soldiers get ready together. How can they not? They live in a tiny dorm. Ramon begins to wonder if he’ll be placed in another unit. The ball is already rolling and he is certain the other soldiers from his unit are not here yet. He slings his gear-bag over his shoulder and follows the other like cattle.

SC-12 is alive with movement. There must be a curfew here, Ramon thinks. Not to mention some very pretty girls. The military is full of pretty girls. Also, a lot of officers that nobody seems to be saluting. It must be annoying, considering the constant direct contact between enlisted and officers through these corridors. As well, the large panel shutters are open and the soldiers are now afforded a magnificent view of space. It feels like it should be day and yet, if it were not for the large corridor lights over-head, there is only darkness in space. The group comes to a consensus that they should not dilly-dally through this hallway. Soldiers have very few friends above their rank, and since they are low-ranking, socialization with superior officers isn’t much fun.

The office of in-processing is three streets down, a left on to a street called Biltmore, and then a further four blocks from the intersection. Ramon isn’t sure but he thinks he can feel the breeze as well as smell the ocean. Nice try, he thinks, but the synthetic smells do not make the environment any more comfortable, believable, or real. As they turn on to Biltmore, the thoroughfare opens up into two small lanes of traffic with vehicles stopping and going at the lights. The male in-processing sergeant is waiting outside in front of the office. “So what do you think of SC-12?” he says with a half-cocked smile. “The theme this month is Los Angeles, which is why you can smell the beach.”

Ramon, Andrew, and the other three crinkle their brows. “I know,” the sergeant says, “It’s not very realistic. L.A. stinks.” He hands them each a stack of papers each. “Read these,” he says, “And be ready for another briefing tomorrow.” Ramon thumbs through the handbook. It is a guidebook for behavior on SC-12. “You’ll be required to exercise six times a week with Marian. Other than that, consider yourselves on leave until your unit arrives.” The five stare back in disbelief. Show-up and

wait (the military motto), however, this is great Ramon thinks. I do not have to do anything but exercise and read. The other five have been waiting outside the office. Ramon can almost see their hearts break with envy when they hear that Ramon, Andrew, and the other three are released for the day.

An hour later, Ramon and Andrew make their way to the commissary. Osman, Delmore, and Nathan follow close behind. The facility is amazing; evidently, living in space is not so bad. The food court alone has all five soldiers drooling. It is food from Earth and Mars. Terra-Rio sausage and pasta, Renewed Orleans Gumbo, New York Pizza. The military contracts chefs from both planets to prepare food on SC-12.

A group of soldiers, loud and stupid, passes them by in full uniform. Ramon and his crew are not in uniform. They got into their civilian clothes after being released. Ramon reminds himself to show up and exercise at seventeen: thirty. The building is twelve blocks away.

The five soldiers take a seat in a small café. They are beginning to notice the many civilians within the facility. In addition to the contractors, there are families with kids running through the court. Of course, military personnel have families as well. A soccer ball nearly hits Delmore in the head as the waitress arrives to take their orders. The food is not elegant within this café. They order sandwiches and coffee. Osman flushes pink. A young Martian waitress is serving them. As the other four begin to leave, Osman pretends to enjoy his coffee. He settles into his seat and refuses to move. The beverage quivers in his hand. An arcade draws Ramon, Andrew, Delmore, and Nathan. The blinking lights hypnotize their need for entertainment. Osman is still a virgin and looking to get his feet wet (no pun intended). He is incredibly awkward alone, without a thing to do but sip his coffee. He begins to feel it, rises abruptly from the table, and walks away. Hardly a performance he thinks. He has no game. Picking up girls perhaps is not his forte. The many soldiers in uniform make him feel welcome. He knows that he belongs in uniform. He, unlike Ramon, will never leave the military. The uniform is his home. He shuffles across the food court to the arcade. He only finds Ramon, the other three have gone away. "Where is everyone?" Osman inquires to Ramon.

"What do you mean?"

"There is no one here but you."

"Really?" Ramon takes a pause from the game and looks around. "Holly shit. I don't know," he says, "Hang on. Let me finish and we'll leave."

Osman sits in the empty game next to Ramon. He does not want to start a game of his own. He wants to leave when Ramon is done. He is not watching the game but hears the distinctive sound of failure echo from the game. Ramon's game is over. "Alright, let's go," he says and grabs his jacket from the top of the machine.

Osman follows him like a puppy dog. "I wonder where the others are at?" Osman says.

Ramon hardly notices. He is still happy to be free. "Let's see a movie," he says.

"Shouldn't we wait for the others?" Osman insists. Ramon looks at him hard. "No," he says and begins to head for a theatre he saw before entering the food court. Osman obediently follows behind. They leave the food court and are immediately met by the faint smell of the ocean that saturates the air. A unit of twenty soldiers goes marching by lead by a sergeant with two bright stars on his shoulder. Ramon knows that Captain Tate will want to show off when the rest of his unit arrives. Enjoy the peace of mind while you have it, he thinks to himself, because life will be a marching hell when the others arrive.

Osman and Ramon quietly watch the movie like long lost family. They are kindred strangers in a foreign world. Within a military theatre, there is quiet excitement in the air. The cinematic escape is a lull before the storm. Ramon slouches in his seat and takes up both armrests during the movie. It is a need to establish personal space, a show to the people within the theatre that they are not romantically involved. Not a single soul within the theatre notices them. More than anything, it is a public ritual amongst men keeping each other company.

They leave the theatre feeling fed with the pleasure of storytelling. No doubt, it is only these stories and their arms that they will have in the storm of conflict. They do not talk about the movie, they discuss the Martian waitress from the café while they are walking home. "Why didn't you talk to her?" Ramon asks.

"I felt weird sitting there alone."

"Why didn't you ask us to wait?"

"I didn't know how. I'm not good with things like that. People don't like it when I ask them for things."

"Let me tell you something Osman. You better get good with people or get good with being alone. One or the other, and if you do, the rest will come easier. Girls, friends, whatever. People don't like it when you have nothing to offer them, especially when it's obvious you want something from them. I promise you, that girl noticed you checking her out, but she's not going to make the first move when

you want something from her. Just put yourself out there so she can see you and watch all the good things come.”

Osman takes it in. Ramon smiles to himself. It is amazing how successful he sounds with the women considering he has never successfully picked up a hunny. Ramon is a nice-guy, and nice-guys get women with mutual understanding, not with honey-tongued charm. He would have done little better than Osman, the only difference is that Ramon knows himself enough not to put himself in that situation. He would have either said something insightful during the meal or made an ass of himself to make her laugh. Ramon approaches women like baseball, if he gets a hit three out of ten times he feels that he is doing well. Osman tries to hit a homerun at every bat, which is why he never scores.

Ramon walks home unaware of how happy he is to have made another friend. It has completely slipped his mind that he is supposed to be at physical training. That is where the others are. “God damn it,” he says. It dawns on him as soon as they reach the dorm. It is six: thirty. They are an hour late. They begin running for the in-processing office.

The situation is not well. Ramon does not know these sergeants. He knows that he will be treated mercilessly since there is no personal connection between him and his superiors. “Get in here!” Andrew says when they arrive. “You idiots! You’re so lucky! We’ve been waiting here for an hour and no one has arrived.” Both sergeants arrive a moment later. “Dipshits!” the female sergeant barks as if it is their names. “Who told you to wait here? If we’re going to exercise, don’t you think we’d meet in the gym?”

Ramon wishes he could roll his eyes. Since his incompetence has gone unnoticed, he feels at liberty to undermine her logic. Not if you don’t tell us that, he wishes he could say. The female sergeant looks at Ramon and Osman still standing in their tee-shirts and jeans. She only rolls her eyes. She lines them up into a small formation but allows them to walk normally to the gym. It is a few blocks away.

When they arrive, it is packed full of people. It is amazing, the kind of shape some people in the military are in. They look like body-builders. Not all of them. Only some. They use the mats in the back of the gym. The work-out is not a joke. They certainly break a sweat. The female sergeant, who appears to be portly, is in fact incredibly fit. A military build is strictly practical. You do not need to be pretty to serve.

Sweating and tired, the five young men arrive at the dorms. A lettered-envelope is sitting on each of their bunks. Ramon opens his. Your unit will arrive in three days, is the main message with the letter.

Great, he thinks, I sure miss Captain Tate barking at me and threatening to know my head off like a mad and raving dog. Everyone retires to their bunks. Some listen to music, others eat candy that they bought at the commissary. Ramon is nervous. They will be in Terra Rio in two weeks. Ten days of briefing before it. Dear God shoot me, he thinks and then knocks on wood. Is that right? Anyways, I take that back. The five other soldiers living in this dorm enter. They look tired and dirty. “What did you guys do?” Ramon asks.

“Firing and all that. I took forever to clean the heavy gun. I’m fucking tired.”

“Do you know which city you are going to?”

“New Frisco or Ellay-Rio, I think. And you?”

“Terra-Rio.” The soldier cringes and laughs at Ramon’s response. “I’m sorry,” he says with cold sarcasm. “I’m not,” Ramon retorts. “I’m sorry,” the soldier says again with equally indifferent sarcasm. His eyes are laughing. “Whatever.” Ramon says, closes his eyes, and puts his headphones on. There is nothing as annoying as living with a casual enemy (a.k.a. a dick). This mutherfucker, he thinks. The dorm immediately begins to sink when the soldiers take off their sweaty uniforms and boots. “You stink. Go shower,” Ramon says. His adversary only smiles and dabs his armpits with his tee-shirt. “Better?” he asks and lies down in his bunk.

“Jesus Christ!” The in-processing sergeant says when he enters the dorm, “Go shower, everyone, it smells like you wiped your asses with your feet!” Everyone groans and then complies. SC-12 is psychotic; at least there are separate showers, Ramon thinks. It feels better to be clean. Men, in these matters, can be lazy. The in-processing sergeant is still waiting in the dorms when the soldiers emerge from the bathroom. “You’re Captain and your unit will be here tomorrow so as of now you are released from my direct command,” the sergeant says as the soldiers emerge from the bathrooms, “Report to Office 213. That is where your unit will be staying. Let’s go, get your shit.”

Everyone is listening. Captain Tate’s five soldiers organize their gear and make their way to this office. They would have no idea where it is at. The sergeant decides to escort them in person. He knows SC-12 too well and is always concerned for new troops until they prove themselves otherwise.

Ramon throws his pack over his shoulder. My burden, he thinks. The corridors of SC-12 are filled with officers and soldiers in marching formations. A jeep with a highly decorated general goes speeding by. Captain Tate’s five soldiers stand at attention. The sergeant salutes.

Office 213 is just another dorm. This one is larger. It also has an office reserved for the officer in charge of the unit assigned to it. At least Andrew is with me, Ramon thinks. This would really suck if I

were alone. Ramon takes a look at Andrew keeping-on. The look across his face is one of misery and he feels a deep kinship to him because he knows Andrew's personality and he knows that he too is not having fun. Osman is keeping-on with a military man's spunkful happiness. To each his own, Ramon thinks.

Ramon finds a locker in Office 213. The plaque above its door reads 'The Devil's Laboratory' (an allusion to an event or possibly a group of soldiers Ramon is unaware of). Each locker has a similar label above it. Captain Tate's five soldiers spread out fairly evenly across the large dorm. A few hours later, like orphaned children, they line up together to eat at the Chow Hall a few blocks away. They decide to go in uniform and march the entire way.

The captain storms back and forth. His quivering unit on full alert. At attention, he inspects them unforgivingly. Ramon's canteen is on the wrong side of his belt. "What the fuck." He places a hand on to the canteen, holding Ramon in his gaze. The heavy dark circles beneath his eyes throb like a bruised thumb. Ramon does not look down, though realizing he has fucked up.

Ramon clears his throat then mutters, "Copy that sir."

The battle gear is awkward and heavy, over fifty pounds of armor and munitions attached to his torso. The explosives make it difficult to reach his canteen. He all but spins in a circle, chasing his tail like a stupid dog. "Rifleman Fulmore! Fuck with your gear on your own time," Captain Tate barks from across the room without looking up from the inspection that he is conducting. Ramon wants to roll his eyes but certainly knows better. He is a little scared of Captain Tate.

Captain Tate begins handing out assignments on Terra-Formed Mars. "Rifleman Fulmore," he says with a stern voice.

"Sir," Ramon replies.

"You're infantry." He hands out many assignments. "Rifleman Trots," he says to Andrew.

"Sir," Andrew says.

"You're with the patrolmen. Report to the patrolman desk by this afternoon." The morning went on like this. The captain splits his unit up. Half go with him to infantry. Half go to the SCIC patrolmen.

Ramon gives Andrew a pound on the knuckles when they break. "See ya bro," he says to Andrew.

"Alright man, see ya."

That is all the good-bye that there is. The fact that they even say good-bye is enough to let them know that they are friends. Ramon hooks up with Delmore who was also assigned to infantry. They give each other a pound on the knuckles.

Delmore is an interesting fellow. Huge and muscular, he is a mixed-martial artist who also loves to play roll-playing card games. Most people do not mock him for it.

Captain Tate puts them into formation. He marches them to a large hanger a mile away. The additional gear they will need for Terra-Formed Mars is neatly stacked in five large groups within the hanger. Two riflemen are standing post at each pile of gear. They are given new uniforms, boots, a medical kit, and a manual on behavior for a rifleman on Terra-Formed Mars. Ramon grows angrier with each item bundled into his arms. What am I going to do with this, he thinks while holding the briefing. I could read it but what good will it do? I don't even think half of these idiots can read and we need to behave as a unit. What good will it do?

Research has found that people need to feel the sensation of being in the sun. A large UV light glows when the unit emerges from the hanger in order to synthesize the effect of sunlight. It does not work. The intention is transparent and therefore un-affecting.

Captain Tate has been speaking with another officer, higher ranking, the entire time. He puts them into formation before briefing them on the events to come. "You have twenty-four hours to read your manual. Be prepared. We will deploy after that. I could release you but I'm not going to. We are going to go back into that hanger, have a seat, and read. Let's go." He puts them back into formation and they march into the hanger.

Rovaldo places his vodka-cranberry on to the small square table that squats in front of his couch like a bulldog with its ankles out bent. He stares at his wife Teresa. She is angry with the recent decisions he has made. She does not trust the Martian Security Regulars and she feels her husband is too stupid to see the larger picture. “Honey it doesn’t matter,” she says, “They are using you as cannon fodder. That fucking corporation has ruled us since time began. How long do you think Mars can stay independent? Don’t fight please.”

“Do you want to lose your family’s farm?”

“Of course not.”

“That’s what you’re asking. They’ll taking and taking until we have no country, no culture, no way of life, no nothing. Only business and that is no good.”

A long pause. Rovaldo’s eyes feel sore. He rubs them and takes another sip of his cocktail. Teresa unzips the drawstring of her cigarettes. She removes the upper half of the plastic outer cover and packs the package against her hand. Pat, Pat, Pat. “Let somebody else fight!” She screams.

“No.”

Teresa runs her thumb across the lip of her cigarettes. It feels clean but full of poison. She folds the top back and breaks in the virgin crease. She pulls the silver inner lining till it pops like a champagne cork, wets her finger, and removes a single cigarette. She does not place it in her mouth. She stares at the floor in front of her and blinks her eyes, tasting the saliva in her mouth. She attempts to raise the cigarette to her lips but lets her forearm fall into her lap. She does this twice, takes a deep breath, places the cigarette into her mouth, and lights it. Her skin immediately turns to leather. She feels hard and guarded. “Do whatever the fuck you want,” she says in between a hard pull on her cigarette.

Rovaldo has been swirling his cocktail without the slightest thought of her. He is riveted with the thought of fighting SCIC. He sets the drink down. The cocktail’s flavor is still in his mouth. He runs his fingers across the arm of the recliner then stands up. He does not look at Teresa. She does not look at him. One foot in front of the other, he abandons the living room and makes his way to the garage through the front door. The sun is setting and the sky is purple and orange overhead. His daughter has left her toys on the lawn. Revoldo attempts to pick them up but ends up leaving them where they are. Too much work. In the garage, he has two APR-1230 assault rifles hidden in the lower drawer of his tool shed. He places a blanket on the floor, kneels, and sets the rifles in front of him. They are clean, well-oiled, and in perfect care. He takes care of them daily; daily making sure their maintenance is well tended to.

He wraps both of the rifles within the blanket and places the bundle into the trunk of his tiny car. He hesitates a moment. Maybe it's the booze. He decides not to say good-bye. He sits down in defiance and ignites the car. He should pack a suitcase but decides against it. I plan on losing everything in this war so my family won't have to, is what he thinks.

Revoldo is well-respected within the Martian Security Regulars. He is a quite leader within the ranks. He is greeted at the entrance to the groundwater tunnels with smiles and handshakes. A deli masks the operation. From the deli out front, a short green hallway leads to three doors. One is the bathroom, one is the stocking room, and the last one is the janitor's closet. Within the stocking room is three floor-to-ceiling racks for placing buns and condiments. There is also a large refrigerator for the meats. Beneath the refrigerator is a turn-key and a hatch. The device is cheap and low-tech but, for now, the only option. Revoldo does not enter. He places his rifle against the refrigerator and re-enters the deli to have a bite to eat. The bread smells delicious. They do not bake it on site. There is a bakery down the street that they work with. It is not a front. It is a legitimate business.

Revoldo enters the kitchen and grabs a bun from the counter. The sandwich he makes is sloppy without the grace of trained hands. Placing his food on to a paper plate, he seats himself in a corner chair with a glass of soda and thinks about his wife and kids. The alcohol from earlier has worn off and he feels guilty for having not said good-bye. He takes a big bite from his sandwich and lets the food settle on his Adam's Apple, emotional with guilt. While still chewing, he takes a gulp of soda. The food and sugar make the heavy guilt bearable and also help to settle his nerves. Another security regular enters the deli. They are getting sloppy but it does not matter. When the war starts they will detonate the hole that leads to the tunnels beneath.

Revoldo does not recognize the boy. He is short and over-weight for his size. His head is glazed with thick curly brown hair that shines in the sun. His face is covered with small dark freckles and his eyes stare back from beneath. He smiles at Revoldo and gives a thumbs-up. Dear Lord, Revoldo thinks. Is this kid for real?

The kid sits in a chair two seats over from Revoldo, smiles, and then winks an eye. Revoldo stares back in disbelief. Who does the recruiting these days? "Come here," he says, grabs the boy by the shoulder, and leads him to the corner by the soda machine. "What are you doing?"

"You know," the boy says while still smiling.

"No I don't know."

“No, you know. The resistance.”

“Come here,” Revoldo says. He grabs the boy by the shoulder and takes him outside. An ally is next door. The trash near the dumpster is where Revoldo plops down the kid. “Comfortable?” he says.

“Agh! What the hell? I’m here to help you.”

“Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“This is not a game. So don’t use the secret agent’s handshake you saw on the television. Do you understand?” He slaps the boy across the face. “Does that hurt?” He slaps the boy again. “Does that hurt?”

“Yes!”

“Good. Welcome to reality.” He picks the boy up by the shoulder. “Who told you about us?”

“No one. I’m here to serve my brother Diego.”

Revoldo immediately begins to feel like he went too far in reprimanding the kid. “Damn it. Fuck. Get inside,” he says and pushes the boy in. The moment that they enter the deli the pudgy boy’s reek becomes apparent. Perhaps seating him in a pile of three week old garbage wasn’t the best way to deal with the situation. Marselle emerges from the backroom. The look across her face is total disgust. “What the hell happened to you Romo?”

“Nothing,” he says, “I was almost jumped on the way over and I had to hide in a dumpster.”

Revoldo stares at the floor. Keep your cool, he thinks.

“Well, you stink. Go home, wash-up, and come right back. I have paper work for you to do,” Marselle says.

The boy waddles off while rubbing the cheek that was plopped into the trash. Again, Revoldo feels guilty. “I kicked his ass,” he says as soon as the boy leaves.

Marselle turns around surprised. “What?”

“He was acting weird, winking and all that; so I took him out to the ally and worked him over until he realized this wasn’t a game.”

“Damn it Revoldo. I was going to have him do paper work for the deli to keep him busy while his brother is gone. He didn’t know anything.”

“Damn it. Now he does.”

“Well, go get him.”

Without another word, Revoldo jumps to his feet and knocks over his chair with the back of his knees in the process. He shoves the door open. Looking left then right, he sees the boy kitty-corner mindlessly walking down the street. Revoldo does not shout to him. He begins to jog and crosses the street in loose strides. Catching Romo by the shoulder, startling him in the process, he says, "Hey, why were you acting so weird back there?"

"It's no use mister," Romo says, "I already know that my brother does stuff there."

"Well then, I'm following you until you return to the deli."

The home of Romo Valentine is small. The boy rushes through the front door and locks it before Revoldo can respond to him. Who cares, he thinks. Just don't come back smelling like trash. He sits down on the steps and plays with his cell phone. Fifteen minutes pass before the squatty boy emerges. He is pristine and groomed to perfection. "I am ready," he says with stately and composed grace. He stands proud before the soldier.

"Then let's go. Marselle is waiting." For a moment they walk in silence. "You do not look like Diego."

"He is my half-brother."

"Huh."

Nothing else is said until they reach the deli.

Marselle is waiting in the dining room of the deli with three stacks of papers in front of her. Immediately she hands them to Romo. "Take these to that corner and organize them by last names," she says. She touches Revoldo on the shoulder. "We'll talk later. Now is not the time. Things have been compromised. Go home to your wife."

I can't do that, Revoldo thinks. He goes out to the car. He waits and wonders what he should do. All the while he is growing tired from the booze and stress from the day. He begins to fall asleep. Rain begins to pitter-pat against the windshield. This is not helping, he thinks. Boom. He hears a muffled explosion in the distance. What the hell was that? He cracks the door, which, in this time of confusion, seems to stick before giving way. It is noticeably cooler outside. The smell of rain is in the air. Headlights are turned on as the gray clouds hide the city. No one seems to be bothered by the shock from the explosion. Perhaps no one is paranoid enough to even notice. Revoldo feels nervous and wishes he had the weapon that he left within the deli.

Revoldo returns to the deli. The door to the deli is intact. It has been bombed with a controlled explosion. He enters. There is no trace of Marselle or Romo anywhere except perhaps the stack of papers in the corner. The green hallway is intact. The door to the stocking room is open. Before entering, Revoldo grabs a deli knife. The knife feels slippery in his palm. The thin metal could easily break if enough strain was placed on it. Revoldo places his back against the wall and tries to make himself as small a target as possible should anything emerges as he approaches the door. A faint metallic smell, almost acidic, is in the air as he comes closer and closer to the door. Placing his belly on to the floor, quickly, very quickly, his knuckles supporting his body, he pops his head in and out to get a peek within the room. No one appears to be inside but the refrigerator is noticeably turned over. He peaks his head again. Beneath a floor-to-ceiling stacker, he sees his rifle. It must have slid across the floor when the refrigerator was knocked over. He stands back up and inverts the knife within his palm so that the blade runs along his forearm. He exhales sharply and enters the room with the blade raised ready to slash a target. The room is empty. The blind spots prove to be empty. There is only Revoldo, his rifle, and a big empty hole.

Revoldo approaches the hole. Arching his back, trying to stay as far away as possible, he peaks into the hole. The ladder is intact. Only the hatch door has been compromised. Revoldo gets on his hands and knees and, again arching his back and keeping one palm on the floor, reaches under the stacker full of buns. The floor is greasy. His hand slips and he painfully catches himself with his elbow against the floor. The rifle is well within reach. To touch it, the relief he feels is overwhelming. Unfortunately, there is no ammunition within the weapon.

The cleanliness of the weapon is startling. Revoldo has never noticed before the care he has taken to ensure the weapon is combat ready. He racks the weapon by pulling back the slide and makes sure that it is truly empty. It is. This is not good. The rifle's potential is greater than its performance without ammunition. He slouches against the wall and holds the rifle in his lap. His phone feels heavy in his pocket. He realizes he has left his wallet in his car. Pulling himself to his feet, he thinks of the ammunition in the trunk. Perhaps he is imagining things. Adrenaline is pumping in his veins. The color of the world seems ultra-vivid. He stumbles through the green hallway, through the front door, and into the street with the rifle dangling from his shoulder. Revoldo stumbles and swaggers with heavy feet. The rain is still falling in a steady drizzle that makes the footsteps to his car slippery. He slams against the car as if his depth perception is off. He pulls out the anchor in his pocket and fumbles for the

key to unlock the trunk. It is the only key with an oval head on the ring. The key chambers into the lock. Its teeth bump within the machinery within the lock. The trunk springs open, for a moment it wags up and down. A single box. A single box of sixty rounds is found within the trunk. If I need all sixty of these rounds, I should be dead he thinks. Sixty rounds. It is enough. As if he is not in plain sight, Revoldo sits on the curb and proceeds to load the magazine ...five... twelve... eighteen...

“Drop the weapon!”

A roving SCIC patrolman has spotted him. There is only two. The weapon of one is drawn, the other is calling back-up. Eighteen rounds. He has only chambered eighteen rounds. Then again, his assault rifle with eighteen rounds gives him the advantage. Revoldo rolls behind the wheel-well of his car. The patrolman’s pistol cackles off two rounds. The rounds go skipping across the concrete like stones flung across a lake in the summer sun. The concrete is shiny from the rain. Quiet. The falling rain begins to sound like swaying wheat. There is total silence except its fall. Revoldo rolls up and above his trunk and fires off four rounds, which puncture the windshield of the patrolman’s cruiser in what appears to be a happy face. He dives back behind the wheel. “Patrolman down!” he hears his assailant shout.

Revoldo can hear the words echo across the entire planet. The war has just begun. Revoldo rolls back above the wheel-well and lobs ten heavy rounds into the patrol car and through the light cover the patrolman’s car door provides him. He is unsure if he has hit him. He begins to run. Four rounds are combat ready. Forty-two are in his jacket pocket. Thirty will fit in his magazine. He hears a round comically wiz by his head. Like the roadrunner is some lonesome canyon being chased by the coyote. One thing is certain, the second patrolman is not dead. He is still lobbing rounds at him. The front window bursts as Revoldo enters the deli. He certainly is not dead. Revoldo stumbles through the green hallway, finds the hole, and descends.

Andrew rolls in pain and thinks. The concussion of the rounds was just as damaging as the puncture wounds. It knocked him off of his feet as if he had been punched in the chest by a boxer. His partner, Osman, is dead. Andrew’s breath begins to hollow from his chest. Rolling on his back, the rain pitter-pats against his skin. It is so pretty coming down. How it coils in the wind. Like a beautiful woman walking in a skirt made of light cotton. Soft and airy. Blood gurgles across his chin. He feels the bullet hole in his chest and hears the sirens wailing. The authority of that sound. That sound was made to be noticed. That sound...made to get the attention of a passerby. Andrew begins to cry. His body feels

cold. Cold. Cold. His lower back and shoulders feel stiff. He can no longer feel the belt around his waist. He tries to wipe the water from his face and knocks the patrolman's cap from off of his head. His tightly shaved scalp is exposed. He rolls on to his side and sees how much blood he has lost. The murky red and purple concrete is covered in blood and the pitter-pat of rain. Mouth-to-mouth, mouth-to-mouth, compressions against his chest. He is unsure if he is dying or being saved. Mouth-to-mouth, mouth-to-mouth, compressions against his chest. He sees light and begins to warm. "Just hang on," he hears.

The ambulance rolls to life and howls through the streets. He sees light and feels warm. The rain is no longer on his face or chilling his bones. His uniform is splayed open. A nurse with her arms braced against his chest is working on him. The other nurse is performing mouth-to-mouth. No one is working on his, on Osman's. He is still dead. Did someone secure my weapon or is it still lying on the street, he thinks before falling asleep to wake again.

Each step down the ladder is met with caution. Revoldo has not had the chance to chamber the other rounds. The rifle begins to feel worthless in his arm. Only four rounds. While descending, there is a period of twelve or so seconds that he spends in total darkness until the light from a maintenance hatch cracks the thinnest red beam into the heavy darkness. He opens up the tiny door filled with switches and begins testing them by flipping them one by one. A long corridor of dim lights sparkles into reality and replaces the dark. Many forgotten tunnels, Revoldo thinks. The left-overs from the under-developed times of Martian history. Revoldo is not safe. Patrolmen are to his back and groundwater tunnels are to his front, without the security regulars, he is just prey.

A huddled silhouette is in the distance. Revoldo goes prone. He feels stupid but there is little else he can do. As he gets closer, the huddled creatures screams frightened as if a giant black but is crawling across the floor towards it in this subterranean hole.

"Romo. Is that you?" Revoldo says.

"Huh? Who...who are you?"

"Oh my god! It is you." He rises to his knees. "It's Revoldo."

Romo begins to cry and grabs him. "It took Marselle. I just sat there. It took her down her. I just sat there. I thought I could find her. I couldn't."

They continue down the hall.

Taking a moment to chamber a full magazine, Rovoldo needs to calm Romo. “Calm down Romo. Who took her?”

When Romo does not answer, Rovoldo says, “More?”

Romo only shakes his head. The tunnel has many ways a voice can travel. The sound of Marselle’s faint mummer sucks in air from around him. Traveling to her in a dream of unknown possibility, the discovery of her standing over a man in black shakes them like children still in awe of some greater force.

Revoldo inspects the body. Marselle is shaking. She has many scratches all over her skin from the Artifact Animal’s wild clawing. He leans against the tunnel wall and says nothing. She only breathes in and out, in and out. Revoldo inspects the body. An SCIC agent he is sure. There is no identifying marks. No I.D. No agency logo. Only black. Black pants, black shirt. He cannot see the tattoo beneath its pant leg. Weapon 58.

The ladder Rovoldo is standing beneath extends fifty feet into complete blackness. Marselle holds Romo’s hand. Her free hand rubs the teeth marks that clipped her jaw. She nudges Revoldo to ascend the ladder. Acknowledging the situation with a deep and anxious sigh, he places his left foot on to the bottom rung. He almost feels as if he is about to be hit by an on-coming train as he stares into the consuming pitch on either end of him. After disposing of that awful creature with grayish purple skin, the tunnel has led them here. Marselle knew where the ladder was leading to. Rovoldo didn’t. It would be a shame if they were apprehended at the top of wherever this ladder was leading them. Rovoldo places his right hand on to the fourth rung and pulls himself off of the concrete beneath him. His rifle bangs into the ladder. Romo anxiously pushes himself in front of Marselle. His shoulder is pressing against Rovoldo’s thighs in anticipation of the next rung.

“Ack! Ack!” A sound from the tunnel echoes through the chamber. Marselle screams and pushes Romo to the next rung. With dangerous and reckless speed, they begin to climb. The pummeled body of an Artifact Animal is dragging itself. It is not yet dead, it cannot die, it can only self-terminate. Blood and drool empties from its mouth. It leaves a snail trail as it pulls its animated corpses across the floor in pursuit of the fleeing Martians.

“I’ll kill you!” it screams with an outstretched hand and bulging red-shot eyes. It does not appear to be capable of climbing a ladder. All the same, no one better fall, Marselle thinks. The hatch above the ladder slides open. A hand is extended to Rovoldo from it. The fleeing Martians are pulled to safety.

“Just clear it again sir,” the on-coming Lieutenant says to Captain Tate.

“Yes mama,” he says with forced humility. He turns around and recalls his team from their positions with a whistle and a circular wave of his hand. He taps Delmore on the chest. “You’re going first Ramon, you’re following him, I’ll be right after you, we’re going to clear that tunnel for an intelligence team to follow.”

Ramon and Delmore only nod. The penetration is the same, only this time Delmore takes point, Ramon follows. Six other riflemen follow Captain Tate. Two stay posted topside with radios.

“Ack! Ack!” they hear so faintly. “Ack. Ack.”

Delmore crosses his brow and makes eye contact with Ramon. Ramon only shrugs and points his rifle into the empty tunnel. Two riflemen from the rear rush to the front with flood lights. Click. Click. The lights open up the tunnel light almost blinding just in time to see bared teeth and the lunging form of the Artifact Animal. “Fuck!” Delmore barks while letting go a burst of rounds. He steps to the side to get better footing and trips over the flood lights sitting on the floor. One spins around. The other gets pointed towards the ceiling.

“I need those lights!” screams Captain Tate. Ramon slings his rifle and grabs a flood light. The heated metal burns his hands. He points it back down the tunnel. It is empty.

“I’ve heard of shit like this before,” Delmore says wide-eyed and scared. “Did you know that there are crocodiles in the sewers of some Martian cities?”

“This isn’t a sewer genius.” Ramon says.

“Still, it’s pretty scary to think about.”

Ramon only shakes his head. Captain Tate repositions the second flood light. The tunnel is too small to take the entire unit he has with him. Within this small corridor, friendly fire is inevitable. Taking Delmore, Ramon and a flood light, he leaves the other soldiers as back-up by the ladder. He holds the flood light in his left and he carries his rifle in his right hand like a gun-slinger who fires from the hip. Ramon and Delmore are positioned to the right and left of him.

When they close the hatch, the Martians hear the cackle of fire behind them. The MSR foot soldier manning this hatch puts his index finger to his lips. Quiet. He points to the window. The crack between the curtains is just enough to see the marching formations of SCIC riflemen. We are hardly clear of this mess, Rovoldo thinks.

The MSR foot soldier points to a hallway dotted with bedroom doors. The hallway empties to a parking lot beneath the building. Marselle pats him on the shoulder. She obviously knows the young man. She grabs Romo by the arm and puts her arm around his waist. Rovoldo takes this time to chamber the last twelve rounds he has rolling around in his pocket into his magazine. There is a sense of urgency in the air but no one bothers Rovoldo as he accomplishes this task. A bang on the door draws the gaze of everyone. Marselle grabs Romo by the hand and pulls him through the hallway. She quietly turns the knob to the parking lot and disappears behind the door. Rovoldo looks the foot soldier in the eye. The soldier touches him on the shoulder. Rovoldo does not know what the young man is going to do when they penetrate the room but he has a feeling that he will be alright. With a shuffled step, Rovoldo crosses the hallway. Romo and Marselle are huddled between two cars. Rovoldo joins them. They hear the entrance door crack and the barking of “Clear! Clear!” as the SCIC riflemen secure the building. Revoldo grows scared. They have precious moments to escape. It will be nearly impossible once the army establishes a strong perimeter around the building.

The exit sign glows kitty-corner to their position. Staying beneath the hood height of each car they shuffle to the exit. The hallway door opens. Two SCIC riflemen enter the parking lot. The door bangs open and against the wall. Empty silence. The soldiers do not enter. They do not clear the room. They are smart. The cars make clearing the room an impossible task for two men. “Please leave, please leave,” Rovoldo says to himself.

“Fuck this dude, let’s wait for the captain,” a rifleman says. “I’m not waiting here alone.”

They let the door close with a quiet hitch. There is no time, they all realize this. They begin running for the door. Marselle and Romo put their backs against the wall. Revoldo turns the door knob with his hand but opens the door with his shoulder. The alleyway appears to be as empty as it is wet from the rain. They three rebels slip through a small crack as they can make in the door. Marselle and Romo begin to hurry to the street. Revoldo grabs her by the shoulder and shakes his head. Instead, he points to the fire escape. The message is clear, on the street we will be spotted. Revoldo grabs the metal bars embedded in the building. It is a short climb to the first grated platform. He waits for Marselle and Romo to catch up. The pudgy boy is pale white and sweating. Who cares, Revoldo thinks, he is keeping up. They make it to the fourth floor just below the roof, before they hear the faint shouts beneath. The riflemen are too late. The building they are on is in absolutely no way connected to the MSR REBELS. They cannot detain everyone, Mars has not yet become a police state.

The fleeing Martians sit on a bus heading to the other side of town. No one has mentioned what they saw in the tunnel just yet. Marselle's chin hurts from where she was bitten by the Artifact Animal. Lost in anonymity, they draw comfort from each other as though in a dazzled state; they find themselves troubled, again, while they flee even deeper into the gushing fog that surrounds them having newly emerged. The down pour on foot is only noise from passerbys. All seems to be as it should be. When the turns of flight become too withdrawn in wonder, they stop to let the cooling drizzle reorient them to their surroundings. To flee among the building's inhabitants after someone pulled a fire alarm, they find their shifting reality a nauseating silence. The mortal fear and freedom of escape fills their hearts with natural concern that comes and goes with the way they perceive their safety. Could these people I cling to be important? To question now is the concern of people who search for hope in what cannot be changed. Eye contact, warmth that can only be the human touch, stands for the reality that will carry them through until they find a place to sleep. "Let's go," Rovoldo speaks. His youthful lips press the air from his mouth and what is fear blends together with a view of himself brought about by the lessons learned as a child.

Marselle and Romo hold each other as they cross the road blazed with new conflict. The free blowing debris brings them to a state of awe as the path converges on the easier road of concern leaving them behind. They disengage and draw in breath for the day ahead. The neighborhoods point their fingers and yawn like trees which encourage them to continue further until they find a clearing that should likely be ahead. When simple ideas take over, simple notions of who and where I am return, when the world itself spins on an axis that can be understood, the group returns to each other and speaks in a circle to cover all bases. "We should disband," Rovoldo says while staying fixed, calm and level-headed.

"Does Romo know where he is?" Marselle lets him make his own choice as to how he perceives his safety.

"I know my neighborhood. It's an easy run home from there." He say.

The neighborhoods pass them by enroute. In fleeting instances of recognized time spent there in days past, they stay together until, within blocks of the youngest one's home, them disband and follow their own unique paths and the group fades from memory.

Ramon could not believe what he saw. Osman. Dead. Andrew, without help, will follow him. Their patrol car is a riddled mess of bullets. The rain pitter-pats against his head. Captain Tate points to the deli. Delmore and Ramon follow him in a triangular formation. They paste themselves against the deli wall. The storefront window was shattered as Andrew returned fire from his back. Osman's dead body will not leave Ramon's mind. Captain Tate and the two soldiers from his unit are accompanied by another four soldiers assigned to Captain Tate's command. The captain is on the left side of the entrance. Ramon is on the right. The captain kicks in the door and immediately clears the room's blind spot to the left. Ramon does the same to the corner to the right. The others pour through the entrance and take up tactical positions by establishing clear lines of fire. The unit takes a moment. The only sound is rain and breath. The captain points a finger into the kitchen. Ramon nods. He kicks the half-sized swinging door and clears the blind spot at the foot of the deli counter. He is immediately followed by Captain Tate and the others who follow into the green hallway. They try as hard as possible to make themselves as small of a target as possible by sliding their backs against the wall. Ramon remains in the kitchen for a moment. He is guarding the rear. Within the green hallway, two doors are closed, one door is open. An acidic smell reeks from the door swung open. Again, the unit takes up positions to penetrate the room. Captain Tate takes the left. Delmore takes the right. His finger is off the trigger and rest it on the trigger guard. His forearm muscles ripple through his skin. Sweat and rain drip from his face like a rolling sand dune. The penetration is quick. There is absolutely no one there. Captain Tate finally speaks. "Ramon!" he shouts.

The audible frightens the other soldiers. "Ya!" Ramon shouts while rushing into the green hallway all the while looking scared. "Clear the other rooms," the captain orders. Ramon takes Delmore. The task is quick. Nothing but mops, brooms, and toilets are in the other two rooms.

The captain takes Ramon by the shoulder and whispers into his ear: "That was the easy part. If there is any danger it is down that hole." He is not being malicious. He is being an officer in charge. Dear God, Ramon thinks, he's going to send me down first.

The faint chime of another unit arriving begins to grow discernable. Ramon holds a finger up and rushes through the green hallway. Through the broken storefront window, he sees the other SCIC units arriving. They begin cordoning-off the area. Hopefully, Ramon thinks, they'll come up with a better plan than sending me down first. "Ramon! Get in there!" Captain Tate barks.

Fuck. Too late.

Each step taken further; even further, is terrifying. Sure, they nerve-gassed the hole. Sure, they dropped motion sensors down the hole. But each boot gently touches the wrung beneath it and the well beneath him sinks in like a god of war. Ramon has never felt so aware of his gear and the banging noises that appear only to imagine the worst around him are just that. Fear developed from many sources and they do not fit together. Fear of the unknown, he imagines. That he is exposed in such vivid colors of make-believe, as he is now, dangling in the ink of sweat he wears, draws him into further clarity. He is aware of everything down to the aluminum tub of carmax in his pocket. The rifle tick-tocks beneath his arm, like the tongue of a grandfather clock, as he takes each wrung. It occasionally bangs into the ladder. There is no graceful way to descend a ladder with a rifle in procession. The carmax within his pocket digs into his thigh uncomfortably. Others stay put and shine a flashlight on his head. If the light would not shine in his eyes, Ramon would give them a dirty look.

“Delmore go,” the captain says in a hard whisper. Delmore is almost relieved. That was fucked-up, he thinks, and jumps on to the ladder’s first wrung. Ramon instinctively feels relieved. He touches the bottom after nearly fifty feet of descending into an unknown abyss of blackness. The tunnel he is standing in is hardly lit.

“What do you see?” the captain again says in a hard whisper.

“Jack shit.” Ramon says in a normal voice.

“Alright, get up here. Both of you. We need more men.”

Delmore is still descending when the captain says this. Delmore immediately changes gear and starts heading back up the ladder. Ramon hops on to the ladder and, soon enough, feels safe.

The officers are talking. No one is relaxed. Ramon takes cover behind the wheel-well of Rovoldo’s car. This is the position from where he shot Andrew and Osman. Ramon is unaware. With both units together, there are twenty men. They are making plans to storm the hole with long term implications to secure the deli. Security measures are developing but the choice to leave was wrong. “You should have kept your position Captain Tate. Now we will need to penetrate and secure the tunnel. Christ! No one better get killed!” The oncoming officer is only a lieutenant; however, Captain Tate’s blunder has given her the leverage to speak as she has to a superior officer. Captain Tate says little. He only smolders enraged as well as embarrassed.

Ramon retreats into an oncoming meal and wonders if his turn is done. Thirty troopers arrive to assist with security measures and the much needed reinforcements for the deli's more intangible features. The perimeter looks as good as any to avoid a hostile order to fall in and Ramon takes his food to a safe place away from his superiors to sit and eat his food. He can see three others he knows well who also are doing well enough to eat in a formation that is helpful and that is how the day is won. He sits and does his best to be happy with silence from others to ensure his safety here forward.

Dr. Harris turns the air conditioning off and settles grumpily into the living room couch.

“What Greg? Are we going to have to put up with your attitude tonight because the rest of the world refuses to?” Martha is in no mood for tantrums. Dr. Harris has a hair up his ass.

“You Martha. I’m in no mood for your bullshit either. Okay. I’m mean you’d think a guy would be able to come home and forget about his problems but there you go, like always, bringing it up. Taking it home. God!”

“You know what Greg? Go take a nap. Seriously, you’re acting like a child whose favorite toy was broken. I want to leave Mars! I don’t care about our jobs! I don’t care about taking the kids out of school! I want to feel safe.”

“Where are we going to go? There is nowhere safe. SCIC owns everything except Mars.”

“Everything. Including you.”

“Real mature Martha, real fucking mature. I can’t even look at you right now.” Dr. Harris slams the bedroom door behind him. Martha peeks through the door a half hour later to find him passed out on the bed. She understands. He always gets grumpy and childish when he is really scared. She takes a glass of wine to the living room and sits on the couch. Her front door explodes like a box of toothpicks dropped on the floor. Four commandos storm through the front door and seize her. Her ears are ringing too loud to hear their commands. Dr. Harris comes flying out of the bedroom and grabs Delmore by the shoulder. Ramon quickly grabs his ankle knife and stabs him three times with it. They take him and Martha to the shuttle to be detained until the war is over.

Greg Harris lies in a soggy mess of bloody rags. A medic is tending to his wounds. Martha is nowhere to be seen. Greg tries to sit up. A rifleman places the butt of his rifle against his chest and gently nudges him on to his back. Greg is furious, however, he is not stupid. These men have already proven their willingness to kill. He is in no condition, or position, to physically fight. He does not even know why he is being detained. He does not realize that he is in an SCIC detainment camp. He has been singled out by the corporation as a potential instigator of conflict against SCIC. Martha sits in the female camp two miles away. She is as clueless of Greg as he is to her.

General Morgan feels that detainment camps are the best way to destroy MSR and subdue the Martian people. He knows the measures that must be taken to subdue a foreign culture. Destroy the family without destroying the man and you will break their spirits, he thinks.

The reporter opens her notes. The professor's file, Greg M., is growing. She turns her head to see the sky and dust spin together with the beauty of nature working as it has since time began. "A decent guy," she says. The professor has done more than just teach. A former security regular, with a family, makes her feel suspicious of SCIC's presence. The man implies security for the region. "The people have developed a lot of these ideas without help," she thinks. She pads her pockets for a cigarette but only finds sweat and bone beneath cotton that was recently purchased here on the Terra-Formed Mars. She stumbles towards a lot where a man selling the various knick-knacks of pedestrian interest, such fun and tobacco, waits with calm demeanor. When she meets him with her gaze he neither smiles nor contorts his face in disapproval. She passes by without the detainment society requires of strangers who must know the other's business before proceeding with the task which lay before them. She takes the time she has given to herself, a five minute break, to open magazines and look for diversions that interest her as of now. As the garage accumulates of purchases that she does not need to own she decides to look for a consumable. She grabs any magazine before moving on and, after thumbing through chocolate and sweets, she places the magazine on the counter: "I'll have a pack of Merry Tobacco also," she says, "and some gum."

She places the tobacco in her shirt pocket and chews the gum and reads the magazine. The SCIC dignitary will be leaving his report and the detainment camps in the Terra-Rio county press box for local reports to produce and discuss and the news break has her a little jittery but she feels cool overall. After reading his report, perhaps she'll get a story from it. Her producer, Barry Tate, is waiting to hear from her. She is not excited but he might be producing coverage, on location, which makes her tension a bit more obvious.

Her producer, Barry, is supposed to be a bigger guy though they have never met. She turns the key to the station's van and proceeds to the press meeting. Senator Martin will be releasing his official statement, through his staff, and the three hour wait still might not get her close enough to "kill it" as the motto goes in the station. She maneuvers through the traffic with the speed she can invent from sweat and corner-cutting.

She opens up the crates to the night equipment she will be using to capture images of when the Senator arrives, in case he should use a clandestine hour to avoid press. Though the meeting is intended to cover all-bases, she wants his arrival to be recorded so that she can increase credibility for the station's point of view. "A distinguished look," she says, "I will be up all night, for something small."

Part 2: The Crews Prepare for Terra-Formed Mars

The van is still cold. Mason Monroe rubs his eyes and yawns. He does not want to inspect the van. He creases the vehicle checklist into squares and places it in his pocket. Mason looks at his partner Barry Tate and makes a perplexed face. Barry shrugs his shoulders. They are still waiting on the newest member of their crew. He offers a cigarette to Barry, which he accepts with a smile. Barry leans an elbow on the van and lights it. Mason lights his own smoke as Barry takes a very long drag. Neither has bothered to get started, which they should, in case an urgent call comes through. As he flicks an ash, Barry squeezes his growing waistline. He looks at the burning ember. "I need to quiet this shit," he says in a low shameful voice.

As Mason and Barry smoke and joke, a van pulls into the parking lot of the station. The running engine turns in circles as the driver maneuvers about to collect her thoughts from the night while parking. The windshield wipers slice through the caked mud that covers the window. The driver's side door thrusts open with creaking joints. An empty soda can goes skidding across the floor as the driver plops onto the concrete like wet clay waiting to be molded. For a moment, she simply stands in place rubbing her eyes. She can think of nothing but her bed. Mason tries to talk to her but she does not bother to stop and speak to either Mason or Barry. She waves a hand and smiles then proceeds to the double doors leading to the station. Before she goes in she points a finger to the van. Mason yells, "The equipment better all be in there. Mother fucker," he says under his breath. "She doesn't recognize us. Go get some sleep!"

Mason flicks his butt on to the concrete. He removes the checklist from his pocket and opens up the door to the newly arrived vehicle. It is company policy to do change over in front of the team clocking off, in case equipment is missing, but Mason could not bring himself to keep the night team awake a moment longer. He opens the sliding-door and removes two aluminum crates filled with image recorders. The equipment is all here, he notices. Barry flicks his smoke in the same manner that Mason did a moment earlier and grabs one of the crates and takes it to their idle van, placing it inside with casual negligence. The crate goes skidding across the floor and bangs against the other side of the van. Barry climbs in and secures the crate in a frame and harness. Mason hands him the other crate that was retrieved from the vehicle of the night team. Barry opens up the crate and inspects the equipment. It is slightly banged up. They must have had a busy night. Pretending not to notice, he harnesses the equipment to the floor, pulls up his pants that have started to hang low enough to show his crack, and

slides over the driver's seat back onto the concrete outdoors. The front left tire is flat. Barry takes the checklist from Mason's hand and begins the inspection. Mason shrugs his shoulders and lights another cigarette. Neither notice that a young woman has emerged from the double doors of the station until the doors creak closed. Mason turns around. This must be her, Mason thinks. She is dressed ridiculous, like a cadet. He can tell that she is nervous. He waves a hand towards himself and Barry. She takes a deep breath and settles her dress before proceeding.

As she approaches, the radio within the van cackles to life. Mason jumps into the driver's seat, removes the receiver from the dashboard, and says, "This is Unit-Charlie 47".

The front desk says, "Have you guys made contact with the new girl on your team?"

"Ya, she just arrived."

"Well you'd better make your introductions quick. You just got the story of your life. I'm sending the briefing."

A report illuminates the screen within the van detailing the story that they are to cover. Mason blinks. He cannot believe what he is reading. He drops the receiver and prints a hardcopy of the briefing to give to the new girl to read. He lifts the handle to the door and grabs Barry by the shoulder. He shouts, "Get your ass moving, we've got a story!"

Yolanda Price is nervous as she sits in the shuttle bus heading towards the station. Her mind is occupied with many things, namely, her career. She rearranges her appearance and then checks her breath in the palm of her hand. She blushes thinking 'this isn't a date'.

It is not long before the bus reaches the station parking lot, which is busy. Yolanda sees a beautiful sports car parked in an executive's parking space. She thinks, someday I want one of those. The shuttle bus stops in an area designated for it. She steps off of the bus along with two other cadets new to the station. No one says goodbye. Yolanda takes the walkway across the two lanes of traffic just in front of the station. The moment she touches the sidewalk on the other end she is immediately intimidated. No one is dressed like her. She suddenly feels ridiculous in her cadet uniform. They told me to wear this on my first day, she thinks. Damn it. She gathers her strength and marches into the station. She is little noticed. A few people smile but there is nothing malicious in their appraisal of her appearance. She sees a very attractive lady walking. She copies her behavior down to the rhythmic goose-stepping of her pumps on the marble floor.

She does not bother to stop and talk to the information desk in the center of the lobby. She can see her department just ahead. The department sign reads, *Image and Appeal*. This is where she knows she is good. Yolanda has been training to be a crew-face since she was fifteen.

Yolanda pushes open the single glass door and enters the office. The man at the front desk is very pretty and busy with a call. He acknowledges her with eye contact, raises a single finger as if to say ‘one moment’, and continues with the call until it reaches its conclusion.

“Can I help you?” he says with a startlingly deep voice.

“Hi, I was told to report to the *Image and Appeal* office. This is my first day.”

“What is your name?”

“Yolanda Price.”

“See those two doors at the end of the hall? Go through those two doors and you will find your crew in the parking lot. Sign here.”

He hands her the office log. Yolanda removes a pen from her purse, clicks the button on top trying to appear professional as she signs her name before she proceeds through the doors. The morning sun is enormous and exhilarating. Yolanda hesitantly steps into the parking lot which is filled with Skyline Four’s many different crew-vehicles. From a distance, she can see two people standing in front of a van. The windshield is large and tinted wrapping around the entire body of the vehicle like a snake squeezing its prey. As she approaches, she can see the faint machinery of motion-sensing cameras beneath it jerking from side to side with erratic gestures. Neither of the two has noticed her approaching until the station doors creak and close in slow motion. One turns around while the other jumps into the cab of the van before she can catch a full glimpse of him. With short nervous steps she makes her way to the van. She says, “Are you guys my crew.”

A heavy-set man with a stubby unkempt beard turns around a little surprised and smile. She says, “Hello, I’m Yolanda Price.”

He extends a hand, which Yolanda grabs with a smile. “Barry Tate” he says just before he is spun violently around by the other member of the crew.

Yolanda can see him now. He has olive skin and wavy black hair, which is slightly long for a professional in this line of work. She still does not know his name and this makes her nervous. “Get your ass moving, we’ve got a story,” he says. The young man shoves a two page report into her hands and says, “Read this.”

Yolanda barely gets her last foot into the cab of the van before it lurches off. She falls on to her ass with a boney crunch.

“Sorry about that, I forgot we had the new girl,” Barry says with the careless tone of a person focused on something else.

“No problem,” she says while wincing as she heaves herself to her feet and places herself into a seat against the window. She buckles herself in. As Yolanda reads, the van accelerates like a grizzly bear, heavy and fast. Barry cuts through traffic. The burning building is still twelve blocks away. For the speed that Barry is driving, the van is incredibly secure. Nothing jostles from side to side. Yolanda notices two crates securely fastened to the floor of the van. The editor, Mason Monroe, begins releasing the crates from the harnesses. They are full of recording equipment that she does not understand. Yolanda remains perplexed. She does not know anything about the job except what they taught her in the academy. Training has begun. Mason looks at her in between work. “You’re doing fine. Just stay calm and keep reading,” he says.

She continues reading the report. It begins with, “A burning building downtown...Potts & Martin is in flames...largest disaster in Terra Rio this year...”

When she is done, she prepares herself for the performance. Articulation and a cool head are always a reporter’s best tools. Feeling silly, she pulls out a breath mint and pops one in her mouth. Through the vehicle’s body-windshield, Yolanda can see billowing black smoke extend beyond the silhouettes of buildings emerging from the horizon. The van gets closer, closer, closer. She begins to hear sirens chiming in faint harmonies from all corners of the city. The entire downtown district is lively and turbulent. Yolanda is quiet. Mason continues to organize gear and shuffling aluminum crates of equipment to more accessible positions.

“Hold on we’re coming to it.” Barry says. He begins to slow down and maneuver through the jammed cars and frightened people. A firefighter is directing traffic. Ash and ghostly plumes of opaque black smoke choke downtown. A subtle heat is growing. The firefighter sees Barry’s reporter logo. He waves him through with his left hand while controlling traffic with his right. Paper blows uncontrollably through the charcoaled streets. Barry continues to creep through. People are being evacuated by the fire teams. The dying building can be seen choking in flames and smoke like a demon is hatching from its belly.

Police sirens sound from everywhere. Mason picks a spot and gives instructions for Barry to begin shooting. Barry halts the big van as quickly as he can and jumps into the back cab from the driver’s

seat. He puts on a head set and grabs the slender image recorder from the aluminum crate. The toy is light and maneuverable in Barry's hands. Yolanda springs the door open and is greeted with a gush of hot air and smoke. The breeze is strong and pushy. Mason hands Yolanda a small headset. She struggles to control her gear. The editor gives two thumbs up to Yolanda. They are ready. The red light on Barry's camera flashes on and off until catching on a steady green signifying that visual is being recorded.

The cameras behind the body-windshield of the van capture two firefighters charging toward the flaming building on foot. Yolanda and Barry follow like tornado chasers. Mason jumps into the front seat and follows in the van. People are still being evacuated from the surrounding buildings. Faces can be seen pressed to the glass, office workers with apparently no reason to leave the scene.

Firefighters are organizing equipment and donning additional gear. Some are only half inside their gear before they begin running for the burning building. A chorus of orders is shouted. Yolanda sprints after the firefighters in her low cut pumps. Yolanda feels winded and sick when she reaches the group. She knows she should keep in better shape. Barry is doing fine. With the gear and the run, he has only broken a sweat. Yolanda collects herself and wipes the sweat from her temple with her sleeve. Her complexion is going to appear murky on camera from the run. Yolanda gives Barry the thumbs-up to begin rolling on her. The red light on the camera flickers while Barry is fingering three, two, one.

Yolanda delivers the report. A crew-face should have a photographic memory and she recites the report she was given nearly word for word. A large explosion shivers the ground. Particles of debris and ash swirl through the air like dust-devil's. One man is standing in the middle of the firefighters. He is stocky with his visor down in front of his face. He is pointing and giving instructions. The other firefighters begin nodding. Evidently a plan of action has clarified. Barry is filming the spectacle while Yolanda continues to give updates and occasional progress reports. Without warning the firefighters charge the building in formations of twenty men. They have three large aluminum cases between them.

Plumes of white smoke and chalky powder begin erupting from the windows above and below the effected floors. The fire retardant being used is a white powder that becomes buoyant in air when the temperature begins to increase. When the powder comes in contact with a heat sources it solidifies into a mass of white goop. The building begins to look like a birthday cake as fire and frosting trickles down the side. When the fire is isolated to a single floor, a single heavy explosion detonates on the floor still flaming. The fire retardant solidifies and the building goes charcoaled and quiet successfully extinguishing the fire.

Mr. Potts sits at his desk twisting his pen around his fingers and chewing his bottom lip. The images from Yolanda's crew are very good. He knows they are good because they make the tragedy seem like the second coming. She looks great in her cadet's suit, a real patriot. He wonders why they have never thought of it before. This is what he has been looking for; a crew that can bring people the end of the world night after night. As he meditates on the pandemonium, he realizes that they are perfect for the war.

Samantha and Armie stand in the ally of Diego's apartment. The Artifact Animal is still a rotting mess of flesh lying on the concrete. "Pack him up Armie, we still might need him." Samantha says.

Armie rolls his eyes and opens up the trunk to the black Sedan that he drives Samantha in. He removes a body bag from the trunk and throws it on the car floor. He takes his coat off and places it into the back seat of the car. After rolling up his sleeves, he dons a pair of plastic gloves. Armie begins to pad its body for the artifact. Where is it? Armie thinks. He holds the Artifact Animal by the bottom of his trousers and shakes him. Its greasy head bumps into Armie's pant leg and leaves a stain. The alteration to his good looks enrages him. From his thin immaculately manicured beard, down to his manicured nails, Armie appreciates a neat and orderly appearance. In the rear view mirror while driving, he continuously checks his hair, often staring at himself for long periods of time. His shoulders bulge through his tucked in cotton tee-shirt. "Hurry up Armie," Samantha says with snapping rage, "I hate Terra-Rio. Let's go."

"It's not here."

"What?"

"The artifact. The Mickey Mouse. It's gone."

"Fuck!" Samantha screams. Her talons claw her hair. "This blob of meat is worthless without his toy. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Pack him up anyways. We need to get that little rodent back! Do we have another Artifact Animal ready?"

"No."

"Damn it. No matter. If Diego is not dead he is infected with compromise. We'll have the Martian Security Regulars under control soon enough."

Samantha checks her phone. She missed a call from the senator. His is my toy, she thinks, a front for SCIC's darker side. For Samantha's power within SCIC, she began her career as an intern. A

nobody within the corporation. She was a brilliant scientist but SCIC is full of them. No matter how educated a person might be, to find work within the districts on earth, most people start at SCIC. Being trapped in debt makes a person ambitious. The Artifact Animal was her contribution to the world. “Get his body into the trunk!” Samantha shouts. Armie, willingly, complies. The ride is quiet. The Artifact Animal’s infection should begin to spread through the Martian Security Regulars.

Barry fidgets nervously in his backpack. The gear is not what he was expecting. Two buckles dangle freely around his waist. For the life of him, he cannot figure out what to do with them. Yolanda looks great. Her gear looks professional and her smile makes her look like she was born for this type of job. Barry looks at her sheepishly, “How do I look?”

“Pretty good.” Yolanda smiles but hardly gives him a second look. She stops and takes a second hard look at him. “Actually, never mind, Want some help?” She says.

Barry lifts his shoulders helplessly and wrinkles his brow, “I won’t say no.”

Yolanda steps off of the platform to the mirrors and grabs Barry by the shoulder strap. He loses his balance a bit but doesn’t say anything. “How you feelin Barry?”

“Great, considering my career has started.”

“Listen, I want you guys to feel comfortable around me so I can do the same with you. I know this is lame stuff but this is a great opportunity for all of us and I want to make sure that we all do well.”

“I know Yolanda, and believe me, Mason knows too. If there is anyone in the world who is concerned about his careers it is Mason.”

“Great.” Yolanda pulls the first buckle across Barry’s waist and fastens it to a latch on the video pack; she then takes the second buckle and tucks it in a pocket. “You only need that if you plan on carrying your equipment like a suitcase.”

She pats him quiet on the chest and grabs her gear. She opens the glass door to the parking lot and takes a big gulp of fresh air. She puts her equipment into the back seat of the van and unbuckles the field equipment she has on. The equipment manager for the station throws open the door with a pen and papers in his hand and stops here before she can get into her car.

“Miss Price, you need to sign-off for that equipment before you leave. She smiles and takes the pen from his hand. It feels sweaty and the papers are crinkled from the wind. She signs the papers and hands the pen back to the manager. He smiles and leaves without a word. Yolanda settles into the driver’s seat of her car. She buckles herself in. When she turns to put the cruiser in gear she sees

Mason's face pressed against the window, "We're coming with you Yolanda." He says. She cannot help but laugh. "Well, where are we going?" She ask.

"To lunch," Mason says while smiling. "But we've got to get Barry first. There is something we want to talk about."

She unlocks the door while Mason goes back in to get Barry. Mason and Barry come out of the glass doors that elastically swing back when they let go. Barry sheepishly waves to Yolanda and Mason opens the door. They both sit there for a moment quiet. "I think I look great in travel gear," Barry says. He smiles big, which makes Yolanda laugh. It was a great way to break the ice.

"Where to boys? You know this town better than I do." Yolanda asks.

"Marty's," They say together.

"Barry, why don't you drive?" Mason says.

Barry shrugs his shoulders and opens the door. He walks around to the other side of the cruiser and opens the door for Yolanda. She gets out and Barry sits down. He jumps the car to life and hits the main freeway. The car hiccups over the intersection then settles into a soft hum on the highway. Mason starts:

"How do you feel about this assignment Yolanda? Do you feel comfortable with everything that is going on?"

"I don't know. I guess so. I mean it is a bit strange, actually really strange but regardless, do you think that we should say no to the assignment?"

"Oh no, I'm not saying that, definitely not, but we need to get our facts straight with each other before we get into this thing. For us I mean. What do you think is going on?"

Yolanda stops to think about this. She has felt like something strange had been going on from the beginning but had no intention of saying anything until she got to know the guys better.

"I definitely think before the end of this we're going to be involved in something big but I have no idea. I hope it's big, but I also hope that it's not something evil, or too evil to cover with any integrity." She says then stops and looks at the guys with questioning eyes.

When their eyes meet the tension lifts.

"Great." Mason smiles at her and settles back into his seat.

"What?" Yolanda crinkles her brow in confusion. "What?"

Mason smiles back at her, "I glad, I just wanted to make sure we weren't heading into the Wild West with an idiot. That's all. It's hard to count on somebody too by the numbers and you can't count on a

dreamy eyed moron either, you seem safely in the middle and that's good. I mean, I love my job, I love it, at the same time, I don't want to get killed doing it because the new girl on the team is an idiot because, we will probably see some things in the next few months that we will wish we hadn't. What can you do but report it?"

Mason again sits back in his seat. The car is quiet all the way until the restaurant.

SC-12 has been authorized by Senator Martin to lead the invasion. Nothing less than a million men would be adequate to secure Mars in the fashion that he intended. Senator Martin had every intention of leaving his military legacy on this invasion and going down in history as one of the great bridges between civilization gaps. This war was to be that war would unite mankind for good, and his strategies would be the catalyst.

Senator Martin, from his high rise office in New Frisco looks across the fifty thousand Academy soldiers personally assigned to this base. Each soldier sharp and willing, at his command, to execute his mandate with as much discretion as he deemed it necessary for the given situation. He chuckles to himself, taps the glass a few times and then sits down behind his five by ten foot oak desk placed immediately in the center of the room. Decorations, diplomas, and degrees along with countless pictures festoon the walls. Senator Martin felt immortal within the affirmation of success his office offers him.

Two sub Senators buzz him over the intercom and Senator Martin admits them into his wing of the building. The men look nervous and ridged. Senator Martin was a well-known career killer within the upper branches of the armed forces. Both men come to attention and salute the Senator, he casually waves a hand for the men to stand down and wheels his chair around in one motion to the window behind his desk. The soft summer sun bathes the room white and yellow. The two sub Senators look at each other unsure what to say. Senator Barbus begins:

"Have our gurillas captured Diego Valentine's notes?"

"I don't now Barbus."

"Did you want a report on his health?"

"Not really, he survived. This is unfortunate – I want both battalions on Nova one and three, the other ten are to circumvent the equator on 12 hour ellipses, make sure logistics map out the most efficient rotations to cover area. Special Forces will arrange drop points for military leadership once the legislators of Mars have been dealt with. The last ten will arrive shortly after within each of the large cities to control the economic stability of the planet. This entire operation should last no longer than

four weeks, understood? We will reestablish our dominion over the planet.” Senator Martin stops abrupt and stares at his desk. He swallows hard and dismisses the two men with a condescending wave. Both men come to attention salute and leave without a second word. The Senator goes over to the mini bar and drinks a soda to escape the madness of questions. There was no stopping it.

“Try to stay strong.”

Desmond hears Armie’s words like the breeze as he walks off the fearful night; A man can be seen running across the streets as Desmond steers his groggy point of view back, forth then away. A lightning bolt of many noises from the city jolts him upright as the day from here furthers him along. His body aches and the looming grey cloud of fear compels him to move. He rubs the gold charm and the simulator overwhelms him to speak. “But, nooo.” He can muster this much but little more. It does not satisfy the urge to know, to know the comfort of feeling safe. He pulls apart the city, hearing screams of madness that seem to grow from his ears. He sets down and the earth welcomes him to rest more until he can find moving forward useful.

The rain falling collects in sheets of silver and trickles down the sides of his face, like frost, as clouds form. The chill picks him from the walkway he could almost sleep upon and gets him moving towards a goal. The air that is drawn into his lungs is chilly and to cough affords the point of view of time passing. Cooler air becomes a blanket from some imaginary place that covers him and the mere thought of more makes him wince through it.

Slashing through the storm with his arms crossed as a warning to the turmoil that is still to come, Desmond finds the lost road before him to be known and useful. People giggle at his struggling appearance and the coat he has still does not shield him as it should from appearing under prepared for the region's changing climate. The furious wind only makes him exotic, as his traction takes hold of this uncertain street. He growls and pulls his eyebrows up and down to control his feelings by looking normal. The on-lookers that notice only pause to exchange perplexed looks in return which stand for communication that shield Desmond from further inquiry.

Gusty air from the hollow entrance fans through the old man’s still thick hair. Beads of sweat drip like diamonds as he faintly takes the first wrung. His rifle bangs the edge. His flashlight clear-cuts hunks of darkness. A small canteen full of drinking water glistens like a dot at the bottom of the still active hole. It is perhaps a week old. This is an active hole.

He ends up nearly five miles away in a part of town that is known him. Light creates an opportunity to see and he steps from the door in the kitchen of a small forgotten apartment in a central neighborhood of Terra-Rio. Footsteps of pedestrians falling into place as they walk, happy to have a road before them and a destination can be seen through a sunken half-window casting light from just above the sidewalk. His rifle is piercing like a sword. Like a blade to parry an unknown threat. The silent apartment has not yet revealed danger or an ambush from the mist before him. Low lying dust remains trapped inside as he makes his way to the street.

Armie throws the trunk open. The half alive Artifact Animal still squirms. The small gold charm glistens in its mouth. So as not to be bitten, Armie slams the trunk lip once. The Artifact Animal lurches. The trunk resonates and echoes from the packing sound of meat being banged against it. Popping it back open, the creature lies flat on its back, the charm lies beside its head. It reels back and forth, clawing the air with a fixed glazed stare holding on to nothing. The shine of slobber is warm is Armie's hand as he grabs the trinket.

Slapping the Artifact Animal on the cold metal slab, the effect of substitution is obvious. Thinning cell membranes. Narrowed bone structure. Slightly hunched gait. The agents do not last long. Did this creature learn something about society and then destroy it? Hopefully, Armie thinks. Reduced judgement is critical to destroy civilization through crime.

The chunk of hair Diego held in his hand is unnerving to recall. Is there something I don't know? He thinks. The boy brings him a cup of water. The circular shape he draws around the encounter distracts him from fear that seems to stretch his skin with a tight ghastly pallor. Am I smiling? Why am I smiling? The agent said to himself. Diego recalls the encounter with a deep wind of concern drawn into the sea of feelings that he wrestles with.

"Are you okay sir?" the boy asks.

"Just help me get to someplace safe. This small problem I can fix with what I already have discovered up until now. I wish I could have learned more. My notes are lost. Come, help me."

The bumpy ride back to Terra Rio registers as little more than sensation. The world reveals itself to Ramon as just colors and sound that he does not associate with his surroundings or anything else for that matter. The taste of swallowed lunch meat and bread still lingers in his mouth but he cannot remember

the joy of eating it. He does not hear voices. The noises made by his peers do not seem to come from a need to communicate as much as a need to express the collaborative sensation of many men simple moving through a strange and foreign landscape. The muggy feeling of his gear is far more real. The weight of cotton around his skin parachutes with air. Someone did not secure a button attached to a heavy canvas strap that can be opened for scenery. He reaches up to inspect the stubble that has begun to show itself upon his chin. He places his hand back on to the rifle between his legs. It feels warm and slightly moist from him holding on to it for so long he had forgotten about it. The desire to sleep enters through the tiny air pocket. Like an angel, the light of forgetfulness seems to be everywhere. A kind of collective yawning, as if everyone has become tired at the same time. A close-enough explosion breaks the illusion of peace. Shoulder to shoulder, the only real comfort is the few friends he has managed to stay close to amidst the shuffle. He is still unsure where Delmore is. As he breaks the seal of an oatmeal cookie, two battle planes thunder overhead. He takes a bite and pretends not to notice the others staring at him.

“If I gave him the slip, I’m not sure,” Raman says to the sergeant sitting next to him.

The Martian Sun hangs onto Barry’s shoulders. He can feel the weight. Yolanda eats yogurt, big scoop after big scoop. The jeep keeps the sweeping wind at bay. The last shuttle comes in and collapses somewhere useful. Its shadow eliminates the sun long enough for Barry to catch an upward glance. The back seat camera swings. It traces the long-arching dip of the landing aircraft as it all but furrows its brow through the atmosphere. The hanger is merely a toy on the horizon. Yolanda throws the now empty cup into the back seat. She takes a moment to simply sit in the jeep and let the flavor of yogurt disappear. “He should be on this plane,” she says quietly without looking at Barry. A lost in thought look puzzles her face. It feels strange to her, to actually be on assignment on Terra-Formed Mars. Her dreams and reality fight for supremacy in her heart.

Senator Martin memorizes only a small portion of his speech. His eyes are fixed on the vodka tonic and lime, which could be sweeter. A grey wet circle stains the paper like a cattle brand. He wipes the wet area a few times with his thumb. From the window, he sees that SCIC patrolmen have cordoned off the airspace. No reporters are allowed. They lead they had has stalled and they must wait for developments to push him, the Senator, to speak. “Let’s catch up with him later. I don’t like the idea of hanging around without a story. It’s confusing us.” Barry says. Barry keeps the team moving forward but from a less conspicuous point of view. He has a deck of cards and they play until it’s time for dinner.

“What did Diego say to you, hun?” she says. Rovoldo’s wife does not care if he makes eye contact. He eats quietly. The food placed on his plate is full of steam and he says ‘thank you’ under the breath he brought to dinner. “He wants to know how the family is? Are we holding up?”

His pause is full of family concern that is contrived though encouraged. “I’ll speak,” he says: “I don’t want to be a “specialist” for Diego Valentine because I do not care if the region or the countryside or the planet for that matter continues to develop.”

“It’s a better situation. A house. Regional protection from Diego’s patrollers. He might create a constitution. You’d be important if he does well fighting SCIC.”

“I believe what I did for the Terra-Form years ago was what I did for money. I do not believe in Diego’s cause! It is dangerous to say that I stand for something when I don’t. Diego wants to start something huge. I want to protect my family.”

His dramatic burst stitches his upper chest together and his shoulders are full of unease and muscles that feel like pavement. The constant pain is stop and go throughout his body. His back feels built up like traffic without a point to relax or exit. “Thank you,” he says to his wife before he leaves the table to sit and watch something easier to handle than conversation. He can hear her piling dishes and he feels guilty but unable to move.

A piece of bread cold and full of butter has not been eaten. “I’m going to finish,” he says to his wife. He shoves the bread into his mouth leaving a small pinch to hold. She smiles and leaves to a dark hallway where she disappears into a bedroom to be by herself. She is tired and agitated. The meal took long enough to make that she did not want to lift another finger. Rovoldo’s picture, along with his morning routine, are bundled and ready for use, tomorrow; as he has prepared his keys and wallet, in a pile, in the night before.

The sound of her family alive and happy to have the evening to talk and pass time affects her deep commitment to aid them throughout the life they have together. The meal was enough and she knows why she prepares meals so big so the whole family can forget their problems and spend time talking. The time to reflect draws in the nightly atmosphere from the neighborhood and the characteristics of the land. The wildlife takes turns to mutter and the streetlights slowly fill in the room as her eyes adjust to the dim, quiet emptiness. Wind tests the glass from time to time with twigs pulled from the trees. She sits up to join her husband and finish cleaning up.

Five kids with soccer balls and baseballs stumble along with little care for appearance as they walk on and off the sidewalk and in the street. The streets of Terra-Rio will be safe enough mid-day. Rovoldo sees the first light of day lift the darkness from his bedroom and the clock reminds him that it is morning. Rovoldo looks and sees the young people, loud and carelessly sharing their lives as they meander here and there, as a group that did not choose a place to stop and sleep for the night that now passes to day.

SCIC has not declare the high-orange light from Base Tiltmore, a large often two story group of buildings, centrally placed near downtown just out of sight of daily life for Terra-Rio's coming and goings of often considered, a still uncertain social outcome. Differences between people are unclear to troopers in theater but understood by those who call the planet their beginnings in the solar system. Rovoldo takes his keys that lay fallen in a heap and makes way to the isolated carriage at the corner block. Daniel Makes' roads allow people to move around the city. One out of eight marked roads in Terra Rio was established by his corporate effort and MSR recognizes him as a founder of the city. As the group has grown, the eight young people yo-yo back and forth through the streets. As Rovoldo passes them while travelling, they make eye-contact and he smiles and then averts his eyes as a stranger of indifference. His day is open and the literature in his hand is the travel plan he will use to reach the corporate research site for SC-15; to discuss his growing interest in travel to what is to be a new life. The eight youth dive down and away turning towards a western playground as Rovoldo heads south to connect with an eastbound carriage. The time it takes to read the book points him here and there as a future citizen and a founder of the legal constitutional precedent: "To be remembered as the law for those who follow in our way of life."

His eyes pass over the daring book and the tenuous tone of ideas billowing to the surface. The reassurance of a group whose faith in the future can be placed. As the carriage continues, he places money in the box to assure the driver that he can keep the pace and direction they are heading. Taller buildings roll towards him and rise from earth that is covered in the dunes of the land that is surrounding.

A group of shops, small and bustling, approach as the carriage slows to stop at the corner, where Rovoldo can regain with an eastbound transportation. Rovoldo takes a step towards the east and covers his mouth as folding black smoke rolls towards the intersection where he stands. Sirens gather in whining circles but the chaos does not come into focus. An SCIC patroller billows passed the confused man loud as thunder that strikes just past the hill.

Three shadowy figures lie just inside the empty lot just behind him as he makes connections that perhaps might be true. They sit quietly in a half-circle watching patrollers cross the intersection and into the theater of troubled times. In the distance, two buildings glow from within. They are smoking good and the atmosphere encompasses the miles that distance Rovoldo from the incident. Ten patrollers pass before Rovoldo's carriage halts and the astonished single-figure can board and depart.

The three man team sinks deep and clear into the watery depths of concerned memory. Diego Valentine would recruit him for battle during the Time of Trouble which now casts the light surrounding Rovoldo's motives. Should I leave Terra-Formed Mars? he thinks. Those were not MSR Regulars; those were recruits for Diego Valentine's counter offensive and his chance to take the tunnel and join in directly against SCIC's interplanetary presence.

Rovoldo's step clears of the space between the carriage and the sidewalk. Guarding the heavy script with two hands, he asks simple questions that keep him focused on what he wants to do. He checks the messages on the tablet he carries to speak with family. The device blinks twice. Nothing in the house concerns him. The weekend is a time to stay occupied with even something trivial. Rovoldo checks every room. He finds his wife passing time in front of a monitor reading nothing of much concerning him.

He places the device and the script into his bag, concerned with troubled times. The presence of three men is still clear and as looming as the smoke. He asks the carriage man to stop so he can disembark. The lessons of the future that are addressed today do not reach those dearest when they are assured of their safety.

Getting closer to the empty lot, perhaps only blocks away, he attempts to call Diego Valentine. On friendly terms with the man often undefined by many, he is not concerned with the meaning of their talk being heard. The grainy communication does not become a signal. A piece of stone large and sharp like a tooth casts a shadow on the curb. He grabs it from the curb and places it in his pocket, hot like a battery that could use a break.

The grey creature looking back at him assures him with unflinching confirmation that he recognizes him. From more than twenty paces, the oxygen that the two of them roll across their tongues tastes salty. The fear of who stares back is enough to startle Rovoldo who finds a reason to check his pockets and scratch his head. He turns and walks in plain view. He leaves behind the disgusting air in his mouth. New ideas come to mind and certainly is invented as the hysteria dies down. Three blocks of hurried

missteps and uneven ground and no one has followed. He draws breath and exhales in rhythm with his legs and the progress he makes is clumsy. A carriage is passing heading east. Relieved and standing in the darkness of Troubled Times, Rovoldo rubs his eyes at the carriage that is passing, heading east. He takes the carriage's cue and hurries up to meet the transport moving on. He throws the stone on the ground and continues without the need to know more in light of the troubled times before and behind him.

The Artifact Animal finds his way along the curb. The simple steps are placed randomly as he moves forward. The intersection chops through other plans and surrounds itself with business.

Rovoldo stops and summons a carriage. The smoke from the glowing structures passes him with a warming presence. The Artifact Animal just wants to sleep. The building off the street is empty and dark-dimly lit. I could find a quiet place to sit and think about where I went wrong with—he chooses to move closer and see.

He continues to follow the man. His eyes wander as he appears to be in deep thought. After grabbing something from the curb, their eyes meet. An inward horror molds the flesh of the two men and what is left between breaths fire through their skin. He notices the other man's skin flush and he holds a look of an unending horizon as the blood now rushes from his face. He dabs his lips with his tongue and a childish distaste alters the way he looks. A memory of primal fears plays in his eyes that sparkle from an inwardly voice that plays as well. He turns and walks away. From a single block the man darts from view.

The Artifact Animal would like to talk and he follows a few steps before changing course due to uncertainty and exchange of motives. An anxious feeling of confusion makes his body weak and he takes a knee. The coming and going of the neighboring business swirls and pins to his head more confusion. His eye contact declares a sense of childish faith in strangers and he could weep. The feeling of isolation draws upon memories of his only, his one and only partner and he moves forward as certain as any other person who is still looking for something important. His skin is pale and bruised. His eyes water from stress and he can force himself to see no further. Blood trickles from his lip and he cannot remember if he has bitten himself unknowingly. Perplexed on-lookers hold back a normal pace for respiring easy. With a normal amount of guarded nerve and unassuming security in the neighborhood, people continue and the furious man controls himself the best he can by touching fixed objects as he moves. The distance to the empty rental space is reach by taking deep breaths.

Air from the room swallows up the Agent. Silence follows. He scoots his feet across the room. Gravel rolls across the floor. His footing is lost as his frozen body can only fall, on top of flat feet instead of glide with grace. The table lies across the floor as though it has fallen from some higher plane. He grabs the table and rolls it from its side. The security tunnel stares at him with the enormous eye of uncertain fate. Every option he can think of looms above his head and he takes the tunnel without considering an overarching purpose. Merely to know drives him forward. The Artifact Animal enters the tunnel feet first and the dark surrounding inhales his entire life from there. A sense of purpose. A sense of knowing right from wrong. A notion of a greater purpose. Even a destined purpose shines clear and even clearer than faith in realms beyond the here and now. The Artifact Animal now has a purpose: Weapon 54. Weapon 54 could glow his eyes shine brightly in the dark passage. His breast plate protrudes forward between fists clenched as he snaps and blinks through the tunnel. A deep breath of air circulating by design through the deeper maze as though a pulse, and he can feel his head clear from a deeper purpose or now only remember motive. "If by chance I find a motive, I will be free of my trance," he can almost whisper. MSR has a defense system that includes memory recognition, which means motives must be discovered through chance while in an altered state. An Artifact Animal stays devoted to a person they have never met and in doing so, they can search until they find a motive; a single minded purpose that leaves no trace of memory. To forget the gift of life and long for its memory is the motives of an agent. To be given a gift and recall a memory is the motives of war and agents only know themselves during war: "I would not give me gifts, I am at war," Weapon 54 says to the question in the dark tunnel that was asked of himself: Where am I? Having established a motive for war, Weapon 54 can move forward undetected by security elements that are rooted in tracking agents through memory.

300 year old tunnels that are being used to hide people should have an idea at some point to the journey. Perhaps a person who is at the heart of rebellious elements, in other words, he could have a motive to move forward. His memory crumbles around his feet leaving only his heart and his eyes to rebuild his motives and those of others: Two warmongers discussing their motives in a deep tunnel. Boogers in his nose are picked by dirty fingers and he longs to urinate and sleep.

Diego's lungs hurt and his back is aching from problems that have challenged him since he was younger. His hand is caught beneath his body and he can faintly hear the boy in the distance asking his name to an evolving problem with sight. Having fallen from the pull cart, he breaths low and off routine.

The child searches for the way through the mountains of natural barricades. The slope catches the soles of his superhero shoes here and there. The piles of dirt stain the cheap white pleather and he swallows his tears because his shoes are being ruined. He rubs the shiny plastic face of the hero clean and continues to step on and pass the obstacles, by staying clean, as he finds a way to stand and walk above the garbage packed earth.

The sun passes through what can be seen among the tents sweeping through the city. The smell of dying people, old, sick, and treated poorly by the conditions of a campaign to stop development of new ideas in the region fills in many details for Diego and the boy taking care of him. The three men with clip boards pass through the tents, counting to themselves, by placing people into categories, without offering aid. They lift boards and look in the unlikely places a person could be struggling through the campaign even if they are dying. A man in simple dress distinguished only by plastic gloves and a surgical mask makes eye contact with Diego, who lies still and full of memories from plans he intended. "I'm not going to hurt the boy," he says. He reckons with his choices, as a man does when he sees the final stroke approaching like black rain at night. The evil man can almost hear his prayers to die. The faith of a helpless man lies in the choices that lead to here and now. Diego is alone. He could cut his hands off and let the last blood run from his arms into the veins of plastic and mud beneath him. The chill of a driven man's final hours say something about his character. Diego calls to the boy who struggles to find him with the whimper of courage expected from youth. "Bring some water," he says. His tongue feels like glue stuck to the roof of his mouth. "I have some place I want you to leave me."

The boy does not feel concern, having just reemerged from an empty tunnel.

Part 3: A Shadow, to Hold, From Our Sovereign Earth

The lights sweep through and create the effect of approaching water. The boy leads by five steps. He remembers the procedure from clearing the last tunnel of “critters.” Diego often sleeps near the entrance to a tunnel. He lifts stones and places them as barriers before he steps over and continues down in glorious swirls of possible choices that are nearly tangible though empty. He leaves the small barrier and Diego lands like ooze far away to follow the boy who moves forward.

As he lifts another stone to place thirty, or so, feet from where he found it, the Artifact Animal sitting still, his back against the wall of the tunnel, slowly turns his head to meet eyes with the boy. “You can come here now, I can see as far. When you’re closer, I’ll stand to introduce myself. Try not to scare yourself as you approach. But now we must talk.”

The boy’s temporal lobe raises and the pupils of his eyes scream for light. He places the stone near the wall. The Artifact Animal stands and approaches.

Diego retreats to the darker corridors behind him instead of moving forward. The well blinks with strange life. His feet sink into the murky air and fill his body with knowledge of the abyss. His knuckles tense into a fist around the bar. His feet let go and fall through the air in faith of landing safely upon something trustworthy and familiar as a surface.

He is huddled when the boy finds him. Diego places a hand around the boy’s face almost choking the air from his mouth and nose. To the boy Diego says, “You’re just supposed to witness my death. I could not do what I was supposed to do. You can just leave me here. Go home and grow up. Be with your family. That’s all I have left to say. You’ll find me here years later if you’re unsure. You can go.”

“Is this him?” he says as his head clears. He points to a decayed corpse.

“I’ve come down here for weeks to see the body.”

“You don’t know this man?”

“I found it. I haven’t told my mom yet.”

“Tell me who he is.”

“Please don’t tell my mom.”

The Artifact Animal feels his concern leave.

The boy has two sodas in his hands. The vendor across the street is full and shiny. Dust sweeps across hardened earth and collects in small fortresses in front of fallen structures. He crosses the street muffled by clouds of sunlight. He draws breath low and smacks his lips. As the planet swing in place, he follows directions that were given to “be quiet, be quick, if you’re tired, go get something to drink.”

Placing the can, as though to beckon a creature from hiding, the boy re-concerns himself with activities of surviving into maturity. An opportunity to run, a thin strip of road between pedestrians glows white and sunny. After stepping aside to let people pass by, to get a track on...he begins a stroll with cold soda and a few buildings of exposed room to see before he reaches green grass to sit and drink his soda among people eating and talking, too concerned to notice him.

The boy hides his head beneath his shoulders with determination written across his face. The huge men compare themselves with eye contact that is not returned except through posture. As he steps aside a second time to let people pass by “to get a track on...” big heavy men dressed in uniform hurry about as though they had discussed where to go ahead of time. Rails of sturdy aluminum above his head imply steps to a child look-out. A few boxes squat upon the city and block the ally full of chilly possible outcomes. He takes a knee behind a condemning vagrant shadow cast by the debris. His family has left him with little more than mandatory hugs and kisses to uncovered the meaning of what he sees; He drinks his soda, from a kneed-view of the troopers terrifying presence, to solve his problems and he grows smarter from make-believe.

The formations aboard SC-15 drive through as though monster trucks. The mud, sand, and dust caves in upon the floor and leaves the structures exposed. “Is the terrorist Diego Valentine aboard?” Linda shouts as the field commander hands her a writ-to-enter. The astonishment confuses even on-lookers as they search for word to describe images of the mind at-work. Linda turns to her staff who turn to her and then turn to the commander for further words to describe their confusion. The commander understands theft, enough to stick to the paperwork instead of taking over Linda’s authority with her staff. He smiles and gives her back authority by staying silent as he conducts this search. “You will be detained while we conduct our search. You will not be removed from the ship because I feel it is not necessary but our sources have informed me Diego Valentine is aboard! I have Shoot-to-Death authority aboard SC-15 (Spec-Inspection Ready, Pre-Boarding, Pre-Rationing). You will not finish this Foundation without me boarding! These are my lawyers...Is Diego Valentine here? That is why I entered the way I did. I intend to find out.”

“Then these are the people I should be talking to.”

Senator Martin hides from soldiers and cops. He pushes through the crowds of people. As state representative for SCIC, he will speak for America’s good intentions on Terra-Formed Mars. Two percent of America’s economy funds research conducted by SCIC and another two percent of law enforcement serves aboard SC-12.

“State Representative!” Yolanda shouts! “Is it true? You’re here to keep the people safe?”

“I’m here to represent the interest of America in future worlds.”

“Why are field commanders inspecting the development of SC-15 if the whereabouts of known terrorists are still unclear?”

“We are ensuring that future worlds are not polluted with foreign as well as domestic subversives. We do not want these people to escape!”

“As state representative, can you ensure we are deescalating or escalating to war on Terra-Formed Mars...”

“We are deescalating.”

“Thank you Senator, so you are concerned with the safety of the people.” Yolanda all but pats him on the chest.

He has the file on an Artifact Animal in his bag. “An agent knows himself during times of war.” I will place this man myself, he thinks.

“One last question: Is it true: SCIC and America have been placing Subdued-Agents into foreign theater in order to monitor developments in local conflicts?”

“I have no knowledge of any ‘Subdued-Agents’ I am here to speak on behalf of America’s interest on Terra-Formed Mars. We do not meddle in local conflicts!”

Mr. Potts invites the Senator to sit while Yolanda declares cavalier satisfaction and knightly gait, there, at the foot of the stage. She smells lemon from cocktails but she stays seated. The Press Release has been over nearly an hour and talk has become the who is who of recent memory. Yolanda walks to Senator Martin, places her hands on his hand, and says, “thank you, you covered everything I feel we needed.”

“Yes, well, yes. Thank you correspondent. Are you sure you’re finished?”

“Yes, a night of sleep will do me better than hanging out here.”

Taking a plate of food covered in napkins, she leaves without say hello until another time presents itself. Her heavy-step soaked feet fall and squish as though filled with alcohol.

She sees her old crew and an opportunity to move forward with someone locally. To move forward with locals was the talk of the town. It is unlikely that Barry's insight into local affair will get her enough for the effort. The correspondent's view is better than the editor's and Yolanda know too much to wait for slow-pokes to catch-up. New contacts should be used by morning. Barry is just a friend. He is allowed to find work according to his contract. Yolanda wants to chase the story and gain further insight using her contacts from the sociable. Barry's stern face does not put people at ease; Yolanda is a face that can be informed, a good person to release ideas that governments have been developing in secret.

A man from Senator Martin's press team buys Yolanda an expressive drink.

"Why, yes." She says with the charm of nonsense that has been delivered well.

"There is lots of work...and you have a great face, a great tone, great pace. If you want to work, we want to work. How's Barry?"

"Done. Barry is a friend. When I applied, Barry put my portfolio on top. He's a good person. His best ideas are that talk of the industry. He does not mess up, that's his charm. He's always found work that way."

"Isn't that how you got here?"

"Mostly. Some of our contact came from me. The team is solid."

"But can you move forward."

"Without a doubt. I have my sources and he has his contacts."

"And your sources are all that I care about."

They toast lightly to the future.

The yellow lights emphasize the smell of cleaning and Yolanda takes bigger steps. Nothing is manned by staff, empty shops that bristle during daytime square up the hall into ghostly shapes. A few counter tops and machinery serve food as though in use and nothing draws upon memories or her deeper concerns. It is the daily food of those who care about their jobs and bags of chores. The view is unimportant, it is not a story. It is a storage room that will unpack a story tomorrow morning.

Yolanda wants to see the people and their concerns in light of International Dignitaries expressing their concerns locally. American is an on-going Pangea of change; war and politics makes it an interesting story to tell people locally. That America has lost or gained a state compels the local economy; will we

have less or more due to demands from foreign peoples? Someone of non-terrestrial wealth is a celebrity of foreign interest. Will the people ask these questions, she thinks.

She grabs a handful of folded clothes and still no keys. Lifting her hard work at angles she can use to see beneath and between clothes, she settles into her seat. Sweating with the struggle of a morning that will likely lose her friends, she takes a sip of warm water and continues searching. Before she leaves to speak with the new station, she will call her old station to activate her “non-commitment clause,” while chasing new leads. After her new contract expires, she will return to her old station and report her findings through personal accounts and confessional reporting. Nobody should care. Barry’s job is one part editor, one part recruitment. He is responsible for developing new teams if new opportunity arises while in field.

The dark circles beneath her eyes fill with moisture. Leaving the room, unlocked, she proceeds to the station to meet her producer and new editor. Chugging water from a hotel cup, she dashes through the occupied aisles of rooms as though she were thumbing through books and lands on an exit leading to stairs. Beside the stairs is the elevator. Still nervous about her key, she stays on her feet and takes the stairs.

A gush of the warmth outside turns her inside out from the shift in environment. More water and she will feel better. The hotel has people sitting here and there just outside its gates. Blankets have landed in dry dusty roadways and she finds it difficult and uneven heading towards the main streets just ahead. Ignoring the blinking “missed call” on her phone, she walks uneven ground that eventually leads to a curb and she steps from the dusty unpaved mounds of earth that blocked her path. The city does not clean shrubs more often than not and a few sections of curb have been broken by pests and weedy tough plants.

The surrounding businesses sit at angles as Yolanda walks the streets looking to quench her thirst and learn more about Terra-Rio. They just want the way that you say it, she says. A great story and Yolanda does not want her expectations to interfere with what she knows. She does not know much, if anything. She has her camera and her legs are getting tired from walking the hills that surround her hotel.

Yolanda takes pictures without her film crew. The young children sing and play with the instruments that were given to them by their parents. The music of children at play is nice and she looks around to find a new development. Standing at the door of the community at large are those waiting for the situation to produce jobs and wealth. The sober eyes of poor people reach Yolanda as she continues to

search for connections to her leads with the Senator's producer. An opportunity to lead herself comes from her favorite pen. With lots of money in her pocket, she sits down to plan her evening while clicking her pen. The city's descending streets have artfully tucked away the allies next to buildings as destructions from what is obvious instead of opportunities to pursue a lead. She clicks her pen. Her phone is forgotten weight in her pocket. With a few corrections to her line of thought, she calls her producer to update her progress: "I have a lead." She clips the phone closed, tucks the camera in its case to conceal her purpose and walks the ally while she shuffles with her pen.

None of the sidewalks are unserviceable but interior plumbing in exposed and a few sinks with running water are left open. She turns the knob to a plastic washtub that could fit a baby or dirty clothes and smells the water as she passes the palm of her hand beneath the funneled beam and scoops it to her nose. She sips the water then takes a deeper drink until her discomfort restrains prolonged use. The sidewalk is dry and solid; she removes her shoes to try seeing this neighborhood differently. She takes another drink and waits with the mist of confusion surrounding her removed. "It's hot. Who would stand her like this? I would?" she says playful through taking notes. Her work develops and she photographs the ally barefoot. She annotates the street address that has shown the courage to endure. The door to the structure is locked and the windows are reinforced with an iron mesh to keep out intruders. "How nice, free water." She licks her lip and takes another drink.

The journey through her books at home is an image of a tunnel someplace safe. "An offering from benevolent forces, even priests, to keep me above the underworld demons." She says through notes. "Look at this security. The thoughtfulness is obviously charitable."

As she stares into the washtub like an oracle would stare into the eyes of a crystal god to see her fortune, the city's concerns grow more obvious with the surround heat. A declaration of fear managed by charity is an obvious motive for those who live here. Criminals and victims should not be far away from here. A startling grey man stares from a full stone's throw away. He smiles but his smile implies the bliss of expectations that can be understood without speech. The obvious criminal implications of a free source of water frighten her enough. She puts her shoes on and makes plans to call her producer.

"She has not returned one call."

The vans sits in the parking garage near the landing zone and it says to Barry enough about the work. Yolanda has not returned to her hotel room in over a week. Barry sits near the van as he has for the past

few days and still he has not seen her. The lonely drive back and forth steels him though he does not have a lead.

The lessons of the new city draw him in and he finds things to do that help him to learn how to chase good leads. Leads that were not seen by others. Thirteen pages of notes become a daily chore. He opens and closes his notepad to see things in a productive way. Food that he like and that is also cheap, helps him keep track of other things like who is who in what is an ever changing landscape. Restaurants, names of people he meets, even strangers on street corners, are written down and pieced together so that clarity is his single-minded focus. The city, the dim wand he owns to understand his problems, can be spun in hand and the ways he sees things change over time once written and read. Thirty-five names in his thirteen pages help him connect dots to problems that can be solved with the diligence that is shown to them. Without his team, his notes are his mind alone and the new reporter becomes a new problem he hopes to solve before a big story goes adrift from view. He keeps an eye on what can be done as he searches for a way to connect with the girl Yolanda Price.

The ache of her toes stretch until they can twist a finger in her back as she peers in and out. “Ouch,” she says with a grimace of self-loathing pain. The van is cool and it does not look as though it has been used. Un-swept windows shine though dust from the garage has developed into thin layers that choke her as she peers inside the van for clues. The garage itself appears used. A chair has been pulled from the others that sit waiting around a small table. Maybe someone did stop her, she thinks. The plan to say hello is more complicated than it needs to be: She gathers her things to leave without being noticed. The small studio she was to be using with her team from *Our Sovereign Earth* rest beyond the hills not far from the garage where the van has slumbered. Her old producer has made it clear she can chase other leads as long as they can produce her point of view through eye-witness testimony at some point in the campaign, later. As though SCIC does not have many correspondents with various roles. This is hers. The two people in the small cab of a car watching her do draw fear, for the moment. They place a small police lamp on their dash but do not announce their presence through sirens or megaphone. She begins to walk to the flashing lights of the cab when the eyes of the people begin to poke through the urgency of the flashing lamp.

The woman in the passenger seat holds up a hand and turns down the lamp thought it still rotates as though orbiting now on a string. She opens her door as if the stiff shove she gives it could make her tense legs relax. Holding on tightly to a posture, her back does get the message to take over and she must

wait until a long breath helps her to stand up straight. A long strobe of red and blue swipes at the two standing in the open like bleachers to a game that will never end.

“Chasing a lead miss?”

“Just wanted to say hello.”

“If you don’t move your vehicle from time to time, it is considered loitering as a journalist. It’s a non-residential clearance.”

“Yes, yes. I will...”

“What you do is known miss. Keep it clean, keep it ethical.”

“Yes.”

“If we catch you in the wrong crowd, you’re no longer welcome. The name of the game is hardball and your new sources do not play nice.”

“Got it.”

It does occur to her that Barry’s reputation is impervious and her heart sinks. Perhaps the producer who knows Senator Martin is involved in illegal activity. “This city has eyes. People watch people. It’s no good. Keep it clean. That’s it.”

The patroller reclaims her dignitary before returning to the cab. “Okay,” she says and her partner nods before turning off the police lamp. The traction from the car leaving reminds Yolanda of her fear of solitude. To feel alone is shameful and she quickly looks for diversions in her bag.

Smart enough to solve problems before moving forward, she finds her phone and calls Barry for the first time in what is nearly two weeks. No answer. She will take it one step further and return to her old studio just in case his phone is dead to say, ‘I did everything I could before moving forward.’

Having returned from the field, the station equipment is all he has. Under orders to leave his personal phone behind, Barry has been communicating via company equipment. His team is now useless and he has been staying busy by offering help to others in the field. His situation has developed as team-leader without help from his team. An awful dispersal of personal and he feels he has lost his vision for now. Chasing a lead can be done independently but developing a story takes a team. Right now they have nothing but their egos driving them forward. “I have lost my vision,” he says without a clue where Yolanda might be as a correspondent.

She comes through the door as though set down there by the very wind. She looks distracted as though she has missed an important step.

“You can chase leads, but you are still responsible to me, then as a crewman; that is in your contract. If you don’t want to be my face when I pull this story together, and I always pull together my story, you still owe me time, as a crewman.”

“Yes, yes of course. I’ll do some copyediting. I can carry some of the equipment...”

“Fine.” He says sternly though obviously disappointed. “You don’t have to share your leads but you will not be the face of my story and you are right, it is my story.”

“Fine.”

The moment of understanding is little more than they shouldn’t talk again for a decent spell.

As Barry stacks his papers and attempts to move his team forward as far as possible today, before they part for a decent spell, to work elsewhere, Yolanda steps outside to smoke. When he steps outside to say hello, she grabs a few crates and places them in the van. “Can we finish tomorrow?” she asks.

The eye contact she makes is condescending and a sense of adultery or cheating shimmers with unnecessary humor. “We can finish later.”

“Just go then,” Barry says. “I can finish. I can do an occupational correspondence by myself.”

As she smiles, he says, “Make sure to login and logout in the station every few days otherwise it will not look like you are working.”

“Done,” she says and stamps the smoke with chivalry that is obviously saving something special for someone else.

He turns to grab a few crates and she turns to leave while his hands are full. “Thanks. Fuck.” He says under his breath.

Diego’s clearances are becoming well-known. One of his few remaining contacts in MSR stays just long enough to say no to dinner with Diego. “Thank you, I will look at it,” he says to the man before he leaves. The manila envelope contains his notes on Mr. Potts thus far. The renewal of effort feels heavy. His work so far has produced on-going results that have not reached a point of convicted ending. “Go back over what you wrote one more time before moving forward with final judgement,” his contact says. “You’re still all alone. If you can’t do this, and I mean lift up everyone, even the people that hate you, we will not try again. Not until the time is right. They all get away with it. They steal and lie and we will

let them until we get another shot at an independently governed people. Don't feel bad. Who else is going to shoot criminals but you?"

With a body that fell through the cracks of struggle, he sits in the small restaurant and drinks water which almost cools his wounded purpose. Diego knows who he is. He does not smoke he does not drink. He has never painted a picture nor written a word for personal or creative reasons. To survive by playing dead has given him perspective but it has not changed things. "To re-establish purpose in man, that is what I do," he says the words as lightly as he can. When the food is placed he says thank you as though he could crush the waitress with his character.

The chubby man sits across the room from him. The music from him while he eats his food is disarming. With leadership written across his face, he appears abandoned. His hat covers a full head of hair that is kempt and respectable. Diego drinks his water and tries not to gaze coldly.

The two cops sitting a few booths down notice him and he feels his life is threatened. He eats his food quickly and then leaves without making contact with Barry. Diego's manila folder pulls his arm and draws attention away from his surroundings. It is a delicate stack of papers that needs protection. He looks and he does not feel that it is safe. He opens his backpack and puts the folder away. Words on his tongue, which he swallowed, settle his stomach as he stares in the direction Barry took when leaving. What little he knows of SCIC's tactics of warfare rest inside his bag. He has names, pictures, and his personal observations of what they have attempted so far. Who is safe? Certainly not these key players while holding on to such important opportunities to lead people away from SCIC's foreign policy.

The body that he has, the one that bit him is cold and dead. He places Mr. Potts' picture above the body as though the shrine could speak. He does this to give his enemy a face. Diego lifts pages from the file he has on Mr. Potts. The pictures are colorful and they are fixed with adhesive to board paper that has been bound by stitching. Between the glued images of Mr. Potts are Diego's notes he has taken on the Artifact Animal and Mr. Potts over the past eleven years of foreign occupation on Terra-Formed Mars. Diego's notes on Mr. Potts himself go back twenty years to when he first met the man while he was in uniform and Mr. Potts struck a dignitary for his behavior while among "foreigners." The dignitary was a respected politician and Diego needed to separate the two men, which made the liberty taken between the two men unusually equal and possibly of clandestine relations. Someone who perhaps obeys rules that supersede law. As a regional forces team leader, Diego witnessed SCIC's comings and goings

while he protected those born in the middle jurisdiction of “corporate children” in need of constitutional precedent. Diego’s primary role was to ensure that people were not treated sub-human by the corporation that provided them with the means to live on a foreign world.

Steam lifts the smell of rice from the plate. He pulverizes a spoonful of food and drinks orange juice because the rice doesn’t satisfy thirst or hunger. He goes to the beginning of his paperwork. The picture of himself is old and greasy from crud that has developed over years. “Who was I before we met?”

Diego begins from there:

“As a Blue Stripe Judge of Terra-Formed Mars, reformed from my role as Armed-Scientist of MSR, I act herein act as primary source of law to elevate the agency past foreign policy; These files are my notes, taken from observation of questionable law; Of what I have seen through non-confiscated observation is as follows. As a judge, what I see as lawful or unlawful must be observed; Initially, I was allowed to move about in his company, Mr. Potts. My role was defined through simple signifiers of authority. Namely a shield, handcuffs, and a weapon given to me as an Armed-Scientist of MSR. He witnessed me several times apprehend credentialed personnel, oftentimes as important as those that he was surrounding himself with at the time. I was also allowed to ask questions of foreign dignitaries—with my title and identity still clandestine—but I was not allowed to confiscate property, in order to bar and remove slavish treatment of inhabitants of the planet. And now, through survival of numerous assassination attempts, I now elevate MRS past the judgement of criminals. Who I am, a Blue Stripe Judge, shall stand in to augment proof to assassinate Mr. Potts, of SCIC affiliate, as criminally involve in promoting war on this Terra-Formed World. Mr. Potts has violated authority and jurisdictional freedom entrusted to me, an inhabitant of this world, now elevated by observation and prolonged survival, for purposes of legal precedent and positive reform, to bar slavish treatment of those whom develop constitutional insight into humanity. By promoting war through human specimens, such as the one that lies before me, whom have been reduced in regards to perception of pain and consequence, as well as lacking insight into same-species boundaries such as cognitive growth through speech and loin-cloth dissembled human forms; I can prove that judgement has been removed from this perversely engineered specimen. A perverse declaration against humanity has been observed. Insight into higher order purposes and legal precedent has been reduced by Artifact Animalism, a method of war, as can be seen in this deity lacking judgement. I, as judge, through observation, move forward from here to bar and remove this perverse declaration against humanity through means of final, terminal and conclusive

ends to include harmful and deadly execution of those involved in developing slavish specimens intended to redirect positive reform and legal precedent. Without these virtues, reform and legal precedent, inhabitants of the world can expect slavish treatment as future property of the corporate body SCIC, to include profound violations against human growth here forward.”

Diego lifts the word processor and places it next to the body on the table of Weapon 38 so he can stare at it while reading his Declaration of Intent towards the foreign criminals, namely Mr. Potts. His food sits across the room. Light from the staircase warms the plate of food, so it seems, due to the chill of working underground. He goes upstairs, with the plate in hand, and leaves the food on the dining table. While standing in the room, while evening circles him, he thinks of his many enemies and what they know. Friendly with so few in the agency, Diego often thinks of what will happen if he fails. He is known by so few, many have died even of simple aging.

Rovoldo eats just four blocks from Diego’s small drab apartment with the cellar that was placed temporarily and has not been refilled. His lungs feel weary and old. The colorful evening sky pulls him from his home and he walks with bearings towards someplace useful. The recruits he was pushing for will remain without contact. Diego would like to know if Rovoldo is still intent on remaining away from the calling of a Judge.

The prospector with belief, in Daniel Makes’ SC-15; a belief that doesn’t avoid eye contact, sits next to Rovoldo and asks if they can talk further about what relocation means. A briefcase. The two men recline and talk. Pockets of sun rest all about them. The open court directs foot traffic where to go and Rovoldo wants to find the food he bought.

“So what brings you to the mission?”

“I want to know more about the constitution and the quality of life aboard SC-15.”

“We are special and you will be special if you do come with us to Martian Lazifor.” The prospector smiles while one hand keeps the brief case closed and central to the conversation: “Our constitution holds together the Sovereign-Self through support given to us from our Enlightened Resources. What that means is that there is something about a person that can be offered to a society of people because it is uniquely ungoverned. It means that my dignity is ungoverned and it is also something I can offer to a new society of people as government. Dignity is our government. Aboard Daniel Makes’ SC-15, the people will be prosperous because they are governed by dignity itself.” Rovoldo takes a minute to smile

to himself. The food he bought is warm and in ruin though he still takes a bite. “Would you like to take a virtual tour of SC-15?”

“I’ll try it.” Rovoldo keeps his shoulders level with his view of the distant fading horizon to imply they are in agreement.

The prospector unbuckles the computer from the case sitting near and slides it free. The weight of the virtual tour is fifty pounds of hardware. Rovoldo places the palms of his hands along the sides of the tour and looks into the pool which is deep as liquor poured luxuriously. The bottom spins and the edges crash against the wall of the hardware. Rovoldo chooses his words to mix with the tour’s imagery.

“I was born 37 years ago.” He says. The smell of the nursery and the noise from the cafeteria nearby trickle in. Rovoldo places his nationality card from his wallet into the signage placard in front of the hardware to authorize a few memories that are approved for Americans as public memories. “My mother was strict. She did love me.”

The smell of the family lawn and the dirt path leading to his house makes him laugh and he crosses his brow as he thinks of the past and the future and what it means. Age regressed uniforms and clothing are mentioned as he places his palms in the deeper liquor of the hardware’s interface. He tumbles his fingers in the thick watery mass to get a feel for the clothing. Using innovative memories, he says, “Those were cool.”

The feel of leather stitched tightly around stuff floods his mind with clumsy dance moves from youthful times spent with friends.

Rovoldo wants to know if time with family is important to Daniel Makes. He stares sternly into the distance and says out loud, “Sometimes I feel overwhelmed by my life. I don’t want to live without my kids in my life.”

The interface turns black as ink on paper. The module stops humming and Rovoldo sits in silence for five minutes without a word conveyed. He then says, “I feel better now.” A fizzy soda pop smell and carbonation crackle in the watery interface foams-up like dish soap around his hands.

Rovoldo hands the bowl to the prospector and feels better as he draws breath. “You can leave your manual and your constitution with me and I will share it with my family.”

“You still have to buy the manual,” says the prospector, “we can give you the constitution for free. I apologize. The manual is something Daniel Makes’ values in business. The constitution is our belief, our scripture in a way. We share our constitution freely.”

Rovoldo says thank you. He takes the constitution without paying for a thing. The prospector says thank you. The light red bound pamphlet feels as though the ink were engravings into monumental stone boundaries. Rovoldo opens the pamphlet later in the day while alone in a dinner that finished an entire afternoon of very little.

A large plate of food and something to read fills the table as much as a second stack of cooked sugar and eggs. The pages have curved from Rovoldo's peeking, though he hardly reads. He eats while not hungry. The waistline of his suit keeps him uncomfortably aware of poor habits. "Do you have a phonebook?" he asks the waiter. "Synthetic Continents are usually pretty good reads." He says to the waiter, "I'll probably pick up a copy of their society manual later."

The waiter smiles and leaves the phone book with Rovoldo. When his eyes finish absorbing the manual, the figure standing outside, to him, is obviously a Blue Stripe Judge.

The kid waves to Diego who returned to his apartment without a word said to Rovoldo, while eating.

The baseball Diego gave him had his address on it and the boy wanted to return it. "Hello mister."

Astonished at the sight of Diego, the boy turns flush and full of emotion. He hands Diego what he has brought but his eyes are jumbled with thought as though they were trying to take a bite of fruit. "You will help me, today. Sit and we will eat here before you go."

Diego accepts the baseball and the boy stands there like a paperboy.

The plate of food appears heavy from chicken and rice that is depressed beneath steaming meat. The boy lifts it and the bottom of the plate stays centered like a bowl from the sticky rice. Diego says, "Now you know where I live. Come by when you need something."

"Aren't you afraid of the man in the tunnel?"

"I trust your judgement. If you don't need anything, then don't come by. It is something that encourages crime in civilization. As I said, you have good judgement: a seer may not know what is happening; they simply compare one world to the other world using their best judgement. You do not know me, you do not know him, we are from different worlds. You only see the world according to me and him and make a choice based on character. That's why I don't mind you coming by. I will not harm you."

"I will most likely never come back," the boy says as he leaves. In pursuit of a goal, I find things, he thinks. Sometimes, I just hangout. It will be difficult to wander about if we know each other. I cannot disguise myself as we walk among strangers.

Barry stands beneath a great statue when Diego finds him. The drops descend from angles that still reach Barry's boots as he finishes speaking to his team. "What do we know now that we did not know before? What keeps us ahead of her leads?"

"We're not working for her leads. Does that help?"

The lone soul holds them with all his strength fixed upon them though he has not spoken yet nor moved.

"How are you sir?" he says and pulls at Barry through two assistances.

Beads of rainfall twist in air as he spins to see the man who beckons him politely. Diego's voice is deep and spoken from a distance as though he was withdrawn from solitude or concern. "If history asked of you, to be a great man, would you accept the challenge and say yes?"

"That's why I'm here," Barry replies.

"Your friend knows dangerous people who are developing dangerous weapons and war. Would you like to know what and why?"

Barry recognizes the two MSR detectives standing next to him.

Barry hands Diego's files to Linda Espiele. "It gives me chills to read. Considering the people involved, this will wrap up with a few dangerous people caught within."

"Can we prove any of this?"

"According to two MSR detectives, he is a *Blue-Stripe Judge*. The agency chose his life to stand in for law and order as *The Terra Formed Mars* develops into stable representatives of humanity. His life will stand in for proof that the system can survive in the face of crime, true crime."

"And the folly of humankind."

"What a great story."

The restaurant where they meet is the same. Diego sits alone and smiles when his company arrives. Barry smiles generously towards him with Linda shotgun to his right. The SCIC trooper watching them makes Diego nervous but the two MSR detectives watching the door is encouraging to see.

Daniel Makes rises to shake Diego's hand where he is; brought to here, Daniel's legal headquarters, to speak of crime and punishment. The MSR detectives escort the three involved. Both stay outside the office as evidence is collected and notifications are made by Diego Valentine.

“What will be the enlightened resources of Lazifor?” Linda nudges her temple with a spoon.

Her nose itches. She takes a tiny look at the food that has been delivered suspiciously.

Obviously she is not hungry. “Dignity and enlightenment should guide the labor of progress,” she says and shoves the food away as if the smell could prolong an inspired moment and turn it into doodles.

“Dignity provides humanity with eyes to perceive the memories we cling to.” Linda bangs silverware with enthusiastic rhythm. “It is perception itself.”

Jennifer looks at Linda’s bowl of grilled chicken in peanut sauce getting colder. “Perception can cast light but it does not substantiate thirst or hunger.”

Linda pauses with deeper understanding.

“Some people have dignity but will never know more than a belly of food.” Jennifer proclaims a conflicted tone. The food is not begrudgingly offered. As she takes a bite, Jennifer notices that it is not contested either. “Dignity is what can be remembered because of success. It is not perception. It is like this food, a well-prepared meal.”

“I’ll buy that. It is something that we cling to.” Linda gives Jennifer a squeeze. Her shoulders feel small and easily manipulated.

“My best memories taste like they were homemade.” The food begins to get to her. Linda considers taking a bite.

“Dignity is what has *been* clung to. It is the resourcefulness of people.”

“Then what are enlightened resources?” Linda blushes as she eats her food.

“Enlightened resources create the body of work that has been *clung* to, as a people. They are the possessions that reflect our dignity. The rest is burden. Labor placed in my hands by others.”

The Seven Sovereign Clauses of Lazifor

- Stone found thirty miles deep outside the jurisdiction of SCIC. (*Lawful*)
- Ancient granite first discovered by local farmers and unanticipated by foreign nation. (*Discovery*)
- Stone moved by hand in larger quantities by hand for purposes of self-betterment by local citizens in local regions according to MSR than by any foreign nation. We are allowed to keep the art we created if it has surpassed the output and quality of foreign people's ingenuity.
- Military decorations established by formational precedent that expanded the cultural welfare of local citizens and found outside the jurisdiction of foreign sovereignty.
- Records created by hand that are regionally amassed in sufficient numbers to represent indigenous libraries
- Chemicals that have been invented using stones or natural cauldrons native to Terra-Formed Mars' geological growth that has not been exploited by foreign interest.
- Five MSR scientists defend a water tunnel from bandits through formation established around an entry point.* The MSR entry and exit procedure is established. MSR "Entry & Exit" decorations administered.

Daniel pivots and the maneuvers taken keep the tone lively and unfamiliar between the two men: “I know that SCIC built my continent, Mr. Potts; that’s what I paid them for, and it’s not for sale.”

“Not even SC-12 has the design characteristics necessary for a trip to the Dry Planet Lazifor. Your specifications were very good.”

“I think it’s time for you to leave Mr. Potts.”

“We’ll be in touch.”

“If you say so.”

The door bangs close. Daniel Makes feels the gravity of his response. A hard no. His company, his corporation has owned SC 15 for twenty years. His family, along with a group of other Martian entrepreneurs, had it built. It has become a source of national pride on Mars, a symbol of new world wealth and a terrifying sign to those in power on *Our Native Earth*. The first Martians to commission a successful Synthetic Continent.

Some speculate SC-15 is what the Terra Form War is really all about. The symbolic value of the continent has begun to unite the planet in ways that nobody had anticipated.

“Because Senator, there is a profound difference between getting people to Lazifor and getting an entire colony!”

“We can’t go destroying our customer’s orders Mr. Potts.”

“I think we have options. In fact I’m certain of it.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Just get one of those things aboard SC-15. No, in fact, get a bunch of them aboard SC-15. A little good-bye present from SCIC.”

“They are not scheduled to leave for 18 months.”

“Twenty thousand spots hunny. The bare minimum needed to start over. It’s worth a shot.” Rovoldo rubs his head. The stress is everywhere. Across his forehead down to the craters of his eyes.

“Do you really want to start over?”

“Yes, Terra-Formed Mars is no home for our children.”

“Things have gotten worse, I know. I don’t want to leave my neighborhood.”

“Just think about it.”

Her eyes take a nervous walk to the living room where her kids play in the glow of innocence. The

habitual learning experience of tears and misunderstanding are still a reminder of their long journey into adulthood. The children fight over the remote. The jousting back and forth isn't as playful as she would like it to be.

Samantha's assistant ties her hair into a ponytail. She is supposed to shadow Daniel Makes' legislature as they continue to draft a constitution for SC-15.

"‘A time of judgement’. That's how she plans to solve her problems on Lazifor. We'll see. They still need to choose the right people."

She thumbs through her wallet for her nationality I.D. and her SCIC contractor I.D. She presents them to security posted in the guard stand just inside the entrance to the government building where Daniel has begun the drafting process of the constitution for SC-15. She has her copy of legal precedent on Synthetic Continents dog-eared for the section on "biographical clauses" as a solution for Terrestrial government.

She has studied law for fifteen years. She gives Armie a wave of indifference and continues down the hall.

Daniel's legislature consists of eight people. The back and forth hum of coffee within the room is acknowledged as productive.

"Bring lunch if you're hungry," Linda says to Samantha's assistant.

People are getting work done. She sits between two men who are both reading legal precedents that suite the mission. She waves but does not accept a verbal hello. Her hands are cold and dry. Wind sweeps the Terra-Form in buckets of sand. She's happy to be indoors. Homeless people struggle as waves in sheets of trash and dirt stick like dried sugar. She sees two men in layered clothes pass by like Arabian travelers or eyeballs wincing through a storm. They could be Daniel's secret guards or MSR detectives. She produces the comprehensive legal historian of Synthetic Continents she has brought with her and begins referencing the source material that is being used to draft the constitution. She wants to know where these legal precedents have been successful in the past.

"We can help you with what we are working on."

"I do my own research. Thank you."

"You're allowed to look."

"Thank you."

The source material is closely studied.

“The constitution of SC-15 is designed to create legal clauses out of the ‘biographical life.’” Samantha’s assistant directs her question toward Linda herself. The shuffle of pages is enough to acknowledge the unspoken agreement:

“Character determines direction while the Sovereign-Self struggles to develop. When enlightened resources become rare, we must establish new origins. The self becomes a new origin, through character, when enlightened resources become so rare people no longer pursue fulfillment. The Sovereign-Self implies new origins. The identity of people will change under pressure.”

Linda hits “save,” to make a chemical record of her research. “The enlightened resources or ‘stones’, as we like to call them, chosen for the alteration of Lazifor are deliberate,” she says to Samantha’s assistant. “I understand that you’re allowed to shadow our staff.”

Linda requests her file from the building’s staff. Samantha’s assistant offers her hand. “Don’t bother...” Linda says between pages, “Terry Mull. SCIC will find it offensive, what I’m doing.”

“Apparently that’s why I’m here.”

“Why not?” Linda offers her hand and they shake on nothing. “The Lazifor clearance card will directly correspond to the geological alterations made to the planet. It will be Lazifor’s claim to independence due to the sovereign-self’s need for dignified resources.”

Terry reads, “These are our dignified resources and this constitution corresponds to the alterations made to Lazifor using our dignified resources as a people.”

Three men and two women enter the weight-identity room. A weightroom. The weight aboard SC-15 and resource-consumption, or calorie-conversion, of each person is recorded from start to finish aboard the agile craton. The captain watches them come and go. He places his placard of achievement above the switchboard in the ship's cabin. He has been contracted to execute three two-year journeys for Daniel Makes. He twists his handlebar mustache. People are not given rations of food and meals are consumed socially, he thinks: "Some people eat more than others."

He pries apart the thin seal and dumps a scoop of sweet potatoes onto a paper plate. The meals are administered along lines of collective bodily-mass and sometimes people go a little hungry, which means they eat more later. The door swings wide. He closes the door and continues eating. This will be his first time as captain aboard a synthetic continent. Arguments over food at the dinner table are not discouraged as long as people have manners. People should be talking through their problems.

"Everybody has problems," he says to himself. "I had a hard day. I would like a second scoop of sweet potatoes."

"Take the night off Frankie." He says to the guy who agreed to wait with the captain while he processes new people. "I do not want to be here either."

"I'm pissed off," he says between scoops of marshmallow. "I'm solving my problems by eating dinner at lunchtime."

"Thank you."

"New people will be arriving over the next two months. When the weight of the colony is absolutely perfect, and we have enough education spread out among the different people to meet our performance goals on Lazifor, we will leave Terra-Formed Mars. Thirteen thousand people. Eighty percent of which must survive for thirty years and of that eight percent, over half should be skilled workers and educated personnel. Which means we need five thousand strong healthy adults to survive thirty years in order to ensure success on Lazifor."

"Take the night off captain."

"When I get a chance."

Daniel's staff believes in him. Five new applications are handed to Terrance Brascapt. Nationality applications can be thirty pages. Terra-Formed Mar's nationality applications are perhaps twelve. They are cross-checked in the Regional Origin office against the nationality I.D. the person should have on

them. It is not suspicious to be missing an SCIC I.D. It is suspicious to be missing a Nationality I.D. The Regional Origin office will then research who the person claims to be according to their application. Samantha's assistant takes the gold chain from his neck and replaces it with the lighter gold chain with the small threaded-charm. The memories are light. A sense of fraternity as he makes eye contact with the lady adjusting the chain that hangs like two bar bells in her hands. He remembers his friends and how long their friendships lasted. "That should be enough she says."

The certainty in her voice subordinates even his unimportant memories. A decent smile. Even her dress implies indifference that is charming.

Daniel coughs. Samantha's assistant appears harmless. He knows who she is, Samantha, and Daniel will not be refusing important applications. Daniel's personality implies confidence though surrounded by subversion and Samantha is important. Mr. Potts has called him three times. Daniel will rely heavily on his board. SCIC's subversive elements are not deterred from a barricade.

The database is updated by general activity such as attending a sporting event, purchasing grocery, or entering the courthouse for jury duty. The regional offices are always staffed by a member of a host nation that participates in SCIC's development. Although they are not shareholders. Some nations participate more than others. SCIC is considered a global right to the further development of sovereign nations. Eventually, most sovereign nations participate in checks and balance system that takes place within the regional I.D. application offices. Although the information that corresponds to the application cards is detailed, it is publicly shared with anyone who administers citizenship aboard a synthetic craton. Information about citizenship is administered under the watchful eye of many nations.

Daniel's staff places the regional applications in the first line of defense aboard SC-15. The briefcase holds over fifty applications. Although the applications are paper, they are written in ink that corresponds to their regional application cards. The ink that is used says as much about the person as what is written on the application. Daniel's staff witness the application as it is filled out and there are not further alterations allowed after the document has exchanged hands.

Daniel's staff has been informed of a potential security threat. MSR detectives monitor potential subversive elements on Terra-Formed Mars. The report is considered top secret due to the people involved. Samantha Barraguin's activities are not welcome on Terra-Formed Mars outside of the persistent financial need the city-states still demonstrate towards SCIC. The MSR detectives data collection note pad accepts evidence. She thumbs through the report. "The Artifact Animal," she says.

Her partner shakes the assistant's hand. "The only thing I said was that MSR still has jurisdictional authority as long as the craton is still terrestrial."

She places a wad of gum in her mouth. "She's just an assistant."

"I am just now finishing the report."

"I could care less if they sink Daniel's craton. I only care about the food stores on the Terra-Form and whether or not SCIC will seek subjugation in exchange for what was said should be free."

Daniel's staff could be considered former MSR detectives. Every member of his team has already applied for citizenship aboard SC-15. They still have authority to engage threatening persons as though a citizen of SC-15. SCIC's small standing army is disconcerting to detectives who manage food, storage, and distribution. They still have contacts in MSR and they will need them to deal with SCIC troopers as the craton evolves. The loss of thirteen thousand people is destabilizing. SCIC has their reasons, Shelly thinks.

The two detectives approach Terrance Brasecapt with the buttons of their coats shiny as walls of glass. Terrance tucks his brief beneath the desk and straightens his shoulders by tucking in his shirt. "We're just here to escort you to Region Office." says Amanda Feathers.

A plain clothed SCIC trooper chews cud. His refusal to make eye contact which amounts to little more than indifference to social norms. Why not smile, Amanda thinks. SCIC must submit paperwork for their standing troops on Terra-Formed Mars. Though intended to appear as a gesture of good will, they were not invited and they are still moving in combat formations. MSR continues to create their records. Who is this person and do they correspond to the record that was given to the agency. To forge these documents would be considered and illegal international military formation. If this can be proven, it will be difficult for the corporation to say that fighting occurred due to civilian struggles already present on the planet. SCIC must still report to the established nations of *Our Sovereign Earth*.

"He didn't give me a copy of the application." Shelly runs her fingers through her feathered crew-cut. "Terrance Brasecapt is one of the smartest people on Daniel's staff." Amanda replies. "You can get a copy as soon as he submits it for authenticity production."

The SCIC authenticity card is produced in triplicate: one for personal identification, one for society recognition and one for security elements to monitor behavior. The society recognition copy of the SC-15 citizenship card is an extension of Synthetic Continent legislation. Each citizen grows the

constitution of SC-15 by adding a single copy to the legal body of Daniel Makes' invention. Which means success aboard SC-15, that is in agreement, with law, becomes legal precedent and that is how Daniel's board has established government. That a person's life can be considered a legal clause which establishes precedent for legislation. Precedent is not judicial; precedent is biological. After forty-million people have come and gone on Lazifor, then the constitution will become judicial and that is how Daniel and his board will make the leap from SC-15 to Lazifor. Through biographical clauses that establish heredity and native identity from applicants aboard a synthetic continent to free citizens who belong on Martian Lazifor.

"I wouldn't do it. That's a lot of responsibility," Shelly says, "Biographical clauses are a great way to manage risk. People need to feel that they belong...Isn't that interesting. What if nobody exceptional arises after forty-million people. Your new government may take-off poorly."

"Crappy art still serve a purpose to those who like it."

"And they can still crap in Daniel's SC-15."

They laugh lightly.

"A few million souls lost aboard Daniel's failed invention."

"Perhaps two-hundred thousand can return. That is Daniel's only clauses for complete failure."

"Is the ticket sold as a one-way trip?"

"One out of a hundred people can return and they know who they are. Return passage is gift-giving among peerage. Daniel has three tries to do this before the Regional Office revokes his clearance to receive applications."

"Let's hope nobody gets scared and tries to run for it. People always have trouble."

"Daniel has three tries. That's not that bad. We'll see if anyone tries to return."

Samantha's assistant has people surveillance the two detectives escorting Terrance Bacecapt. Light concussive air draws Shelley away from the road. The city is fighting though open war has not been declared. She checks her rearview mirror.

"I'm feeling a little distracted," she says into the radio.

"Rodger that." The patroller behind Terrance replies.

"We're not stopping till we reach the Regional Application Office."

The radio keeps her informed. Local units here and there discuss security with SCIC troopers.

"Why not be like that, sister. I know who you are."

The pothole takes its toll on Terrance who is nervous and clumsy. He is considered “Classified Personal” while custodian of Regional Office Applications. He looks at the patroller behind him. Though he is plain-clothed he declares his presence with a muted-siren on the dash. He veers after signaling and checks his rearview mirror. The vehicle stops with uncertainty. The stop signal blinks with warning. He rubs his eyes and shoves the wheel. Hurry up, he thinks. He has worn many hats. Terrance has worked for Daniel Makes nearly twelve years, he recalls. His first experiences in record keeping cover citizenship databases from more important places than Terra-Formed Mars. Daniel’s board offers growth in innovation for those who are hired as employees or accepted as future citizens. Terrance is also the archivist for Martian Lazifor’s seven enlightened resources.

The ink on the applications is considered constitutional if the applicant is accepted as a citizen of SC-15 and a future biographical precedent of a judicial government on Lazifor. Terrance thumbs through the documentation surrounding each application; Samantha’s assistant has submitted three interesting individuals. The young man with capillaries showing off his cheekbones submitted a painting and a family photo with his application. He also submitted the first draft of a book of scientific drawings that details the appearance of different rocks in central China.

Rovoldo walks through SC-15. He places his hands in his pockets. The chill of air is enough to encourage eye contact with Melody. The steel-plated floor is buried in dust. The double doors lull open like a sneezy child. Rovoldo takes a step out doors. Twenty paces from the craton breathe with fresher air. Unexpected tears well in his eyes and he swallows and wipes his nose. Melody approaches him and grabs his arm. “I’m sorry,” he says.

Rovoldo children watch him from the safe carriage of a car. “Would you like to finish inspecting the quarters you and your family were given?”

As the door closes, a thin layer of dust powders-up. The grainy paper in Rovoldo’s pocket is cool and dry. His clothing feels thick as drapes. Fresh clean air blows through the vents. The wind chips its teeth against the glass. His single unit glows as Rovoldo takes his time to stretch his legs in the walkway leading to a cafeteria in his neighborhood. He finishes the citizenship form Melody handed to him by writing the address to his unit in the top left corner. Three security guards walk and smile. They point Rovoldo to the cafeteria which is dimly lit. A family huddles together and smiles. My children, Rovoldo thinks.

“Joyful Cafeteria,” he writes in the grocery section of the citizenship form. “How do I find Chinese food?” he writes in the “notes” section of the form.

The grocery store is empty and large. According to Melody, Rovoldo is allowed to be cavalier while inspecting his quarters. She wants him to feel comfortable in his neighborhood.

She falls over the coat soft and full of the smell of aftershave. She finds the key and plucks it from the bundle. The ignition acknowledges the single turn that produces a small cough of dusty forgotten filth. The cabin heats faster than the children can remove their coats and hats.

“I’m getting hot.” The younger brother cracks the door and takes a step outdoors.

His sister watches him from the cabin as he throws stones and shuffles his feet in the dust.

Rovoldo approaches Terry’s citizen applicants. He swings his arms deliberately, offers a smile, then his hand. A hello is passed back and forth before settling with little more than small talk exchanged. They rock back and forth with neighborly unease. The cafeteria paints a broad picture that is understood.

Rovoldo’s main concern is food. SC-15 will provide 10% more food than Terra-Formed Mars. His two children have not eaten since this morning. Snacks and sodas are offered.

A table in the center of the food court flowers up with brochures sodas and snacks. Rovoldo’s attention is in exchange for nutrition. More would be better. He grabs four small bags, two chips and two cookies for his kids.

Ramon encourages the children to leave. Melody Juniper’s citizen applicants are touring the synthetic Craton. Ramon lightly touches his firearm. It is still there, he thinks. A single MSR detective shadows his reconnaissance. He was told to take two pictures of each citizen from Terra-Frisco if they apply.

Captain Tate requests a status report. “Safe and secure,” he replies.

The MSR detective relays something similar. Ramon does not leave the cab without the camera or the firearm. “I want you two to stay in the vehicle,” he says to Rovoldo’s children.

His appearance is intimidating due to the detail he is required to maintain. His face implies stress and sympathy. A strong pause of agreement is understood as communication. “Go,” he says.

The children nod. They paper themselves inside the vehicle and seal the doors. The event travels to memory for context. The impression of such orderly behavior is placed next to the fathers of the world.

Why do I have to do this, the children think. Fear of restraint lies beneath the look of order. I have taken

direction with peers at school. To exercise restraint invites communication and at some point people steal space that does not end in fighting. I am safe, the child thinks.

The detective approaches Ramon as he snaps pictures of Rovoldo leaving the craton. “Are you allowed to be taking pictures here? Do you have paperwork?”

“No I don’t. I have my squadron orders.”

“What is your squadron number?”

“4351.”

“Who is your squadron leader?”

“Captain Tate.”

“My orders indicate you do not have clearance to take pictures near Craton SC-15. Will you relinquish your film voluntarily?”

“If my squadron leader says so then I will.”

The MSR detective draws his firearm. “Get out of the car!”

Ramon takes five seconds to consider saying no or perhaps reaching for his rifle before reconsidering such an empty space in judgement. “Done,” he says.

Ramon’s sheepish-smile is understood. I just lost my firearm, he thinks. Handcuffs spin in place around his wrists. Ramon’s body becomes a square block when motion comes to terms with limited mobility. Ramon stays down until leadership arrives.

“This man took your firearm Trooper Balliar. You were just supposed to take pictures.”

“Yes sir, the only thing I want to say...”

“Done, the commander will administer your paperwork.”

“We’re still fighting and this trooper lost his firearm.”

“So what. He didn’t have paperwork,” the captain shrugs.

“There is only so much I can do if the Terra Form does not declare combat. They’re just using law enforcement.”

“Obviously they see the troopers.”

“We have artifact animals for subversive warfare. For illegal warfare.”

“Send that idiot back to SC-12.”

“I need the people, done. He loses rank and is dismissed from theater.”

Rovoldo makes eye contact with Terry Mull's applicants. Five thoroughfares lead to the cafeteria and he is allowed to walk through all of them. Rovoldo can already taste the empty calories he plans to feed his waiting children. The idea of two bags for each child no longer seems keen or helpful. I haven't eaten either, he thinks.

The thoroughfare lights when Rovoldo finds the pedestrian switch. Construction equipment lies in fallen heaps here and there. Cardboard mutes the sound of footfall.

Safety lights cast pockets of matte purple against the cardboard muting underfoot. The moisture is so thin it crackles. His stuffy blazer tightens around his waist. His body can barely fit into a size large. Heat spills from his chest when he unzips his coat. His greasy fingers pry apart a few of the layers of hanging plastic.

Ten paces further and the first signs of getting lost rap and wait. He wanders about absent-mindedly. Housing unit after housing unit and their appearance melt in atmosphere. Open space that needs further thought and detail lifts small pieces and places them where needed. The brush strokes of labor leave empty boxes here and there.

A torch draws Rovoldo away from rebuilding what looks to him like destroyed communities. The craton answers his hopes from memories. His children play a part by adding laughter to the mounting, fearful dream. Melody's voice articulates the torch. I don't think I've ever amounted to...anything, he thinks. "Hello Rovoldo. You are supposed to walk the craton for as long as you need. I should not be bothering you but there is a detective who says that you should wrap it up." The radio on her hip blinks.

The sand builds and builds until his soles crumble the windy formation when he moves. Pedro's gummy legs loose traction through the hall. His shoulders lie beneath a small windfall of snowy shaky dust. The lieutenant detective licks sand from his lips as Pedro hobbles towards the commander's office. A small fish tank draws attention from the individual sitting among many files. "Very nice," he says to Pedro. The commander flips Ramon's file open so both men can see. The handwriting in each box applies purpose to execution while in country. Ramon has been busy killing time. "His unit has made more mistakes." Pedro says. Three inches of legal text and original case build up, one upon the other. Five offences here and there over two years. Ramon's pictures wiggle beneath a paper clip. Pedro adds his notes: "Ramon lost his firearm."

Thirteen incidences of deadly forces smother the guy.

Pedro and his reputation pin the men's success and their strategy. Captain Tate still does not know his rank or his last name. The contest to learn stalled when Ramon lost his camera and his firearm to Regional Police. "The Spin will work. Most people do not want to hear how their toys were taken for misbehaving."

"We can do a press release. I like a few reporters in the region. At least their crew is sharp."

The commander knows the space between his desk and the mini bar due to constant use. A coffee machine takes the room where drinks and liquor should be placed. His judgement invents a move through the boundaries invented by furniture. The manilla envelope road fails here and there in puddles of paper. Pedro grabs his arm, "certainly are swamped."

The seat next to Pedro nudges him into the corner of the office: "Let's see that file."

"His judgement is decent."

"I think his heart is not in it. It's his captain that worries me. It's his fault. The trooper, alas, should not have been there. MSR just disarmed a spy. We can prove it. We have his camera. Is this the same army that said: If we Believe. We Stay Trusted."

"MSR has always trusted SCIC. This is unusual."

The commander's routine sticks its head in the door. Distractions dot the room with coasters and unimportant charms as Pedro can tell. His assistant places vitamins beside his cup that does not move from where it is until the assistant leaves the room.

The television mentions Barry through clips put together the day before. The clubs soda from the evening ripples with the last film of carbonation left in the water. Barry's toes pluck the carpet that needs brooming. Lint and pieces of garbage travel across the floor and find places to rest beneath the bed. The weight of his revolver sinks inside his backpack. He accepts the weight with both hands and leaves his revolver sinking in the bed. The bulb from the bathroom light steps into the quiet bedroom humming with news. The taste of toothpaste showers in until his mouth waters from fixing his bad breathe. Three of his belongings form routine that Barry is aware of. The phone waits to ascend and descend in circles around the night stand. It is a toy for a baby sleeping.

The firearm finds the two feet of cushion shoving back its weight. The edges press into the blanket until the best divot implies its form.

Toothpaste that takes two hands to carry interrupts Barry as he travels across the hotel room.

A bang on the door down the hall shouts to Barry, wake up! The exchanges are commands and fearful responses. What the occupants say peddles away from the officer's demeanor. Barry grabs the wall with his ears. The silences and blinking lights communicate an agreement that was possibly forced by one party upon the other.

Barry puts the toothpaste near the lamp against the wall.

The phone should ring. His heartrate rattles the cage in the chest. There are two more in there the officer says to his partner in muted Terra-Rio.

Three percent of SCIC troopers speak Terra-Rio. Barry squints to hear what he can hear. The words roll towards him astonished and misunderstood. His mind bobbles with the phrases he remembers from speaking with friends about the planet. His field manual decays from use. The book emphasizes important pronouns. He removes the notes tucked behind the last page that were taken when two troopers sat him down to explain the basics when he first arrived in theater.

A peak outside drives towards Barry furious with noise. Flood lights pick up details that have gone unnoticed in the silence of his hotel room. The drape implies character that insists on standing vertical like a pushy child pulling on his sleeve. He withdraws and the drape hangs with no complaint. The firearm asks Barry questions that are muffled by folded clothes thrown on top to alter the setting. The phone should ring, he thinks.

A regional guy who does something similar keeps pace with Barry as he follows Yolanda on the Terra-Formed Mars. Caffeine stirs in his throat and he could use a break from waiting. His arms barely lift the keys which remain adrift in memory like a small cloud hanging over his head. Choices weight a thousand pounds and hang on to everything.

Barry has his mobile phone. Each refill settles his nerves. Sleep circles around his head. It does not choose a spot to rest. To stay-up on sugar keeps him restless with ideas. Soon, the confusion just now thrown at him lands in an order he can use.

Work with Yolanda stalled three months ago. Barry has been sleeping ten hours a day. The work is his only reason for moving to this city. Perhaps something exciting drags through the streets while he kicks the dust in New Frisco. Perhaps something still grows. The sand dunes pile higher than the people who clear the streets can complain. The office of Daniel Makes pushes people who would stray from the sidewalk. They are drafting the constitution for SC-15 in a large building downtown.

Two patrol cars parked outside sit. The tint that keeps them menacing heaves from the lower body of patrollers staying busy watching people. The medicine ball rolls back and forth between the two. Suspiciously they declare nothing to on-lookers and those before them. Barry drinks ice tea until he can taste his teeth cover in plaque.

The receiver is heavier than expected. “Hello,” is garbled with flem and he swallows disgusted. Sleep crumbles as if made of sand and water.

He arms raise and fall as he holds the receiver to his ear. Apparitions are easy to conjure. Two police cruisers intimidate Barry; the ongoing presence of non-descript lawful and persistent glares ask questions that Barry would rather not answer. “Has your manager spoken with MSR detectives?” he thinks. “That’s the phone call I’m waiting for.”

Barry’s manager found him work after Yolanda Price released him from responsibility so she could work with regional editors. Barry is not allowed to work with subversive elements. SCIC has not declared war through combat formations. Barry has heard the term, “Rugged elements,” or “Combat-Reduction,” to describe SCIC’s presence on the Terra-Formed Mars. Barry is allowed to stay occupied as an editor according to his contract.

Barry stands outside for five minutes. Steam from cheap coffee wraps around and grabs his breath. Still nothing. The cruiser waits and reads him. Barry revolves pictures and chooses scenarios that fit a law abiding image. Shadows and setting aid the portrait and Barry finds himself performing for the police cruiser fearful of question. It is nearly 5 a.m.

The knob turns and Barry falls through the door as wary as he has been all night. His manager has not called. The police cruiser has only recently departed. The monitor to his camera blinks. Cotton-green light advertises the phone-number sent moments earlier by frequency. “Let’s talk,” blinks in the message box. “Call me tonight, just touching base.”

The cruiser behind Barry is unyielding. “We’re meeting the detectives tonight,” his manager says over the speaker-phone.

“And my clearances to work on Terra-formed Mars are current?”

“Yes, they’re non-subversive. You can relax. Yolanda’s testing my last nerve, buddy. Think I want to find work like this either.”

The rear light in front of Barry draws his attention away from talking. Fifteen yards becomes twenty-five yards becomes a hundred yards. Hands touch the steering wheel with confidence and do somersaults, one over the other, to reach their destination. "One, two, three," he says. His nerves get the better of him as he checks his mirrors. "I spoke out loud," he thinks. The feeling that he spoke too much breaks his concentration. Remember what you're doing. The thought passes by him fast enough to invent fear. What am I doing? He thinks. What if I get arrested, and released, for working with MSR detectives?

I used to be a cop.

What if I lose my clearance as a reporter? Has these newer developments angered our contractors? That could affect my national clearances as an American...

Pedro's car keys keep him moving forward. The parking lot is full of people talking. A few colleges make eye contact but they keep distance respective and polite. "Thank you," two detectives Pedro avoids bother him while not working. Nightfall is grey and full of blue clouds. How to avoid people is a distraction. Pedro rubs his eyes. The weight of his entire life drags mud behind him. Heavy as sacks of junk, the wheel is his only frame of reference. Terra-Dune-Rio is the fifth neighborhood he has been to as Lead Detective of Elements.

Pedro sees his childhood grocery store. The wood hangs and empty holes filled with nightfall offer up the mystery of time. A moment's pause gives Pedro perspective because he is unsure if Barry will agree. The man was nervous and distracted for the entire interview.

The five pictures hanging on the wall are people he still thinks of fondly. His friends and colleges in the department ask questions that are private to him. The refrigerator's extra room is filled with vegetables cut artfully. Pedro can see his job in every aspect of his life. The cups of tomato cherries are numerous and half empty. Pedro stores and consumes food from the same cheap ceramic dishware often. Bacon and a full half-head of lettuce are placed in a bowl along with soda and a scoop of cold pasta.

Pedro's view of the city is level with the other second story units across the street. SC-12's landing strips are implied along the horizon. Twenty miles from his apartment, here, the synthetic continent deploys units fifty troopers at a time. The bowl has been sitting with Pedro outside. Sweating and defiant, it warms to the touch as Pedro eats dinner and thinks about his problems. It has taken thirteen years to make lead detective on Terra-Formed Mars and he still makes little money. The food is good and he passes the evening doing simple chores. Enough time quietly alone brings the only pet he owns to

the glass door leading out to where he sits. His choirs are contemplative and he can see how he passes time. "I work a lot at home," he says as he picks up the cat and nibbles the ear. He has shuffled a few heavy bag of soil to sweep the small space outside. The cat sits and watches. The curious look of being offered food keeps its ears perked. Pedro is also curious that perhaps a mouse will escape. He shoves an empty cup with the broom. The cat leaps from where it is sitting and paws the waxy cardboard to feel it out for food. It grabs his hand as he reaches down to pick it up and throw it out. Lifting its soft lean body with his left hand, Pedro barely heaves the door open. He throws the cat inside and closes the door. He cannot remember what was so important. Grabbing the bowl, he steps inside to pour his little friend something to eat from the huge bag of cat food in the closet.

The work on the table in the living room is a looming headache. Pedro thumbs the many pages paper clipped together here and there. They are paperweights stacked high and heavy. It is no easy task getting started.

Barry's titled pages are hole punched and clamped to the inside cover of the folder. Barry's place of birth takes nearly twenty minutes to read. The region is described in the droning detail of government diction. The uniform tells all from behind a shield.

Ramon waits with an oval of fog spreading across the pane of glass. The pile of tomatoes throws the pile of lettuce into a small corner of the cutting board. Ramon drags half into a bowl along with the lettuce while scraping and bumping the divots with the blade.

The door pries open and Ramon feels the cold room grow colder. The security checks in every three hours and wasting time in normal. Three months of cleaning before they will allow him to return to his squadron. The worst that can happen is that he will be sent home. If things do not workout in his favor, he will most likely not be discharged early.

The steps he takes fall on to thin carpet. The cushion of the hall way flooring is enough to bring a plate of food to the bunks he is staying in. Twenty buildings down, Ramon's squadron sleeps. His toes are dirty and the food did not fill him. A huge plate of pasta and he is still hungry. He did not even touch the tomatoes and onions, which stare down from a window. Five people share the bunks where Ramon sleeps. Laziness has become his life; dirty dishes are spread around like furniture.

The MSR police report and his squadron report simmer from being touched by Ramon. Nervously, the build-up blackens the edges of the paper with dirt and oil throughout the week. Three months of waiting, three months of demeaning work hanging around a foreign squadron. Ramon knows no one...

The few boxes that are garbage stack high and do not move due to the comfort of forgotten choices between right and wrong. Ramon does not feel that he should clean up. Good behavior has been forgotten and comfort in food has built a fortress in the room.

Ramon is not free to think about future burden. He sits and stew on the god darn bull of being caught. Could I have said things differently? His toes hang from the top bunk and the space between the bunks softens his joints as he stretches then lies down.

The danger is not so pending that, to the point, he can still venture with excitement into future survival. If and when that happens, I will do this, he thinks. Very young and Ramon knows youth is a tenuous advantage. Five feet from his bunk the letter from family was read as though it could not provide him answers. Now many attempts at maturity from home, he will not give his family enough time to grow close.

Four sets of cloths across the bed are folded neatly. Box by box point upwards and are placed into a pile that allow the air to circulate. Ramon can smell the air from the vent and the feeling of moving forward is a heavy weight. The boxes are a slow process that Ramon takes two trips to finish.

Half way to the dumpster, Ramon turns his head and sees an entry check point one-hundred yards from the place he is standing. He puts his shoes on the second time he visits the dumpster to throw out the last few boxes. The lights keep the walkway clean from the constant help that is required from traffic through the halls. Ramon does not see garbage here and there as he continues on to say something to Delmore before crawling into bed.

The walk seems far. Through the steps are preoccupied he manages to cross the space between the hall and the entry point to find it empty and barren. Wasting time. Ramon is uniformed and as he wanders about within the boundaries that have been declared by shouts, he fills in the new squadron with details intended to comfort him as he waits.

The entry point distracts Ramon by choosing to stay quiet. Ramon can tell it is remotely monitored. The empty room functions with the clutter removed. I could talk to my bunkmates Ramon thinks. Ramon bounces once and settles into the cold room surrounding him on his lonely bed. Sleeping in a tank top, he rolls back and forth to stay warm. The cool air does not changed into an unbearable chill. Ramon's sleeping bag develops into an uncomfortable pile and his toes wiggle beneath the mountain of covers at his feet. Light sleep stretches throughout the night into the vague social bond of roommates. He somersaults into his sleeping bag which is unzipped and dozes as people come in and out of the room as the night passes. The lights turn on and it is bright enough to shine through the cracks between his

covers and the bed. He rises to see the room and takes the opportunity to place his warm soda in the fridge. Ramon pushes his food into the corner of the fridge and keeps his socks on when his bunkmates stop to say hello. The guy makes eye contact and he is not in a fighting mood either. He smells strong. Cologne and alcohol follows him as he moves here and there to stow away his possessions.

The smile that he offers before turning off the lights leaves a ruffle of uncomfortable exchange. Is someone supposed to be the one in charge? The pressure to answer this question tightens up around the belly that would do better exercised instead of loosening the belt.

A long stare into the wall tumbles the mind of Ramon into an imaginary plot of ground wrung with gardened flowers. He turns his back and the mattress sinks and leaves a flattened imprint as he tosses and turns while the night passes into daytime.

The two open the walk to the cafeteria as strange company does with the talk of bridging the gap of understanding. The question of food draws the two in close to pool their thoughts, all things considered in the squadron. The way to get around while staying out of sight until it is necessary to put on a responsible appearance is understood. An agreement is made to find something near and then both can continue on separately as troopers avoiding judgement that leaves a long term record that is scarred. Both troopers are being detained for losing their rifles.

The fire exit funnels towards the high ground. The mesh-guard grabs his fingers as he runs his hand over its surface heading to Level One where the food courts are found. The guys say hello mid-way there and smile.

Mr. Potts drills two fingers into Armie's back. "Go park Armie. I can cross the street."

Mr. Potts places his hands across his coat which gathers wind in the belly of the fabric. Ten paces from the crosswalk, he looks both ways then crosses before red lights can create a pause for pedestrians to time a crossing point.

As he reaches the other sidewalk, Mr. Potts takes another look both ways. Smells of street food and the sound of normal people talking about the struggles of comings and goings within the world as such, merely offer passing insight. "The world has not changed," he says disappointed though still in control.

Paulodelle sits on his squadron detention papers that have been folded four times and that are now twenty pages thick in his back pocket. His bunk mate did not attend the bar. Paulodelle clears his mind

and feels chubby from drinking. The new squadron is not that awful so far, Paulodelle's intuition says to him as he relaxes. The smell of beer clears up his breathing and his muscles are looser.

Eye contact with the two men down the bar says something about why they are here. Paulodelle remembers their appearance, vaguely, around the squadron. The faces of many people describe life around the installation. One smile is exchanged and the guy closest to Paulodelle stands to say hello. Mr. Potts does not move. He will enjoy a drink as they discuss the future for the SC-12 trooper.

Linda approaches Daniel with the Writ to Execute. “I will deliver it myself to the men working with Diego.”

Daniel puts his name on the writ, as well, before sealing the envelope with water and glue. “Tell me more,” he says before handing it back to Linda.

“What this means? We are responsible from here forward for our safety. We cannot ask for help if we need it. MSR will assume an important role as guardians of Terra-Formed Mars and we no longer will be beholden to foreign interest for safety and inspection. Completely independent of SCIC. Who really believed that just our contract would keep us safe? The law needs to develop in order for us to do what we are doing. That is why we have our Writ to Execute. The development of the future is our best shield. Continue from here Daniel, it still is the safest route.”

“We could not do this without support from your friends on Our Native Earth.” Diego places his hand on to Daniel’s hand to ease his worrying over the killing of a man. “Your developments into Humanity’s future have affected everybody. Can so many say that they do not care what happens to you as you further yourself, and your people? Many people follow you Daniel, even with nationalism.”

Upon this draft, his friends have spoken: Then Daniel Makes’ board successfully assassinated Mr. Potts, in the eyes of many, they all but say. When Daniel Makes and his board assassinate Mr. Potts under the jurisdictional authority of Diego Valentine, it is done with a higher purpose. As Judge and Jury. Senator Martin is then disavowed by several important nations. Many still want support from those who live many long nights and many long days into a distant future from Our Native Earth; even if they must dismantle some of SCIC’s developments into the war.

“Dismantle the army...by over half,” says Captain Tate. The General’s tone is concerned though he does not seem to fear the results. “Some of the clandestine figures of the company have drawn those working with our forces into unattractive light. Since there is no consensus on how much was shared concerning these advanced weapons, we must scale back the army. Many of people are beginning to lie about how much they know to me, and to each other. And the board they are using has massive support from people of differing opinions. It’s no longer a good time to be messing up in foreign affairs.”

The understanding is mutual. The elaborations continue though the general speaks in a roundabout way from here. “It is called domestic instability for you know who. It’s that, or we dismantle it completely.”

“What does that mean?” The captain feels the heavy verdict of drawing back his forces grow even more cumbersome to take.

The general continues, begrudgingly. The captain needs to know little more from here. “Apparently Senator Martin, and the company figure, Mr. Potts, can no longer hide their dealings abroad. Not everybody was included in the development and application of the methods they were using. The company does not want instability upon Our Native Earth. They knew the risks they were taking when they traveled as dignitaries. The People will cut you loose if things do not workout elsewhere. Pure transparency while working on the future with other people’s money. The legal path, the board they are using is brilliant. They are acting as Jury to the Judge, Diego Valentine, who works “on-behalf” of MSR. Which re-instills faith in the eyes of The People who fund SCIC from many sovereign nations. Domestic stability is still more important than foreign affairs to the people who are currently upset. Which is why we must draw back by over half.”

While hiding out near a bar, Diego find him lounging after orders to develop the weapon further are given. Men approach him and a Writ to Execute is administered through sight of their shields. The men who enter first upturn tables but do not take cover. Two lines form as Diego enters the room having now started of dignified new beginnings. The line of shields is stunning and it is intended to communicate the renewed purpose of MSR as high authority.

Melody recalls the small showdown on the streets that takes up the day tactically involved with intermittent moments of combat between the two. She opens the envelope from Daniel with a timeless seal glued to the front. The letter reads, “I made the money that I wanted from SC-15. The planet’s yours. Thank you for your service.”

“To begin anew,” Melody says to her granddaughter. The baby takes her first step.

The End.

Part 4: Author Notes

8/3/2015

Use less perception verbs. Use more description verbs. Describe the surroundings and avoid your point of view.

- Less Perception, More Description: to be or not to be
- Place an observation where needed
- Objective prose/to be (lyrical, metaphor) (less)
- Subjective prose/not to be (narrative, description) (more)
- Prose is counter-intuitive because the Poetics have been removed
- Prose is Poetry in reverse

Summary:

“Struggles and Our-Kind, Enroute to a Vision,” is a vocabulary-based science-fiction novel that takes place around the lives of a Judge and a wealthy entrepreneur. Three worlds have been drawn together by a vision of the future that culminates in the near extinction of humankind and a struggle to survive the baser impulses of ill-gotten wealth. Those who must piece together meaning while dealing with the price of greed find reason and therefore can continue.