

PART I

We don't march toward death, it marches toward us
as a summer thunderstorm came slowly across
the lake long ago. See the lightning of mortality dance,
the black clouds whirling as if a million crows.

—Jim Harrison, *Songs of Unreason*

Late spring or early summer

10151 A.U.C.T. +/- 18.583 years (estimated)

He crawls up into the daylight, half-seasick and whirling in his mind. Dizzy, brain-fogged, and bone-chilled. Throat and esophagus sandpapered raw from intubation, forehead bruised, muscles stiff and aching, atrophied body pitifully weak and alien-feeling. His grip on consciousness itself feels brittle, as if he's holding on by the slightest branch and at any moment that branch might snap, sending him tumbling backward into the dark.

He finds a water source, a tiny freshwater brook seeping down the hillside through a forest of massive hardwoods and lichen-plastered granite boulders. Lying on his belly on a bed of moss, he tries to gulp some of the tea-colored water but can't keep it down. He scoops another cold handful, uses his lips like a straw to suck a few ounces into his mouth. Holds it there. Swishes it gently. Swallows it slowly. Vomits.

An hour with his chin resting on the mud at the edge of the brook and he tries again. This time it doesn't come back up. Electrical impulses twitch in his aching limbs. His nerve endings tingle as they gradually return to life.

Several more hours sitting and crawling among the ferns, experimenting with different muscle groups, and he feels ready to try a little protein. He finds a snail crossing an algae-slick stone at the bottom of the brook. Has no jackknife, no toothpick, nothing but the nylon-blend jumpsuit on his body, so he uses his primate mouth, suctioning the shell lip and closing his front teeth gently around the rubbery foot. He draws the shell away steadily, careful not to bite too hard, and the stretched creature finally breaks off.

He chews it well. Swallows it, bracing for his gut's reaction. It stays down.

So long away. Liminal memories of an endless whirling passage through total darkness. The whole arc of the species passing through his mind like a slideshow in a conference room in some long crumbled city. The dawn of consciousness. A blurry snapshot of the beckoning savannah through parted branches. Horses and aurochs painted on a cave wall. The Bering land bridge. New settlements at Abu Hureyra and Jericho. The killing at spearpoint of the planet's last saber-toothed cat. Before

anyone had a chance to question what it might mean, Homo sapiens had traded in its habitual nomadism for planting and harvesting, hoarding and trade. The domestication of cattle. The invention of alphabets and iron smelting—because there was no stopping progress. The rise of the city states: Minoans, Sumerians, Egyptians, Olmecs. Gilgamesh and Imhotep, the Great Pyramid and Stonehenge, Solomon and Buddha. Slideshow running faster now: Lao-Tse, Alexander the Great, Rome and Teotihuacán, Jesus and Muhammad, the Tang Dynasty, Leif Eriksson, Genghis Khan. The whole sordid history of ignorance and savagery, of fumbling in the darkness with occasional lunges toward the light. Maimonides and Alfonso el Sabio, da Vinci and Shakespeare, Zheng He and Isaac Newton. Philosophy and learning, art and exploration, advances in science and medicine, the industrial revolution and the technological revolution, but always the darkness came flooding back. Plague and famine, slavery and prostitution, greed and demagoguery. Wars of conquest, of tribalism and religion and race. The senseless slaughter of crusades and jihads, holocausts and ethnic cleansings and the utter banality of evil.

Soon it was his own century, the twenty-first. A few flickers of hope, followed by pandemic and renewed violence and accelerating climatological disruption. Bills coming due for those heady decades of optimism and affluence and devil-may-care consumption built on fossil fuels. Deadly weather, raging wildfires, melting icecaps, acidifying oceans. Drought and famine, dislocation and war, fracturing societies, mushrooming authoritarianism. The microbial plagues returned, lethal and unstoppable. Homo sapiens losing its grip. Falling backward into the abyss.

Within a generation, no human voice could be heard across the 197-million-square-mile surface of the planet. No radio, no television, no internet. A few beacon signals persisted from orbiting satellites, but in a moment those signals too would flicker and die out, and the physical remains of human civilization would enter a rapid process of decay. Buildings sparked by lightning strikes, colonized by mold and termites, invaded by water blowing in through broken windows and collapsing roofs. Materials cracking, rusting, rotting, corroding. Exposed plastic bags degrade in fifty years, aluminum in a few centuries more. Glass bottles gone in half a millennium, Styrofoam perhaps a millennium or two. Within five centuries most towns and cities had been swallowed up by forests, dunes, flooding river deltas. Rising oceans eating back their minerals from the rusting I-beams and the crumbling foundations. Alluvial plains forming where cities used to be, leaf litter and soil deposition burying cracked PVC pipes, dead keyboards and LCD screens, the buckled asphalt of roads and parking lots.

A few thousand years more and a sentient observer would be hard-pressed to discover any

evidence at all of humanity's brief flourish on the land masses of Earth.

Down below the surface, however, in a carefully prepared limestone cavern, at least one human being had persisted. Twitching and shuddering, bruised by the bands and harnesses that held him in place, conscious of nothing but a vague ache in his limbs as his atrophied body whirled through the darkness like a sleeping customer on a nightmarish, never-ending carnival ride.

Suddenly his oxygen supply had been cut off, and he'd been choking.

His eyes had opened but there was nothing to see in the blackness. A contraction in his gut, then intense pain spreading up through his chest and throat like a powerful fist pulling his vital organs out through his gullet. *It's only the tubes retracting*, a long-unused inner voice reassured him.

Foul stomach acid surged up behind them, burning his throat, and he felt an overwhelming need to throw up even though he couldn't because his stomach had been vacuumed empty. The sphere that had contained him all this time opened slowly, a mechanized Easter egg. The harness released and he dropped in the darkness, his forehead hitting the stone floor with a sharp crack.

The pain accompanying the slow revival of his nervous system had been nearly unbearable. Much worse, though, was the return of specific memory. He could still feel the tender impression of Natalie's lips on his cheek from that one final kiss, awkward because of the tubes running out both corners of his mouth. She'd squeezed his hand and backed away, smiling encouragement, the tears in her eyes glimmering in the bright LED work lights. Then, turning away to signal another member of the team, she'd stepped out of his line of vision forever. The hydraulic closing mechanism had kicked in, the wedge of the visible world narrowing inexorably to a single horizontal line of bright white light: his final glimpse of the twenty-first century. With a hydraulic sigh the vacuum seal had closed, leaving him alone in the darkness for another moment or two before the drugs had kicked in and he'd lost consciousness.

Then he'd found himself awake again, face down on the cool stone, the air filling his slowly recovering lungs moist and redolent of earth and limestone. Natural, unrecycled air, bracingly fresh in his nostrils. Eventually he'd been able to sit up, with his knees hugged in and his head resting on his clasped forearms. After a long time in this position—perhaps another half revolution of the planet—he'd gathered the strength to try his feet. He'd swayed in place, slowly gaining balance. Shuffled forward through the darkness in the direction of his ancient memory of the cave exit.

After some fumbling and a few false turns he'd spotted a beam of natural light slanting in through

the access tunnel. Incrementally, he'd dragged himself up through the slanted chimney of rock, laboring and groaning until his elbows finally rested at the edge of the cave mouth, a small bright triangle of sunlight crosshatched by an unruly mat of roots and vines and dead leaves.

It was the sunlight and the vegetation of the deep future, where he will now pass whatever remaining months or years of life fate has granted him.

He spends two nights and one full day shivering in the open air on his bed of moss, drifting in and out of sleep, sipping the tea-colored water, choking down the occasional snail or grub to build his strength. On the second morning, he finds a dead branch to lean on and hobbles off into the forest.

He has a protocol to follow, and the idea of taking steps in a certain direction, of putting things in motion for a specific purpose, is comforting.

The first item is to find a clearing with a wide enough view of the skies. This accomplished, he is stunned if not exactly surprised to find his eye catching on precisely the celestial object he's looking for: Antares. Once a red giant, now easily discernible as a bright white pin-point in the cloudless morning sky. A supernova.

Beyond a shadow of a doubt, then, it has come to pass.

The simple idea that everything he's ever known could have been so fully erased by the passage of time. Computers, smartphones, the internet. Social media, Hollywood movies, *any* movies. The stock exchange, McDonalds and Starbucks, Coca-Cola, kombucha. NASA, plug-in hybrids, rock-n-roll, jazz. The Roman calendar. Days of the week. Politics. Blueberry scones. Every invention, every creation of the human society he'd once known, not to mention his family and friends, and Natalie and the rest of the Centauri team. Everyone he'd ever admired, everyone he'd ever scorned, all the human beings he'd ever met, and the multitudes he never did. All of them, vanished and expunged. Never to be revisited, except in memory.

It's a lot to take in.

On the plus side, he finds himself surrounded by what is apparently a rich and healthy ecosystem. A humid forest populated by old-growth trees, mostly hardwoods, whose trunks and branches are covered in multicolored lichen as if by a manic tree-climbing Jackson Pollock. The season appears to be late spring or early summer, the forest floor covered in ferns and sedges and mushrooms of every description, with extravagant layers of emerald and yellow-green moss upholstering a complex topography of boulders and crisscrossing fallen logs. Insects everywhere, a symphony of droning and humming and clacking. There are strange wasp nests suspended from many of the higher branches,

inverted vase-like paper constructions the size of a mummified infant, the likes of which he never saw in his own time.

The first vertebrates he sees are birds, mostly familiar forest birds. Nuthatches and chickadees flitting from branch to branch, a pileated woodpecker drumming its beak against the trunk of a tall dead tree. No, not a pileated. It's huge for one thing, with a jet-black head under a prominent red crest and a long powerful beak that isn't gray or black but a kind of luminous off-white. He rubs his eyes in disbelief. Could that be an ivory-billed woodpecker? Or has the pileated for some reason evolved over ten millennia to more closely resemble its extinct cousin?

A flock of turkeys struts through the understory, pausing occasionally to pluck beetles or centipedes from the leaf litter. Noticing him, they all stop moving at once and fix him in their cold yellow gaze. Heavier and more massive in build than the wildland turkeys he remembers, these tall glossy-feathered birds are powerfully clawed and primeval-looking, as if trending back to their dinosaur roots. And there's something in their eyes, too. A surprising boldness of attitude. A look of calm curiosity, as if they're more eager to comprehend the nature of this strange new visitor to the forest than they are afraid of him. But this might just be his imagination.