

A World of Difference (1-932802-98-3)
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Chapter 2

Round 'em up

A dim beam of light came through the window to the desolate landscape of the Martian surface. The day was about to begin. Darren McAndrews rolled over in his bed to stop his annoying alarm. He must have hit the snooze button at least four times, so it had to be about 6:45. After silencing the contraption he sat up in his bed. "Today's the big day," he said to himself. He then turned out of his bed onto the floor. He headed toward the closet stepping over the piles of discarded clothing he had lying around. He reached the closet and opened it to reveal a single uniform. It consisted of a pair of white and maroon athletic shorts and jersey to match. The jersey had a maroon stripe down both sides that followed into the pants. On the back of his jersey was the number 27 with McAndrews written above it. On the front was again the number 27 but it had the name New Boston Craters across it.

Darren took the outfit from the closet and stared at it briefly. He then turned his attention to a trophy on the wall over his bed. He shook his head in disgrace as he read the inscription.

2157 Pounce World Championship
New Boston Craters
Second Place

He then turned away from the award and back to the jersey. “It’s gonna be different this year,” he announced with a new spark of confidence in his speech. He donned the jersey and walked into his bathroom. He looked at himself in the mirror and gave himself a once over. The brown hair that reached to his shoulders was good enough and his brown eyes were bright and full of confidence. “Looking good,” he boasted to himself while striking a pose. He wasn’t very big or as muscular as some of his other teammates but he definitely had greater skill. That’s why he was the captain.

He headed downstairs and out after shutting off the lights in his apartment and stepped out into a large corridor about thirty feet across and about thirty feet high. Brilliant white tile lined the floors and matching white paint covered the walls. The smell of pine filled the hall from being washed last night. It was only cleaned once a month. Darren turned left and headed for his first teammate’s apartment, which was down a ways. On his way he spotted a storeowner putting up a sign in an unfamiliar language. “We keep getting more and more people up here that speak more and more languages,” he said to himself.

He eventually came to his friend’s room. From out in the hall he could already hear hardcore music from inside. He knocked on the door. “Yeah, come on in,” called a deep voice from inside. Darren opened the door and walked in. He could see Butch on a bench press in the living room. The stench of body odor and burnt food flooded Darren’s nose. He could see Butch’s food burning on the stove in the kitchen.

“So, how much you got on there?” Darren asked his friend.

“Four hundred,” Butch replied. Darren went over to extinguish Butch’s breakfast.

Butch Murray was a good friend of Darren’s since before they joined the professional league together. Both were twenty-six years old. He was a very large, muscular black man with a

shaved head. He had an attitude when it came to playing the game and had the grunt to back it up.

Darren watched as his friend strained himself under the pressure of the weight. A small puddle of sweat had collected under Butch's head, discoloring the carpet. His muscles surged with power. The veins in his arms bulged with every press as if about to spew blood. When he finished and got up his entire body pulsed to the rhythm of his heartbeat.

Darren threw him a towel. "Wipe yourself off man. That's just sickening," he said.

"You just wish that you could do that, man," Butch answered back. After wiping himself off he put on his matching number 8 team jersey.

"What exactly were you cooking?" Darren asked.

"Man, I don't remember what that crap was," Butch replied with a slight laugh, and the two walked out of the room back into the corridor.

"Alright. Let's get goin'," Butch declared.

"Alright then," Darren agreed. The pair headed across the corridor to an elevator on the opposite side. Darren pressed the call button and the car was there in a second. "Hold on," Darren reminded his large friend as they entered the elevator. The doors shut and the car seemed to try to pull the two off the floor as it descended twelve floors.

"Damn! Does that thing really need to go that fast?" Butch exclaimed angrily. "I mean, are we in that much of a hurry?"

"You'd be surprised how fast some people want to move around here," Darren said. On that note, the doors opened and they were immediately pushed out of the elevator by a group of rushing shoppers.

The lower ten floors consisted mostly of shops and restaurants. It was the busiest place in any dome. "How do Terry and Amanda live down here with all these...these...loonies?" Butch asked, disgusted by the masses of people.

“I don’t know why Terry would, but Amanda, well that’s a little self-explanatory I think,” Darren added. With that they headed down the corridor to Terry’s room. When they arrived they had to open the doors themselves because Terry wouldn’t be able to hear them from inside. They entered a dark room with the lights out and only some candles lit. On the other side of the room, they saw Terry sitting, staring out the window.

“Welcome,” he said in a very calm tone of voice not turning his attention from the window.

“Are you ready to go yet?” Darren questioned.

“I’ll go get ready,” he answered, and he went upstairs to his room to change.

Terry Michaels was the most nonviolent one of the group and the least athletic. He was a peacekeeper who avoided confrontation and respected others even if they did not respect him. He closely resembled Darren in hair and in his height but he was pale and not as big, but he came to be on the team because of his drive to win. Just because he was nice didn’t mean that he didn’t know his game. Plus, he could think his way out of some hairy situations. Terry came back down after only a few seconds. “Okay. Let’s go get the rest,” he announced in his number 19 jersey, and the three of them exited the room and entered back into the racket of the corridor.

Their next destination was a bit further this time, about a mile down. In the center of the corridor was a large metal track that ran the full length of the dome. On top of the track was an open rail carriage that was used to move people down the corridor. The three of them stepped on board and strapped themselves in. The carriage took off in a flash. Their backs were pressed against the seat rests as they were carried at tremendous speed. The carriage was like a horizontal elevator that only stopped where it was told to. The carriage came to a halt just outside Amanda Pershing’s room.

The group approached the door and knocked, but there was no answer. They tried again. Still nothing. Darren approached and called out, "Amanda, are you up yet?" but he didn't hear anything. Worried about their teammate, they decided to override the door controls and open it from the outside. When the door slid open, there was no sign of Amanda. The lights were off and nothing was turned on in the living room. "Butch, you and Terry wait outside in case she left for breakfast or something and comes back," Darren suggested.

"Well, what are you going to do?" Terry questioned.

"I'm just gonna check upstairs and if I don't find her, we'll go out and look for her. Got it?" The two agreed and waited outside while Darren checked her room.

He climbed the stairs to the top floor and walked to the bedroom door. He could see light reflecting from inside the room on the floor, so he knocked, but there was no answer. He decided that the best thing to do was to go in. She wasn't to be seen. Darren noticed that her bed was empty and the sheets were pulled back, so she was up somewhere. The question was, where? Just as Darren was about to head downstairs and join the others he heard a noise. He looked over and saw the bathroom door open and Amanda stepped out, naked. At the sight of each other under the circumstances they both screamed and Darren ran downstairs.

He reached the bottom and was met by both Terry and Butch. They had heard the yelling from outside. "Whoa, man! What happened up there?" Butch asked. Darren didn't answer him. He didn't dare tell any of them about what he saw up there, but they had an idea of what happened. They waited downstairs for Amanda to finish up.

"Why do women always take so long to do everything?" Darren asked with some boredom in his voice. "I mean it feels like we've been down here forever." Nobody answered.

Not long after Amanda came down. She peered around and noticed that everyone was looking at her. “What are all of you staring at?” she asked. She could tell they knew something.

Amanda was a very attractive girl. She was rather tall, slim, and had an athletic figure. Her face glistened with her bright green eyes and the long blonde hair that cascaded down her back all the way to her waist. The team used her as a distraction against the other teams some of the time. She was the only girl in the sport, and Terry’s cousin. But don’t get me wrong; she had an arm like you’ve never seen. But because of her vulnerability, she had worked up quite an attitude, even with her high-pitched voice. That made her dangerous, even to her own teammates at times. She did, however, embrace her beauty. Even the number 92 jersey she wore exposed her midriff. “Well, what are you lunkheads sitting around for?” she yelled. “We got a game to win. Move out. Go, go, go,” she commanded. The boys knew not to get in her way and they got up and left immediately.

Now they only had one member left to retrieve, H, their goalie. He didn’t live in the same dome as the rest of them, though. To go get him they had to take the carriage all the way to the connecting corridor to the other dome. From there they would board a sort of subway that ran the length of the connecting tunnels to other domes. Their destination was Dome 8, a full twenty miles from their own. Fortunately, the stadium was in that same dome, so they wouldn’t need to make two trips.

While on board the tunnel system, Darren was looking around the coach at the players, his friends. “What’s wrong, Darren?” Amanda asked puzzled by his behavior. The other two looked up to listen to what he was about to say.

“This is our third season together,” he began. “I’ve always looked at you guys as not only teammates, but as family. I enjoy sharing the field of battle with you, and I hope that we will for a

long time to come. Thank you all for coming back this season. I hope it's a good one."

"We feel the same way as you do," Terry acknowledged.

"We're glad to be here," Butch added.

Darren just looked at them, proud of their courage and loyalty; then the train came to a halt and they got off.

Lastly, the team had to pick up H. He lived in an apartment just like the rest, but he lived in a secluded area of the city, away from people. The team approached the door and knocked. Unlike the others, he answered the door and was already ready to go. "Now see; you can all learn something from H," Darren implied. The rest just hung their heads.

H was a very mysterious person. He hardly ever spoke and had short brown hair and the look of a serial killer on his face. At 7 feet tall he was the tallest of the bunch. He looked like he belonged more on a basketball court and not a Pounce field. H had a very empty past. He was abandoned when he was two and no one knew who he was or where he came from. He had lived most of his life in homeless shelters living with strangers. That was until he joined the Craters' team three years ago. He was one of the best players on the team. Still, no one knew his real name, his nationality, nothing. Even his jersey had H written on the back. It was given to him by his current teammates. The only real life he had was the one he was living right now. With nothing further being said, the team walked down to the practice field to prepare for their big day; but they had no idea how much their lives would change that very day.

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