

Chapter 2

Founders' Meeting, October 2029

Shane flew to Tomas's Poland estate in his personal Manta Ray.

It was only autumn but he wasn't surprised to see the snow-covered landscape of Europe. There was little human activity now that could melt the snow; industry and trade had shrunk to small local endeavors that caused little heat. He noted with passing interest a battle as he flew over it, hundreds of people clashing with blades, spears, and arrows across an ice-bound river. Ammunition for guns had long since been used up in Europe and, besides Tomas's Institute division, only the very rich still had any. The Institute made

their own guns and ammunition to protect their properties.

Smoke rose into the still air from wood and coal fires. The environmentalists had imagined the small, sustainable population of the future would live in an electric world. However, without the infrastructure to support electrical generation, the world had reverted to fossil fuels and wood, defeating the whole object of the environmental scheme. He was shocked to see even Europe's great cities—the few he flew over—as lifeless as the rest of the lands. From the air they looked like abandoned ruins with only a few columns of smoke rising from

open fires to attest to activity.

The sight gave Shane a cold feeling in the pit of his stomach. Tomas had

said he and Alexis didn't understand the situation on the surface. He now saw Tomas was right. By the time the Ray began its descent, Shane was pleased to see the back of Western Europe.

3

PAUL JAMES

The Ray landed on an enclosed runway and rolled to a halt. Shane opened the cabin door and stepped out. Behind the Manta Ray, the runway gates closed. He smiled. Tomas might like to think he was a rough character who lived in the real world, but he was as isolated as the rest of them. The dome he'd built over the castle and grounds sustained a Mediterranean temperature, warm and dry. Outside, a Polish autumn storm complete with snow was brewing, but Tomas and Nadia wouldn't be "enjoying" any of that.

Shane removed his jacket and placed it on the seat of the car that had arrived to meet him. "I'll walk awhile," he told the car. "Follow me."

It was good to stretch his legs and feel the earth beneath his feet. He hadn't known he'd missed it.

When he arrived at Tomas and Nadia's home thirty minutes later, Shane found only Nadia waiting for him. She strode forward and embraced him before he could react, kissing him on the cheek. She knew full well he would be acutely uncomfortable at such familiarity, particularly as she was heavily pregnant.

"It's good to see you again in person, Shane," she said, smiling at his embarrassed stiffness.

"It's good to see you too, Nadia. Is Tomas not here?" He hoped he wasn't going to be long on his own with Nadia. He'd never understood women.

"He was, but you took so long getting from the air terminal to the door, he got fidgeting and remembered he had something else he could be doing. You know what he's like if he has to wait for something."

"I just had to walk."

"Well, come inside and let the servant take your things." She gestured to a NuMan footman who was waiting for orders and led Shane inside. Two small children ran on uncertain legs to cling to her skirt.

"You haven't actually met our older kids, have you? This is Tasha"—she gestured to the older child—"and this is Anna."

Shane nodded to each and said "Hello," hoping they would go away soon.

"And another on the way." Nadia patted her distended middle. "We're repopulating the West on our own!" she laughed.

"Perhaps we should let Tomas know I've arrived." Shane hoped he didn't 4

RIVAL INSTITUTES

sound too desperate to be free of this family scene.

"Oh, he knows," Nadia said. "He's just punishing you for making him

wait. You'll be lucky to see him today, unless Alexis arrives soon and saves you." She laughed again.

Shane did his best to smile. One of the two little girls left Nadia's skirt and tottered over, grabbing his pant leg. Her upturned face seemed to demand attention and, awkwardly, Shane found he couldn't look away. Her arms reached up and he found himself bending, grasping her under her arms, and lifting her up. She hugged and kissed him as Nadia had done. Shane could feel the blush hotly burning his face and making its way down his neck.

Seeing her sister's success, the other child tottered over to Shane and he couldn't do anything but shift the first child to his left arm and lift up the second. She, too, welcomed him and Shane's discomfort was complete.

"You may want to sit, Shane," Nadia said, hardly able to contain her laughter. "They'll grow heavy in a while."

Shane did as he was told and sat, lowering the girls onto his knees.

"It seems children like you." Nadia smiled wickedly. "You should have some of your own."

Shane could find nothing to say. He was unable to think of anything that might entertain the youngsters or encourage them to go back to their mother. No small-talk to share with Nadia even came to mind. He could only hope for an asteroid to hit Earth and save him.