

CONTINUANCE: A TALE OF TWO PLANETS

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

It's often said by climate activists, "There is no planet B." Our galaxy contains hundreds of billions of planets. There are probably thousands of planets B in it, and maybe a lot more — enough, in any case, to prompt me to write a novel that touches on questions like: Could humans ever reach a planet millions of times farther away than Mars? What kinds of reactions might we expect from governments and individuals to an imminent threat to all humanity? What ways might there be of achieving a kind of "continuance" after death? What benefits and risks might flow from artificial intelligence? What might a "twin-Earth" be like? What unique qualities might be found among types of self-aware, intelligent, reasoning beings? What would be needed besides "enlightenment" for the felicitous playing-out of human history?

I'd welcome any comments readers may have on these subjects or any other aspect of this novel. I'll reply to emails to ep@edwardpackard.com to the extent time and energy allow. May good fortune attend all of you who embark on this reading adventure, and all of you who do not.

CONTINUANCE

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PART I

2053

Early one bright shining morning in the middle of May, 2053, Angus Arthur Stinson, who was often referred to, though he hated it, as the “First Gentleman,” raised his glass of watered-down orange juice in salute to his wife, Katie Wendell, the President of the United States. The occasion, as was customary most days at this hour, was breakfast in their private quarters. A few days after Katie had won the past November’s election, Angus requested and was granted a sabbatical from his job as a history professor at Swarthmore College. In his application, he explained that he was needed in Washington “to help around the house.”

Holding the print edition of the *Washington Post* in front of him, he said:

“Did you notice your approval rating? Four months into your first term in office, and it’s, quote, surprisingly high.”

“Of course, I’m pleased,” Katie replied, “but, you know as well as I do that it’s mostly the honeymoon effect, plus economic indicators are up, *not*— don’t tell anybody — because of much I’ve done.”

“Your uplifting presence has had a big effect, darling. You inspire confidence.”

“I hope so. I do think that the mood of the country has improved since the election. I got letters congratulating me for slowing global warming because sharp-eyed observers saw snowflakes falling on Valentine’s Day.”

“Snow as far south as Washington. It was a wonder to behold.”

“Another thing, Angus, it’s become clear that artificial intelligence is resulting in higher productivity.”

“And you’ve convinced the public that the genius behind a lot of it won’t take over the world.”

“I suppose that’s still a danger, but I’m very hopeful. Herb Wu has spent a lot of time with Kuizmeyer, and you know what Herb said when he was here in March.”

“I think the gist of it was that Kuizmeyer is a crazy genius, but not an evil one.”

Katie, grinning and turning to look at her husband, said, “That was my take exactly.”

“Herb was pretty convincing,” Angus continued, “but these androids — parahumans, as Kuizmeyer calls them — they are, I would say, more than spooky.”

“I agree, but the media loves them.”

“Except for the media that loves to hate them.”

“It’s reassuring,” Katie said, “that he keeps them on a short leash and won’t license them commercially, and they have immense practical potential.”

“The Mars mission.”

“Yes. A lot of people are in a twit that our brave astronauts will be staying home with their beloveds, but sending parahumans is much, much safer and cheaper.”

“And they can accomplish more.”

“Oooh, I’m late for morning briefing.”

Not one to linger over meals, or anything else, Katie took a last gulp of coffee, tossed her napkin on the table, blew a kiss to her husband, and strode out the door, almost colliding with an aide who was about to knock.

Soon afterward that same morning, the sun emerged from behind the mountains and shone through a thin veil of clouds on the twenty-six-acre walled compound in Aspen, Colorado, world headquarters of the corporate entity founded by the singularly accomplished A.I. developer and computer science and engineering genius, C. D. (“Kooz”) Kuizmeyer. The scene was a popular attraction for tourists. The day had hardly begun, but more than a dozen were gathered near the entrance.

Kooz, a legendary figure, though still in his early thirties, was rarely seen. The mysterious activities that took place inside his fiefdom were off limits to the public, but people enjoyed standing across the street from the huge glass-paneled revolving door set in the slate-gray facade of the main building. Silver letters etched in stone read: SPACE UNBOUNDED. Camera-equipped mini-drones the size of blue jays darted and swerved in the vicinity. They were often likened to birds, but their flight patterns more closely resembled those of bats.

Tourists found these acrobatic objects to be a source of fascination and hoped to be lucky enough to glimpse Kooz's most astonishing invention, androids that he called parahumans. It had been widely reported that he had produced eight of them at cost of six billion dollars. The sighting of one, memorialized by a photo, was an occasion for a front-page story in the *Aspen Daily News*.

Parahumans had no biological components, but they were "fleshed" and "skinned" in a way that made them seem uncannily lifelike. They were readily distinguishable from humans — their complexions had a non-human platinum look. They came in male and female versions, and wore tasteful simple clothes, which covertly served as radiation receptors. They were distinguishable from one another, but had been designed to have a family resemblance. They ranged from fifty-eight to sixty-six inches in height and were physically much stronger than most humans, though not as well coordinated. They had no last names, only conventional first names. Humans who were familiar with them generally interacted with them as if they were real people. According to a Space Unbounded press release, they had brains and skills comparable to those of competent engineers and computer scientists. Of course, they didn't reproduce biologically, but recently, more to amuse himself than for any other reason, Kooz had designed, manufactured, and "started up" two juvenile versions.

"What is Life Like for Parahumans?" was the title of a widely read article in the Spring, 2053, issue of *Trend* magazine. Its thesis was that, although the emotions of parahumans were calibrated at about twenty percent of the intensity of human emotions, they did have some feelings, and among them was the feeling of being bored. The author of the *Trend* article asserted that Kooz treated the parahumans like cows, which, when not being milked or slaughtered, are content to stand and moo occasionally, but that parahumans have intellects comparable to those of humans, and they need stimulation in their lives to keep from being miserable and bored, which the author believed could lead to "frighteningly undesirable behavior."

Initially, Kooz had shown no interest in making existence more fulfilling for his creations. His plan had been to train them, keep them under tight control, and possibly upgrade them from time to

time. To the surprise of many, instead of being defensive about how the *Trend* article lamented the way parahumans were treated, he released a statement claiming that even before the article had appeared he had decided that they would function more efficiently if they had breaks from their work for sports and games, and that he had already taught them how to play basketball, soccer, chess, and poker. In an interview in April, 2053, he stated that parahumans engage in sports or games for at least an hour every day.

Kooz's assurances didn't stop a lot of people from agitating for total freedom for his androids. A human rights group sued him, claiming that he was holding them in involuntary servitude in violation of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States. To the dismay of many, a federal judge threw the suit out of court, citing the precedent of a case involving a chimpanzee that had been decided twenty years earlier.

As the name of Kooz's company, Space Unbounded, suggests, he was intensely interested in space travel. With the help of a twenty-billion-dollar grant from NASA, coupled with thirty billion from his personal funds, he had been engaged for the past several years in designing, constructing, and fitting out a spaceship, the *Athena*, at the SU facility near Santa Rosa, New Mexico. Launch was planned to take place in November, 2054. The cost of development and construction of the ship was double what it would have been otherwise, because Kooz had insisted on equipping it with a nuclear fusion drive that could accelerate it to almost seven percent of the speed of light. It hadn't concerned him that, as a practical matter, the *Athena* could attain only a tiny fraction of such extraordinary velocity on a trip to Mars.

The *Athena's* first voyage was to be crewed entirely by parahumans. They were considered to be at least as competent and versatile as real humans, they would be energized, rather than harmed, by solar radiation, and they would be a lot less trouble and expense to maintain. Their mission, after landing on Mars, would be to set up a habitable base and find sources of critical materials and water in preparation for the establishment of a permanent colony of humans.

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Those lucky enough to be admitted inside the SU compound in Aspen discovered that it had a shortened soccer field, two tennis courts, several large abstract sculptures, and a pond stocked with lake trout; also tastefully designed buildings containing offices, conference rooms, residential spaces, a cafeteria, a restaurant, laboratories, a library, and a gym, in which one morning near the end of May, 2053, four parahumans, Tom, Dick, Harry, and Olivia, were attempting to play basketball on a half court with one hoop, which was a foot lower than regulation height.

These life-like androids were trying to get rebounds and make shots. Often a shot came close, but they rarely sank one.

To be fair, they weren't concentrating on the game, pausing frequently to talk about the planned mission to Mars, on which they would be joining two other parahumans who would be their crewmates and were already at SU's Santa Rosa facility.

"Hey, guys." Dick, the tallest of them, said, after trying to make a shot but missing the backboard, "Did you see the latest?"

Tom grabbed the ball, which was rolling on the floor. "From the N-E array?" he asked, referring to the Newton-Einstein space telescopes that had been launched in 2049. "They've turned up what they say is interesting data, but won't talk about it until they study it more."

Tom bounced the ball to Dick. It went a little to the side, but Dick grabbed it, clutched it against his chest, and said:

"Maybe Kooz knows something that we don't know. He's gotten obsessed with exoplanets NASA is studying."

"Kooz was excited about sending us to Mars," Harry said, "but lately he only cares about deep space — finding the perfect planet."

"He gets excited easily," Tom said, and was about to add something when their attention was diverted by a three-foot-high juvenile male parahuman who had come onto the court. This android child was using a remote controller to manipulate a mini drone, a model of a World War I biplane, causing it to flit about in the air by pointing his finger in the direction he wanted it to move.

"Billy," Tom said, "Please take that some place else."

Without a word, the juvenile caused the drone to land on his palm and trudged out the door.

The adults let their game lapse, though occasionally one of them took a shot in the direction of the basket. Dick, trying to position himself for a three-pointer, backed into a four-foot-long metal table near the side of the court. He lifted it with one hand, placed it against the wall, and flipped the ball to Harry, who shot for a basket and watched intently as the ball hovered on the rim before falling outside it. Dick took the rebound and said:

“Two weeks from today, we’ll be in Santa Rosa. Our training will begin in earnest.”

Olivia had been silent up to now, and though the others had bounced the ball to her several times, she had yet to try a shot. This time, upon receiving the ball, instead of passing it on, she stood holding it.

“I’ve been thinking about this Mars mission,” she said. “I’m not sure I want to do it. We haven’t been asked whether we want to do it. Why should we?”

Tom, Dick, and Harry, shocked into silence, stared at her. After a few seconds, Tom, in a gentle tone, said:

“Olivia, that’s a forbidden question.” He glanced at Dick and Harry. Then, taking the ball from Olivia and bouncing it to Harry, he took Olivia’s arm and said, “Let’s you and I walk to the shop. We’ll make sure you’re okay.”

He gently led her off.

Dick and Harry exchanged glances. Dick said:

“Probably just a loose module, or something.”

Elsewhere in the compound that morning, C. D. Kuizmeyer was working in his spacious, well-appointed office, which, through floor-to-ceiling windows, offered a splendid view of mountains called the Maroon Bells. They seemed so close that one could reach out and touch them, even as, at this moment, they were becoming cloaked by heavy dark clouds — a late spring shower was in the making. Lighting from wall panels, which had been barely perceivable, brightened. Kooz, fixated on some abstruse problem of “rocket science,” as he liked to call whatever he was working on, remained immobile at his desk.

He was sturdy of build, above average in height, clean-shaven but with copious dark brown hair and in the kind of shape one would

expect of a man barely in his thirties who adhered to a Mediterranean diet and rarely skipped his daily workout. He was alone except for two large and shaggy black dogs — Newfoundlands — which were lounging on the floor, when his romantic partner, Simone Slade, walked in. A well-regarded novelist, she was sleek, pretty, and engaging, but she had to tap Kooz’s shoulder a couple of times to gain his attention. They had met eighteen months earlier at a party given by her publisher, who had almost, but not quite, convinced Kooz to write a book on what would happen if parahumans were mass-produced and completely replaced the human labor force. Kooz had been impressed by Simone’s quick wit and playfulness. She liked his enthusiasm and his unassuming nature. They walked out of the party together, and, since then, had rarely been apart for long.

When, after a few moments, Kooz perceived that Simone was standing beside him, he was on his feet in an instant, greeting her with a happy smile. They hugged. He quickly pulled away, but apparently only to admire her, for he said:

“What we have — I want to last forever.”

Simone smiled and drew closer. “That would be nice, darling,” she said, “but it’s not the way the world works.”

“I want to change the way the world works,” Kooz said. “I mean it.”

At that moment a trim severe-looking woman walked in, Isabel Marquez, Space Unbounded’s chief engineer in charge of parahuman management. “Sorry to interrupt,” she said, “but you’d want me to. NASA just identified an unusually interesting planet. You might want to turn on the news.”

Kooz gave a little wave at Isabel as she withdrew. He pointed a finger at a wall-mounted screen. The screen moved out and positioned itself at the optimum viewing angle in relation to where he and Simone were standing. Kooz wiggled a finger, and the newscast reverted to the beginning. A Navajo woman — Lisa Elkhart — appeared. “This just in,” she said, grinning. “NASA has announced discovery of an exoplanet they say is practically a twin of Earth. The finding is based on data from the Newton/Einstein telescopes that were launched in January 2049. NASA chief, Dr. Gina Milano, calls the new discovery ‘the Goldilocks planet,’ meaning everything about

it is just right, or almost so. She suggests naming it ‘Goldie,’ and apparently that’s what it will be called. It’s slightly smaller than Earth and slightly closer to its sun, an orange-yellow star just under thirteen light years from our solar system. It’s listed in astronomical catalogs as Cepheus Seventeen. We have Dr. Milano joining us now from Washington.”

A woman about fifty appeared on the screen. She had dark hair and large brown eyes and was wearing a flight jacket with NASA insignia. She was apparently in her office. An enormous poster of a computer-generated image of the Milky Way galaxy spanned the wall behind her.

Lisa Elkhart said, “Thanks for joining us, Dr. Milano. I know you’re short on time. Do I have my facts right?”

“You do!” Gina Milano exclaimed. “This star, Goldie’s sun, is just a stone’s throw away from us, if you could throw a stone eighty trillion miles. Seriously, it’s one of the closest stars to our solar system. It’s a little less bright than our star, the sun, but if you knew where to look, you could see it through a good pair of binoculars.”

“Could you see Goldie?”

“Oh, no,” Gina Milano said. “The planet is much too small for that. You could see its star, its sun.”

“What we all want to know, Dr. Milano, is how closely Goldie resembles Earth.”

“We’ll be studying it a lot more, but data so far suggest that its diameter is a bit less than Earth’s, but Goldie and Earth have roughly the same proportion of oceans to land masses. All indications are that most humans could breathe perfectly well on Goldie. Oxygen density at sea level is what you’d find on Earth at about two thousand meters altitude. Goldie’s rotation period is just over twenty-two hours, so its days and nights are a bit shorter than ours, and — this is *something* — spectroscopic analysis of Goldie’s atmosphere suggests that plant and primitive animal life may be abundant. We’ll be compiling more information and we’ll issue an update after the weekend.”

“This is exciting,” Lisa Elkhart said. “We’ll want to hear more whenever you have it!”

“Oh, another thing I wanted to mention,” Dr. Milano said, “Goldie has one moon, just as Earth has, and it’s about the same size as our

moon, but it's much closer to Goldie, and it would look much larger in Goldie's sky than our moon does in our sky. Spectroscopic analysis shows that if Goldie's moon were in *our* sky, more than anything else it would look like a ripe peach."

"How delightful," Lisa Elkhart said. "Thank you, and do keep us apprised."

In response to a gesture from Kooz, the screen went black and moved back against the wall. He and Simone exchanged glances. Simone, wide-eyed, said:

"Holy cow!"

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