

# PLANET OF GLASS

By Keith Kissler

## Chapter One

Simon Gyrus woke from a dreamless sleep to the sound of his alarm chirping in his ear. Bleary eyed and slightly dizzy, he swatted his bedside table until he found the snooze button.

Forty-five minutes later...

Simon bolted upright in bed.

"Shit!" he said under his breath. Grabbed yesterday's jeans, a shirt from the day before, his courier bag dangling from the doorknob and put them all on as he ran down the stairs.

Simon rented a room in a stately old brownstone, just a few blocks from the Max line, in Goose Hollow. His landlady, Mrs. Pavlovna, had left Russia while the cold war was still frosting up the windows of the Kremlin. It was obvious that once upon a time, Anna Pavlovna had been quite the swan, though now was old and gray and stooped a little when she walked, which she almost always did with a slight limp in her left leg. Mrs. Pavlovna let the boy's old rooms mostly to have company in the house. Simon rented the room at the top of the stairs. In the room across the hall lived Lilly Wickerman, a pretty young woman with long red

hair who painted intricate watercolors of famous murderesses. Her portrait of Lizzie Borden, which hung in the hallway, was especially moving, as young Lizzy looked wistfully into the distance, the bloody axe dripping just a hint of scarlet onto the rug as evidence of her crimes, which had occurred somewhere out of frame.

Simon had always found Lilly attractive, if a bit sad. Lilly had been raised on a farm and her hands had been lopped off by a thresher. She wore a fine set of wooden hands but they hardly served as a replacement, though she managed to eat, comb her hair and paint with them just fine, so perhaps there was some other secret sorrow of which Simon was simply not aware.

He tripped over his feet, nearly breaking his neck on the second floor landing, paused to steady himself as he tied his left shoe in mid air, and slung his courier bag around his neck as he hopped down the stairs, into the kitchen.

Mrs. Pavlovna stood in front of the black iron behemoth of a stove, cooking bacon. Lilly sat at the table by the window, admiring the fog clinging to the treetops and flipping idly through a fashion magazine with her delicately articulated wooden fingers.

"Good morning," said Mrs. Pavlovna. Lilly waved.

Simon attempted to say good morning in return, but the strap from his shoulder bag had slipped over his mouth as he wrestled with his jacket, so it came out more like, "Hood mooring."

"Care for some bacon?" Lilly nodded towards a plate on the table.

"No time," said Simon, grabbing a handful of bacon and stuffing it into his mouth, "late." And was out the back door before he could hear a reply.

Simon slung his bag onto his back and hopped on his bike. He was half way to the University before he even swallowed his half chewed bacon.

The autumn streets were chilly and draped with fog, but the gray veil of the morning was lifting slowly to reveal the bright red and orange trees, and the front stoops of houses lined with jack-o'-lanterns waiting for nightfall and the candles to come out.

Simon arrived at the little café on the corner of this street and that avenue exactly ten minutes after getting out of bed.

Doctor Carter, calm, cool and bespectacled, was sitting at a table by the window when the bell over the door rang and Simon ran in.

Jerry Carter enjoyed playing the stereotype of the intellectual academic. He let his graying hair grow a bit shaggy, favored black-rimmed glasses and even owned a blazer with suede elbow pads. He usually only wore this the first cool day of the fall semester or to faculty meetings.

On the table in front of him sat an empty cup of coffee and the remnants of a bagel and cream cheese.

"Sorry I'm late," said Simon. "I was at the observatory until four going over the data." Which he flopped in one overstuffed folder onto the table in front of his professor, then slid into the chair opposite.

"Simon. Always a pleasure," said Professor Carter. "Even if the pleasure was scheduled for a half hour ago." He opened the folder and eyeballed the top sheet, which was covered in data heavily annotated in scrawling pencil figures and doodles. "I see the thesis is going well. You look like hell by the way."

"Yeah, thanks," Simon said, trying to catch the eye of the barista and order his vanilla latte via telepathy. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"Oh, that bad is it? Well, no one expected you to prove Panspermia in one go."

"No, the thesis is just about done. Got the last bit of spectroscopic data on the comet last night, but the comet, see, that's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"Ah, so. Success then. We've met little green men and it turns out we are they."

"Well, maybe," said Simon. "There's some pretty solid evidence for amino acids in the comet ice, which if I'm right, could be pretty exciting. But that's not the point! The point is

this..." Simon shuffled through the folder until he found one heavily notated sheet, which he handed to Carter.

"The comet's moved."

"Well yes, they tend to do that and at several thousand miles a second."

"No, look. It's changed its trajectory. Its orbit is closer to Earth than it should be. A lot closer."

Doctor Carter looked over the figures for a moment.

"Huh. That's... interesting," said Carter. "And you showed this to Doctor Ipsum, yes?" Carter handed the paper to the slender woman with cinnamon colored skin and red hair sitting with them at the table.

Simon was almost certain she had just sat down the moment before but this fact quickly slipped away, like it was hiding from him. She had been sitting there this whole time. (Unless she hadn't. There wasn't a chair there a minute ago and didn't she walk through the door after him? Or was it before? How many times did the bell ring?) There was a third chair at the table and she was sitting in it. She had wide brown eyes and a thin purple scarf around her slender neck. She was dressed all in black and across her back and down one arm was a tattoo of a tiger. The tiger looked like it was about ready to devour her, starting at the elbow.

"Doctor... Ipsum?" Simon said the name as if testing its seaworthiness. It felt like it was made of lead but it floated just fine.

"It's probably just a perturbation," said Doctor Ipsum, barely glancing at the data. "Comets are odd little things. This one in particular has been wandering all over. Probably just got snagged by the moon's gravity and kicked in a little closer to Earth. It's still going to miss us by a few hundred thousand miles. I wouldn't worry about it."

"So... You're Doctor Ipsum?" said Simon. He scratched his shaggy head and squinted. There were mental waves and her name bobbed up and down on them.

"Simon, are you alright?" asked Professor Carter. "You really have been overdoing it. Laura's been... she's, well, she's a specialist on..." Professor Carter looked at Doctor Ipsum, who raised a curious eyebrow back at him. He smiled sheepishly.

"You've been here just over a year now, and for some reason, I can't remember your specialty. Forgive me. I'm embarrassed. And I was on your search committee!"

"That's OK, Jerry," she said. "It's celestial mechanics. I studied at Oxford with Toynbee. You remember." (It struck Simon that this wasn't a question, it was a command. This fact slipped away as well).

"Of course! And it's only midterms! At this rate I'll be senile by Christmas," Professor Carter raised his coffee cup to

take a sip, remembered it was empty and set it down again. A thought like a nervous squirrel half crossed his mind, saw a car coming and darted back the way it came.

"Anyway," he said to Simon. "Your stray comet theory is intriguing but I'm afraid it just doesn't hold any water. Better stick to extraterrestrial life."

"Yeah... I guess you're right."

"Well, sorry to be such a downer," said Laura Ipsum, Specialist in celestial Mechanics. "If you'll excuse me, I have to go get ready for class. Be seeing you." She stood, removed a book from her purse.

"Oh, Simon you left this at the observatory this morning," she said, handing the book to Simon.

"Um. Thanks," he said, taking the book. "I uh... yeah. Thanks."

Then she left. Or someone did. Simon and Professor Carter weren't entirely certain about this. There was the distinct feeling that there had been someone there, but now there was just a lingering absence, like a hole in the world. And why was there a third chair at the table?

"So. Simon," said Doctor Carter. "Any plans for tonight?"

"Tonight? Oh! Right. You know, I've been so busy, I almost forgot it was Halloween."

"You should take the night off. Go to a party or something. Relax. The comet will be there tomorrow."

"Yeah, I know. You're probably right..."

Simon examined the book. It was a hardback edition of H.G. Wells' *The War of The Worlds*. The pages were yellowing a bit but otherwise, there was nothing especially remarkable about it. Simon flipped through the book, searching for a particular passage that he half remembered, about the way the Martians looked when they crawled out of the cylinder. Instead, he found a small card tucked between chapters 16 and 17:

Grave Matters Are Afoot!

Please Attend a Gathering of a Most Unique Nature

Arrive promptly at 7:00 P.M., October 31<sup>st</sup>

C.S.

On the back was an address in Forest Park. It was then that everything became clear: C.S. was obviously Charlie Sultan, and this was an invitation to one of his infamous Halloween parties.

Simon had met Charlie in his undergraduate days at the University of Portland and right away, was impressed by the lavish attention to detail that he paid to planning his parties. Simon remembered, vaguely, one previous Halloween party in which Charlie had hired some of the drama students to haunt an abandoned house. Their makeup was the most convincing Simon had ever seen. He never did figure out how they managed to appear and disappear from one room to another. Several people had gotten

scared when they wandered into the basement looking for a quiet spot and found the dungeon, complete with rack and pig's blood spattered on the walls. It was just like Charlie to deliver invitations tucked inside of books. (Wasn't it? Simon half remembered being handed the book by someone but just who escaped him at the moment).

Simon decided that Doctor Carter was right. He needed a night off. The computer would be collating data most of the night anyway, and the mystery of the self-steering comet could wait. It was probably just an error in math anyway.