

**EXTRACT:** “AGENDA 2060 Book Two: AI and The View from Space” by A.I. Fabler

## **Chapter One**

### **1. LEVON TOFLER**

The main thought in Levon Tofler’s mind as he careened across the tropical ocean eleven hundred miles south and east of Miami at over six hundred miles per hour was that, as crazy ideas went, this was right up there.

Levon Tofler didn’t mind other people’s ideas. In fact, he loved other people’s ideas when they worked, like this one. But throwing up a sixty-two-mile-high carbon nanotube cable with one end attached to earth and the other tied to a counterweight in space, then running up and down it just like using a building elevator had taken some balls.

“Literally?” he’d asked. “Like, you want to tie Earth to space with a rope?”

They’d talked to him about it way back in a different time, around 2040, and he’d said then that if they ever got it up and running, he’d promise to use it. But it was their creation, not his (by which he meant that you only truly love your own brainchild).

That was twenty odd years ago, and now that they’d finally finished it, here he was: true to his word, using it.

He’d flown out to the floating space station at Port Gaia in a Tofler Sky Taxi, so he could land and take off vertically with no delays. Being autonomous and electric, the taxi was both safe and silent, so the port’s controllers had made no objection when he told them his plan, not forgetting that his space shuttle business was so important to them that they’d accede to whatever he wished anyway.

It was such a beautiful day, with the sky and sea conjuring every shade of blue and blending them into each other like a Curaçao cocktail, in the middle of which, like a bright green sprig of mint, sat the island of Trovador, the land base for Port Gaia, which floated six

miles offshore, connected by an undersea tunnel. The entrance to that tunnel was what he wanted to avoid today because it would be packed with the world's media, Deep State operatives from the Ministry of Truth and Public Guidance, and very likely an official party from the Agenda Implementation Tribunal. The highly anticipated return of Alexa Smythe to Earth was creating a feeding frenzy.

Levon smiled to himself and unwrapped an aniseed twist, licked it thoughtfully, then popped it in his mouth. His companion, the implacable package of muscle and bone known to the world as Tank, pointed at the rapidly approaching port and to the Sky Taxi's dashboard instruments above their heads, as if to say they were going too fast. Levon was itching to override the autonomous controls and do a few swooping dives and loops around the port's tower and sky cable before landing, but luckily, the controls were childproof. While the eyes and ears of the Sky Taxi were in the edge computing built around its perimeter, the pilot was a self-learning piece of code in a sterile data center miles away in the desert, run by one man and a dog. The man's job was to feed the dog. The dog's job was to stop the man from touching anything. Ha ha, Levon liked that one. He told it a lot.

The rear propellers turned in reverse, and as they slowed, all four propellers began to swivel upwards and synchronously put them into vertical mode. All good ideas were simple. Levon cracked the hard-boiled aniseed twist between his teeth. The more complicated things became, the more certain people were that machine intelligence was taking over and the chances were increasing that they were living in computer simulations. Demoralizing, depressing, cataplexic paranoia of that kind was spreading like an induced trance among people who were untethered by intellect or belief. What they missed was the element at the core of every great idea, which was the human desire to make it happen. No machine carried that desire within it, no matter what its level of intelligence.

"You know something, Tank?" he thought to ask. Tank nodded and kept an eye on the instrument gauges. "No machine wakes up in the morning and says, 'I've just had a great idea. It may be crazy, and it may not work, but I'm going to give it a try.'

"That sounds more like you, Levon," he replied on Tank's behalf.

The strength of his relationship with his constant companion and bodyguard was in good part due to the fact that Tank was mute and made no attempt to talk, so Levon spoke for

him. They'd never had a single disagreement or misunderstanding, and no unwelcome pest had ever got close enough to Levon to lay a hand on him. Except for a bat-crazy woman or two, but it wasn't Tank's fault that Levon was drawn to creatures who hung upside down in trees until night came.

Hanging upside down on its now vertical electric props, the Tofler Sky Taxi lowered itself delicately onto the deck of the port. They were expected. The large person in the parachute-silk boiler suit with the boyish grin and floppy black hair who stepped out of the aircraft was the genius-level founder of the commercial space industry, which had thrown open the Earth's window to the universe over the last four incredibly short decades, so of course he was expected. The future of Port Gaia very much depended on his continuing support. If he had another, better idea in his head about how to launch and land spacecraft, the rest of the space industry would follow him, and that could be disastrous for the Port. That conclusion was writ large in the body language of the welcoming group who stood on the landing platform, ready to pay obeisance, while desperately trying to interpret his thinking from what they could see in his facial expression, not realizing that Levon's facial expression was seldom anything but pleasant and expectant and no guide at all to what he was thinking.

The delegation advanced, bowing from the waist, business cards at the ready (they had preserved that strange Japanese custom, it seemed).

Levon jumped out. Tank stayed put.

*"Minasan e no go aisatsu."* The eccentric genius grinned, giving the whole scene an awkward wave with the back of his hand, accompanied by an involuntary skip not dissimilar to that of a child who couldn't contain its energy.

*"Subarashī hi,"* he called out, hoping it meant what he meant, which was that it was a great day, and more particularly, a great day to be returning to Earth. For high above them, at the Geostationary Earth Orbit Station, the Tofler Mars Shuttle had successfully docked over forty-eight hours before, allowing its crew and passengers to be put through deconditioning tests and microgravity adjustments, ready for their descent down the Elevator to the Earth Platform and a debriefing by Levon himself. That was the official line. Unofficially, returning shuttles from Mars had become a regular event, not requiring his

attendance. Space was no longer a vast void leading into infinity; it had become a highway. And he wasn't here for the debriefing; he was here because of the special passenger on board.

Soon he was surrounded by Tofler Shuttle ground support crew, and they ushered him into the Earth Port for cold drinks and sushi rolls filled with smoked eel and orange crab eggs, which Levon ate greedily. He loved being around aeronautical engineers and astrophysicists because gems spilled out of their mouths in conversation like grains of sticky rice, and Levon hoovered them up. "What are we learning?" he'd ask, and off they'd go, reeling off incredible facts and setting his mind racing. For someone who'd never had the time to finish a degree, it was a gift from heaven that he could understand what they were saying, and oftentimes, be ahead of them.

Now, as they were talking about the perfect landing they'd achieved at the Karman line on the edge of the Earth's atmosphere, his mind flew away to the dream he'd only shared with a very select few. It was so exciting that he wanted to talk about it to everyone, but it would have to wait.

"And launching?" he asked. "How much benefit do we get from the slingshot dynamics?" Slingshot dynamics, using the leverage of planetary motion to multiply the speed of rockets into deep space a hundred times over with no extra cost in energy, was how David had beaten Goliath. Beautiful. Simple. Wait until they learned about the plan he was hatching to utilize its dynamic force. The world would never be the same again.

But at the same time that he was thinking this, he was thinking also about what Alexa had said in that episode of *The View from Space*, which had blown his mind wide open like an exploding Crosse (Levon was a big pyrotechnics fan). Who'd have thought to describe the galaxy in the way she did, and then to have postulated that a mathematical calculation to explain its creation and positioning was just a hair's breadth away from a quantum computer's grasp? She wasn't just a genius; she was an Emanator: a source of creation. And Levon had known immediately that he must come to that source. Which is why he was here this day.

All this while others talked, and Levon listened.

Before going into the arrival hall to greet the returning Mars mission, he sneaked another piece of sushi off a waiter's tray, unable to resist the brilliant orange of the crab eggs.