

Around the year 4200 AD, trouble was brewing all over the world and it would seem that only the greatest of miracles would get the world out of its mess. Humanity had saved itself many times over its past few millennia. It had fought thousands of wars, suffered hunger on a global scale, been attacked randomly by disease.

It is fair to say that humans have seen it *all*. However, it seems that a great catastrophe is about to engulf the world in darkness. Earth is about to be expunged of all life as we know it. Things will be different.

50 years before...

Scientists predicted the catastrophe to strike. Due to tension between countries and many preparations for war, they built a last resort shelter as a final refuge for the human race. They called it the W.A.S.H. (World Annihilation Safe Haven).

The people building the W.A.S.H. would not only have to supply the families living in the bunker with necessities, like food and water. But they would also need to think about what people would need when they emerged into the harsh and unforgiving world of the future. They could not keep them in a special habitat forever.

This was the question that was on Dr. Valerio's mind. He had run through dozens of computer simulations over the years trying to find the right set of data so that they could program the W.A.S.H. to help the survivors in every possible way. This was an extremely difficult job as the universe is very unpredictable. It would take decades to invent and create a device so complex that it reacted and took action to defend humanity at any given moment. Dr. Valerio did not have that kind of time. But he did the best he could.

He decided to create a hatch on the W.A.S.H. that would automatically open after 300 earth years. Valerio decided on 300 years because hopefully, after that amount of time, the world would be in good enough shape to support life. It *had* to be enough because the W.A.S.H. could not hold enough energy to last any longer than that. Sooner or later, its massive battery-banks would run out of power.

Everything that ever happened in human history led up to this moment. *He*, Tim Valerio, decided the fate of the human race and swore an oath to himself that he would not let the human race crumble.

Year 4267

Dr. Valerio was running through the streets of Washington DC., tears flowing across his face like a broken faucet that wouldn't stop. He mumbled something about space and time. People all around him were screaming and sobbing.

"Jonathan!" He heard a woman scream in an ear-splitting cry.

"Jonathan where are you?!" He heard again.

He saw whole families hunched against buildings with their knees tucked up to their chests praying for it to end. Dr. Valerio felt dizzy as he looked around him and thought about what the once beautiful world had become. All the buildings around him had smashed windows and crumbling walls. He felt as if a breeze of wind could push him over. But he swiftly wiped the tears from his face and ran toward where his family was waiting.

As he went into his apartment, doors were off their hinges, lamps were broken, and scraps of paper were blowing in the air. He found his family at the end of a broken down hallway. As he ran to them, he noticed cracks in the smooth walls. Lights were flickering on and off, bulbs lay broken on the floor. As he looked into his wife's eyes, as well as his two children's stunned faces, his mouth opened but no words came out.

"Are...are you ok?", he finally stuttered.

"Yeah", the three of them mumbled softly.

"Good", Valerio spoke sternly. He said it more bravely than he felt. "Now, come with me." They all followed him through the apocalyptic world.

He brought them to his lab and rushed them into the W.A.S.H. and quickly locked the doors and yelled, "Goodbye." The spacecraft launched and he slowly shuffled back outside, alone. Valerio grasped tightly on a small metal box. Inside it, a photo of him and his family. Under that, inscribed on the hard surface, was his name: Tim Valerio. As he stared at the photo, someone in the distance screamed, "LOOK UP! GET DOWN!"

And there in the sky, he saw the most horrifying and massive weapon of war whistling through the sky. Suddenly Dr. Valerio heard the loudest sound he had ever heard.

"vvvvVVV BANG!"

The deafening sound shook the ground and echoed across the city. It was a ray of light that hacked the incoming projectile in under a millisecond. Just then he saw an unimaginable explosion of insane proportions just a couple hundred feet away from him.

"So long", he whispered to himself. He heard a few screams then saw a bright light.

"May my life's work pay off", Valerio's final thought flashed.

The world fell silent.

War Never Changes...

Year 4571

Ben glanced around his new class. It was stark white with little compact desks with different compartments for class utensils.

"Ok class, my name is Mrs. Georgia and I will be your teacher for the next three years," his new teacher said proudly.

Ben scanned her face. She was bony and pale with sharp cheekbones, flowing blond hair stretched a third of the way down her back, as well as intelligent darting eyes. She was wearing pointy black shoes and flashy red pants.

“Ooh”, whispered a kid from one of the back desks, “I heard she’s pretty good,” he said excitedly.

Another whispered back, “No, I heard she’s harsh as stomping on a LEGO.

Paul told me she is...”, he added a few seconds later in an obnoxious voice.

“Well, how does Paul know?!” the other boy said back in an even more obnoxious voice.

“Quiet! At once!”, the teacher said in a firm voice trying to stay calm on the first day of school.

“Now, if you’ll let me speak, today we will begin our first year by studying what life was like around the year 2000 AD on Earth. Now, if you all close your eyes, I will transmit the information you will need on this subject into your brains”, announced Mrs. Georgia.

As Ben went through the transfer from Mrs. Georgia, he paid very close attention, because it was Ben’s first day of school at T.V.S.(Tim Valerio School). It was the best school in the W.A.S.H. Ben knew this name had something to do with a famous Earth person who helped create this school, as well as a lot of the public community work. Ben did not know much else about him though.

As Ben processed the thoughts from Mrs. Georgia, Ben heard things about weapons that shot metal balls, metal boxes with wheels to get around, stacks of paper that had symbols on it to speak to people without their voice, how days were only 24 hours long, and water that falls from the sky. This all sounded like complete gibberish to Ben. He had so many questions. Why they didn’t just use thought transmitters, and what was a sky? But he did not want to sound stupid in front of his new classmates. He kept silent and tried to pay attention to the rest of the information he absorbed that day.

When Sentra Control shut off at the end of the day, Ben took his thought transmitter off his head and carefully returned it to the teacher.

When everybody had left the class, Ben went to ask his old teacher, Mr. Ruben, what a sky was. As he asked the question, he heard a girl snicker behind him.

“Neta, I believe class is over. Correct?”, said Ruben with a sigh through his nose.

“Yes Mr. Ruben”, said Neta, trying to hold in a wide grin. Ben felt a flash of anger in the back of his head as he watched Neta leave the room.

Ben turned back to Mr. Ruben who explained.

“A sky was a big blue dome that surrounded the earth,” he said looking up at the ceiling as if he were imagining it was there.

“Why was it blue?”, asked Ben.

Mr. Ruben didn’t exactly know the answer for sure, but he didn’t want Ben to know he didn’t know, as he had been Ben’s teacher for so long.

“Because...because, well, you wouldn’t understand, it has to do with the atmosphere”, he finally mumbled.

“I know about the atmosphere”, Ben said cheerfully puffing out his chest.

Mr. Ruben let out a deep puff of air in frustration.

“Then maybe we can talk about it next class.”, Mr. Ruben said with a fake smile.

Ben walked across the artificial grass field. “Blue dome? hmmm”, he repeated in his mind over and over again. “Earth must have been a perfect little world”, he thought in wonder and curiosity. And for the rest of the day, he lay there on the synthetic grass, not so hungry, simply imagining what it would be like to be under a sky. It was hard to imagine though, as he stared at

the boring white bunker roof. Some of the lights up there kept flickering and sparking like they always did.

“I want to be out *THERE in the open*”, he yelled in his mind. “Why am I in this cage? Where is the blue sky atmosphere?”, he repeated quietly. His mind was spinning with thoughts.

“Are they hiding the Earth somewhere?”, thought Ben.

“Then again, maybe people just like the W.A.S.H. better.”, he pondered.

Just then, all the lights around him completely blacked out.

He heard a number of people gasp, “What?”...and “Whoa?”,

Ben felt cold in the darkness, but soon the lights came back on, and everything was back to normal.

Ben returned to his thoughts and wondered what W.A.S.H. stood for. Everybody he ever asked said they did not know.

The next *lights on*, or virtual dawn, Ben walked into school and found everybody looking at him raising their eyebrows as if he wasn't wearing pants. Then he heard whispers about Ben, and sky, and... giggles. Ben glared at Neta and his head boiled with rage. His hands turned to veiny fists and he felt a painful dizziness in the back of his jaw as Neta laughed with her friends.

“Why was it so funny that I didn't know what a sky was.” he wondered with anger.

All of a sudden Ben froze and nearly fell to the ground but caught himself on Mrs. Georgia's desk.

Suddenly he noticed a spark emanating from the back of Mrs. Georgia. Of course nobody noticed because they were too busy ignorantly laughing at him. “Silence!”, the teacher said, and school began. By the end of the last period, Ben was overwhelmed by everything he did not know. But just as he was about to leave, Ben couldn't forget the spark that seemingly burst out of his teacher.

“Could she be a robot?”, Ben wondered.

Ben turned around. “Um...what exactly is the name of your father”, he asked Mrs. Georgia.

“Why, Mr. Tim Valerio dear”, she replied dryly.

That name sounded familiar to Ben.

“And um...when...when was he born?” He asked seeing the possibility becoming more and more prominent.

“Year 4171”, she said.

“Ok...”, Ben said with a cold face trying desperately to keep himself composed, realizing that was over 300 years ago.

Mrs. Robot smiled back.

Ben left the class dumbfounded not knowing what to think of this.

“Should I tell somebody? I am pretty sure robot teachers are illegal”, Ben thought.

Ben started racing home, hearing his dad calling him for dinner. As Ben ate his small nutrient pod, he decided not to tell his dad about his teacher.

Ben lay down on the bottom bed of his bunk, he wondered why anyone would even let a robot be a teacher.

Just then he saw Neta's friends out the window coming home from their wormhole after-school activity.

He shot out of his bed but unfortunately thwacked his head on the top bunk. Neta's juvenile friends started giggling again and skipped off.

Ben was simply infuriated. He wanted to tell his teacher but then remembered how not helpful Mrs. Hardware would be.

Ben kicked the wall as hard as he could in total rage. Out popped a piece of the wall. But this hole in the wall was not exactly broken, but rather a perfect octagon, almost as if it were meant to be opened.

“Wait... What?!”

Ben knelt down to peer into the newly discovered hollow octagonal opening.

On the other side of the hatch was a long hall with light panels going on and on in what seemed like an endless maze.

Ben knew what he had discovered was important. He desperately wanted to explore what was on the other side. Just then, his mother called him to turn off his room lights. Ben took one last glimpse at his unexpected discovery. Just as he began to reseal the hatch, there came a loud hissing noise like air leaking out of an oxygen tank. The eerie noise was interrupted by his mom, once again calling him to go to sleep. A couple seconds later, the hissing ceased, and Ben painfully fought his curiosity and hesitantly flicked the light switch off.

In the middle of the night, Ben had a dream about there being a big blue sky dome on the other side, and it being open and free. He imagined sprinting through endless fields of what his teachers called soil. The thought seemed so wonderful but just out of reach.

Ben was awakened by the beaming W.A.S.H. lights of pseudo dawn. As always, recorded bird noises blaring in the background, and the sounds of fountains trickling water.

He stood up from his bed and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. He looked out of the window at the stretch of synthetic grass and roads until his eyes met his school. Ben grunted.

He walked to his bathroom and started brushing his teeth thinking about what homework he would get today. He slipped on his clothes and slung his backpack over his shoulder.

Ben gripped his room doorknob then nearly jumped out of his pants. “The hatch!”, he yelled aloud.

“What was that, sweetheart?”, his mother asked from the kitchen.

“Nothing” Ben replied. “Just uhh...making my bed”, he lied.

He slowly began walking to the hatch. Ben rewound everything that had happened last night. He crouched down to open it. “Breakfast is ready”, his mom yelled in the background. “AHHRRRGggg!”, Ben moaned. “Every time!”, he said. “What? What are you doing up there?”, his mom asked. “Nothing...I'm coming”, Ben said with a sigh.

He once again took a last look at the hatch, then headed to the kitchen. After breakfast, Ben's mom wished him luck and he was off to school.

On his way there, the lights flickered off. Everything went silent. Except this time, it stayed dark. No more bird chirps, no more fountain water. Nothing.

Panic began to rise throughout the W.A.S.H.

Ben froze, this had never happened before. He became cold in the lonely darkness. "Forget about school", Ben cackled to himself. "I know exactly where I'm going" he spoke with determination.

As Ben scrambled past the chaotic open floor, he heard people running and screaming in all directions. Some of them slamming into Ben. "Magnetic shield... minimal power!" warned the W.A.S.H. from above. "Emergency compressed oxygen release." It blared again. Ben heard an enormous amount of air rush past his body.

The whole area had been completely robbed of any peacefulness.

Ben could see his house doors. He would be there in 4 seconds, 3...2 and...

Suddenly his robot teacher smacked into him. He remembered her asking him if he was okay, but he was out cold after that.

He woke up in his bed. His parents staring down at him. "It was all a dream!", he said. "Oh thank god it was...", then he looked out the window. It was pitch black, with people running around. "Just *fantastic*", Ben grumbled.

"Are you okay?!", his mom asked nervously.

"What happened?!", his dad asked in a squeaky voice. Ben ignored the questions.

"Who did you buy this house from?" Ben asked swiftly. His parents exchanged looks. "Why... uh...I believe, from the president of this place himself. I heard him call it the E.T.", His dad added.

E.T. Ben repeated. "Extra-Terrestrial?" Ben wondered. "The classroom's Empathetic Teddybear?" Ben questioned. "What the heck am I thinking?", Ben said to himself. "I must have hit my head pretty hard", Ben thought. The whole time his parents looking at him like he was not their son.

"Escape Tunnel!!!", Ben whispered in disbelief. "We *were* meant to leave this place", Ben yelled at the top of his lungs with wild eyes.

Ben hopped out of bed and over to the hatch. His parents were still frozen looking at the place Ben had just been.

"See you on the other side.", Ben said to his parents like he had been waiting 1000 years to say it. Ben gripped the hatch and pulled with all his might. Before he went in, he hugged his parents, though they were still in shock.

Ben heard that screeching sound from the tunnel. Like oxygen leaking from a tank.

He dove in. "Blue skies and fresh soil, here I come", Ben said.

Ben began to crawl through the tunnel. Ten minutes later, his hands and knees raw from the cold hard floor. Ben was excitedly terrified. But still could not see an end to the tunnel. Ahead of him, the path was drenched in pure darkness.

At this point, Ben had been crawling for a half an hour. “What if this is just a random ventilation shaft?” Ben thought. “What if it's all a mistake?” “It can't be!”, Ben reasoned to himself. “It's my best shot,” he confirmed. He kept on going.

Ben began to wonder if his parents were still there staring at each other. Ben looked down as he crawled and bonked into something. Another hatch! He opened it by turning its metal wheel, submarine style. On the other side unfolded an open room.

He stood up and brushed off his knees. The room lights were off. It had an eerie silence. The walls were dark black with complex wire patterns throughout the room. In the center of it all, was a table with buttons and levers all over it. Computers built into the table had circuit boards hanging everywhere. You'd think a tornado had blown through the area. The word ‘error’ was flashing continuously on all the computer screens.

Ben gazed across the room until his eyes met a window. He immediately dashed over to it like it was a heap of gold.

When Ben reached the window, he looked out. His eyes grew wide. For a moment Ben forgot how to breathe. He slowly shuffled away from the window, then turned back to the tunnel. He took one last look, then began to crawl the long way back. There was but one thought in his mind: “People *need* to know about this.”

After the tedious crawl back, Ben's back ached from bending down. He arrived to hear his parents arguing in the other room.

“It would be safest to bring police to get him out!”, his father said in a panicky voice.

“We're his parents”, complained Ben's Mother. “We need to get hi-“, Ben's Mom suddenly saw him.

“Oh, honey!” She exclaimed with great joy. “Where?! What?! Why?!”, Ben's Mother was clearly confused.

“I saw Earth!”, shouted Ben. “Out of a window! It looked just like the ancient photos of Earth Mrs. Georgia showed us!”

Both Ben's parents just looked at each other, questioning: “*Is he ok?*”

“*Ugh*”, said Ben, exasperated. “I've got to tell people what I saw!”, Ben puffed desperately and then bolted out the door.

Outside, the chaos had only grown worse. The area was still dark, but within it roared hundreds of people frantically running and yelling. Ben ran all the way to his school. He knew exactly what he was searching for. He caught a glimpse of the megaphone surrounded by safety glass. Ben kicked the glass Chuck Norris style. It instantly shattered. Ben grasped the megaphone and ran all the way back to the center of the clearing, dodging people left and right. “Attention!” He said through the megaphone. Everyone kept running and panicking.

“**I...SAW...EARTH!**”, he shrieked in the emergency megaphone.

That got their attention. The yelling and screaming died down. Ben peered into the darkness and saw confused faces looking at him.

He gulped nervously.

He explained to the mob about where he had been and what he had found. I saw the Earth out a window”, Ben dramatically terminated his speech.

Dead silence.

“How do we know you are telling the truth?
And how do we know it’s safe?”, protested a familiar voice. It was Neta.

“Feel free to stay here when this place runs out of oxygen. Besides, I would rather take my chances out there, than spend the rest of my life in this fake world.” Ben barked back.

More silence.

“We are coming with you!”, said Ben’s parents together, proudly.
Me too!”, said a few more people. And before long, everyone was willing to make an escape.

Ben led the way. Dozens of people began filing through Ben’s room and into the tunnel. Ben went in last. He could hear the echoes of people chattering ahead of him in the tight tunnel.

When Ben reached the other side, the newly discovered room was stuffed with people. “Over here!” said a woman from the back corner of the room. Everyone gathered in a semi-circle to look.

Before them was a thick metal door that read: *Earth Rendez-Vous Pods*. Everyone gasped, which was followed by another rush forward through the tunnel door. This tunnel, however, was tall enough to stand in and was lined with more steel doors.
Each read: **pod 1, pod 2, pod 3** and so on. Once again, a mad rush to get through the escape pod doors.

When everyone had gotten in their pods, about ten people each, Ben finally got in his. The pods were about the size of a van and had one window at the front of the spacecraft. The door shut behind them. “Please be seated and brace yourself for launch”, the soothing pod voice stated calmly. As Ben sat down in one of the pod’s seats, it created an energy shield, tight around his body. It felt like being wrapped in warm bubble wrap.

After just a minute, the pod made a “clunk” sound, as it released from its docking port. Ben looked out the front window. They started slowly moving toward... Earth!

He glanced to the left and right of the space pod. Moving in formation, he saw all of his fellow pods, all heading straight to Earth. In concert, the pods thrust forward with breathtaking speed.

They were rapidly approaching Earth. As the pods began to descend down to the blue dot, Ben knew why their ancestors had installed energy shields. The nose of the spacecraft was shrouded in flames. Ben felt heat rise into his seat. Meteoroids and asteroids zoomed past them, nearly grazing their pod. Ben watched in horror as a red-hot meteoroid viciously slammed into the pod to the left. The pod was disintegrated. Ben felt immediate guilt. He had embarked them on this deadly journey. But there was no turning back now.

When Ben's craft was a few seconds from Earth's crust, it abruptly flipped itself upside down and fired its landing boosters. It came to a surprisingly soft landing. Everyone in Ben's pod sat in stunned silence.

Ben slowly opened the thick airlock door. It popped open with a creak. There, before him was *real* grass. Miles and miles of it. He leaped onto the grassy Earth surface. What immediately caught his eye was the great royal-blue sky, as well as some sort of light in the sky, too bright to look at.

He felt the damp soil on his shoes.

The air felt pure and fresh.

The other members of his pod were gawking at the beautiful scene before them. As Ben peered into the distance, he could see the other landed pods and members, gasping and laughing. It was a magical moment.

He lay in the grass, absorbing the sunlight. They had been given a second chance at the world. At life. It would not end there, this was just the beginning of the human race...take two.

And then he saw it. Sticking out of the dirt was a small piece of metal. Ben curiously picked it up. It had been sealed shut by the searing heat of an explosion. Ben slammed it against a rock. It cracked open. At this point, his whole pod came to look. Inside, was a photo of a man and his family.

Written under the photo was a familiar name to them, a hero to all: Tim Valerio.