

# **A Better World**

*BY SALMY UDIN UNDERWOOD*

*We pledge to invest in mercy, love and kindness,  
To achieve mercy; we must be empathetic,  
To achieve love; we must be non-violent,  
To achieve kindness; we must be compassionate.*

## **Unified Earth Committee**

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## **ARTORIUS ABBEY**

Iania Hari silenced the series of random thoughts in her mind. She couldn't wait to get away from the penthouse and into her conservatory. As soon as she stepped off the elevator, her vehicle initiated its engines. She waited for the ARS, Adhesion Release Safety unit, to suction her shoulder and waist onto the driver's seat. Once she was secured, the vehicle accelerated and she soared away from Artorius Abbey.

Her vehicle flew straight toward the U-shaped valley. Tall, artificial red pine trees lined the left side of the mountain and blue pines on the right. The cataclysmic event of CE45, the cosmic explosion at constellation Carina on 2045, generated solar flares that weakened Earth's atmospheric pressure and evaporated its oceans. These synthetic trees concealed the stark landscape. Her husband's property stood out against his wealthy neighbors with the success of the organic green bristle cone pines lining the valley floor. They not only survived the dry conditions but rejuvenated the toxic atmosphere. Sadly, these organic pines were rare. She hoped to discover a similar specimen and returned the planet to breathable air.

"Do you want to release the top hatch?" her vehicle asked.

Iania switched off the thoughts-decipher link on her vehicle. "Only if you can open it for more than ten seconds and no mask needed."

"Any longer would cause harm," her vehicle said. "Not using oxy-masks would cause harm."

"I know, but come on, V, look at these green pines. They're thriving, aren't they? That equals hope, I'm sure of it."

Her vehicle hummed. “Unified Earth’s planetary commission projected an atmospheric conversion of breathable air at approximately 36,630 days...”

“That’s over a century!” Iania interrupted the humming vehicle. “No, stop calculating. No more projection. I don’t care what the commission predicted, I’m optimistic it’ll be sooner than a hundred years. Just launch the holosphere, please.”

A cone-shaped 3D multi-level data-filled sphere swirled above her dashboard. “Today is seventh of August, twenty-three hundred and ten,” the monotone voice announced. “Time is zero eight twenty-two thirty. The weather is sunny and...”

“Stop commentary. Look at that, another week of glorious sunshine.” She swiped the weather information to the side and layers of media infocasts replaced it. One of them were discussing her latest skin color change from deep browns to soft purples with the layer of glittering gold, which they named, ‘Iania’s Dreams’. She inhaled before swiping the infocasts off. It was hard to keep her composure with millions of eyes constantly watching her through the publicity vid. They followed her everywhere, but thank goodness, not in restrooms or her bedroom.

Iania turned on the tracking system and watched her husband’s shuttle leaving Earth’s planetary shield on its way to the orbiting substation. She linked the sphere to the substation’s interior feed as top-level employees stood in line with their cydroid assistants – the socially, human-like androids – waiting for her husband, Jude Hari, the owner of ABW Corporation, to dock his shuttle at the substation.

At seventy-two, Jude carried the vigor of a young man in his forties. He was not a tall man, but his straight military-like posture exacted compliance from his subordinates. A member of the Unified Earth (UE) Committee, he was adored by his peers, the other wealthy Arctic citizens, for his outlandish parties. She swiped through the feed and watched the hundreds of vehicles and transporters in different stages of completion packed the space factory. A newly completed starship caught her eye, she enlarged the sphere to read its name.

‘The IANIAAIRI.’

Iania gasped before reading it again. It was unexpected to see a version of her name on the starship. Jude had always reminded her that their marriage of convenience meant that nothing of his would ever be hers. Did Jude change his mind? A few years ago, she was shocked when Jude wrote down her name as the owner of the conservatory. Did he intend to give her the starship too? Or was it another attempt at publicity?

“Yes, that’s probably it.” She nodded. Her hands itched to contact her husband but decided against it. After their argument at breakfast, she doubted if he would speak to her, let alone answer her questions. The holosphere shut down as the vehicle neared the conservatory. It hovered for a mandatory security scan before flying in and parking at the usual spot near the entrance of her Zen garden.

Iania waited for the vehicle’s ARS to release her before stepping out and sprinting through the garden. She stopped at the entrance of her lab and slipped on her well-worn white lab coat over her designer dress before lowering her hands into the Cube. Bubbles of cold steam cleansed her hands and a gust of warm air dried them. A layer of protective gel coated her hands and a set of green lights lighted to signal the end of sterilization. She lifted her hands out of the Cube and marched into her climate-controlled lab.

Heat blasted through her lab coat when she entered her lab. It was regulated to match Earth’s hot and dry climate. Rows of her experimental plants and flowers and their mix aromas released a blended sweetness throughout her lab. “Ah...” In an instant, her mood was uplifted. She picked a potted orchid from the workstation and balanced it on her left palm. Eight distinct colors formed on the unique orchid from petals of swirling greens and stamens of intense reds. It was a statement in beauty and as lovely as its name – ‘*Cypripedium Parviflorum*’. The words rolled as she twirled the flower under the ultraviolet light.

It glowed.

“You’re so beautiful, but you already know that, don't you?” Iania stroked one of the soft petals.

Instead of using the usually efficient cutting mechanism to propagate the orchid, she decided to use a hand-held laser cutter. Suddenly, the silence was interrupted by an intermittent, high-pitched sound of an alarm.

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

Her hands shook. The potted orchid flew across the aisle. The laser cutter shifted. Before she could stop the cutter, it had sliced the feeding lines through the row of budding autumn crocuses. She turned it off the laser, but the pulsating lines had already sprayed liquid nutrients all over her coat. Fragments of broken pots, flower petals and dirt pooled under her feet. She was no longer on firm ground. In the split second before she slipped, Jude’s angry voice appeared in her mind – ‘Don’t you dare appear at our anniversary looking like that!’ That thought made her turned her body to the side and pushed her hands forward.

“Ahhh!!” Iania squirmed. Her voice echoed with the screeching alarm. A piece of the broken pot wedged between her fingers. She took a deep breath before pulling the sharp piece out between her fingers.

“Ow!!” She threw the invading object across the aisle. The deep cut stung as several angry scratches grew across her purple skin. She would’ve to redo her skin color again. It was Jude who demanded her skin color to match ABW’s iridescent purple logo part of their upcoming eighth wedding anniversary. The pain numbed her fingers. As she grabbed the workstation to stand, it shook and a red cylinder flew. A memory disk was activated.

“Blu!” Iania cried as the image of her adorable seven-year-old brother disappeared through the strobing white lights. The flashing bright lights pulsated in tandem with the shrieking alarm. It was both blinding and deafening. With her eyes closed, she covered her ears with her bloody fingers.

The strong scent of copper surrounded her as she shouted, “Help! Please, help me!”

“Ms. Hari, you must leave,” a cydroid worker said and scooped her body from the middle aisle and ran toward the lab exit.

Iania clung on the cydroid's strong neck. "Yes, please, to my vehicle." Unlike her male cydroid assistant, Co-Jaq, the cydroid worker had no name or gender. Ze stomped into her Zen garden and the half-moon bridge creaked under them. She opened her eyes as the agitated recycled waters rocked her collection of green and white star-shaped water-lilies and miniature rainbow fishes wriggled out of the mid-sized pond. Heady perfume permeated around her when the cydroid worker brushed the clusters of pink jasmines and tri-colored daffodils near the rustic bench and along the "S" shaped stone path. Finally, they exited her garden. The cydroid worker set her down by her vehicle.

She steadied her legs and asked, "Do you know what happened?"

"Clarification not available," the cydroid replied.

"Right!" In her confusion, Iania almost forgot that Jude programmed his cydroid workers with specific tasks. The cydroid worker's only objective was the conservatory. "Wait!" She tugged on ze uniform. "Transmit progress reports to me." The cydroid worker repeated her command and ran back into the garden. She sat in the driver's seat and waited for the ARS to secure her while the hatch closed.

"May I suggest medications for your injuries?" the vehicle's soothing, synthetic voice asked.

"What?" She almost didn't understand the question. Her ears were still ringing and her hands throbbing. Then, she noticed her reflection – messy hair, bloodied cheeks and splotches of liquid on her lab coat, and said, "Of course, start the antiseptic." After the command, streams of cold steam misted around her followed by the soothing surge of warm air. She breathed in the fresh, medicated air. Slowly, the bleeding between her fingers stopped and the ringing in her ears subsided.

"Okay, V, I'm good," Iania said. "Now, straight to Acropolis."

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## THE AGENDA

[23:33:33Z 2310-08-07 SUNDAY]

Bogg craved for calm recreation. His discussion with members of the Committee had been unproductive. They were incapable of reason. He broke the seal of the experimental *MBa* and dripped the liquefied drug onto his antique smoke pipe carved with the INCAS logo – a lion on top of green, red and brown triangles – the extinct animal had represented his regal ancestry that symbolized courage, strength and a commitment to fight for the greater good for over five generations.

After CE45, the cosmic explosion that changed the planet, corporations saved the population by giving away their stockpiles of goods. Later, employees of corporations created order throughout the chaotic times. After stabilizing the atmosphere with the invention of the planetary shield, these corporations formed the Unified Earth (UE) Committee. FIRM Foundation controlled the Committee for over two centuries after they merged with Taylor Corporation and Independent Biodegradable Magnalox and became the largest and most popular corporation on Earth.

Bogg planned to oust FIRM by expanding INCAS and merging with the popular Admundsen and Secretas and purchasing ABW. He inhaled the strange mixture of Moric (M), and Balsium (Ba), the elemental drug used in REM – the brainwashing program used on prisoners that replace and alter their childhood memories. It was never meant for recreational purposes, but his two assistants had guaranteed that in small doses, the *MBa* was not only harmless but produced a feeling of euphoria.

“Whooh!”

An energetic tide of optimism flushed through him. A realm of pure bliss took over his mind and joyous enthusiasm washed away his irritation at the Committee. He smirked, chuckled, and then, giggled.

*He giggled?*

He never giggled.

*Ever!*

Pleasure fought with his need for composure. The drug was indeed powerful. He only wanted a moment of diversion, but the *MBa* gave him a total loss of perception. He couldn't seem to stop from tipping more of it into his pipe and inhaling its deep-bodied aroma. “Ah... this is unwise but yet good.” He giggled again.

“No!” Bogg banged on the table to halt his nonsensical reaction. He needed to stay alert and take over the Committee. No one else was going to tackle the serious issue of Earth's depleting resources. The other members were only interested in bickering like children as they compared their senseless and over-the-top entertainments with each other.

*Small-minded jerks!*

Unlike the altruistic nature of the previous Committee members, the current entitled members seemed to only care about themselves. They turned cydroids into glorified assistants instead of using the limited assets and find a solution for the planet. Their stupidity infuriated him. Earth's next assault wouldn't be due to cosmic forces, but from the overblown egos of these lazy members. His emotions suddenly fluctuated as anger turned to pleasure. The drug continued to reverse his logical mind. He floated in euphoric radiance. Although, a small part of him rebelled at his loss of control. A sliver of his memory recalled an antidote and he spotted the slim vial on his desk.

*That's it!*

Bogg picked the vial and squinted to read the instructions when the words suddenly vibrated and then, leaped right off the vial toward him.

“Whoa!”

He gripped the vial and almost crushed it when a flash of rational thought coaxed him to swallow the liquid. When he did, the streams of bitterness lingered. He coughed and coughed several more times until the blurred objects in his office cleared.

Then, his mind suddenly reenacted the agonizing memories of his lonely childhood. As the sole heir of INCAS, he had been raised by cydroid nannies. The only human interaction had been with Amel Lynn, his overbearing aunt and guardian. She filled his schedule with studies and the boring subjects of new world economics and generational philanthropy. He never had time to play, laugh or giggle.

Feelings of desolation nearly pushed him to reach for the *Mba* again. Bogg pushed aside his depressing memories and focused on his plan. The one thing his strict upbringing gave him was the need to aspire for nothing less than absolute success. So far, his meticulous plan to take over the Committee was progressing rather nicely. No one could stop his ascend to the position of Chair of the Committee once his plan reached its completion.

*Ab...*

The antidote worked and his desire for escapism vanished. He launched the holosphere and illuminated layers of INCAS activity reports swirled above his desk. As if he had summoned her, a blinking red light appeared on the sphere. He sneered at the image of his aunt before accepting her connection.

“Bogg!” Amel Lynn’s high pitch voice screeched. “Are you going to the meeting? Do you hear me? You must attend this meeting.”

*What a sad, sad woman!*

Her pitiful features resembled an alien, not the lovable and cute one, but the slimy and grotesque one. She would be the perfect candidate for *MBa* drug. It might lighten her mood or at the very least, lowered that wailing voice.

He laughed.

“James Vladimir Bogg the Seventh!” Amel Lynn shouted, and the wrinkles across her forehead deepened. “Don’t be rude. I raised you better than that. For goodness sake, you’re not a Southerner, show some civility and answer my question.”

“I’ve been busy, woman!” He bit the inside of his lips to stop himself from laughing. Usually, her use of his full name vexed him, but today, all he wanted to do was laugh. Maybe, he was still under the drug’s residual effects. “Besides, what’s the difference if I’m there or here in my office?”

“Of course, there’s a difference,” Amel Lynn said. “For one, you’ll get to interact with the others. It’ll change your outlook when you meet other humans in person.” Her sunken eyes glared. “Have you been indulging in impropriety?”

“Actually, yes, I have. I’ve snorted. No, that’s not right. I’ve smoked. You should try my latest indiscretion. It’ll do you good.”

Amel Lynn’s thin lips quivered. “Are you trying to rile me up?”

*Of course!*

Bogg shouted the reply in his mind. “Why the sudden interest with this meeting? Are you keeping a secret from me?” He squeezed his lips and forced himself not to laugh. “Oops!” He coughed to disguise the little squeaks escaping his lips.

“What’s wrong with you today? I don’t keep secrets, Bogg, at least not from you. NEA mining is on the agenda and I know they’ll approve it in the meeting. I’ve made sure of it.”

“Hmm... did you bribe someone?” he asked. “Or maybe more than ONE, maybe you bribe them all!” He wouldn’t be surprised if her proposal went askew. Mining the Near-Earth Asteroid was a giant

undertaking and he doubted the pathetic Committee would agree with her. They would probably postpone or worse, dismiss it altogether. A sudden need to laugh permeated from his chest and spilled inside his mouth. He finally gave up from holding back his laughter. At first, his lips spread and he smiled. Then, he started to laugh. A few seconds later, he howled. His laughter lasted longer than he had expected.

Amel Lynn's nostrils flared. "Are you done?"

"Hmm..." Bogg needed a moment to relish his aunt's bewildered look. Her eyebrows thinned as if they were reaching out to touch each other. Her wide nose flared and her lips were thinner than he had ever seen. It had to be the only angry expression she could muster. He exhaled, and said, "I hope you're referring to freshwater mining."

"Of course not!" Amel Lynn replied. "We're going for helium-3, you know, one of the components used for Olganium. The mines on the moon are depleting."

"I don't need a science lesson, aunt. You've made sure I had enough of it as a child." He reminded his relative and asked, "You're not going for water then?" Even though he knew that combining Helium-3 with the abundant spazine and zenium would turn the element into the prized Olganium, the ultimate clean energy used by vehicles, homes and first generation cydroids would be good for INCAS. However, he would still rather mine for precious water.

"Your idea of compassion always surprises me. You're not thinking of the big picture, Bogg. Olganium will be good for INCAS and I'll do anything for the good of INCAS. What? You don't agree?"

*What do you think?*

Of course, Bogg agreed with her. It was the only thing they had in common. "Stop pointing out the obvious. Tell me what you've done?"

"I've liaised with ABW and they agreed," Amel Lynn said, and straightened her shoulders.

"You did what?" He wanted to smack off her smugness. "How can you be so daft? No, let me rephrase, that's beyond daft, it's idiotic."

“How dare you say such things to me after all I’ve done for you?”

“Don’t go there, woman.” Bogg almost lost his balance when he stood and stepped on something solid. Luckily, the antique pipe survived his weight. He didn’t remember throwing it away earlier. He picked it up, swiped off the smidge of liquefied drug and placed it back on his desk. “I say and do whatever I damn well please.”

Amel Lynn’s eyes almost sprung out of their sockets. “Have you no respect?”

*For you? Never!*

He glared at the older woman. “What makes you think Hari won’t use your liaison and take over INCAS?”

“ABW can’t afford it and they needed the publicity more than us.” Amel Lynn shook her head, her ridiculous-looking pink hat moving from side to side and wisps of curly green hair trailed down her hollowed cheeks. Her years of facial reconstructions had overextended her bone structure giving her that alien-like features with her flattened lips, hollowed cheeks and large veins around her neck.

“That might be the case, but I still don’t trust that man.”

“Don’t tell me you have a different plan? I don’t believe you do.”

*Why am I not surprised?*

Bogg wanted to wave off their connection, but he didn’t. “If you must know, I do have a plan.”

“An intelligent one, I hope.” Amel Lynn groaned.

“Unlike yours, you mean?” His patience was turning to be as toxic as the atmosphere outside his window. His plan was revolutionary compared to her one-time liaison with ABW.

Amel Lynn sighed. “Well, what’s the plan?”

Bogg thought about it for a moment and then, he decided that she wasn’t worth his time. He couldn’t spend another minute explaining his takeover plan to the woman. It had taken him over a month to explain and asking her to approve his plan to diversify INCAS to mining.

“You know what, I don’t think I’m ready to share any of it with you. You’ll just have to trust me,” he said. “By the way, don’t forget to vote me in as the next Chair?”

Amel Lynn glared. “Chair of the Committee?”

*Obviously...*

“Just do as I asked, Amel. Same as you, I will do anything for the good of INCAS.” Bogg ignored her open mouth and focused on the data swirling on his holosphere. Transportation businesses like INCAS and ABW depended too much on weather, which justified his decision to expand INCAS to mining. He grinned. Of course, crushing FIRM’s monopoly and taking over Chair Dina Pays’ position at the Committee would allow him to do more than mining an asteroid.

“Why get rid of Dina?” Amel Lynn shook her head. “I’ve never heard any of this before.”

“Stop that!” He pointed at the sphere. To him, her head shaking of disapproval always meant that he had failed. “Stop shaking your head at me. You know what, I think you’re getting too old for this, aunt. Why don’t you just retire? Perhaps, right this very second.”

“And give you all the power. I don’t think so.”

“I’m done talking here.” Bogg waved off their connection. The feminine voice of his holosphere restarted and announced the day, date and time. After listening to his aunt’s vexing voice, he had no desire to listen to another high-pitched female voice. “Change vocals to masculine.” As soon as he requested the change, the voice on the sphere slowed before it restarted with the deepest masculine voice he had ever heard.

He giggled.

“Damn!” Bogg shut down the holosphere and marched out of his office.

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