

Slimeborgs of the Behemoth

A Scout Brooks Story

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Slimeborgs of the Behemoth: A Scout Brooks Story

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For Noah

The coolest brother-in-law and the #1 Scout Brooks fan!

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PROLOGUE

Flashin' Back

So there I was, getting ready to join the Astro-Nog's, an after-school Astronomy club run by Professor Nog, when out of nowhere, the hallway exploded and I saw Nogger running straight for me with some giant alien-robot chasing him, firing off lasers from some high-tech space-gun-extreme!

We took cover in his classroom and before the giant beast could do anything to us, Nog pressed a button on some small machine he had, and it zapped the creature back to where it came from – a planet near the Crab Nebula called Bethani.

In the weeks that followed, I discovered that Professor Nog was in charge of a secret government organization called the E.I.A. or, Earth's Intergalactic Ambassadors. There were only a few people involved at the time, and I soon became a member as well.

Turns out, Nog and his old partner, Farrow, had somehow gotten involved in an intergalactic war with a race of alien-robots called The Frooginites. The Frooginites used portals from their home planet to come to Earth to try to destroy the E.I.A. once and for all.

In the process of them trying to do this, my girl-crush, Mandy Lee, was zapped to their home planet, as well as Nog's partner,

Farrow and a bully from our school, Matt Radar. Nog called an emergency meeting for all the members of the E.I.A. and I soon found out that the high school principal, Principal Smidgeon, a local comic book storeowner, Jakon, and my best buddy, Chuck Taylor were all a part of it! Who knew?

Well, long story short, Nog sent Chuck and I to Bethani to rescue the three of them and to destroy the portals that would allow the Frooginites to get to Earth. And we didn't disappoint – we were able to bring back Mandy Lee and Farrow with no problem!

Unfortunately, we weren't able to bring back Radar or this random homeless guy we found on the planet. I want to say it was devastating, but it wasn't really. The kid who bullied us was 6,500 light years away, and as for Homeless Harry, I just plain old forgot about him. Plus he was homeless, so it wasn't any big loss.

Being in the E.I.A., and more specifically becoming the leader of an elite group of space explorers called The Fellas four years after I was initially inducted, has its perks, but it also has its downfalls. We can't tell anyone who we are. It's hard at times. Not being able to tell my mom, my brother, Mark or my other best friend, Phil, kinda blows, but I guess being a hero has its rules.

So that was the excitement my freshman year. When my sophomore year came, it really threw me for a loop. It made me

realize what kind of person I was supposed to be and was also filled with another space adventure, slime-filled robots, mustaches, a tragic accident and a deep-space threat that none of us saw coming.

CHAPTER ONE

A Sophomore Mustache

I.

I stood in the upstairs bathroom, staring hard into the mirror. I'd been staring for almost ten minutes, waiting patiently for the light to glare at just the right angle again; cause I'm pretty sure I saw the start of a single mustache hair above my lip. Even though it was only for a split second, I'm pretty sure that's what it was.

I know, you probably think it's ridiculous that I, Scout Brooks, a sophomore in high school, is searching the upper lip valley for the start of what could be a legendary stash that this moment might be foretelling. But it isn't as far-fetched as you'd think. I had asked Mark about it not too long ago – he'd been trying to grow a stash for years, and now at the age of 24, he thinks he might finally be onto something.

Phil already had the full-blown deal. It was dark brown and made him look a little 'dirty'. When I asked Mark about a sophomore mustache, he said "There's always that one kid in your school who has a mustache before everyone else. It's not fair."

Well, Philly was sporting a good one and I was hoping I wasn't too far behind. But for now, I had to catch the bus because it was going to be here soon.

I got dressed in some warm clothes, threw on my jacket and backpack, popped on one of those winter hats with the little ball thing on top and left the house, ready to journey to the bus stop. It wasn't too far, but winter was really starting to take its toll on Kings Town. Between the ice and the snow, it made walking down to the end of the street a freezing cold ordeal.

Across the street from my house was a moving van in the driveway of a home that had been vacant for at least six months. There was only one guy unloading boxes that I could see of. He appeared to be middle aged, was clean shaven with short, rough brown hair and was bundled up in his winters best.

It was such an odd time to be moving. The man saw me and went through great lengths to set the box down that he was carrying and wave at me. "Hello there!" he shouted through the wet flakes that were falling.

I just smiled and waved back. Creep.

The school year was already underway by about three and a half months. It was already the third week in December and our Christmas break was just around the corner. A few more days of

school, then the Christmas dance, and then a nice break where I'd be able to enjoy the holiday with my mom and brother.

The Christmas dance was going to be Friday night and I had been trying to work up the courage for weeks to ask Mandy Lee, but I just couldn't do it. There was still some time left though. I thought after I saved Mandy's life last year she'd be a little more into me. That wasn't the case. Sure, she was appreciative – and technically owed me big – but the experience of being kidnapped and taken away to a distant galaxy still didn't sit well with her. She'd smile and say "Hi" to me occasionally, but most of the time she'd pretty much keep her distance. She acted like none of it ever happened – which kind of benefited Professor Nog. He didn't have to worry about her blabbing to anyone.

Still, I wanted to ask her to the dance. My crush on her had only grown over the past year.

My first period class was Math – Geometry to be precise. Who needed to take a class about shapes? Math sucked and I was failing it. The only cool thing about the class was that my best buddies, Chuck Taylor and Phil Easton were in it with me. That's the first class since high school started that all three of us had together. It ruled, even though the seating chart had unknowingly spread us out amongst the classroom.

The teacher, Mr. Hobbs, was a cool guy I guess. He was younger than most of the teachers and for some reason always

said, “Jot this down”, like he wanted us to write down everything he was saying.

The bell rang to start the school day and Mr. Hobbs took center stage.

“Alright class, jot this down.” Mr. Hobbs turned to the chalkboard and began to draw a right triangle. As the Math terms started to spew out from his mouth, I tuned out. I was looking forward to second period; it was space stuff.

After I passed Astronomy with flying colors, I elected to take Advanced Astronomy my sophomore year just so I could kick it with Nog a little more. It wasn’t a necessary class, but if I was officially an Intergalactic Ambassador for Earth, I figured I might as well brush up on the cosmos as much as I could.

“Scout, care to venture a guess?” Mr. Hobbs asked, rudely interrupting my thoughts.

“Uh...” I stuttered, not knowing what the question was. “Can you repeat the question?”

“No.”

Huh. I was in a corner and there was definitely no way out. Might as well get fresh. “Well, you’re the teacher, you should know the answer. You tell *me*, Mr. Hobbs.”

I sat back in my chair and crossed my arms with a smile. The class chuckled, and the first thought that raced through my head was *why the heck did I just say that*.

“Mr. Brooks, you talkin’ back?”

“Maybe,” I said, continuing this act that wasn’t typically me. I was in so much trouble.

“I’m not gonna stand here, wearing this perfect tie that my girlfriend bought for me, and take that from some disrespectful sophomore,” Mr. Hobbs said. “And I’m pretty sure Principal Smidgeon won’t either.” He pointed to the door and snapped his fingers, “GET!”

I packed up my books into my backpack and walked though the classroom, passing Chuck and Phil. Chuck was chuckling, but Phil wasn’t. Come to think of it, Phil really hadn’t been the same with us since that note someone had slipped him about Chuck and I not being who we say we are. Phil had been quite curious about us for the past year, keeping his distance at times, but sporting that golden stash *all* the time. It looked so sweet.

I left the classroom and headed straight for Principal Smidgeon’s office.

II.

“Scout, you’ve become quite a little loud-mouthed turd here lately,” Principal Smidgeon said to me from across his desk. I smirked, knowing he was right.

“Sorry, bro,” I said.

“It’s cool. But I can’t keep pretending to give you punishments much longer. Straighten up, boy,” he said.

I nodded and looked around his office. There was a picture of Smidgeon on the wall with his family – two teenage girls and his wife. “How’s your family?”

“Oh, they’re fine. The wife’s been on my back about retirement. I don’t know, it sounds nice I guess.”

“Would you retire from the E.I.A. too?” I asked.

“Who knows, Scout. Now that the government has approved our grant because of Nog’s shuttle experiment, there’s gonna be a high demand for positions. It’d be only a matter of time before I was replaced anyway. I’m getting a little old for this.”

“Old? Nog has like twenty years on you, man. *He* should be the one retiring.”

“Nog won’t retire. He and Farrow founded the E.I.A. They’ll both be with the group until the day they die.”

“Have you made any progress on the ‘ghost’ from last year? It seems like we haven’t heard a peep out of him since that note he gave to Phil,” I asked.

“There’s no progress to be made. I haven’t been able to figure anything out about his identity. After you guys made it back from Bethani, he just vanished. The threat might be over.”

“Or he’s just waiting for something.”

The two of us sat there and nodded together like a couple of agreeing pals. The bell rang to end first period and I grabbed my backpack off the floor.

“Well,” I said, “I’m off to Nog’s. We’re learning about gaseous masses today.”

“Sounds just like Nog,” he said and we both laughed. “Tell the old geezer I said ‘hey’,” Smidgeon said.

“Will do. Catch ya later, brotha,” I said with a wink and a point in his direction.

Professor Nog was running late to class for some reason, but he finally showed up about five minutes into the period. He was the same as ever – long, white lab coat, terrible comb-over, flashy red tie; he was ready for the day.

“Alright geeks, get out your books and turn to page 100. We’re about to have a pop quiz up in this mother,” he said, heading straight for his desk.

The class released a unanimous groan, but it didn’t phase Nog. If he wanted to quiz us, he would see to it that we got quizzed. Our Astronomy books were assigned to our desks and were kept in a small metal basket under our seats. I pulled my book out, just as everyone else did, and opened it to page 100.

There was a note in my book. A note for me – ‘Scout’ was written in black marker on the front of the folded piece of

graphing paper. I looked up at Nog and he shushed me with his finger. I opened the note and read it to myself:

Scout, last night Jakon received a transmission from deep space. It was Fritz. Jakon was able to download all of the data received and analyze the crap out of it. Gather up Chuck and meet all of us at my house tonight at seven.

-Peace, my brotha

I looked up and gave Nog a thumb's up. He reciprocated with a nod and the deal was all squared away.

III.

Lunch period came and I was literally devouring my honey-roasted turkey and provolone wrap. I chased it down with a loud gulping swig of my boxed chocolate milk and let out a sigh of satisfaction. The hankering had been met.

Chuck sat across from me, eating left over pizza that he, for some reason, always wrapped in tin foil. Phil sat to my right – he was on his second egg salad and tuna sandwich.

“So, are you guys going to the dance on Friday?” I asked the table.

“No. That’s not my thing,” Phil said blandly.

Chuck laughed, “Hey, we should all go as a joke. It’ll be hilarious.”

“Yeah?” I asked, not sure what would be so funny about it. “I was actually thinking about asking Mandy. What are your guys thoughts on that?”

Phil nodded, agreeing with my idea, and Chuck shrugged. “Maybe,” Chuck said, “I mean she doesn’t really seem to care too much about you anymore.”

“Did something happen in Europe?” Phil asked. “After you got back to the states from jumping her bones abroad, she’s kept her distance. I thought for sure that would have bonded you two together forever.”

I *so* wish I could tell Phil that instead of Europe, it was outer space. But it was too risky. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“You should ask her though,” Phil said. He was right; I needed to ask her.

“What are you gentlemen doing for Christmas break? I’m thinking the three of us should try to hang out or something. Maybe grab a bite at Father Peanuts?” Chuck asked.

“Sure,” I said.

“We’ll see,” Phil said. I wasn’t too sure exactly what was going through Phil’s head when he was around us. It was obvious that he didn’t completely trust us because of that stupid

note. I don't know why he'd take the notes' word over ours, but oh well. I was hoping he'd get over it eventually.

Phil looked up from his food when he noticed a student walk by with a hot meal tray. He smiled with his gums blaring, and waved at the kid.

"Hey, Lamar!" Phil said as he grabbed all of his lunch stuff and stuffed it back into the brown paper bag it once came from.

"Where are you going, Phil?" I asked.

"I'm gonna go sit with Lamar. See you guys later." Phil was gone in a second - off to spend the rest of the lunch period with this Lamar character. I didn't really know him, but all I knew was that he was a black kid who literally sported a '90s flat top haircut, a Bob Marley T-Shirt and cut off jean shorts with strings that hung down past his knees.

"What's Phil think he's doing?" I asked Chuck.

"That's Lamar. I don't know, Phil's been hanging out with him a lot lately. Ever since they did that vinegar volcano project together in Science."

"Hmm," I muttered to myself, watching Phil sit down three tables away with Lamar. Who knows what those nerds were talking about? Who even cares?

The end of the day came quickly, which I was thankful for. I rode the bus home and it dropped me off at my bus stop just

down the street from my house. I walked carefully on the sidewalk, trying not to slip on the ice. It was freaking cold, man! My ears were about to freeze off and shatter on the ground. I pulled my knit cap down over them, hoping to prevent them from actually doing that.

“Hello!” a man’s voice cried out. I looked across the street as I approached my house and saw that creepy guy still moving in. The moving truck was now parked in the road and the driveway was full of boxes. That guy was weird – staring at me from across the way.

I encouraged a small smile and timidly waved to him. He started walking my way. I began to pick up what speed I could get on the ice, trying to get to my house before this dude came too close. I didn’t know what he was packing!

“Are you my new neighbor?” the guy asked, stumbling a little on the ice in the road. Ok, this guy wasn’t going to give up, so I did. I stopped on the sidewalk and faced him.

“I guess so,” I said.

“What’s your name, kid?” the guy asked, approaching me and extending his freezing cold hand. I shook it.

“Scout.”

“My name is Butch. Butch McSides. I originate from the west coast.”

“It’s usually warmer over that way. Why move here... in the middle of winter?”

“Seemed like a good time,” Butch McSides said, standing back and admiring his new dwelling with both hands on his hips. “It’s a fixer-upper for sure, but hey, I’m up for the task.”

Butch looked back at me and smiled. “Could you spare some muscle and help a guy move a few boxes?”

There it was – the luring. I’d be reported missing within hours and dead within minutes. “Uh, no, sorry. I have a lot of homework to do. See ya, though!” I nodded one last time and walked straight up to my porch.

“See ya, Scout,” Butch said. I turned around as I opened my wreath-covered front door and saw he was carefully shuffling back across the icy street. I got inside and shut the door – obviously locking it up real tight. I’m not getting involved in any of that nonsense.

“Scout!” a man’s voice shouted out in excitement from behind me. I swung around, startled, and faced the Christmas decorated living room. It was my Uncle Jones! My mother’s brother sat on the couch in the living room next to Mark. He hopped up fast.

“Uncle Jones!” I shouted, dropping my backpack to the ground. We met halfway through the living room for a huge hug. “What’s up? What are you doing here?”

“I’m here for Christmas, you idiot! Your mom didn’t tell you?”

“No!”

“She didn’t tell me either,” Mark chimed in from the couch, flipping his out-of-style emo hair out of his eyes.

“Then it’s a Christmas miracle!” Uncle Jones laughed and threw his arms up in the air, eventually transitioning into a solo Irish jig right there before my very eyes.

Uncle Jones was one crazy mother. He was so goofy and a self-proclaimed “ladies man.” He’d done it all and was so full of wisdom and knowledge. All these crazy things always seemed to happen to him.

One time, he said he was stationed in Iraq during the war on terror and had to build a helicopter from scratch just to get him and his platoon out of the country before a massive bombing happened. He was so cool! Then, this one time, he was rock climbing in Colorado and fell into a pit of snakes. He said that he literally tied two snakes together just to show them who was in charge while he was down there. Uncle Jones, man! He was here – in my house!

“What’s happening, bro?” Uncle Jones said.

“Nothing – just school. This new guy across the street just tried to pick me up.”

“Oh yeah?” he said, pulling the curtains back from the window. Butch was carrying another box into his house. “He’s one of those guys, then, huh?”

“Yeah. I’ll probably call the cops or something,” I said.

“That reminds me of the time when I was in Seattle – not sure how I got there seeing as how I started off in Phoenix – and this guy robs this store, right? So he comes flying out of the store with bags full of money and he’s coming straight for me. Now, by this time I’ve lost track of my buddies, so I feel like it’s my duty to take care of business. So, this guy comes flying past me – I whip off my belt in one fluent motion, lasso it around the guy’s neck and pull him down to the ground. I caught the moneybags in my hands before they even touched the ground. A news crew just happened to be right there filming a story on some restaurant opening and got the whole thing on tape. They called me a hero. It’s on the Internet, look it up if you don’t believe me.”

“I believe you!” I said – Mark and I were both in awe. Not sure how that related to the neighbor debacle, but it was still a cool story.

“Look, I’m gonna climb out of your hair, guys,” Uncle Jones said. “I told an old friend of mine, Booya Boggs, that I’d meet up with him for a couple beers. I’ll be back for supper though.”

“Okay,” I said as I slapped a high five onto Uncle Jones. He swung around and slapped one on Mark too. Within a flash, Uncle Jones was gone.

“When did he get here?” I asked Mark.

“He’s been here all day. I woke up this morning and he was already here on the couch watching cartoons.”

Cartoons? Classic.

Mark turned around and grabbed his acoustic guitar from the corner of the living room. He sat back down on the couch and began to strum away.

“You writing songs again?” I asked.

“Yeah, so what?”

“Nothing man, just asking,” I said in response to Mark’s snappy tone. I headed upstairs to do my homework before the E.I.A. meeting at Nog’s.

I felt bad for Mark to a certain degree. After Red Badger bombed horribly at the Battle of the Bands last year, none of them took it well. Kristen, Blane and Leo all quit, leaving Mark all by himself. Red Badger was dead.

Mark continued on his own though, going under the name Mark Badger. I think the band breaking up was the best thing that ever happened to him though – he was free to make his own music. And it wasn’t too bad actually; it was a lot more grown up than the heaping piles of cow pies Red Badger use to concoct. He played the occasional open-mic night, and he had a semi regular gig at Bowling Buddies. If he stuck with it long enough, the right person would eventually hear his music.

IV.

Seven o'clock arrived and I found myself sitting in 'The Secret Room', a secret room in the large bunker of underground laboratories that were under construction below the barn on Professor Nog's property. He called it Fort Nog's.

After the creation of the Intergalactic Peace-keeping Shuttle got around to the appropriate sources, the President granted the Ambassadors a large sum of money to continue with space research, alien stuff, and experimentations that the world could never find out about. Nog's selfishness is what led to Fort Nog's being built below his grounds.

The entrance to the underground labs was located in the barn, behind the gate of a horse stall, guarded by two armed security guards, Marco and Hastings. The underground was full of Nog's own personal staff. There were nurses, scientists and construction guys still building in certain areas. The E.I.A had grown quiet considerably over the past year.

The Secret Room is where the E.I.A. hosted their meetings, since Nog's kitchen was now considered 'out-dated' by the old man. The room was pretty big - four metal walls sheltered a long meeting table like you'd see some high-flying business guys sitting around in the movies.

We all sat around the business table; myself, Chuck Taylor, Professor Nog, Principal Smidgeon, comic storeowner Jakon, and

Nog's old University buddy, Farrow. A new meeting was underway to discuss recent developments.

“Gentleman and kids,” Nog announced with a smirk. He said that every single time we were all together. “We have some news, some weird developments and some mysterious things to discuss.

“As you all know, Jakon has built some machines in the back of his comic book store that he's been using to try and track down the I.P.S. Well, a couple days ago, he found it. Jakon, would you tell us what you found?”

“Sure,” Jakon said with a strong lisp. He stood up as Nog took a seat. “The I.P.S. was located in deep space, and is currently on its way back. From what I can tell, D.R. Fritz is still up and running, and has loads of data recorded for us to analyze. We should have them back within the next day or so.”

We all seemed to relax a little bit. It'd been over a year since D.R. Fritz went AWOL and left us on Bethani due to someone changing the mission plans in his computers. It was good news that he was returning.

Nog stood back up. “Once Fritz gets back with my awesome, and now patented, spaceship creation, I'll get all up in there and try to figure out the details about the tampering.”

“With good news though, comes bad news,” Jakon continued, looking straight at me for some reason. “I was also able to

pinpoint a massive object in deep space which is hurling itself towards Earth at ridiculous speeds.”

“Aliens?” I asked.

“Probably,” Jakon responded. “But we can’t be sure. The only thing I am sure of though is that something detached itself from the massive object, and lasered itself through space and broke our atmosphere a couple days ago. And, surprise surprise, it landed somewhere here in Kings Town. How predictable, right?”

“Scout and Chuck,” Nog said, “Since you two seem to work well together as a team, I am sending you guys out into the cold night with a new device I’ve created that is supposed to track down anything that has some space particles clinging onto it for dear life. I call it, the Space Detector.”

“It’s like a metal detector,” Smidgeon said as he put a closed fist to his mouth and cleared his throat.

Nog looked at Smidgeon, annoyed by his sudden involvement. “Thanks, Smidge,” he said sarcastically.

Nog shook his head and then reached under the table and pulled out the space detector. It was shaped like an iron, and had a handle on the back...like an iron. But instead of a flat, steel front, it was full of blinking lights.

He handed it to me. “You point this thing around town and it will start to beep and the lights on this bad boy will light up like

Christmas. The more lights you see, the closer you are. If all the lights are shining, you're pretty much on top of it, so get off of it and don't break it. Got it, boys?"

"Got it," Chuck and I said in unison.

"Time is precious. We need to figure out what fell off that giant mass before whatever it is gets here."

Chuck and I stood up and left The Secret Room. We wandered down the long corridor to an elevator, which we took to the top floor, which opened into the horse stall in the barn. Chuck pushed open the stall gate and we left the barn on a mission from Nog.

CHAPTER TWO

Space Savior of the Universe

I.

Chuck and I wandered around Kings Town in the ice-cold weather. It was ridiculous of Nog to have us do this. We were wading through a few inches of snow, slick ice patches and chilly winds that kept stinging our cheeks.

We made our way out of the countryside and into the old part of Kings Town – the historical part. All the stores and stuff closed up early in this part of town, so there wasn't much activity now.

I held the space detector out in front of me, but there were no blinking lights at all, nor were there any beeping sounds.

“Maybe this thing doesn't even work, man,” I said to Chuck as we walked side by side, bundled up to the extreme.

“Who knows,” Chuck said. “Hey, what if this space debris is something we don't want to run into. Once again, Nog isn't thinking about our safety.”

“He never does,” I agreed. He *definitely* wasn't thinking of our safety. But you know I ain't worried! We could handle anything that came our way. “We're heroes, Chuck. In the movies, the hero always comes out on top. We'll come out on

top even if it's something we have to fight, blow up, incinerate or melt. Trust me."

"We don't have any weapons."

"Maybe you don't have any weapons, but I'm packing two experienced guns of domination right here," I said, kissing the coat sleeve that covered my biceps.

I noticed Chuck shaking his head.

"What?" I asked.

"You're different, Scout. Ever since we got back from Bethani, you act all high and mighty. Like you're a gift from the Heavens."

Was he serious? Of course I was a gift from the Heavens! "Dude, we went into space, to another galaxy, and rescued people, while taking out aliens left and right! You're a gift from the Heavens too, bro. We're awesome now."

If people only knew what I had done, I'd be considered a celebrity. I should have sponsors and stuff. I should have my own brand of cologne or dog toys. I should be on a cereal box like one of those Olympic guys. Better yet, I should *have* my own cereal: Scout Brookios with Marshmallow Enhancers. It'd be delicious.

"All I'm saying is that you better watch yourself. No one likes a jerk," Chuck said.

I could tell he wasn't going to let it go, so as always, I'd be the bigger man and drop it.

We walked around Kings Town for almost three hours and came up with absolutely nothing on the space detector. We decided to call it a night, so we returned the equipment to Nog and went home.

Morning came too quickly. It was Thursday – one more day until the Christmas dance. I was out of time to ask Mandy, so today would have to be the day.

I rubbed my eyes and let them adjust to the light that was shining in my face. It was blinding. “What the heck is this light?” I said out loud, unable to see anything.

“Sorry, Scout. I didn't mean to wake you,” I heard Uncle Jones softly say. The light flipped off and my room was still dark. I looked at my clock radio and it said it was only a little after 4am.

“Uncle Jones, what are you doing in my room?” I asked, flipping on the lamp that sat on my nightstand. Uncle Jones sat down on my bed holding a flashlight and wearing a very short pair of pajama shorts and no shirt. His swirly chest hair was hypnotizing.

“I was just making sure you were ok. I've been hearing weird noises all night outside, and I could have sworn I heard them

inside. Like footsteps or something. Like someone was walking around.”

“Footsteps?”

“Yeah. I was making my rounds. Your mother slept right through my shining light, Mark was already up writing songs or something, and I woke you up by accident. Come, look here.”

I climbed out of bed and followed Uncle Jones to the window. He carefully pulled back the curtains and pointed across the street. I looked closely and saw Butch McSides sitting on top of the moving van in the road, staring up at the night sky.

“What is that guy doing?” I asked.

“Who even knows,” Uncle Jones answered. “He’s a very peculiar guy.”

“Should we call the cops?”

“For what? Cause he’s sitting on top of a truck at 4am for no reason? No. You said he got a little too close for comfort yesterday, and now he’s being weird again. Your mom will be at work all day today, so I think I’ll invite Mr. McSides over for a beer to see what he’s all about.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“Of course. I’ll feel him out, and if nothing comes of it, I can at least scare him into leaving you alone.”

I nodded. Sounded like a plan.

II.

The actual morning did come quickly after Uncle Jones had left my room. I fell back to sleep for a couple hours and woke up just in time to get ready for school and head for the bus stop.

As I stood in the falling snow, waiting for my bus to arrive, I couldn't help but notice that Butch McSides was out and about. He was shoveling the snow in his driveway. He saw me and waved.

I didn't respond.

"Scout! What's happening?" Butch called out from his yard.

I still didn't respond. I saw him drop his shovel and start to walk towards me. This guy was creeping me out hardcore! I heard the roar of the school bus turn the corner and onto my street. I saw it coming.

"Scout! If I could just get a moment of your time!" Butch called, trucking through the snowy street.

"No, man, I got school," I said, just as the bus pulled up and opened its door. I hopped on, picked out a seat near the back and looked out the window as the bus moved on. I saw Butch walking back towards his house.

Mr. Hobbs was droning on and on about triangles and squares or something, so I instantly tuned out. I looked around the

classroom and watched all of the students trying to learn. They had no idea what was out there, hanging out in the universe. They were so ignorant to it. I glanced at the wall by the door and there was a plaque hanging by the light switches. All of the classrooms had them. They were all engraved with ‘Never Forget Matt Radar – He Will Be Forever In Our Hearts’.

After the police finally called off the search for Radar in January, his parents moved away. It was too hard for them to be in the town where they raised their little hellion. Everything reminded them of him and the constant outreach from the community only deepened their emotions. They needed a fresh start.

Only a few of us new the truth, but it was a truth that couldn’t be told unfortunately. His parents never got the closure they were hoping for. I had halfheartedly suggested to Nog that we should go back to Bethani and track him down, but he wasn’t game for that. He didn’t want to chance opening up any portals again. I didn’t blame him. There was no telling what the Frooginites would have done this time. Nog also said that there was no reason to even think he was alive still. I sort of disagreed with that. After all, when we left him, the Frooginites were only beating him to a pulp and not actually killing him. That always intrigued me.

There was a knock on the classroom door and Jeffrey Shuster, a kid in my grade, walked in with a note. He was on office duty

– he’d take notes around to the different teachers throughout his assigned period and help with summoning people who were in trouble.

Mr. Hobbs took a look at the note and looked up, straight at me. “Scout and Chuck – it appears you guys have been busted again. Principal’s office – NOW!”

I wondered what was up. I gathered my stuff and walked to the front of the classroom, passing Philly. I looked at him and he gave me a very bland stare and then looked back down at his papers.

Chuck followed me out into the hallway and we headed for Smidgeon’s office.

“What do you think is going on?” Chuck asked.

I shrugged.

We entered Smidgeon’s office and instantly noticed that Nog and Smidgeon were standing there. There was an overwhelming sense of seriousness going on. Nog was holding the space detector, and it appeared to have a good majority of the lights on it blinking accompanied by an occasional beeping sound.

“I was out doing some searching this morning before my first class,” Nog began, “and my space detector started getting all beepy and flashy. Depending upon where in the school we are, the lights seem to fluctuate.”

Nogger handed the space detector to me. “I need to get to class, but under the cover of you two being busted by Smidgey, you need to go scour the school grounds and report back to me. Whatever crash landed is definitely on the property.”

Smidgeon crossed his arms and stood tall. “You guys can sneak out the side entrance near the nurse’s office. There’s no one ever in there.”

Nog bolted for his classroom and Smidgeon escorted Chuck and myself through the teachers lounge and into the nurse’s office where an emergency exit was.

Chuck and I were out in the elements. The elements of it being freaking cold and us not having our jackets with us!

“C’mon, Chuck, let’s search for this thing before we freeze to death,” I said as we started to march through the shin-deep snow.

We made our way around the side of the building where the senior parking lot was. I kept checking the space detector periodically to scope the light situation. About half of the lights on this thing were blinking and it was beeping slightly. I aimed it out into the parking lot and the lights seemed to fade a bit.

“Keep it aimed up the side of the school, bro,” Chuck instructed me. I did as he said and the lights that had faded came back. We were on the right track.

The wall we were following eventually ended and we turned the corner to face the football field. The lights picked up some

heat. We hugged the side of the building some more and moved towards the football field.

“Stop,” Chuck said. I did as he said again. I was getting tired of taking orders from this guy.

“What?” I asked, irritated. I looked at Chuck and I could see he was noticeably getting nervous. He looked around and blinked heavily.

“I don’t know if we should be doing this alone,” he said.

“Don’t be a wuss, dude. We got this,” I assured him as I began to walk straight ahead again.

“Scout, stop.” Chuck grabbed me by the sleeve of my shirt and I shrugged him off.

“What, Chuck? What’s wrong with you?” I asked.

Chuck just stared at me. He didn’t say anything.

“Fine, I’ll do it myself,” I shouted.

“Oh, of course! You’ll do it yourself!” Chuck was obviously upset at me. “You’re Scout Brooks, Space Savior of the Universe! Leave it to you to find all the space debris!”

“Shut up, guy! What do you know about anything anyway? It was me who saved everyone on Bethani. You were just ‘there’.”

“Everyone? You didn’t save *everyone*, Scout. Radar? Homeless Harry? You left them for dead.”

“I had no choice about Radar, and as for Harry, did you even remember him? He was just randomly thrown into the rescue mission for no reason and there was a lot of laser battles going on. He was easy to forget.”

I noticed Chuck was facing me, but looking past me. What the heck was he looking at? It was just a wall behind me. I turned around and realized we were standing by a classroom window - Mr. Hobbs' classroom. The entire class was gathered around watching Chuck and I argue outside with the space detector. Mr. Hobbs' face and ears were bright red with anger. The only thing missing was the sound of a squealing teapot.

I saw Phil's head slowly rise from behind a few of the students. We made eye contact. This wasn't going to help our situation with him. I turned back to Chuck.

“We gotta bolt, brother,” I calmly said. Chuck turned and ran back the way we came from and I dashed in the other direction, towards the football field.

I looked at the space detector as I approached the fenced-in field and noticed that just about all the lights were illuminated and this thing was beeping like a madwoman. I aimed it towards the bleachers – it must have been behind them. I climbed over the fence and fell flat on my face. I coughed out the powdery snow, picked up the space detector and jogged over to the bleachers.

All of the lights on the space detector were lit up. It was here for sure. I looked around and noticed a humongous pile of out-of-place snow. I walked over to it, cautiously of course. I set the space detector down and brushed some of the snow off from the pile. There was a black object underneath. I brushed more and more snow off until I was finally able to see what had crashed here in Kings Town a few days ago.

It was a pod of some kind - a black, cylindrical pod with a small window at one end of it. Without digging the entire thing out, I estimated that it must have been about ten feet long and maybe four feet across. It was a very polished black color, barely a scrape on it.

“Professor Nog, are you there?” I asked, hoping he was in my head. I waited for a few minutes and then remembered he was teaching his class.

III.

Mr. Hobbs had told on us and Principal Smidgeon pretended to yell at us in his office to humor him. I told Chuck and Smidgeon what I had found and then he let us go back to class.

Lunchtime finally came and I unpacked my ham and swiss on rye and baggie of cheddar chips and started to feast. Chuck sat down across from me.

“Sorry about yelling earlier,” he said to me. I responded quietly, only nodding. Chuck opened his lunch bag and started to eat as well. It was quiet for a minute before he spoke up again.

“What do you think that pod thing is?”

“I’m not sure. There didn’t seem to be any markings on it at all.”

“You said there was a small window? Could you see inside of it?”

“I didn’t look all that closely, but it appeared to be empty.”

The table shook as Phil plopped down next to us.

“I can’t stay, I’m having lunch with Lamar,” he stated. “He’s in line right now. But I wanted to ask you guys what you were doing outside during class, holding some glow-in-the-dark iron?”

Neither Chuck nor myself answered. What could we possibly say that would sound believable?

“Causing mischief?” Phil asked.

We didn’t respond. I had a hard time taking my focus off his legendary mustache.

“I know you guys have secrets,” Phil said, running his finger across the ‘stache, basically showing it off. “I didn’t want to believe that note last year, but you guys constantly act suspicious. Something obviously is going on, and if you don’t want to tell me, that’s fine. But I just got some news this morning that I would love to share with you.”

Chuck and I looked at each other and then back at Phil.

“What is it, Philly?” I asked, genuinely curious.

He smiled. “Tell me your secret first.”

I didn’t respond. Chuck sat there quiet as well.

“Well, until you do, you wont know my news. It’s big, guys,” Phil said as he stood up and then trotted off three tables away where Lamar was just sitting down with a hot meal.

“We should talk to Nog, and see if we can let Phil in on this,” Chuck said. “He hates us right now, Scout.”

“We can’t.”

“Maybe he can get a custodial job at Fort Nog’s,” Chuck insisted.

“We can’t, Chuck. Think of how dangerous being in the E.I.A. has been. Do you want Phil’s life to be in jeopardy too?”

Chuck didn’t answer.

“Hey!” a voice cried out from behind me. I turned around and saw Nog running through the cafeteria, his red tie flapping over his shoulder. He stopped at our table. “How dare you boys deface my car in the parking lot by carving key streaks through it? You’re in so much trouble! Come with me, right now!”

Chuck and I were startled, confused, and embarrassed. The whole cafeteria was looking at us, most of them laughing. We started to pack our lunches up.

“Leave them! There’s no need for lunch where you’re going!” he shouted, adjusting his glasses. We did as Nog said and followed him.

Up in Nog’s empty classroom, Chuck and I sat in the front row as he stood in front of us, super curious about what I saw.

“First of all, don’t talk in my head when I’m teaching, Scout. You know I can’t answer, bro! Secondly, what was it you saw exactly? Smidgeon said it was some sort of space pod?” Nog questioned.

“Yeah. I mean it was long, maybe about ten feet or so. It had a small window near the top. I didn’t open it or anything, so I don’t know what was inside.”

“Okay, I’ll have to call a team from Fort Nog’s to come and retrieve it,” Nog said, then turning his attention to Chuck. “Mr. Taylor, I need a huge favor.”

Chuck sat up from his slouched position. “What is it?”

Nog looked at me first. “Scout, you can go now. We’ll meet up later.”

I stood up and made my way to the door. I turned around and saw Nog lean in to discuss something with Chuck. I left the room before I heard anything.

IV.

History was my last period of the day. Mrs. Viper had assigned a project that she wanted us in teams for. We were supposed to build a diagram depicting a certain event in U.S. History. A space rescue perhaps?

As soon as she said, “Pair up”, I immediately walked across the room to where Mandy Lee was sitting. She was scouring her backpack for a pencil, I assumed. I stood by her side:

“You want to be partners, Mandy?” I asked her.

She looked up not realizing it was me at first. She forced a smile. “Um, I was actually going to see if Audrey wanted to pair up.”

“Oh,” I said, watching as Audrey was making her way over from the other side of the room. “Well, then I have a quick question for you.”

“What is it, Scout?”

“Would you go to the Christmas dance with me tomorrow?”

The world became quiet, and even the pins across the globe hesitated to drop. She didn’t say anything. I gulped, and it sounded like everyone in the school could hear the saliva clanking down my throat. A shaky and hopeful smile pierced across my face. She finally answered my question after years of me just standing there:

“No. I’m sorry, Scout, but you’re just different than you were our freshman year.”

“But I saved your life.”

“Which I will always be grateful for, but you’ve become this very cocky and arrogant boy.”

“No I haven’t,” I said, getting annoyed.

“Yeah you have, Scout. Remember the first day of school this year when you shouted ‘Release the Kraken’ in the cafeteria and then mooned the entire boys lacrosse team? Or last week when Mr. Anderson assigned us to write a paper on an American hero, and you wanted me to write it about you?”

“But...”

“No buts, Scout. I don’t want to go to the dance with you,” Mandy said, just as Audrey pulled up a chair next to her. I stepped back. “Bye, Scout,” Mandy said.

I just stared at her. How dare she! I saved her life from alien robots, for God’s sake, and this is what she thinks of me? She sucks.

After school had let out, I took the bus home to change clothes before I headed off to Fort Nog’s. I wanted to see what exactly the analysis was on the space pod.

I walked in the house and immediately saw Uncle Jones and Butch McSides sitting on the couch laughing hard, cold ones in

their hands. Uncle Jones looked up at me and wiped the tears from his face.

“Scout! Welcome home!” Uncle Jones said, standing up and coming over to give me a drunken hug. Butch stood up and stumbled towards me and extended his hand.

“What’s up, Holmes?” he said. I refused to shake his hand. What was going on here? I didn’t want this creep in my house. Why was Uncle Jones getting along with him so well?

“What, no shake?” Butch said. “Are you more of a malt guy?”

Uncle Jones cracked up at Butch’s poor excuse of a joke.

“My God,” Uncle Jones said nudging me with his elbow, “this guy is hilarious! I don’t know why he creeped you out so much, Scout.”

I rolled my eyes and headed straight for the stairs. This was ridiculous. I walked into my room and shut the door. I stripped down to my smiley face boxers to the sound of Uncle Jones and creepy neighbor, Butch McSides, hamming it up downstairs. I threw on some cargo pants and a hooded sweatshirt that was designed by Chuck. The image was of a cartoon rhino wearing sunglasses and a bathing suit and said “Rhino what you’re thinking” underneath.

Chuck was making some mad cash with this little novelty shirt venture he had going on. He supplied Jakon with at least twenty

shirts every couple weeks, and per their agreement, earned half of the cut. He probably had a good little stash of cash somewhere.

“Hey, Scout!” I heard Uncle Jones call from downstairs.

I opened my door as I threw on a baseball cap. “Yeah?”

“I’m going to go over to Butch’s house and help him unload some boxes. Cool?”

“Cool,” I responded, not really caring. But if it got those two out of the house, then it was fine by me. I was getting ready to leave anyway.

I heard the front door open and close, and then went to my window and watched as the two of them carefully navigated across the snowy road. Uncle Jones slipped a couple times, but Butch was right there to prevent the falls. They better not become best friends or anything.

Butch turned around and looked back at our house, and then up to my window. I watched him carefully for a moment as he ominously smirked and winked at me. Was that a message of some kind, or just a drunken tic?

V.

I journeyed hard through the snow and out into the countryside of Kings Town. Next year I’d be able to drive, so no

more of this nomad crap. It took thirty or forty minutes, but I finally made it to Nog's farm.

I made my way straight to the barn and opened the doors just enough to slip right in. When I walked in, I was stunned. The I.P.S. – the shuttle that took us to Bethani and then vanished into the darkness of space – was back. It was sitting in the barn like a plane in a hanger. There were scientists and engineers all around it and working on it. I can't believe we finally got it back. To my right, I saw Farrow instructing some of the younger scientists. I walked over and waited until he was done talking.

“When did the I.P.S. get back?” I asked.

Farrow used a small cloth to clean his narrow glasses before putting it back into the pocket in his lab coat. He ran his hand across his bald head and thought for a moment. “Well, probably about three or four hours ago, man.”

I nodded and looked back at the shuttle. “Was D.R. Fritz on board?”

“Yeah. Jakon took Fritz down to one of the labs to try and get inside the program to see where everything went wrong.”

“Where's Nog?”

“Down in the labs. You can go find him if you want. I need to oversee this situation a little more. This thing has come back with butt-loads of information, brother. On space, alien worlds, mysterious objects in space; you name it, we probably got it.”

“Good deal, man,” I said. I slapped Farrow a quick high-five and headed for the horse stall that was guarded by the armed and dangerous, Marco and Hastings. Alright, well, not dangerous. They were pretty soft guys actually. Marco always had some lame joke to tell, so when he asked me “What do you call a pony’s cough?” I wasn’t too surprised.

“I don’t know, what?”

“A little hoarse,” Marco chuckled as he unleashed the punch line. “Get it, Scout? Cause we’re in a horse stall?”

“Yeah I get it, Marco.”

“It’s just a little equestrian humor,” Marco added.

“Yeah, no I got it, dude.” I looked at Hastings, who was holding on tightly to his laser rifle. “How do you deal with this, Hastings?”

Hastings smiled and shook his head. Seems like that’s all he ever did.

“Okay, boys, let me in,” I demanded. The two guards moved out of the way and I entered the horse stall and hit the elevator button on the back wall.

The elevator took me down about three levels to the Experiment Labs. I walked down a long white hallway and to the magnetic key operated door at the end of it. I knocked, since I didn’t have a key.

The door beeped and I heard it unlatch from the locking mechanism. I opened the door and walked in, removing my coat. Nog was sitting at the computer, staring at images that had been downloaded from the I.P.S.

“Nogger, what’s up, bro,” I said, walking up to him.

“Scout, my brotha, what’s the deal?” he asked, not removing his eyes from the space images. “It’s astonishing, what the I.P.S. has seen.”

“What about Fritz? Any word on his little malfunction last year?”

“Jakon’s down on level four looking into it right now. You can go ask him if you want.”

“Sure.”

Nog handed me the magnetic key card. “You’ll need this to get into the labs down there.” He looked up at me, “Also, we’ve been developing something here for you, Scout. I’ll show it to you tomorrow – my engineers say it’ll be done then.”

“Oh, ok, cool. What is it?” I asked.

“Now that would ruin the surprise, guy! Just leave it alone until tomorrow,” Nog shouted.

“What about that space pod? What’s the word?”

“I have a team studying it now. It appears to be an escape pod of some sort. Almost like it was jettisoned from a larger ship.

That's probably what the giant mass Jakon detected was. Some sort of monstrous spaceship."

"Was there anyone in it?"

"No, it was empty. Whatever was inside that pod though, got out and is somewhere here in Kings Town. I need to organize a search team for it."

There was a knock at the door and Nog pressed a little button next to the computer that unlocked it. I watched as Chuck came in carrying a folder in his hand.

"Hey, Scout," he said smiling, "What do you call a pony's cough?"

"A little hoarse," I said. "Marco is rehashing already?"

Chuck handed Nog the folder. "Here you go, Professor," he said, "just as you ordered."

Nog opened it and looked at a picture inside. I tried to peek a quick glance. I saw it was a drawing of an awesome looking cartoon frog with an attitude, chomping down hard on a smoking cigar.

"That's cool," I said. "What is that?"

Nog quickly shut the folder. "It's a surprise. Go on, Scout, get out of here. Weren't you going to go check on Jakon or something?"

I shook my head as I walked for the door. There were too many secrets in the organization.

I took the elevator down another level to four and got out. I walked down another white hallway and saw the Experiment Lab was up ahead. I swiped the key card in front of the sensor and the door opened.

I walked in, but didn't see anyone. "Jakon? You in here, brotha?"

I made my way through the lab, which was full of science equipment, beakers and machines that meant nothing to me. I walked into another room that was connected to the lab and noticed that most of the lights were off. There were a few on in the corner of the room, so I walked over to the steel tables that sat beneath them.

There were mechanical parts scattered all over the few tables. I tried to figure out what they were all from, and finally realized when I saw the head of D.R. Fritz sitting on the edge of one of the tables. Jakon had taken him completely apart? Why? He just needed access to the motherboard.

I heard someone talking and turned around. On the other side of the room, I saw a door that was opened just a crack. There was light coming from inside, as well as the man's voice that I was hearing. I approached it, seeing that above the door it said, 'Communications Department'.

I looked through the crack in the door and saw Jakon sitting down, his back facing me, at one of the computers. He had on a

pair of headphones and was speaking into one of the microphones. I tried to listen to what he was saying:

“He’s already in place. He arrived a few days ago,” he spoke into the microphone. “Are the Slimeborgs ready for action?” he asked.

What on Earth was he talking about? It was weird and suspicious for sure. I was starting to get a little nervous and the juices in my stomach were starting to gurgle with the hopes for a release. I clenched to avoid such a release.

“Good. I’ll radio in and tell him that it’s time. If all goes as planned, this should take care of both of our problems,” Jakon firmly stated.

Wait a minute...could it have been Jakon who tried to strand us on Bethani? I mean, I knew he was really upset when he found out Chuck and I became a part of the E.I.A., and that he thought it should have been him to go on the rescue mission, but would he go through these great lengths to get rid of us?

“Okay, I’ll be seeing you soon. Over.” Jakon removed the headphones just in time to hear my sprightly bubbly release; I just couldn’t hold it in.

He turned around quick and saw me standing there. “Scout? Did you fart? What did you hear?” He stood up and charged at me. I froze in panic as he grabbed me by the shirt and pulled me

into the communications room. I let out a tense squeaker as he shut the door and pinned me against the wall.

He stared at me for a minute, sniffed the rotten air, and anger began glowing in his eyes. “Why are you down here?”

“I was checking on Fritz.”

“Well, you saw him out there. Fritz is no more. There will never be any concrete evidence on this reprogramming.”

“I don’t get it. Why are you doing this?”

“Why? Kids shouldn’t be allowed here, Scout. Things were going pretty well until you and Chuck wandered on in. It should have been me going to Bethani. Nog was an idiot to let two rookies go instead. I earned it!”

“We didn’t ask to go,” I pleaded.

His forceful grip on my shirt tightened and he pressed me harder against the wall. “I’ve spent years gaining experience and earning respect in this group and then when you came into the picture, Nog was so excited to have such young faces. What was it he told me... ah yes, ‘We’ll be hip now’. THERE’S NO NEED FOR HIP HERE! IT’S SCIENCE! We’re a government organization, Scout, not an after school kids club!”

“Nog!” I shouted. Jakon’s eyes shot back and forth rapidly as he finally realized what I was doing...contacting Nog through my neuro-communications device that was implanted into my brain.

What?

“Jakon’s gone mad! He’s the ghost!” I shouted. Before I could hear Nog’s response, Jakon swung me around and threw me into the corner of the room where I crash-landed into a few carefully placed glass beakers on a small table. The table collapsed and the beakers shattered. I smirked just a tad because it must have looked so cool!

I looked up just in time to see Jakon open the door and dash out of the room. I stood to my feet and followed him out into the hallway. He was running fast towards the elevator. I was closing in on him. The elevator buzzed and the meter above it indicated that it was on its way down from level three. He stopped, looked around at his options and ran into the nearest door, shutting it behind him.

I made it to the door and ripped it open. I saw Jakon climbing into some sort of chamber that was against the back wall. He pressed a few buttons once he got inside and then the sliding steel door to the chamber closed. I stopped in the middle of the room and I could see the inside of the chamber illuminate a bright green color and then with a loud buzzing noise, the light settled and everything was quiet. The door slid back open, slowly, and a thin fog billowed out.

“Scout!” Nog yelled as the elevator out in the hall opened. I turned around and saw Nog and Chuck rush in, laser phasers locked and loaded.

VI.

“It’s our latest teleportation chamber model,” Nog explained of the foggy chamber against the wall. “It hasn’t been tested a whole lot yet, but it appears to have worked just fine.”

Nog stepped into the teleportation device and read the computer screen on the wall out loud. “It appears that he programmed it to teleport him to his store.” Nog walked out of it and approached me. Chuck was standing next to me with his hand on my shoulder, comforting me.

“Scout,” Nog said, “tell me everything.”

“Well,” I began, not really wanting to explain the whole thing, “to make a long story short, I walked in on D.R. Fritz in pieces down the hall. I then heard Jakon talking in the Communications Department – I don’t know to who though – about someone arriving a few days ago, something about Slimeborgs, and then saying that if the plan works, then both of their problems will be solved.”

Nog thought for a moment.

“Slimeborgs?” Chuck asked, concern broadcasting in his voice. I watched as Nog started to pace around the room. I could tell he was deep in thought.

Chuck looked me up and down and noticed small bloody scratches on my arms and face. “You okay, bro?”

“Yeah,” I said, looking at my horrific wounds. “Dude, you should have seen me. Jakon tossed me across the room like a rag doll and I was crashing into a whole bunch of glass. It was so loud. Dude, I bet it looked awesome.”

Chuck smiled, “I wish I could have see that!”

“So,” Nog said, “Jakon is obviously the one who tried to sabotage us last year.”

“Yeah,” I added, “he hated the fact that there were kids in the E.I.A.”

“So he tries to strand you guys on Bethani in hopes that both of the kids would be eliminated. Now, he’s speaking to someone through the Communications Department about someone who arrived a few days ago. That space pod arrived a few days ago.”

“You think Jakon is in cahoots with space aliens?” I asked.

“Possibly. But if this mysterious space pod man-creature was supposed to solve both of their problems...I can only assume it would be to teach you and Chuck a lesson you’d never forget.”

Chuck and I looked at each other. Jeez, Nog, that was a scary way to put it.

“Who else from space would view you guys as a problem?” Nog continued.

We all thought for a second, but only one person came to mind: Radar.

CHAPTER THREE

Firing Back With Turd Brains

I.

Chuck and I walked through the snow that was starting to fall in Kings Town. We were bundled up to the max in our winter coats, and we were each concealing our laser phasers underneath.

It was almost seven o'clock, and Nog had us on a mission. We were on our way to Jakon's Comic Collectables to see if Jakon had been by there after he attacked me.

When we arrived, the store was dark and appeared empty. We peered through the glass door where the 'closed' sign hung on the other side of it.

"Well," I said, "what now?"

"I have a key, dude," Chuck said, reaching into his front pocket. He pulled out a key that was attached to a lucky rabbits foot keychain.

"How'd you get a key?"

"Jakon and I are in business together, Scout."

Curious, I asked, "Did you steal it?"

"Yeah, when he wasn't looking. A few months back I gave him a box of shirts, you know, the ones with the alien face that

said ‘Martian Luther King’? Well anyway, I realized afterwards that I had made a mistake on the alien’s goatees, so I -”

“We get it, Chuck,” I stopped him, “you stole it. Just get us in there.”

With one swift turn of the key, we were in. We headed straight for the checkout counter and hopped over it to gain access to a door that was behind it. Nog supplied Jakon with the means of creating a sort of lab behind the door. It was supposed to be able to survey space and possibly connect the E.I.A. with other forms of extraterrestrial life. It also had the equipment necessary to track objects, which is exactly what he did with the space pod and that mysterious large mass that was still heading straight for us.

We searched the room for any sign that Jakon had been there, but we came up with nothing. I flipped through a notebook that was laying on one of the desks. Scribbled sloppily inside were the words, ‘Operation: Behemoth’. I read through the notes but couldn’t make heads or tails of it. There were a lot of diagrams and coordinates. I shoved it in my jacket so I could get a better look at it later.

“What’s this?” I heard Chuck say from across the room. I walked over and looked over his shoulder. There was a sheet of paper laying out with an address on it: 3859 Goober Lane. That was my street...and that was the house across from me where Butch McSides had decided to nest.

All the information began to race through my head as my brain started to piece the puzzle together.

“Butch McSides, bro,” I said. Chuck looked at me waiting for me to say more, so I didn’t disappoint. “This guy just moved into this address a few days ago around the same time that the space pod crashed in the school yard.”

“Yeah, so?” Chuck said, annoyed. Did he really not know what I was getting at?

“Butch McSides crashed landed on Earth in that space pod and is now stationed across the street from my house, dude.”

Chuck finally caught on.

Butch McSides was definitely from outer space and was teamed up with Jakon, and possibly Radar. And if the whole plan was to get to Chuck and I...Uncle Jones was in big trouble.

II.

We ran through the streets and into my neighborhood, braving the snowy conditions.

“Uncle Jones was helping Butch with some boxes earlier,” I explained to Chuck as we were both running out of breath. “He gave me this really ominous look when he was crossing the street. I think he’s definitely up to something.”

Chuck just nodded, which looked weird since he was running.

We dashed down the icy street of Blunder Drive and made a right onto Goober Lane. The moving van was still in sight, parked out in the street. All of the boxes from the driveway were gone – they must have gotten them all inside.

Our run finally dwindled to a wheezy jog, and finally ended with us gasping for breath as we walked up to Butch McSides porch. My lungs hurt – they hurt bad.

Chuck clenched his fist tight and pulled his forearm back. He was gearing up for a knock. I quickly put my hand up and stopped him.

“What?” Chuck asked, putting his arm back down and releasing his fingers from clenching.

“We can’t just knock on some sort of space villains door, dude!” I told him. “We need to bust it down.”

“Ah, yeah! Like in the movies!” Chuck and I were finally on the same page.

“On the count of three, we both start throwing our weight around like we own this joint. Got it?”

“Got it.”

We both braced ourselves for the inevitable coolness that was about to happen. We were gonna throw ourselves into the door and shatter it down to pieces and charge in there, probably saving the day or something.

We both armed ourselves with our laser phasers, and I mouthed the countdown to Chuck. One...two...three...

We both, with all of our might, bashed into the door repeatedly, and within about forty-five seconds, we were able to loosen it. We kept bashing away and I finally heard a couple screws fall and hit the porch. I smiled as my arm began to bruise; it was about to happen, I could feel it.

With a couple more final throws of our bodies, the door finally busted into the house, and Chuck and I collapsed into the living room.

We stood up, dusted ourselves off and looked ahead - our laser phasers held outward. The sight we saw was confusing. Uncle Jones sat in a wooden chair, tied up and bound to it. Standing next to him on the left was Jakon. He was holding a laser rifle. Standing to the right of Uncle Jones, was Butch McSides. He too, was packing laser heat.

Scattered all around the living room were large cardboard boxes – the ones Butch had been moving for the past couple days. There was no other furniture to be seen.

“Freeze!” I yelled, and I held my laser gun out further.

Jakon and Butch both laughed at me.

Embarrassed, I changed my tone: “Who are you?” I aimed my gun specifically at Butch.

“You should know who I am, alright? I’m the other one you left behind, alright?” Butch said.

Alright? Who used to say that? I left him behind? Wait...

I studied Butch carefully. He was a clean-shaven masterpiece, dressed nicely, his dark brown hair was cut...definitely not the way I remember seeing Homeless Harry.

“Homeless Harry?” I asked.

“Yeah, it’s me, alright? What are you going to do about it?”

“What’s the big idea here, Scout?” Uncle Jones cried out in a nervous panic, “Is this some kind of epic gag you’re trying to pull on your old Uncle U.J.?”

“No, man,” I said to my Uncle, “he’s a homeless guy from outer space looking for revenge!”

Homeless Harry then slapped Uncle Jones straight across the face and Uncle Jones let out an “Ugh!”

“Stop!” I shouted. “Why are you doing this? How’d you get here?”

“It’s a long, drawn out story, Scout,” he said, and then started in on the story. “Basically, after you left Radar for dead, the Frooginites sensed his anger towards you and thought they could use him as a weapon against you guys for destroying their portals.

They took Radar in as one of their own, or as he's now called, Lord Radar the Great, and started to train him to be an angry fighting machine.”

Chuck and I were trying to absorb all of this unexpected nonsense. Harry continued:

“Lord Radar the Great eventually became very well respected on Bethani, especially with the Frooginites. By his orders, the planet was completely rid of all of the green butt aliens that inhabited it. In their planet-wide extermination, they discovered me hiding in my dumpster. I pleaded to Lord Radar and told him how you abandoned me. He could relate on many levels. We both hated you, and we both wanted revenge.

“So a ship was built – a massive space ship of death – The Behemoth. We created an army of Slimeborgs, built by our laborers, and set a course for Earth.”

Jakon chimed in, “A few months ago, when I was checking the computers for any sign of the I.P.S., I intercepted a transmission from deep space. It was Lord Radar the Great. When I said I was with Earth's Intergalactic Ambassadors, he flipped out and started calling me names. He threatened to beat me up a few times, and when I finally realized it was you he was after, I sided with him. I didn't want you two in the E.I.A. from the beginning. Lord Radar and I had an understanding, and I was supposed to make sure, that at all costs, you and Chuck suffered. We're taking this Uncle Jones character to The Behemoth, where

Lord Radar will see to it that he never returns. Lord Radar insists on being blessed by your company.”

Without warning, Homeless Harry threw down a flash bang grenade and everything went white. The ringing in our ears brought Chuck and I to our knees. I felt someone bump into me, and when I turned to look, I saw Jakon dashing out the front door. Homeless Harry was right behind him with Uncle Jones draped over his shoulder.

“Chuck, get up!” I ordered. I stood to my feet and stumbled to the front door. I saw Jakon open the back of the moving truck and pull down the ramp. The two of them carried Uncle Jones into the back of the truck and within a matter of seconds, the roof of it exploded off, and a small shuttlecraft of some kind emerged from inside and blasted off at full speed with nitro rocket boosters that looked awesome, and disappeared into the snowy sky.

“They’re gone,” I said. “Chuck?” I wondered what he was up to. I turned around and saw Chuck looking into the living room, watching as each of the dozen or so cardboard boxes opened up. From within each of them, something strange stood up.

They were weird robot things. Their bodies were made up of some sort of transparent material, almost like a Plexiglass, that allowed us to see right through them. Inside their bodies were enough mechanical devices to know they were robots, and they seemed to be filled with neon green ooze, or slime. The only

feature on the head or face was a single eye, which rapidly flickered a bright red color.

Chuck and I armed ourselves quickly as each of the Slimeborgs raised their arms. Each of them had an arm that turned into a gun. Within seconds we were in another epic battle.

I rolled onto the floor and ducked behind a couple of cardboard boxes. I popped up and fired a few beams of lasers into a couple of the Borgs. They shattered like glass, sending the gooey slime splashing in every direction.

Chuck popped off a few rounds and mowed down, like, at least four of those things. I saw a smile on his face that didn't seem to fade away.

I took quick cover behind the box as a couple of the Borgs fired their lasers at me. A few beams hit the box and I saw smoke emerge from the laser holes. It smelled like it was burning.

I hopped over the box and put my back up against it, putting myself out there for the Borgs. I pumped off shots of lasers and shattered a few more into a slimy mess.

Chuck rolled into a somersault, his signature move, and hopped up. He punched one of the Slimeborgs in the face, and it stumbled backwards. Chuck aimed his laser phaser point blank in its face and fired off one quick bolt. The Borg flew backwards, his face shattering and spewing slime.

There was one more robot coming up from behind Chuck. I knew he knew it was there, so I let my buddy take care of some business. He swung turned around fast, transitioning into a roundhouse kick, and shattered the Borg on impact.

Chuck turned to me with a huge smile on his face. “Scout, you’re on fire!”

“Thanks, man! You were too, brother!” I said, standing up from my squatting position. Chuck’s smile disappeared.

“No, man,” he shouted and pointed at me. “You’re *on* fire!”

I turned around fast and saw the cardboard box that was shot was a little bit on fire. I smelled something else burning and knew it was the back of my coat. I stopped, dropped, and rolled like I was always taught, and the fire was extinguished.

I lay there on the floor, smoke swirling off my body. Chuck approached me, and extended his hand to mine.

“Come on,” he said, “we have to get to Nog.”

What a battle. It felt good to be back in action.

III.

Chuck, Nog and I sat around in Nog’s self-proclaimed “outdated” kitchen as we explained the entire situation to him. He stood up from the kitchen table and started to pace around the

room, occasionally going over to the stove to stir the soup he was heating up. I have no idea what kind of soup it was, but it stunk like crap.

“Why couldn’t we do this in The Secret Room?” I said, waving the stink away from my face. It felt like the smell was curling my nose hairs in a singe.

“Because they’re installing a high-tech super-laser guided security system down there because of the Jakon debacle,” Nog said, licking the soup spoon dry.

Nog eventually returned to the table, but towered over it with his skinny and frail look instead of sitting down. “Well, I think the answer is pretty clear. We have to send you boys to The Behemoth so you can rescue Uncle Jones and defeat Radar and his Cosmic Posse.”

“I’ll do it,” I sighed, accepting the challenge myself.

Chuck looked at me. “You’ll do it?”

“Yeah, I guess. It has to be done, Chuck.”

“By yourself?”

“Yeah, man, I’m capable,” I said; I thought I had made myself clear on that by offering to go alone.

“No you’re not, man,” Chuck exploded, “not by yourself!”

“Yeah I am! You said it yourself, bro! I’m the Space Savior of the Universe!”

“That was sarcasm, Scout! I was mocking you! MOCKING YOU!”

I rolled my eyes at Chuckles.

“Shut up, all ya’ lls!” Nog shouted. “You’re both going. It’s my call, and that’s my call.”

“Turd face,” Chuck childishly squeaked out of the side of his mouth.

“Turd brains,” I fired back with a vengeance.

“Shut up, fools!” Nog insisted, and slammed his fist down on the table. He became quiet again as he ran over a few things in his head. “I have to think of the best way to handle this.”

“We need to kill them all,” I said.

“Whoa, Scout,” Nog said, “We don’t want to resort to murder. Not just yet.”

Nog took a deep breath and continued, “Okay, you boys go home and get some rest while I come up with an epic plan. It looks like that surprise I have for you, Scout, will come in handy tomorrow.”

I was really curious what the surprise was, but I was glad it was for me. I deserved it.

Chuck and I left, both going our separate ways home. It seemed like he didn’t have much to say to me.

IV.

It was late and I was sitting awake in bed. Before she retired to her bedroom for the night, my mom asked me if I had seen Uncle Jones, and all I told her was that he mentioned something about a buddy of his, Booya Boggs, and that was all she needed to hear. “He’ll be gone all night with that idiot, Boggs,” she had said. There must have been a story there, but I didn’t know it.

Just the thought of another space mission was tickling my excitement bones. I was more than ready. It’d been over a year and I was just itching to get back on the saddle. I wondered how Chuck and I would get to The Behemoth. Would we use the I.P.S. again? Doubtful, since it was being studied currently.

There was a lot I needed to do before our next mission. I needed to get into shape, I needed to brush up on weaponry, I needed to think up a cool line or two to shout off while I was defeating enemies...it was all making me hungry just thinking about it.

I wandered down into the kitchen around midnight for a snack. I buttered up some saltines and chugged a glass of OJ, then went back to my room. I needed to get some sleep – I had a big day coming up.

I woke up, showered, ate a complete balanced breakfast, and headed for the bus to begin my Friday.

When I got to school, I went straight to the cafeteria for a second breakfast. They were serving cake battered flapjacks and hash brown sliders – my favorite! I sat down at my usual table and only had to wait about three minutes or so before Chuck plopped down next to me.

“I ran into Nog in the parking lot,” Chuck said.

“Yeah? What did he say?”

“He said were blasting off right after school, if that works for you.”

“Of course it does. Mandy turned me down for the Christmas dance, so I’m free for space. I’d rather be doing that anyway. Saving the world and stuff.”

“I told Nog that after school, we’ll head right over to his farm,” Chuck said.

The table shook, and we noticed Phil plop down across from us. Lamar sat down with him.

“Why do you guys have to go to Professor Nog’s farm after school?” Phil asked.

Gulp! He wasn’t supposed to hear that.

“Um...” I said.

“Um...” Chuck said.

Phil waited for one of us to say something, but neither of us did. “This secret you guys have must be a whopper. Now it includes a teacher?”

I turned my attention to Lamar. He was staring at me.

“Hi, Lamar,” I said.

“Sup,” Lamar replied.

“Look guys,” Phil said, “I really, really want to tell you my news. But in all fairness, I shouldn’t because you guys have been so sneaky over the past year. So, this is your last chance. Tell me what’s going on. If you don’t, not only will you not find out my news,” Phil sighed, “but I don’t know if I want to be bothered by being around you two anymore.”

I felt sad almost instantly. I couldn’t lose Phil as a friend. He was too important to me. Plus, I hadn’t finished reading his *Dragon Wind* book series yet.

“Phil,” Chuck said, sounding like he was about to give in.

Phil focused on Chuck. Chuck hung his head and didn’t proceed.

“If we told you, you’d be in danger, Phil,” I said to him.

“Trust me. We’re only looking out for you.”

Phil nodded his head slowly. I could tell he didn’t believe me. He stood up and tapped his new best friend on the shoulder. “C’mon, Lamar, let’s go get some hash brown sliders before all the crispy cheddar ones are picked over.”

Phil and Lamar were gone instantly, leaving an empty void in the pit of my stomach.

I sat in History with my fist holding up my head on the desk. I was in ‘The Thinker’ pose, only seated. Was he seated? I don’t know, whatever. I was worried about losing Phil as a friend. I wish there was something I could do or say to him to make everything all better without giving away the secret, but I kept coming up short in that department.

I looked around and everyone was paired up working on their diagrams. Since I wasted all that time yesterday asking Mandy to go to the dance with me, I ended up being the only one in class who didn’t have a partner.

I watched Mandy and Audrey cutting up cardboard and twirling some neon colored twist ties around stuff. Looked like a cool project. Mandy looked up in my direction and saw my depressed look. She could tell something was wrong. A few seconds later she stood up and walked over to me.

I sat back in my chair and laid my hands out flat on the desk as she sat down in the seat next to me. She smiled:

“Hey, Scout,” she said.

“Sup, Mands,” I replied, giving her the worst abbreviated name in history. I closed my eyes tight, wishing I could’ve just reversed that.

“I did a lot of thinking last night, Scout. It all boils down to you saved my life. I am truly grateful for that. You were so nice to me last year, but it’s apparent that your personality has changed. I know that sweet little freshman nerd is still in there somewhere,” Mandy said, putting her hand on one of mine.

What was this?

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I’d be willing to give you a chance, Scout,” she said, gripping my hand with hers. “Maybe you’d be different again. I’d really like that.”

I smiled. “Yeah of course! I can definitely change.”

“Good. So, you want to go to the dance tonight?”

“No, I can’t, I’m going on another space mission.”

Her smile disappeared. “What?”

“Something’s happened, and I have to go to space.”

“I thought you wanted to go to the dance with me.”

“I did, but when you blew me off yesterday, I jumped at the chance to battle more aliens.”

Mandy stared at me. “Blew you off? Maybe you *can’t* change, Scout.” Mandy released my hand and stood up.

“Wait,” I said, reaching out for her, “don’t you want to know what the mission is about? I’m going into battle, Mandy. I’m gonna be a hero again!”

She shook her head and walked away.

“Fine!” I yelled, catching the attention of everyone in the classroom. I noticed they were all looking at me, but I didn’t care – Mandy needed to know. “I’m glad I’m not going to the dance with you! I can do better anyways!”

The class gasped and laughed – they were all excited about the sudden drama I’d just started. Mandy stopped on her way over to Audrey and turned to look at me. Her mouth was wide open and her lips started to quiver. A single tear traveled down her cheek and everyone heard it splash on the floor.

She ran for the door and left the room crying hard. I stood up in a fury and looked at Mrs. Viper. “She left in the middle of class, Mrs. Viper!” I cried out. “That’s detention!”

CHAPTER FOUR

The Frog Hopper

I.

School let out for the day and I rode the bus home, not saying much to anyone. Maybe I was a little harsh with Mandy, but who knows.

I cut through my snowy yard, glancing over at Butch McSides...er...Homeless Harry's house. It was quiet now, but I knew that inside the house, slime was everywhere. Evidence was everywhere in there.

I walked into my home and for some reason the Christmas decorations annoyed me. It didn't feel much like the holidays. Instead of celebrating at the dance with the girl of my dreams, who I'd do anything for, I was gearing up to battle Lord Radar the Great and his Cosmic Posse.

I walked upstairs and Mark came busting out of his room, huffin’.

“Scout! Thank God you’re here,” he said, out of breath from just running from his room to the hall. This guy needed to get off his guitar and hit the workout mat or something.

“What?” I said, trying to walk by him to my room.

“I just got a phone call from Bowling Buddies, and guess what?”

“They want you to play a full set?” I guessed, even though I was pretty sure that’s what it was.

“Yeah, how’d you know?”

“Just a guess, brother.”

“Well, they do! I get to perform six of my songs tomorrow night. I want you there to see it. It’s not just a single song anymore, they want a whole set!”

Mark was crazy-excited. I wasn’t sure if I was going to be back from The Behemoth or not by then, but I assured him anyways. “Yeah, bro, I’ll be there.”

“Bring your pals too! Chuck and Phil! It’ll be awesome! Bring a girl too! That way you can say ‘you know someone in the band’, and maybe you’ll score some points with her. Epicness awaits, Scout! EPICNESS!”

Mark flew back into his room and slammed the door shut. I heard him start strumming on his acoustic again. Good for him.

I walked into my room and stripped down to just about nothing. I needed to re-gear. I threw on some jeans and another one of Chuck's t-shirts. This one had a small cartoon fly with a human's head, wearing a hat. Underneath the fly, it said 'Sly Fly Guy'. These shirts had been killing it at the store. But I assumed that little venture of Chuck's was over. With Jakon turning cheeks, his shop would be closed down for sure. The business was probably dead.

I asked Mark for a ride to Father Peanuts so I didn't have to walk through the cold winter weather again, and he obliged. The whole way there, he made us listen to demo CDs of his songs. Ugh...I didn't need all that right now.

He dropped me off at the café and I told him I'd get a ride home later. He took off and I waited for him to turn the corner, and then I made my move. It was only about a mile to Nog's farm from Father Peanuts. That was much better than starting at my house.

I braved the cold winds and powdery snowfall and made it to the farm around 4pm or so.

I slipped through the doors and into the barn. It was craziness in there. The I.P.S. was in pieces, stashed along the walls of the barn. Everyone in there seemed to be busy with something or other. I saw Farrow instructing a bunch of young scientists on some new computer system near the back. There were engineers tinkering around with the I.P.S. parts. A couple construction

guys were pulling heavy chains that were attached to something somewhere up in the rafters. It was crazy.

“Scout, my brotha!” I heard Nog call out from over near the horse stall. I looked over and saw that he was walking my way with Chuck by his side. Chuck was holding what looked like folded clothes in his hands.

“What are those clothes?” I asked, pointing to them as Nog and Chuck approached.

“It’s part of your surprise, Scout,” Nog said. “Chuck, unfold!”

With Nog’s instructions, Chuck opened up the folded clothes to reveal some sweet space uniforms! They were like, dark blue jumpsuits with black elbow and kneepads built in. They zipped up from the crotch and on the left side breast-pocket area, was that awesome cigar-smoking attitude frog head.

“Shaweet!” I shouted, grabbing one of the two jumpsuits from Chuck. “That frog’s a logo?”

“Yup. It’s for your missions from here on out,” Nog said. “I remember how annoyed you were when I sent you fellas to Bethani in just your street clothes. Now that the E.I.A. has a budget, we can get you nice things.”

“Thanks, Nogs!” I said, the smile not once leaving my face. I stripped down to my boxers right there in front of everyone and slipped on the jumpsuit. I zipped it up slowly, for dramatic

effect, and then stood there as people gawked at my awesomeness. “This is more like it!”

“Now, for the main course, Scout,” Nog said. I couldn’t wait to see what he had for me now! Nog shouted at a couple of the construction guys who were pulling the large chains from the dark rafters above us. They knew what to do and started pulling hard on the chains.

Right before my eyes, a space ship was lowered from the rafters and into the center of the barn. It was beautiful. It was smaller than the I.P.S., maybe the size of a mini van, was black in color with red flames across the hood. It reminded me of a small personal jet. It had wings, rocket boosters on the back, and a seriously cool tinted front windshield.

I walked around the ship and noticed that on both sides, the attitude frog picture was stamped on it. This was official stuff!

“With this puppy,” Nog said, “you’ll be able to bounce around from galaxy to galaxy like a frog on a pond full of lily pads. Scout, I present to you...The Frog Hopper.

It had a freaking name!? Awesome!

“Dude! Chuck do you see this?” I said as I ran my fingers across the black finish of the ship.

“Yeah, I see it,” Chuck pouted. “You didn’t tell me that’s what this frog was for, Nog! Where’s my super-awesome gift?”

“I need you boys to follow me down into the labs,” Nog said, leading the way to the horse stall. “You’ll get your gift down there, Chuck. Plus, those jumpsuits come with utility belts, boys!”

“Utility belts?!” I was so freaking happy about all this.

“And backpacks to match!” Nog added.

“Nog, you son of a gun!”

“And newly designed laser phasers!”

“WHAT!?” I cried as Nog kept delivering the goods. I took one last look at The Frog Hopper before we took the elevator down.

II.

Chuck and I stood there in Lab B-1. We were both dressed in our jumpsuits, wearing our utility belts full of gadgets, with our matching backpacks, and holding the newest model of the laser phaser. We felt authorized.

Nog pulled up a screen on his computer and Chuck and I gathered around to see it.

“This is imaging from my now patented Super Magnified Telescopic Deep Space Identifier...or the S.M.T.D.S.I. for short.”

Nog explained. “It’s the first device in my line of Zoomable Science Equipment.

“I was able to get a good look at what we’re dealing with up there. The Behemoth has entered our Solar System and is now passing right by Pluto, God rest its’ soul.”

The pictures that Nog was showing us were incredibly clear. They showed a massive space ship with the words ‘The Behemoth’ stenciled onto the side of it. It looked like the ship itself was maybe around seven or eight stories high, probably longer than a couple of football fields and had some sort of nitro rocket boosters all up in there.

“I’m thinking, if my calculations are correct, The Frog Hopper will be able to get you to The Behemoth within about an hour. Your ship has far more advanced engines and power than the I.P.S. did. That thing’s basically crap compared to the Frog.”

“Sweet,” Chuck said, “but where’s my gift?”

“Will you calm down and shut up for five seconds, Chuck. God, I’m getting to that, jeez!” Nog stood up and walked to a locker that was against the wall. He punched in a digital code and the locker door opened. Nog pulled out a weapon that I’d never seen before.

He handed it to Chuck, and I could have sworn I saw Chuck’s mouth actually water. He ogled the piece up and down. It was black and silver, a little longer than the laser phasers and had not

only had the normal barrel, but it had another one attached underneath. The attitude frog was plastered on the side of the top barrel.

“Chuck, this is your new weapon of choice... the P2 - The Plasma Phaser,” Nog said. “The top barrel shoots out your generic lasers, but the bottom one shoots out controlled plasma bursts. They will explode on impact and destroy the crap out of everything. I’m sure this bad-boy will come in handy up there. Just be careful with it.”

Chuck held the plasma phaser out in front of me and smiled. “Ha! Check it, Scout.”

“So,” I said, trying not to show my jealousy, “I got my own spaceship.”

“Well, I got a plasma phaser.”

He didn’t deserve that. I did. I was the main star of the show here. I’m the one who has a spaceship – I should have my own personal weapon of choice too! “That’s mine, Chuck!”

I reached out for the gun, but Chuck pulled away.

“Give it here, Chuck!” I said, swiping at it.

“No.”

“Give it, dude! It’s mine!”

“It’s clearly not! Nog!”

“Boys! Boys! Shut up!” Nog shouted, stepping in between us. “Why are you two acting like such boobs here lately?”

“I’m not a boob, you are!” I yelled.

Nog reached for me and grabbed me by the chest. “Did you just call me a boob? A mammary!?”

He looked annoyed so I quieted down and he finally let me go.

“Professor?” a man’s voice called from the doorway. We all turned and saw a tall man in a suit with a white lab coat thrown over top of it. He had a neatly combed full head of gray hair, wore a pair of tinted glasses and was holding a clipboard.

“Wait here, fellas,” Nog said and then walked over to the man. They walked back out into the hallway.

“Scout, let me ask you something,” Chuck said, resting the plasma gun on his shoulder. “Why are you walking around like you’re constantly stuck in big-head mode?”

“Chuck, leave it alone.”

“No, bro! Ever since Bethani, you’ve walked around like your farts don’t stink. And they do, bro! They reek!”

I shook my head. I didn’t want to hear any of this. My attitude was my business. I was comfortable with who I was – a science fiction hero. This wasn’t The Chuck Taylor Story, after all.

“Just come back down to Earth, dude. Be the guy you used to be,” Chuck said as his voiced calmed. I could hear his concern, but he was too far out of line.

“Scout! Chuck! Come here!” Nog called from the hallway. Chuck and I walked out into the hall and saw Nog standing with that other guy.

“Boys, this is Dr. Hix Blossom. He’s from the government, and is a huge reason why the E.I.A. is what it is today. He’s responsible for funding Fort Nog’s, The Frog Hopper, etc. Shake his hand, boys.”

He put the clipboard under his arm and I shook the Doctor’s hand. “Hix Blossom, huh? Like the Higgs Boson?” I said all science-like.

“Hm,” Dr. Hix pondered as he shook my hand back, “I never put that one together. No, actually, I come from a very flowery family tree. Lots of florists and stuff.”

“Gotcha. I’m Scout Brooks.”

“Chuck Taylor,” Chuck said, reaching out and shaking Dr. Hix’s other hand. Hix was shaking both of our hands at the same time; it was weird.

Nog stepped in, “Alright, that’s enough.” We let go of Dr. Hix’s hands. “Dr. Hix wanted to show us the new super high-tech laser guided security system they just installed.”

“Step back, lads,” Hix said as he scooted us all back against the end of the hallway. “All you gotta do is hit the button.”

Hix pressed a button that was newly placed on the wall, and instantly, red beams shot out of small tabs on the hallway walls and criss-crossed each other in a tangled neon mess. The new security system was cool and it gave off a soothing ‘hum’ sound.

“Any questions?” Hix asked, pressing the button again to turn it off. “It’s pretty straight forward, I suppose. Just activate and you’re secured.”

“Thank you, Dr. Hix,” Nog said.

There was a crackling noise that came over the intercom. It went on for a few seconds and then Nog got annoyed. “God, when is everyone gonna figure out how to work that intercom system? You can talk now, ya morons!”

With that, a man’s voice came over the base-wide intercom. “Professor Ed Nog, there is someone here to see you. He said he’s with Scout and Chuck. Please come to the barn.”

Nog looked at us. “Who was with you?”

I was clueless. “No one.”

“Nope, no one,” Chuck added, just as confused.

The intercom crackled again and it went on for a few more seconds. Nog was annoyed again.

“Talk already, morons!” he shouted.

There was a slight squeal of feedback that popped in our ears, and then another voice came over the system - a different voice.

“Attention Intergalactic Ambassadors of Earth,” the young sounding male voice said. He spoke clear and crisp into the microphone – crispier than I’ve ever heard before. He continued:

“This is Lord Radar the Great, and I have hacked your communications system.”

We all looked at each other. It was the real deal – Radar was alive and kicking up plots of revenge.

“My request is simple,” he announced, “Send Scout Brooks and Chuckles Taylor up to my space base – The Behemoth – and I promise I won’t destroy your precious little club.”

“It’s not a club,” Nog got all defensive, “it’s an organization!”

“Whatever, bro,” Radar’s voice echoed through Fort Nog’s. “I just want those two in my hands so I can de-pants them in a way they never imagined – by killing them!”

“Radar,” I said, “This is ridiculous. Give me back -”

“IT’S LORD RADAR THE GREAT, SCOUT!” Radar exploded in fury.

We all got quiet and waited for Radar’s heavy breathing to stop. When it did, he finally continued:

“You two left me stranded on that planet over a year ago, making me miss out on everything back on Earth, and now

you're gonna pay the price. You two better come on up here, otherwise I'll blow up the entire universe. Lord Radar, out."

There was a click and he was gone.

"We have to get you guys up there. The whole entire universe is in danger!" Nog shouted. "Let's go, we have no time!"

III.

The elevator opened and we passed through the horse stall. Marco grabbed my arm. "Hey, Scout."

"What?"

"What do you get when you cross a T-Rex with a firecracker?"

"I don't know, man, we're kind of in a hurry here," I said, pulling away from his grip. Nog and Dr. Hix opened the horse stall gate and walked out into the barn. Chuck and I were right behind them.

"Dino-mite!" Marco shouted behind us. I didn't look back, but I laughed. So did Chuck. Marco had been on fire lately.

"Farrow, my brotha!" Nog called out. Farrow, across the barn, turned away from the group of young scientists he was teaching and faced Nog. "Who is here to see me?"

Farrow pointed over near the entrance where Hastings was standing with someone. I squinted to see who it was, and then my heart sank. In the pit of my stomach, I felt a knot that had been tangled enough to the point where it'd be impossible to unwind.

It was Phil. He was in the barn. He was in Fort Nog's. He was facing the awesome Frog Hopper and he was witnessing all the busy-bodies that worked for the E.I.A. I must have been dreaming.

I turned to my left and punched Chuck in the arm.

"Ow, dude! God, what was that for?" he said, rubbing his arm.

"I was seeing if I was dreaming."

"You have to do that to yourself, bro, not someone else," Chuck said as he let a punch fly that hit me in the chest.

"Ouch!" I yelled. "God, Chuck!"

Hastings walked Phil over to the four of us.

"What's all this nonsense?" Nog asked. "Who is this nerd?"

"His name is Phil Easton. He said he was with Scout and Chuck and asked to see you specifically," Hastings said.

Nog looked at Chuck and I. "You told this kid about the E.I.A.?"

"They didn't say anything," Phil spoke up. "I put all the pieces together and tracked you guys down here."

There was an awkward silence for a few seconds.

“Take him to The Secret Room, Hastings,” Nog said. “Take Scout and Chuck too. You guys can hang there for a bit until we get The Frog Hopper prepped. Looks like we have a new member now...”

Nog turned and walked away. Dr. Hix followed him.

“C’mon, boys. Follow me,” Hastings said. He led the way back to the elevator where Marco was still laughing at his dinosaur joke.

I couldn’t believe this was happening.

IV.

Chuck, Phil and I sat around the meeting table in The Secret Room. Hastings was on guard out in the hallway. Phil kept looking at Chuck and I with his eyebrows raised like Chuck on a flagpole. He just kept looking at us, going back and forth between the two of us. I was wondering what he was thinking.

My heart was pounding something fierce and Chuck was sweating nervously; his facial tics were getting the best of him. What were we supposed to say? We’d been lying to our friend for over a year, and we’d been pushing him away too. There wasn’t much to say, except:

“Pretty cool, huh?”

Phil looked around, admired the room and then nodded.

“Definitely. Philly loves what he sees. Why didn’t you guys tell me?”

“We weren’t allowed to. It was the rule,” Chuck said.

“We wanted too, Phil, but it would have put you in danger as well.”

“I heard that whole announcement from Radar,” Phil said.

Crap – I forgot he was already in the barn before Radar hacked the system.

“Let me explain, Phil,” I said, gulping for the right words.

“You see, when we were at -”

“No need to explain, Scout,” Phil interrupted. “I know what happened. We were planning a revenge prank on Radar at Battle of the Bands, but instead of ruining his bands’ performance you somehow stranded him on another planet? Dudes, that’s all kinds of classic! You got him so good! Forget overlapping his vocal track on stage, you guys were thinking outside of the box! Outside of the galaxy!”

I couldn’t believe this was going as well as it was.

“So you’re not mad?” Chuck asked.

“I’m a little mad. But if it was a rule, then it needed to be followed.”

This was great. Now, by default, Phil was going to be in the E.I.A. We could all be pals again!

“So, what now?” Phil asked. “You guys have to go to his space ship and take out the trash?”

“That’s the plan,” I said.

The three of us sat around the table for at least another half an hour, chatting and laughing away. We were able to explain everything to Phil; everything from Mandy, to Homeless Harry, to Blorf and his European Sphere Spear – it felt good to get it all out in the open.

Hastings came into the room and said, “It’s time.”

It was time.

CHAPTER FIVE

An Unexpected Space Café Skirmish

I.

We were strapped in and ready to go. I sat in the pilot's seat of The Frog Hopper and Chuck sat to my right in the co-pilot's seat. There were two other seats sitting directly behind us, but they were empty. I assumed they were for whenever our team grew.

I looked around at all the lights and buttons on the dash and soaked in that new frog smell. We had helmets on with sweet visors and were both suited up in our new uniforms and gear. Chuck's P2 phaser was holstered to the back of his seat and our backpacks sat on the floor right beneath it.

Scout, how do you like your new digs?

“They're sweet, dude. Thanks!” I responded to Nog's head-voice.

We'll be ready for your launch here in a just a few minutes. Were just making sure all your vitals are stable and Farrow is running through one last systems check.

I took a deep breath and looked at Chuck. “You ready, brother?”

“Heck yeah, man. Let’s do this.”

“Now when we get up there, you follow my lead.”

Chuck didn’t respond. He just looked forward, out the windshield.

“You got me, Chuck? You follow my lead, okay?”

“No, Scout. I’m not your sidekick. Do I looked like Robin to you?”

“No, Robin didn’t have a gut like yours.”

Chuck shook his head. “One of these days, man, one of these days.”

“One of these days what? What does that mean?”

“Your whole ego is gonna come back and take a big old honkin’ bite right out of your butt cheeks. You’re setting yourself up for karma.”

“Karma Chameleon,” a boys voice said from behind us. We both turned around real fast and saw Phil plopping down in one of the seats behind us and buckling up.

“Phil?” Chuck and I both exclaimed.

“Sup, broster’s,” he said.

“What are you doing in here? Did anyone see you sneak in?”
I asked, nervous as all get-out.

“No, I came in through some side hatch on the side. No one saw. I just wanted to come.”

Chuck and I looked at each other and then I decided: “Ok,” I said. “Just keep your mouth shut during our launch so Nog doesn’t suspect stowaway stuff.”

“Scout, he can’t go! That’s treason!” Chuck yelled. Clearly he didn’t know what treason meant. “He’s just a civilian with no training.”

“You trying to hog all the spotlight again, Chuck?” I said, “He *can* go. It’s my mission, my team, my Frog Hopper, my call.”

“Bro, I quit. I quit so bad, bro,” Chuck said, taking off his helmet and unbuckling his straps.

It’s lift-off time, fellas. Start your engines, Scout.

I lifted a small lever and pressed the red ignition button and the ship fired up with a quick jolt. Chuck panicked and strapped back in quickly and put his helmet back on. I smirked – I wasn’t about to let him bail on this!

“You strapped, Phil?” I asked.

“You know it, son.”

“Let’s do this,” I said as I pulled back the stick shift and the ship started to slowly move forward. I watched out the front windshield as people were scattering out of the way and hitting the deck.

Scout, you moron! We haven't even opened the barn doors yet!

Oops.

I pulled back on the joystick steering thing and punched it hard. The rocket boosters on the back ignited and a blast of fire blew out the back of the Frog and it launched us forward from 0 to 100 in about a half a second.

We crashed through the front of the barn, sending wooden shrapnel everywhere. I was hoping everyone dodged out of my way.

My barn!

We sped by Nog's house incredibly fast, clipping his porch with one of the Frog's wings. I saw it collapse in the side mirror and it crumbled to the ground in a cloud of dust.

My porch!

I pulled back on the steering system and we lifted off the ground and sped through the sky. I did a quick little spiral move and then hit the boosters again, setting fire to the tops of the trees on Nog's property.

My tree line!

We blasted through the clouds, out of the atmosphere, and within seconds, we were finally back in space.

II.

By the time we buzzed by Mars, the intense rocket boosters had shut down and we were pretty much just coastin’.

“This is pretty sweet,” Phil said, seemingly not even phased by the fact he was in outer space.

“You haven’t seen anything yet, dude. You’ll get to see us battle and fight robots and stuff,” I said.

“Do I get a gun?”

“Of course. I’ll grab you one when we dock with The Behemoth. There’re some extras in the back of my ship.”

Chuck sneezed and that was the first peep I’d heard out of him since he tried to abandon ship. I looked at him:

“What’s wrong, mang?”

“I’m not your mang, Scout. I said that I had quit, but you punched it anyways. Why? I don’t want to be a part of this team if it’s all about you. Plus, I don’t think Phil should even be here. It’s too dangerous for a noob.”

“A noob?” Phil said from behind us. “For your information, Chuck, I have experience when it comes to interstellar battles.”

We both looked at him hoping he’d expand on that a little.

“I watch the SyFy channel all the time, and I’ve been playing this online game with Lamar for a couple months now called

Lunar Rocket Star. I'm pretty sure a 'lil deep space mission won't throw me off."

Everything got quiet again. I could see Jupiter coming up in a few million miles. I turned to my bud, "Chuck, I didn't let you get off because I need you. Side kick or part of a team, we're in this together."

Chuck nodded, but didn't look at me.

Things were pretty chill as we were passing by Saturn. Chuck stared out the side window, Phil was slowly pulling a thread out from his Christmas themed sweater and I was just kickin' it.

Suddenly, one of the machines on the ship's dash started beeping. It caught the attention of all three of us, so we leaned in for a better look. It was some sort of radar/sonar screen. It appeared that there was something floating around in space that we were coming up on fast.

I looked out the windshield but didn't see anything.

"Professor, are you seeing this?" I said.

No.

"It says we're approaching something, but I don't see a darn thing."

Whatever it is, it must have some sort of cloaking device. Stay on course – maybe you'll just by-pass it.

Or hit it! What was Nog thinking?

I squinted and stared out the window again and what I saw, amazed me. Something was out there, slowly materializing and shedding it's cloaking device. It was a ship or a floating base or something. I couldn't really tell. It was long and flat like an aircraft carrier, maybe around fifty feet long, made out of steel, and it had some sort of hub stationed in the center of it.

"What do you think it is?" Chuck asked.

"I don't know," I said. "Should we check it out?"

"Let's do that," Phil jumped in, "I'm hungry and maybe there's food there or something."

"Phil, there's no way there's food right there, smack dab in the middle of the Solar System," I said.

The Frog Hopper soared into the station's gravitational pull and we landed right outside of the hub. Once the Frog came to a complete stop, the three of us suited up even more into the space suits that came with the ship.

Once we made sure everyone's oxygen tanks were good to go, we opened the back door to the ship and walked out onto the flat surface of the mysterious space station.

All moon walking-like, we bounced our way over to the hub. When we got there, a door slid open and the three of us entered.

Well I'll be darned – Phil was right. We had just walked into some kind of space station restaurant. There was a long bar with

about a dozen hovering bucket seats. There were about six or seven high-top tables bolted to the floor accompanied with four hover seats each. There was a menu on the wall over the counter, but it was all alien to me. There were pictures of food, but I couldn't understand the language everything was written in.

There didn't seem to be anyone else in there, so we made our way to the counter and we took our helmets off. We each sat in a hover chair and set our helmets down on the counter top. A swinging door behind the counter opened and something weird came out from the back room/kitchen area.

It was an alien, so the three of us were on guard. It was around five foot tall, skinny, brown scaly skin, had one eye in the center of the head and a small mouth. It was wearing something similar to an apron with blood smeared across it.

He moved his way right on up to us from the other side of the bar.

“Earthling’s, huh? We haven’t had one of you guys in a while,” the thing said, “I believe the last guys’ name was Lance-something. He was a singer or something.”

The three of us were stunned. It appears the interstellar communications that Blorf had told me about last year were still in order. Every species would sound to us however our brains allowed them to sound. So to us, everything came out in English.

“Can I get you Earthlings some grub?”

“Can we see a menu?” Phil asked.

The alien waiter gave each of us a clear slab, and right before our eyes, it digitally formed a menu.

“We’re not here to eat,” I said. “My name is Scout Brooks and this is my exploration team, Chuck Taylor and Phil Easton. This is just a pit stop to see what this place was.”

“That’s a shame. We haven’t had a customer in months,” the alien waiter said. “The name’s Cy.”

“Cause of your one eye?” Phil asked. “That must be so cool. To have one eye.”

We all ignored Phil’s randomness as he continued to be the only one who was looking at the menu. I smiled a bit – it was good to have good old Philly back.

“So, Scout, what brings you to the outer rings of Saturn?”

“We’re on a mission to dock with a massive space ship called The Behemoth. We have business there.”

“I see. I know all about business. Bluxtor and I have all kinds of business,” Cy said, rubbing his eye.

“Who’s Bluxtor?” I asked.

“My chef. Speaking of which, anything strike your fancy on that menu there?”

“No thanks,” I said.

“I didn’t look at it,” Chuck said.

“I’ll have the open-space club sandwich with a side of Saturn rings and a Milky Way shake,” Phil said, licking his chops.

There was a buzzing noise coming from outside. We looked out the window and saw another small ship landing out in the lot. Cy seemed anxious by it.

“Look here, Scout. Things are about to get weird,” Cy said. He lifted a small black satchel up from under the back of the bar and handed it to me. “Take this, and whatever you do, don’t let these guys get it.”

“What guys?”

The door to the space café opened and two menacing-looking aliens came in. They were both light green in color, stood about six feet tall and wore very tight, white jumpsuits.

Doing as Cy said, I stuffed the satchel in one of my space suit pockets and buttoned it up real nice so they wouldn’t see. I had no idea what was going on.

“Get out of here, Earthlings,” Cy said.

The three of us put our helmets back on and latched them up real good. I was getting nervous. What was going on? We stood up from the hover chairs and walked past the two ominous looking creatures. They approached the bar and engaged in conversation with Cy.

Chuck, Phil and I stood by the door and watched the aliens.

“Where’s the satchel?” one of them said.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Cy responded.

The two creatures pulled out laser pistols.

“Now Hulger, Kirpstal, fellas... we can work something out,” Cy pleaded.

“There’s nothing to work out,” Hulger said.

“You were warned,” Kirpstal added.

Cy took a deep breath. “I guess you spelunkers want to do things the hard way...BLUXTOR!”

On Cy’s mark, the brute, Bluxtor, busted through the swinging kitchen doors. He was a huge alien, the same species as Cy, and wore something like a chefs uniform complete with the hat. He was three times as big, full of bulking muscle madness and he was armed with a seriously big gun.

He opened fire on Hulger and Kirpstal and they dove out of the way, firing back. Cy grabbed his apron with both hands and ripped it off while doing some sort of throaty battle cry. He hopped the counter and pulled out some futuristic sword and began to slash it at Hulger and Kirpstal.

“Let’s get the heck up outta here, fëllas!” I shouted as we bolted out of the café and moon-bounced back to The Frog Hopper.

Once we got back in, we strapped up quickly and blasted out of there. We zoomed back into space and I looked in the side mirror and saw the whole café space station explode.

III.

We were back on course, maybe about fifteen minutes or so out from The Behemoth, and all we could do was talk about the café skirmish. We were all clueless as to what happened. We obviously walked in on something illegal, but we didn't know what it was.

I had Chuck look in the satchel, and all it was, was a small tube with dark blue goo inside. We weren't sure what it was, so we agreed we'd give it to Nog when we got back for further analysis.

There was a sharp static that came over our radio system. Chuck started turning knobs like a madman trying to fix it. That's when Lord Radar the Great's voice pierced the speakers:

“Attention dweebs,” he said. “This is Lord Radar the Great and I have you in our sights.”

I looked out the windshield, and just as we zoomed past Uranus, I could see it – The Behemoth. It was intimidating, ominous and unnecessarily massive in size.

“What do you want, Radar?” I asked, gearing up to get serious.

“I want you guys to dock with my ship, come in and pay the price of admission – which is death.”

“Are you going to let my uncle go?”

“I can’t make any promises. Who’s with you?”

“It’s me, Chuck and Phil.”

“Philly Fat Cakes made the trip?” Radar laughed. “Once your little embarrassment of a ship gets close enough, our tractor beam will do the rest and bring you in. That’s right, I have my very own tractor beam. You’ll then be greeted by my minions and taken to me for some price-payin’. Got it?”

“Oh we got it, Radar. We got it *real* good,” I said, not really knowing what I meant by that. It sounded good, but I don’t think it made sense.

“See ya soon,” Radar maniacally laughed before there was radio silence.

“Are you guys ready for this?” I asked my team.

They both nodded, and we continued on course towards The Behemoth.

We eventually got close enough and all of our electronics turned off and left us in the dark. We could feel the force of Radar’s tractor beam pulling us in. We watched out the windshield, as we were brought closer and closer to the ship. I saw a cargo bay door open straight ahead and we were sucked right into it...into The Behemoth.

CHAPTER SIX

Gadzooks!

I.

The Frog Hopper came to a complete stop as it rested in the cargo bay. We heard the large door close and clamp shut behind us. It was quiet in my ship. Chuck unlatched himself from his seat and leaned forward, looking out the windshield. I saw exactly what he saw.

There were about six of the green butt aliens from Bethani, Blorf's species, armed with laser rifles and dressed in extremely tight black jumpsuits. I'm talking *really* tight – as in it left nothing to the imagination, butt-wise. They all started to gather around the ship with their guns held out in front of them.

“What do we do now?” Phil asked, leaning over my shoulder.

“We kick butt,” I said. “But we have to be cool about this. Phil, reach into my backpack there and give me my Mini Frog.”

Phil unzipped my backpack and started rummaging around in there, but eventually stopped. “What's a Mini Frog?” he asked.

“Just give me the bag,” I said, tearing it from his grip. I searched it and pulled out a tiny, palm-sized laser pistol. I grabbed a roll of duct tape from the bag and taped the Mini Frog onto my butt.

“Ok, guys, they are gonna probably confiscate our weapons,” I said. “Then, out of nowhere, I’ll rip this from my butt and blast our way to freedom.”

“Are you sure that’s a smart move, Scout?” Chuck asked.

“It’s the smartest, trust me. Now, arm yourself so it doesn’t look suspicious.”

Chuck armed himself with this P2 phaser and I armed my laser phaser. The butt aliens started shouting at us in an aggressive manner, so I knew it was time.

I pressed a button on the dash and the rear ramp on the Frog Hopper lowered. The three of us made our way down it, where we were immediately surrounded.

“Drop ‘em! Drop ‘em now!” one of the aliens shouted.

“Drop ‘em!” another one needlessly added.

I slowly placed my gun on the floor ahead of me. Chuck, even though he didn’t want to, did the same with his awesome new piece.

“You! Where’s your weapon of mass destruction?” one of the aliens shouted at Phil.

“What’s up, dude,” Phil said to the alien. “I’m not packing.”

“Secure that one!” an alien instructed his men. Two of the tight-suited green butt aliens dashed over behind me and grabbed Phil by his arms.

Phil uncomfortably laughed, “This is weird.”

There was a moment of unnerving silence, as it seemed nobody knew what to do next. I scratched my eyebrow because of an itch, and one of the aliens freaked out.

“Don’t move!” he shouted, forcing his gun towards me.

“Hey...” one of the creatures that had restrained Phil behind me said, “this one has something on his butt!”

I assumed they were talking about me.

“Don’t touch it, it may be contagious,” another one said.

“Is it inflamed?” another said, lowering his gun and walking towards me. Okay, it was time for sure.

“Hit the deck, boys!” I shouted as I reached for my butt and ripped the Mini Frog off. Chuck and Phil both crash-landed to the cold metal floor and I knelt down and blasted the creatures, one by one. The four in front of me dropped dead, steaming from their wounds. I swung around and blasted the other two and they were launched backwards, off the ground, and slammed against the Frog Hopper before falling still on the floor.

“Dude that looked so real!” Phil said, standing to his feet.

“Cause it was.”

Chuck stood up with his P2 phaser and I shoved the Mini Frog in one of my front pockets. I picked up my laser rifle and walked back to the Frog Hopper and up the ramp.

“Phil, we have to arm you to the teeth. C’m here,” I said.

Phil and Chuck came back into the ship and we suited up. Chuck and I both threw our backpacks on and I gave Phil one of the extra laser rifles.

“Now, we have to find out where they are keeping my Uncle Jones,” I said. “He’s priority number one. Number two is to destroy Radar, Jakon and Homeless Harry. Any questions?”

Phil raised his hand. “Are you going to your brother’s gig at Bowling Buddies tomorrow night?”

Baffled, I answered Phil. “Yeah, I think so. Why?”

“Just wondering,” he said. “It should be fun.”

I shook off the randomness and lead the way back down the ramp. “Follow me, stay close and do as I say, fellas.”

II.

We walked through a door that took us to a long corridor. The floor was grated, the ceiling was sort of low, and there was black and yellow caution tape all over the walls. I led the way and the three of us slowly made our way down the hall.

“Radar must have enslaved those poor chumps to be his minions,” Chuck said.

“I thought Harry said that they had exterminated the race?”

“Obviously he kept some around.”

Chuck and I were walking like we were constantly on guard. Both of our hands were gripped tightly to our weapons and our eyes were shifting around, looking for anything. Phil, on the other hand, was walking upright behind Chuck, holding his rifle down to his side like it was no big deal.

“Phil, you have to be in a position like ours. Like, you need to look like you’re on a mission, not just casually walking around a Walgreens,” I said.

“Oh, ok,” Phil said, hunching down a bit and holding his gun in both hands. “Do you guys have any gum? I’m starving.”

“No, Phil, no gum,” I said. “Let’s just keep moving.”

At the end of the hall, we came to a large glass door. We hit the wall and I slowly peeked through the door. There were three green-butts sitting around a table, playing cards. Behind them I noticed a computer screen that seemed to have blueprints on it. Blueprints of the ship perhaps?

“Okay, boys,” I whispered, “we need to see the computer in the back of this room. But there are a few aliens in here we need to knock off first. Any suggestions?”

“Yeah,” Chuck said, “watch this...”

Chuck lifted his P2 phaser and stormed past me and faced the glass door. “Hey! Ya’ll wanna get mashed?”

I heard the aliens scramble inside, but it was too late. Chuck held down the trigger and swayed his gun from side to side, spraying lasers into the room. The glass door shattered and Chuck let off the trigger.

We let the last piece of glass hit the floor before we raided the room.

“That was a good line, Chuck,” I said. “I need some cool ones too.”

“Thanks, bro.”

The three of us gathered around the computer and used the keyboard to scroll through the blueprints. I studied it carefully and finally found what I was looking for.

There was a room on the fourth level of the ship called ‘Captured Suckers’. That had to be where they were keeping Uncle Jones.

“Alright, guys, let’s get to level four,” I said. We ran back into the hallway and right across from us was a freight elevator. I pressed the button and the door opened. We walked inside and rode it up to the fourth floor.

III.

When the elevator door opened, it opened in the wrong place at the wrong time. We were standing there as about ten green-butt aliens faced us with their guns aimed in our direction.

“Aw, crap,” I said.

One of the aliens stepped forward. “Drop your weapons and come with us. You’re captured now.”

“You can’t tell me what to do,” I said.

“Under the order of Lord Radar the Great, all three of you are hereby under cosmic arrest. Now drop ‘em!”

Okay, I’ll let them have their fun. They arrest us, take us to the Captured Suckers room, and then we’d be in a position to save Uncle Jones.

I dropped my gun, and Chuck and Phil followed my lead. We all put our hands up, cause that’s what seemed appropriate, and three of the alien guards grabbed us.

“Move!” one of them said, pushing the barrel of his gun into my lower back. The aliens forced my team down the hallway and through a few sets of doors. We crossed a large open room and eventually made it to the Captured Suckers room.

The door slid open and the three creatures forced us in there.

“I’ll be back with your rope and mouth gags in a few minutes,” one of the aliens said. The three of them left the room and the door slid shut, locking into place.

I looked around the room and saw a few green-butt aliens strapped to the walls in chains. They must have been traitors or something. Then, in the far corner, I saw my Uncle.

We raced over to him and saw he had been stripped down to his underwear, and his hands and legs were tied up. His head was hung low.

“Uncle Jones?” I said.

His head lifted up quickly and he smiled, not expecting to see me. “Scout! Scout you’re here!” he shouted, excited. “You’re here?” He then became confused. “What’s going on here? Where are we? How’d you get here? Why do those creatures wear such tight clothes? It’s frightening.”

“We came here to save you, man,” I said.

“Scout, what’s going on here?”

I proceed to explain everything to him from the beginning. Chuck added his own sound effects as I described action scenes from the Bethani mission.

“But you have to promise not to tell anyone, man. Not even my mom. This is top secret stuff we got going on here,” I concluded with.

“Your secret is safe with your old Uncle U.J. Now let’s somehow get out of here.”

I knelt down and untied my Uncle from his knots and I helped him to his feet.

“I’m gonna need some clothes,” Uncle Jones said.

Right then, the door slid back open and one of the aliens rushed in, out of breath. He made sure the door locked behind him and then he faced us, pointing his long green finger directly at me.

“Scout! What in Gadzooks name are you doing here?” he shouted.

What did he mean...wait a minute...could it be? “Blorf?” I cried.

“Yeah, it’s me! Why are you guys back here in space?”

“How are you alive?” I asked, ignoring his question.

“My God, Blorf,” Chuck added, “We watched you die! You died!”

“Yeah, only for like a couple hours though,” Blorf said. “I have the ability to regenerate damaged tissue. After my organ and skin creepily grew back to normal, I was captured by the Frooginites and enslaved for all eternity.”

Wow. I couldn’t believe our oldest pal in the universe was still alive and kicking!

“Can you help us?” I asked.

“Of course I can, Scout, what kind of freaky dumb question is that?”

Blorf typed in the secret code on the door mount and the door opened. He waved us on, and the four of us followed him back out into the large open room.

“Your weapons are on that table,” he said, pointing us in the right direction.

Chuck, Phil and I grabbed what was rightfully ours and readied ourselves.

“What about me, guys?” Uncle Jones said, standing there in his underwear.

“Just stay close, dude. Let us pros handle this,” Phil said, not even close to being a pro.

“Just follow us,” I told him.

Blorf led us back out into the main corridor on the fourth level. I looked up and down the hall and noticed that scattered about were about a dozen red doors. I almost asked what they were for, but Blorf quickly pulled us into a huddle to discuss a game plan.

“Okay, I’m gonna do the best I can to help you, but I can only do so much so the others don’t think I’m a traitor.”

We were listening. Blorf continued:

“Lord Radar the Great is on the level right above us, chillaxin’ in his lair. The room is heavily guarded by a couple of Frooginites. Now, he has a couple henchmen too; some idiot named Jakon and another buffoon named Harry. I don’t know where they are, so be careful while you’re sneaking around in here.”

“Thanks, bro,” I said, shaking Blorf’s hand. Chuck shook it too and Phil saluted the green guy. Uncle Jones stood back, embarrassed about his underwear. He just nervously smiled at Blorf.

Blorf scurried away down the hall and out of view. It was time to get this show on the road.

“Professor, we got my uncle. Were moving out!”

Scout...I’ve been looking through this ‘Operation Behemoth’ folder you stole from Jakon’s store. There’s something really interesting in here. Something you might want to know about. Let me tell you what it is. Are you listening? Here’s the thing-

Before Nog could ever get out the big news, there was shouting coming from up ahead in the hall which drowned out the sound of Nog’s voice.

“Hold that thought, Nog,” I said and my team and I armed ourselves and faced forward. Up ahead, it was Homeless Harry with two Slimeborgs on either side of him.

“You’re all screwed now!” Harry called out.

“What makes you so sure?” I yelled back.

“Cause of these...” Harry put his arms up and showed off his borgs. We’d already seen them. “And there’s plenty more where they came from.”

I raised my gun, aimed real quick and fired a beam that blew right through one of their heads. The head shattered and green slime splashed on the wall. I aimed to the other one and did the same. The borg shattered and hit the floor.

Homeless Harry didn’t know what to do next.

“Piece of cake, Dumpster Breath!” I yelled, hoping that was a good line. I got a small laugh out of Chuck, and an irritated sigh from Phil.

Harry pointed straight at me and said: “You asked for it! When these Slimeborgs get done with you, you’ll have X’s where your eyes should be!”

Harry then lifted a small radio device that was strapped to his belt and spoke into it. “Release them...”

Upon Harry’s command, all of the red doors in the corridor opened at the same time and swarms of Slimeborgs emerged; their single red eyes were glowing bright and the green slime that filled their clear electrical bodies swished back and forth inside of them.

“Holy!” is all I could get out before adding, “Shoot!”

I aimed my gun straight ahead and began shooting lasers at all the borgs I could focus on. Green slime sprayed up into the air and covered the walls and ceiling.

To my left, Chuck was firing his P2 phaser straight ahead along with me. I could see him grinding his teeth as he pulled back hard on the trigger. I turned around quickly to see what Phil was up to. I just stood there as a swarm of borgs was approaching us from behind.

“Phil, shoot, man!” I yelled as I aimed my gun past him and blew away a couple more. Phil then decided to lift his gun and wildly pop off a few beams. They weren’t hitting anything.

I looked down and noticed Uncle Jones down on his knees, crying in his boxers. He looked pathetic.

“Scout, check this out!” Chuck yelled at me. I turned around to see a group of Slimeborgs lifting their weaponized arms and getting ready to open fire on us. Chuck flipped a tiny switch near the trigger of his P2 and then pulled back to release a giant burst of plasma. It shot down the hall at the borgs and it exploded on impact. A fireball came rolling towards us and we all ducked for cover. I could feel the flames singeing off some of my hairs.

I looked past Phil and saw about a dozen more Slimeborgs coming our way. They lifted their arms and began to spray a barrage of lasers in our direction.

“Chuck!” I yelled, and he knew what to do. He knelt down, swung around and pulled the P2 trigger again, sending another ball of plasmatic energy spiraling down the hall and blowing up the flock of borgs. We shielded ourselves from the flames and slimy debris once more and then the excitement finally calmed down.

The four of us stood to our feet and looked down either side of the hall. There were bits of flaming Slimeborg scattered all around. I noticed that Homeless Harry was gone. He must have made his escape during all the commotion.

A door next to me opened and Chuck and I quickly aimed our guns to it, but saw it was just Blorf. He looked into the hall, seeing battlefield.

“What was all that noise?” he asked.

IV.

We regrouped in the room that Blorf had emerged from. Sweat was pouring down my face, mainly from the intense heat of the firefight.

Uncle Jones sat in the corner of the room, unable to sport anything but his boxers and a small hair covered gut. I could tell he was overwhelmed.

“Uncle Jones,” I said, “it’s too dangerous to drag you around this ship with us. I need you to stay in the room while we go kill everyone. We’ll come back for you before we get back on the Frog Hopper.”

“You’re just going to leave me here?”

“I’ll stay with him,” Blorf bravely volunteered to hang back and not involve himself in any other battles. “Since I’m one of them, I’ll be able to keep a good eye on this uncle of yours and move him to safer locations if need be.”

I nodded. That was a good plan.

“Chuck, Phil and I will head out and try to make contact with Radar and his goons,” I said. “Nog, are you there?”

I’m here.

“What were you about to tell us before we went into battle?”

I was going to say that that ship is supposedly filled with these Slimeborg characters. Be careful and watch your backs, boys.

If there was ever a good moment to face-palm, this was it.

“Thanks, Nog. We’ll keep that in mind.”

I walked for the door and Chuck followed. Phil stayed put. I looked at him as the sliding door to the room opened. “You coming Phil?”

“Uh, I think I better stay here,” he said. “You saw me freeze up out there. You saw me shoot at nothing. I don’t know if I’d be any help to you.”

“Of course you will, man,” I said walking back to him and patting him on the shoulder. “You’re part of *my* team. *My* team doesn’t quit. *My* team wins...all the time. I’m not letting you get lazy on me.”

“Scout,” Chuck interrupted me, “let him stay. He’s obviously not comfortable with this. He doesn’t have our training. What if something happens?”

“Shut up, Chuck. He’s coming and that’s final. Gear up, Philly.”

I walked back to the door and it slid open and I left the room. No one’s quitting on my watch.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ice Chamber, Man

I.

Once again, I led the way through the twisted corridor laden Behemoth. We were still on the third level, needing to find a way to the fourth. I walked slowly with my laser phaser held out in front of me. I was taking advantage of the new sight scope these things were now equipped with. They were sweet.

I could hear Chuck following close behind; he hadn't said anything for a few minutes so I knew he was still upset about me dragging Phil along. Oh well, when we got back to Earth I wanted to ask Nog if Phil could be part of my team officially. And if he was, this was a good introduction to the field.

Phil was third in line. He kept grunting and his normal quirky personality had completely disappeared. I could tell he was nervous. But hey, ya gotta do stuff!

"Scout, do you even know where we're going?" Chuck finally asked. I looked around to make sure the coast was clear and then we ducked off into a room to my right where the door was open.

"Not really," I responded. "I was just walking around looking for some way to get up to the next floor."

Chuck rolled his eyes. "Nog?"

What did Chuck think he was doing? Talking to Nog on my watch, on my mission!

A few seconds later, Chuck told me what Nog had said in his head: “He said there is a ventilation system on this floor somewhere and we can use it to climb to the next level.”

“Good work,” I said, encouraging him.

“He said that the vents should be marked with green vent covers.”

I looked around the room we were in but didn’t see any green vent covers. “Okay, we’ll split up and look for them.”

“Split up?” Phil nervously questioned my authority.

“Yeah, it’ll make everything go quicker. Chuck head back down the way we just came from, Phil, check a couple of these rooms that the doors are open to, and I’ll keep heading down the hall. Yell if you see one of the vents.”

I made the plan and everyone reluctantly scattered about.

I moved slowly down the hall, taking quiet steps along the metal flooring. I kept my finger on the trigger at all times. You never knew when another Slimeborg would pop out of nowhere.

Right then, a door up ahead opened and I quickly ducked behind a large metal crate in the hallway that was conveniently placed there. I looked behind me to see if Chuck or Phil were in sight, and I could see Chuck still walking down the other

direction. I was hoping that fool wouldn't do anything to make noise.

I poked my head over the metal crate and saw a Frooginite – beefed up and covered in their space armor like they had on Bethani – carrying two of the green butt aliens by their necks.

“TRAITORS WILL BE DEALT WITH,” the Frooginite spoke in an echoing mechanical tone. It stopped in front of a solid black door with a window on it and dropped the squirming aliens.

The Frooginite pressed a button on the wall and the black door opened. I could see a light fog emerge from the chamber, almost like it was a refrigerating device. The more I looked at it, I was right. It was some kind of freezer, pumping out ice-cold blasts.

The Frooginite grabbed the aliens by their heads and tossed them into the chamber one at a time and then pressed the button to shut the door. There was a beeping sound that began, and beeped once every second. The Frooginite turned around and walked back through the door it originally came out of. I waited for the door to shut and then I stood up and ran for the ice chamber.

I looked through the window and saw the ice-cold blasts were from vents on the wall and were freezing the two green butt aliens. Within seconds, they were solid ice, stuck in the awkward positions in which they were frozen in. The beeping noise caught my attention and I looked right above the button that opened and

closed the ice chamber. It was a countdown, and it had already made it to three.

Two...

One...

I looked into the chamber and watched as the back wall opened and the two frozen aliens were sucked out into the darkness of space. The back wall closed back up and my jaw dropped. Holy crap!

I turned and looked down the hall and saw Chuck rushing my way. He was about halfway to me when doors on either side of him opened. A total of six Slimeborgs poured out from both doorways, and Homeless Harry followed. Chuck stopped dead in his tracks.

“Drop the gun, Chuckles!” Harry shouted. I ducked back behind the metal crate in hopes that the bad guys wouldn’t see me. I peered around the side of it and watched the situation unfold.

The Slimeborgs surrounded Chuck and he set his P2 phaser down on the ground and put his arms up. I watched as Harry reached behind his back and pulled a laser pistol from under his shirt. There had to be something I could do.

I scoured my utility belt for anything that could help me. I lifted a latch and pulled out a can of mace. Really? Mace?

I checked another one and pulled out a small spherical object that said ‘Gernog’. Gernog?

“Nog,” I whispered.

What?

“What’s a Gernog?”

It’s a grenade, you idiot, designed by me. It’ll give you a good explosion if that’s what you’re looking for.

I smiled, “Indeed, brotha.”

I armed the Gernog by holding down a button on its side and looked around the metal crate again. I had to make a move fast otherwise Chuck was a dead-heap.

Leaving my finger on the Gernog button, I lifted my laser phaser with my other arm and stood up. I looked down the sight scope and got the back of one of the Slimeborgs head in target. I figured if I killed the one that was standing in front of Chuck, he’d get the hint when the things’ head exploded and take cover.

I drew my arm back and prepared to throw the Gernog. That’s when time slowed down and everything felt like it was in slow motion.

I pulled the trigger once and watched as the single bolt of laser pierced the air and traveled down the hallway. To the right, I noticed Phil slowly emerge from a room that he was investigating. The laser buzzed by him and he turned his head and followed it. The laser connected with the back of the

Slimeborgs head, shattering it. The Plexiglass shell of the borg exploded into hundreds of little pieces as the green slime inside sprayed towards Chuck. He squinted and turned his head while holding his mouth shut so none of it got in there. The slime splashed onto Chuck's face and made him stumbled backwards into another borg. Homeless Harry turned around, dodging some of the slime and saw it was me who committed the deed. I threw my arm forward and released the Gernog into the air. It flew down the hallway like a spiraling football as Harry lifted his laser pistol in my direction. I noticed Phil had turned back to look at me, but when he saw the Gernog flying down the hall; he turned his head and followed it again. By now, all of the Slimeborgs had turned in my direction. I could see Harry grit his teeth in anger as he aimed his laser gun at me and pulled the trigger. A beam came flying towards me, passing the Gernog in mid-air. The Gernog hit the metal floor and bounced a couple times before coming to rest at Harry's feet. Harry looked up and to his left where he saw Phil standing in a doorway. Harry looked back at me and bent down and picked up the Gernog. I hit the deck as the laser beam from Harry's gun buzzed over my head and hit the wall behind me. I rolled over and looked back down the hall to see Harry in mid-throw. He had thrown the Gernog, like a baseball, towards Phil. Phil dove back into the room he'd come from and the Gernog followed him in. That's when the slow motion stopped and everything became intense.

The room exploded ferociously. Chunks of the wall blew off and the lights in the hallway flickered. Flames roared from the room where Phil had taken cover. I stood up fast, “PHIL!!!”

I lifted my laser gun and began opening fire on Harry and the Slimeborgs. I made contact with Harry’s arm and he dropped his gun, clutching his fresh wound. Chuck stood up behind the line of Slimeborgs with his P2 phaser and only had to pull the trigger once to blow them all forward; slime, wires and Plexiglass rained down in the hallway. The blast also flung Harry back against the wall and then he hit the ground hard.

I ran up the hall and Chuck ran in my direction. We stopped at the room where Phil was and had to shield ourselves from the burning wreckage. We tried looking in, but couldn’t see much. Everything in the room was on fire.

“What have you done, Scout!? What have you done!?” Chuck kept yelling and shoving me. I was in shock... what *had* I done. Phil could be dead in that room and it was all because of me! I forced him to come along. It was my fault.

My heart began to race and I felt flushed in my face. I thought I was going to be sick.

Chuck tried looking through the flames in the doorway and he spotted something. “He’s in there,” Chuck said, pointing. I didn’t want to look. Phil was bound to look like a complete mess. “I have to get him. I have to see him,” Chuck said. I was

seeing a side of Chuck that I'd yet to see – brave, dedicated, reliable.

With all of his heart, Chuck ran through the flames that were blocking the door way and into the room. I looked in and saw Chuck kneel down over Phil on the floor. It was too smokey to actually see what he looked like. Chuck stood up and ran back over to the doorway.

“Scout, I need to get Phil back to the Frog Hopper. You need to go and take care of business, like, really fast, bro. Then meet me back at the Frog and we need to get Phil back to Earth as soon as possible.”

I nodded, still in shock.

“Go, Scout!”

Chuck tossed me his P2 phaser over the flames and I looked cool catching it with one hand. I wanted to smirk, but it might have been too soon given Phil's situation.

Wait, no it wasn't! If there was ever a time to be heroic, awesome and save the day, it was now – in honor of Phil. I wanted to make him proud. I turned around in the hallway and saw Homeless Harry was no longer on the floor. I looked around the hallway, and noticed him back down where the ice chamber was. He was knelt down on the floor messing with something against the far wall.

“Oh, no you don't!” I yelled and dashed in his direction.

Harry turned around quickly and stood up as I approached him. I forced the barrel of the P2 phaser in his face and looked on the ground behind him. It was a green colored vent cover. That was my way up.

“You killed my buddy,” I said angry.

“You left me stranded!” Harry yelled back.

“You lived in a dumpster, bro! You can do that anywhere!”

“Lord Radar the Great isn’t going to let you off this ship alive. He’s going to kill your uncle, he’s going to kill your Chuckles, and then he said something about giving you a cosmic wedgie before using you as a human piñata.”

Cosmic wedgie? I didn’t like the sound of that.

“He must mean business if he’s talking cosmic,” I said.

“He’s all business. He tested the cosmic wedgie on a few of the Norfits. They didn’t make it.”

“What are Norfits?”

“Those weird green aliens with the butts. Remember those butts, Scout?”

I remembered the butts too well. Those slick green cheeks were forever plastered in my mind. I shivered just thinking about them, tight and bubble-like.

Right then, Harry charged at me and forced all of his weight into me. I stumbled backwards and swung my gun at him,

connecting with this cheek. He grabbed the side of his head and leaned up against the wall.

“God that hurt!”

“Well,” I said, “I’ve only *begun* to rearrange your face. Need a new nose location?”

I forced the butt of the laser gun into his face, busting his nose. He grabbed it, obviously in major pain.

“Did your chin get a new job? Cause it’s being relocated to the wall!” I slammed the butt of the gun into his chin from the side and his face hit the wall. I heard something in his face crack.

He stumbled across the hall and leaned up against the ice chamber, knocking into the button and opening the door. I smiled because this was all working out better than I thought it would. Actually...I thought of something; something on the fly, and I knew everything felt right. It was the perfect line to say.

“Am I crowding you?” I asked. Harry looked at me, his face all battered up. “Then here...” I began, my voice deepening with suspense and intensity, “let me give you some space...”

I felt goosebumps erupt all over my body as I was finally able to deliver an epic line. I kicked Harry into the chamber and shut the door behind him. I watched through the window as the ice blasts froze him from head to toe. The countdown began and I watched it drop from ten seconds all the way down to zero when the back wall to the chamber opened and Homeless Harry was

sucked out into outer space. The back wall closed back up and I sighed.

One down, two to go.

II.

I sifted around in the air vents for nearly ten minutes before I was finally heading in the right direction. I was doing a lot of banging and clanging around up in here, so I was really hoping my location wouldn't be given away.

I crawled my way down the longest of all vents and came to a junction that split off into three different directions. I knew I had crawled *up* a vent for a bit, so I assumed I was on the right floor. I just didn't know which direction to go from here.

I took a wild stab in the dark and went left. I crawled my butt off for another few minutes until I came to an opening in the vent. I peered through the slits and saw a room that appeared to be what I was looking for. It looked like a room built for a king. There was a large, over-sized throne, a long red carpet that led out to giant metal doors and there were two Frooginities planted at the door, one on each side.

This had to be Radar's room.

I tried to quietly jiggle the vent to see if it was loose or anything, but I must have been too loud.

“THERE! THE VENT IS MOVING!” a Frooginite cried out.

Crap.

Both the Frooginites dashed in my direction. I let go of the vent and shuffled back a little bit hoping this wouldn't amount to anything. The Frooginites arrived and knelt down, tearing the vent cover off in a quick swoop.

I tried to shuffle back a little further, but one of them reached in and grabbed me by the backpack and pulled me out and tossed me onto the floor. When I hit the floor I rolled purposefully and leapt up to my feet, drawing Chuck's P2 phaser.

I aimed it right at the Frooginites who stopped and stared.

“I wouldn't do that if I were you, tool bag,” a boy's voice said from behind me. I turned around slowly, building anticipation, and I couldn't believe what I was looking at.

A neon red mohawk, a long black cape with a red velvet inner lining, a cape collar that wrapped all the way around the back of his head, a soul patch...it was Radar. Dang, even Radar had facial hair.

“Put down that weapon, Scout,” Radar instructed. I did as I was told and quickly tried to think of a plan, a way out of this mess. “Do you like my space base? The Behemoth? It's called that cause it's huge.”

“I get that,” I said. “So what's your plan, Radar?”

“That's Lord Radar the Great to you, Scout.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to me!” Radar squealed. He took a couple steps forward and stood about three feet away from me. “When you left me stranded on Bethani, the locals could sense my anger and hatred towards you dorks. Over the next year, I became their leader, their boss. I found Harry, who could sympathize with me, I was in communication with Jakon, who hated you guys too – everything conveniently fell into place pretty nicely.”

I nodded along, already knowing this story from when Harry explained it to me back home. Either way, Radar continued:

“You took everything from me, Scout. My life, my band, my family; what ever happened to my parents?”

“They moved after the police called off the search.”

“No one told them what happened?”

“We couldn’t. The E.I.A. is a secret organization, dude. It wouldn’t be a secret anymore if everyone knew about it.”

“So you all just let my parents leave?” Radar started to get slightly angrier. “Did my band at least win the battle?”

“No. The Acidic Chickens did.”

“Friggin’ Chickens,” Radar huffed, looking down and to the left. He looked back up and faced me again. He reached under his cape and slowly extracted a long, shiny sword.

“What are you going to do with that sword?” I asked, taking a step back.

“I’m going to slice you all up, Scout. But first,” Radar snapped his fingers and the two Frooginities were instantly on me, lifting me off the ground.

“What’s all this then?” I shouted, kicking my feet around.

Radar reached into his pocket and pulled out a small remote. Upon pressing a button, a small portion of the ceiling opened and a hook was lowered into the room and stopped about four feet off the floor. I was hoping this wasn’t what I thought it was...

“Are you prepared for a wedgie of cosmic proportions, Scout?” Radar maniacally laughed.

“Oh God, no!” I yelled as the Frooginities tore a hole in the back of my jumpsuit and attached the hook to the rim of my boxers. “No!”

“This should be fun,” the fifteen year old Space Lord continued to laugh.

The Frooginities let go of me, and I was just hanging there. I could feel my boxers getting tight in the crotch and I howled in pain. Radar hit another button on the remote and the hook was then retracted back towards the ceiling, lifting me with it, giving me a cosmic wedgie.

I squeaked as I was approaching the ceiling. I squinted hard as the tightness I was feeling in my boxers only constricted more. I looked down at Radar below me. He was pressing buttons like crazy on the remote; it seemed to not be working. The hook I

was on lifted all the way into the ceiling and the small hatch closed. The hook stopped and I was able to loosen myself and hop off.

I was in the ceiling – talk about a random escape! I ducked down slightly because I only had around four feet to deal with. I got on my hands and knees and started to crawl around when I heard Radar start shouting.

“Come down from there, Scout! I mean it! That wasn’t supposed to happen!”

“Never!” I yelled back.

“C’mon!” he whined.

I didn’t respond this time. I needed to figure out my next move. Before I could do that, the Frooginites began blasting their guns at the ceiling. Up ahead of me, the ceiling blew off and crumbled to the floor below. It happened again behind me and then once more off to my left. I stayed still, hoping they would think they got me. It was nerve wracking up here. The juices in my stomach started gurgling again.

“Scout, if you’re not dead, show yourself!”

I then heard multiple and frantic knocks on the metal doors to Radar’s room. A heard Radar walk over to them and open the doors.

“Lord Radar the Great, look what I happened to find stashed away in a room,” a man’s voice said with a lisp. It had to be Jakon.

“Well well well!” Radar announced. “If it isn’t Scout’s uncle and what appears to be a traitor!”

I quickly crawled over to one of the blown out holes and looked down. I saw Jakon standing in the doorway with Uncle Jones and Blorf. There was a team of five Slimeborgs behind them.

I poked my head through the ceiling: “Uncle Jones!” I shouted.

Uncle Jones, oblivious, looked around for me, but couldn’t find me. Everyone else looked directly to the ceiling.

“Radar! You touch my uncle OR Blorf and I’ll make sure you pay -” I was interrupted by the ceiling cracking below me and shattering. I fell to my death and hit the floor hard.

Thank God I didn’t die. I stood up and dusted myself off and raced to the P2 phaser, but before I could get to it, one of the Frooginites stepped down hard on it and snapped it in two. I stopped and stared at it, bummed out. Chuck was going to be so mad.

I could hear laughing so I turned around and saw Radar and Jakon laughing at me. Blorf and Uncle Jones stood there with their hands tied out in front of them, hanging their heads.

Then I remembered I still had the Mini Frog. Maybe I could use that little genius to my advantage.

“Bring them in here!” Radar ordered Jakon of Blorf and Uncle Jones. Jakon shoved them both into the room, the Slimeborgs followed them in, and then Jakon made sure the doors were shut and locked.

“Scout,” Radar said, walking up to me with his sword out, trying to intimidate me. “Let me ask you a question. Where are your friends? Chuckles McGee and Philly Cheese Steak?”

“I’m not telling,” I said, standing my ground.

Radar put the sharp point of the sword to the front of my neck. “Tell me.”

“I’d rather die.”

“Well, that’s a given. I plan on blowing up the entire universe anyways.”

“The whole universe?” I asked, confused by his logic.

“Yup.”

“Well, then you’ll die too. You know that, right?”

“Ha! The jokes on you, Scout,” Radar said, holding his sword back down to his side. “We’ll blow up THIS universe, but we will have escaped to another one. We’ll be harmless.”

“There’s only one universe, man! And you mean free of harm, not harmless,” I said. “You’re thinking about galaxies.”

“I know what I’m thinking about!” Radar snapped. He turned and looked at Jakon. “Am I wrong, Jakon?”

“Yes, Lord Radar. You mean galaxies,” Jakon said.

“Why didn’t you correct me before? You’ve been making me out to look like a fool!”

“I just figured it didn’t matter,” Jakon shyly spoke.

“It matters to me!” Radar flipped out. He calmed down just long enough to ask Jakon, “Where’s Homeless Harry?”

Jakon shrugged.

“I gave him some space,” I chimed in, reliving the epic line delivery in my head with a smile.

“What does that mean?”

“I froze him in one of your little ice chambers. He was sucked out into space.”

Radar’s eyes widened and he lifted his sword into the air and rushed me. I ducked and he flipped over me, falling face first into the ground. His sword skipped across the floor and over by his unnecessarily large throne. I stood up and ripped the Mini Frog from my front jumpsuit pocket and aimed it at Radar as he slowly stood to his feet.

“Scout, watch out!” Uncle Jones screamed. I swung around and saw Jakon running at me, drawing a laser pistol from his pocket. I fired a shot at him but missed, and it hit one of the Slimeborgs. The other borgs lifted their gun-arms and opened

fire on me. I ran behind the throne and took cover. The floor was being torn up all around me by the heavy onslaught of lasers.

My laser phaser was still strapped to my back so I armed myself with it and aimed around the throne, firing like mad at the army of borgs. I took a couple more out and noticed Radar fleeing the room, pushing Blorf and Uncle Jones down to the ground as he left.

I watched Blorf carefully as he seemed to acquire some sort of super-human strength. He screeched some sort of battle cry, which I've seen him do before, and tore his way out of the chains his hands were tied up in.

The two Frooginites saw me and started firing at me. I took cover again and all I could hear was a bunch of racket and commotion. There were a lot of grunts and banging sounds coming from out in the room. I noticed one of the Frooginite's guns flew past me and hit the wall, shattering on impact.

I heard a couple of the Slimeborgs shatter as well, and heard the splashing sound of the slime on the floor. There was the sound of a small explosion and everything calmed down.

It was quiet.

I slowly peered out from behind the throne and saw Blorf standing on top of a wreckage pile of Frooginites and slime-covered borg corpses. He posed in a very heroic stance, and gripped Radar's sword in his hand.

Jakon was on the floor, covered in slime, crawling in my direction. I stepped out from behind the throne and stood tall over him. All he could do was look up at me and tremble.

“Tell me where Radar was going when he fled the room,” I demanded to know.

“I...I have no clue,” Jakon said.

I lifted my leg and stepped down on Jakon’s hand. He winced in pain and started to grind his teeth.

“Where’d he go?” I asked again, getting impatient.

“I don’t know.”

I stepped forward with my other leg and stepped down on his other hand. I heard a couple of phalanges crack beneath my boot. I smiled.

“Where?” I yelled.

All Jakon could do was close his eyes tight and shake his head.

“Alright,” I said, “where’s that remote for the cosmic wedgies?”

“No! Anything but that! I’ll tell you!” Jakon pleaded. I stepped off of his hands and let him crawl to his knees. “The escape pods down in the cargo bay, near your ship.”

“Like the one at the school yard?”

“Yeah.”

“Is he going back to Earth?”

“I would assume so. He’s been swearing revenge on the E.I.A. since the day he was stranded.”

I looked up at Blorf and he was still stuck in a pose to self-proclaimed awesomeness.

“Blorf,” I said, “tie Jakon up and bring him back to the Frog Hopper.”

“Yes, sir, Scout!” Blorf hopped down off the pile and yanked some wires out from one of the Slimeborgs’ battered bodies. I jogged over to Uncle Jones and untied him.

“Scout, this is madness,” he said.

“I know,” I said as I looked into my uncles’ eyes. Our secret was out to yet another civilian. “So,” I said, “what are we going to do about this?”

“About what?” Uncle Jones asked, still standing there in his boxers.

“Now you know all the dark secrets of the universe, and that I’m involved in them.”

Uncle Jones surprised me with a chuckle. “Scout, do you realize who you’re talking to?”

“Huh?”

“I’ve been abducted before!”

“HUH?”

“I’ve told you all kinds of crazy stories about my adventures. Just imagine the stuff I *haven’t* told you.”

I smiled. “Like what?”

“Back in 1999, my buddy Tom Lance and I were in Chicago taking a tour of the city. We ran into a guy named Hotchkiss, and well, long story short, we ended up on the moon.”

My eyes were wide with astonishment. Uncle Jones, man! He’s done it all!

Blorf rushed by me, forcing Jakon out in front of him. “C’mon, Scout! Let’s move!”

III.

We rushed through the Behemoth trying like heck to get back to the cargo bay as soon as possible. We needed to stop Radar before he got into one of those escape pods.

My mind was clouded with visions of Phil blowing up. We needed to get him back to Earth fast if there was going to be any hope of saving him. I couldn’t live with Phil’s death on my conscience.

We took the elevator down to the bottom floor where a long corridor took us right to the cargo bay. As we turned into the bay, I saw the Frog Hopper sitting there in all its glory. I had

forgotten how freaking awesome it looked! I noticed a couple of the lights were on in the ship and I could see Chuck moving about inside.

“Blorf!” I yelled, “Take Jakon to the Frog Hopper and strap him into one of the back seats. He’s our hostage now. We’ll need him of collateral damage, or something.”

Blorf did as I asked and I instantly heard something off to my right latch into place. I turned and saw a line of escape pods against the wall of the cargo bay. One of them lit up and flashing green lights outlined it. I squinted and saw it was Radar through the small glass window.

“Uncle Jones, get to my ship! I’ll take care of this...”

I ran over to the escape pod and slammed my hands up against the glass. Radar just smiled.

“This isn’t over, Scout,” he said all muffled.

I didn’t know how to respond. I noticed Radar look past me and his smile enlarged into a heinous laugh. I turned around to see what was so funny and saw an army of Slimeborgs flood into the room.

Crap!

“See ya later, Scout!” Radar said and before I knew it, the escape pod shot downwards through an opening in the floor and jettisoned out into space.

I swung around and opened fire on the army of borgs. They fired back and I ran, dodging all the lasers. We were screwed; I was under heavy fire, Phil was burnt to a crisp, Uncle Jones was wearing nothing but boxers...there was no way out of this mess.

“Boom!” I heard a voice shout just as an explosion launched several of the Slimeborgs into the air.

“Boom!” the voice shouted again as another small explosion ripped more borgs apart. I looked over at the Frog Hopper and saw Blorf standing on top of it, throwing Gernog after Gernog towards the swarm of borgs.

“Scout! Get up out of here, guy! I’ll hold them off!” Blorg yelled.

I took advantage of this and dashed back to the Frog Hopper. Blorf jumped down as he fastballed another Genrog towards the Slimeborgs. It exploded and sent pieces of Plexiglass and buckets of slime everywhere.

“You don’t have to do this,” I told Blorf, grateful for his continuous heroics.

“I don’t?” Blorf asked with a hint of salvation in his eyes.

“Well, I mean, we’d appreciate it,” I said, hoping he’d still do it.

Blorf nodded and swallowed his pride. “Go, Scout. Get home! Get home to your world!”

I quickly ran up the back ramp of the Frog Hopper and heard another Gernog explosion rip through the air. Once inside, at a quick glance, I saw Phil's smoking body lying in the back on the floor and Chuck was hovered over top of him. I didn't look too long because I didn't want to see my friend in that condition.

"Chuck," I said, keeping my eyes in front, "c'mon, strap in."

I shuffled by the back seats where Jakon was tied up and Uncle Jones was latched in at. I dropped my laser phaser and backpack to the ground and climbed into the pilots seat and flipped some switches, turning this beast on.

Chuck sat down next to me and strapped his belts.

"How is he?" I asked Chuck. I looked at my friend and saw he was crying.

"He's not looking good, Scout," Chuck sniffled. "Did you find Radar?"

"Yeah, but he got away. Right now, though, we have to get Phil home."

Chuck nodded and faced forward, taking a deep breath and quivered as he exhaled. I thrust the Frog Hopper into gear and slowly started to turn around. As we turned around, I saw Blorf pelting the Slimeborgs left and right with Gernogs. He must have emptied the ships entire supply!

We finally faced the cargo bay doors and they weren't open, so I decided to just ram them like I did Nog's barn doors. I

shifted the gears and felt the Frog Hopper shake violently as the rocket boosters on the back exploded and sent us crashing through the hull of the ship.

As we cleared the vicinity of the Behemoth, I looked into the side mirrors and saw that space was vacuuming out all of the Slimeborgs and unfortunately, Blorf too. I squinted and saw Blorf's entire body swell up and look like a balloon before he fell still and floated off into space.

We'd lost a good man. Again.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Attach Nog's Name to Anything

I.

We zipped and zoomed through space like professionals. I counted down the planets until we got to Earth; Neptune, Uranus, Saturn, Jupiter, and so on, until Earth arrived into view. We were making excellent time. I kept glancing back at Phil. The smoke continued to swirl off of his body. He better be okay, that's all I know. If not, I'd kill Homeless Harry again.

“Hold on to your butt cheeks!” I yelled as we plummeted into the Earth's atmosphere and broke wind through the clouds. The radar system on board the Frog Hopper began beeping, letting us know we were on target for landing back on Nog's farm.

Once through the clouds, we entered the snowy sky above Kings Town. The city below kept getting bigger as we got closer.

I turned the joystick and guided us north towards Nog's. We came up on the farm quickly and I hit the brake buttons and our speed slowed to a simmering putter.

The Frog Hopper hovered over the farm for a minute and then I landed it in the driveway, and rolled the ship back into the barn.

Everyone jumped out of the way again as I made my unexpected return.

My ship powered down and I shut the engine off. We all unlatched our belts and I ran out of the lowering ramp in the back of the Frog. Marco and Hastings came rushing up to me from the horse stall doors with their guns drawn.

“Scout! Are you okay?” Hastings shouted.

“We need help! Phil’s been hurt!”

“Who’s Phil?”

“Our pal. He snuck onto the ship.”

Hastings looked to Marco, “Does our insurance cover stowaways?”

“Just help!” I yelled.

Hastings got on his walkie-talkie and radioed for medical assistance.

“Scout!” Nog’s voice pierced the air. I looked over and saw him and Dr. Hix rushing up to me.

“Professor! We need help! We need to help Phil!”

Within seconds, a couple nurses arrived with a stretcher. They carried it up into the Frog Hopper and carefully lifted Phil’s charred body onto it. They began to wheel him down the ramp and I was finally able to get my first good look at him. He looked like a really badly burnt piece of toast. His face was

blackened and his arms looked like that weird part of a cigarette that always burns away fast. You know, like the ash part? Only they were really black.

As people started to gather around, Nog forced them back. “Give him some space! Back away!”

The nurses bumped the stretcher into Nog by mistake and rattled Phil’s body. Without warning, one of his arms crumbled and littered the floor with dark ashes. I felt like I wanted to hurl.

“For God’s sake, will someone grab a broom!?” Nog shouted and a young intern sprinted for one.

All the commotion dwindled and I stood there breathing heavily. Chuck stood by my side and put his hand on my shoulder. Uncle Jones came walking out of the Frog Hopper sporting his boxers.

“For God’s sake, man, where are your clothes?” Nog questioned my uncle, repulsed.

“I was stripped down to these up there in space, and I couldn’t find -”

“What happened up there, Scout?” Nog rudely interrupted Uncle Jones.

“It’s a long story.”

“Then let’s sit in my kitchen and talk about it,” Nog said.

“Okay. Jakon is in there,” I said, pointing to the Frog. Nog snapped his fingers and instantaneously, Hastings and Marco went in and secured him.

II.

Chuck and I sat around Nog’s kitchen table. Nog served us each a small glass of blue drink and sat down with us. Dr. Hix was leaning against the wall.

“Is Phil going to be okay?” Chuck asked. I couldn’t believe that actually happened to Philly. It was entirely my fault and I was really bumming hard over it. How could I make a call that selfish? That’s not me. Mandy was right. I’d become someone else.

“He’s in the infirmary,” Nog said. “I have my elite staff of paramednog’s doing the best they can. We can only hope from here on out.”

“Someone should let his family know?” Chuck asked.

“No, not unless he actually dies. Then we’ll make something up. But for now, let my paramednog’s do their thing.”

“Is my uncle going to be okay?” I asked, taking a sip of the watered-down blue drink.

“We can only hope, Scout. I have a team giving him clothes as we speak.”

“Poor guy must have been so cold,” Hix added.

“Now, kids, from the top. Explain,” Nog said. He clamped his hands together and rested his chin atop of them.

I began to explain that we had been cruising the stars and came across the space café. “That reminds me,” I said, reaching into my backpack which I had sitting next to me on the floor. I pulled out the small satchel and removed the tube of dark blue goo.

“Some alien at the café gave us this for safe keeping,” I said. “I figure the E.I.A. can do some experiments on it or something.”

Dr. Hix Blossom came over and grabbed it. He looked at it closely. “Hm. Interesting.”

“What happened after the café?” Nog was growing impatient. I proceeded to explain everything from Blorf, to Phil’s explosion, to the murder I’d committed, to running into Radar and his soul patch, finding Uncle Jones, to the cosmic wedgie (which he winced at), to Radar escaping and Blorf dying – again.

“Sounds like quite an adventure,” Nog said. “So you have reason to believe Radar might be coming after the E.I.A. next?”

“That’s what Jakon said.”

“We’ll need to track where his pod may have landed,” Hix said.

“We’ll have to be ready for anything. I’ll call in an order of some soldier units from Washington. Let’s hope Radar doesn’t show up before the soldier units have time to -”

KABOOM!

The house rattled and things fell off the shelves and shattered on the floor. Hix stumbled to the corner and fell on his butt. Nog fell off his chair and rolled under the table.

KABOOM!

Another thunderous explosion shook Chuck and I right off of our seats too and we crashed to the floor. I pulled the tablecloth down with me for dramatic effect.

I managed to bounce to my feet and I made a quick dash to the kitchen window and pulled back the rooster drapes. I saw the barn – the entrance to Fort Nog’s – on fire, and a single person was responsible for it. Lord Radar the Great stood out in the driveway surrounded by the swirling snow globe effect that the winter storm was giving off. He held a giant gun in his arms and had it aimed for the barn. He appeared to have his head back and was laughing a very villainous laugh. He pulled the trigger and fired his weapon again, sending a giant fireball of green energy hurling towards the barn and it exploded on impact.

Nog’s house shook again.

“It’s Radar!” I exclaimed.

The Professor quickly rolled out from under the kitchen table and grabbed something from the counter and tossed it to me. I caught it and looked at it.

“Look through my binoculars, just to make sure,” he said.

“But it’s him, I just saw him.”

“Make sure, Scout!”

I humored Nog and looked through his ‘binoculars’, and just as I suspected...and already knew and told everyone...it was Radar.

“We have to do something!” Chuck shouted.

I turned to my buddy, “This is what we do, Chuck. This is what we do.”

Some standard issue laser phasers were hanging on a gun rack in the living room – I remembered seeing them when we walked in and wondered why Nog would be so careless to leave some top secret weapons out in the open.

Chuck and I armed ourselves with them and ran for the back door. I ripped the door open and out of nowhere, Jakon piled into the kitchen with a laser pistol in hand.

“He escaped!” Hix stated the obvious.

“It’s about that time, Scout and friends,” Jakon spoke very ominously. “Time for the final showdown.”

“I’ll *‘show’* you *‘down’* to the floor!” I came up with that off the top of my head. I grabbed Jakon to toss him to the ground, but he pushed me down instead. I crashed into the cabinets and dropped my gun. I looked up just in time to see Jakon rush Nog and deliver him a wallop. Nog was instantly throttled and down for the count.

Jakon moved onto Hix next and roughed him up a tad and settled his face into the kitchen floor. I stood up and ran at Jakon, shoving him back into the stove. If I could light him on fire or something, that’d be perfect.

“Let’s light this fire...” I said reaching for the burner knobs, but Jakon threw me across the room again. Crap, what a waste of a good line.

I saw Chuck leap about five feet off the ground and hop onto Jakon’s back and ride him into the living room. “Giddy-up you sucker!” Chuck kept shouting.

I followed the Jakon-bucking-Chuck to the living room and saw Chuck get thrashed into the old giant television set, which was so old I was almost positive it must have been in black and white. It had knobs!

I aimed my laser phaser at Jakon and told him to “Stop right there!” He did as I instructed and stared at me. Chuck scrambled to his feet and held out his gun too. We were all catching our breath.

“None of this is going to end well for you, Scout,” Jakon said with his patented lisp. “Lord Radar the Great is going to blow Fort Nog’s apart one room at a time. Disintegrate every employee one at a time – now including your crispy fried Philly – and then he’s going to blow you and Chuck to smithereens.”

“What happens after that?” I asked.

“Him and I are going to find a way back to the Behemoth, destroy this galaxy, and move on to others.”

“Don’t you think that’s just a tad bit much? I mean, c’mon, dude. You own a comic book store,” I said.

“I won’t even look back. There’s nothing for me here. Only greatness with Lord Radar.”

“He’s a kid, brotha! You’re like a grown guy. Shouldn’t you be in charge?”

Jakon thought about what I just said. It kind of made sense though. Why would an adult like Jakon want to follow orders from a fifteen year old? I think he just got caught up in the anger and epicness of all this.

Nog’s house shook again and Jakon looked out the living room window. We all did. It appeared Radar had made his final blast at the side of the barn and started walking towards it. Within minutes, he was going to blast his way through the fort and destroy everything we’ve worked so hard for. And kill everyone.

“Make a choice, Jakon. You can make the right one. You feel me?” I said, calming my voice and extending my hand. Jakon looked at me and in his eyes, I saw he had made his decision.

“I am going to miss my comic book store,” he said. “But oh well...”

Jakon lifted his laser pistol and aimed right for me. Chuck pulled his trigger first and a blast of laser shot through Jakon’s back and out his front. He dropped to the ground, steaming from his wound, and was gone.

Chuck’s mouth opened wide with a hint of a smile. “I did it! I saved the day!”

I shot a quick smile back at Chuck. It hadn’t sunk in for him yet, but he just murdered someone. He was going to need some help.

A saw a bright flash of flames shoot past the living room window from the barn, and we could feel the heat. “Chuck, we need to stop Radar – now!”

We ran back through the kitchen, hopped over Dr. Hix and Professor Nog’s unconscious bodies, and out the back door.

III.

Chuck and I covered our faces from the blinding winter storm and then shielded them from the flames as we ran through the burning hole in the side of the barn.

Everything was on fire; the hay bales scattered about; the electronic equipment against the walls, portions of the idle Frog Hopper.

We looked around and saw about a half dozen employees sprinkled around the ground, moaning and beaten up. It didn't appear that anyone was seriously hurt, so that was good news.

We dashed up to the horse stall and saw Hastings and Marco leaning against the wall. Their uniforms were singed and they had cuts and scrapes all over their faces, necks and hands.

I knelt down and slapped Marco across the face, "Marco, wake up!"

"Ow!" he cried. "What'd you do that for, Scout, I'm awake! God!"

"Oops, sorry bro," I said. "Where'd Radar go?"

"I'm assuming you're talking about that neon red mohawk psycho that just burned through here..."

"I am."

Marco pointed over his shoulder to the elevator behind the horse stall. “He went inside – level 3, I think. There’re dozens of people down there, Scout. You need to help them.”

“That’s what we’re here for,” I said. I stood up, but before I could step forward into the stall, Marco grabbed my pant leg. I looked down at him.

“What?”

“Why did the arsonist go to the gym?”

“Huh?”

“To burn some calories.”

I about lost it! I cracked up so hard, as did Chuck. Even in highly intense situations, Marco could crack a joke.

“That was another good one! You’re on fire, dude!” I said, sending Marco into a laughing/coughing fit.

It was time to get serious. Chuck and I hit the elevator button and waited for it to come up from downstairs. We hopped in and rode it down to level 3 – that’s where most of the people would be.

Chuck and I caught our breath on the ride down and prepared ourselves for anything. Radar was blasting his way through Fort Nog’s and it was up to us to stop him.

The elevator came to a stop and after a loud ‘ding!’, the doors opened. Level 3 seemed to be quiet...something wasn’t right.

Chuck and I held our laser guns out in front of us and slowly moved down the hallway, glancing in each of the rooms as we passed by.

“Do you think he’s in here? I don’t hear a thing,” Chuck said.

“He’s got to be. Marco said he took the elevator down to this level. He’s around here somewhere.”

We continued to inch down the hallway, waiting for something to jump out at us.

I peered into one of the laboratories and saw one of Nog’s paramednog’s crouched against the far wall.

“Hey, bro,” I whispered loudly. The guy looked up at me. “Where’d he go?”

“He gathered everyone up and moved them down to level 4.”

“How’d you get away?”

“The kid put his gun to my face and I told him that I didn’t want any trouble. He said, ‘you’d better not’, and then turned away and left the room. I was the chosen one, saved by a God that I could only imagine has the power to -”

“”Ok, thanks, man,” I said cutting him off. I didn’t care what that guy had to say. I needed to stop Radar like right now.

Chuck and I moved swiftly down the hallway and felt the floor rumble. The lights on the ceiling flickered. Chuck and I made eye contact and knew that Radar must have blown something else up.

“Scout,” Chuck said, worried, “the infirmary is on level 4.”

“Phil...”

We quickly made it to the elevator and rode it down one more level. The doors opened and it was an entirely different scene.

It was chaos. Flames shot out from some of the rooms; people were running up and down the hall. A few people were face down on the ground with burn holes through their lab coats.

At the other end of the hallway, I could hear Radar screaming. “Bow to me! Bow to Lord Radar the Great!”

His big honkin’ gun he had, had a flamethrower app on it, and he then sprayed some hot flames down the center of the hallway. People jumped out of the way and ducked to avoid the fire.

That’s when Radar made eye contact with me and held his gun down to his side. “Scout! There you are...”

“Here I am,” I needlessly added.

“And Chuck Taylor!” Radar said, “Remember when I hoisted you up on the flag pole? That was classic.”

Chuck aimed his weapon, but I quickly calmed him down. The people in the hallways scattered and took cover in the rooms that weren’t ablaze.

We were in a standoff – the *final*, final showdown – ignoring what Jakon had earlier declared. We were about to make an example of Radar. He just didn’t know it yet.

“Scout,” Chuck said nudging me and pointing to the door that Radar was standing next too. It was the entrance to the infirmary. Radar noticed our interest in the room and he creepily smiled as he took a peek through the glass window.

“What the heck happened to Phil?” Radar laughed. “Looks like someone turned up the broilers on that sad sack of ashes.”

Okay, that angered me. I could feel my teeth grinding together as I took a few steps down the hallway in Radar’s direction. Chuck followed close.

“What? Did I strike a nerve?” Radar continued to laugh. “Do you like your Philly well done? Blackened? Charbroiled?”

I picked up my pace and held my gun out. Radar’s smile disappeared quickly and he raised his gun as well. Chuck and I stopped about fifteen feet away from him.

“Where’s Jakon?” Radar asked, getting his serious on.

“He met his fate. Chuck killed him.”

Radar moved his gun slightly to the left and gathered up Chuck in his crosshairs.

“So, you guys killed Jakon and Homeless Harry... my goons!”

“Sure did,” I said. It was starting to sink in how dark this whole situation was. I mean, Chuck and I were only sophomores in high school and we each just killed someone. Granted my kill was more original, but either way...we were going to need some

serious counseling after this for sure. Hopefully the E.I.A. had someone for that.

“You guys are history. You’re whole organization is literally burning to the ground.” I could hear Radar’s gun charging up and getting ready for another plasmic blast.

“You’re so angry...” I said.

“Well obviously, ya jerk face! You left me for dead! How the heck would you feel! You took EVERYTHING FROM ME!” Radar’s face was turning red and his eyes were starting to tear up. This dude had some anger, and I guess I was partially to blame.

I needed to end this once and for all. I was contemplating ideas: Should I kill him? Send him off into space? Detain him? I mean he was just a kid...a fifteen year old who should have been a sophomore in high school with us. His family cried for months before moving on after his search was called off.

But on the other hand, he was nuts. He was blazing through Fort Nog’s burning everything in sight. Who knows how many of Nog’s employees were seriously hurt or killed. He abducted Uncle Jones, built a Slimeborg army with the intent to kill us, he was threatening the destruction of the universe...

It would be totally justified to wipe him off the face of the Earth. But to be fair, maybe I’d let him determine his own fate. It would just depend on his next move. Calm? Or hostile?

CHAPTER NINE

Bright Red Spider Web

I.

Radar lifted his gun, stared down the sight scope and pulled the trigger. HOSTILE!

A giant ball of green energy came flying at us. I turned around and tackled Chuck to the ground. I could feel the ball of plasma buzz over top of my head and hit the wall next to me. Chuck and I covered our heads and protected ourselves from the falling wall chunks.

Sparks flew in every direction and the lights on the ceiling began to flicker. I stood up and charged Radar, tackling him and forcing him back into the wall – which caved in.

We both fell into the infirmary where Phil was in the middle of surgery. Three doctors in surgical masks stood over top of a white sheet-covered Phil. One doctor held a small glowing red orb, the other held some sort of mechanical hand, and the third held a scalpel.

“You can’t be in here! We’re in surgery!”

“You’re messing everything up!”

“You’re going to pay for that wall!”

The doctors were livid. Radar and I stood up. I grabbed him by the cape, swung him around and threw him back into the hallway.

“Sorry, brothas!” I said to the doctors. I dashed back out into the hall way and kicked Radar while he was down.

Chuck came rushing up and grabbed Radar by the neck and held him still while I unleashed a barrage of punches to his gut, rib cage and a couple to his face.

Radar spit blood into my face and I screamed like a girl. I stumbled backwards and wiped the blood off my face with my hands, and then wiped my hands on my space uniform. It needed to be washed anyway. I rubbed the blood out of my eyes and looked ahead. Radar was kicking Chuck, who was now on the ground.

“Hey!” I yelled, grabbing Radar’s attention. I threw another punch and clocked him across the cheek. He stumbled back into the wall as Chuck stood up.

Chuck grabbed Radar by the collar, forced him against the wall repeatedly and then tossed him to the floor. Radar lay still for a moment and then moaned as he slowly climbed back to his feet.

We were winning! Two against one!

Chuck and I both stood back and waited to see what Radar would do next. He was a complete wreck. He was missing a few

teeth, had two black eyes, his ears were red, his mohawk was disheveled, and he had several rips and tears throughout his attire.

However, he was still able to smile. He began laughing very maniacally.

“What’s so funny?” Chuck asked.

Radar continued to laugh. It was getting creepy.

“What?!” I yelled.

“You guys don’t even realize what’s happening right now,” Radar said with a cough and a couple little sniffles. “As we’re down here, beating the holy crap out of each other, I have a bunch of Slimeborgs infiltrating the fort. You guys are completely out numbered, dudes.”

If that was true, Radar was right. This was getting out of hand. How were we supposed to handle all of this!

I looked to Chuck. “Go check it out.”

“And leave you here alone with him? Never!” Chuck said.

“Chuck, you need to find out what’s going on up there. I’ll be fine. I’ll keep an eye on him until you get back.”

“Well, don’t do any more beating him up until I get back either. I want a piece of that action.”

“You got it. Be careful.”

Chuck turned and ran down the hall towards the elevator. I glanced on the floor and saw Chuck's laser phaser. He was going to need it.

“Chuck!”

Chuck stopped and turned around as I walked ahead and grabbed his gun. I tossed it down the hall to him and he caught it pretty awesomely. He continued down the hall. I watched to make sure he got to the elevator ok.

How was Radar able to get more Slimeborgs to Earth? It was only one pod that came down from the Behemoth, and Radar was the sole dude. It didn't make sense.

Unless...

I heard a click from Radar's weapon and turned around fast. Radar stood there and aimed my own laser phaser at me. It was a trick!

“Later, dude...” Radar said and pulled the trigger. I ducked just in time. A laser beam shot from the barrel of the gun and pierced my hair as I hit the deck. I looked down the hall.

“Chuck!”

Chuck stopped right in front of the elevator and turned around. The laser beam hit Chuck in his right arm and launched him back into the elevator. The door ‘dinged!’ and closed, taking the injured Chuck up a few levels.

I stood up fast and kicked the gun out of Radar's hand. I had an idea...one that would include yet another good one liner.

I grabbed Radar by the collar and swung him around. I kicked him in the groin and he hunched over in a huff. I pushed him down and he rolled into the middle of the hallway. I quickly rushed to the wall, right next to the laser security button that Dr. Hix Blossom had installed.

I put my finger on the button and waited for Radar to stand up. We made eye contact and I knew it was time.

“Laser, dude...” I said.

I pressed the button and the security system ignited in the hallway. Criss-crossed red lasers shot out from everywhere and filled the entire length of the hallway. I stayed pressed up against the wall, out of harms way.

I looked at Radar who now stood as still as a statue, a look of horror forever plastered on his face. He looked like he was tangled in a bright red spider web. The constant hum from the laser system was soothing, yet haunting.

I pressed the button again and lasers vanished back into their wall tabs, dropping the penetrated body of Lord Radar the Great to the floor.

I didn't know what to think. I'd just killed someone else. But he tried to kill me, and might have killed Chuck for all I knew! He needed to be put down. My mind raced with contradicting

thoughts. I wasn't even able to appreciate my latest one liner. I took a deep breath and sat down against the wall, just staring at Radar's lifeless body lying on the floor.

The threat was over.

II.

I aimlessly wandered down the hallway and pressed the button for the elevator. It came down to my level and opened. Chuck was on the floor, leaning against the wall. There was a burn hole through his right shoulder with just a speck of blood.

"You okay, brotha?" I asked.

"Yeah," he wheezed. "Are you?"

"Yup. Radar's history."

Chuck looked past me and saw Radar's body at the other end of the hallway. He smiled.

"Come on," I said, helping Chuck to his feet. "Let's see how Phil's doing."

"Then we should check on Nog and Hix."

"Good call."

Chuck and I walked back down to the infirmary and glanced in from the giant hole in the wall. We watched as the doctors, nurses and various paramednogs operated on Phil.

I was really hoping that he'd pull through. I just didn't know exactly what kind of strange operation this was.

"I wonder what the news was that Phil had for us," Chuck said. "Remember? He said if we told him our secret, he'd tell us something important."

"I hope we find out," I said. I was really worried. I wasn't sure what was to become of Phil.

"Where I am? Guacamola?" Nog said, teetering to his feet and rubbing his head. He had no idea where he was. "What happened?"

Chuck and I stood in Nog's kitchen and helped the Professor and Dr. Hix Blossom into the chairs at the table.

"What happened, Scout?" Nog asked again.

"It's over. Jakon's dead. Radar's dead. Fort Nog's is a train wreck. Dozen's are injured."

"Is anyone hurt?" Nog asked, his concussion clearly not allowing him to hear what I just said.

"Dozens."

"My God," Nog said. "Fort Nog's is a mess, you say?"

"A complete mess."

"How complete?"

"It's finished."

Nog and Hix followed Chuck and I back out through the snow, which was starting to lighten up a bit, and into the barn. We showed them all the damage, and Nog became overwhelmed.

“Alright, well, I’m going to need some help sweeping and with dry wall and stuff. You boys ready?” Nog asked.

Chuck and I looked at each other. Was he freaking crazy? After all the crap that just happened? Yeah right...

“Nah, dude,” I said. “We’re pretty beat. Long day, ya know?”

I could tell Nog was annoyed, but he had people for this. He had a whole staff of custodians and I’d be darned if I was going to be the one who was going to get on my hands and knees and pick up every last ash, glass shard and messed up hay bale.

Farrow came rushing up to Nog and put his arm over his shoulder.

“Are you okay, Ed?” Farrow asked.

“Yeah, just another chapter for my memoirs, Farrow. It’s gonna be a doozey. A long, two-part doozey.”

“We can discuss all the dooze over a bite to eat tonight. I’m thinking barbecue. But right now, we need to clear out the wounded and get our machines up and running and back online as soon as possible.”

Nog looked at me. “Scout, forgive me. I have some things to attend to.”

I nodded and he walked away with Farrow; Hix followed close behind. I felt bad for the old guy. His whole operation was a disaster right now. It was going to be a lot of hard work and time to get this place back up and running. He had his work cut out for him.

“Scout,” Chuck said with worry in his voice. “Can we stay here until we know if Phil will be okay?”

I couldn’t have agreed more. We needed to be there for Phil.

III.

Two hours had passed and Chuck and I were down on level four, sitting in the hallway playing a dice game that we were making up on the spot called Fuzwali. I rolled a six and a two and called out “Fuzwali!” Chuck groaned in defeat and I was now winning 14-6.

The door to the infirmary was still closed, and the huge chunk of dry wall that I tackled Radar through was temporarily boarded up.

There had been cleaning crews coming in and out of the hallway, sweeping, mopping, extinguishing random fires that would sprout up...it was just the beginning of a massive clean-up and remodeling.

Dr. Hix Blossom took the blue goo sample down to the storage chambers on the floor below us and then had to scam back to Washington. He shook both of our hands and thanked us for a job well done. He said he'd be back in the spring to see the progress and personally perform our yearly audit.

He seemed like a cool guy and was more than generous with the cash flow into the E.I.A. He said someday we might actually get paid to do this. I was excited for new adventures. I just wish my latest one wasn't such a rehash with the same people again. But I was pretty confident that brand-spanking new adventures were right around the corner - more exciting and more dangerous ones.

The door to the infirmary opened and the three doctors came out removing their surgical masks and taking off their latex gloves. Chuck and I stood up and watched as all three of them passed right by us.

The cold shoulder? Not on my Rolex!

“Excuse me, Dr. Brotha?” I said.

The trailing doctor turned around and looked at us as the other two continued down the hall.

“That's Dr. Brosser. What do you want kid? I just preformed an epic three hour surgery. I need a Fresca,” he said.

“How's Phil?” I asked. Chuck and I were both on the edge of our seats.

“That’d be against Hippo violations.”

“We’re fiends,” I said.

“Good friends,” Chuck added.

“Oh, well in that case,” Dr. Brosser began, “we did the best we could. And we did awesome.”

Chuck and I sighed and smiled in relief.

“What’s the damage?” I asked.

“Well, he lost an arm, so we gave him a mechanical one. He lost vision in one eye, so we just scooped the goop and replaced it with a state-of-the-art artificial eye with zoom-in capabilities and laser firepower. And his mustache is completely gone – nothing left but rough stubble.”

Chuck and I stared at Dr. Brosser with our jaws hanging open. Did we just hear him right?

Dr. Brosser continued, “He’s more dangerously awesome robot than man now. But you’ll have that. He’s lucky to be alive. He’ll be a valuable asset to the E.I.A., that’s for sure.”

Dr. Brosser turned around and jogged away to catch up with his buddies.

Chuck and I dashed to the door and looked through the window. We could see Phil adjusting in the bed. There was a female paramednog standing next to him, taking his vitals.

I cracked the door open and whispered in. “Can we see him?” I asked.

The nurse smiled and nodded. She stepped aside and Chuck and I entered and walked up by Phil’s bed. We looked down at him and his eyes were closed, but he was moaning a lot.

I saw the mechanical arm first. It looked awesome. He was part robot! Who could’ve predicted this?

“Philly, you awake buddy?” Chuck asked quietly.

Phil struggled, but opened his eyes one at a time. One eye was normal – hazel and bloodshot – and the other one was red and mechanical. It was sweet. Phil smiled.

“Hey, fellas,” he said.

It was good to see Phil again. We had been so worried about him.

“Phil, I am so sorry for the way I acted up there. I had no right to drag you along. It’s all my fault that this happened to you,” I said.

“It’s okay, Scout. I forgive you. I was just happy to be apart of things for once.”

Phil closed his eyes tight and groaned. He opened them back up and continued talking. “The doctor’s said I only have one good eye now. One of them is a weapon, I guess?”

Chuck and I nodded.

“Then I have a favor to ask you guys,” Phil said.

“Anything, man. What is it?” I said.

Chuck and I leaned in closer.

“Will you guys...will you call me Philclops?”

Philclops? Aw yeah! That was awesome!

“Heck yeah we can call you Philclops!” I shouted.

Chuck started clapping at the thought of it.

Phil smiled. We all felt close again. That was something that we hadn’t felt since the beginning of our freshman year.

“Oh, I almost forgot. I got so wrapped up in the space adventure, that I forgot to mention my big news to you,” Phil said with some energy. “Lamar’s dad owns a publishing company that specializes in pre-teen fantasy stories, and they want to publish my *Dragon Wind* series.”

“That’s awesome, Phil!” I said.

“Yeah, congrats, man!” Chuck was still clapping.

“I’m going to be a published writer, guys!” Phil laughed, and I heard his mechanical eye zooming in and out with excitement.

Things finally felt normal once again. The three of us were back together, and I wasn’t about to let anything happen to that again. We hung out with Phil for another hour or so, laughing and goofing off, before we finally went home for the night.

CHAPTER TEN

Radical Ricky Rosa and the Freeze Frame

I.

I woke up the next morning with a bit of a headache. I dreamed about Blorf dying to save our butts and Radar's soul patch.

I thought about how the Christmas dance went. I could have been there with Mandy if I wasn't such a jerk. The last time we were together wasn't my finest hour. She probably ended up getting a detention because of me. Maybe the school would let me serve it instead of her.

I got dressed in some comfy sweatpants and a hoodie that Chuck had designed and went downstairs for breakfast.

Uncle Jones was sitting at the coffee table drinking a cup of steaming hot coffee.

"Where're mom and Mark?" I asked.

"Your mom ran out for donuts, and Mark is still sleeping I think," he said.

I sat down and joined my uncle for a cup of Joe. I creamed and sugared my French Roast and took a hot sip, which burned and welted my top lip.

“So,” Uncle Jones began, “an astronaut soldier you are, huh?”

“Yeah. Promise not to tell mom?”

“I promise. After all, you saved my gluteus rump up there.”

“Just doing my job.”

“You did good, Scout. You have some serious talent in your field. How long have you been cosmically involved?”

“Since last year. I stumbled upon all this craziness when I was trying to join and after school activity. Nog had no choice but to include me. One thing led to another and, well, here we are.”

“You’re destined to have some awesome adventures just as I have. I hope you know what you’re in for.”

“I do.”

I took another sip with the same burning results.

“Just wait for it to cool down, Scout.”

I pushed the coffee cup away and waited for the steam lines to diminish.

“I want to hear all about your adventures,” Uncle Jones said.

I smiled and nodded. “Of course.”

Uncle Jones downed the last bit of coffee and pushed his coffee mug towards mine. He stood up and grabbed his coat from the back of his chair. He put it on and extended his hand.

“Keep it real, Scout. I’ll see ya around, bro,” he said.

I stood up and shook his hand. We shared one last appreciative gaze into each other's eyes and then he walked out the back door. What a class act.

The back door opened back up and Uncle Jones came back in, taking off his jacket.

"I forgot I'm staying for Christmas," he said.

"Oh yeah."

"That just felt like a good moment to part ways."

Uncle Jones sat back down at his chair. "Maybe I'll have more coffee."

"Have mine. It's hot though."

"Cool."

II.

Around noon, Nog wanted all of us to meet at his house, so we did. Chuck and I stood in the corner of his kitchen. Nog, Smidgeon, Farrow and the newly designed and tuned up Phil sat at the table.

Nog stood up and cleared his throat – the international sign for "alright, listen up."

"I've called this meeting of the Earth's International Ambassadors for a couple reasons," Nog began. "First of all, I'd

like to introduce and welcome Phil ‘The Philclops’ Easton to the E.I.A.”

“Just Philclops. No ‘the’,” Phil said.

“Very well,” Nog continued. “Due to a massive anatomical change and exposure to space dangers, he’ll officially be in the organization. And because of his powerful arm and eye, he’ll be extremely valuable.

“Secondly, I’d like to thank Scout, Chuck and Philclops for saving the universe, uncovering the ‘ghost’ and ending the latest deep-space threat. A few people were killed in the process, but in a case of good vs. evil, they were necessary deaths. Counseling will be available upon request for anyone who was guilty of a murder, or loss of any sort of limbs. Scout, Chuck and Phil, I’m looking at you.”

“And I’m looking at you, Nog,” Phil said, closing his one good eye and zooming in with the other.

“Alright, stop creeping everyone out, Phil,” Nog said.

“Sorry.”

“Finally, I’d like to say that Fort Nog’s is currently back up and running, even though a huge remodeling is required. We’ll continue missions, research and explorations in the meantime. And since Scout and Chuck have proven to be such a good team, and now with the inclusion of The Philclops, I am creating an elite group called ‘The Fellas’, in honor of you guys, and you

guys will be them. As the E.I.A. will continue to grow, ‘The Fellas’ will be the first choice of action against all alien threats. Congrats.”

Everyone clapped.

Smidgeon stood up and cleared his throat as well. “I’d also like to make an announcement. After this school year is over, I plan to retire from Principaling forever. And with that, I feel like it is my time to retire from the E.I.A. seeing as how I feel pointless here. I don’t do anything. I just show up sometimes and chime in for no good reason. I don’t add any depth to anything.”

“You’ll be missed, Smidge,” I said.

“I would like to run the idea by you, Nog, of maybe adding my seventeen year old daughter, Adia Smidgeon, to the group. That way the Smidge’s will always be somewhat involved. She’s a good student and seems to know a lot about Astronomy.”

“I’ll look into it. Send me her papers,” Nog said.

“You got it.”

“That will conclude the meeting,” Nog said. “Everyone please enjoy your Christmas break. If there are any breaking developments, I’ll let you all know. In the meantime, think of me when you’re opening your Santa presents. Peace, my brothas.”

Phil was required to stay at Fort Nog’s for the remainder of the weekend for monitoring. Nog said he’d make something up

to tell Phil's mom so there wouldn't be any worrying. I smelled a holiday in Europe brewing...

III.

It was time. Chuck and I walked into Bowling Buddies at eight o'clock exactly. Mark should've been getting ready to go on at any time.

The bowling alley was packed. It was mostly high school-aged kids with the occasional family scattered about. The clapping sound of the ball hitting the pins echoed through the building. Fresh fries could be smelled cooking in the back and a slight odor of beer found its way into the masses from the bar area.

Over near the shoe rental counter, Mark was setting up for his performance. He had a bar stool pulled up and was plucking at his acoustic guitar, getting it ready for action. He had a small sign set up next to him that read 'Mark Badger Live'.

I was proud of my brother. He was doing what he loved.

"I'm going to go get a soda. Want one?" Chuck asked me.

"Sure."

Chuck scurried away to fetch some drinks and as I watched him go, I saw Mandy Lee walking by a rack of bowling balls

with her friend Audrey. Mandy was a sight for sore eyes. I needed to talk to her and apologize.

I made my way through the crowd of people and tapped her on the shoulder. She turned around, and when she saw it was me, a smile snuck out before she quickly pulled it back.

“Can I talk to you?” I asked.

Audrey put her hand on Mandy’s shoulder and said “I’ll give you a few minutes.” She left and Mandy and I were finally alone.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“I was a jerk. You were right all along. I let last years space adventure go to my head. I apologize Mandy.”

She just stared at me for a minute and then smiled.

I continued: “On our mission yesterday, my self-centered attitude was solely responsible for Phil getting blown up.”

Mandy gasped and covered her mouth. All I could see was her wide-open eyes.

“He’s OK,” I added, trying to calm her down. “Nothing a mechanical arm and laser eye couldn’t fix. We call him Philclops now.”

Mandy relaxed a bit.

“But it wasn’t until then that I realized that I can’t act that way. It’s not fair to my friends. It wasn’t fair to you. Did you end up getting a detention?”

“Yes,” she said quietly. “I have to serve it after the Christmas break.”

“I’ll talk to Smidge about that. Maybe we can work something out.”

“Thank you.”

There was a moment of typical high school awkward silence as we brushed our feet against the floor, digging for the next thing to say to break the unnerving silence.

“How was the dance last night?” I asked.

“I didn’t go.”

I was a little surprised by her answer. “Why not?”

“Because I guess you were the only one that I would have wanted to go with anyway. But you were in space,” she said. “How’d it go?”

I smiled. “Maybe I can tell you all about it over a bite at Father Peanuts tomorrow afternoon?”

“Sounds good.”

Mandy and I were finally back on good terms.

“Ladies and gentlemen. May I have your attention?” a man’s voice crackled over the PA system. “Welcome to Bowling

Buddies. Please give a warm welcome to tonight's act, Mark Badger!"

Those who were listening and paying attention clapped. Mandy and I looked back over at Mark who was now surrounded by a small group of people. He started strumming his guitar and then leaned into the microphone.

"This song is called, 'Roses are Dead, Violets are Too'," he said, flipping his black emo hair out of his eyes. He started singing his new song and everyone seemed to dig it.

Chuck finally spotted me in the crowd and brought me my soda. "They didn't have Mellow Yellow, so I got you a Mountain Dew."

"That'll do, I guess," I said taking the cup. "Want a sip?" I asked Mandy. She smiled again and leaned in and took a sip from the straw.

As Mark continued to play his song, some guy came up to us. He was wearing a blue blazer, had spiked hair with frosted tips, and a whole slew of necklaces around his neck.

"That your brother up there?" he said to me.

"Uh, yeah," I said. "How did you know that?"

"You have the same nose," the young, crazy dude said. "Look, man, my name is Radical Ricky Rosa. I run Ricky Rad Records in the city. I've been creepily hanging around this

bowling alley on Saturday nights when all the high school kids are here, trying to spot the talent.”

This guy was coming off a little weird.

“I’ve seen this guy, your brother, this...Mark Badger so-to-speak, playing up there on several occasions. He’s good – darn tootin’ good. I want him to give me a call about a record deal. Think you could pass along my card?”

“Sure...” I said, unsure of this Radical Ricky guy. He reached into his blazer and pulled out a flashy business card with all his information on it.

“Tell him, Radical Ricky Rosa was asking for him,” he said. “I have a date with some local ‘talent’, if ya know what I mean, so I can’t stay until the end of his set. Don’t let a brotha down!”

“I won’t,” I said. Radical Ricky hopped away to the beat of the tunes and was gone.

“Wow,” Chuck said, “Phil’s going to be a published writer and Mark is going to be signing a record deal?”

“Phil’s going to be a writer?” Mandy asked surprised.

“Yup. That Larmar kid, his father loved the *Dragon Wind* series. He’s in!” I said.

“Um, Scout...” Mandy said, starting to pay close attention to my face.

“Huh?”

“You have something on your face...” she said.

I felt around my face for whatever it might have been. I was touching my cheek and then my forehead.

“No, it’s under your nose.”

What could she have been talking about? I felt under my nose and right above my lip, and my eyes widened. I felt a single, strong and sharp hair. A mustache hair...

“Aw heck yeah bro!” I shouted and jumped into the air with my fist high in the air hoping for a classic sitcom-style freeze-frame ending, as the credits would roll on my latest adventure.