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Evolution

by David Lettis

Benji Tomlin squirmed in the seat of the command module as the stiffened foam pressed uncomfortably against his muscles. The seats in the earlier space capsules never felt so painful, but the next generation space shuttle, dubbed the X-40 Alpha Class, didn't require the immense space suits of the past.

“Your muscles going to survive, Old Timer?” Trevor Garish asked with a smug grin.

Benji sighed. He turned to see how Trevor was faring in the seat next to him and noticed that he showed no signs of discomfort. “Just focus on systems checks and leave the flying to the adults.”

Trevor laughed. Nearly thirty years younger than Benji, he looked loose and casual at the controls, flipping on the holographic navigation panels while simultaneously engaging the atmospheric regulator that counterbalanced the pressure on the ship's outer hull generated from the incredible velocities.

“Good seal,” Trevor said, feeling the artificial atmosphere replace the natural oxygen.

“Engaging the Whistler,” Benji said in return.

The Whistler was the ship’s dark energy drive, named after Dr. Antawn Whistler who fifteen years earlier perfected the calculations to harness the once elusive and misunderstood energy source. Ironically, the system also made a soft whistle when activated.

As the whistle filled the cabin, both Benji and Trevor took a moment to consider the occasion. This was to be the first flight of the X-40 that utilized Whistler thrusters prior to landing on an object in space. The easiest test—both in terms of distance and difficulty—happened to be the moon, which the Whistler would allow them to reach in only a matter of hours. Moon landings had become common since the commercial space travel industry got off the ground in the twenties, but this particular lunar landing would happen entirely by autopilot, powered by a fully autonomous quantum system with artificial intelligence. They affectionately dubbed the system after Benji’s boyhood crush, Debbie Gibson, not that Trevor understood the reference.

Benji found himself moderately excited about the opportunity. He figured this would be his final mission to space and he could ride off into the sunset having tested the first functional dark energy system to get to the moon. It also meant he could retire before NASA made the shift to the negative energy drive. The dark energy drive allowed a ship to accelerate to nearly the speed-of-light while traveling along the curvature of space, but the negative energy drive was built to enable faster-than-light space travel by expanding space behind the ship and shrinking space in front of it. Essentially, as Benji liked to tell people, it created a Big Bang and the ship would get thrown out into the Universe. He was about as excited to test that system as he was about sitting on the epically uncomfortable seats of the X-40.

“Houston, check one two, check one two, how me?” Trevor said.

“Roger, Juniper, loud and clear,” Roger Arles said through the radio. “For the record, we are embarking on the maiden voyage of the space shuttle, Juniper. Your mission, gentlemen, is to engage thrusters to put Juniper into Earth’s orbit, break orbit through Whistler thrust, successfully enter the moon’s orbit one hour and forty-two minutes later, land on the moon, and then return to Earth orbit. If successful, it will be the fastest flight to and from the moon by an order of magnitude. And then, God willing, Benji will find it in his heart to retire already.”

While Trevor laughed, Benji responded by saying, “Negative on the transmission, Houston, please head over to the flight deck and relay via megaphone.”

Trevor and Benji looked at each other and their demeanor shifted from humor to sincerity. “In all seriousness,” Trevor said, “we all know it should be Martha sitting here. How’s her new arm?”

“You remember your first class with me? What’d I tell you?”

“Space is big, cold, and hard. Don’t make it harder by being stupid.”

“Employing one-armed crewmembers is kind of stupid.”

“Wouldn’t be the stupidest thing we’ve done.” Trevor laughed again. “All jokes aside, though, it’s an honor to be here with you, even if you are really old.”

“You deserve it. Once I get this piece of junk off the ground, I’m calling it quits, just between you and me.”

“No! Really?”

Benji turned and looked in the back of the command module. His space suit was secured against the wall next to RAT, the Robot for Artificial Transference. RAT was currently cold and still, its blank glass face as lifeless as the chair upon which it sat. Benji turned back to Trevor.

“It’s not the same without Martha. Besides, I don’t recognize this world anymore.”

Trevor nodded, smirked, and leaned his head back to let the seat’s neural processors slide into his neck and connect to the adaptor that had been implanted in his brain stem. His smirk faded as he closed his eyes and seemed to slip into a blissful sleep.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Trevor said. The voice did not come from Trevor’s body, but through the computerized optics of RAT. “All you old timers always push back against technology. First it was coding, then augmented reality, then A.I., and now transference. If you just embrace it, you could be here a long time.”

Benji once again turned around and looked at RAT, who was now sitting upright and tapping each of its fingers individually against its thumbs to test its motor controls. Red eyes flashed through the glass face, which had shifted from an opaque darkness to a light transparency. Benji long ago accepted the red eyes weren’t as nefarious as they looked, but they creeped him out nonetheless. RAT rolled its rotator cuffs and moved its head from left to right and then up and down. Benji always thought the voice sounded like Trevor, but muffled, as though Trevor was stuck in a computer and shouting for someone to come save him.

“Here I am annoyed my life is in its twilight, and you just willingly transfer yours to a hunk of metal. Seriously, don’t get comfortable in there. Now come on out and let’s get this thing airborne.”

Trevor suddenly took a deep breath as his consciousness came back to his human body. He smiled and looked at Benji like a kid who had just ridden a roller coaster—or worse, Benji thought, someone who had discovered a new drug and wanted more.

“Houston,” Benji said into the radio, “Trevor’s playing with his toys and not paying attention. Permission to fly solo.”

“Negative, Juniper,” Roger said. “And his toys are expensive, so don’t break them.”

“You’re stuck with me, Old Timer. Sorry.”

Benji sighed and proceeded with his mission. “The time is thirteen hundred hours, May fourth, 2038. Firing thrusters.” With both of his thumbs, he flicked the glass cases off of his joy sticks and pushed the two red buttons underneath. The ship began to rumble and then slowly lifted and hovered above the ground. He smiled. It felt even smoother than in the simulator. “Let’s go to the moon.”

The X-40 had no windows, but when Trevor initiated the ship’s translucence, the immense gray moon overwhelmed the blackness of space. In 2026, Benji had been the first person to step foot on the moon since the Apollo mission, traveling via a private space agency. He had returned four times since, so the sensation of viewing it up close had lost its luster. This time, the beauty of the visit rested in Trevor’s face, which was awe-struck by the lifechanging event.

“Incredible,” Trevor said as the moon shifted from an abstract image in the sky to a living body of dust and craters.

“Yeah, not quite the same in virtual reality.”

Trevor didn’t respond. He shook himself out of the captivation. “Wow.” It was all he could muster. He disengaged the translucence and then input the coordinates for their pending landing on the holographic navigation screen in front of him. “Let’s bring her down.”

“Yes, Sir,” Benji replied. “Houston, please acknowledge, we are breaking orbit and beginning descent to lunar surface.”

“Acknowledged, Juniper, cleared for descent.”

“Coordinates locked,” Trevor said.

“Shifting to auto.”

“I know that must be hard for you.”

“Yes, to say the least. At least the Dragon capsules required some flying. Alright,” Benji said as he sighed, “let’s see what’s up this lady’s skirt.”

“How eloquent of you. You know, overt chauvinism just makes you seem old.”

“Whatever you say, Sweetheart.”

Trevor retorted, but Benji didn’t hear. By disengaging pilot controls, he handed their lives to the X-40; he handed their lives to Debbie Gibson.

“Thanks, Benji,” an automated female voice said. Earlier iterations were male, and then robotic, but the female voice created a calming influence, or so NASA told them. “I’ve been waiting to get behind the wheel. I promise a smooth ride.”

“Thanks, Debbie,” Benji said.

“She’s had a crush on you for a long time,” Trevor replied with a grin.

Benji rolled his eyes. “You’d think it’d be you, living in a robot most your life.”

“One would think. She must have a daddy complex.”

Benji shook his head as they felt the X-40 slow to a stop and begin spinning like a top. The thrusters began to fire on the aft side of the ship, which flipped it so the top of the rounded shell faced the moon. All the thrusters then fired at once, sending Trevor and Benji careening head first toward the surface. Once the ship felt the pull of the lunar gravity, Debbie cut the thrusters and allowed the ship to freefall. The shell of the X-40 and the seat’s mechanics were designed to prevent spinal contraction from when Debbie re-fired the thrusters, but the freefall

was much less violent than Benji had experienced on his previous moon landings thanks to upgrades in the hull design.

“All right, Debbie, we’re approaching ten thousand feet,” Benji said. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

“Roger, Benji,” Debbie said in an oddly soothing voice. “You’ll feel a little pressure. I can’t help that.”

Trevor and Benji looked at each other as best they could and then mentally braced themselves. They heard the thrusters begin to burn, but the pressure was evenly distributed and the ship sped faster toward the surface. More weight was distributed to Benji’s hindquarters as the acceleration pushed against his mass.

“Debbie, thrusters are misfiring,” Trevor shouted. “Debbie, God damn it, slow us down! Cut thrusters on port!”

Debbie did as commanded and shut off half the thrusters, but it caused the X-40 to spin uncontrollably end over end. The various metal objects that had been tied down began to rattle and the emergency alarm blared out warnings, flashing a red light across the module.

“Debbie, straighten us out!” Benji said.

“Roger, Benji, initiating dynamic vector controls.” Debbie began firing thrusters from all sides to no avail.

“Abort, Debbie! Abort mission!”

Trevor and Benji were pinned against their seats, but they both pried themselves off and leaned forward to try and push the red abort button. They were twisted within their support mechanisms, their arms outstretched as long as possible. Trevor, slightly taller was able to reach the button first and pushed. All thrusters once again fired and the X-40 stopped spinning almost

immediately. The sudden jerk of ship as it evened out its flight path snapped both men back into their seats, which cracked their twisted spines like hoses that had their water supply cut off. Benji immediately went motionless, his widened eyes screaming for help even though his mouth couldn't respond to his body's commands. He continued to feel the X-40 pull away from the moon. Once his eyes found Trevor—sitting motionless and silently screaming for help—he blacked out. The last thing he heard was Debbie as she said, “See, I told you it would be a smooth flight.”

When Benji awoke, the world seemed fuzzy. Something cold gripped his hand and he felt a pillow under his head and sheets over his body, but the sensations were literally skin deep. His muscles weren't tense or relaxed, they felt hollow. He tried to blink, but his eyelids didn't work; they didn't need moisture, it was merely a habit to want to blink.

He turned his head and saw his wife sitting next to him. She smiled and said, “Hiii, Spaceman. There you are.”

The words first echoed in Benji's ears and then faded and then echoed again, like a DJ slowly spinning a record back and forth.

“It's okay,” Martha said. “They said it'll take a while.”

“Martha?” Benji muttered, contorting his mouth to form words. His cheeks felt stiff, his mouth as though it had never operated before.

“Yep, I'm here.”

Benji smiled, but he could actually feel the tendons along the outside of his eye-sockets pulling his lips up.

“Hey, Spacewoman.”

Benji assumed his eyes were still adjusting because Martha looked older, with new wrinkles on the sides of her face. He began to scan down Martha’s body until he saw her arm. Where she once had an artificial arm attached directly above the elbow, she now had a robotic limb. She let go of Benji’s hand and raised her metallic appendage, wiggling her fingers at him as though they were natural phalanges.

Benji’s eyes widened. “What the hell is that?” The movement of his mouth began to feel more natural, less forced.

“It’s my new arm.”

“When... When did you get that?” When she didn’t respond, he asked, “How long have I been out?”

Her smile faded. She instead made the same face as when she needed to console Benji after his first application to NASA was denied, and then again when their son passed away from cancer at age five while Benji was at the Space Station.

“Ten years, Spaceman. It’s been ten years.”

The words didn’t register in his brain. Ten years. What did that even mean?

“I’ve been in a coma for ten years?”

“No, Benji, not exactly. They thought having me here would help soften the blow.”

Benji stared at her. He tried to gulp because his brain told him he should gulp, but he didn’t, he couldn’t. Martha’s mechanical hand reached down and once again clutched Benji’s hand. She raised it so he could see it. His hand wasn’t mechanical, but it also wasn’t human. It looked synthetic, like a wax sculpture at Madam Tussauds.

“What happened to my hand?” he asked.

“Not your hand, Benji, your body. It’s called Active Intelligence. You broke your spine when the X-40’s central computer lost vector control. You were going to die, so...” She stopped and once again made her consoling face.

“So what?”

“So you had signed your life away to NASA. When the doctors determined that you weren’t going to wake up, they placed you into an experimental program.”

“Active intelligence.”

“A.I. The new A.I.”

“What happened to me?”

“Your brain was removed and inserted into a synthetic body. This morning they brought you out of a medically induced coma.”

Benji’s brain began to hyperventilate, but his body didn’t respond. He felt trapped, like he was inside a being that wasn’t him. “What’s happening? What’s happening?”

“Hey,” Martha said softly. She stood up and leaned over him. “Hey, you have to relax.”

His eyes shot around the room. How could he get out of this nightmare? Then Martha leaned down and kissed his synthetic lips. His brain comprehended the feeling, but the synthetic neurons exploded with sensation, sending orgasmic vibrations through his body. When she pulled away, he took a deep breath and could feel the air being pulled into his body even though his chest didn’t rise.

The overwhelming sensation brought tears to his eyes. When he wiped them away, he found a milky white substance on his fingertips.

“It’s a nutrient-rich sustenance fluid for your brain,” Martha said. She had clearly been practicing saying that because she said it without a hint of irony. It was normal.

“I don’t want this,” Benji said. He thought about it some more. “What if I don’t want this? Who else has had this procedure? Am I the only one?”

“You’re the success story. But, now that they have the procedure down, people are lining up. Insurance companies are even considering adding it to their plans!”

“Am I in a nightmare?”

“No. You’re here. You’re alive.”

“But it’s not me.”

As he said that, the door opened and a man in a wheel chair rolled himself into the room. He had a grin on his face and appeared, at least to Benji, to be entirely human. It was Trevor.

“Hey, Old Timer. They told me you’d be awake.”

Benji looked him up and down. Like Martha, he showed signs of aging, but it was still Trevor. “They didn’t put you in a robotic prison?”

Trevor laughed and shook his head at Martha. “So cynical. The man cheats death and he says he’s in prison.”

“I’m not alive.”

“You are!” Trevor rolled himself closer. “It’s your brain. It’s you. Martha has a robotic arm. Is she any less human to you?”

“You don’t seem to have any changes.”

“There was no need. The accident nearly killed you. Me? It just took my legs. But, I don’t need my legs.” He pointed to the back of his head. “Transference has gotten very advanced.”

“This is barbaric. This isn’t natural. They should have let me die.”

Trevor's smile faded. "This is natural. This is evolution. And you and I have some unfinished business."

"You ready for this, Old Timer?"

Benji turned to look at the RAT. The Robots for Artificial Transference had been updated over the past thirteen years and were molded into the likeness of their operator using the same synthetic material that made up Benji's Active Intelligence Body. This RAT looked like Trevor, if Trevor were one of the old mannequins that Benji used to see at department stores.

"You look ridiculous," Benji said.

"And you're becoming slightly predictable. Not to mention," Trevor switched to a whisper, "have you looked in a mirror lately?"

Benji sighed. He didn't take in any oxygen, but one of the demands he made during his beta testing of the body was to enable features that mimicked real motion. His chest would expand every few seconds and a deep breath would trigger an influx of oxygen to the brain, even though the oxygen was produced and provided by the body's internal oxygenator.

When Benji didn't answer, Trevor said, "But, seriously, are you ready for this?"

"Yes. Debbie, remove plasma guard."

They both watched as the red shimmering bubble around them that created a shield extending from the bottom of the ship to the round detraction platform dissipated, leaving them in the vacuum of space.

"Bet you never thought you'd be stepping foot out there again," Trevor said.

"Am I?"

Benji commanded his leg to step off the platform and watched the moon dust mold to his foot. Even though he was now inside the shell of a synthetic body, he still had to wear a space suit to protect the living tissue of his brain. The space suits of 2052 were much sleeker than the Apollo era of the 1960s and came complete with gravity boots that adjusted to the environment. The heightened senses of the synthetic body allowed Benji to feel the lack of pull from the lunar surface and the boots adapting to keep him grounded, and he could feel the neurons connecting up his body to tell his brain what sensation to register.

“Come on, say it,” Roger Arles said in his ear. “We want to hear it.”

“That’s one small step for synthetic man,” Benji said on command. He turned and looked at Trevor’s RAT, which was capable of operating in the lunar environment without a space suit. As the RAT stepped off, Benji grinned. “And one giant leap for pussies who won’t leave the space ship.”

“Watch the language, Juniper, people are listening,” Roger said. “But, damn good to have you back up there. I knew you’d miss it.”

“Ah, yes, walking on the moon isn’t enough. Now people are only interested when our abominations can do it for us.”

“I suppose your predictability is somewhat comforting,” Trevor laughed. “Besides, I don’t know what you’re talking about. It’s your brain in there. I’m powering this RAT.”

“Don’t confuse our consciousness with life, young Padawan.”

“Oh how I love when you get philosophical. And what is life, oh wise and powerful?”

“I hate to interrupt you two lovebirds,” Debbie Gibson said, “but the Chinese COMSAT should be directly overhead in ten seconds. Synch interference detection is part of your mission.”

“Yes, yes,” Trevor began, before his left arm began twitching and he repeatedly said, “yes, yes, yes, yes.”

“Houston, suspicion confirmed,” Benji said. “Satellite interference disturbs the RAT uplink.”

“Roger, Juniper, continue observation.”

Benji watched as the RAT suddenly went lifeless and slouched its shoulders. A few seconds later, the RAT regained consciousness.

“There, see, no big deal. Now let’s go check out why pump nineteen is no longer digging up Helium.”

“Houston, RAT is back online and ready to rock. Still doesn’t make me very comfortable that China is sending satellites over Sector eight.”

“Roger, Juniper, just get the pump back online.”

Benji and Trevor continued to move away from the X-40, which looked like a black circular silhouette against the dark sky.

“You seem tense, what’s up,” Trevor asked as they slowly treaded across the lunar soil.

“Martha’s going through with the surgery. Ocular Implants. They say it’ll allow her to stay in her body longer.”

Trevor laughed. “No robot sex for you two.”

At first Benji ignored the comment, but then a thought occurred to him. “Well actually, the implants allow her to connect to my neural network during stasis.”

He looked at Trevor sheepishly to which Trevor responded, “You dog.”

“What does it feel like?” Martha asked.

“It feels like I’m sitting here talking to you,” Benji replied.

“Are you happy?”

“I’m most happy here. I’m on a beach right now, I’m watching the waves and you’re talking to me. What does it look like for you?”

“It’s a screen. I’m talking to a screen.”

“Sorry. I’m sorry. You know I’m stuck here while they transfer me to another body. Come join me. I just sent you the coordinates.”

“Okay.”

Martha closed her eyes and tapped a button behind her ear to accept the coordinates and she was transported to the beach with her husband. She was younger in her transference. Her skin was tighter and she wore a yellow bikini.

“God you’re beautiful,” Benji said, taking her hand. “You’ve always been so beautiful.”

“Always the charmer.”

“So how does it feel to know that someone is watching and listening to everything you say, every thought you have?”

Martha smirked. “You’ve been gone too long. There’s no difference in here from out there.”

Benji closed his eyes and felt the ocean breeze across his face. “Well, it’s kind of nice in here.”

“It is. Have they filled you in on your new body?”

Benji sighed, having already taken the time to accept that his new body would be a complete upload to an artificial brain repository. “Yes.”

Martha waited for him to express his feelings. When he didn't, she said, "You'll be fully transferred from organic brain matter. Your consciousness will be uploaded into a synthetic neural processor. It'll be you, just no longer organic."

Benji laughed. "Sounds like it'll be just like me."

"Your body will be permanent. It's a new material, made of..."

"Let me guess, some sort of synthetic?"

"Don't be difficult. It's a new material. It mimics life. DNA-based, combined with a new synthetic, but responds to stimuli and works with the brain."

"The brain?"

"You know what I mean. There's a lot of advantages to moving on from a robotic brain. You won't age and you'll be enhanced."

"Like pat my head and rub my belly at the same time?"

"To be fair, you never could do that."

"I suppose my brain will be sent to some lab for research."

"Of course it will. There's a lot you can teach people. Plus, they'll want to run comparisons to see if your consciousness remains..."

"Me?" Benji barely even understood what that word meant anymore. He stood and began to walk along the sand. He could feel it slide through his toes before it was washed away from the warm water as it flowed up the beach and back to the ocean.

"So that's it. I'll be a synthetic man."

Martha rose to join him and they held hands as they strolled along the beach.

"Importantly, you'll be a man. They even say your *parts* will work as expected."

Benji looked at her. "What good will that do?"

“Well, they can implant DNA-based semen. In theory, you could procreate from a synthetic body.”

Benji laughed again. Nothing seemed too outrageous to believe at this point, but synthetic procreation pushed the limit.

“Who exactly would I procreate with?”

“Me.”

Benji stopped. He clasped Martha’s hand tighter and turned her to look in her eye.

“What does that mean?”

“It means I’m joining you. My body isn’t responding to the Ocular Implants. They think maybe it’s an age thing. Younger bodies have had more success. So I’m going to join you. Together. We’ll enter the next phase of our lives together.”

“Martha, you can’t do this. I don’t want this for you. This isn’t life. This isn’t a phase of life.”

“It is, Benji! Don’t you see? We are making the next step in evolution. This *is* life. It’s our life. Our life together.”

Benji reached up and grasped her head. Her hair was smooth and he could feel the contours of her skull. She was perfect, even though she wasn’t really there.

2078. How the world had changed. When Benji first arrived to Mars seven years ago, the colony resided in the temporary habitats sent years in advance. The habitats, which were larger versions of the X-40 space shuttles, began generating water and fuel and eventually became connecting points for the plasma bubble. Outside the plasma-contained atmosphere were

twenty-two domed-structures made of twelve-inch thick ballistic plastic and linked by underground hallways.

Humans—or any traditional lifeform—could not survive the environment. The plasma gradually eliminated the artificial environment that mimicked Earth's and allowed the Mars environment to seep in. The mixed Martian and Earth air allowed the synthetic bodies to adapt.

The synthetic bodies were grown from an individual's stem cells, creating a DNA-based skin blended with a manufactured protein that both protected the internal "organs" of the body and adapted to the environment. (Benji got a kick out of the fact the only organic material resided in his skin and in his testicular cavity. Good old NASA figured if the skin's DNA could adapt, maybe semen could as well and equipped men and women with reproductive body parts.) NASA constructed the body to run much like a traditional human, powered by a synthetic heart, affectionately dubbed a PASE maker, short for Pulsating Amino Stimulant Energy.

"Hey, Old Timer," Trevor said, chiming in from Earth.

A picture of Trevor emerged in front of Benji, a projection that only he could see. "Audio," he said, flicking the image away from view and once again letting the Mars landscape fill his sights.

"Audio?" Trevor quipped. "Audio? Don't pretend you don't miss me and my smiling face."

"I was just thinking how much I enjoy the solitude up here."

"You mean the solitude of Mayflower getting its five-hundredth resident?"

Benji flicked Trevor's image back into his sight. "You're finally making the trip?"

Trevor smiled deviously. "My body's finally ready. They're uploading me tonight."

"You're not sending this one back like the others?"

“Nope! Face is exactly how I envisioned myself when I was twenty-four. Although I had them give me a bigger chin.”

Benji shook his head and flipped Trevor back into the background. “Finally getting out of the machine, huh? How long’s it been?”

“Five glorious years. You should have seen what I saw, Old Timer. Mining asteroids is like surfing the waves of space. Total freedom. Why would I ever want to leave this place?”

“You say that without a hint of irony. Mentally locked in a computer and running RATs on asteroids is not total freedom.”

“But being mentally locked in a synthetic body is?” Trevor asked. Benji sensed the sarcasm.

“I’ve accepted my fate.” Benji sighed. “When do you get out here?”

“Three weeks. Still need to transfer to the new body and make sure I’m all there, so to speak.”

“Roger. Well you better brush up on your Martian,” Benji said, referring to the international language created on Mars. “You’re the only person I still speak English to.”

Trevor appeared in Benji’s sights again with his fingers aligned like Captain Spock from the century-old television show. “Live long and prosper.” He signed off before Benji could properly respond.

Benji laughed and sighed again and then approached the edge of the Mayflower. He moved his feet around the Martian soil and looked at the sky through the green-tinted shell of the plasma. “Debbie, open Egress Pod Four.”

“Ay ay, Captain Tomlin,” Debbie said. As the founding member of Mayflower, Benji was afforded the right to insist Debbie assume the persona of the city’s central computer.

The metal door slid open and Benji stepped into the pressure chamber. When the door slid back down, he could hear the air hiss and feel it begin to switch from the partial Martian environment to entirely Martian. His skin, covered only by a thin NASA jacket, sensed the freezing temperature and his chest cavity registered the complete lack of oxygen, but his body adjusted and immediately adapted, making him feel entirely normal. The outer door slid open and Benji stepped out in the red dust of Mars, exposed to the elements and feeling no different than taking a stroll through a park on Earth. He remembered training in the Arizona and Utah deserts amid the red rock formations back when he was entirely human. This didn't feel much different. As he began walking, the coarse soil crunched under his boots and gave way to leave imprints. He could have taken the underground tunnels as many of the newcomers do, but he preferred to be outside.

Benji walked about two hundred yards to the nearest greenhouse structure, which was approximately the size of a football field. The total footprint of the twenty-two greenhouses was roughly as large as Mayflower's main city. Martha had signaled to him that she was in number one, where she grew varieties of lettuce, peas, and potatoes. She had just finished overseeing the planting of a stone fruit orchard in twenty-two. People like Benji and Martha didn't actually have to eat, but about half of Mayflower were still human and wealthy visitors frequented the facility for two- to three-week stints. The mission of Mayflower was not human survival, though, so humans had special facilities or required space suits.

When he arrived, Benji manually opened the outer door and then allowed the automatic pressure chamber to institute full Earth atmosphere. His skin again adjusted and then he opened the inner door and stepped into the humid air of the green house. Debbie Gibson had no oversight over the green houses. They were fully autonomous from the Mayflower central

computer, the thinking being that if the computer crashed, the residents could survive, but it would take years to regrow the crops.

When Benji stepped around the table of spinach, Martha was waiting for him entirely in the nude. Martha had requested a replica of her twenty-six-year-old body, when she was young and fit and flying F-35s for the Air Force. It was her age when she first met Benji. Seeing her in the nude made Benji's senses go into overdrive.

Stimulation experienced. Continue: Yes or No? The message flashed in his eyes and he immediately motioned **Yes**.

"Hey, Stud," Martha said. Martha had embraced her body and her existence as a consciousness within a synthetic body. "Let's make a baby."

Nine months later, Benji held his child in his arms while Martha watched with a loving smile. Benji brought the child to his nose and smelled the scent of the newborn. He closed his eyes and felt the joy and nerves of fatherhood run through his veins.

"How does it feel to have the first natural-born child on Mars?" Martha asked.

He looked up and saw her smiling at him. Once they inseminated the egg, NASA allowed it to fertilize for two months before removing it from Martha's artificial womb and allowing it to grow in an external incubator.

"We have a child," he responded.

"We have a child!" If Martha could cry, she would have produced waterworks.

"So she'll be able to survive Mars?"

“Her skin is just like yours,” the doctor—a human on a six-month deployment—said. “We’ll insert an O2-generator and ocular implants next month. You should be able to take her everywhere. This one very well could live forever.”

“You hear that, Benji?” Martha asked. “We created a Martian.”

“What if she gets cancer?” Benji asked.

Martha placed a hand on his shoulder. “Then we’ll fix her.”

Benji began to nod. “We’ll fix her. Our Martian. A new species.” He paused. “What does this mean?”

“It means you’re a father. It means I’m a mother. It means we’re parents.”

Benji could accept that logic, even though he knew in the back of his mind that it was wrong. They couldn’t be parents because they weren’t real, but the love he felt couldn’t be denied. This was his daughter. He brought her head up to his lips and kissed her.

A few days later they brought their daughter to their one room abode. Benji bounced the baby up and down exactly how Debbie recommended while he fed her from a bottle, and then he placed her in her crib as she dosed off. Benji and Martha looked down at her with a pride and joy that only parents can feel for their child. When they determined she was satisfactorily asleep, Martha caressed Benji’s face with her hand and then moved in and hugged him, resting her head on his shoulder. Benji dropped his chin against her cheek and closed his eyes. It was perfect.

When they separated, they both sat in their chairs, but continued to hold hands.

“I love you,” Martha said.

“I love you, too,” Benji replied. “I love you more than anything. This is perfect.”

An image appeared in Benji’s eyes: **Power off for rejuvenation: Yes or No?**

He selected **Yes** and powered off.