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opening extract from

The Supernaturalist

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CHAPTER 1:
COSMONAUT HILL

SATELLITE CITY,
Northern Hemisphere, soon



SATELLITE *City. The City of the Future,* proclaimed the billboards. A metropolis completely controlled by the Myishi 9 Satellite hovering overhead like a floating man-of-war. An entire city custom-constructed for the third millennium. Everything the body wanted, and nothing the soul needed. Three hundred square miles of grey steel and automobiles.

Satellite City. A supercity of twenty-five million souls, each one with a story more heartbreaking than the last. If it's happy ever afters you want, stay away from the city of the future.

Take Cosmo Hill, for example, a nice enough boy who never did anything wrong in his short existence. Unfortunately this was not enough to guarantee him a happy life, because Cosmo Hill did not have a sponsor.

And in Satellite City, if you didn't have a sponsor, and they couldn't trace your natural parents through public record DNA files, then you were sent to an orphanage until you reached adulthood. And by that time you were either dead or the orphanage had fabricated a criminal record for you so you could be sold to one of the private labour prisons.

Fourteen years before we take up the thread of this story, baby Cosmo was discovered swaddled in an insulated Cheery Pizza envelope on Cosmonaut Hill in Moscowtown. The state police swabbed him for DNA, searched for a match in the Satellite mainframe and came up blank. Nothing unusual about that, orphans turn up every day in the city. So the newly christened Cosmo Hill was dipped in a vaccine vat and sent on a tube to the Clarissa Frayne Institute for Parentally Challenged Boys. Freight class.

Satellite City was not part of any welfare state, so the institutions had to raise funds any way they could. Clarissa Frayne's speciality was product testing. Whenever a new modified food or untested pharmaceutical product was being developed, the orphanage volunteered its charges as guinea pigs. It made perfect financial sense. The orphans got fed and cleaned, and the Frayne Institute got paid for the privilege.

Cosmo received his schooling from education software, his teeth were whiter than white and his hair was lustrous and flake-free, but his insides felt like they were

being scoured with a radioactive wire brush. Eventually Cosmo realized that the orphanage was slowly killing him. It was time to get out.

There were only three ways out of Clarissa Frayne: adoption, death or escape. There was zero chance that he'd actually be adopted, not at his age. Truculent teenagers were not very popular with the childless middle classes. For years, he had cherished the dream that someone would want him; now it was time to face facts.

Death was much easier to achieve. All he had to do was keep on doing what he was told, and his body would give up in a matter of years. The average life expectancy of an institutionalized orphan was fifteen years. Cosmo was fourteen. That left him with less than twelve months before the statistics said his time was up. Twelve months to plan for the final option. The only way he was getting out of Clarissa Frayne alive: escape.

At the Clarissa Frayne Institute for Parentally Challenged Boys, every day was basically the same. Toil by day, fitful sleep by night. There were no days off, no juvenile rights. Every day was a work day. The marshals worked the orphans so hard, that by eight p.m. most of the boys were asleep standing up, dreaming of their beds.

Cosmo Hill was the exception. He spent every moment of his waking life watching for that one chance. That split second when his freedom would beckon to him from outside an unlocked door or an unguarded

fence. He must be ready to seize that moment and run with it.

It wasn't likely that his chance would come on this particular day. And even if it did, Cosmo didn't think he would have the energy to run anywhere.

The no-sponsors had spent the afternoon testing a new series of antiperspirants. Their legs had been shaved and sectioned with rings of tape. The flesh between the bands was sprayed with five varieties of antiperspirant, and then the boys were set on treadmills and told to run. Sensors attached to their legs monitored their sweat glands, determining which spray was most effective. By the end of the day, Cosmo had run ten kilometres and the pores on his legs were inflamed and scalding. He was almost glad to be cuffed to a moving partner and begin the long walk back to the dormitory.

Marshal Redwood ushered the boys into the dorm. Redwood resembled a waxed gorilla, with the exception of a red quiff which he toyed with constantly.

'Now, boys,' said Redwood, unlocking one pair of cuffs at a time. 'There's a game on tonight that I am very interested in seeing. As a matter of fact, I bet a few dinars on the outcome. So if you know what's good for you . . .'

Redwood didn't have to finish his threat. The boys knew that the marshal had a hundred legal ways of making a no-sponsor's life miserable. And a thousand illegal ones.

'Sleep well, young princes,' grinned the marshal,

keying his code into the dorm door. 'Tomorrow, as usual, is a busy day. Jam-packed full of fun.'

The no-sponsors relaxed once Redwood had gone, and the silence of discipline was replaced by the groans and sobs of boys in pain. Cosmo touched his leg gingerly where a particularly acidic spray had actually burnt the skin.

'Five minutes to lights-out,' said Redwood's voice over a network of speakers. 'Climb the ladders, boys.'

Three hundred orphans turned immediately to the dozen or so steel ladders and began climbing. Nobody wanted to be stranded on the dorm floor once the ladders were retracted. If the marshals caught a no-sponsor on the ground after lights-out, a ten-kilometre run would seem like a Sunday stroll compared to the punishment they would dish out.

Each boy had a section in the dorm, where he ate, slept and passed whatever leisure time the no-sponsors had. These rooms were actually sections of cardboard utility pipe that had been sawed into six-foot lengths. The pipes were suspended on a network of wires almost fifty feet off the ground. Once the pipes were occupied by orphans, the entire contraption swayed like an ocean liner.

Cosmo climbed quickly, ignoring the pain in his leg muscles. His pipe was near the top. If the lights went out before he reached it, he could be stranded on the ladder. Each step brought fresh stabs of pain to his tendons, but

he climbed on, pressing against the boy ahead with his head, feeling the boy behind closing in.

After a few minutes' feverish climbing, Cosmo reached his level. A narrow walkway, barely the width of his hand, serviced each pipe. Cosmo slid across carefully, gripping a rail on the underside of the walkway above him. His pipe was four columns across. Cosmo swung inside, landing on the foam rubber mattress. Ten seconds later, the lights went out.

A sick yellow glow lit the interior of each pipe. Dinner. The meal had been thrown in earlier by a marshal in a cherry picker. The meal-packs had been tested a few years previously by the no-sponsors for use by soldiers in the field. The trays and water bottles were luminous and also edible, which meant that the orphans could eat after lights-out, saving the management a few dinars. The tray was a rough unleavened crispbread, and the water bottle a semi-rigid gum. The army had discontinued use of the meal-packs following several lawsuits by soldiers, claiming that the luminous packs caused internal bleeding. The orphanage bought up the surplus and fed them to the orphans every single day.

Cosmo ate slowly, not bothering to wonder what was in the meal. Wondering about it would only add one more worry to his list. He had to believe that he would escape Clarissa Frayne before the meal-packs could do him any lasting damage.

Cosmo saved the water for last, using most of it to

wash down the crispbread tray. Then he turned the gum bottle inside out, laying it across his head like a flannel. *There must be a better life*, he thought glumly. Somewhere, at this very moment, people were talking openly. Surely people were laughing. Real laughter too, not just the spiteful kind that so often echoed around the orphanage halls.

Cosmo lay back, feeling the gum bottle's moisture seeping into his forehead. He didn't want to think tonight. He didn't want to play the parent game, but the sleep that he had yearned for was proving elusive. His own parents. Who were they? Why had they abandoned him on Cosmonaut Hill? Maybe he was Russian. It was impossible to tell from his features. Brown curly hair, brown eyes, light skin freckled brown. He could be from anywhere.

Why had they abandoned him?

Cosmo transferred the gum bottle to a red strip on his leg. *Shut up*, he told his brain. *Not tonight. No living in the past. Look to the future.*

Someone knocked gently on the pipe above. It was Ziplock Murphy. The network was opening up. Cosmo answered the knock with one of his own, then pulled back his mattress signalling Fence in the pipe below. The no-sponsors had developed a system of communication that allowed them to converse without angering the marshals. Clarissa Frayne discouraged actual face-to-face communication between the boys on the grounds that

friendships might develop. And friendships could lead to unity, maybe even revolt.

Cosmo dug his nails into a seam in the cardboard pipe and pulled out two small tubes. Both had been fashioned from mashed gum bottle and crispbread, then baked on a window sill. Cosmo screwed one into a small hole in the base of his pipe, and the other into a hole overhead.

Ziplock's voice wafted through from above. 'Hey, Cosmo. How are your legs?'

'Burning,' grunted Cosmo. 'I put my gum bottle on one, but it's not helping.'

'I tried that too,' said Fence from below. 'Anti-perspirants. This is nearly as bad as the time they had us testing those Creeper slugs. I was throwing up for a week.'

Comments and suggestions snuck through the holes from all over the pipe construct. The fact that the pipes were all touching, along with the acoustics of the hall, meant that voices travelled amazing distances through the network. Cosmo could hear no-sponsors whispering a hundred metres away.

'What does the Chemist say?' asked Cosmo. 'About our legs?'

The Chemist was the orphanage name for a boy three columns across. He loved to watch medical programmes on TV and was the closest the no-sponsors had to a consultant.

Word came back in under a minute. 'The Chemist

says spit on your hands and rub it in. The spit has some kind of salve in it. Don't lick your fingers though, or the antiperspirant will make you sicker than those Creeper slugs.'

The sound of boys spitting echoed through the hall. The entire lattice of pipes shook with their efforts. Cosmo followed the Chemist's advice, then lay back, letting a hundred different conversations wash over him. Sometimes he would join in, or at least listen to one of Ziplock's yarns. But tonight all he could think about was that moment when freedom would beckon to him. And being ready when it arrived.

Cosmo's chance at freedom came the very next day during a routine transfer. Forty no-sponsors, Cosmo among them, had just spent the day at a music company watching proposed TV spots for computer-generated pop groups, followed by a sixty-kilobyte questionnaire. Which sim-singer did you prefer? Which sim-performer was cool? Cool? Even the company's computers were out of touch. Kids rarely said 'cool' any more. Cosmo barely read the questions before ticking a box with his dig pen. He preferred music made by real people to pixel-generated pop. But nobody complained. A day watching music videos was infinitely preferable to more chemical tests.

Frayne marshals loaded the no-sponsors into a truck after the session. The vehicle must have been a hundred years old, with actual rubber tyres instead of plastic

treads. Cosmo was paired with Ziplock Murphy as a cuff partner. Ziplock was OK, except that he talked too much. This was how he had earned his orphanage name. Once the Irish boy had *talked too much* to the wrong person and got the ziplock from a food baggie superglued over his mouth. It took weeks for the blisters to heal. Not only did Ziplock not learn his lesson, but now he had something else to talk about.

'They don't call it superglue for nothing,' Ziplock said animatedly, as one of the marshals threaded the cuffs through the restraining ring on the seat. 'Medics use that stuff in war zones to seal up the wounded. They pour it straight on to the wounds.'

Cosmo nodded without much enthusiasm. Ziplock seemed to forget that he had told this story about a million times, maybe because Cosmo was the only one who even pretended to listen while he talked.

'They had to use boiling water to get the bag off my face,' continued Ziplock. 'I didn't feel anything, in case you're worried. One of the marshals shot my entire head full of anaesthetic first. They could have been banging six-inch nails into my skull and I wouldn't have minded.'

Cosmo rubbed the flesh beneath the cuffs. All the no-sponsors had a ring of red flesh around their wrists. A mark of shame.

'You ever try breathing *only* through your nose for an entire day? I panicked a few times, I'll admit it.'

In the cab, the pilot was uplinking the truck to the navigation section of the Satellite. But there had been trouble with the Satellite lately. Too many add-ons the TV brainers said. Myishi 9 was simply getting too heavy for its engines to support such a low orbit. There was even talk of some companies' aerials snapping off and burning up.

'What's the delay?' shouted Marshal Redwood. The bulky redhead had bad breath today and a worse attitude. Too many beers the night before. His pendulous belly spoke of too many beers almost every night.

'If I'm late again tonight, Agnes swears she's moving to her sister's.'

'It's the Satellite,' shouted the pilot. 'I can't get a line.'

'Well make a line, or my boot is going to make a line to your butt.'

Ziplock sniggered just loud enough for Redwood to hear.

'You think I'm joking, Francis,' shouted the man, cuffing Ziplock on the ear. 'You think I wouldn't do it?'

'No, sir. You'd do it OK. You've got that look in your eyes. It isn't smart to mess with a man who's got that look.'

Redwood lifted Ziplock's chin until their eyes met.

'You know something, Francis? That's the first clever thing I've ever heard you say. It isn't smart to mess

with me, because I do whatever I please. The only reason I don't get rid of a dozen of you freaks every day is the paperwork. I hate paperwork.'

Ziplock should have left it there, but he couldn't. His big mouth wouldn't let him.

'I heard that about you, sir.'

Redwood tugged harder on the chin, cranking it up a few more notches.

'What's that, Francis? What did you hear?'

Cosmo tugged on the cuff chain. A warning. Redwood was not a man to push over the edge. Even the psycho kids were afraid of Redwood. There were stories about him. No-sponsors had gone missing.

But Ziplock couldn't stop. The words were spewing out of him like agitated bees from a hive.

'I heard you don't like the paperwork, on account of some of the words have more than three letters.'

The sentence was followed by a high-pitched giggle. More hysteria than humour. Cosmo realized that Ziplock was headed for the psycho ward, if he lived that long.

Redwood transferred his fingers to Ziplock's throat, squeezing casually. 'Morons like you never get it. Being a smart mouth doesn't win you any prizes in this city, it just gets you hurt, or worse.'

The Satellite saved Ziplock's neck, beaming down a transportation plan before Redwood could tighten his fingers another notch. The truck lurched from its spot

in the parking bay, rolling on to the main highway. A guiding rod extended from below the chassis, slotting into a corresponding groove in the highway.

'We're locked in,' called the pilot. 'Ten minutes to the Institute.'

Redwood released Ziplock's neck.

'You've got the luck of the Irish, Francis. I'm too happy to inflict pain on you now. But later, when I'm in a foul mood, you can count on it.'

Ziplock drew a greedy breath. He knew from experience that soon his windpipe would shrink to the diameter of a straw and he would whistle when he spoke.

'Keep a lid on it, Ziplock,' hissed Cosmo, watching the marshal continue down the aisle. 'Redwood is crazy. We're not real people to him.'

Ziplock nodded, rubbing his tender throat.

'I can't help it,' he rasped, tears in his eyes. 'The junk just comes out of my mouth. This life just drives me crazy.'

Cosmo knew that feeling well. It visited him most nights as he lay in his pipe listening to the cries around him.

'You must feel it too, Cosmo? You think anybody is going to adopt a borderline psycho kid, or a moody teenager like yourself?'

Cosmo looked away. He knew that neither of them fitted the likely adoptee profile, but Ziplock had always managed to pretend that today was the day his new

parents would show up. Denying that dream meant that Ziplock was teetering on the brink of crack-up.

Cosmo rested his forehead against the window, watching the city beyond the glass. They were in the projects now, flashing past grey apartment blocks. Pig-iron buildings, which was why the locals referred to Satellite City as the Big Pig. Not that the material was actually pig iron. It was a super-strong, steel-based polymer that was supposed to stay cool in summer and warm in winter, but managed to do exactly the opposite.

The truck shuddered violently. Something had rear-ended them.

Redwood was thrown to the floor's plastic planks.

'Hey, what's going on up there?'

Cosmo raised himself to the cuff's limits, straining to see. The pilot was on his feet, repeatedly punching his code into the uplink unit.

'The Satellite. We lost our link!'

No link! That meant they were out here on an over-crowded highway with no pattern to follow. Minnows in a sea of hammerheads. They were struck again, sideswiped this time. Cosmo glimpsed a delivery minivan careering off the highway, bumper mangled.

Redwood struggled to his feet.

'Go to manual, you cretin. Use the steering wheel.'

The pilot paled. Steering wheels were only used in rural zones or for illegal drag racing in the Booshka region. More than likely he had never wrestled with a steering

wheel in his life. The choice was taken away from the unfortunate man when a revolving advertisement drone hit them head-on, crushing the cab like a concertina. The pilot was lost in a haze of glass and wiring.

The impact was tremendous, lifting the truck from its groove, flipping it on to its side. Cosmo and Ziplock dangled from their chairs, saved by the restraining cuffs. Redwood and the other marshals were scattered like so many leaves in a storm.

Cosmo could not tell how many times other vehicles collided with the truck. After a time the impacts blended together like the final notes of a frenetic drum solo. Huge dents appeared in the panelling accompanied by resonating thunderclaps. Every window smashed, raining crystal rainbows.

Cosmo hung on; what else could he do? Beside him, Ziplock's hysterical laughter was almost as piercing as the shards of glass.

'Oh man, this is it!' shouted the Irish boy.

The truck revolved a half-turn, slewing off the highway in a cascade of sparks. Chunks of tarmacadam collapsed beneath the onslaught, leaving a thirty-metre trench in the vehicle's wake. They eventually came to rest after smashing through the window of The Dragon's Beard Chinese Restaurant. The spicy odours of ginger and soya sauce mingled with the smells of machine oil and blood.

Cosmo put one foot on a window sill, taking the strain off his arms.