

## Beta Read Sample

### PROLOGUE

*Your puppet's ready.*

Hector Lynch doesn't react when the message he's been waiting for all day flashes up on his Palmcom.

He's in a meeting with the president, whose hologram is sitting at his desk opposite him.

Joseph Abbot, Australia's second president, has pale blue eyes, a boyish smile, and a full head of blonde hair.

Hector concentrates on maintaining a neutral facial expression, despite disturbing news from the president that an upstart agent from Canberra, Keely Moss, will be arriving at the Space Agency tomorrow to conduct a report on passenger wellbeing at the Quarantine Station.

Hector is to report to her for the duration of her visit.

He doesn't get much one-on-one time with the president, so his every minute must count. The hologram is not a good one. Details of Joseph's face fade in and out, and crackle with static, much like the old analogue televisions of old, but his blue eyes are strong and consistent. So

Hector focusses on them, trying to ignore the message on his handheld device. But it's difficult. Because he's been anticipating news of his "puppet" being ready all day.

"She's young Hector, but highly respected," says the President, of the upstart agent.

"How young, if I may ask, sir?"

"Very young," says the president. "You aren't going to like it. All I ask is you co-operate, show her around, reassure her everything's above board, so she can write her little report. Let her play at being boss while we sort out the bleeding hearts."

Hector clamps his hands on his knees to stop them jiggling.

"To be frank, Mr President, I can do without the distraction right now."

Commented [KV1]: Reformatted for review purposes.

Commented [KV2]: Intriguing opening line

Commented [KV3]: Work with a proofreader to assist with varying sentence structure and paragraph formatting

Commented [KV4]: Can we describe a little more organically?

Commented [KV5]: This is the organic description we were looking for. With notes like this, you don't need the previous summary of his looks.

Commented [KV6]: I'm surprised to see he's so nervous. Wondering how he becomes more of a villain by the end of the novel.

“You’re head of security. You’re in charge. No-one’s taking that away from you. But we need to tick this box.”

“How long will she be here?”

“As long as she needs. Hopefully a couple of months tops. She’ll have an office at the Space Agency. Let her run her report from there. You keep doing what you’re doing at the Quarantine Station. This Mars mission is the most important event in Australian history. Let’s not lose sight of that. I know, I know, it’s the last thing we need right now.” Joseph sighs and rubs his chin. “So don’t let her stop your work on the Homo Elonious project.”

“I’ll do my best as always Mr President. You can count on me.”

“That’s the spirit, Hector.”

“One last thing, if you don’t mind me asking Joseph. The promotion we spoke of last time?”

Hector holds his breath.

“Still very likely. Just keep doing what you’re doing. And for God’s sake, help Seth find what he needs. That’ll seal the deal.” Hector winces at the mention of the Mars Chief Dr Seth Black, who has been on his back relentlessly to find the missing data. The final piece of the puzzle in creating Homo Elonious, the new human adapted for life on Mars.

“Understood sir.”

Joseph raises a hand to sign off and his hologram fades to nothing.

Hector stands so abruptly that his chair topples backwards, landing with a clatter on the hardwood floor.

He inhales sharply, stands up tall and resets his face. He grimaces at the message. *Your puppet’s ready*. He objects to the word puppet for his robots. Its immature and derogatory for such fine creations. He heads off down the corridor, to the robot lab. Already he has a name in mind for his new robot. Cassius. He has 42 of them so far. Each one better than the one before. So lifelike, it’s difficult to tell they’re not human. And he can program them to defend

**Commented [KV7]:** Surprised to see this scene. Based on the synopsis, I thought it may have been a surprise reveal that Hector would be working against Sasha.

**Commented [KV8]:** It seems it would only be respectable to address the president by title or sir.

**Commented [KV9]:** Wondering if we could SHOW this exposition differently at a later point. Perhaps show Hector’s reaction for now and leave the reader to wonder what it was about. Then later, Hector can express to someone how he feels or the relation to Dr Seth in a conversation.

**Commented [KV10]:** I could see this being a significant detail closer to the finale!

the space precinct, carry out his commands without question. So much more reliable than the piss-weak flesh and blood security corps who demand wages and human rights.

His robots please him. But he has problems. His promotion to Commander (which the president reassured him was almost in the bag), depends on tracking down that lost data from 30 years ago, which may or may not even exist. And he is getting nowhere.

Hector changes his mind. The robot can wait. He takes a left turn towards the comms room.

He sits at the touchscreen desktop and opens his file on the Simpson Family. Flicks through images. Greta and the doctor, Walter Simpson. Daughter Kirsten Barnes. Granddaughters Joanna and Alexandra “Sasha” Barnes. And Jack Jones. Another problem – the so-called resistance. Stayers who want to prevent the move to Mars.

Getting anyone to talk about this resistance has proved impossible. Even with his spies on the ground in Portobello and the People’s Post. Nothing. And now this dratted agent from Canberra’s coming to sniff around. Because someone’s raised an alarm that people aren’t being treated like royalty at the Quarantine Station. Laughable!

His Satcom flashes. It’s his voicelink to Mars. It’s Seth.

Hector rearranges his face again and answers, his tone obsequious.

“Ah Dr Black, how good of you to check in.”

“Cut the crap Lynch. I need a progress report on the data I’m looking for. Anything?”

Hector sniffs. The man is as rough as guts. No finesse. No charisma.

“I admit progress is slow...”

“You’ve got nothing,” Seth cuts him off. “We don’t have time to waste, so let’s get straight to it. We have an idea.”

The royal we, Lynch thinks. How this boring, unattractive, unappealing man landed up with the woman he did, is incomprehensible.

**Commented [KV11]:** It would be excellent to see this in the conversation held with the president previously. A sort of presentation on “why this girl/family”

**Commented [KV12]:** This is a good place for that exposition you provided on that relational dynamic with Seth earlier.

“It involves bringing the little sister home to Portobello. I’m sending an updated file on her now. This will be low risk, maximum gain.”

Lynch listens to the plan as he opens the file. Sasha, the younger sister, 17 years old. Lives in a hovel in Sydney with her mother Kirsten and little brother Freddie. Mitch, the father is not in the picture.

He studies her photo. She’s in a school uniform, a basic checked shift dress, hitched above her knees, unkempt dark hair, arms folded across her chest, leaning against a bus shelter. She has a scowl on her face and a tattoo of God-knows-what covering her left forearm.

Hector’s heart swells in his chest. He feels short of breath.

“She looks just like...”

“Yes, yes, just like her sister, may she rest in peace. She’s a wild one. But we need her.

You’ll have your work cut out for you. But we think you’re the perfect person for the job. If anyone can rein her in, it’s you.”

**Commented [KV13]:** Until now, I thought Joanna was the younger sister for some reason.

**Commented [KV14]:** Oh wow. Is the older sister dead?

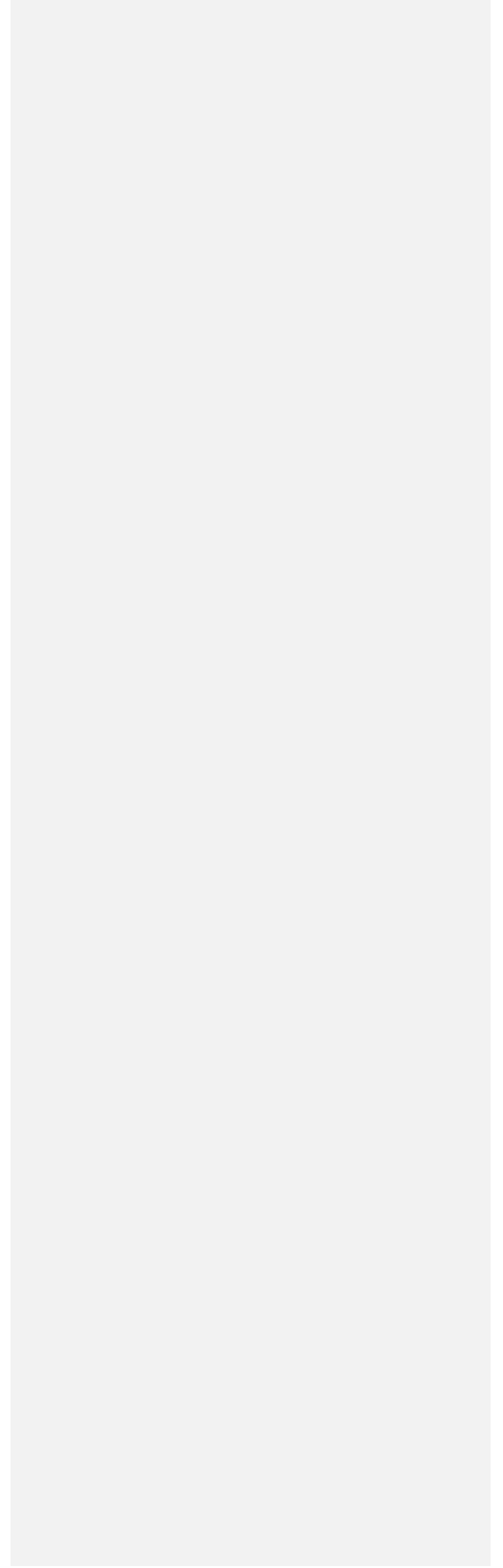
**Commented [KV15]:** Interesting setup. I’m surprised, based on your synopsis, to see Hector being assigned in this manner as he comes across as a much more vicious villain later. The mention of his robots are an interesting nod that I think will serve more purpose later. I’d save that for when they’re more relevant. It’ll be interesting to see how this plays out in the rest of the opening pages. More notes in the report!

PART 1

*Portobello*

*New South Wales, Australia*

Saturday, 19 July 2053



## Chapter 1 - This world is not for ever

19 July 2053

I open my eyes on the morning of my eighteenth birthday to the sound of kookaburras laughing. **It's my first day of adulthood. And my last day on Earth.**

**Commented [KV16]:** Strong opening line! Nice job! To make it even stronger, I'd switch the 2 sentences.

I've been awake for hours, tangling myself up in my covers. My mind hasn't rested. It's been preparing to go to Mars.

It's still dark. I sit up and look out the window of our attic bedroom. There's a red glow behind the gum trees. The sun is rising. Everything is silent. The kookaburras have stopped.

My little brother Freddie is coiled tightly in a foetal position in his bed opposite me. **His is thumb jammed in his mouth.** **He's such a baby for a seven-year-old.** He's clutching Brutus, his teddy bear, by its mangled ear with his other fist.

**Commented [KV17]:** Typo

**Commented [KV18]:** Try less of a statement and try to mix this with voice. Ex. "He's seven, yet he's clutching Brutus, his teddy bear, by its mangled ear with his other fist." This conveys that he's older, but Sasha thinks he behaves like a baby without telling us straight-out.

**He'll be okay without me. He'll be *better off* without me.**

**Commented [KV19]:** Good interiority here.

I can feel my heartbeat throbbing in my veins.

*Look ahead. Don't look back. I've made my decision. I'm going to Mars to find Joanna. And that's the end of it. I must get through this day. Keep my secret. Tell no one. **It's the only way to keep Freddie safe.***

**Commented [KV20]:** This creates good tension and builds curiosity.

I climb into track pants and a warm jumper, pull on my boots with icy fingers and remind myself what a pain Freddie is. Always whining and begging for my attention. Always coughing and sickly. I'm not his mother. **Our mother is dead. And that's not my fault. In fact, it's his fault. And it's his fault our father left us too. We're orphans, thanks to him.** And I don't count the old hag downstairs as a parental figure.

**Commented [KV21]:** We're getting mixed signals. She seemed to care so much for his well-being in the previous paragraph. Telling herself she's sick of his begging and whining comes across as her trying to convince herself not to miss him so much. Blaming everything on him comes across as her not liking him much at all.

I tiptoe across the room and turn the doorknob. Freddie stirs and I stop. He keeps sucking on his thumb, his cheeks flushed. I close the door behind me and go down the stairs, feeling my way in the gloom, gripping on to the railing to lighten my tread.

\*\*\*

The house is huge. Yet we only use four rooms - the attic room I share with Freddie, Greta's room on the first floor, the loungeroom and kitchen. It's too expensive to heat the whole place. Pathetic, when you think that this grand old house, *Greensleeves*, was once filled with people, my family. And pets. My grandad's GP practice used to be bustling with patients at the other side of the house, cars parked in the pretty stone-paved driveway. And the grounds had orchards and outhouses. All within cooe of the beach. I think it was a happy place once. I lived here until I was four years old. When my sister Joanna was still around. And my grandad Walter was still alive. My mum and dad were still a couple. And the Earth still held the promise for the future.

In the kitchen corner, the dog bed lies cold and empty. Greta's border collie, Ashbarty used to sleep there. Her wiry black hair clings to the blanket. I am still surprised she isn't there and feel the prickle of tears beginning in my nose. I imagine her tail thumping when she spots me. I fumble for the matches and light a candle. The electricity won't be on yet. There's a joke they tell around here. What did they have in Portobello before they had candles? Answer: Electricity. The same joke could be applied to bicycles. Answer: Cars. And newspapers. Answer: the Internet.

It's an exaggeration of course. There are some cars, and plenty of solar panels, so it's not like we live in the dark ages. And we do have the Internet, there's just not everything up on it like there used to be.

And now we have Mars.

I light the gas and put on the kettle. The kitchen is the heart of the home, my mum used to say. But I'm not sure you can call this place a home anymore. My grandmother Greta didn't welcome us with open arms when Freddie and I arrived six months ago. We were shell-shocked, heartbroken, numb, our clothes still reeking of smoke from the fire that killed our

**Commented [KV22]:** Like the setup here. You have a clear style with these short sentences. Just be sure to vary your structure every now and then. Has me wondering what happened to everyone.

**Commented [KV23]:** There's the predictive future part. Good hook!

mother. Greta is still angry with me for being here. She had given up on life when Jack dumped us on her doorstep. And she resents us both, me especially – for burdening her with an extra responsibility.

\*\*\*

I take my coffee out the back, warming my hands on the mug. I imagine Ashbarty is following me. We always come and go through the kitchen, hardly ever use the front entrance. It's too dark and cold and cavernous at that side of the house. Birds are starting to twitter as the sky lightens. I chat to Ashbarty as we pick our way through the wet grass. Silly I know to talk to an imaginary dog, but it helps me to imagine she's still around. We pass the chook pen, the old barn and on to the track that leads down to the beach through the bush. I can smell the sea, hear the waves crashing on the shore.

As we approach the old railway tunnel, a figure appears ahead. My heart skips a beat. It's Jack Jones. I'm sure of it. I know his bulky frame, the elegance of his gait. I don't know whether to call out to him now or wait to catch him unawares on the beach. I hold my breath and crouch, fondling Ashbarty's imaginary ears as she flops down beside me.

You see, I think I'm in love with Jack. And being in love with him is so inappropriate.

Another secret I have to keep.

The first time I ever saw him was in Sydney. He appeared like a knight in shining armour to save us. After the fire, Freddie and I were being held at the police station until they figured out what to do with us. Social Services were trying to find my dad. But Jack turned up, saying he was taking us to live with our grandmother, Greta Simpson, the famous astronaut. We went with him, driving through the night to Portobello, Freddie asleep in the back of his clapped-out Hilux hybrid, only stopping once at an abandoned-looking hut where Jack bought a can of petrol and some sandwiches, and we took turns to use the composting toilet round the back.

**Commented [KV24]:** Clear wound. Good job!

**Commented [KV25]:** We could use a little more context of who Jack is here. This is Jack Jones, correct?

**Commented [KV26]:** Can we show this with an interaction between Sasha and Greta to immerse the reader in the situation more?

**Commented [KV27]:** Some nice description in this paragraph. Interesting note that she imagines interacting with the dog.

**Commented [KV28]:** Interesting setup. Interspersing this with some interaction with Jack could help keep the reader immersed.



Jack's the strong, silent type. He doesn't say much. Taciturn. That's the word. He was my sister Joanna's boyfriend. He's my friend Billy's uncle. He's 30 years old. I think he loved Joanna, still pines for her. Everyone thinks she's dead. But I think she's alive and living on Mars. And I'll do anything to find her.

Commented [KV29]: Ohhh this complicates matter.

Commented [KV30]: Ummm, could be controversial. Though she is 18... Hmmm. I'd ask advice on this one.

Commented [KV31]: This drives suspense. Excellent!

Commented [KV32]: Good motive here.

I'm nearing the old railway tunnel. Jack must be on the beach by now. I dodge the mounds of smelly seaweed banked up in there. Ashbarty whimpers and sniffs around, scratching at the wall. I call to her as I step onto Ten Mile Beach, looking left and right, searching for Jack. I can't think where he could have disappeared to because there's nothing but miles and miles of powdery white sand, with waves gently lapping, and a few seagulls picking through the seaweed. I look for his footprints on the sand, but there are none.

I shiver but make myself stay a while, closing my eyes, trying to commit to memory the salty smell and soothing sound of the ocean. I linger, hoping to catch sight of Jack, but he seems to have disappeared into thin air.

\*\*\*

The sun has risen when I get back to Greensleeves. It's still low in the sky, casting an orangey light on the dewy grass. Birdsong rings in my ears. Being on the beach has calmed me and I can breathe again. The house is quiet and peaceful. Freddie and Greta must still be asleep.

Commented [KV33]: I like this setup, but we could use a little more action/dialogue to avoid too much static reflection in the opening pages. However, this feels more engaging than the prologue so far.

I step into the chook pen, shooing away the chickens so as not to tread on their feet. I crouch down and open the hatch, feeling for eggs. There are six, still warm and plastered with chicken shit and straw. I place them gently into the basket. Do they have freshly-laid eggs on Mars? Do they have gum trees on Mars, lorikeets, magpies, noisy miners, possums, wallabies... Stop I tell myself. There are things on Mars that are far better than anything on Earth. As the Goers keep telling us, it's the future. There will be no bushfires, no floods, no diseases, plenty of food, jobs, opportunities. And if I can find Joanna, who knows what will

Commented [KV34]: Good way to show her mixed emotions about leaving.

happen? We could send for Freddie... and maybe doctors there could help him with his lungs. It could be a new life for him.

**Commented [KV35]:** Oh no. I'm wondering if this is related to the fire.

I know Greta's view on things. And Jack's. And Billy's. And just about everyone in Portobello. They are staunch Stayers. They believe we should be concentrating on saving the Earth. They believe Mars is a cop-out. There is still a future on Earth, even though it's running out of everything – food, fuel, money. Staying is madness, the Goers say.

**Commented [KV36]:** I like the way you're setting up her internal conflict.

I shake my head, try to stop thinking. I've been over this so many times. I'm not interested in politics. I have to concentrate on *my* plan, and the reasons for it. To find my sister. And when I do, they'll all know I'm not the delusional, rebellious, unreliable teenager they think I am. They'll know that my memory of Joanna, the night before she disappeared was real. I was only 4 years old but since I've been back at Greensleeves, I've had vivid memories of Joanna that I never had before.

**Commented [KV37]:** We need to see this rather than be told about it. Notes on this in the report.

**Commented [KV38R37]:** NOTE: SHOW how people treat Sasha, rather than telling us how they treat her.

My favourite memory is when she gave me the Mars rock. We were in the attic room, on her bed. I adored her! She was beautiful, and she was my big sister.

**Commented [KV39]:** Can you show us the strong connection Sasha had with Joanna? How can you show the reader that Sasha would adore her, and why she would adore her?

I've found all her old stuff in the attic room. I'm wearing one of her t-shirts. The Beatles one.

**Commented [KV40]:** This seems out of place with the flashback.

She said, "It's a rock from Mars." I gasped as I studied the rock, turning it over in my hands. One side was smooth and glossy black, the other rough, with specs of gold and silver. From that day I have always pictured the ground on Mars to sparkle. "I'm going to Mars, Sasha. Tomorrow. And you'll join me there some day." She had dark brown eyes, and thick black eyelashes. I thought the rock was the most special thing I'd ever seen. I've kept it ever since. I sleep with it under my pillow. In fact, it's in the pocket of the tracksuit pants I'm wearing now.

The next day, she went missing. And they think she died.

But I don't believe it.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Commented [KV41]:** I like the backstory, but I think it will be much more engaging if we slow down and show the reader what happened, rather than telling them. Picture revealing this story to the reader like a movie. Notes on this in the report.

I'm going to find out what happened to her and then I'm going to find her. And anyway, I have no choice now.

I begged Hector Lynch to help me find her. He's the only person who agrees with me that she's still alive. He was the detective who was on the case when Joanna disappeared. Now, fourteen years later, he's still trying to find her. But he doesn't trust me. And I don't trust him. He killed our beloved dog Ashbarty. I can't prove it, but I know he poisoned her. I'm startled by a cry from the kitchen step and I stand, peering over the top of the chook pen fence. Freddie is making his way across the lawn, barefoot, his pyjama bottoms soaked from the wet grass. His face is contorted, fearful. He rubs his eyes with the back of one hand, his other is still clutching that stupid teddy bear.

"Sasha," he sobs. "I woke up and you were gone. I was scared." He struggles to get the words out, breathing raggedly and coughing inbetween his bleating. I feel a flash of anger, hot and red, coursing through my veins and spotting my vision.

"Oh shut up Freddie," I yell back. "You're being ridiculous." I want him to stop crying but I've made it worse. He lets out a wail and collapses on to the grass. Cross-legged, he sobs into his teddy bear.

"Oh for God's sake," I mutter under my breath, stomping over to him, the basket of eggs under one arm. "This is all I need!" I want to slap him. Why can't he behave himself today of all days? Yelling at him isn't going to help, and I don't want to alarm Greta, so I sink down on my knees and pull him towards me, ripping the bear from his hands and tossing it aside next to the eggs. It's because of that bear that my mother died. She went back in to get it, because he didn't want it to burn in the fire. It's fur is singed and blackened around it's face. I hate that bear. But he is so attached to it. It has a little zip up pocket in its tummy, for treasures like money from the tooth fairy, and for little surprises to use as bribes for him to be a good boy.

**Commented [KV42]:** Lots of great opportunities to present all this background in a visual manner. We want to "see" these dynamics and not just be told about them.

**Commented [KV43]:** Why does this make her angry?

**Commented [KV44]:** 😊 She seems overly angry here.

**Commented [KV45]:** Ah... okay. Doesn't justify the slapping part, but I get it. Lol

**Commented [KV46]:** This sounds like a useful setup

“I had a nightmare,” he blubbers, snot trailing down his top lip. I recoil, not wanting to get it on my jumper. I jiggle him in my arms, pat the top of his head, and hear the rattle of his chest. How can I leave him? When I go, he will have no link to our mother, no one to love him. Greta is still a stranger to him, and he’s scared of her. I’ve tried to be mean to him to make him stronger, but he is so fragile, so alone. And the nastier I am to him, the more he wants me. But staying isn’t an option. Because not only did Lynch kill our dog, he has threatened to harm Freddie if I don’t keep my side of the bargain.

**Commented [KV47]:** Intriguing cliff hanger. Definitely makes me want to know more!