

Chapter 1: Not Mars!

The 2080s

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Chapter 1: Not Mars!

11:30am Friday 25 December 2084

‘Your unofficial world ranking,’ said Tom, with a rapidly growing smile, ‘is 10,360. That’s about 20,000 places above me.’

Zak leapt out of his chair.

‘Brilliant!’ he shouted, shaking his fists in triumph.

‘Let’s put that into perspective,’ said Tom. ‘You’ve only been playing True-To-Life for six weeks. Most of the people above you have played for years. And there’s seventeen million registered players.’

Zak took deep breaths, and paced around the tiny clear floor space in his bedroom.

‘On the other hand it shows you how tough it is at the top,’ said Tom, ‘considering you are near perfection now.’

‘I know I can get a lot better,’ said Zak, pointing at Tom on the wall.

‘It will be years of hard work. But you can go all the way.’

‘The next target is the top 10,000. What’s the chance of making that today?’

‘Well the ranking bonus for completing the game won’t be enough,’ said Tom, ‘But if we do this last mission in a super-quick time, that should push you up there.’

‘Then what are we waiting for?’

Zak threw himself back onto the gaming chair, and in a single movement brought the chair horizontal. He slammed his head back onto the Mind Mat, and shut his eyes tight.

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11:58am Friday 25 December 2084

Zak reached the Presidential Office of Victory Palace. Fired up by his ranking report, he had rampaged through the mission. He had led his team to the gates of the heavily guarded Palace, then split them up to launch a four pronged assault. As expected, he had reached the top first.

He stopped to assess the situation. President Erslan would be within the Office, no doubt accompanied by a force from the Presidential Guard. Large oak doors were the obvious way in.

His health was adequate, given the advanced stage of the mission. The only significant damage was a bullet through his right thigh. The leg was missing a chunk, somewhere under the blood-soaked rag of his trousers. But he was still mobile. He had learned to ignore the pain, and let adrenaline drive him on. Injuries did not count against his ranking, only the end result.

He took a deep breath to clear his mind.

‘Zak!’ came a voice.

The call struck him with fear. Not that he was afraid of any horror the game could throw at him.

‘Zak, are you there?’

It wasn’t a team-mate. The voice was distant and echoed. It was his mum calling.

‘Oh god!’ he cried. ‘Not now.’

‘Don’t tell me she’s only just realised,’ said Van.

‘I’ve locked the bedroom door. That should keep her at bay for a while,’ said Zak. ‘But she must be communicating through the Mind Mat.’

Zak had been expecting this for the last six weeks. But what timing!

Better get this done as quick as possible, thought Zak. He launched his attack, throwing two grenades at the oak doors. The explosions ripped off the doors and the surrounding masonry, filling the air with smoke and dust. He dived through the resultant hole and rolled onto the floor.

On this mission, Zak carried an automatic rifle. His tactic with it was straightforward, but required great skill. Each three round burst of gunfire was directed in a trajectory to hit three targets. It was an approach pioneered by his hero, Abel White. Zak had practised it to the point where it was now being carried out by his subconscious. A dotted line of enemy heads would flash in his mind, and he would guide the three bullets along it.

After each burst, he dived to the floor again, to take cover behind the large oval table. Despite there being a dozen or so bodyguards, he had killed them all within seconds.

For most players, overcoming the Presidential Guard was the big end to the game. He had supposedly done the hard part, the game was effectively won. Now for the civilian President, the formality needed to clinch it.

‘Zak, we need you here,’ insisted Mum.

‘I’m nearly finished!’ shouted Zak.

‘I told you not to play today.’

Zak had to finish before she did anything drastic.

There was a single door leading from the room. Zak stepped through it into another room dominated by a large desk, but no sign of the President. A handgun suddenly appeared round the side, but Zak shot it away. There was a scream, but he knew he hadn’t killed the President, as the game had not ended.

‘Don’t shoot!’ begged the President. ‘Haven’t you heard about the ceasefire agreed at Helsinki?’

Zak had lost interest in the plot. He wanted to finish it right now. With plenty of ammunition left, Zak started shooting and circled round the desk.

‘Damn!’

The President had disappeared down a trapdoor.

Zak ran to the square hole and fired a burst down into it. But still the game did not end.

Mum’s voice spoiled the sound of the gunfire.

‘I’m not waiting Zak,’ she said, and repeated.

The trapdoor led to a passageway. Zak jumped down and fired along it, but it only ran for a short distance before steps led down. He sprinted to the edge.

The President was hurtling down the steps. He had made some distance, but they stretched a long way. Zak lifted the rifle to take aim, and put his foot on the first step down to steady himself.

He squeezed the trigger. Gunfire rang out, but he was blinded by a white flash. The gun disappeared out of his hands and he tumbled forwards.

Was it the end of the game? No. This was wrong.

The steps had gone. Zak found himself hitting a plain white floor. He rolled over and bounded to his feet, to be confronted by a scene that left him bewildered.

‘What’s all this about!’ he cried, furious that he had not seen the outcome of his last shot.

‘Good afternoon Zak,’ came the voice of Dad. ‘Glad you could make it.’

Zak’s physical body still rested on the Mind Mat. But his mind had been pulled into another virtual environment.

The scene was a three-dimensional family portrait. Taken two years ago, just before he became cool, Zak hated it. Above the portrait hung a banner with the phrase “The Carter family future”. Zak realised that Dad had put together some kind of presentation. He peered around the side of the portrait to see the awkward way they had their hands resting on each other, and cringed.

‘I can’t believe you’ve done this to me!’

‘Relax Zak,’ said Dad, in a calming tone. ‘You’ll soon forget about whatever it was you were doing. We have very important news, that will change your life forever.’

Zak simply gasped in disbelief. He tried to open his real eyes, in order to return to the real world. It didn’t work.

‘*Quit* is disabled Zak,’ said Dad. ‘I don’t want you or Skye running off halfway through.’

Zak was desperate to find out what had happened in the game, but Dad’s restrictions prevented him from communicating with Tom.

He would have to wait until the news had been delivered.

‘I hope the future doesn’t involve me looking like that,’ said Skye, also horrified by the portrait.

‘Okay kids,’ said Mum, ‘be quiet now and let Dad say what he’s got to say.’

The portrait faded out, and another scene faded in.

All four of them were standing in a flat and empty icy landscape, with daylight dimmed by low cloud and swirling winds. Each was dressed in thick winter wear with goggles. Zak looked around, and could see patterns in the ice.

Dad opened his arms to the scene around him. 'Home!' he said. He smiled, waiting for the reaction. Zak was the first to speak.

'Dad, this is obviously the North Pole, not Warwickshire,' he quipped.

'It's not Warwickshire now Zak, but it's what Warwickshire will look like in thirty years time.'

Another pause followed, as Zak and Skye appeared to be taken aback.

'I don't believe that for a minute,' said Zak. He felt the need to say something just to break the stunned silence. 'What makes you think it's going to be like this?'

'It's not what I think Zak, it's what scientists around the world are predicting,' said Dad confidently. 'The world is entering an Ice Age, and this will be the result.'

Suddenly, they found themselves in the street outside their house. It was a sunny day, but they still wore their winter clothes. The three-story terraced houses stretched in both directions. The odd motor car was dotted around - a few people still owned those. Then, almost instantly, the sky went grey and snow started to fall. Beneath them, the snow settled and quickly accumulated. Zak realised that the scene was progressing at time-lapse speed, each second covering several days.

As the snowfall intensified, the snow underfoot began to rise, and the four of them rose with it. The motor cars disappeared one by one, presumably, Zak thought, to represent their owners getting rid of them. But one remained, and it was soon submerged under the rising sheet of snow.

The sound of a window smashing made Zak and Skye jump. But the sound became frequent as more windows followed. Zak was startled to see that the windows on their own house had become boarded up, but again, that pattern followed quickly throughout the street. The family stood there, continuing to rise.

As they neared the top of the houses, they could see huge piles of snow on the roofs. As the piles continued to grow, some of the roofs collapsed, causing the houses below to disintegrate into debris. In just a short time, the sheet beneath the family had risen to chimney level. Around them, on houses that had withstood the crush, the chimneys began to detach themselves, and disintegrate in a streak across what was now ground level.

Now, they could see across their town. There was little left except a smattering of treetops, the odd church spire and the tall buildings of the business district, with their hated 2040s architecture.

The pace quickened. With less to get in the way, the sheet below them rose, flattened and hardened, gobbling up the few remaining remnants of human civilisation. The last to disappear was perhaps the oldest part of town, the cross on a spire on the top of a hill.

Time appeared to return to normal, and they found themselves facing the same scene as at the start.

Zak slouched, with his arms folded. ‘What a load of rubbish!’ he declared.

‘It’s not rubbish Zak,’ said Dad. ‘It has happened many times before, and it will happen again.’

‘But how can this be Dad?’ said Skye. ‘We’ve been taught that the world has been getting warmer for a hundred years, and that the last few years are just a blip.’

‘For a long time scientists did believe it was a blip,’ said Dad. ‘There are several forces that battle to pull the climate between hot and cold, and they had predicted that for the next hundred years also, the forces bringing heat would dominate. But we’ve now had ten successive years of cold winters, and the effects of that alone seem to be triggering a runaway freeze.’

‘But the snow melts in the summer,’ said Zak, ‘so how can it build up like this?’

‘The new predictions state that it will get a lot colder. The winters will become longer, and it will get harder to clear the ice. When we give up trying, we’ll be overrun in a matter of years.’

‘Well,’ said Zak, feeling a bit fazed, ‘you must regret building the swimming pool now.’

Surprisingly, Dad laughed at this.

‘I’m a fair bit older than you all,’ he said, ‘so I can remember what it’s been like here the last forty years. It used to be hot. Ah, we had some great summers, didn’t we dear.’

‘Oh it was wonderful,’ said Mum, sighing.

‘I think it’s a shame,’ said Skye. ‘Heat is much more desirable. Why don’t they just pump more pollution in the air, that’ll sort it out.’

‘Well Skye,’ said Dad, ‘there’s a lot of important people arguing about what to do.’

Zak was getting impatient.

‘So Dad, have you got any more interesting footage, the North Pole’s getting a bit boring now.’

‘Oh yes,’ said Dad, as if he’d forgotten.

The desolate ice morphed into a lovely beach. The sun was beating down, the air was baking and there wasn’t a breeze. The sea shone a brilliant turquoise, and along the beachfront was a row of tasteful little cafés, with plenty of people, but not too many, relaxing in various ways. A couple of musicians played from under a canopy.

To his horror, Zak found himself wearing a multicoloured striped shirt and shorts.

‘Yessss!’ shrieked Skye, in a smart bikini. ‘We’re moving to Africa.’

Dad answered her from beneath a wide brimmed hat that cast shade over a beige shirt and trousers. ‘It’s a nice idea Skye, moving to Africa. But we can’t.’

Skye’s beaming smile quickly turned into a frown.

‘The problem is,’ continued Dad, ‘the Africans won’t have us. Neither will the South Americans, nor the Asians, nor the Australians.’

Skye’s frown became a look of disappointed surprise.

‘Oh,’ she said. ‘Have we not been very nice to them?’

‘Not really. I said it used to be hot. Well it was very hot. A large swathe of land around the equator became almost uninhabitable. Unfortunately, our predecessors in Northern Europe wouldn’t take in those people affected,’ explained Dad.

‘What! How selfish, I can’t believe that,’ said Skye.

‘We’re talking billions of people Skye,’ scoffed Zak.

‘These are difficult times, Skye,’ continued Dad, tolerating her remark. ‘People don’t like being forced to give up their space to strangers. It creates conflict. It was true then and it’s true now.’

Zak found that he was listening seriously to what his dad had to say. It was strange to hear him speak with authority. He always seemed to be the very opposite of authority, bumbling around, never getting Zak and Skye under control. He never shouted at them, or even spoke sternly. Zak found him a bit embarrassing at times, but in his heart he knew he had a good dad, who at the very least, was clear about right and wrong. Still, Zak felt it was his duty to make barbed comments.

‘So why are you showing us this beach?’ asked Zak. ‘To rub it in?’

A group of surfers walked by, clearly having a great time. Dad frowned.

‘It’s just to say that this was our first choice,’ he said. ‘We applied for residency in all the Southern political blocs – Africa, America, Asia, Australasia, but were rejected.’

Zak and Skye glanced at each other nervously. Zak suspected that whatever choice Dad had been left with was not a promising one. Skye then grabbed a bright green cocktail from the drinks tray of a passing waiter, and took a swig.

‘Yeeuch!’ she screamed, and spat it out.

‘Oh sorry,’ said Dad. ‘I didn’t have time to set everything up properly. That’s probably beer. Anyway, onto the next scene.’

‘Wait a minute Dad,’ said Zak. ‘I’ve got it! You work in the construction industry, so you’re going to build us an igloo on top of the ice.’

‘Well Zak, that’s very perceptive of you,’ Dad smiled. ‘As it happens, we will be living in one of my mobile housing units.’

The scene started to change again. It only took a few seconds to fade the old one out and the new one in. But during that transition, a moment of realisation descended on the two children. Time suddenly seemed to slow down in Zak's mind, as he absorbed the meaning of Dad's remark. Dad designed mobile housing units. It was so obvious, it was amazing he hadn't considered the prospect before. Almost in unison, Zak and his sister let out a cry.

'Noooooo!'

The next scene crystallised. Whether it was an animated or static scene was hard to tell. A two-storey mobile housing unit stood in front of them, a bulbous steel cube with round port-holes. Around them was a desolate landscape, with no sign of life and no weather to cause movement. Everything was bathed in a deep red hue. This was because Dad's mobile housing units were built for only one purpose – living on Mars. The children were aghast, and hadn't even noticed they were wearing boiler suits.

Zak was the first to recover his composure. 'Dad, you have got to be joking. You're not taking us to live on Mars.'

'Well Zak,' said Dad, nervously, 'I'm disappointed in your reaction. I thought at least *you* might find it an exciting idea.'

'But look at it!' said Zak, pointing around. 'It's a dead red dust-bowl. Only crazy people come and live here!'

'It's not like that at all....Skye, don't cry,' said Dad, getting anxious after the unanimous reaction. 'Your mother didn't cry, did you dear?'

'So Mum doesn't want to come either,' said Zak angrily, sensing the argument was going one way.

'Now look!' Dad started to raise his voice, and it quivered. 'We have no choice but to move. In the next few decades, our homes and our towns are going to be crushed by glaciers advancing from the North. Those who stay are deluding themselves. There won't be any igloos on the ice, because the snows will relentlessly cover anything we build.'

Dad continued, his voice growing more emotional.

‘If any of you had ever taken much notice of my job, you would have seen this coming. Who do you think is buying these housing units? People are starting to move to Mars in their droves. We Northern Europeans are lucky. When our predecessors turned away the refugees they had to return home and suffer. Now that it’s our misfortune, we have a way out, and it’s to go to Mars.’

He paused, but nobody responded. From the look on the faces of Zak and Skye, there was some sort of reluctant acceptance of what he was saying. His tone changed, calming down and becoming more measured.

‘The Scandinavians were the first. It didn’t take long for that part of the world to be affected. They saw the writing on the wall soon enough and didn’t wait for the scientists’ conclusions. Most emigrants to Mars now are Scandinavians, and the company I work for is selling the units that enable them to live there. They’ve filled it with flat-pack furniture of course, although our units are also assembled on site.’

Dad lifted his head proudly.

‘But Dad,’ said Zak weakly.

‘No buts! I’ve been offered relocation to Mars, and I’ve decided to accept it,’ said Dad.

‘But Dad,’ tried Zak again. ‘I won’t be able to play V-Commando.’

Dad reacted with puzzlement.

‘Of course you will,’ he said. ‘You’ll be able to get all your entertainment.’

‘But I won’t be able to play in the Earth League,’ protested Zak. ‘Once you get away from Earth, communication time makes it impossible.’

‘Isn’t there a Mars League?’ inquired Dad, as if stating the obvious.

‘Yeah,’ said Zak. ‘But the standard is very low.’

‘Then maybe you’ll have a chance of winning,’ said Dad, unhelpfully.

Zak lifted his hands in despair. 'You don't understand do you. I want to be a professional V-Commando player. I need to compete against the best, or I'll never get good enough.' He shook his head. 'This is a disaster!'

'Zak!' said Mum impatiently, 'We can't change our plans just because of your pipe dream.'

Zak sighed again, loudly.

'Zak only thinks of himself,' said Skye. 'What about me? I've got to leave my social life behind, to go and live in a shack in the middle of nowhere.'

Mum shrieked in frustration.

'We didn't take this decision lightly,' she said sternly. 'Originally, we weren't going to move until you were both adults.' She sighed. 'But in the last year, we've come to despise living in England. It's becoming a miserable place. The run-in with your school was the last resort.'

'So this is all Zak's fault!' said Skye, turning menacingly towards him.

Zak stepped back. Was this all his fault?

'Zak ignored the warning from school to improve,' said Mum. 'He played his game instead of doing his homework. It wasn't hard to notice. So as expected, we received an official note yesterday to say that he has been excluded. We knew there would be no way back with that lot, so had already made our plans.'

Skye maintained her threatening glare.

Dad raised his hands as if to calm everyone down.

'I think we're missing the point here,' he said sweetly, trying to break the stand-off. 'You might love it.'

The front door of the housing unit opened, and a dark brown dog with floppy ears bounded out towards them, barking joyfully.

'What's Rover doing here?' said Zak, confused.

'He's coming with us,' said Dad cheerfully.

'Great,' said Zak, still with despair in his voice. 'But what's he doing here now? You haven't strapped a Mind Mat to his head have you?'

‘Don’t be stupid,’ said Dad. ‘It’s a perfect avatar of Rover, but it’s controlled by artificial intelligence.’

Knowing it wasn’t really Rover, Zak ignored the creature.

He gazed into the sky, and found he only needed to squint slightly to be able to stare at the Sun, which appeared much smaller than from Earth. He noticed an object emerging over a hill. It was a plane, but its wings were so long that Zak had trouble making out the cabin.

With an instant scene change, they found themselves sitting in the plane. Its tiny cabin only had seats for the four of them, squeezed behind the cockpit, but gave them a breathtaking view of a huge plain banked by mountains. They were approaching a city.

Involuntarily, both Zak and Skye gasped.

‘We won’t be living in the middle of nowhere,’ said Dad, smugly.

The skyline was dominated by three large domes, but countless housing units were lined up in blocks across the surrounding landscape. There were no highways, and only a handful of vehicles moved across the open terrain.

Zak noticed that there were no pedestrians. He knew that in reality, it was not possible to survive out in the open on Mars, as they were doing in this virtual presentation. Dad must have deliberately obscured that problem. Life on Mars was one of confinement to relatively small spaces. But then it occurred to him that he spent most of his spare time in his bedroom.

‘And don’t forget, we’ll also have a magnificent journey through space to get here,’ said Dad. ‘Travelling into space is absolutely fantastic. I’ve been to Mars once before if you remember. I can’t wait to make the journey again.’

If Zak had no plans, he would have welcomed the news - a new planet, a new adventure. But he already had an exciting future planned. His career had been plotted in detail. He had worked hard to get into that position. How could they take a decision like this, without even asking him?

Could he have prevented it - if he hadn’t hid himself away for the last six weeks?

The thought that all he had worked for was to come to nothing, caused him to well up with anger.

He got up from his seat and pulled open the door to the cockpit. The pilot looked up at him with surprise. Zak punched him across the face, knocking him clean out.

‘Zak!’ roared Mum.

Zak dragged the unconscious pilot onto the floor, then climbed into the seat. He grabbed the control wheel and pushed forwards, directing the plane downwards.

‘Zak!’ roared Mum again, now right into his earhole.

He winced, but was undeterred. He had no plan. He just wanted to scare everyone.

The plane quickly reached a steep angle, filling the view with the city below. A cacophony of voices now shouted at him to stop. Mum lost her balance and tumbled forward into the front of the cockpit.

‘Right now!’ she screamed.

Zak was almost on top of the control wheel. He brought his feet up and put them either side of it, then pulled back.

The largest dome grew in the middle of the cockpit window.

‘Hey Skye, can you see what shops they’ve got?’ said Zak straining.

He glanced behind to see Skye and Dad with their eyes shut, clenching whatever furniture they could hang on to.

Zak laughed. But the plane would not pull up.

‘Uh-oh,’ he said.

In a matter of seconds, the hexagonal framework making up the dome filled his vision, as the plane hurtled towards it.

Zak was aware of a loud smash. It was long and drawn out, as if slow-motion. He was thrown forwards and through the glass.

He felt no impact on his body. This was a family program. If it were truly realistic, he would have been cut to pieces.

It took him a few seconds to come to a stop. He somehow lay upside-down on the nose of the plane, saved from the fall by his trousers snagging on part of the wreckage.

He looked up. They had smashed through the dome roof and were suspended from it, high above the buildings within. The physics had fully taken effect. The wide wings of the aircraft had entangled with the frame of the dome. Rather than punching a hole, the impact had pulled at the entire web. The sound of a large structure under strain was unmistakeable. The dome was screaming.

Zak heard Dad's frustrated voice.

'Oh come on,' he said. 'I can't get it restarted. We were just getting to the best bit.'

Dizziness hit Zak. The hanging cockpit was swaying. He saw Mum's face appear in the shattered window. Then, she fell out.

She slid down the nose desperately trying to grab on to something. The look of anger on her face as she passed Zak made him shiver.

He tipped his head back to watch Mum plunge to the ground, to the horror of a terrified crowd below.