

## Chapter Two

As the party was scheduled for that night, Simon barely had time to put together a costume. Right after class, he peddled his bicycle as fast as he could and managed to reach the boarding house in record time.

Simon informed Mrs. Pavlovna about the party and they managed to devise a simple costume suitable for the occasion: from the nearly infinite depths of the hall closet, Mrs. Pavlovna pulled her dead husband's old Soviet army uniform.

"Oh, Gregor. You were such a tiny, tiny man..." said Mrs. Pavlovna. She tugged on the short sleeves of the coat, which left Simon's wrists exposed. The pants were tight but only a little high. No one would notice, as long as he didn't sit down.

"That's alright," said Simon. "I'll be an exceptionally hip communist." He put on the hat and looked at himself in the mirror over the mantel. The applets on his shoulders made him smile.

Lilly sat on the sofa, flipping through *War of the Worlds* with her wooden hands and occasionally watching Mrs. Pavlovna's impromptu tailoring.

"I don't remember any Soviets in the book," said Lilly.

"Well, it's a fairly loose interpretation," said Simon, adjusting his tie, "but well within the theme of the party."

"And you can tell this just from the invite?"

"No, the book."

"I thought it was your book?"

"No. I don't own a copy of *War of the Worlds*. At least, I don't think I do... Anyway, it's just like Charlie. He once threw a Civil War ball and all the invites were printed on pages from *Gone With The Wind*. You could, uh, come along, Lilly. If you want. We could maybe find some green face paint and you could go as a Martian."

"Parties aren't really my thing," she said. "I think I'll stay here and give out candy."

Just then, the doorbell rang. Lilly picked up the bowl of candy and was greeted by tiny shrieks of, "trick or treat!" as she opened the door.

Mrs. Pavlovna found a false mustache in the old makeup kit left over from when her oldest son, Johnny, was briefly involved with an amateur troop of actors. The mustache completed the costume nicely.

"There," said Mrs. Pavlovna. "You look just like him."

"Gregor? Really?"

"Oh no! Gregor was ugly as a troll! No, you look like Yuri Gagarin, from his pictures. With a mustache, of course. Now there was a handsome man!"

At a quarter to seven, Simon set off on his bicycle, false mustache flapping in the wind, *The War of the Worlds* and invitation in his courier bag.

It was dark by the time he reached the house in the Portland hills. The house was a sprawling modernist collage of cantilevered roofs, hard right angles and wide picture windows with a narrow driveway leading up a steep hill. Puffing as he came to a stop in the driveway, Simon tucked his bicycle into a nook between two shining cars and took a minute to catch his breath before knocking on the front door.

A woman opened the door. She wore robes of multicolored translucent silk that shimmered and changed patterns depending on what direction the light was hitting them. Standing there in the moonlit doorway, they were purplish silver. The fitted sleeves and headscarf accentuated her long neck and arms but hid her hair and everything else, except her hands. Her face was covered by a sleek bronze mask with a Mona Lisa smirk.

Simon thought she looked familiar but decided that was impossible, as he couldn't even see her face.

"Um. Hi," said Simon. "I'm here for the... party?"

The woman regarded Simon impassively and held out her slender fingered hand. Simon fumbled in his courier bag for the invite and handed it to her.

Without a word, the woman turned and disappeared into the courtyard. Simon realized after five paces that eh was supposed to follow. The ground was covered in finely crushed gravel that glinted silvery in the dusk, with a single slender tree, bereft of all but three orange leaves.

The main door to the house was shaped like a keyhole and opened into a living room sparsely decorated by low tables and chairs made of delicately arched rods of aluminum and wood. The walls were bare but several statues were placed around the room. Most of these were squat organic figures with hollow centers or holes, which reminded Simon of navels. Others were roughly human shaped spindles like Giacometti figures. In the center of the room was a giant silver pointed spire that resembled an elongated rocket, or a bird. Simon couldn't decide which.

About a dozen people stood among the rooms, almost like statues themselves. Some stood near one another, as if in conversation but not talking, while others drifted in and out of other doors, other rooms. They were all silent. And they were all dressed like the woman who had greeted Simon at the door, in diaphanous robes of indeterminate color and wearing masks that covered their faces. No two masks were the same. They were as

simple as a silver featureless orb, or as elaborate as a spiraling rams horn.

Simon paused in the doorway to take in the scene and realized he had lost his guide somewhere. She had apparently just kept walking and wandered off to some other room. He became acutely aware of his false mustache, which was beginning to itch. Also, that he was just standing there, in the doorway. He forced himself to walk across the room, nodded to several people as if they were old friends. They very well could have been, under the masks, though he doubted it. The way they looked at him made it hard to say for certain, as most of the masks lacked visible eyeholes and the ones that did all had curious yellow glowing lights in place of their eyes. But even without being able to see their eyes, Simon felt hot white daggers poking his skin. There was a tide of aggravation, disdain and confusion that threatened to drown him slowly, starting at his high-water pants and trickling up to his false mustache.

Simon reached the other side of the room after what felt like a thousand years. There was a narrow door there that led down a hall. Simon leaned against the door jam, crossed his arms. Uncrossed his arms. Put his hands in his pockets. Took them out of his pockets. Adjusted his tie.

From his vantage point by the door, Simon could see a room at the end of the hall where several people, also in masks and weirdly colored togas stood around a man, dressed like them, who

was waving his hands over a small polished steel box with antennae. A gentle humming and whirring sound changed pitch as he waved his hands between the antennae. The lights in the room at the end of the hall also changed, swirling purple and blue and green and the haunting music, like the sound of stars breathing or the dreams of comets, echoed down the hall.

A man in a reddish gold robe and wearing a brass Roman centurion style mask with narrow eye slits and a blank mouth walked up to Simon and took him by the arm.

"Don't say a word," hissed the man under the mask. "Follow me."

He escorted Simon down the hall and into a darkened side room. The man in the centurion mask turned the light on, revealing a narrow, sparsely decorated bedroom. There was just a bed made up with crisp white sheets and a lamp, which was sitting on the floor.

The man raised his mask so it was sitting on top of his head, revealing the grim and determined face of a civil servant or high school math teacher. The low angle of the light cast by the lamp on the floor gave him ominous shadows underneath his watery eyes.

"Who's double booking?" said the man.

"Double what now?"

"Who sent you? FBI? Army Intelligence?" He looked Simon up and down, examining his too-tight Soviet uniform. "Has to be Army Intelligence. No one else is that dumb..."

"Hay!" protested Simon. "This is the genuine thing! It's better than your toga party getup. What, you think this is some frat boy shindig?"

"What in the Hell are you talking about," said the man. He took his mask all the way off and ran a hand through his thinning light brown hair.

"What in the Hell are you talking about?" said Simon

"I asked you first!" hissed the man.

"Look," said Simon, "I'm going to go see if I can find Charlie, say hi and go, because this is all just a little too weird for me."

"Oh, it's weird," said the man. "You don't even know how weird. Leave it to Army Intelligence to send some noob in, blowing my cover... shit!" The man threw his mask on the bed. "Do you know who I am? Who I work for? Do you know how long I spent getting these people to trust me? And you walk in here dressed like, like... that! And threaten to blow everything! If they find me talking to you... fuck me! The whole operation'll be blown! Alright look," he grabbed the mask from the bed and slid it over his head. "I tell you what, obviously, you're playing some esoteric angle here, Mr. Army Intel. You army boys always did like your freaky calculus... But whatever it is you got going,

that's fine. We'll just, just... pretend you never saw me. We didn't talk and I don't even know you. Got it?"

"Yeah," said Simon. "Think I can swing that."

"Good." Said the man.

"Fine," said Simon.

"Whatever," said the man. He opened the door, peaked out, looked both ways, then shut the light out on Simon and was gone.

Simon stood in the dark, trying to trace the trajectory of his day, and how it could have possibly led him here. Then the door opened. The chandelier in the hall cast a column of light on Simon's face and a hand reached in and pulled him out of the darkened room.