

MATTHEW  
MATHER

THE DYSTOPIA  
CHRONICLES

THE KEY TO HUMANITY'S FUTURE  
IS ENCRYPTED IN ITS PAST.

THE **DYSTOPIA**  
CHRONICLES

***Atopia***

*The Atopia Chronicles*

*The Utopia Chronicles (forthcoming)*

*CyberStorm*

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THE **DYSTOPIA**  
CHRONICLES

Book Two of Atopia

by Matthew Mather

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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*For Julie, and the memory of Ash House, where much of this was written. And for the boys and girls of  
the White Horse. You know who you are.*

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# Contents

## [Prologue](#)

### [Part 1: Limbo](#)

[1](#)  
[2](#)  
[3](#)  
[4](#)  
[5](#)  
[6](#)  
[7](#)  
[8](#)  
[9](#)  
[10](#)  
[11](#)  
[12](#)  
[13](#)  
[14](#)  
[15](#)  
[16](#)  
[17](#)

### [Part 2: Heresy](#)

[1](#)  
[2](#)  
[3](#)  
[4](#)  
[5](#)  
[6](#)  
[7](#)  
[8](#)  
[9](#)  
[10](#)  
[11](#)  
[12](#)  
[13](#)  
[14](#)  
[15](#)  
[16](#)

[17](#)  
[18](#)  
[19](#)  
[20](#)  
[21](#)  
[22](#)  
[23](#)  
[24](#)  
[25](#)  
[26](#)  
[27](#)  
[28](#)  
[29](#)

---

[Part 3: Treachery](#)

[1](#)  
[2](#)  
[3](#)  
[4](#)  
[5](#)  
[6](#)  
[7](#)  
[8](#)  
[9](#)  
[10](#)  
[11](#)  
[12](#)  
[13](#)  
[14](#)  
[15](#)  
[16](#)  
[17](#)  
[18](#)  
[19](#)  
[20](#)  
[21](#)  
[22](#)  
[23](#)  
[24](#)  
[25](#)  
[26](#)  
[27](#)  
[28](#)  
[29](#)  
[30](#)  
[31](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Glossary of Terms](#)



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# Prologue

SEEING HIS DEAD mother making tea in microgravity, a hundred million miles from where he buried her in Idaho, was the first thing that ever struck fear into Commander Stockard during his thirty-year career as a space jockey. Even seeing the world flicker like a candle just moments before—the lights of the entire night side of the Earth winking on and off as if someone was flicking a switch—hadn't fazed him.

Startled perhaps, but not scared.

Not like this.

It's just a hallucination, he tried telling himself, cabin fever from being stuck in this tin can for two months. *It's not real. Keep calm. Panic is the enemy.* His dead mother smiled, wagging a teapot in the air—did he want some? He shook his head. *No, thank you.*

It had to be the stress. Parking a hundred billion tons of comet ice in Earth orbit was a project of destiny. Seven years ago, when the deep space monitoring network picked up comet Wormwood P/2058D12, it was heralded as humanity's opportunity to finally—*really*—begin colonization of near-Earth space.

Commander Deng looked at him and frowned. "Still no comms from Earth. What do you think about the solar flare?"

Stockard breathed deep. Maybe, but their instruments would have picked up a magnetic disturbance. "Probably more to do with the fight between Atopia and Terra Nova." In the two months since the Comet Catcher mission left Earth, the struggle between these two colonies had climaxed in a full-blown kinetic conflict.

The engine burn had been going on for a minute already. The ship rumbled.

Bits of debris from weeks of zero gravity fell as the ship decelerated. A pencil Stockard left wedged next to a display unit bounced off his suit. He tried to grab it, swearing as he missed.

Glancing at Commander Deng, he could see something was wrong. "Everything all right?" Stockard yelled above the roar of the engines.

She blinked and shook her head. "It's just . . . I think I'm hallucinating . . ."

"Burn complete," announced the system computer. "On target for Wormwood."

Stockard gazed at her steadily. Should he tell her? Fear was contagious. Out of the corner of his eye, in the reflection of the cockpit glass, Stockard's dead mother waved at him from just down the access tunnel. Goose bumps rippled across his arms under the thick layers of his spacesuit.

His mother was waiting for him.

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Part I:

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# Limbo

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# 1

A DOZEN ARCHED doorways lined each side of the great hall, each twenty feet high and topped with sparkling colored glass. Bright light streamed in. Between the doorways, gold-veined marble columns rose from polished floors to a ceiling frescoed with cherubic angels. An image of God hung over the middle of the room, reaching down to the world below.

It was a virtual projection, one of Jimmy Scadden's private worlds, and it was the first time Nancy Killiam had seen it with her own eyes. She'd heard rumors, but getting into this space had been difficult. You had to be invited. Nancy wasn't, but she'd infiltrated the virtual sensory channels of someone who was.

She was spying from a front-row-center seat.

"Join me if you believe in everlasting peace," Jimmy thundered from a pulpit in front of her, shining in his white military uniform. "Join with me, and you shall never grow old, you shall never die."

It was a psombie recruitment session.

Row upon row of young men and women sat at attention, all of them attending the meeting virtually through pssi—the Atopian poly-synthetic sensory interface. Their eyes and minds were focused on Jimmy. In exchange for unlimited and unfettered access to the Atopian synthetic reality multiverse, Jimmy was bargaining for use of their physical bodies in the real world, disconnecting their minds with a body-lease contract, turning themselves into psombies.

*What was he up to?* Nancy squirmed to stay hidden behind the consciousness of the observer whom she was hiding. A part of her wanted to burst out and announce to Jimmy that she'd discovered him, but she'd never been good at confrontation, and what Jimmy was doing wasn't illegal. She couldn't go running back to the Cognix Corporation boardroom or Atopian Council, screaming like a child. *Aunt Patricia would have known what to do, but she was dead. She's gone. You need to figure this out for yourself.*

Patricia Killiam's passing hadn't just opened up a yawning gap in the fabric of Nancy's life; having one of the founders of Atopia die had opened a vacuum in the power structure of what had become one of the most potent forces shaping the world—the release of pssi technology. Nancy stared at Jimmy on stage. Patricia had been a central figure in his life as well, but her death didn't seem to be affecting him. At least, not in the ways that made sense to Nancy.

"I have chosen each of you *personally*"—Jimmy nodded to his audience—"to be my representatives in your communities. You are the chosen ones." He paused and smiled. "If, of course, you choose me."

The crowd shifted in their seats. They were here. They'd already made up their minds.

Nancy had known Jimmy her whole life, grown up together with him in the pssi-kid program on Atopia, part of the first generation of children born with limitless virtual reality built into their minds. But this man up on stage wasn't the quiet and efficient Jimmy with whom she'd grown up, the

shy boy who had hidden in the labs of the Atopian research centers almost as much as she had.

—Jimmy opened his arms to the crowd. “Let me be the one that saves you—saves you from a life of drudgery, from a life of pain, from uncertainty. I can free you from all of this, to a world where your every desire is fulfilled.”

With these words the doors to the great hall flew open, revealing dreamscapes beyond. Nancy could only guess what the rest of the assembled glimpsed. Jimmy was using open access to the memories to project fantasy worlds, a combination of where each attendee had felt safest, and of what they always wanted to be. All Nancy saw was her Aunt Patricia, staring back at her from the grave.

“Give me your bodies,” Jimmy roared, “and in return I offer immortality.”

The reality skin of the hall merged with the fusing realities of the attendees, each of them greeted by a splintered copy of Jimmy who whisked them into their fantasy lands. Nancy released the sensory channels of the person she was ghosting, letting her primary presence settle behind her office desk. Mahogany paneling appeared in her visual sensory frames. Bookcases lined the walls behind her, copper-studded leather attending chairs, the Persian carpets underfoot lit softly by green-glass lamps that glowed on the walls.

Cunard, Nancy’s digital symbiote—her proxxi—was sitting in one of the chairs. “We should gather more information before we say anything to anyone.”

Nancy smiled. Cunard, her protector and counselor, more now than ever before, and never as less of a perfectionist. Then again, he was just a reflection of herself. She nodded, agreeing with him. “Good work on getting me into that meeting.”

“What he’s doing might not be strictly illegal, but it’s certainly suspicious, and it’s been hidden from the Atopian Council.”

“Or at least hidden from us.” Nancy wasn’t sure where the fault lines in the newly evolving Atopian power structure were falling. It might just be that she wasn’t on a need-to-know list. She felt like she was drowning, unable to get a firm grasp on anything to hold her up. She needed help. “What do you need you to focus on is finding Bob and Sid.”

“And Vince,” added Cunard.

“Yes, and Vince,” Nancy agreed. She wasn’t sure that they were all together, but they all rushed off just after the fiasco with the altered-reality skin and simulated storms that nearly brought about the destruction of Atopia. Terra Nova, a competing off-shore colony in the Atlantic Ocean, admitted to implanting the reality-skin, forcing a closure of the Atopian borders just after Bob and Sid had left with Vince. “Do you think they’re trying to find Willy’s body?”

“Yes, but something else is going on. Why would they have cut off contact?”

Nancy could see Bob running off to help his friend Willy—with Sid, as usual, in tow—but it was odd that Vince went with them. Never mind that he was three times their age and the famous trillionaire founder of PhutureNews, but Nancy had never seen Vince Indigo rush off to do *anything* all the years she’d known him when she was growing up. Why now?

“Bob did beg you to go with him,” Cunard reminded her. “I don’t need to tell you, but his anger is always just under the surface. Hard to say what losing Patricia did to him.”

Nancy took a deep breath. Was Bob angry at her? She’d only just caught a glimpse of the old Bob before he left, the one she’d known and loved all those years before his brother had killed himself. For years, Bob had cut himself off behind a veil of drugs, filtering his life through the pain of losing his brother. Nancy rubbed her eyes. I was supposed to be with him, he’d begged me to come, but how could I just take off and leave Patricia’s dream in the hands of Kesselring and Jimmy when she died?

Almost as soon as Bob had left Atopia on the passenger cannon, Nancy lost all connection with him, with everyone in his group. They’d completely disappeared off the grid, which was no easy

feat.

— They had to be hiding on purpose.  
But why? Where *was* he?

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## 2

“LIFE IS SUFFERING,” said a disembodied voice.

The words floated to Bob through a steaming jungle, and he followed them into a clearing where he found a herd of massive, dorsal-finned creatures. Halfway through mouthfuls of fern and bush, they swung their heads to observe him.

“The cessation of suffering is attainable . . .”

Bob looked into the sky, and then down at his hands; four fingers webbed with translucent green skin. The landscape, the animals, the vegetation—it was alien.

“Bob,” said another voice, more familiar this time. Bob looked up to find his proxxi Robe standing to the side of the clearing. The animals began lumbering off, crashing through the forest. “Time to get up, Bob.”

His proxxi smiled, offering a cup of coffee, and the jungle behind him shimmered. Replacing the familiar outlines of Bob’s bedroom in his family’s habitat on Atopia. Bob shook his head. He didn’t need to be babied. Reaching into the reality skin around him, he ripped it down. Sloping wooden beams appeared, the now-familiar ceiling of the farmhouse bedroom in which he spent the last few weeks sleeping. On a high shelf above the door, long-forgotten trunks stood collecting dust, and for the hundredth time he wondered what was in them. Perhaps today he’d have a look.

This end of the farmhouse was turn-of-the-21st-century: wooden-framed construction with solid mineral walls—gypsum calcium sulfate sandwiched between paper—fastened together with former metal nails and screws. *Primitive* was the word that came into Bob’s mind. The wilderness of reality outside of Atopia was reinforcing the sensation that he’d been cast out of paradise.

On Atopia, his floating island home just off the coast of California, even physical reality was clean, shining, every detail accounted for. The forests up top were perfectly manicured. The corridors below were always polished and shining. Before leaving—before being *asked* to leave—he had only experienced the rest of the world through wikiworld simulations. Now he was out in the wild, with illicit smarticles embedded in his nervous system, and the limited bandwidth forced him into the dirt and grime and specificity of being in only one place at a time. To say it was a new experience was an understatement.

And the constant barrage of hate media didn’t help.

When he took off from Atopia right after the *incident*, and then immediately dropped off the grid, the conspiracy nuts were in hot pursuit of Bob and Sid and Vince. It wasn’t just the nutjobs though. The longer their gang remained hidden and off the radar, the more the mainstream mediaworlds were latching onto the conspiracy theories. People wanted answers.

So did Bob.

Propping himself onto one elbow, he rubbed his eyes. “What was that about?”

His proxxi appeared on a floral-print chaise in front of the fireplace in the small room. “What?”

“The jungle with the dinosaurs.”

“Dinosaurs?”

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Connectivity was limited in rural Montana. Bob had a few dozen splinters—synthetic intelligence bots modeled after his own cognition systems—hunting down leads as they searched through the virtual and real worlds for any sign of his friend Willy’s body. Synthesizing all the information they collected in real-time was impossible through the tiny data pipes they had access to, so his splinters were integrating into his meta-cognition systems while he slept.

It made for strange dreaming.

“You were standing in a jungle with me,” Bob continued, sitting upright in bed. “Was it a gameworld? A past construct . . .?”

Robert shook his head. “You must have been dreaming.”

Bob stretched and felt through the extra-sensory network of smarticles dusted around the peripheries of the farm. Nothing—no danger, no incursions, not yet.

The dream was fading, the giant creatures sliding into mind-fog.

Robert began feeding Bob a summary of the night’s searches. The most significant news was that the Comet Catcher mission had launched from orbit the night before and in two months would be shepherding the Wormwood comet into Earth orbit. Bob scanned the top level of Robert’s reports, but there were no new answers, no resolutions. It was going to be another day of waiting. Bob detached his visual point-of-view to see where everyone else was, leaving a fresh splinter to finish chatting with Robert.

Snapping out of his body, his viewpoint rose up toward the ceiling while he flipped his visual system to scan for warm bodies. A housebot appeared through the bedroom door with Bob’s clothes for the day. The walls faded and through the transparency the red-outlined images of his friend downstairs in the kitchen appeared, their voices rising into his consciousness as he flitted down to them.

“Sidney *Horowitz*?” laughed Vince as Bob’s virtual presence announced itself, pinging everyone’s networks while he sat his projection down at the head of the breakfast table. Sid and Vince were sitting at the table arguing about something. Willy’s virtual avatar and Brigitte sat across from them, holding hands.

Sid nodded at Bob, acknowledging his arrival, before turning back to Vince. “What’s the big deal? It’s not like it was secret.”

“Horowitz the mastermind scientist!” Vince thumped the table and shook his head. “I just always imagined your surname . . . ah, never mind. It doesn’t have a bad ring to it, on second thought.”

The main living area, attached to the front of the aging farmhouse, was more of the type of thing Bob was used to on Atopia—lignin-based bio-thermoplastics curving smoothly into an oval dome thirty feet high and fifty feet across, climate controlled as phase-shifting particles in the membrane shell regulated heat and molecular flow across its boundary. Sparrows were nesting at its apex, darting around.

“Want some breakfast?” asked Deanna, busy cooking at the stove. She was an old friend of Vince’s, from way back. “I mean, when your body gets down here.” She was still getting used to the way the Atopians flitted around their conscious points-of-view. “And since we have all the masterminds at the table now, could you explain to me what happened to Willy’s body again?”

Bob nodded, and an angular-armed bot on top of the refrigerator opened itself and handed a packet of gro-bacon to Deanna. Communal eating was just one more in a list of things Bob was getting used to. He glanced at Sid, expecting him to answer Deanna, but Sid was already lost to the work again—optimizing the geothermal regulator under the farm, rearranging the drone scheduling, doing systems analysis of the mixture of crops in the surrounding fields. Like a chameleon he melted into

his surroundings; he'd already added cowboy boots to his usual repertoire of ragged jeans and t-shirt. Bob wished he could lose himself so easily.

"It was my fault," Willy's avatar offered, glancing at Brigitte. "I was trying to make money by splintering my mind into hundreds of pieces, trying to be everywhere at once in the stock markets. He looked at the table. "What I was doing was illegal, at least at the time, so I tried to hide it by rerouting my conscious stream through an anonymous connection on Terra Nova."

Deanna turned to Willy from her cooking and crinkled her nose. "But how did that lead to losing yourself, or I mean, your body?"

Willy forced a grin. "At a certain point I was so widely splintered that I lost track of home base, so to speak, and that's when my proxxi took off with my body."

Deanna frowned. "He *stole* it? I thought your proxxi friends were there to protect you." She glanced at the table of proxxi—Hotstuff, Robert, Vicious, and Bardot—sitting around an identical table in a virtual projection next to the gang.

"That," Bob interjected, "is exactly the mystery. We think he was protecting Willy, but we don't know from what."

"From myself," Willy muttered, and Brigitte squeezed his virtual hand.

"And you have family in the Commune?" Deanna asked. "That's why you want to get there?"

Willy nodded. "Yeah, my mother. If I hadn't been so stupid, none of us would be here . . ."

Bob shook his head. "That's not true, Willy, there's bigger things going on."

"And this has to do with that virus that infected the virtual reality systems on Atopia, those fake storms that nearly wrecked the place?"

Vince held up a hand. "Sorry, Deanna, as I said before, we can't say more. And we *really* appreciate your help."

She arched her eyebrows and returned to the stove. "All those things they're saying about you in the mediaworlds, you could stop all that just by coming out—"

Vince cut her off. "We just need to get into the Commune."

Shrugging and smiling, Deanna scooped the bacon and eggs onto a plate.

Bob took a deep breath. Nearly six weeks of waiting, a month and a half of letting the dust settle, and this was where they were—still waiting for approval to enter the Commune. Vince thought it best if they all stayed together. The Commune's agents liked things to move slowly during the process. Bob shook his head. "This is such a waste of time." He looked at Willy and Brigitte. "I mean, we need to get searching, do something. Not just sit here."

Sid looked up, dragging his attention away from his virtual workspaces. "Hey, calm down, we're all a little itchy from switching to the new smarticles, your body is going into withdrawal—"

"What the hell are you doing optimizing the farm's geothermal pumps?" With his phantom hands, Bob stood up and grabbed Sid's virtual workspaces and pulled them into primary reality for everyone to see. "Shouldn't you be trying to find Willy's body?"

"Hey!" Sid grabbed his workspaces back and filed them away. "I *am* searching for Willy, but there's only so much I can do."

Vince reached out and tried to get Bob to sit back down. "Patience, young man, patience. We have a plan, we'll stick to the plan."

Bob shook him off. "And who put you in charge?" Spinning a splinter of his mind into the fields around the farm, he checked a tripped motion sensor, but it was just a stray buffalo calf.

"In charge?" Vince laughed. "Are you kidding? Anyway, isn't all this what Patricia wanted?"

The poly-synthetic sensory interface—*ps*si—product release by Cognix had worked as planned. Over a billion users had joined in the first six weeks since its release, but, like many start-up

operational demands caught up and slowed it down. More important was that it had started to work its world-saving ambitions. Just two months from release and there'd been no new flare-ups in the Weather Wars, and projected birth rate indicators seemed to be dropping.

"Then why the heck did she send us out here?" Bob shot back. The release of pssi was having the effect that Patricia had created the entire Atopian project for—to push humankind on a new path away from material consumption and into a new world of virtual consumption—but was Jimmy still the threat to the program that she'd imagined?

Bob's body, inhabited by his proxxi, finally came walking down the stairs, but Bob decided to keep his own point-of-view fixed in his virtual self. As Bob's body seated itself at the table, Deanna walked over and dropped the plate of fried eggs and toast in front of it, and Robert, Bob's proxxi, started using Bob's body to eat it.

"I'm done waiting." Bob fidgeted and spun his viewpoint out around the farm again, but then in the corner of one eye he saw his body's hand pick up a strip of bacon. "Hey, none of that!" His body was getting fat from all this sitting around, and bacon wasn't going to help.

His proxxi, Robert, looked at Bob from his own eyes and smiled. "No need to yell." He diverted the bacon onto the floor for Deanna's ever-watchful dog.

"Sometimes, I don't know why I put up with you," Bob fumed at his proxxi. It was intended to be rhetorical.

"Ever wonder if I think the same thing?" his proxxi replied without skipping a beat.

*Because you have no choice*, Bob thought but didn't say.

"I think we're all getting a little stir crazy." Deanna wiped her hands on a dishtowel. "The boys need some help loading lumber, and I need to scan a package in town. How about coming in with me?"

"Sure," mumbled Bob. "I'll flit in when you're on your way."

Deanna rolled her eyes. "I meant you in your body, Bob."

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THE PICKUP TRUCK bounced its way along the gravel road under a clear Montana sky. Bob rolled down his window to get some air, letting his viewpoint escape and spin out above the fields.

Golden fields of summer oats, ready for harvest, swayed in the breeze. Between them, the green shoots of the secondary harvests rose up through their ranks with the winter wheat. Thickets of sunflowers dotted the landscape, alongside clumps of sugar beets in leafy-green patches, barley, and more. The traditional dry land farming of the area had turned wetter and warmer in past years, which much of the southernmost plains had returned to the dustbowl of more than a hundred years earlier.

Swarms of ornithopter beebots hovered between the swaying wheat and oats, while crawlers and mulebots scoured the ground. The robotic harvesting ecosystem was powered by both the sun and waste organic matter that the crawlers brought back to the hives where it was combusted for energy. The harvest was in full swing, but it wasn't really farming anymore—at least, not like it used to be.

When Bob came outside, Deanna was kneeling, picking up a handful of earth and staring at the horizon. “I often wonder what my daddy would have thought of all this,” she said.

A generation ago, a strain of genetically modified crops—which grew sulphuric acid in the stems at the end of the seasonal cycle—had been experimented with to eliminate tillage. The trials were abandoned, but not before the gene jumped into the wild, burning away a swath of America before it was stopped. With traditional farming already on its last legs, a Defense-sponsored program to root out the damage and replant the Great Plains with semi-wild perennial crops began, using robotic drones to tend and harvest the multicrop.

“Did your family own the place a long time?” Bob asked as they drove into town. Nothing was in the databases.

“A few generations of farmers. But it's not like when I grew up here. Nobody left, not the old ones, anyway.”

Perennials and robotics had saved the heartland, reducing emissions and erosion, but it had also eliminated the need for humans. Most of the center of America, away from the coasts, became deserted, with herds of reintroduced buffalo again roaming the skeletons of ghost towns strewn across the plains. Food production slid under control of the newly formed Defense Agricultural Division. The Great Plains had become a drone-infested wilderness, and DAD was now feeding the country.

“So were you and Vince, well, were you ever . . .” Bob struggled to find the right words. He had been itching to ask since they got here, but he was trying to resist his constant urges to pry. Everything about coming out here—hiding, staying quiet, confined to one place and one small group of people—ran against the grain of Bob's character.

Deanna laughed. “Yes, we were. A long, long time ago. I met him when my family sent me to MIT to study robotic harvesting, to try to keep up.” She sighed. “And look where that got us.”

DAD had been created at the outbreak of the Weather Wars, when maintaining the food supply became a critical national security function—but it also had a darker purpose. The tens of millions

drones used in food production could be repurposed in the event of an attack, from inside or out. As their pickup truck rumbled its way along the gravel road into town, Sid was covering them, hacking into the sensor systems of the thousands of drones that were recording the truck's passage, erasing the image of Bob sitting next to Deanna.

"When did you last see Vince?"

She laughed. "Before three weeks ago—when you all arrived—I hadn't seen or heard from him in more than thirty years."

"And you just took us in when he showed up on your doorstep?" Bob shook his head. He liked Vince, but the man had a way of taking people for granted that rubbed Bob the wrong way.

Deanna turned to look at Bob. "Vince isn't so bad, you know. Sure, he can be conceited, loves to talk more than get things done—"

"Superior, controlling," Bob continued for her.

"Someone's in a bad mood," laughed Deanna. "Yeah, all those things, and wouldn't you be you were him?" She shook her head. "But you know, he's also incredibly clever, and no matter how shallow he can be sometimes, you'll never find a more dedicated friend. He's not used to dealing with real people."

Now Bob laughed. "That's a problem for everyone from Atopia."

"That's better." Deanna smiled. "And you know what?"

The truck bounced on a rock in the road, knocking Bob into the air. He steadied himself. "What?"

"Ten years after Vince and I last spoke, twenty years ago now—just after PhutureNews started to take off—I received a message from the land registry people that someone bought the deed to my family's farm."

"What do you mean?" Bob had assumed she owned the place.

"When things went bad here, my family lost it after working the land for nearly a hundred years. But someone bought it and put it back into my name." Tears welled in Deanna's eyes. "I never found out who, but I know. That man looks after his own. Taking you in and hiding you was the least he could do."

Bob looked away. He had to admit, Vince was dedicated. He'd spent a fortune already, and he never wavered. Bob turned back and smiled at Deanna. "He is a good guy, sorry, you're right."

Bob released his primary presence again to skim out above the fields. Coming up on the edge of town, they passed abandoned gas stations and grain silos and minimarts. Derelict farmhouses dotted the landscape. Further in the distance, larger, aggressive-looking new developments hugged the foothills. These were massive, a tribute to the new materialism version 2.0 that the explosion of the robotic ecosystem had brought to America. This area of Montana, along the eastern edge of the Rockies stretching up from Yellowstone, was one of the few areas of the interior of America experiencing an influx of new residents, but they weren't here for the farming.

The reason was below, the magmatic upwelling that brought abundant geothermal power.

It was also the reason the Commune was here.



"IT'LL JUST TAKE me a minute to authenticate this package." Deanna hopped out of the truck. "Why don't you follow the bots to the lumber yard? I'll be there in a sec."

Bob sent a splinter to find out what a “lumber yard” meant. Thousands of references opened and he began assimilating the data. He eased down the lever that opened the aging pickup’s door, marveling at the mechanics of it. As he jumped out, the robotic carriers clambered out of the bed of the pickup, bouncing the truck up and down on its suspension.

Deanna watched him, amused. “Just follow the bots. They know where they’re going.” She closed her door.

Embarrassed, Bob closed down the lumber splinter. “Sure.”

The quad-bots, nearly as old and dented as the pickup, waited for a cargo transport to pass on the road before running in their awkwardly graceful trot toward a large building down the other side of the street. With a wave to Deanna, Bob burrowed his hands into the pockets of his hoodie and followed them.

It was nearing midday on Monday, and work crews from the surrounding area were stopping for lunch in the town center. The wide sidewalks, built in an earlier and more optimistic time, felt empty. Trucks and cars competed with robots, legged carriers, and VTOL turbofans for parking spots along the side of the road. Bob scanned the faces he passed, sending splinters to hack and tap into the cameras and sensors nearby to search for anything that might be threatening. Just to be on the safe side, he initiated the identity-theft algorithm from Sid that morphed his ID from one person to the next as he passed them.

At the intersection he stopped and looked up at the traffic signals, the colored lights like ancient semaphores. A knot of workers emptied from a bar at the corner behind him. Bob couldn’t help staring at them, forgetting that he was staring from his physical body and not through an invisible ghost in the wikiworld.

“What you looking at, kid?” said one of the workers, the metal elbow of a robotic prosthetic limb poking through the ripped flannel of his shirt. He took a step forward, wobbling back and forth. Both of his legs had to be mechanical as well.

“Sorry.” Bob looked down and kept walking.

Many of the people here were mandroids of one form or another, Weather War veterans with wrecked bodies replaced by robotics. As ever, rural communities were providing more than their fair share of fodder for the Wars. Bob shook his head, a faraway splinter scanning the scorched earth around the city.

Something triggered an alarm.

Tensing, Bob flooded his body with smarticles, quickening his nervous system, the world slowing down as his mind sped up. Spinning, he shot backwards a few steps, reaching out to grab a young girl just as she tripped and fell out into the street. A transport growled past just inches from them.

The girl gasped.

More threat alarms triggered. Someone grabbed a weapon in the bar behind him. The emotional constructs of the workers nearby spiked into aggression, and a police camera focused on him. The attentional structure of the whole area zeroed in on Bob.

Reacting without thinking, Bob launched a protective wall into the surrounding digital infrastructure, throwing up one hand with a dozen phantoms that he spun around himself and the girl. Doors and windows rolled closed and locked, and the cars and transports passing in the street skidded to a halt. Overhead, turbofans were redirected away from the area. Screeching white noise filled the audio inputs of people nearby, doubling them over in pain, while he scrubbed the local data and video feeds, firewalling off this section of the wikiworld.

“Stop! Stop!” Deanna yelled, running up the sidewalk behind him. “He’s with me.”

Still crouching, Bob looked around. He watched Deanna running toward him in slow motion.

The person in the bar with the weapon was kicking down the door Bob just locked. Bob scooped the girl into his arms, getting ready to bolt, and then Deanna was there. She leaned close and held him back.

“It’s okay, let her go,” Deanna whispered into his ear.

With a crash, the door to the bar shattered open and a man appeared holding a shotgun. The gang of workers had disengaged from the white noise attack. They realized where it had come from and their emotive aggression constructs spiked into directed anger focused on Bob.

“It’s okay, Phil, this is just a mistake!” yelled Deanna, holding a hand up at the man with the shotgun. She repeated to Bob, “Let her go, it’s okay.”

The girl was breathing in quick panicked gasps in Bob’s arms. He released her, and with a crash she pushed him aside and ran toward the man with the shotgun, collapsing into his chest.

“You’re that Baxter kid in the news,” said one of the workers, pointing at Bob. They might be in the country, but they were still connected. Even out here, he couldn’t escape the negative media. “We don’t want no smart-asses around here.”

*Smart-asses.* He meant people using Atopian smarticles. As pssi had spread, so had the pssi-kids. Celebrities in some circles, pssi-kids’ ability to infer thoughts, to seem like they were everywhere at once, was as unnerving as it was amazing.

“What are you doing mixing with them, Deanna?” asked the man with the shotgun.

“That’s my business.” Deanna picked Bob up. “You mind your own.” She whispered again into his ear. “Release everything, right now.”

Trusting more than understanding, Bob unlocked the windows and doors in the area. Close by and into the distance, their mechanisms clicked and snapped through the silence. The engines of cars and transports in the streets started up again.

Above the hum, Bob heard the man with the shotgun. “You get him out of here.”



“NOT EXACTLY THE way to keep a low profile,” Deanna joked as they bumped their way back along the dirt road to the farm. “People aren’t used to pssi-kids in rural Montana.”

Bob sulked in the seat beside her. Reality had a different edge here, rough and wild, and wasn’t something Bob could mold the way he was used to. Even a cursory probe of the social cloud showed that almost nobody in Cut Bank was using pssi yet, even as the rest of the outside world had rushed to adopt it in the past weeks. Deanna was nearly the only one in the city even wearing lens displays.

“They’re afraid of what they don’t understand,” added Deanna when Bob didn’t respond. “All they have to go on are the lies spread in the mediaworlds about you.”

“I saved that girl’s life.”

A phuturecast sweep had tripped Bob’s alarms and predicted her stumbling over a dropped package onto the road, falling right into the path of an oncoming transport.

“I know that and you know that, but they didn’t see it. They just saw you running and grabbing her.” Deanna sighed. “That was her father with the gun. I know you know that now, but still, you should’ve looked a bit deeper yourself.”

He’d been too quick in assessing and reacting to the threat. He’d failed to parse that the man grabbing the gun was the father of the girl he was rescuing. He could have defused the situation, but instead he made it worse. He made it more dangerous.

“You want to try?” asked Deanna after another mile of silence, nodding at the wheel. Montana was one of the few states where it was still legal to manually drive—in the rest of the country on automated driving was allowed on public roads.

That got Bob’s attention, and his mind collapsed inward from the cloud of splinters following the truck. “Yeah, maybe I could get my proxxi to learn it . . .”

“I mean do you want to try it?”

Bob shifted in his seat. “Ah, maybe.” But he wasn’t sure. He spun back out into his splinters.

After another mile of silence slid by, Deanna smiled and looked at Bob. “One moment you can be like gods, and the next, babes in the woods.”

Coming up on the farm, she parked the truck next to the old barn out back. Its gray iron clapboard sagged under the weight of time. Part of its roof had fallen in. The timbers were rotten.

“Endless reality brings an end to morality, that’s what the doomsdayers are saying about Atopia,” Deanna said as they climbed out of the truck. The robot carriers in the back started unloading the lumber.

“Nothing is endless.” Bob’s main subjective, still flying around the fields, brought itself back to the conversation. “If it was endless reality, nothing would mean anything, and that’s not true.”

“It’s not?” Deanna smiled. She was teasing him.

“I’m here for Willy, my friends, and because Patricia asked me.”

“But you didn’t want to be here, did you?”

Bob looked down. The only place he wanted to be—where he burned to be—was next to Nancy back on Atopia, but his friends needed him here. “That’s a hard question.”

Deanna paused and waited for him to look up. “But here you are.”

It was time for Deanna to get to work. They walked around the back of the barn and she unlatched its door, swinging it wide open. Something pinged her incoming circuits. Bob waited.

Holding onto the barn door, Deanna smiled. “Looks like one good turn does deserve another.”

“What happened?”

“The Commune granted Vince and Brigitte entry.” Deanna disappeared into the darkness of the barn.

Bob reviewed the message from the Commune’s Reverend that Deanna sent him. “They won’t let me and Sid in? Just Brigitte and Vince?” He tried to make sense of it. If this was in response to Bob saving that girl in town, then why wasn’t he invited?

A gust of air and dust and hay rocketed out from the barn. Bob squinted and staggered back. The sleek outlines of Deanna’s electric jet hovered into view, the setting sun glinting off its polished curves.

“No idea,” said Deanna, on comms now. The turbofan’s engine ratcheted up several decibels as it rose. “But looks like somebody’s watching out for you.” Her jet jumped up into the sky, receding to a tiny dot before disappearing on its way into New York.

Deanna was a two-sleeper—a tweeper—dosing up on a cocktail of melatonin and synthetics to sleep twice a day on her three-and-a-half hour commute into and out of New York on her personal electric turbofan each morning and night. The tweeper movement claimed it was natural to sleep twice a day and that this was the way humans used to sleep. The way they went about it wasn’t natural though, tweaking their nervous systems with drugs and electronics.

It made no sense to Bob. Why didn’t she just flit into work, using a virtual projection? But that was just one in a long list of things on the “outside” that made no sense. It seemed wasteful, but that was all the energy for her back-and-forth trips was sucked up from the ground, from the geothermal generators, and Bob certainly had no standing to complain about anything seeming unnatural.

Bob stared at the spot where Deanna’s jet had disappeared into the sky.



A THIN LINE of light hung on the horizon, the remains of the setting sun disappearing as stars began spreading across the sky. Willy had always heard how nice it was to walk in the countryside, but the reality was different than flitting in and experiencing it in the wikiworld. Confined in his virtual space now, he was afraid he'd never get to find out. He let his point-of-view spin out around the perimeter, shifting into infrared. In the plains in the far distance, a herd of buffalo scattered at the noise of a passing drone.

Willy was taking an opportunity for some personal time with Brigitte before she went into the Commune. With pssi installed in Brigitte's neural pathways, even if Willy was only a virtual presence here, to Brigitte he still looked and felt as real as if he was there physically. Still, he was a lucky man that she didn't make a big deal of it. They held hands as they walked down a path leading away from the farmhouse.

"Do you really believe all that stuff Patricia told us about Jimmy?" Brigitte asked. "About his taking over Atopia? That he stole Commander Strong's wife's mind?" She paused. "Do you think he killed Patricia?"

Willy didn't hesitate. "She's dead, isn't she? Isn't that enough evidence?"

"Maybe it was natural . . ."

"Nothing about Atopia is natural. People like her don't die anymore." Willy sighed. "Do you really think it was just coincidence?"

"No, I guess I don't." Brigitte carefully stepped between glowing sugar beet leaves. Genetically modified from bioluminescent houseplants, a novelty fifty years before, had jumped into the wild a long time ago. Now patches of the outdoors, grasses and plants and even some trees, glowed as brightly as the stars over their heads. "It's very brave of everyone to come out here."

Willy kicked his foot along the ground. "They're here because of me, because of my mess."

"That's not true."

"I think it's better if my body stays lost. Something worse might happen if we find it."

"Willy, stop that."

Holding hands, they looked up at the faint smudge of the comet being brought into Earth orbit. It was being billed as the spectacle of the millennium. Where Atopia was trying to help the world float into inner virtual spaces, supporters of the Comet Catcher mission were dreaming of humanity jumping outward. Either way was an escape from the crush and clutter that plagued Earth.

"I do know that I'm not the only reason Bob is here," Willy said after a pause. "He likes to please people. It's his only fault, if that could be one." He considered his statement for a second. "That plus his temper."

"I know why Bob's upset." Brigitte stopped to pick one of the glowing leaves at their feet. "I know what it means to be afraid for someone you love." She looked into Willy's eyes. "He's worried about Nancy."

Willy squeezed her hand. "It's not just that. You only know Bob as the stoner surfer, but back when we grew up together, he was the star of the Academy. He was Patricia's favorite. He was a couple with Nancy since they were kids."

"Was it what happened to his brother?"

Willy nodded. "To us it seems a long time ago, but to him . . . When Martin committed suicide, Bob blamed himself. Something happened he never told us about. He's angry at himself, angry at the world, and he hid it under drugs, pushing Nancy away, pushing us all away."

They continued in silence, walking to sit underneath an oak tree on a hill overlooking the

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