BITCONAUTS

THE INVISIBLE HEROES



To my children,

I hope to help leave them a more accessible universe.

PREFACE

Author's Note

I've always thought in images. That's how my brain works.

It's no coincidence that I studied Film and Advertising. I learned to build from the visual — to construct an image from a script or a brief, to translate concepts into photos, videos, or designs, to make a frame or a color carry what words take paragraphs to say. It's what I know how to do. Ideas arrived as images and stayed as images, because prose always felt like a foreign language to me — one I understood but didn't speak.

I'd been carrying this story for years. A universe that existed in sketches, in visual structures, in conversations with myself that never found their way to the page. I had it complete in my head — the characters, the arc, what I wanted to say — and I couldn't get it out.

Until I found a tool that did what I couldn't: turn my images into prose. For the first time the process reversed. Not idea to image. Image to text. What had been a wall for years became a bridge.

I don't apologize for that. It would be contradictory to do so — and this novel is, among other things, about the contradiction of rejecting new tools.

Bitconautas is a novel about technology as a lever of human progress. About the tools that change what's possible to do, what's possible to imagine, what's possible to be. About those who bet on new ideas before the world understood them. Writing it with a tool that still

generates prejudice is not a contradiction. It's consistency.

What we find in these pages is grounded in real science — current research, possibilities that the world's best laboratories are already exploring. There is creativity, yes. But to speculate and extrapolate from what exists today, not speculation without foundation. The future I describe is not one I invented: it's one already being built.

Bitcoin appears in this story because I believe we are at a precise moment. A moment where it is still possible to change course. Where the question of who controls money, who controls energy, who controls information, still has more than one possible answer. Bitcoin is a central part of that conversation, not as an imposition, but as a question. As are space exploration, artificial intelligence, and everything in this book that appears as future but has already begun.

Some of the topics this novel touches on are sensitive. Religion, money, power, the origin of civilization. I don't claim to be right about any of them — I claim to ask the questions that seem necessary. These pages reflect my vision of the world, not a universal truth. If something written here makes you uncomfortable, I hope it's because it opens a conversation, not because it closes one.

The rest I built the only way I know: image by image, until it had the shape of a novel.

CHAPTER 1

The World We Built

Ares Station, orbiting Mars
March 17, 2130

At a certain age the universe grants you a strange privilege: you start to see the patterns. Not the ones in the stars or in physics — those you see young, if you're lucky. The other ones. The ones about how people make the same mistakes over and over, how the same wars are fought under different names, how every generation discovers fire and believes it's the first. What nobody tells you is that seeing the patterns doesn't make you wise. It makes you aware. And there's an enormous difference between the two — the wise man believes he's arrived, the aware man knows he never will. That every answer opens three new questions. That fire is discovered again and again, and every time you see it burn for the first time you feel exactly what the first person felt when they saw it: pure astonishment, as if the universe had just invented it for you alone.

My name is Franco Rowe Belmonte. Eighty-five years old. Retired Admiral, aerospace engineer by training — with a specialization in life support, which in 2063 sounded like the future and now is simply standard procedure for every mission — a handful of decorations I can no longer remember which drawer I put them in, and the strange fortune of having been present — directly or indirectly — at nearly

every event that changed the last century. I didn't plan it. It simply happened.

I could also tell you that this morning it took me four minutes to find my shoes in a forty-square-meter room. It's been happening a lot lately.

I don't have a home. I had one once. Now I live in the residential sector of Ares Station, an orbital station around Mars. Two hundred and twenty meters long, corridors, laboratories, a cargo bay that never sleeps, a restaurant where by this hour people are already drinking coffee and looking at telemetry screens the way you'd read the morning news. The residential sector rotates — just enough to simulate something like gravity, though the walls have that subtle curvature that makes you dizzy at first and then disappears from sight. I could be at the restaurant. But this morning begins a series of interviews from Earth that will last several days, and for interviews I prefer my room. Forty square meters — a spatial luxury, literally.

I'd stepped out for a moment before breakfast. Not out of necessity — the room has a replicator, I could have prepared something without moving — but out of habit. At a certain age, habits are what's left when urgency disappears.

In the corridor of Sector B I passed a surface technician coming off the night shift. The suit was already stored but Martian dust has that irritating property of appearing anyway on the collar, the wrists, the edges of the boots. She saw me, made the gesture — not the military salute, that's been gone for years, but something simpler, a nod of the head that means 'I know who you are and I respect you' — and kept

walking. There was nothing to say. That's something you also learn with time.

The restaurant already had several people. Some with telemetry data projected on the surface — numbers and orbital routes floating between the cups. That immersion in information makes me a little dizzy; I've never quite gotten used to it, I still prefer screens. One of them gestured in the air and the projection changed. Nobody looked up.

I poured myself coffee. The machine already knew what I wanted — I've been here two years, my preferences are recorded in the system with more accuracy than in my own memory. Coffee, black, sixty-eight degrees. What once surprised me now seems as obvious as turning on a light.

From the north wall, the view of Mars. That orange you eventually come to love the way you love the color of your own neighborhood. Somewhere in that landscape, buried under layers of regolith and silence, was what we'd spent decades building. Four hundred people carrying forward something that fifty years ago was science fiction and now was simply Tuesday.

"Admiral, when you have a moment — the corporation sent another query about the quarterly routes," said one of the technicians.

"Tell them to review it with operations," I said. "My opinion doesn't change what physics says."

He nodded with the expression of someone who already knew the answer but needed to have asked anyway. That's how institutional

dynamics work when you've been a reference point long enough: they consult you not because they don't know, but because they want the weight of the decision to have a name behind it.

I finished the coffee. I went back to my room.

No real windows — the rotating sector doesn't allow them — but the walls are floor-to-ceiling screens. The resolution is so astonishing they might as well be windows; I lose track of that constantly, forget they're screens. Right now I have the view of Mars from the north camera: that dirty orange I love, the still and ancient surface below. On the desk, which is also a screen, I have three windows open — station telemetry, pending messages, and the interview communications channel still on hold. I have two framed photographs hanging between the screens, on the only stretch of wall I left dark. Not projections — real photographs printed on paper, because there are things you want to be able to touch.

In the first one I'm with my father, both of us looking up at the sky from the backyard in Cape Canaveral. It's from 2058 — the year of the launch of the mission that carried the Kilopower reactor to Mars. The crew that was going to change everything. He has his eyes squinting in the sun. I'm thirteen years old with my mouth open.

The second is of Uncle Raúl. Standing in front of a blackboard covered in numbers, a pen in his hand and that crooked smile he had when he knew something the others hadn't figured out yet. I brought it because it's the only photo where you see him exactly as he was — not posing. Being himself.

Two photos. Two heroes.

Three minutes remained before Lucía Bruno connected from Buenos Aires.

A notification blinked on the desk — Mars surface, eastern mining sector. A young engineer, familiar face, asking my opinion on a routing decision that could easily wait until tomorrow but that he needed validated today. I forwarded it to the operations chief with a single line. Closed the window.

One remained. Just one. The one I hadn't closed in three weeks.

It wasn't urgent. It wasn't operational. It was the kind of notification the system generates when a ship leaves conventional communication range and enters extended-delay territory — when messages no longer travel in real time but in encrypted packets that arrive hours, sometimes days, apart. The system flagged it with a blue indicator. Calm. No alarm.

I left it there. Like always.

I didn't know her. When the interview was confirmed, I looked her up. Journalist and historian, one of those people who write about the past as if it still hurts — which is the only honest way to do it. She was writing a book about this era, about everything that changed, about those who were in the middle of the change without quite knowing they were. She wanted me to tell her my part.

I said yes, though I didn't know exactly why. Maybe because at eighty-five you start to feel that stories left untold are lost, and that strikes me as an unforgivable waste.

One minute left. I changed the image on the wall — Mars outside creates too much glare on the connection screen. I chose deep space: pure black, a strip of stars along the left edge. Better that way.

The walls pulsed for a fraction of a second — a warm tone, almost imperceptible, that dissolved into the usual white before the eye finished registering it. Shift change in the cargo sector. No one in the corridor seemed to notice. Then silence — just the background hum of the rotation, so constant it had become part of the silence.

I'm not sure why that minute stopped me. Maybe because I was about to tell a journalist how we got here, and I suddenly realized I'd never asked myself that question seriously. You live forward — always the next mission, the next problem, the next horizon. There's no time to look back when the present is still demanding everything you have. And then you retire, and suddenly the present stops demanding, and there they all are, waiting in line, with a patience that frankly strikes me as a little threatening.

Uncle Raúl. My father in the garage that night. The Aurora Solar splitting in two in silence. The first time I saw Earth from so far away it fit completely in the palm of my hand. The first time I saw Mars with my own eyes. The first jump on Enceladus.

Things I thought were stored away. Turns out they were just waiting for someone to ask.

At my age you don't know if what you suddenly feel in your chest is nostalgia or just breakfast. But there it was, whatever it was.

Down there, even though I could no longer see it, four hundred people were starting their day without thinking too much about the extraordinary fact of living it on another planet.

Something impossible becoming ordinary. That's the sign that we actually did it.

I put on my shoes and waited.

* * *

The connection arrived on time. The quantum network has no delays.

But there's still something strange about speaking with someone eighty million kilometers away — a distance the brain never quite processes even when reason understands it perfectly.

Before accepting the connection, the system asked which wall I wanted Lucy to appear on, or if I preferred immersive projection — that mode where the image surrounds you completely, as if the person were in the room with you. You know what I think of that. I chose the north wall. The screens.

When she appeared, sitting at her desk with a cup of coffee, the first thing I noticed was that she had a paper notebook on the table. A paper notebook, in 2130. The first thought was that I was going to like her. The second was that she had my mother's eyes.

The third was that I wasn't going to say either of those things.

"Good morning, Mr. Rowe," she said. "Can you hear me clearly?"

"Perfectly," I answered. "But let's drop the formality — protocol is an elegant way to waste time. Call me Franco."

She nodded. "All right, Franco."

"And I'll call you Lucy," I added. "If you don't mind."

She frowned, barely. "Lucy?"

"My mother's name was Lucía," I said. "Like yours." I paused. "Bruno by marriage, isn't it? Belmonte by birth."

She looked up. One second — she hadn't expected that.

"It's a tribute, not a lack of respect," I continued.

She smiled — a calm smile, from someone who has interviewed many people and learned not to be surprised. "I don't mind," she said. And she wrote something in the notebook. With a pen. Like the old days.

"Lucía Belmonte," I said. "That's my mother's exact name. The odds of that being a coincidence are almost zero."

"Did your mother know," she asked, "that you'd make it this far?"

I fell silent. It was a question that had nothing to do with what I'd just said, and yet it had left me without words.

"She saw almost everything," I said. "Mars, Enceladus, most of it. What she didn't see was the end." I paused. "I think she knew anyway."

Lucy nodded slowly. She lowered her eyes to the notebook.

I kept the question. I still have it. Belmonte. Lucía Belmonte. The universe is not that careless.

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"I want to ask you something that's not in my notes," she said. "Who were the real heroes of this story?"

I stayed quiet for a moment. Not because I didn't know the answer — but because it was the first time anyone had asked me like that, directly, without preamble, before even warming up the conversation. Most journalists arrive with their hypotheses already assembled and the questions are just the excuse to confirm them. Not Lucy. Lucy threw the stone and waited to see where it landed.

I liked that.

"The ones who never left Earth," I said.

She looked up from the notebook.

"Some of them died without seeing anything they built," I continued. "Some didn't even use their real names. People who in the seventies, eighties, nineties — when the internet still smelled new and governments still believed they could control everything — sat down in front of a screen and started asking a question nobody else was taking seriously: why does money need a king?"

Lucy wasn't writing. She was watching me.

"That question," I said, "is the mother of everything that came after. Of Mars. Of the stations. Of the trips to the belt. Of your book. Of this conversation. Everything begins there, with a group of people the

world called crazy or naive or dangerous, depending on the day."

"Bitcoin," she said. It wasn't a question.

"Bitcoin is the answer," I said. "The question was asked by others, decades before. People who understood that financial freedom wasn't an abstract concept — it was the necessary condition for everything else. Without them, no Bitcoin. Without Bitcoin, none of this." I gestured vaguely toward the wall, toward the quiet stars of deep space. "Nothing."

* * *

"Why does someone become obsessed with an idea the world doesn't understand?" asked Lucy.

I appreciated the precision of the question. She didn't say 'rejects.' She said 'doesn't understand.' There was an enormous difference and she knew it.

"Because understanding is not a prerequisite for believing," I said. "The people who built Bitcoin didn't wait for the world to understand them. They waited for the world to need them. And they knew that moment would come — not because they were prophets, but because they had understood something fundamental about how power works."

"Pretend I'm not a historian," she said. "Explain it to me from scratch. What did they understand before everyone else?"

"That money is not neutral," I said. "It never was. Money is a technology, like any other, and like any technology it can be designed

to serve many or to serve few. For centuries it was designed to serve those who controlled it. Kings, governments that printed it, banks that managed it. Those who decided who could use it and who couldn't, how much it was worth today and how much tomorrow." I paused. "Satoshi didn't invent a currency. He invented a technology that took that decision away from any central authority and put it in the code. In mathematics. In something with no boss, no headquarters, no face."

"And the world didn't understand it," said Lucy.

"The world didn't have the tools to understand it," I said. "Not because it was stupid — but because it was trained to think about money in only one way. As something that exists because someone backs it. A government, a bank, gold. The idea that money could exist without any backing other than mathematics and the consensus of a network — that didn't fit any known model."

"And those who did understand it from the beginning? What made them different?" asked Lucy.

I thought about that for a moment.

"They weren't different," I said. "They were more honest. They had looked at the system with enough attention to see the crack. And once you see the crack you can't stop seeing it. The money printed whenever convenient. The debt that grows without limit. The inflation that steals value from people's savings slowly, so slowly that nobody notices exactly when it started." I paused. "Satoshi saw it. And before him, others. People who in the seventies, eighties, nineties started asking questions nobody else was asking. Who spent decades

building the pieces of something the world didn't yet know it would need."

"The invisible heroes who died without seeing anything they built. Who never had statues or speeches. Who the world didn't ignore out of malice — it ignored them because it didn't have the framework to understand what they were doing."

It wasn't the first time that had happened. Galileo didn't discover the future. He discovered a truth of the present that his era couldn't tolerate seeing. The rejection wasn't ignorance — it was self-defense. A society that accepts that reflection must also accept what it implies — to change, to question itself, to let something go. And that hurts.

Lucy wrote something. Then she looked at me with those eyes I had already decided not to mention.

"Did you have one close to you?" she asked.

I smiled. I looked up at the photos for a moment.

"Not at that founding level," I said. "But I did have someone who understood all of that before most people in my world, and who made sure I understood it too. Who formed me without my knowing it. He was one of my heroes."

"Are you going to tell me about him?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. "But first you need to understand the world he appeared in. Because without that world, without that crack he saw, nothing that came after makes any sense."