

The Scout Brooks Story
The Freshman Invasion

Written By
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The Scout Brooks Story: The Freshman Invasion
A Product of The Infinite Doctrine

Third Edition
2014

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*I would like to dedicate this book to my wonderful wife, Erin.
Thank you for all of the happiness that you have brought into my
life. I love you!*

BLAST OFF!

I looked out the window again and couldn't see anything. It was dark and everything was moving so fast. I started to feel dizzy, and then it really sunk in – I was a fourteen-year-old being blasted into space in a homemade space shuttle built by my high school Astronomy teacher, on my way to another galaxy to save three people from evil robotic aliens. Some would roll their eyes and say “yeah, right.” I, however, say “Awesome!”

The Scout Brooks Story

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PROLOGUE

The Name's Brooks

What's up, playas! The name's, Brooks. Scout Brooks. Sorry if that came off a little too James Bond-ish, but in all seriousness, I've done some things that even James Bond would be jealous of; stuff he could only dream about.

You see, I have a secret – one that only a few people know about. I don't share my secret with many, not even my family, because, frankly, it's in my best interest not to. There are certain 'situations' that could arise.

I use to be a normal kid – a geek if you will - just like a lot of other awkward kids in high school. I got acne just like anyone else. I found myself in dozens of awkward social situations. I got made fun of. I got a ticket my very first day driving alone. I killed my first alien my freshman year.

Yeah, that's right. I said alien, bro! My official job title is an E.I.A. - Earth's Intergalactic Ambassador. Technically, I'm the leader of an elite squad of pals known as The Fellas. It's a position that very few people besides the President know of, and they like to keep it that way.

So, how does a socially awkward kid with weird friends become an Intergalactic Ambassador, where I get to drive a pretty sweet spaceship and save the Earth from aliens everyday?

Well, like I said, I don't share my secret with many, but since I don't know you and you took the time to listen to my story, I guess I can let you in on this. It all started my freshman year...

CHAPTER ONE

The Frosh

I.

“Holy freaking crap,” I muttered under my breath as I walked through the front doors to Kings Town High School for the very first time. It was like walking into an unexplored castle that I was 100% unprepared to be in. I gripped my backpack strap just to make sure it was still there. I didn’t want to lose this thing – all my crap was in there. Protractor, compass, rulers, number two pencils and about a hundred other things that I would probably never even use over the next four years.

I could feel a nervous sweat coming on and my glasses were starting to slide down the bridge of my nose. I pushed them back up, accidentally smudging my left lens. I ripped the specs off my face, and with the bottom of my shirt, rubbed out the smudge. I put them back on just in time to see a random student standing in front of me, awkwardly gawking.

He had on thick rimmed glasses, gray sweatpants and under his blue and red flannel shirt, I could see he was hiding a bit of a gut. He looked like he wanted to cry.

“Look man, you gotta help me out here,” he sniffled.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, glancing at my watch. I needed to find my first class before I was late. “I really need to get to class. I’m not even sure where it is.”

“The zipper on my backpack broke off, man. I can’t get any of my crap out!” The sniffing and nasally kid started getting all worked up. He swung around, back facing me, and glanced over his shoulder. “Can ya mess with it, bro?”

I was slightly put off by this kid, but oh well. I looked into the situation. “I’ll see what I can do, man,” I said, looking into the situation.

I reached for it and noticed immediately that the zipper wasn’t even broken. It had just folded into the bag itself.

“Oh man, it’s not that bad, the zipper is still there,” I said, flipping the zipper back out. I could hear the kid sigh heavily in relief. “You’re all set, buddy,” I reassured him.

The kid swung back around, and feathered his hair back. He wiped a tear from his cheek and extended the same hand out to me for a shake. “Thanks. I’m Chuck. Chuck Taylor.”

I smiled and shook his hand back. “Like the shoes?”

“Yeah. First day of high school – I’m a little nervous about the name. I don’t need a nickname this early in my high school career.”

“You’ll be fine. I’m Scout Brooks.”

“Well, it’s nice to meet you Scout. I need to find my first class too,” Chuck looked around at the mess of students filing into the school. “This is gonna suck.”

I nodded, and he continued. “Good luck to ya, Scout. I’ll see you around.”

Chuck turned around and quickly disappeared into the massive clog of students. I pulled my schedule out of my pocket and saw my first class listed: Mr. Watson – Homeroom – Room 100. That was on the first floor and it was the first room in the hall. Not a bad start at all.

II.

Homeroom was kind of weird, but I guess it gave me a perfect example of all the different types of kids that would inhabit the school with me. Goth kids, skaters, preps, and nerds – which I guess was the category I fell under.

Mr. Watson reminded me of what I might look like in 20 years. He had short black hair, glasses and wore an ugly-as-sin dress shirt, complete with a purple bow tie. Strange for sure, but hey, I’ll give him credit for taking such a daring risk.

Mr. Watson was in the middle of a pretty intense roll call. He’d yell a student’s name at an unnecessary and alarming volume and expect a “Here!” immediately. He was about halfway

through the list of students, when all of a sudden the classroom door creaked open. Everyone's attention, including Mr. Watson's, was drawn to it.

Chuck Taylor poked his face in. "Mr. Watson's homeroom?" He asked, nervously blinking.

Mr. Watson put his list down by his side and his free hand on his hip. "You're late to my class. About ten minutes late to be exact."

"Sorry," Chuck scurried into the classroom and found a seat near the back where he plopped down. Mr. Watson closed the door and turned around to face Chuck.

"And your name would be?" he asked, looking at his list. Laughter was imminent. Chuck swallowed and blinked again, heavily, before boldly stating his name.

"Chuck Taylor."

I was right about the laughter. Students from all four grades put aside whatever maturity they had, if any, and exploded in to a chorus of laughter. Mr. Watson settled the kids down and continued through the list of names.

The rest of homeroom went by quickly, and I moved on to second period: math. It was a good thing to get Math done first thing in the morning – not my subject of choice. Third period, Astronomy, came and went. Fourth and fifth crawled by and

sixth couldn't have come any sooner. It was lunch and I was starving.

I sat alone at a small round lunch table. I started to devour my turkey and provolone sandwich with mayo, as I glanced around the rowdy cafeteria. It was like a zoo. I felt weird because everyone was getting along already and I didn't know anyone. I mean, I knew some kids from middle school, but I didn't know them well enough to start a mature high school conversation. Even Jeffrey Shuster, the captain of our middle school football team, was hanging out with seniors! How does that happen so fast?

I felt the table move, and I looked to my right. Chuck Taylor plopped down in an empty chair at my table. He was brown bagging it too. He pulled out a cube of foil, unwrapped it, and pulled out some left over pizza. He took a bite and looked at me.

"Man, I really bombed in homeroom this morning," Chuck said with a mouth full of food.

"Yeah, that was a little rough. If I knew you were in my homeroom you could have followed me."

"Holy crap, you were in that class?"

"Yeah, I was sitting against the wall."

"Man, I was in the back," Chuck took another bite of his cold pizza.

“Late to your first class on your first day of high school. Were you embarrassed?”

Chuck swallowed a mouth full of pizza, unintentionally leaving some sauce on his cheek. “Yeah. I’ve been late to all my classes so far.”

I laughed, “Really?”

“Yeah, I’m just...I’m freaking out, man. I’m not cut out for all this, ya know?”

“You’re not cut out for...school?”

“Yeah. I don’t really fit in with all these people. I’ve always had a problem fitting in.”

“Me too,” I said, trying to comfort him.

“Plus,” he added, shifting his eyes around the cafeteria in an accusing manner, “this place creeps me out.”

There was a slight commotion going on behind us. Chuck and I both turned around and saw three of the older kids, probably juniors, standing on either side of a tall, fat kid. The older kids, obviously some kind of jerk skater punks, were picking on him. He appeared to be an easy target. He was tall, overweight, had long brown hair pulled back into a ponytail and was literally wearing a Hawaiian t-shirt. One of the skater kids glanced our way.

“Don’t look!” Chuck shouted at me, swinging back around and stuffing more pizza into his face.

“Why?”

“Cause they might come over here. We don’t need that, Scout. It’s gonna be crazy, I just know it.” Chuck was obviously a nervous wreck about his first day, but he was right. The bullies escorted the fat kid over to us and one of them, the head honcho, tapped Chuck on the shoulder.

“Hey, Shoes!” he said. Chuck looked up at him, afraid. The bully’s friends laughed.

“Shoes?” one of the friends questioned.

“Yeah man, Shoes. This kid’s name is Chuck Taylor.”

The bullies laughed, and forced the fat kid down into the seat next to Chuck.

“This is where you belong, you wad. See you guys later! Bye Shoes!” The lead bully grabbed his friends and they trotted off, laughing. I was stunned.

“Uh, what’s up?” I asked, not sure where to take it from there. The fat kid responded, not even remotely bothered by what happened:

“What’s up, dude.”

“What just happened?” I asked, trying to create a conversation out of his awkward arrival.

“I don’t know. I guess it’s illegal to sit at a lunch table full of popular kids around here.” He spoke like he had been running all afternoon – out of breath.

“I’m Scout. This is Chuck,” I pointed to Chuck, who was still chewing. Seeing another kid of his same nerdish presence, he eased up a bit.

“Chuck Taylor,” Chuck properly introduced himself. The fat kid smiled and shook both of our hands. His smile was gargantuan. He showed more gums than he did teeth.

“I’m Phil Easton. You can call me Philly if you want,” he said.

“Philly?” I asked.

“Yeah. It’s just a little something I came up with. It’s nice to meet you guys.”

“You too,” I said.

Chuck swallowed the rest of his pizza and looked at Phil and I, sauce still on his face.

“I think we just accidentally created the reject table,” I joked.

Chuck and Phil laughed, like they were use to being the ‘rejects’. I never really considered myself one through what school I had already completed. I usually kept to myself, didn’t get extraordinary nerd-type grades, and hung out at home on the weekends, but I never labeled myself a reject.

III.

My 10th period – the last period – just happened to be a study hall. Not a bad way to finish off the school day. I could have used it to get a start on homework, study for the next day or just write – something I occasionally enjoyed doing. But nope, I used it to study Chuck Taylor. He just happened to be in my study hall - that made two classes we had together. But for some reason, study hall even made the kid nervous. He sat in the back corner of the room, clicking his pen ferociously. It was non-stop. The teacher kept looking up from his *Guns and Ammo* magazine to see where it was coming from, but he could never pin point its exact location. I wished he had stopped; it was the only sound in an otherwise dead quiet room.

I didn't understand Chuck. He was more nervous than anyone I had ever met. He was awkward, not good in crowds; there had to be something to him. I wondered what he did for fun.

Since the school year started on a Wednesday, we only had two more days until the weekend. Thursday went by pretty similar to the first day. Chuck, Philly and I ate lunch together again, and were a little more comfortable with each other. Chuck lightened up just a tad, but not much. I found out he liked comic books – big surprise, right? Philly didn't seem to have many

interests, almost like he'd come to school, go home, and do nothing until he needed to come to school again.

Friday went pretty quick too. We ate lunch together again – seemed like it'd be like that from now on. There was a pep rally at the end of the day, which acted more as a “welcome to high school” speech for us freshmen. They made a whole big deal about it. Cheerleaders were flipping all over the place, the football team appeared at the center of the gym with the captain trying to pump everyone up, and claiming they were going to be undefeated all season long. He had a very put-on macho tone in his voice. Brandon Checkers was his name. If it weren't for the simple fact that he was the captain of the football team, I'd bet a hundred bucks that he'd get picked on. I mean, Checkers? That name is just begging to be ripped apart.

When school finally let out for the day, Chuck gathered Phil and myself near the buses, and asked if we wanted to meet him at Jakon's Comic Collectables in the morning.

“What do you say, guys? Do you want to come check the place out with me?” Chuck asked.

“Hanging out with friends on the weekends, huh?” Phil pondered to himself. It didn't seem like a strange question to me.

“Sure,” I said, “What time?”

“They open at 10am. I’ll be waiting by the front door for you guys. You’re gonna love it, it’s pretty badass,” Chuck stopped immediately after saying ‘badass’. He looked shocked.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I’ve never cursed before,” he said, ashamed of himself.

“It’s cool man – not really a big deal. My brother curses all the time,” I said.

“Yeah, but how old is he?” Chuck asked, seeming to freak out again.

“23.”

“See, he’s allowed to!” Chuck backed up, and tried to regain his composure. I didn’t realize that 23 was the age that allowed one to swear. This kid had a weird view of the world. I turned my attention to Phil, who was still wondering if hanging out with people on the weekends was something he’d be up for.

“Are you coming, Phil?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said, “I guess it wouldn’t hurt anything.”

Chuck finally snapped back to reality. “Okay guys. Be at Jakon’s Comic Collectables at 10am tomorrow. It’s on Wilbur Avenue. Bring some money – you’re gonna wanna spend it!”

Chuck was obviously excited about this place, and even more, showing it to other people. I think I finally knew what made this kid happy. We all got on our separate buses, and went home for the weekend.

IV.

Dinner was good. My mom made Steak-Ums and Ramen Noodles – my favorite meal of all time! Had me a root beer with it. My brother, Mark, came home from hanging with his buddies all afternoon and ate with us. He was in a garage band called Red Badger. They thought they were good, but they really weren't.

Mark was their guitarist. His friend Blane was the bassist; Leo was the drummer; and Kristen was the singer. I guess that'd be the one thing I'd give them – a female singer. There weren't too many good ones around. Kristen had a good voice, but butchered everything the band gave her to sing. Mark was the main songwriter – his lyrics were childish, and extremely uncreative, yet he thought they were cool. And don't get me started on the music, or as I called it, a jumbled mess of noise and un-tuned guitars.

I lay in bed for a good hour before I actually went to sleep. All I could think about was the first few days of school. It was just the first few days of four long years there. New people and new surroundings - it was going to be weird and uncomfortable. Should I join any clubs, or get involved in any school events?

I kept hearing a clicking noise in the back on my mind. It was getting repetitive and louder. Crap! It was Chuck's stupid pen. He'd been clicking it non-stop in study hall for the past three

days. What's with that kid? I mean I felt bad for him. I could see where he would have a hard time fitting it. He was afraid of everything.

And what about Phil? Philly? He was just as strange, if not worse. This guy was a bumbling, generically fat, kid. He kind of didn't have a care in the world, and it didn't seem to bother him that people picked on him. All I could see in my mind was his large smile – all gums, no teeth.

I should stop. It wasn't nice to make fun of people for the way they are. They could be saying some rotten things about me too, who knows. Oh my God, were these guys going to be my friends? Was I going to be permanently sitting at the 'reject table'? The weird thing is, the more I thought about it, I didn't even care. As strange as Chuck and Philly were, I enjoyed their company. They didn't make fun of me, nor I them – at least to their faces; I should stop that if were going to be friends.

Jakon's Comic Collectables in the morning – this would be the first time the three of us hung out outside of school. We'll see how it goes.

I popped on my iPod, selected an alternative rock play-list, rolled over, and faded away into a slumber.

CHAPTER TWO

Return of The Acidic Chickens

I.

Just as he promised, Chuck was waiting in front of Jakon's Comic Collectables when I arrived. He was dressed in his Saturday morning best: high top sneakers, blue jeans, and a white t-shirt with a yellow smiley face on it, with the words, "don't be surprised" stamped underneath. I didn't get it.

I arrived just before 10am, just like Chuck instructed. It was cool out for a September morning, but chances were the temperature would sky rocket into the 80's again. I lived close enough to the store where I could walk, and not take my bike. I approached Chuck, who was happy to see me.

He jumped up from the curb where he was sitting, and met me halfway from where I was. He raised his hand, and we both failed at a high five. We tried again with the same results, and just left it at that.

"What's happening, man?" Chuck smiled. I felt like I was in his territory now. I've heard of the store before, but never really checked it out. I was never much into comics.

"Not much. Haven't been out this early on a Saturday morning in a long time."

“It’s going to be fun,” Chuck said, looking back at the store. A ‘closed’ sign hung in the window, with a darkened store behind it. “I was thinking the three of us should go get some Slushies afterwards. There’s a place just down the street that sells them. They have good sandwiches too.”

“Uh, sure,” I said, trying to think of the place he was talking about. I couldn’t. I guess I didn’t really know Kings Town as much as I should have.

Moments later, during an awkward silence between Chuck and I, we could hear a small, sickly sounding motor. We both looked around, not knowing where it was coming from. It was getting louder, although slightly, by the second. Then, we saw it.

In epic fashion, Phil came pattering around the corner of the building, standing tall on a motorized scooter; he was all gums.

Chuck’s jaw dropped, “Wow, Phil has a motorcycle.”

“That’s not a motorcycle, man. That’s a scooter,” I corrected him, not once removing my eyes from the glorious sight.

When Phil’s vehicle pattered to a stop in front of us, it was hard to tell if he had turned it off, or it just died. It was a very old piece of junk.

“What’s up, my brotha’s,” Phil said, hopping off the scooter.

“Nice ride,” Chuck said, amazed by the device. He began to check it out, running his fingers over the peeling paint.

“Thanks,” Phil responded, “I got it for Christmas last year. I ride this bad boy everywhere.”

Phil really shouldn't have described his scooter as a 'bad boy', as it had clearly seen better days. Actually, it wouldn't surprise me if he had received it used.

“My grandfather got it used at a pawn shop. I've been meaning to pimp it out for months now – just haven't found the time,” Phil said, standing back, admiring his ride.

I glanced back at the store, and saw the lights were now on and there was a man of medium height standing behind the glass door, looking at us. Next to his head, the 'closed' sign was flipped and now said 'open'.

I nudged Chuck Taylor. “Dude, it's open.”

Chuck turned and saw for himself. “Nice! Let's do this.”

Phil and I followed Chuck into the store. It was a pretty cool looking place. It wasn't very big at all, maybe the size of a couple master bedrooms put together. The walls were lined with comic books – both big franchises, and local ones. There were two aisles going down the center of the store which shelved sketches, artwork, collectable figures and busts, DVD's, rare music CD's and other collectable knick knacks. If you were into this stuff, it was very obvious this could be your Heaven.

Back near the entrance was an empty rack, which looked like it was intended for hanging shirts on. Next to the rack was the

checkout counter. Sitting behind it was the man who was staring at us – obviously the owner. He was kind of short, had receding brown hair, thin glasses, and spoke with a lisp:

“Good morning guys. Chuck, looks like you brought me some more business,” he said.

“I hope so. I told these guys to bring some money!” Chuck gathered Phil and I up and brought us to the checkout counter. He proceeded to introduce us.

“Guys, this is Jakon. He owns the store.”

“Jakon bake,” Phil said.

An awkward silence fell over the entire store. Chuck, Jakon and I all looked at Phil, who was smiling, appreciating his own joke. He looked at me, and his smile disappeared.

“What was that?” I asked, confused.

“It was a joke,” Phil said, trying to defend his embarrassment.

“Yeah, but...it didn’t make any sense. You didn’t even set anything up. You just said, ‘Jakon bake.’”

“Yeah, that’s not a joke, Phil,” Chuck added. Phil shot a quick nervous glance at Jakon, looking for some kind of salvation. There was none coming.

“Look, guy,” Jakon said, “It’s a two for one deal here. My parents couldn’t decide on Jake or Jason when I was born, so they doubled up. So if you’re trying to take a stab at my awesome, double-sided name, then get out.”

Jakon pointed at the door. Phil stood there, afraid. He could have easily cried.

“Sorry,” Phil said, trying not to choke up.

Jakon slowly nodded in a forgiving way. “It’s cool, man.”

Chuck broke the tension, “Alright guys, check out the store. Buy some stuff!”

The three of us spread out and absorbed what the store had to offer. Jakon kept his eyes on us the whole time.

I hit the far wall and looked at the new releases. Since I was never into comics or superheroes or anything, none of these new titles sounded remotely familiar: *‘Radioactive Time Warp Team’*, *‘Bloch and the Androids’*, *‘The Nuclear Kids Go to Mars’* and *‘Hiroshi’s Mustard Van’* – I wasn’t even going to question that last one.

I turned around to see what the guys were doing. Phil was clear on the other side of the store, fingering through a white box jam-packed with old comics. It looked like ‘December 1988’ was scribbled on the side with black ink. He seemed to pick a random comic from it and stuff it under his arm as he fished for more.

Chuck was in the aisle of collectable figures popping pills...I squinted to make sure I saw that right. I did. He had a small orange pill bottle, and shook out a couple pills into his palm. He launched them down his throat and struggled to swallow. He let

out a couple dry coughs afterwards. I went back to pretending to look at the wall of comics until it was time to go.

II.

About an hour later, the three of us were gathered outside of Father Peanuts, a small café around the corner. We sucked down some of the Slushies that Chuck had mentioned earlier, exchanged some small conversation, and split for the day.

I spent the majority of my Sunday sitting in my room with a six-pack of Root Beer and listening to the new Iodine Eyes CD. They were my favorite band; one of the alternative rock genre who created catchy riffs and hooky melodies. They'd been around for as long as I could remember; I think I had gotten into their stuff back in fifth grade or something.

I had gone downstairs and started to rummage through the cabinets in the kitchen, desperately looking for something to eat. There were a ton of boxes and cans of crap, but nothing sounded good. Mom was at work, so that meant I was on my own.

I heard the front door open and I dashed into the living room, hoping it was Mom. "Mom!" I called out. I stopped when I realized it wasn't her, but it was Mark and the rest of Red Badger. They filed in, carrying their gear, ignoring my cry for

“Mom” – thank God. They were in the middle of a heated discussion, arguing with one another about random stuff.

Mark noticed me, and pointed in my direction. “Scout will tell us the truth!” He assured his comrades.

I didn’t know what he was talking about, and the dumb look plastered on my face gave that notion away.

“Scout, you think we’re good, right?” Mark asked. “As a band, I mean.”

Kristen, Blane and Leo all looked at me for an answer. Should I tell them the truth? Or just what they wanted to hear?

“Uh, of course you guys are good.” I closed my fist, and pointed it towards them. “Red Badger Fever!”

“Right...” Mark said.

“Why?” I asked.

“Well, you remember when we were in middle school, right?”

“Um, yeah...”

“Then you must remember our musical arch rivals, ‘The Acidic Chickens’?”

I tried to hold back a smirk. The Acidic Chickens? I didn’t think there was an even worse band name than Red Badger; I was definitely wrong.

“Well, get this Scout,” Mark began, “They broke up in 9th grade and they all moved away to different corners of the country. Well, guess what?”

“They’re back?” I took a wild shot in the dark, even though his question had an obvious answer.

“How’d you know?” Kristen squealed. “Have they contacted you?”

I shook my head slowly, sort of mocking them.

“Well, they *are* back,” my brother said, “and they’re bigger than ever. Now they’re thinking about joining the battle of the bands in October.”

“So?”

“So?” Mark repeated. He turned to his band mates. “So?’ He asks!”

The four of them laughed at me for some reason.

“We already registered for battle of the bands, Scout! We were a sure thing to win! Now, we have to beat these monkey lovers to a pulp.”

Mark seemed to get his group all jacked up. They hooted and hollered as they grabbed their gear and headed for the stairway. “C’mon, Badgers!” Mark yelled, leading his rebellion, “We have to write the badest song of all time! We need to win this thing!”

Red Badger celebrated their vague plan and retreated to Mark’s bedroom upstairs.

I stood by myself in the living room, wondering what just happened. I started thinking about school the next day.

III.

The bell rang and homeroom began. I looked to the back of the room and Chuck wasn't there yet. Mr. Watson walked to the open classroom door, closed it and returned to his desk. He picked up the roll call sheet, and once again began to demand a "Here!" from everyone.

The start of the second week felt a little more uncomfortable than the previous. It was almost like I was starting to settle in, but I was still aware that there were four more years of this stuff. I didn't like it.

I knew I had to make a name for myself. Maybe try out for the football team? Nah, I was already about 100 pounds disqualified. I needed a sport that would make me stand out a bit. Tennis? No. The chess team? That was more my thing, but I'm sure I would've probably got beaten up. Maybe a club of some kind? Glee? No, I couldn't sing a lick of crap.

Third period came pretty quick and I found myself in Astronomy. It was a pretty cool class I guess. I always thought space was interesting, but never gave it any extended thoughts. My teacher was weird though – actually, my Professor. That's

what he liked to be called. Professor Nog. His name was hilarious. Every time he said it, or anyone said it for that matter, I had to do my best to hold back a smile.

Rumor had it that he was a Professor at a University at one time, but they fired him for his wild theories that he tried to preach in class. That rumored history fit his appearance for sure. He was short, skinny, wore square-framed glasses, was balding with possibly the worst comb-over in history, and always wore a red tie under his lab coat – even when his shirt was red.

Professor Nog started to babble on and on about the Crab Nebula, so I sort of tuned out. I found myself wondering what Chuck was up to. Was he running late for a class? Thinking about comics? Sweating nervously? The possibilities were endless. And what about Phil? Philly? Did he really give himself a nickname, and an unoriginal one at that?

“Hey”, a quiet, feminine voice whispered to me. I snapped out of my thoughts and saw a short, cute Asian girl sitting ahead of me turn around in her chair.

“What?” I whispered back, hoping Professor Nog wouldn’t hear us.

“Is the teacher’s last name Nog? Or Knock? I can never tell what he’s saying,” the girl asked.

“I think its Nog.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

She smiled then turned back around and faced front again. I smiled as well – girl interaction! I was wondering how long it would take! Second week into high school – has to be a record.

I looked at the digital clock above the chalkboard – three minutes until class ended. Professor Nog noticed it too.

“Okay,” Nog began, “For tomorrow, I want everyone to read chapters one through three in the text book. We’ll have a quiz all about the Crab Nebula on Thursday.

“And just as a formality, since no one will join anyway, I want to let you all know that I run an after school club called the Astro-Nogs. The sign-up sheet is in the back if anyone’s interested. We look at the stars and pictures of space and stuff. It’s a pretty decent gig.”

With that, the bell rang and class was dismissed. Everyone left quickly with their belongings, but I stalled for a moment. An after school club for Astronomy? Sounded enticing, but I didn’t want to be the only one who signed up for it.

I walked to the back of the room to see if anyone else had signed up for the club. The empty sign up sheet was on the wall next to a large, bolted metal door. The door looked extremely out of place given the appearance of the rest of the classroom. I curiously studied the door for a moment, and then looked back at the sign up sheet. I would be the first name on there if I signed up, and possibly the only one. Dare I?

“Scott Bricks?” Nog’s voice startled me. I swung around and saw the old foggy standing before me.

“Scout Brooks,” I corrected him.

“Whatever. Were you just thinking about joining the Astro-Nogs?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Why don’t you just go ahead and sign up for it anyways. If you don’t like it after the first couple meetings, I’ll refund your money.”

“It costs?”

“Of course not,” Nog joked. It wasn’t even that funny, but he got a chuckle out of it. Good for him. “It’s a school club, we can’t charge for it. Your parents taxes pay for this stuff.”

“Oh,” I said, not even remotely interested in taxes. I turned the attention to the large, metal door. “What’s that?”

“Oh that?” Nog said, scratching his head nervously. “It’s just a closet.”

“With a metal door?”

“Yes.”

“What’s in it?” I asked.

“Just lab equipment, jeez.”

The metal door began to shake, and something large on the other side began to pound on it repeatedly. I jumped back, my eyes wide in terror:

“What the heck is that!?”

“Nothing,” Nog calmly said, turning around and walking back towards the front of the class like nothing even happened. “So are you going to sign up for the club, or what?”

I watched the odd Professor walk to the front of the classroom, where his next class began to file in. I looked back at the metal door, which had settled down, and then at the sign up sheet. My heart was pounding from the unexpected disruption.

“Heck yeah I’m joining the club,” I muttered to myself, pulling out a number two pencil from my backpack.

IV.

When I got home, I grabbed fist full after fist full of ruffled potato chips and placed them on the paper plate in front of me, in a heap. I then unstrung a couple rods of string cheese and placed the strings gently across the top of the chips, weaving them in and out of each other like some grandmothers newest pie concoction. Thirty seconds in the microwave, and I had a snack - some poor mans nachos – but it hit the spot.

I plopped down in front of the TV, but didn't turn it on. All I could think about was the banging on the metal door in Astronomy, and the way Professor Nog purposefully ignored it and changed the topic. There was definitely something in there – something I had to see. The first meeting of the Astro-Nogs was on Friday, and I was pumped.

The only thing was, I didn't think I should tell anyone about it. They would think I'm crazy. Until I found out what it actually was, I needed to keep my mouth shut. I started to eat my snack, and enjoyed them with a smile on my face. Sweet.

CHAPTER THREE

Honoring the Improvised Waivers

I.

Friday seemed to take forever to get here, but it finally did. I spent all week talking about comics with Chuck, telling Phil that his jokes didn't make sense, and studying the large, bolted metal door in the back of Professor Nog's classroom. Every day I sat in Astronomy, I had a new theory.

At first I thought it was a giant robot that Nog had secretly been building with my parents tax dollars. Then I thought it could possibly be a science experiment gone wrong. Maybe Nog was a mad scientist who experimented on students in his spare time. Maybe he used the Astro-Nog's as test subjects. I even thought for a second that I dreamt the whole thing up, but quickly put that theory to rest when every time I would turn back around to face forward in class, Professor Nog was staring at me, squinting his eyes and putting his index finger up to his lips like he was 'shushing' me.

It didn't matter what wild theories I had brewing – I was going to find out for sure today after school.

I sat at the lunch table with Chuck and Phil, but barely touched my roast beef and white cheddar wrap that my mom had thrown together for me. I saw Philly kept eyeing it, so I ended up just giving it to him. Chuck set down his cold pizza and finished chewing his last bite before he commented to me:

“What’s up, Scout?” he asked. “You’ve been kind of quiet today.”

“Did you not like the roast beef and white cheddar wrap?” Phil asked, finishing it off with a wipe of his napkin.

I couldn’t tell them what I was thinking about. Would they even believe me if I told them that Professor Nog was hiding a giant human-scorpion hybrid in the back of his classroom? That was another theory that I came up with...

“I’m fine,” I said, very unconvincingly. I couldn’t tell them yet. But, I wouldn’t have to tell them if they saw it for themselves. “Are you guys going to join any clubs this year?”

“What do you mean, clubs?” Phil asked.

“Like after school, school-related clubs?” Chuck chimed in.

“Yeah, school clubs. Are you guys going to join any? I’m thinking about checking out the Astro-Nog’s after school. You guys care to come along?”

In unison, they both simply said no.

“Oh, okay,” I said. The day was coming to an end, and I couldn’t have been more nervously excited.

II.

The sound of the final bell ringing for the day was magnificent. Chuck caught up with me as I was exiting study hall.

“You want to hang out this weekend?” he asked, hopeful for a ‘yes’ from me. I didn’t disappoint.

“Sure man. What do you want to do?”

“Sleep over at my house tonight. Philly will be there. Make it around 6 o’clock or so. We’ll watch some bad movies and eat pizza all night,” Chuck said.

“Sounds like a plan. Are you sure you don’t want to hit up the Astro-Nog’s, man?” I double-checked.

“I’m sure. I have a meeting with Jakon in an hour,” Chuck said.

A meeting with Jakon? What on Earth did that mean?

“Alright then. See you tonight.”

Chuck patted me on the back and took off down the hall. A sleepover would be fun. I’d never attended one before, so it’d be a new experience for me. I wandered out into the hallway and loved the sight of the student body thinning out of the school. The first meeting of the Astro-Nog’s was about to be in order!

About fifteen minutes later, I found myself sitting in an empty hallway outside of the Astronomy classroom. The door was shut

and the lights were out inside the room. I had tried to look through the small window on the door to the back of the classroom, but it was impossible to see.

I'd hoped this was the right spot to meet at. The sign up sheet never specified an exact location. I stood up and looked down either end of the hallway. It was a ghost town up in here. The clock on the wall read 3:00 pm – I was hoping this thing started soon. I needed to be at Chuck's house in three hours.

I stood in front of the door and peered through the window again. It was too dark. Where was Nog?

A slight tap on my shoulder made me jump and I shrieked like a little girl. I turned around and speaking of girls, the girl from my astronomy class stood there smiling.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you," she said quietly.

"It's alright, I..." I realized I just sounded like a girl, so I deepened my voice the best I could, "I just didn't know what was going on out here. Have you seen the Professor?"

"No, but he said to meet him at his classroom for the Astro-Nog's," the girl said.

Good, I was in the right place. I'd been sort of attracted to this girl all week but since I was so intrigued by the bolted metal door. I never caught her name during the roll call.

"I'm Scout," I introduced myself with what I was hoping was a charming smile.

“My name is Mandy.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” I smiled and extended my hand. She shook back. She had a very light grip – very feminine. Her smile, and just the touch of her hand put me in a slight trance - which was interrupted by a booming explosion!

Mandy and I both turned around quickly as the building started to shake, and saw at the end of the hallway, smoke billowing from an unknown location. Sparks flew in every direction and with another ear-pounding ‘boom’, a door at the end of the hallway exploded from its hinges and hit the floor, shattering its’ glass window.

Through the dark smoke, I could see a figure materialize and start sprinting toward us. It was Professor Nog! He was covered in black soot, and his lab coat and red tie were shredded. He saw Mandy and I standing – startled – up ahead of him.

“Scout! Get up outta here, my brotha!” he shouted. Naturally, I stood there, confused as could be. What the heck was even happening? Terrorists?

There was a quick, high-pitched piercing sound that emerged from down the hall, and I saw a short beam of green energy pierce through the smoke and come flying at us. I grabbed Mandy and tore her down to the floor with me. The energy blast hit the wall next to us and burned a hole into Nog’s classroom. Was that a freaking laser? Like a space beam laser from the movies? Holy crap!

Nog finally made it to us and frantically juggled his keys in his hands. “I thought I said to get up outta here!” He opened the door as fast as he could. Another green laser beam hit the door to the right of Nog’s head.

“Hurry!” Nog ordered as he shoved us into his classroom and slammed the door behind us.

“Nog, what’s going on?” I shouted.

“It’s *Professor* Nog! Just get down!” he corrected, and then instructed us.

Mandy and I knelt down against the wall and I watched as the weird old Professor stood facing the door. I leaned forward just a tad to look out the glass window, but all I could see was the black smoke inching its way down the hall. Everything got quiet and Nog grew uneasy.

“Professor, I just...”

“Quiet down Scout,” he hushed me quickly as heavy footsteps grew closer out in the hall. I saw Nog’s eyes widen to lengths I’d never seen before, so I leaned forward again to see what he saw.

The footsteps came to a stop and there was a tall – almost 7 foot – being standing there. It was wearing a heavily armored exterior with strange markings on it. It was a beast! It wore a helmet of some kind that had a pitch-black visor on the front blocking any possible visual of the face behind it.

“Is that a person?” I asked.

“What in craps sake do I have to do to shut you up, Scout!?”
Nog screamed, not once removing his eyes from the strange being.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small device – almost like a remote key for a car. It had a red button on the top of it, and a green one on the bottom. Nog hovered his finger over the red button for a minute. The beast on the other side of the door stood still, but I could hear sound coming from him. It was almost like something was charging up – the laser gun perhaps?

Nog heard it too and quickly pressed the red button. He swung around to avoid looking at the hallway, just as a blinding white light out there flashed; it lit up the entire classroom. Mandy and I sheltered our eyes, and a moment later, I opened mine.

Professor Nog was sitting on the floor in a state of relief. I looked to Mandy – her eyes were still closed, and she was holding her head, scared. I leaned forward again to look out the window. The thing was gone.

Nog stood up just as I did.

“Is that guy gone?” I asked – even though I had about a thousand more questions about the crap that just happened.

“Yeah. Back to Bethani where he belongs,” Nog walked over to his desk. I stood by the door and looked out the window.

There was nothing. No being, no smoke – nothing. I walked up behind the old man.

“What’s Bethani?”

“Nothing. Don’t worry about it, Scout. As a matter of fact, I’m gonna need you and Mandy to sign a couple waivers here for me, alright?”

“But I…”

“*Alright?*” Nog reinforced. I nodded.

III.

I sat in Chuck’s bedroom, in his computer chair against the wall. The sleepover was officially underway, but all I could think about was the mass confusion of the armored robot attack at the school a few hours ago. What on Earth had even happened? Professor Nog made Mandy and I sign some waivers saying that we never saw a darn thing, and that we couldn’t even speak of it. That was impossible. Plus, Nog typed up the waivers right there on the spot anyways, so they were in no way legal. I needed to know more about this.

I watched as Chuck and Philly were playing video games while sitting on the floor. I scoped the room out – it was a cluttered mess. No way in heck I’d have people over with my room looking like this. There were clothes everywhere, pizza on

the floor, posters of bikini-clad girls with their faces covered up by cut outs of famous video game characters' faces. There were little figurines spaced out all over the nightstand, TV stand, bookshelf and even a stuffed superhero hanging from the ceiling. C'mon, Chuck...

"We should order more pizza," Chuck said, licking his lips. I was already full, but I looked at Philly to see his response. He didn't speak, but just licked his lips too while remaining focused on the game.

I wondered if Mandy had said anything to anyone, or if she was honoring the improvised waivers. I wanted to say something so bad. I just couldn't.

Chuck turned and faced me after his video game character fell to his death for the eleventh time. "You're a little quiet back there, Scout. What's wrong, mang?"

"Oh nothing. Just thinking about stuff," he continued to stare at me, so I had to come up with something fast. "How'd your meeting with Jakon go?"

"Pretty fine."

"What was it about?" I asked, actually curious.

"I'll tell you guys soon. I want to wait for the deal to officially go through," Chuck said, respawning his character.

"So when are we ordering this pizza?" Phil asked.

“Soon. What kind do you guys want to devour next?” Chuck asked, pausing the game.

“I don’t care,” I said. I really didn’t. I had too many other weird things on my mind.

“PMS,” Phil said with a smirk.

All right, that caught my attention. Chuck and I both stared at Phil.

Phil continued, “Pepperoni, Mushroom, Sausage. Don’t you guys know pizza lingo?”

I shook my head. Chuck nodded, “PMS it is!”

Chuck picked up the phone from his nightstand and dialed up some pizza. After it arrived, we ate it pretty fast – well, Phil ate it pretty fast. We turned the games off close to one and started to settle in for the night after Phil exclaimed, “That’s all Philly Manilli can take for the day.”

I was curled up in Chuck’s old fire truck spotted sleeping bag, Chuck had his bed with wooden sides so he wouldn’t fall out and Phil took a blanket to the hallway, claiming he couldn’t sleep in the same room as other people.

Chuck and Phil were out pretty quick, but I was awake for at least another hour thinking about Nog and that robot thing. What the heck was that? I couldn’t get it off my mind. Slowly I faded away into a slumber and dreamt horrible thoughts about aliens

opening up my brain, robots shooting at me, and Nog robbing a store at gun point for a new batch of red ties.

I had quite the headache when I woke up.

CHAPTER FOUR

I Dreamed of a Teenage Space Lobotomy

I.

“Chuck! Your friends need to go home and you need to clean your room!” Chuck’s mother shouted from the doorway, waking us all up from a deep sleep.

I hopped up from the sleeping bag, and saw Chuck rolling out of his bed.

“But, Mom!” Chuck whined.

“No buts, Mister,” she said. His mom looked at me, and then at Phil, who was making his way into the room. “I’m sorry boys, but I told Chuck he couldn’t have anyone over unless he cleaned. And he didn’t. You’re grounded Chuckles!”

“MOM! Don’t call me that in front of my friends!” Chuck panicked and stood to his feet.

“Well, that’s what you get for disobeying orders,” his mom dropped the bomb and left the doorway.

“Chuckles?” I laughed.

“Shut up, Scout! Please don’t tell anyone about that. Shoes is bad enough.”

I nodded, still laughing. Phil found a piece of pizza from the night before sitting on top of the Xbox, and started to take bites from it.

“I hate cleaning,” Chuck pouted. “It’s for girls. It’s not manly.”

“What about Mr. Clean,” Phil said, chewing the stale slice, “That’s what he does for a living and he’s the manliest guy I know. Have you seen his muscles?”

Neither Chuck nor myself acknowledged Phil’s questionable statement.

“You guys want to help? We can make a game out of it!” Chuck excitedly asked.

Phil shook his head.

“No,” I said. “I have some things I want to do today.” I did. I wanted to try and find out where Mandy lived. I needed to talk to her about what happened yesterday.

“Suit yourself. You guys don’t know what you’re missing,” Chuck said, frustrated.

When I got home, I quickly got onto my computer and searched for Mandy Lee on the Information Super Highway – that’s what they called the Internet back in the olden days. Thankfully there was only one that lived in Kings Town, and it wasn’t too far from me.

I threw on some different clothes, brushed my teeth, and shined my glasses up real nice before heading out.

About three blocks away was the Lee residence. It was a nice house – very modern looking. I walked up to the front door and knocked a couple times. A moment later, Mandy answered the door, and looked shocked to see me.

“Scout? What are you doing here? How did you find out where I lived?”

“The internet,” I replied. There was a moment of awkward silence before she asked again:

“What are you doing here?”

“Well, I was kind of hoping to talk about the random robot attack at the school.”

“Professor Nog said we’re not allowed to talk about it.”

“Yeah, with civilians. But we’re exclusive. We can talk about it with each other, right?”

Mandy nervously glanced behind her, I assume making sure her parents didn’t hear anything. “Meet me at Father Peanuts in ten minutes.”

“Okay,” I smiled as she quickly shut the door in my face. A sharp pain bolted through my head after she was gone, and I grabbed the left side of my face. My headache from this morning was getting worse.

II.

I waited for about fifteen minutes inside Father Peanuts once I got there for Mandy to arrive. When she did, the first thing I noticed was her little sundress. It was nice, and complemented her well. There was a slight flutter in my chest. It was either some kind of medical condition, or just nerves. I kind of liked this girl.

She sat down across from me at our booth. “Okay, what exactly do you want to talk about?”

“I want to know what you thought was happening? Was it like an alien attack or something? Is Professor Nog some kind of government special ops guy? Are we in Area 51? Is it possible for -”

“Scout, stop. Look, I don’t know what exactly happened. Everything is a little fuzzy and I have a pounding headache. Can’t we just do as Professor Nog asked, and not think or talk about it?”

I just kind of stared at her. How could we just ignore it? The giant robot that blew up the hallway was one thing, but I also wanted to know what was in the ‘closet’ in the back of Nog’s classroom. Plus, Bethani? I mean, what the heck does that mean? Another bolt of pain shot through my head, and I cringed this time.

“Are you okay?” Mandy asked.

“Yeah. I’ve just been having these pains in my head today,” I said, shaking off the headache.

That means it’s working, Scout.

“Huh?” I said, wondering who’s echoing voice that was.

“What?” Mandy said.

“I thought you just said something, but like in an old guys voice.”

“Uh, no.”

I did.

“Who did?” I asked, looking around.

“Who did what?” Mandy was lost. So was I really.

“Some guy is talking to me,” I said.

Mandy looked around, but we were pretty much the only ones in Father Peanuts.

Scout stop talking. You look like a fool.

“Who is that?” I asked, nerves kicking in. It sounded sort of like... “Nog?”

That’s Professor Nog. And yes it’s me. Shut up before someone catches on.

“Okay,” I said.

“Okay what?” Mandy asked, confused.

“Um...” I didn’t know what the heck was going on.

*Just excuse yourself from the table and come to my classroom.
It's important.*

I stood up from the booth and looked at Mandy. "I'm sorry, but I have to go."

"Okay," she said concerned. "Are you okay?"

"Uh-huh, yeah. Yup. I'll see you in class on Monday."

Mandy smiled but I struggled to get one out. Then I booked it.

III.

I walked all the way to the school, and found the parking lot completely empty. Of course it would be, it was the weekend. Why did Nog want me to be here? Why could I hear him in my head? Could he hear my thoughts? Can you hear my thoughts, Professor?

Nothing.

"Can you hear me now?" I said out loud.

Of course I can.

I got the chills all over my body. This was starting to freak me out. "How can I hear you?"

Just come inside and I will explain everything to you. Open the front door on the far left – it's the only one unlocked.

I did as the Professor said, and entered the school.

It was a ghost town. I'd never been in a school on the weekend before. The halls were mostly dark, and all I could hear was the hum from the industrial air conditioner. It felt good in here.

I walked the steps to the second floor and ended up in the hallway that sheltered Nog's classroom. The end of the hall, where the explosions had taken place, was blocked off with caution tape, orange traffic cones, and signs that read: "Under construction. Keep out by order of Principal Smidgeon."

I approached the classroom door and peered through the small glass window. Professor Nog was sitting at his desk in his lab coat and red tie. I watched him for a moment as he was sorting through sheets of paper. Sitting on his desk next to his coffee mug was a small device. It looked like a gun, only...futuristic. My eyes widened as I threw the door open:

"Is that a laser gun!?" I cried, walking fast towards the mechanism.

"It's not yours!" Nog yelled, grabbing the gun-like appliance and shoving it in his drawer like some sort of selfish child. I stopped in my tracks and Nog stood up.

"We have a lot of talking to do, Scout," Nog said, gesturing for me to sit in the chair next to his desk. I took a seat, as did he.

"How can I hear you in my head?" I asked.

“I tracked you down last night at your pals house and did a little brain surgery on you,” Nog said.

My jaw dropped, my eyes widened, and I farted in a bout of nervousness. “Brain surgery?!”

“Let me explain,” Nog leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs up onto his desk:

“I was fired from the University that I use to teach at for trying to subtly warn my students about the dangers of the universe. Not the typical dangers, but specific extra-terrestrial dangers. There are a lot of them out there. My partner, Farrow, and I uncovered dark secrets of the universe and actually made contact with a colony of other worldly beings about 6,500 light years away in the Crab Nebula. I can’t tell you all the details, but simply put, Farrow and I started an intergalactic war with them. The President was informed and started a very small team to try and contain the situation. We’re known as E.I.A.’s, Earth’s Intergalactic Ambassadors. You following me, brotha?” the old man asked.

I nodded without saying a word. It was a lot to take it. Was he even being serious?

“Once in a while, these beings find portals to our planet from theirs and try to destroy all of the information we hold about them, as well as anyone who gets in the way. We struggle sometimes to keep the situation under wraps. Obviously, one of

these examples is yesterday when you and Mandy Lee got involved.”

“That thing was an alien?”

“Yeah, and a dangerous one at that. There is a lot we don’t know about them yet.”

Nog uncrossed his legs and sat up in his chair. He continued.

“I dissected your brain, as well as Mandy’s, to try and figure out which one of you would be the best candidate.”

“For what?”

“For joining our team. We like to keep the team at about five or six members max at all times. Were down to five now, including you – Farrow was just reported missing last week. I’m afraid he got wrapped up in some alien stuff and they took him. His neighbor said Farrow’s entire house began to glow red, and then he was gone. ”

“Why me? I’m just a kid.”

“Because you’ve seen too much. Were not Hollywood here, Scout – I can’t just flash your face and wipe your memory clean of this stuff. Mandy seems to have a lot going for her. She’s a straight-A student, a very talented pianist, and is hoping to be a doctor one day. You on the other hand, have nothing going for you. You hang out with nerds and write short stories for fun. I mean, what the heck? This could be your calling, Scout.”

I sat there and pondered it over. My calling? I always dreamed of being a...well, I guess I never really gave any extended thought as to what I wanted to do with my life. Could this really be what I was destined to do? Save humanity from giant aliens? I looked Nog straight in the eye.

“What do I have to do?” I asked.

“I’ll give you all the information you’ll ever need. It’ll be a bit of a process to acquire some good status in the E.I.A. team, but we’ll get you there. There is one rule that you *need* to follow though. Breaking it could potentially destroy the lives of the people closest to you,” Nog informed me.

I was listening. The more I thought about this, the cooler it sounded! I was going to be a science fiction hero!

Nog continued: “You cannot tell anyone about this. It could be catastrophic if you did.”

“You got it, Professor. But what about Mandy?”

“You leave her to me,” Nog said in a slightly unnecessary maniacal tone.

We were quiet for a moment. “You’re not going to kill her, right?” I asked, concerned.

“Heaven’s no. I’ll figure something out,” Nog said, standing up. “Any more questions, Scout?”

I stood up and faced him. More questions? I had like a thousand more questions. “Um, yeah. What was that button you

pressed that made the alien disappear? Did anyone else see or hear the blast or commotion? What's in your metal door closet back there? Is it a giant human-scorpion hybrid monster? Can there ever be -"

"You certainly ask a lot of questions, guy," Nog said, annoyed. "Everything you need to know, you'll eventually know. But for now, take this stuff right here," he picked up a shoe box-sized black box and handed it to me, "inform yourself, and whatever you do, don't let this get into the wrong hands. Go home and await further instructions."

I accepted the box with a question:

"Can you hear my thoughts?"

"Oh yeah, that. It's a neuro-communications device. I implanted it into your brain so I can communicate with you from anywhere. This job takes you to lost worlds and confusing places. We need to make sure we're always in contact. But no, I can't hear your thoughts. Only when you speak, and that's only when I have my transmitter turned on. I won't invade your privacy, Scout."

I nodded and gripped my hands tight around the box. I turned around and walked out of the classroom. Walking down the hall, I got thinking about the possibilities of this new task I'd acquired. I was like a superhero now. I was going to be involved in a top-secret government task force and blow the crap out of some alien scum!

“This is going to be awesome,” I said out loud to myself.

It's not a game, Scout.

CHAPTER FIVE

Some Kind of Particle Puff

I.

Over the course of the next week, I was able to read up on and look at all of the top-secret information from the black box that Professor Nog had given me. There was all kinds of information in there. There were protocols, weapon information, known details on the planet Bethani, pictures of robotic aliens and so on. I guess that robotic exterior was just that; space suits of some kind. No one actually knew what the aliens looked like.

It was all so freaking awesome. This was my reality now.

Study hall was winding down, and I was half-tempted to pay Professor Nog a visit after school. After he talked to me last week, he told me to go home and await further instructions. He had yet to contact me; I hadn't heard him in my head since that day.

He clearly hadn't figured out what to do with Mandy yet either. I saw her in class each day, but she was always so quiet. She hadn't said a word to me since we met at Father Peanut's. It was odd, but I didn't talk to her either, so whatever.

The bell rang to end school for the day, and I stood up.

“Scout!” Chuck shouted from his seat in the back of the room. I turned and saw him rushing towards me, stumbling a few times over his loose shoelaces.

“What’s up, mang?” I asked.

“Nothing. You’ve been a little distant this week from Phil and I. Are you okay, broseph?”

He was right. I had kind of pushed my friends aside this week. I had a lot on my mind and I had been reading over all of the information Nog gave me. I guess I owed them an apology.

“Yeah,” I said. “I just haven’t been feeling myself. I’m sorry. Do you guys want to hang out this weekend?”

“Sure do. I’ll get with Phil and figure out what we should do. Any suggestions?”

“No.”

“Okay, we’ll figure it out. Hey, can you do me a favor and help me with something in my locker?”

“A favor?”

“Yeah. Funny, huh?”

Whatever. I followed Chuck downstairs to his locker. He cautiously cranked in his locker combo so no one else could see, and opened it up. He had a few grocery bags full of what appeared to be shirts in there.

“Can you help me bring these out to my mom’s car? She’s picking me up today,” he asked.

“Sure,” I said, grabbing a few of them. I looked at them carefully. “What are these?”

“Remember my meeting with Jakon last week? Well, it was about this. I just finished them in Home Economics today.”

Chuck set one of the bags down and opened it, pulling out a white t-shirt. He unfolded it and held it out in front of him. “Behold!”

I looked at the shirt, confused. There was a picture of a cartoon turtle on it, which had a mustache. I looked back at Chuck. “I don’t get it.”

“It’s a novelty t-shirt. It doesn’t have to make sense. You put something quirky on these white t-shirts and people will buy them! Jakon is going to sell my line of shirts at the store!”

Chuck was all excited, so I was excited for him. I don’t know who would even really want to wear a shirt like this, but if Jakon saw potential, then whatever. Personally, I thought it was stupid.

“I want you to have the first one,” Chuck said, handing me the shirt.

“Thanks, Chuck,” I said a little too unenthusiastic. I hope he didn’t pick up on it.

“Wear it this weekend when we all hang out. I have one for Philly too.”

I agreed and proceeded to follow him out the front of the school where his mom's car was. Before we could reach the vehicle, a student walked by rather rapidly and forced his shoulder into Chuck's, making him drop all of his bags, as well as the books he was carrying under his arm.

"Watch it, Shoes!" the boy exclaimed with laughter.

Chuck stood there fighting the tears that were inevitably coming. This was ridiculous. Why did other kids feel the need to constantly bully us, especially Chuck. This bully had made a name for himself, picking on the weak, the nerds, and just about anyone with some sort of downfall. His name was Radar – Matt Radar. His pals just called him by his last name because I guess they thought it was cool. It was kind of cool though.

Radar appeared to be almost an outcast himself; hanging out with the same people all the time who just echoed his insults. They were obvious henchmen. Radar was more of a skater-type than a popular jock. His goons gathered around and started to kick the bags that had dropped.

"Oops!" Radar loudly cried, generating laughs from his boys.

"Just leave us alone," I pleaded.

"How about, NO!" Radar said, laughing.

"You're a jerk," I said, and then froze in fear. Uh-oh. Was that going to get me a wedgie or something?

Radar got all serious and approached me. It felt like a silence fell over the schoolyard. “What did you call me?”

I didn’t know what to say. If Radar only knew about the weapons I had access too, he’d think twice before messing with me. I could incinerate him, de-materialize him, or just flat out melt him if I wanted to.

“Do you have something to say to me, four-eyes?” Radar asked, dominantly.

It was now or never. “Yeah, leave us alone, and don’t call him Shoes. His name is Chuck, and your little nickname for him is just as lame as you are.”

I felt a nervous fart coming on as I started to back up. Radar was visibly upset. He rolled up the sleeves to his hooded sweatshirt and began to charge up his fists.

Out of nowhere, Chuck must have snapped. He dashed up behind Radar and shoved him. “Get out of here, ya butt!”

Radar swung around fast just as a woman’s voice cried out from somewhere in the schoolyard.

“Chuckles, you’re grounded!” Chuck’s mom came rushing up from the parking lot and grabbed her sons’ arm. “Pick up all these bags and get in the car! No son of mine is going to be involved in schoolyard altercations!”

It seemed that within seconds, Chuck's mom had all but tossed her son into the backseat of the car and split for home, and the entire schoolyard had erupted in laughter.

Radar looked at me, laughing so hard he was crying. "Whatever, dude. I promise I won't call him Shoes anymore. Chuckles is by *far* the superior name!" He turned around and left with his goons.

Chuck was doomed.

II.

I walked down the upstairs hallway in a pretty vacant school. Nog's room was up on the left, but the door was shut. I approached it slowly and looked through the glass window.

Professor Nog was sitting at his desk, and Principal Smidgeon was sitting in the empty chair next to it. They were chatting about something; must have been important because the door was shut. I tried to read their lips, but I had no luck. How could anyone do that anyway?

I glanced to the back of the classroom and kept my eyes on the large metal door. What was behind it? What was Professor Nog keeping in there that was such a secret? I wondered if Principal Smidgeon knew about it.

I looked back at the two men, and they were both looking in my direction. They saw me! I quickly ducked down below the glass and slid up against the wall. I squatted there nervously for a moment, and then the classroom door opened up.

Principal Smidgeon came out and tightened his tie. He looked down at me and greeted me with a nod, "Scout."

"Mr. Smidgeon," I said, standing to my feet. With that, Smidgeon walked away.

"Scout, come in here a minute," I heard Nog's voice from inside the room.

I walked in and stood before him at his desk.

"What are you doing outside my classroom, sneaking around like some kind of ninja? Listening to my top-secret conversations like some kind of ninja?" he asked.

"I wasn't," I said.

"I told you to await further instructions. That doesn't mean come looking for them."

"I just want to know some things."

"And I told you you'll learn as you go. It'd be pointless to give you all the information now. There wouldn't be anything to look forward to."

I nodded, and then pointed at the door where Smidgeon left. "Does he know?"

Professor Nog stared at me. He wasn't going to say anything.

"Okay," I nodded again. "I'll wait."

"Thanks, brotha."

I turned and walked back out the door. I wasn't only but a few inches into the hallway when I heard a loud buzzing noise emerge from Nog's room, followed by a sharp static sound. I quickly dashed back into the room where a bright blue light from the back of the room had just diminished.

"What was that?!" I exclaimed with a rush of adrenaline.

"What was what?" Nog was at his desk, calm as could be.

I looked around the room, especially to the back of the room where the metal door was. "I thought I heard some electricity going on in here."

"Hm. Nope," Nog said.

I started to smell heat, like something was burning. I glanced back at the metal door once more and saw a very light puff of smoke come out from under the door. I looked back at the Professor. He *still* wasn't going to say anything.

Frustrated and intrigued, I left the room again. Something was all up in there, and I couldn't wait to find out.

III.

Buurrrp.

My throat gurgled and expelled a hint of pork chops as I lay in bed in nothing but a pair of white boxers and my glasses. It was only a little after seven, but I didn't really have much else to do.

I'd been trying to write a short story for a while, just for fun, but didn't really have any solid ideas. All of this Intergalactic Ambassador stuff was starting to trigger some little ideas though - maybe a science fiction story?

Knock knock. Someone banged on my door.

It was probably just Mark. I know he had the Badgers over tonight, because they were taking up the entire garage with their music.

"Come on in," I said casually.

The door opened and the beautiful singer of Red Badger stood there and gasped at my appearance of white boxers and glasses.

"Oh, Kristen!" I shouted unusually loud and I hopped out of bed and grabbed the closest piece of clothing to me, which was unfortunately Chuck's mustache turtle t-shirt. I threw it on quickly and then stood there in only a shirt and boxers. Getting dressed felt like it was taking forever.

"Sorry, Scout, but you said to come in," Kristen said, averting her eyes.

“It’s all good in the hood, Kristen,” I said, scrambling for pants and what to say next. I slipped on some gym shorts and tried like crazy to regain my composure. “What’s up?”

“Um,” Kristen said, looking back in my direction now that the coast was clear, “Mark wants you to come to the garage for a minute.”

I nodded rapidly, sweat droplets beading on my forehead. She smiled and then left. How embarrassing. At least it was a girl though and not a dude. Maybe she feels like she saw me in a very vulnerable and intimate state. Maybe Kristen and I just had a moment. I smiled as dirty thoughts took over my brain.

I walked into the garage where Red Badger was standing around. The drums were set up and all the guitars were leaning against a wall of Christmas decoration boxes. The band was all huddled around a small table where Mark was frantically scratching down words on a notepad.

Kristen looked up and smiled at me. “Hey, Scout.”

Aw yeah, she’s definitely into me. Maybe I’ll have to pursue this. I smiled back.

“Scout, thank God you’re here,” Mark said, picking up the piece of paper. “You have to let us know how the song’s coming. Places everyone!”

Mark and Blane grabbed their guitars and did a quick tune-up. Kristen stepped up to the microphone and Leo sat on a milk crate behind the drums.

“One! Two! Three!” Mark yelled before strumming speedily on his guitar.

Leo began to pummel the drums in every direction and Blane lightly plucked his bass. Kristen hummed for a minute into the microphone before she started singing: “*Here we are, the ones who own you, the ones who need you, the ones you bow to!*”

There was a small break in the lyrics and the band played their music loudly and uncoordinatedly. I cringed and tried my hardest not to cover my ears. Kristen continued with screaming:

“Bow to us, oh, acidic ones! We’re just starting to have some fun! We don’t need no rest! Because we eat CHICKEN FOR BREAKFAST!”

The music and singing all came to an abrupt end, which caused a loud squealing dose of feedback to emerge from the amps. Once it settled, I was at a loss for words.

“What do you think, Scout?” Mark asked with the biggest smile ever on his face.

I didn’t know what to say. It was terrible - horrific in every possible way.

“The Acidic Chicken’s aren’t going to know what hit them!” Leo yelled as he slammed on the drums for a second. Red Badger busted out into a rowdy celebration.

“Thanks for scoping us out, Scout!” Mark cried and then started to strum his guitar again. “Again Badgers!”

Before they had a chance to start playing again, I bolted out of the garage.

IV.

Saturday afternoon I met Chuck and Phil at Father Peanuts. We sat around eating their signature peanut butter sandwiches and sucking down some frosty chocolate milkshakes.

“So I think I know what your problem has been, Scout,” Chuck said. I looked at him; he genuinely looked concerned. I shot a glance at Phil who appeared just as worried. Was this some kind of intervention? Did they know about the aliens?

“Huh?” I said, trying to play it off.

“You’re having some girl issues,” Chuck said. “Some female troubles? A babe dilemma?”

“Are you guys serious?” I asked.

“More than serious, Scout,” Phil finally spoke up. “We’ve been noticing your babe.”

“My...babe?”

“Mandy Lee ring any bells?” Chuck asked.

What did they know?

“So...did she jump your bones?” Phil asked.

“Huh? I don’t even know what that means.”

“Did you jump *her* bones?” he tried again.

“I still don’t know what that means. So no. Guys, can we not talk about Mandy?” I asked.

Chuck leaned back in the booth and slurped down a large gulp of shake. “Not an option. She’s on her way.”

“What?” I shrieked, looking around the café. This wasn’t good. Mandy and I shouldn’t be in the same place at the same time. There were too many secrets that could spill out.

“There she is now,” Phil pointed to the entrance where Mandy was walking in. She looked around, spotted us, and hesitantly made her way over.

Chuck and Phil stood up as Mandy reached the table.

“Well, looks like we’ll be hitting the road, Scout,” Chuck said, not even trying to be subtle.

“Yup,” Phil added with a stretch and a yawn, “we’re hitting the old dusty trail. Mind paying for our lunches, Scout?”

My God, what a couple of ridiculous friends I had. “Yes, actually, I do mind,” I said, irritated.

“Thanks, big guy,” Phil said, and walked away with Chuck. Idiots.

Mandy sat down across from me at the booth.

“That’s nice of you to pick up the tab, Scout,” she said with a friendly smile.

“It’s what I do.”

“So what’s up? Chuck and Phil asked me to meet you here for some reason. I’m assuming they don’t know *everything*, so what’s this about?”

“I’m not sure. They might be trying to play matchmaker or something,” I said, taking the last bite of my sandwich and licking the peanut butter that was buffed up on my lips.

“Oh,” Mandy smiled again, this time a little bigger. “Do you want to take a walk?”

I tried to finish chewing as fast as I could. A walk with Mandy? How could I pass that up? “Sure!”

We headed for the park and ended up on one of the walking trails. We walked and talked for a good thirty minutes or so about our interests and personalities. We seemed to be connecting; it was a good feeling.

The walking trail took us into a wooded area where the coolness from all the trees and shade refreshed us. We sat down

on a bench that was just off the trail and the inevitable came into conversation.

“What’s going on with Professor Nog?” she asked. “Should we be afraid? I mean, I am afraid. I never thought anything like this was real.”

I didn’t want to say too much in order to protect the secrets that Nog had been telling me, but I had to say something:

“I’m sure Nog is taking care of it. I wouldn’t worry if I were you.”

“That’s *Professor* Nog,,” Mandy said, mocking Nog with a deeper voice. She immediately laughed at herself. I couldn’t help but smile; Mandy was great.

“I like you, Scout.”

Aw yeah! A girl actually liked me! This was uncharted territory. What do I do now? Tell her I like her? Hug her? Kiss her? Make out with her ‘til the sun comes up?

Duck, Scout!

What the? “Nog?”

DUCK!

Without another second of hesitation, I leapt onto Mandy and shielded her on the forest floor. I heard a loud familiar blasting sound and looked up just in time to see a bright green laser beam burn through the tree that was next to us.

“Stay down,” I told Mandy, and I looked back to see where the laser came from.

Another giant, seven foot tall robotic alien creature stood there on the walking trail. It looked identical to the one at the school. It held the smoking laser gun out in front of it. It was a huge gun - massive on every level; it was awesome!

“STAND UP,” the being stated in a very robotic tone. I listened, hoping that the next laser beam wouldn’t burn through my face.

“STAND UP,” it repeated. I looked down to Mandy.

“Stand up, Mandy,” I told her, my voice trembling. She stood up slowly, scared and crying.

With its’ other arm, the being held up a different weapon. This one was shorter and fatter with a large opening on the front of it. He aimed it right at Mandy.

“No!” I yelled, just as the alien pulled the trigger. A bright red beam shot out of it and impaled Mandy, who started to glow a pulsating red hue. Within seconds, POOF! Mandy imploded into a dusty demise; some kind of particle puff and she was gone without a trace. My eyes were wide. I couldn’t believe what I just saw! Mandy had been eliminated before my very eyes! This can’t be!

“Scout! Get the heck up outta here!” Nog’s voice was coming from near by. I looked up at the robot and saw Professor Nog running up the trail behind it, packing heat.

“Professor!” I called out. The robot acknowledged the disturbance and turned around, facing the charging and erratic high school astronomy teacher who was holding out some sort of futuristic weapon.

“Suck on this you pile of space crap!” Nog needlessly shouted as he opened fire. Nog’s gun was awesome, shooting tiny little sharp lasers at a machine guns’ pace. The lasers rapidly pierced the robots exterior and blew it up. A fireball came rushing towards me, so I hit the deck, dodging it as well as flying pieces of deadly metal debris.

The metal shards hit the ground all around me, and when everything quieted down, I rolled over and sat up. Nog was standing in the middle of the walking trail, holding his smoking gun. Scorching pieces of the creature were scattered, and dark green blood had been splashed in every direction, covering everything.

CHAPTER SIX

The Electric D.R. Fritz

I.

Until Monday morning came, I pretty much stayed in my room. I didn't want to talk to or see anyone. My mind was blown; did I just watch Mandy Lee die before my eyes at the hands of a alien robot from the Crab Nebula?

I sat on the bus and watched the rain stream across the windows. It was a dark day. The storm clouds had moved in late Sunday afternoon and brought with them some heavy downpours that hadn't really let up. It was kind of fitting.

I questioned the Professor about Mandy not being in school, and what her parents would say. He simply told me that he'd take care of it. I don't know how he could, but I had to trust him. He was the only person I could confide in about this stuff now.

Nog told me there was normally a group of five or six Intergalactic Ambassadors. Besides him and myself, there was only Farrow that I knew of – Nog's old partner who was reported missing. I wanted to know who the other's were. Maybe we all needed to get together to figure this thing out.

When I got to school, I immediately went to the cafeteria where they served a cold breakfast of stale bagels and orange

juice. I didn't eat anything the day before so I was starving. I paid for my food and took a seat at one of the tables.

"Hey jerk face!" a voice called out from behind me. I turned and looked in mid-bagel bite. It was Radar and his goons. Radar approached with a freshly cut mohawk. I knew I should keep my mouth shut this time because of the trouble that ensued before. Or maybe I should just make peace? That might solve everything.

"Look, Matt, I..."

"Everyone calls me Radar, cause that's my name. I expect you to call me that too, ya butt," Radar said with a malicious grin. His pals cracked up.

"Radar," I continued, "I'm sorry about last time. I think we got off on the wrong foot."

"How'd you like to get off on no foot? Cause I'm gonna break yours right off if you ever call me a jerk again. Got it, nerd?" Radar said.

This guy was ridiculous. "Whatever."

Radar then knelt down next to me. "You'll never be cool, Scout. Not like me. You wanna know how cool I am? I mean, besides my mohawk?" Radar stood up and crossed his arms. "I wear sunglasses when I take craps."

Instantly, his goons laughed hard. Even Radar got a chuckle out of it. Did he really just say that? That wasn't even funny. I actually didn't even get it.

"Come on, guys," Radar shouted to his friends, "Let's go find Chuckles and mess with him!" They turned and laughed as they disappeared into the cafeteria.

As quickly as they left, Phil arrived and sat next to me. I watched as he pulled out a tuna sandwich from his lunch bag and started to eat it.

"Is that your breakfast?" I asked.

"No," Phil said with a full mouth. "Where's Chuck?"

"I don't know. But wherever he is, he's doomed. Radar and his gang are going to mess with him."

"Poor Chuck."

"Poor all of us. Why does it feel like we're the only ones who ever get picked on?"

"I don't know," Phil said, licking his fingers clean of some rogue tuna salad. "I wouldn't let it bother you though."

"How can you say that? That guy annoys me so much."

"He'll get what's coming to him," Phil said, pulling out a second tuna sandwich from his lunch bag.

"How can you be sure?"

“Scout, when my parents were in high school, my mom was bullied all the time about the way she looked. She was fat like me and wore ridiculous clothes like me. She even had a ponytail like me. When she grew up, she started her own company, and now works at home making bags of money each year. I call her Money-Bags Mom. She’s very well respected.

“My dad on the other hand was a bully. He’d pick on kids until there was literally nothing left to do. He got in fights, got detention each week – he amounted to nothing, ended up cheating on my mom, got kicked out of the house and now eats dinners at soup kitchens. So you see, when I get picked on, I just imagine how different our lives will be ten years from now.”

Phil had a point. I kind of admired it. I always wondered why the fact that people picked on him never bothered him. Phil broke my thought concentration:

“Did Chuck give you a turtle mustache shirt? Those things are awesome.”

II.

I sat in astronomy class studying Mandy’s empty seat. What was Nog going to do about it all? What about Mandy’s parents? This could get complicated very quick.

Nog stood up in front of the class as the period was down to only a minute or so left. He was surprisingly upbeat.

“Alright guys, lets see if we can crank out a pop quiz real fast. Everyone pull out a sheet of paper and a number two!”

A class-wide moan lead to kids slowly pulling out their papers and pencils. They thought if they took their time getting the stuff out, maybe the bell would ring before Nog had a chance to quiz us. And it did. The bell rang and everyone stood up.

“Ah, rats! Next time you guys, next time,” Nog said, pointing at a random student when he said that. I waited a moment so I’d be the last one out of the room. Nog was gathering up his things and putting them in his briefcase. I walked to the doorway rather slowly and saw him flip a switch near the chalkboard turning off some of the lights in the room. This was weird. He normally had another class come in right after us.

“What’s going on, Professor? Where are you going?” I asked.

“Oh, Scout. How’d you like my lecture on Uranus?” he said.

“It was okay. Where are you going? What about your next class?”

“Oh, I have Mr. Hatcher over in the Physics room taking them in for an extra study hall. I have a meeting.”

“With who?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Tell me.”

“Why do you have to know everything?”

“Does it have to do with aliens?”

“Yes.”

“Then I should know.”

Nog sighed and sat his briefcase down. “I don’t think Mandy is dead. If you want to know more, come by the classroom after school tomorrow. That’s all I can say for now.”

I smiled with hopeful relief. “Sounds good.”

Nog picked up his briefcase and shoved me out of the room. He closed his door and locked it, double-checking it a few times. He was quick to vanish down the hall and out of sight.

Someone tapped my shoulder and I turned around to see Phil. He looked flustered.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Chuck,” he said, out of breath.

What about Chuck?

Phil and I stood outside in the courtyard where Chuck was literally hung from the flagpole in nothing but a very tight – and revealing – pair of patriotic underwear. Students who caught wind of the situation were outside laughing. Poor Chuck; this was the doing of Radar and his squad of boogers. I hated them.

I turned to Phil. “Is this something that you can just ignore?”

Phil looked angry. This actually started to bother him. “Radar’s a dead man. Scout, we need to get revenge. This is Chuck were talking about here.”

I nodded and looked back up at Chuck soaring in the wind above the courtyard. It was wrong, but Phil was right. We needed to plot some revenge.

III.

After the bus dropped me off at home, I walked the couple miles to Chuck’s house. I wanted to make sure he was okay. I could only imagine how humiliated being strung up on the flagpole must have been. He probably had a lot to get off his chest.

I knocked on the front door and Chuck’s mom answered and said that he had left just a few minutes ago. I wondered for a moment where he might have gone, but then I realized it was obvious.

Jakon’s Comics and Collectables was open for business, and I’m sure some of that business was coming from Chuck. I walked in, and the place was empty as usual.

Jakon stood behind the counter reading the latest issue of what appeared to be called *Jack Hammer and the Underwater Rebellion*. Hm. He looked up at me.

“Oh, hey there. Are you looking for Chuck?” he asked.

“Yeah, is he here?”

Jakon pointed to the back of the store where I noticed Chuck was sitting against the wall. I thanked Jakon for pointing me in the right direction, and then I noticed the once empty shirt rack next to the checkout counter had dozens of Chuck’s mustache turtle t-shirts hanging on it.

“Have his shirts been selling?” I asked Jakon.

“I can’t keep them in stock. This is a fresh order. I think I’m going to have him create a new design,” Jakon responded.

I smiled for Chuck, and then went to see him in the back of the store. He was sitting on the floor reading a comic book.

“Hey, Chuck. You okay, boss-man?” I asked.

He didn’t look up from his book.

“That could’ve happened to anyone,” I said.

He looked up. “Really? Cause I doubt it. It was bound to happen, and it was bound to happen to me. This is what high school is going to be like for the next four years, Scout. One month in and I hate it already.”

I didn’t really know what to say, except, “Was it Radar?”

“Yeah, that jerk. If my mom didn’t show up the other day, I would have beat him up, that’s for sure,” Chuck said, confident in the heat of anger. I knew he wouldn’t have, for dozens of reasons, but I let him vent.

I noticed he was blinking heavily again, similar to the way he was on the first day of school. It must have been nerves or stress or something. He checked his Batman watch and then reached into his pocket and pulled out a pill bottle. He popped a pill and put the bottle away.

“You doing drugs?” I asked, wondering what it was he was taking.

“It’s prescribed.”

“For what?”

Chuck hesitated for a moment, and then caved. “I have some Tourettes.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, but just a smidge. Don’t tell anyone, please. I’m like five shades of embarrassed by this.”

“You shouldn’t be.”

“It’s lead to more nicknames and wet willies than I can even begin to mention.”

“You have a lot going for you, Chuck. I don’t see Radar selling shirts off the shelves at any store. I’m sure your making some money off of it.”

“A little. Like fifty percent.”

“That’s fifty percent more than Radar. You have a lot to be proud of. He doesn’t. You’ll go somewhere in life, and he won’t. Phil explained it to me.”

Chuck thought about it for a minute and then smiled. He stood up. “Thanks, Scout.”

“You’re welcome. Plus, Phil and I are already starting some revenge.”

“I like it!” Chuck said excited. He put the comic back on the shelf. “Hey, I heard Mandy moved to Europe. Is that true?”

Europe? *That’s* what Nog came up with?

“Uh, yeah,” I said. “She certainly did.”

Chuck put his hand on my shoulder, “Sorry things didn’t work out. You must have been a lousy lover for the girl to want to leave the country.”

Oh, Chuck, if you only knew.

IV.

The next day, school ended and I killed some time by my locker. Once the halls cleared out enough, I headed up to Nog’s room. The door was open so I let myself in. Nog wasn’t there

yet. I set my backpack down on the floor next to his desk and walked back to the large metal door.

My God! It was opened a crack. Nog would kill me if I opened it all the way, so I just peered through the crack, but all I could see was black. It was completely dark in there.

“What did you see?” Nog’s voice called from behind me. I swung around and saw him in the front of the room setting his briefcase down next to the wall.

“Nothing,” I said. “It was opened when I got here.”

“Opened?” Nog came jogging through the room and to the metal door. He looked the door over, up and down many times; I wasn’t really sure what he was looking at. He put his hands on it and pushed it shut, locking the door back into place.

“This isn’t good. This isn’t good at all,” Nog said, shaking his head and walking back to his desk. I followed him and sat down in the chair next to his desk.

“What’s going on?” I asked. Nog closed the classroom door, locked it, and walked over to his chalkboard. There was a small picture – a crudely drawn solar system, obviously by some kid – taped to the wall right next to it. He removed the picture to reveal a small white button. He pressed it once and his entire chalkboard turned into a video screen. There was snow on it, like a TV with bad reception, before the actual video feed kicked into full gear.

It was night vision surveillance footage that showed a room, similar to the size of the classroom, with something strange in the middle of it. It looked to me like some sort of...robot? A very humanoid looking robot.

As the rest of the information on screen appeared piece by piece, I saw the time – which was real-time – and a name at the bottom of the screen, which read: D.R. Fritz.

“Who’s Doctor Fritz?” I asked.

“It’s not, Doctor Fritz, Scout. It’s D.R. Fritz – Defense Robot Fritz,” Nog said, pointing to the back of the classroom. “This is video footage from that closet you’re so unhealthily obsessed with.”

I looked back at the bolted metal door. *That’s* what was in there? A robot? My first thoughts were dead on! Good job, me!

“What’s it for?” I asked.

“We created it as part of our defense against the aliens. It’s built to take heavy fire, and return that heavy fire. It has an artificial intelligence and is made out of space-age materials that will allow it to leave our atmosphere and return massive amounts of awesome space and alien information to us. It had tons of mechanical issues in its early form, so we named it Fritz.”

I studied the inactive robot on the screen – it wasn’t doing anything. Almost like it didn’t work, or was broke. “Is it on the fritz again or something?” I asked, “Cause it’s just sitting there.”

Nog looked at Fritz on the screen and noticed it too. “No, it usually sparks, or parts of it explode when it’s on the fritz. It looks to me like it’s been deactivated. That’s why I said ‘this isn’t good’. Someone has clearly seen it and messed with it.”

“But who?”

“No clue, Scout,” Nog said, pressing the white button again and turning off the video feed. “I’ll have to start an investigation – I don’t know how anyone but the E.I.A.’s know about D.R. Fritz.”

Nog sat down at his desk and sighed really loud; he was stressed.

“Um, so Professor, what was your meeting about today?”

“I’ll cut to the chase, man. We want to send you there,” Nog barely explained.

“Where?”

“Bethani.”

Was the Nogster joking around or was he dead serious? He wanted to send me, a high school freshman, to the Crab Nebula? “You’re joking, man,” I said, nervously laughing.

“Not even a little bit, my brotha. We’ve been working on sending someone to Bethani for years. We have reason to believe that your girlfriend, Mandy Lee, wasn’t in fact incinerated before our very eyes, but instead, teleported to their home planet. I also think that my partner, Farrow, met the same intergalactic fate.”

“Can’t you go, or someone else from the E.I.A. for that matter? Who else is part of this by the way?” I stumbled over all of my words.

“I can’t go because with my age, the chances of something going wrong are only increased. Same thing with Principal Smidgeon.”

“So the Smidge *is* part of this...” I said out loud, confirming my suspicions.

“Yeah, the Smidge is. I got him involved when I was transferred here. I can’t tell you the others just yet, just to protect them for the time being.”

I shook my head. There were too many secrets involved in this – too many ridiculous ones.

“Scout, on Saturday night, I need you to come to my farmhouse on Rhodes Road. It’s the one with the really long white fence. We’ve been working on a little something that can make the trip to Bethani, and I think we’ve perfected it. We need you to bring back Farrow and Mandy,” Nog said.

I just sat there, concerned, nervous and absolutely blown away by what I was hearing. Within the week, I could be in space fighting a species of dangerous aliens that we didn’t know much about.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Cold Dinner Rolls With No Butter

I.

The next day at lunch, Chuck and I were sitting at our usual table eating some food. I was chugging back on a root beer and was eating a B.L.T. minus the L.T. - bacon and mayo on some bread – delicious. Chuck was eating like a bird; he kept looking around like he was on guard. I couldn't blame him – Radar was on all of our minds.

Phil came back from the restroom and sat down where his food was just about gone. He pointed at his can of soda and then looked at me.

“I saw you take a sip,” He said.

“Huh? What sip?” I responded.

“Not much, man, what sip with you?” Phil said as he wheezed into a laugh. It was rare to see this guy laugh, so he must have thought that abomination of a joke was funny. I shook my head.

“So,” I asked, “Has anyone thought of any good ways of getting back at Radar for raising Chuck up the pole?”

Chuck and Phil both shook their heads. There had to be *something* we could do. “What about if we stripped him down to his underwear and locked him out in the hallways?”

“How would we even do that?” Chuck said.

“I don’t know,” I said. “We could always take some pictures of him in his underwear and put them all on the social media.”

“Nah,” Chuck said, barely picking at his food.

“How about when he’s in the locker room during gym, we steal everything from his locker except for his underwear -”

“Why do you want to see Radar in his underwear so bad?” Phil asked, genuinely concerned.

I didn’t want to. It’s just all I had.

“I heard Radar talking about Battle of the Bands on Friday night. I think he’s playing in it.” Chuck said, not really looking up from his food. “We could always try to sabotage his set.”

Battle of the Bands was this Friday? Chuck was a genius! “Perfect! I’ll already be there because my brother and his dumb band will be playing there. You guys should just come with me. It’ll be good to embarrass him in front of everyone!”

All right! I was officially pumped for this. Radar was finally going down!

When I got home, I saw the garage door was open and Red Badger was slamming away hard on their music. It still sounded horrible so I made sure to slip by unnoticed and dashed up into my room.

I shut the door behind me and locked it so no one could bust in. I had some stuff to do. If I *was* going to the Crab Nebula this weekend, I needed to brush up on all my space crap. I tossed my book bag to the floor then bent over and reached under my bed for the box Nog had supplied me with. I couldn't feel it. I lifted the sheets and looked with my eyes – nothing! The box was gone! Crap! Nog told me not to let it get into the wrong hands. Who on Earth was in my room, stealing my top-secret stuff?

I stood up and looked around my room frantically, searching for any kind of clue as to who – or what – was in here. I couldn't find anything. Nothing else seemed to be missing. I dreaded doing this, but it needed to be done...

“Nog, you there?” I said out loud.

That's Professor Nog, Scout. Yeah, I'm here.

“Um, the box you gave me is gone.”

What do you mean gone?

“Like, gone. It was under my bed and now it's gone.

Gone?

“Gone. What do I do?”

Nog was silent for a moment; I understood I put him in a bad position.

Just stay put, Scout. I'll be right there.

I waited about forty-five minutes before the Professor finally showed up. I watched out my window as he pulled up in a beat-up old car, and he walked right by the garage where Red Badger was still strumming the afternoon away. Nog stopped in the driveway and I could see him talking to the band. What was he saying? Nog laughed with them about something and then looked up at my window before walking towards the front door.

I opened my door and saw Nog ascending the stairway.

“Scout,” he said, “Why you losing all my stuff?”

“Sorry.”

Nog reached the second floor and walked straight into my room. I followed him in.

“So that’s your brother down there, playing music with that awful band?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s good to have family.”

“It is. Do you have a family, Professor?”

“I did. I’m alone now, focused on my work and dealing with this interstellar feud we got going on here.”

Nog knelt down by the bed and looked under it. “This is where you kept all the stuff?”

“Uh-huh.”

Nog reached into a small satchel he carried in with him and pulled out a flashlight. He lit it up and aimed it under the bed, looked around, and popped back up.

“Yup, it’s certainly gone,” Nog said as he pondered to himself. “Here’s what’s going on, Scout. Someone broke into my classroom at some point during the day yesterday and disarmed D.R. Fritz. I’m thinking the same person broke in here and stole the box of information. Do you know what that means?”

I shook my head.

“It means someone knows everything. And this someone might just be working on the wrong side of this war. I’m calling an official meeting of the E.I.A. Scout, you’ll finally be able to meet everyone.”

‘Bout time!

“We’ll have the meeting tonight around ten. Can you sneak out tonight?”

“Of course. Sneak out is my middle name,” I said.

“You’ve done it before?”

“No.”

“Oh...just be there, Scout. My house. Ten.”

II.

I peddled my bike hard down the old country roads of Kings Town. It was dark – very hard to see – and I’d been following the same white fence for what felt like forever. It had to have been Nog’s fence, and I’m pretty sure I was on Rhodes Road.

I finally came to an opening along the fence where a mailbox sat at the end of a long driveway. The mailbox said ‘Ed Nog, 111 Rhodes Road.’ I was in the right place for sure. I started peddling hard down the driveway and about seven minutes later, I reached the house.

It was a nice big house – a farmhouse. Off in the yard behind the house was a large barn with a smaller shed sitting next to it. There was a lot of room here to conduct all kind of space experimentations.

I walked my bike the rest of the way up to the front door. There were a couple other cars sitting in the driveway aside from Nog’s beat-up one. I wondered about the E.I.A. Was I going to fit in? Did I actually have what it takes to be an ambassador for the entire planet of Earth? Nog certainly thought so, which was nice. I never thought I’d amount to much, but it looked like my fate was finally starting to unravel.

The front door opened before I had the chance to knock and the Professor stood there.

“Scout. It’s about time you finally showed up.” Nog said.

I looked at my watch and it just clicked over to ten – I was on time. What did he mean, *finally*? He continued:

“Come on in and make yourself at home – my home. We’re all in the kitchen waiting on one more person. Help yourself to the spread, my brotha.”

Nog led me through the dimly lit living room and into the kitchen, which was decorated in antique silverware, plates, old canvas paintings of greener pastures, and was complimented by a stuffed jackalope sitting on top of the refrigerator. I immediately looked to the long kitchen table where everyone was sitting. Nog sat down at the end of the table. Next to him was Principal Smidgeon. He was dressed down from his usual suit and tie to a pair of bleached jeans and a white t-shirt, sipping a cup of some sort of blue drink.

On the other side of the table, who I saw surprised me. “Jakon?” I was in shock.

Jakon nodded at me. “Scout, what’s up?” he lisped.

“Nothing,” I said, still taken aback. “I just didn’t expect you to be part of the E.I.A.”

“I have been for years. You’re the surprise. I didn’t expect them to let *another* kid in.”

Another kid? Just as my thoughts were starting to run wild, I heard the front door open and shut. I looked back into the dark

living room, and watched as the final member of the E.I.A. entered the kitchen. My jaw dropped.

“Chuck!?” I screamed.

“Scout!?” Chuck Taylor screamed back. We both stood there, facing off against one another, not expecting to see each other. The silence and confusion was powerful.

“All right, you act like you’ve never met before,” Nog said breaking the silence. “Grab some rolls and some blue drink and sit down. We have a lot to discuss.”

Hesitantly I turned, my jaw still scraping the kitchen floor, and walked to the counter where Nog’s spread consisted of cold dinner rolls with no butter and blue drink in a pitcher. I grabbed a couple rolls and poured a Dixie cup of blue drink and sat down at the table, not once removing my eyes from Chuck. This was unreal. Did he stumble upon an alien too? How long ago? Is that why he was such a nervous wreck, especially at the beginning of the school year?

Moments later, Chuck sat down across from me at the table, next to Jakon. We stared off again before Nog stood up and tapped on his paper Dixie cup with his plastic butter knife. It didn’t make any noise, so it was a good thing we were already paying attention.

“Listen up,” he began. “I’ve called this meeting of the Earth’s Intergalactic Ambassadors because we have some serious and

ridiculous issues to attend to. First of all,” he sat down, “Farrow is still missing. He vanished from his home without a trace. The only clue was that his neighbor reported seeing a bright red flash come from the house. So in Farrow’s absence, my main man, Scout Brooks here, will be filling in. Depending upon how he does, he may be a full-time member.”

Nog took a break and sipped his blue drink. Everyone else did the same, so I figured I’d get in on it. I took a sip, and that’s literally all it was – a blue drink. There was no flavor. Whoever made it didn’t put enough blue-flavored powder mix in it.

“Now,” Nog continued, “Recently, Scout’s girlfriend, Mandy Lee, was zapped by a -”

“She’s not my girlfriend,” I stuttered loudly, making sure everyone knew the truth. I wasn’t about to be embarrassed here. Everyone just stared at me. The embarrassment hit hard.

“Like I was saying,” Nog went on, “she was zapped by a weapon that one of the aliens was holding that made her glow red until she was instantly de-materialized into a swirling puff of smoke. Now, what I’ve noticed is that this gun was different than the ones that they’ve been using to shoot at us with. They’re not the ones doing all the damage. Since the entire body of Mandy Lee was zapped into thin air, and not splattered all over the trees, I would say it’s safe to assume that they have simply been teleported – possibly back to their home planet of Bethani.”

I raised my hand. “Why is it called Bethani?”

Nog, irritated by my second interruption, said, “Because their home planet needed a name and Bethani sounded all space-like. Is that okay?”

I nodded quietly.

“Now, as I was saying, I think Mandy and Farrow are still alive, just somewhere on the planet of Bethani – maybe being held captive in a cage of some kind, like some sort of wild beasts. I want to send a team to Bethani to recover Farrow and the girl, as well as find and destroy the portal they have that they keep using to come to Earth and shoot us up. We need to stop them, and this is the only way.”

Smidgeon and Jakon nodded in agreement. Chuck and I both seemed to be out of place. It was obvious from our lack of knowledge and Chuck’s nervous sweating and facial tics.

“Secondly,” Nog said standing back up, “someone knows about us. This ‘ghost’ is an unknown person who snuck into my classroom and disarmed D.R. Fritz. This same person, I’m assuming, also snuck into Scout’s home and stole a bunch of top-secret documents containing important information. Let’s face it, gentlemen and kids, someone knows about the E.I.A., and they seem to be trying to sabotage us. We need to find out who.”

Nog awkwardly and silently walked away from the table, refilled his blue drink, and returned. The rest of us remained quiet.

Jakon spoke up. “Who is the team going to consist of? Myself and Smidgeon, I’d assume.”

“No,” Nog said.

“But we’ve been here the longest, Ed. We’re experienced.” Jakon complained. “We’ve earned it!”

“You’re way too important and experienced – that’s the thing. You two are essential to the E.I.A. I’m sending Scout and Chuck to Bethani.”

“WHAT?” Jakon, Chuck and myself all exclaimed at the same time.

“They’re the newest members; the least important. They have to earn their spots here, Jakon, just as you and the Smidge did.”

Jakon sat back in his seat, annoyed, and folded his arms like a stubborn child. Chuck and I looked at each other. The two of us were headed to the Crab Nebula whether we liked it or not. I kind of did like it. I actually wanted to be a member of this team. I wasn’t quite sure what Chuck was thinking though, until his dumb-founded face showed a hint of a small smirk. He wanted to go too.

“You guys will start your voyage on Friday, right after school,” Nog stated.

Chuck and I immediately looked at each other, both remembering at the same time that Friday was the day we were suppose to get our revenge on Radar.

“Um, can it be Saturday?” I asked. “We have plans on Friday.”

Nog stared at me for a moment. It was like a ‘you have to be kidding me’ look. Then he said, “Sure that’s fine. Saturday morning. Make sure you’re here at the butt-crack of dawn. Got it?”

We nodded before I asked another question. “What about school and our families? What do we tell them?”

“You leave that to me,” Nog said. “Maybe I’ll tell your families that the school sent you to study abroad in Europe. And as far as school goes...” Nog pondered to himself before Principal Smidgeon spoke up:

“I give you kids ‘permission’ to go to Europe,” he said, putting ‘permission’ in air quotes.

“It’s settled then,” Nog said.

“Wait,” Chuck said, chewing what was left of his dinner roll. “How are we getting there?”

We all followed Professor Ed Nog through his yard, the floodlights illuminating our path to the large barn on his property. He unlatched the doors and pushed them open. Automatic lights flickered on inside, and all of our attention was focused on the school bus-sized space ship sitting in the middle of the barn.

Chuck and I ‘ooo’d’ and ‘ahh’d’ over the sight.

“I give you all...the I.P.S.” Nog said, as I noticed that was stenciled onto the side of the futuristic looking airplane. “The Intergalactic Peace-keeping Shuttle.

“There is just enough room for the two of you and D.R. Fritz to make the voyage.”

“Fritz is coming?” I asked.

“Yup,” Nog said.

I looked at the ship and it looked freaking awesome. I couldn't wait to be in it. Maybe I could pilot it. Chuck could be my co-pilot or something. As I stood there taking in the sight of the I.P.S., thinking about what Bethani looked like, visualizing myself blowing up alien robots and portals and rescuing hostages in another world, I got super stoked.

Science fiction had just become fiction. I mean non-fiction. It was really happening.

III.

I had gone home that night and called Chuck. He explained to me that during our freshman orientation, a week before school started, he got separated from his mom at the school and got lost upstairs in the hallway where Professor Nog's classroom was. He stumbled in there to ask for directions and saw that Nog was in hand-to-hand combat with one of the robotic aliens. Before

Nog realized there was a student standing in the doorway, Nog had put one of the E.I.A. developed laser guns (I assume the one I saw on his desk) to the head of the creature, pulled the trigger and sprayed green alien gore all over the walls and floor. Nog had reportedly yelled, “Suck it!” right afterwards, not realizing that the intergalactic murder he’d just committed was witnessed by a fourteen-year-old nerd-student.

From that moment on, Chuck was in the E.I.A. It was cool that we were in this together, but I felt bad for Philly – he couldn’t be involved. It would be too dangerous to let him in on it. It had to be kept between us. Hopefully he’d buy the whole ‘two freshman kids studying abroad in Europe’ lie.

The next day at lunch was sort of awkward. The three of us sat at the table, two of us holding onto a dark secret. Philly didn’t seem to suspect anything, which was good. We couldn’t afford letting anything slip.

“Hey, Philly,” Chuck spoke up, “Scout has something to tell you.”

Phil looked up at me, chewing, and I didn’t know what to say. Chuck put me on the spot. Did he want me to talk about Europe?

“Uh...” I mumbled.

“Go ahead, Scout, it’s ok.” Chuck assured me. I didn’t know what he wanted!

“Um... what was I going to say again, Chuck?” I hinted, trying to figure out what the heck I was suppose to do.

“You were going to tell Philly about our little ‘advanced class’...”

It was official; Chuck wanted me to be the one who lied to our friend. I wasn’t sure what to say, so I figured I’d just wing it and hope it all made sense.

“Oh yeah. Hey, Phil,” I said, Phil already looking at me, still chewing. “Chuck and I signed up for this advanced class that we’re going to have to leave the country for.”

“What kind of class involves leaving the county? Spanish?”

“No. It’s more of an Astronomy related class.” I said.

“Like Astronomy 102?”

“Just like it.”

“But you can’t take that class until next year. It’s a sophomore class.”

“That’s why it’s advanced!” I proudly said, hoping it made sense to the rest of the story.

Phil nodded slowly as if he understood. “What country are you going to go study Astronomy in?”

I licked my lips and felt my throat start to dry up. Here came part two of the lie. “Europe.”

“How long will you guys be gone?”

“Um, I don’t know,” I said, not really sure how long our rescue/demolition of portals mission would take.

“Hm.” Phil said, and started thinking hard. Then he opened his eyes wide as he came to a sudden revelation and looked at me, then Chuck, then back to me. “You guys are lying.”

“About what, Phil?” Chuck anxiously cried out, thinking our cover had been blown.

“You’re not going to Europe to study astronomy. You lied to old Philly. You’re going there to track down Mandy and profess your love for her, aren’t you Scout? Maybe jump her bones while you’re at it? Am I right?”

I sat there in shock and looked at Chuck. He winked at me, which could have meant a hundred different things. I shook off his wink and looked back at Phil. “You’re right,” I said. “we’re going this weekend to track her down so I can jump her bones.” I still didn’t know what that meant, but it seemed to be something Phil would believe.

“You dog, you,” Phil smirked.

I smiled and threw my hands up in the air. “What can I say?”

“Can I come?” he inevitably asked.

I looked at Chuck, who gorged his mouth with the rest of his cold pepperoni pizza to evade speaking on the subject. “No, we

already bought the plane tickets,” I said. “There were only two left and we got them.”

“That’s cool,” Phil said, piling a handful of chips into his mouth. “Just bring me back a souvenir.”

“Will do,” I said. Wow, that all went surprisingly well.

“Are we still going to prank Radar this Friday night?” Phil asked, finally changing the subject.

“Of course,” I said.

“Perfecto.”

IV.

The rest of the week was crammed full of stuff that really stressed me out. Aside from a crap load of homework that all the teachers decided to assign all at once, every day after school Chuck and I would go to Professor Nog’s farm and learn how to use and operate the shuttle. It was a lot to learn, but I think we were starting to catch on.

Nog supplied us each with these backpacks that had all sorts of interesting things in them. There were med kits, beacons we could plant on Bethani to remind us where we are and help locate our ship after all the deeds had been done. And the coolest part –

we each got a laser gun! Nog's technical term he used was, *laser phaser*.

The laser phaser's were developed by Nog, financially backed by the Smidge, and were inspired by the billions of comic book replica weapons that Jakon had come across in his lifetime. They were about half the size of a baseball bat, had one barrel, a laser guided sight scope on top, and had the energy cell at the base of the handle. Once the trigger was pulled, a concentrated burst of energy would heat up in the base cell and fire out of the barrel at a piercing speed. It would instantly burn a hole through whatever you aimed it at.

Nog told us to "always aim for the aliens head or chest area, otherwise those space creeps will just keep on comin' at ya."

The laser phaser training was by far my favorite part, but learning the I.P.S was fun too. There was a single cockpit where D.R. Fritz would lock into – he'd be the one operating and navigating unfortunately. There were two seats against the wall directly behind the cockpit where Chuck and I would be strapped in. The ship was supplied with extra laser guns, medical supplies, space suits, and so on. Anything and everything we would need on our space adventure, we had.

Nog spent the rest of the week fixing up D.R. Fritz until he was in tip-top shape. He was working perfectly by Thursday evening. It was very humanoid in it's appearance, other than being obviously made out of metal and computers. It was built to

take heavy fire, survive explosions and if need be, survive re-entering the Earth's atmosphere on its own. He was a hardcore machine.

D.R. Fritz's computer systems would be able to record audio and video, detect movement, survey Bethani's landscape and supply us with the safest routes to navigate – D.R. Fritz was pretty much the most awesome robot in history. Oh yeah, and he was programmed to speak English, so we could chat with the guy.

Nog performed surgery and implanted a neuro-communications device into Chuck's brain on Thursday evening before we split for the night. Chuck had a hard time coming to grips with someone talking in his head, but Nog said it would be the only way we'd be able to communicate from Bethani, since there is no way any type of communications device known to man could broadcast from Earth to another galaxy in the Crab Nebula.

I barely slept Thursday night, knowing that the most incredible voyage of my life was going to take place within the next thirty-six hours. But first, we had a little prank to pull on Radar and his goons. It was going to be a blast.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Guns of Glory

I.

It was Friday. I sat in study hall, my last period, scrambling to finish my algebra homework. Who knows, it might be the last homework I ever do. Maybe I won't come back from space...crap. I hadn't thought about that.

What if I didn't survive the rescue mission, or even just being in space in general? What if our ship breaks down and we're stuck on Bethani for light years? What would Nog tell my friends and family? "Oh, your son was permanently accepted into a school in Europe." Seems like something he'd say. Why did all of Nog's alibis include Europe?

No. I couldn't start thinking about all the bad things that could happen. I had to stay on the positives. I was going on a space adventure with Chuck Taylor, and we were armed and dangerous with laser phasers, and we were going to cruise all over the universe in a pretty slick ride. We were the stuff bad science fiction TV shows were made of.

I glanced up at the clock on the wall and we had about five minutes left for the day. I looked back to the last row of seats in

the lecture hall. Chuck was sitting straight up in his seat, his eyes closed like he was meditating or some crap.

Over the first month and a half of high school, I noticed such a change in Chuck. He went from being the odd kid who thought his backpack was broke, to being involved in an alien war showdown in another galaxy. I had to give him credit. He was a different Chuck – a more *ready* Chuck.

The bell rang to end the school day, so I scribbled an obviously wrong answer on my last homework question, packed up my stuff and met Chuck out in the hallway.

“So what’s the plan for tonight? Battle of the Bands starts at seven,” I said.

“Well, first I have to drop off another bag of t-shirts at Jakon’s. He’s going to sell a whole line of shirts from me, man. Maybe I’ll branch off into hats, wallets and key chains when we get back,” Chuck said. He seemed sure we’d come back. I’ll just ride his confidence.

“Where are we meeting Phil?”

“We have to go get him at his house when were done at the comic book store. He said he’d keep busy until we got there. He also said he had ‘something up his sleeve’ for tonight.”

“Awesome, bro!”

“Do you want to come help me get – UGH!” Chuck was hit hard from behind and fell face first into the floor. I bent down to

help Chuck up and all I could hear was laughter. I rolled the boy over onto his back and saw blood coming from his nose. Anger stewed inside me. No one hurts my friend!

I looked up to see Radar standing there with his goons. “Boom!” Radar exclaimed with a thrust of his pelvis.

I stood up fast, the rage inside me doing all the work. “Hey!” I screamed as I forced my index finger into his face. I stood there for a moment, not sure what to do or say next.

“What are you going to do, dork? Poke my face?” Radar laughed – his posse following his lead.

I didn’t say anything. All I could hear was the silence that fell over the hallway. I looked around and all the students nearby had stopped and were waiting for me to make the next move.

“You guys coming to the Battle of the Bands tonight?” Radar asked. “My band is playing – Radar and the Gang.”

“Oh we’ll be there alright,” I said in an obviously suspicious tone. Radar caught onto that.

“Why’d you say it like that? Are you up to something?” Radar joked, but in the back of his mind he wasn’t really sure.

“Oh, you’ll see my friend,” I said, lowering my very un-intimidating finger. Radar then forced his finger into my face:

“You better not be up to something, Scout! Or you and Chuckles McGee here will pay the ultimate price!”

“And what would that be?” I stood my ground as Chuck wobbled upright.

“It would be the ultimate humiliation. You, Chuckles, Philly Fat Cakes – you’ll all be humiliated beyond your worst nightmares,” Radar yelled.

I – as well as everyone else in the hall – waited for him to explain more. But he didn’t have anything. “Oh you’ll see, Scout,” he continued. “Just visionize the most embarrassing scenario imaginable, but in front of the whole school, and -”

“It’s visualize, not visionize,” Chuck interrupted, wiping his bloody nose on his mustache turtle t-shirt.

“What’s the difference?”

“Well, one makes you sound stupid.”

There were giggles from the surrounding students. Radar looked around at the snickering student body. Was it possible that this punk just got schooled by Chuckles Taylor? He lowered his finger, and walked away.

The rest of the students dispersed, probably all disappointed there wasn’t more of a fight. But I was satisfied - I didn’t have to use my guns of glory to bust a lip, and Chuck was the one who got the last laugh. I was so proud of him.

II.

We stopped by Jakon's Comic Collectables and dropped off a bag of brand new shirts that Chuck had made. He gave me a sneak peek on the way over. They were hoodies this time – since the middle of October had arrived – and they had a picture of a crudely drawn cartoon goat on the front wearing a sombrero. Chuck definitely had style!

Jakon hung the hooded sweatshirts on the rack next to the counter and paid Chuck in advanced. I could have sworn I saw a good two hundred dollars get exchanged right before my eyes. Chuck might have been onto something here. There are wonderful careers in novelty t-shirt manufacturing.

“Are you going to be there tomorrow morning for our take off, Jakon?” Chuck asked.

“Of course,” he said. “How could I miss it? I want to make sure everything goes as planned.”

“Awesome.”

I nudged Chuck after looking at my watch. “We gotta go, bro. It's almost five.”

We said our goodbyes to Jakon and started our walk to Phil's house.

“I was pretty impressed with the way you stood up for me, Scout. Thank you,” Chuck said as we walked side-by-side down

the sidewalk, surrounded by a sea of color-changing trees. Leaves blew from the yards and right in front of us. The air was cool, and I could smell a hint of someone's burning fire in the area.

This was all so amazing. I finally felt happy with where I was. The weather was beautiful, I was preparing to go on a very unheard of journey, and most importantly, I was with a good friend – my best friend. “I always got your back, man,” I said, putting my hand on his shoulder.

“I hope we find Mandy.” Chuck said. “You guys would be pretty cool together.”

I smiled. I thought about what it would be like to save Mandy from another world. Would she consider me a hero? I would hope so. Would she kiss me there on the spot, just like I wanted to do on that park bench?

We arrived at Phil's house and his mother answered the door. She was a larger woman too, wearing a flowery moo-moo.

“Hello boys. You must be Scout and Chuck. Come on in,” she said.

We entered the living room, and Phil's mother continued. She was very nice. “Phillip has told me so much about you boys. He thinks you guys are like the Three Musketeers.” She laughed. “He's up in his room.”

Chuck and I headed up the stairs and made our way to Phil's bedroom at the end of the hall. I knocked, being polite, and we entered. We were about to see what Philly's mysterious life was like outside of school.

Phil's room was a mess. But not in a clothes-strung-about, pizza-on-the-floor way. There were stacks and stacks of notebooks, journals and papers. They were on the bookshelf, his dresser, stacked neatly on the floor in the corner of the room – they were everywhere.

“Hey Phil,” I said, walking by the dresser and flipping one of the notebooks open. The first page said *Dragon Wind: Book Three*. “What are these?”

Phil was sitting on his bed, writing in another notebook. He looked up and sat his pen down. “That's a story in my *Dragon Wind* series,” he said, pulling his then down hair up into a ponytail.

“You write stories?” Chuck asked, flipping open another notebook on the nightstand next to Phil's bed. I saw the first page in that one said *Dragon Wind: Whispers at Dawn*.

“Yeah. It's my hobby – my passion really. I love to write, guys.”

I was astonished. Philly was a writer. I was impressed – what a cool hobby. I've been known to dabble in the prose before; it's fun, but I've never written this much stuff. “How long have you

been writing all of this stuff?” I asked, taking in the enormous amounts of stories piled up in his room.

“Since sixth grade. My English teacher, Mr. Gray, had us all write a creative story, and when I was done doing that, I realized how much I liked it. I like being creative and being in charge of where a story ends up. Just like if you enjoy reading so much, it’s almost like you’re in another world. You can escape reality – only you choose what happens.”

I could definitely relate. When you’re an awkward kid who gets made fun of and enjoys nothing but comic books and video games, writing could definitely be a good outlet. It made life feel not as lonely.

I’d really be interested in reading some of this stuff. Maybe I could read some on the journey. “Can I read something?”

“Sure,” Phil said. He grabbed a blue and white notebook from his nightstand and handed it to me. I opened it to the first page: *Dragon Wind: Book One*, By Phillip Easton.

“These are my pride and joys. I’ve written ten of them. Let me know if you like it.”

“Will do.”

“This is all interesting, but we have to get to the matter at hand here,” Chuck said in a slightly unintentionally rude tone.

“Right,” Phil muttered. “Getting our revenge on the Radar. This is what I have in mind, boys.”

Phil pulled out his laptop from under his bed, turned it on and opened up a file. It was a diagram – blueprints – of his plan. Phil explained it to us, and it seemed simple enough. We’d be backstage for Radar and the Gang’s set. Phil wanted a second microphone back there so he could start singing over top of Radar – almost echoing him. Then we’d adjust the pitch and volume of his bands instruments, sabotaging the whole thing. Radar would have no idea what was going on, get frustrated, then the plan was to have me walk out on stage and let Radar put the puzzle together.

Radar would start to beat me up in front of everyone since his temper sucks, and then the police that would be there for security reasons would haul him off, forever embarrassing him.

“So, you think you’d be on board for getting beat up, Scout?” Phil asked.

“It’s for a good cause. I’ll take a couple knuckles to my sockets,” I said.

“Good. It’s a plan.”

The three of us tried to pump each other up, and then we looked ahead to the evening. Seven o’clock was on its way, and we had to be at the venue.

III.

The King's Playground was hopping. It was the only concert venue in Kings Town, but it never brought in anyone really big. The biggest band we ever had play here in Kings Town was a band called The Anchovies - not a widely known band, but their song 'Capture the Demon' was used in a local diaper commercial. I was hoping my favorites, Iodine Eyes, would make it here one day.

The stage was a mess as dozens of teenagers and young adults scrambled to set up amps, guitars, pianos and I could have sworn I saw an accordion sitting in the corner. The cool thing about Battle of the Bands, from what I'd heard, is that you never know what's going to happen or be played next. The performers were usually made up of teenagers, college kids who thought their band was their career, and sometimes people in their thirties who usually play weddings or open mic nights around town.

The crowd was starting to fill up – it was noisy, people were already drinking the free soda provided, and the production crew gently played Dave Matthews in the background.

Chuck, Phil and I were backstage, using seeing my brother and the rest of Red Badger as cover for our real agenda.

“Have you seen them yet?” Mark asked, looking around the crowded backstage area frantically. I assume he was referring to The Acidic Chickens. Mark looked ridiculous. He had his hair

spiked up (a look that was definitely no longer in style) he wore black eye shadow (definitely an overdone fashion statement) and wore grunge looking clothes (also not in style). The rest of them – Kristen, Blane and Leo – looked normal. Kristen actually looked really pretty in her Goth-like dress and make-up. Blane wore a Ramones t-shirt with torn blue jeans and Leo wore a dark gray hooded sweatshirt with black cargo shorts. None of them matched.

“No, I haven’t seen them,” I said, not even sure what any of them even looked like. Phil and Chuck stood close by. Phil was already scouting the area for the extra mic for his overlapping plan.

“When are you guys up?” I asked.

“Third,” Mark said, still glancing around for the acidic rivals. “Monkey Trouble in San Fran is up first, then The Acidic Chickens, then us, then some lame band I’ve never heard of called Radar and the Gang. Then the last three performers are just some weird people doing solo, acoustic, accordion crap.”

I nodded. It all sounded like crap to me.

“San Fran Monkeys – you’re on in two minutes!” one of the event coordinators shouted. I saw a trio of teenagers in tuxedos emerge from the mess of people backstage with their instruments – they must have been Monkey Trouble.

“Well, good luck, Mark, guys.” I addressed Red Badger and then walked away with Chuck and Phil.

Seven o’clock hit, and right on time, the venues’ lights dimmed and the crowd roared. Battle of the Bands was starting.

“Welcome to Battle of the Bands! We are Monkey Trouble in San Fran!” the lead singer announced into his microphone from center stage. “1, 2, 3!”

The three of them started strumming fast on their guitars and pounding hard on the drums. It was a disaster. They started out of tune, the singer looking around nervously – he missed his mark to start singing, so they continued to play the disastrous music for an additional couple of minutes. The crowd grew impatient and started to boo loudly.

With Monkey Trouble in San Fran bombing out on stage, Chuck, Phil and I huddled backstage, going over our plan. We discussed it again and made sure everyone knew what they were doing.

Scout, my brotha.

Nog was in my head. He must have been in Chuck’s head too, because we both looked at each other at the same time. We couldn’t answer with Phil right there.

“Um,” I said, “Do you think we should all go to the bathroom before we set this bad boy into motion?”

“Good call,” Chuck said, catching my drift.

“Phil, do you want to go first?” I asked, hoping he’d take the bait.

“Yeah,” he immediately responded. “I’ve been farting up something fierce for the last hour.”

Phil broke away from the huddle and searched for the bathroom.

“What’s up, Nog?” I said.

That’s Professor Nog, Scout. Look, I’ve been experimenting with this new device that is suppose to track extra-terrestrial activity, and I think I’ve detected some activity near The King’s Playground. Have you guys seen anything weird?

“No,” I said. Chuck shook his head too.

Just keep an eye out. Stay safe.

“Will do.”

Nog was gone. Chuck and I looked at each other. We both thought the same thing. Were the aliens coming for us?

I heard the crowd boo hard and loud, ending the music. Did Monkey Trouble in San Fran just get booed off stage? They did – the three dressed up teens walked backstage crying. Passing them, headed for the stage area, were a foursome of neatly dressed college aged kids. Each of them wore baseball hats with a single letter on each of them. In the order they walked, it spelled out ACID. It was the chickens. They were next.

We heard them take their places and start playing a pop, piano driven version of ‘Smells Like Teen Spirit’. It sounded kind of cool.

Scout! It’s close! Check the back alley!

Nog sounded frantic. Chuck heard it too. I looked behind Chuck and saw a door with a red ‘Exit’ sign above it. We dashed for the door and pushed it open, walking out into the dark back alley of The King’s Playground.

Chuck looked one way, and I looked another.

“I don’t see anything,” I said. Chuck didn’t answer. “Chuck?” I turned and looked in Chuck’s direction and we both froze. One of the alien robots stood there, tall, bold and menacing. My God...

“Don’t move,” I said. I saw Chuck slowly reach his hand behind his back and under the back of his shirt. What was he doing? “Chuck, no sudden movements,” I urged.

The alien quickly lifted its arm and aimed one of its’ guns directly at us. It looked like the teleporting one. Oh, no! One of us was about to be dematerialized and sent to Bethani!

Just as fast as the alien raised its’ gun, Chuck whipped out his laser phaser from under the back of his shirt, aimed and pulled the trigger. A bolt of green energy shot out and impacted the aliens’ leg, throwing him off balance, and shooting the

teleporting red laser at the dumpster behind us. The dumpster was gone in a single zap – teleported to another world.

The alien quickly recovered and aimed a different weapon at us – one with the intent to kill. He fired it, rapidly spitting out laser after laser. I grabbed Chuck and threw myself on top of him. We hit the ground and rolled out of the way as the machine gun-like lasers tore up the concrete next to us.

Chuck stood up as I tried to hold him back, and used his guns' sight scope to aim for the aliens' head. He pulled the trigger once more and a blast of energy blew off the aliens' head and splattered the brick wall of the venue. The rest of the creature dropped to the ground, and all got quiet.

“Quick, we have to get rid of this thing so no one sees it!” I yelled, racing over to the armor-covered creature. I ripped the teleporting gun from its' tight grip and stepped back, aiming it at the limp, metallic body.

Chuck came up behind me. “That was awesome!” he cried with an accompanying laugh. I aimed the gun and pulled the trigger. The weapon hummed for a split second, and a red laser light shone out of it, engulfed the rest of the beast, and within a moment, the alien was gone in a puff of red smoke.

I stepped back and held the gun down to my side. I smiled. “*That...was awesome.*”

“What the heck?” a boys voice exclaimed from behind us. We both turned around and saw Radar standing outside the back door, watching us with his eyes wide open.

“Uh,” I stuttered. We were caught. Radar knew.

“What on Earth was that? What did you geeks do?” he shouted, taking a couple steps forward before stopping. His mouth was wide open in shock. I didn’t know what to do or say, so naturally, I aimed the gun at him.

“What...what are you doing, Scout?” Radar nervously chattered.

“Yeah, Scout, what are you doing?” Chuck asked me. I didn’t plan on using it on him – I just thought it would scare him a bit. Maybe put him in his place for once.

Radar trembled before me. I looked down and saw that he started to wet his pants. This was priceless! The bully was peeing his pants right in front of us. I thought I heard Chuck giggle a bit. This was even better than ruining his performance!

“You’ve bullied us around for the last time, Radar,” I jokingly threatened him. I took a step closer, keeping the alien gun aimed at him.

“I’m sorry!” Radar started to cry. Priceless! “I won’t do it again, I’m sorry!”

“I don’t know if I believe you,” I said. Chuck finally caught on to my playful tone. He knew this was all a prank, so he joined in:

“You’re about to be dead,” he said, taking the content a little too far.

“Please...” Radar begged, covering the wet spot on the front of his pants.

I smiled, satisfied, but how was I going to explain what he just saw? We couldn’t just let him in the E.I.A. I tried to think about my options. It was hard to think on the spot – especially with all the thumping music that was coming from within the building.

Suddenly, a blast of feedback from the set inside pierced the air, startling the three of us outside. Unable to control my reaction, I accidentally pulled the trigger and the red beam shot out of the gun, and began to illuminate Radar.

“No!” Radar cried out. “Nerds!” He screamed at the top of his lungs before - POOF!

...Radar was gone. I dropped the gun and Chuck and I stared at the empty space where Radar’s dust was settling.

IV.

Chuck and I aimlessly wandered back into the venue from the back door. We were speechless as to what had just happened. We heard the crowd roar as The Acidic Chickens finished their set.

We sifted through the backstage, like zombies, trying to let everything sink in. “We’re screwed,” I said.

“Does this mean we have to save Radar too?” Chuck asked. I shook my head slowly, still in a bit of a daze. I saw Chuck’s eyes widen and he stopped. He looked at me and said, “Uh...we had an accident.”

It took me a confusing second to realize he was talking to Nog. Nog must have heard us.

Scout, is that true? Did you guys just vaporize another student?

“Um, yeah. It was a complete accident though!” I pleaded.

Christ. If I keep sending kids to Europe, parents might start getting suspicious...

Nog was thinking out loud.

Okay, he’s just another one we’ll have to bring back from Bethani. I would suggest getting home as quickly as you can. You guys will both need your rest before tomorrow morning.

“Okay,” I said. Chuck said the same thing to the Nog in his head.

“Hey, guys! There you are!” Phil said as he came jogging up to us. “Where were you?”

“Getting fresh air, is that ok?” I said, irritated and flustered.

“I guess.” Phil said, weary of my attitude.

“Look, Phil,” I said, “Radar got sick and had to leave. That’s what I heard. He won’t be playing tonight. We’ll have to think of another prank to pull.”

Phil nodded, knowing something was off.

Mark came rushing up to us. “We’re on guys! Come watch!” He was excited and tried to pump us up. It just wasn’t going to happen.

The three of us went out into the crowd and watched Red Badger perform. Their instruments were not tuned correctly, the microphones didn’t work for the first thirty seconds of the anti-Acidic Chickens song, and Kristen forgot half the lyrics. We left after they were booted off stage.

First, we walked by Phil’s house and said goodbye to him. He wished us luck on our trip to Europe to “jump some bones”, reminded us once more to bring him back a souvenir, and I made him a promise to read book one of his *Dragon Wind* series on the “plane.”

Chuck was the next one to arrive home. The goodbye was a pretty quiet one; we both knew what awaited us in the morning.

Nog told us to sneak out and be there at the butt-crack of dawn. He'd be the one to explain to our families that we were out of the country. I knew once we got back – if we got back – we'd both be in a crap storm of trouble.

I arrived home and Mark was already there, sitting on the couch, bummed beyond belief.

“Sorry your performance didn't go over well, bro,” I said.

“It's cool, dude. It's cool,” Mark hung his head low. I walked passed him and to the stairs. As I started to ascend to my room, Mark sat up and called my name. I stopped and looked back at him.

“Thanks for coming tonight to support me,” he said. “You're out of this world, man.”

I smiled. “I know.” I went to bed.

CHAPTER NINE

Trending All Over Hash Tags

I.

The day had come.

I woke up around five-thirty or so. I dressed myself in dark blue cargo pants, a novelty NASA t-shirt, and threw on a backwards Iodine Eyes hat. I grabbed a Fruit Blast Pop Tart from the cabinet in the kitchen and snuck out without a sound.

I had left a little note scribbled on the dry-erase board on the fridge that said, “Europe, here I come!” in order to plant my alibi. Hopefully mom would see that before she thought I was kidnapped or something.

I peddled my bike hard through the early morning darkness that sheltered Kings Town in a cold and quiet state. The wind was cold – it had to be in the forties. Hopefully Bethani was a little warmer this time of year...

After a fifteen-minute ride, I came to Professor Nog’s farm. As I continued up the long driveway, I noticed that he had massive lights shinning onto the barn where the I.P.S. was – you know, not being obvious or anything.

I came to a skid outside of the barn. Principal Smidgeon was already there. He was in a suit and tie, and I’m not sure why.

Jakon was there too - early, just as he promised. He had a lawn chair set up, and was sitting in it, drinking a cup of steaming-hot coffee. He turned and waved to me as I approached them.

“Where’s Nog?” I asked.

I’m in the barn, Scout. Hold on, jeez.

Nog sounded irritated for some reason.

“He’s in the barn,” Jakon said.

“Yeah I know, I just heard.”

Professor Ed Nog pushed the barn doors open and came out in a huff. He wore a white lab coat, had a screwdriver in one hand and his other hand was covered in some kind of black oil. “And that’s *Professor Nog*, Scout. Jeez.” He was definitely irritated.

“What’s wrong? What’s all over your hand?” I asked.

“I woke up at four to get out here and prep the shuttle,” he began to explain, “and when I came out here, the barn doors were unlocked. It looked like someone got in. So I did a once over on the ship, and everything looked fine except for one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“D.R. Fritz was messed with; a latch on the back of him – the screws were loosened. Someone opened up the Fritz and did something to him. I just can’t figure out what.”

“Is he okay?”

“Seems to be, but who knows. He’s responding to everything normally. I went through his system and the details of the trek are still computing. I couldn’t figure out what this ‘ghost’ has done.”

“Did you see or hear anyone this morning?” I asked.

Nog, Smidge and Jakon all stared at me. Okay, I said something stupid.

“You think if Nogger here had heard or saw someone, the Fritz would’ve been tampered with?” Principal Smidgeon lashed out. I was stunned and didn’t respond.

“I’ve been sitting here on guard ever since I showed up,” Jakon said. “There’s been no more funny business on my watch.”

I heard the ground crunching behind me and turned around to see Chuck peddling his Huffy up the driveway. As he slowed down, he nearly lost his balance, and then ended up tossing the bike to the dirt and jogging to his feet, playing it off like he meant to do all that.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey,” I responded.

“Hey,” everyone else said in unison.

“Are we ready to get this show on the road, boys?” Nog shouted in an excited manner.

Chuck and I were as ready as we’d ever be.

II.

I could smell something rank as Professor Nog strapped me into my seat on the Intergalactic Peace-keeping Shuttle. It reminded me of old pork, with a hint of fart. And that's exactly what it was - Chuck had farted. The bubbles in my stomach also began to explode like a freshly poured Root Beer, and I let out a nervous clap as well.

Chuck and I farted back and forth for a couple minutes as Nog secured us in tightly. "What's wrong with ya's?" He asked, annoyed that he was standing there, marinating in our anxious fumes.

I chuckled at it, but Chuck's nerves got the best of him. He didn't seem happy. He was worried about the journey. Actually, I was too a little.

Smidgeon and Jakon walked up the ramp on the back of the shuttle and stood behind the Professor; their arms crossed in an observing manner. Nog made sure we were strapped in tight for the third or fourth time, then stood back in front of us.

"Okay," he said. "let me go over a few things before this puppy blasts you up there."

Chuck and I were paying close attention. We didn't want anything at all going wrong. Nog continued:

“When I start the ship, you will have one minute until the rocket boosters ignite. By this time, you will already be in the sky after a slow, airplane-like take off. From there, D.R. Fritz will take full control of the shuttle. This bad boy will go fast – really fast – and within a couple minutes, you’ll be out of Earth’s atmosphere.

“Once you’ve reached outer space, there are some nuclear thrusters that I’ve installed on the back of the shuttle which will then ignite, and pretty much rocket you through space like a beam of light – like a hyperactive beam of light. Get this, it would take a normal ship 6,500 years to get to the Crab Nebula going at the speed of light. That’s fast, man. With the thrusters I’ve designed, and that the President has signed off on as being ‘legal’, it’ll take you guys two hours.”

“Um, isn’t that a little *too* fast?” Chuck asked, as I heard a squeaking fart slip from between his cheeks.

“Yeah, it’s super fast. Dangerous as all hell, but with D.R. Fritz in control, you guys are safer than a baby made out of foam, falling onto a foam floor.”

Principal Smidgeon smiled and nodded from behind Nog, almost like he got a little kick out of that comparison.

“Now,” Nog continued, “since the I.P.S. has a gravity converter, you guys will be able to un-strap yourselves and walk around normally. I’d suggest looking out the windows from time to time, because I bet it’s going to be a beautiful sight. Plus,

Scout, if we have a quiz or something soon, this would be great preparation.” He winked at me, almost guaranteeing there was going to be a quiz. I got nervous.

“D.R. Fritz will land this thing on Bethani – the estimated coordinates have already been pre-determined and saved to his computers. You guys will get out and follow the Fritz. He has a location tracker already built in. He should be able to pin-point any type of human DNA from anywhere on the planet.”

Nog sighed and I saw a look in his eyes. He was proud of this journey. He was proud to be a part of it, and the one who could make it all happen. I could have sworn I saw a tear trickle down his cheek. But that could have been sweat – it was getting hot in here.

“I think we’re ready,” Nog said. He leaned forward and shook our hands. “Remember all your training. Use the neuro-communication’s device to your advantage. It may be your only hope for answers.” He looked us both in the eyes. “This is monumental, boys - an unheard of journey into the vast unknown corners of space. If the world knew about this, you boys would be trending all over hash tags.”

He clearly didn’t understand what he’d said. “Any final questions?” he asked.

Chuck was silent. But there was something I wanted to ask – something that had been bothering me since the first day I knew about all this. I raised my hand.

“Scout,” Nog called on me.

“When I first stumbled upon this whole thing up near your classroom, you had a little device with a red button that you pressed and it made the alien vanish back to Bethani. What was that thing?”

“Oh that?” Nog said, pulling it out of his white lab coat pocket. “This is a...well, I don’t have a name for it. A vanishing device, I guess. I designed it and built it myself. It was developed to teleport any otherworldly beings back to their planet of origin. They have to be within a five-yard radius for it to work though, so I had to wait for that thing to get right outside of the door. You know what...” he said, grabbing my backpack from a closed compartment on the other wall of the shuttle. He put the device into one of the pockets and zipped it back up.

“Take it with you, you never know what you’ll need there.” He said, closing and locking the compartment back up.

“Are you sure? What if you’re attacked?”

“I made like five of these things, brotha! We’re all cool!” Nog said. “Anything else?”

I had nothing, and Chuck obviously had nothing except for a soiled pair of superhero boxers.

“Then it’s time,” Nog stated, and then tripped over his own feet as he, the Smidge and Jakon left the shuttle.

III.

Chuck and I sat against the inside wall of the I.P.S., secured tightly to our seats. Chuck was breathing heavily to my right. I looked over at him and watched as the poor kid was on the verge of hyperventilating.

“It’s okay, man,” I tried to say in a soothing voice, but it came off kind of seductive. “This blast off will be over in no time.”

“I’m not worried about the blast off, Scout. What if we don’t make it? What if the ship crashes, or we get killed or something? What if Mandy, Farrow and Radar are already dead? You can’t explain something like that!”

All of Chuck’s points were good ones. I’d thought about all of those things as well. “Were in a situation, man. We just have to deal with the cards that have been dealt to us. Let’s go into this thing with an open mind. Look at the positives.” I scrambled my brain for the positives. “We’re the first two people in history to go to another planet that has life – in another galaxy might I add. We’re pretty much superheroes by now. We carry cool laser guns, were trained for combat -”

THUURRMMP! I was interrupted by the sound of the ship starting up. “Here we go!” I shouted and hung on.

The shuttle hummed and jolted back and forth a couple times. When it settled, it sounded like a running engine on an airplane. Chuck closed his eyes. I left mine open; I wanted to take it all in.

You boy's ready?

“Yes, sir,” I said.

Don't call me sir. That's my father's name.

Nog waited another few seconds and then started to count down from three in a very slow and vigorous way.

Three...

Two...

...One.

There was a loud crashing sound and steam poured out of all the vents on the walls and ceilings inside the shuttle. The lights dimmed and were replaced with dark red emergency back-up lights. Chuck started to cry.

I could feel the I.P.S. start to move slowly. The engine started to roar, and the constantly loud hum that the ship was expressing was becoming deafening. I looked straight across from me where there was a small window on the wall. I watched as we slowly rolled out of the barn and into the dark and cold early morning of Kings Town.

The shuttle began to shake as I felt us picking up speed. I looked out the window again and watched as the white fence around Nog's farm seemed to pass us by slowly, and then within seconds, like a speeding freight train.

My eyes widened and I felt pressure on my body. I looked around and the I.P.S. was now shaking violently. I looked at Chuck – he had passed out.

I quickly turned my head back to the window and didn't even realize we were in the sky already. With one final THUD! I heard and felt the rocket boosters on the back of the shuttle explode. My body was forced hard against the back of my seat. It was paralyzing – I couldn't move at all.

I looked out the window again and couldn't see anything. It was dark and everything was moving so fast. I started to feel dizzy, and then it really sunk in – I was a fourteen-year-old being blasted into space in a homemade space shuttle built by my high school Astronomy teacher, on my way to another galaxy to save three people from evil robotic aliens. Some would roll their eyes and say “yeah, right.” I, however, say “Awesome!”

The shuttle seemed to slow down a little bit. I glanced out the window and it was official; we were in outer space. I could see stars in the far corners of the universe and I could see Earth still close by.

“Initiating Nuclear Thrusters,” D.R. Fritz spoke in a very dry, metallic tone. I had never heard the guy speak before.

Instantly, the nuclear thrusters were ignited and it sounded like an atomic bomb blew up right next to my ear. The entire shuttle flashed a blinding white color before it settled down, leaving me blinking ferociously as my vision came back.

The sound of the thrusters dissipated after a few minutes, and then D.R. Fritz made his second announcement, “You may now walk freely about the cabin.”

I reached down and un-hooked all eleven latches on my seat, freeing myself from it. I immediately rushed to the window and looked out into space. It was beautiful – like a painting. The stars were bright and Earth already appeared to be tens of thousands of miles away. We were moving at the speed of light, but it didn’t really feel like it since space was so vast.

I glanced around the galaxy and could see the outlines of swirling and multicolored splotches of light and gas – nebulas. We were heading to the Crab one. And in a couple hours, we’d be landing on an unexplored planet. What crazy adventures awaited us?

I went back and unhooked Chuck from his seat. Still unconscious, he fell hard to the metal floor. I sat with him until he finally woke up.

IV.

The journey started off fairly relaxing. Chuck stared out the window for at least an hour after he woke up, and I sat in the

corner reading part one of *Dragon Wind*. I could tell Phil had written this a while back. It was sort of cheesy, lacked any kind of complicated vocabulary, and seemed to be a complete rip-off of every fantasy video game ever made. It dealt with a chilling wind that came across a far away land, froze the villages, and it was up to a young hero named Otis to journey across the fantasy world and solve the puzzle of why his land was frozen over.

I was about halfway done with it – it was only seventy-five pages – but for some reason, I don't know if it was just because it was our pal Philly who wrote it, I wanted to read his whole series. Phil surprised me with his hobby. It was definitely inspirational.

“Do you think were almost there?” Chuck asked. Nog said it would take about two hours. I looked at my watch and only about an hour and fifteen minutes had drug by.

“Almost. Forty-five minutes or so, man.”

I looked down the center aisle of the shuttle to where D.R. Fritz was sitting in the control pit. Ahead of him were large, thick glass windows that portrayed the cosmic universe that lied ahead. So many wonders, mysterious and adventures out there.

I went back to reading Phil's book and tried to lose myself in its generic story, hoping it would make our trip go by a little faster. Chuck sat down next to me, leaned his head back and shut his eyes.

“Approaching cosmic mass known as Bethani,” The metallic echo of D.R. Fritz’s voice woke me up out of a nap. In front of me, *Dragon Wind* sat on the floor. I must have dozed off. I looked over at Chuck who was waking up from his slumber.

I glanced over at Fritz, who repeated his previous statement. We were there! “Chuck, we’re there!”

Chuck and I stumbled to our feet and dashed up behind Fritz. We looked out of the front windows and saw a gigantic planet sitting before us. The I.P.S. slowed its’ speed as we entered the area.

The planet was brown with darker brown swirls all over it. It was hard to compare it to the size of any other planets, because frankly, my attention was elsewhere in Astronomy class. Chuck and I were in awe of the massive planet.

“Please secure yourselves for landing,” D.R. Fritz said, his voice echoing through the shuttles’ cabin.

Chuck and I ran back to our seats where we strapped ourselves in the best we could, and hung on as we felt the shaking vibrations of the shuttle as it entered Bethani’s atmosphere. The sounds were loud again, just as they were during blast off.

The I.P.S. shook violently as the brightness from outside over took the inside of the shuttle. Once again, it was blinding.

“Hold on, Scout!” Chuck shouted over all the loudness. What did he think I was doing?

I kept my eyes glued to the window because I wanted to know the exact moment we were in the atmosphere. I wanted to see Bethani.

A few minutes passed by where I couldn't see anything out the window, and then it cleared. I could feel the shuttle's vibrations slack off and I could finally see outside. It was cloudy; dark gray clouds in the sky threatened a storm of some kind. When I was able to see the land itself, it shocked me. I didn't really know what I was expecting to see, but what I saw was...a forest. We seemed to be landing in or around a large, thick forest.

“Descending,” Fritz's voiced echoed.

I kept looking outside as we lowered to the ground. The huge and odd-looking trees seemed to grow right before my eyes as we lowered into the forest. We hit ground, and the shuttle shook hard before falling still. The engines shut off and all was quiet.

Chuck and I unlatched ourselves and stood up.

“Prepare for dismount,” D.R. Fritz said.

I assumed that meant we were getting off the shuttle now. Chuck and I strapped on our backpacks, made sure we had everything we were going to need, and armed ourselves with our laser phasers.

I looked at Chuck. “You pumped, man?”

“Yeah,” he said; I could see it in his eyes.

We were on another planet; the whole thing was ours to explore. We had a mission, we had laser guns – we were on top of the world. We moved to the rear end of the shuttle where, after Fritz did some computer stuff, the back gate opened, and a ramp lowered, embedding itself into the soft soil below.

Chuck and I slowly walked down the ramp, creating suspense, and then we heroically set foot on the planet of Bethani.

CHAPTER TEN

The Splashing Of Hoogort

I.

I take it the air is breathable?

I was stunned when I heard Nog say this, as I stood on a planet far from Earth that nobody knew anything about.

“Uh...” I sucked in some Bethani air and exhaled. It seemed okay to me - unless there was some sort of cosmic toxins infiltrating my lung space. “I think so.”

Good, 'cause I forgot all about that. I wasn't sure if you guys were going to need some breathing apparatuses or something.

I took another breath, a little nervous now, and looked around at my surroundings.

Tell me what you see, Scout.

I looked around – our environs were surreal. D.R. Fritz had landed us in a small clearing right in the thick of a heavily overgrown jungle. The trees, fat at the base, stretched unnaturally high into the sky. Vines as thick as baseball bats strung the trees together. Massive flowers, red and green in

color, stood off the forest floor, taller than I was. The soil beneath us was a powdery red dust.

The ambience was quiet – dead quiet. Not a single sound other than the leaves blowing in the wind.

Bethani was beautiful, yet ominous in its own way.

“It’s unlike anything I’ve ever seen, Professor,” I said.

I can see images now...D.R. Fritz is computing.

I forgot that Nog was going to be able to track our every move on the planet. It was nice to have another set of eyes watching out for us.

D.R. Fritz came walking down the ramp from the I.P.S. He was creepy – human-like, but not really. He was thin and colored with silver with black highlights. His glass eyes – too eerily similar to human eyes – never blinked, and his mouth was pretty much just a small, horizontal opening that never moved. His voice box was inside there I suppose.

“Rescue mission has commenced,” his robotic-ness said to us.

“You ready, Chuck?” I asked. Chuck appeared to be ready. He was dressed in a black hooded sweatshirt, blue jeans, and he left his hair untouched from his early morning wake-up. It would have made more sense to have us dressed in some space gear or something. Like matching space uniforms to let everyone know that we were on a mission. I looked down at my NASA shirt, disappointed.

“Let’s do this,” Chuck said, pulling out his laser phaser from his belt holster. D.R. Fritz led the way, and started us through the jungle on one of the red, powdery trails that seemed to snake its way through the overgrowth.

As we left the comfort of the clearing that sheltered our shuttle, I couldn’t help but wonder what lied ahead for us. I just didn’t expect to see what we saw almost immediately...

II.

“Hey! What are ya?” A small, rough voice shouted from somewhere in the wilderness.

We were instantly on guard. I drew my weapon and held it out in front of me. I glanced over in Chuck’s direction and saw he was doing the same. D.R. Fritz came to a stop on the trail. “Computing mission disruption...”

We waited for Fritz to compute the situation, but before he could finish, the raspy voice shrieked again. “You’re all weird! What are ya?”

It sounded like it was coming from the left, my side of the trail. I aimed off in the woods and carefully searched the area through my sight scope. Behind a large, overgrown red flower, I saw a small, green head pop out, and then quickly retract.

“There it is!” I shouted. Chuck joined my side and we both aimed our guns into the thicket. “Behind that giant flower!”

The green head slowly appeared again and then quickly disappeared.

“Alien life form, twenty yards East.” D.R. Fritz computed out loud, a little late to the party. Our robot turned and faced the alien being.

It must have sensed, that – even though we held our weapons in a defensive, yet threatening manner – we meant it no harm. The being slowly looked over the flower again, then revealed itself by walking around it and into our view.

The life form was tall and slender, a dark scaly green with its’ ribs slightly protruding. Its eyes were large and black, its’ mouth small and narrow, and there were absolutely no signs of any anatomical business going on down there.

“Alien!” Chuck shouted and held his trigger down hard, shooting a concentrated green beam at the creature, and blowing it up. Green slimed slathered the trees and ground around the area. The huge red flower was now decorated in guts.

“Chuck!” I screamed. What was he thinking? “What did you expect to see here? Cows?”

“I...” Chuck had no words. His immediate reaction to blow the creature to smithereens was uncalled for. I lost a little bit of respect for the guy.

“Threat terminated,” Fritz echoed.

I shook my head, trying to accept what just happened. Our first contact with aliens on their home planet, and Chuck had to go and kill it.

The plants behind us rustled and we all turned to face the disturbance. “Thank you.” Another rough and raspy voice stated from the trees.

Another one of the creatures walked out from behind some large thorn bushes. This one looked identical, but held some sort of glass spear that was glowing purple at one end.

“Thank you,” The alien repeated. “Hoogort was on the run; murdered thirty-seven of our kind. His fate would have been fatality anyway.”

“Hoogort?” I asked.

“Yes. The one you just splashed on our foliage. He was a criminal.” The creature tightened his grip on his glass spear. “What planetary system do you things originate from?”

“The Milky Way,” I said, holding my hand up in front of Chuck, trying to prevent him from shooting another one.

“What’s...m-i-l-k?” the creature asked, trying to sound it out.

“It’s a drink. From cows,” I stated. “You speak English?”

“I speak however your brain allows me to sound. It makes it easier for interstellar communications.”

I didn't know what to say next. This was first contact with this species, and I wasn't even sure how to interact with it.

“What are you things doing here on our planet?” it said.

“Our planet was attacked by alien robots that came from here. They took three of our people, and we made the trip to bring them back,” I said.

“Oh,” the alien began, “You must be talking about the Frooginites.”

“The Frooginites?”

“Yeah. The Frooginites.”

“What are...Frooginites?” I asked.

“The Frooginites are a violent race of beings that live here along with our kind. They visit planets all over the universe and cause nothing but trouble. They kill, they steal, they kidnap – it's their thing. I'm pretty sure they have a feud going on with another planet right now.”

I smiled. “That'd be us. My Professor and his team are in the middle of it now. That's why we're here. These Frooginites you speak of...they stole some of our people. Were here to get them back and to destroy whatever portal they use to come to our planet.”

The creature nodded. “I see. Do you know where your things are being held?”

“No, we just got here.”

“Let me explain some stuff to you things. The Frooginites are extremely violent. They have bases all over our planet. Your things could be at any one of them. They are heavily armed, the bases are heavily guarded, and one thing is for sure, if they see any kind of foreign beings like yourselves, they won’t think twice about blowing your butts off.”

“Our butts?” Chuck shouted, grabbing a hold of his rump cheeks.

“Watch your butts,” the creature said.

I lowered my laser gun and took a step towards the creature. “My name is Scout Brooks. This is my sidekick, Chuck Taylor. This robot here is D.R. Fritz. What’s your name?”

The creature stood his ground, not taking any chances. He was still a little unsure of us. “The name’s Blorf.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Blorf,” I said, holding back my laughter. These names were killing me!

“Scout, there’s a base not too far from here; maybe about a mile north of our current location.” Blorf said. “You should start there to look for your things. I’m in charge of our punishment division, so I’ll be around if you need me, correcting those who shatter the law.”

“Thanks, man,” I said.

Blorf turned and scurried back into the trees and we lost sight of him.

“Computing new information...” D.R. Fritz spoke. A few computer bleeps and bloops later, he had plotted a course for the nearest Frooginite base and we were on our way.

III.

Bethani must have been in their version of summer, because it was pretty hot. Chuck and I were sweatin’ bullets up on this planet. We trekked through the wilderness, not once leaving the powdery trail. There was no way we wanted to get lost.

We followed Fritz for about thirty minutes or so before he came to a stop. “Forty yards ahead. Frooginite base.”

Chuck and I moved ahead of Fritz and drew our weapons. We knelt down behind a convenient giant flower and looked ahead through the giant leaves and bushes.

I could see some sort of metal structure. It was hard to tell how big it was because of all the trees and stuff. I reached into my backpack and pulled out a pretty sweet pair of binoculars. I looked through them and saw that there were actually multiple metal structures. All of them had black doors, but no windows.

“We need to sneak over there and search the area,” I whispered to Chuck.

“Okay.”

“Don’t fire on anything unless we have to. It’d be pretty cool if we could just sneak in all spy-like and sneak out if we don’t find anything.”

“Like Mission: Impossible?” Chuck said.

“Yeah, just like it. We’ll be all spy-like,” I said again. “Fritz...stay.”

I wasn’t sure how to talk to the D.R. Fritz yet, but that seemed to work. He stayed put as Chuck and I hopped off the trail and moved swiftly and inconspicuously through the woods.

There wasn’t a single sound coming from the base area. It almost felt like it was abandoned. We came out of the woods next to one of the three large metal structures.

Chuck and I put our backs to the wall and slide down to the corner of building. I peered around to get a look at the whole base. The three buildings were placed in a triangular way. There were two side-by-side, maybe separated by twenty yards or so. The third one was straight ahead and stood in-between them. In the center of the ‘triangle’ there was a large black slab on the ground, imbedded into the red dirt almost like a pitcher’s mound would be. The slab had two futuristic-looking light bulbs on it, but they weren’t lit.

“Do you see anything, man?” Chuck whispered.

“No, man,” I responded. Aside from the structures and the slab, there didn’t seem to be any sort of activity. “C’mon.”

I lead the way, slowly, out from behind the structure and into the opening in the middle of the triangle. Chuck and I cautiously looked around, both of us gripping tightly on to our laser phasers.

“Professor Nog, we found one of the alien bases. It seems to be empty,” I said.

How many buildings?

“Three.”

Search them all. You might find something useful.

“Got it.”

I instructed Chuck to search the building closest to us, and I went for the other one at the base of the triangle. I approached the black door and it must have had some sort of motion sensor because the door opened with a ‘*whoosh*’ sound. I walked in, and it ‘*whooshed*’ shut behind me.

The building was tall, really tall, but there wasn’t a whole lot to it. I assumed all three looked the same. They were very open with lots of computer systems and screens on the walls. In the center of the large open room, there was what looked like a grated drain; maybe some sort of door. I hugged the wall to my left and studied the computer screens and buttons. Everything was in an alien language, so it was impossible for me to really understand what was going on or what all this crap meant. So naturally, I started pressing buttons. Most of them didn’t do

anything – that I noticed – but one of them flipped on one of the computer screens. I watched as the screen lit up.

It was security footage of some kind. It was stationed on one of the buildings at the base we were in. I watched the screen and then started to freak out – two of the alien robots, the Frooginites, walked in from the tree line and into the center of the base.

My God, I was hoping Chuck wouldn't walk outside, otherwise he'd be dead meat. I watched as the two aliens stood in the middle of the base, next to the light bulb slab thing. They stood there, possibly speaking to one another, holding their guns.

I ran back to the door, which 'whooshed' open a little louder than I'd hoped. I snuck out of the building and ducked behind it, poking my head out in order to keep my eyes on the aliens.

I couldn't hear if they were communicating or not. They were just standing there facing each other.

'Professor, there are two of the aliens in the base. I can't get Chuck. Can you let him know to stay inside?'

Hold on.

I waited a minute and then Nog returned to my head:

He's staying put. He also said he found something that might help you guys. Scout, listen carefully, it's up to you to take these mother lovers down, all right? I need you to calmly open fire and blow the living crap out of them.

I was starting to think Nog didn't care about our safety at all. We were expendable cannon fodder to him. "Are you sure that won't attract more of them?"

There was no answer from Nog.

"Professor?"

Are you going to open fire or not, Scout? This is your moment to be that science fiction hero you've always dreamed about being.

Even though I had only recently started dreaming about being that hero, I knew what he meant. It was my time to shine. I needed a good line, and I needed to look cool. I took a deep breath and ran out into the center of the base.

"Hey!" I shouted. The aliens looked in my direction. I immediately held my gun sideways to look cool, but I froze when it came to shouting off a cool line. I pulled the trigger hard and blasted laser after laser in their direction. I don't know if I was seriously *that* cool, or it was just beginners luck, but all of my lasers made contact and the two aliens were blown backwards, spraying green blood in every direction. They both hit the ground hard and ceased to move.

The biggest smile in the universe spread across my face like a disease. "Oh...my...GOD! I'm legendary!" I shouted at the top of my lungs. I just killed some aliens!

Chuck came rushing out of his building and over to me. We celebrated my kills.

“You were awesome, bro!” Chuck shouted as we jumped up and down.

“You saw me?”

“Yeah, man! I was watching the whole thing through the security footage!”

“Aw, yeah! Did you see me hold my gun sideways?”

“Yeah, bro! I saw that! Awesome!”

Once the adrenaline calmed down, I realized it was time to get back to business. “Nog said you found some information that could be useful?”

“Yeah, man. There’s another base about fifty clicks west of here that has some major activity going on in it.”

“How do you know?”

“I started pressing random buttons in that building and a monitor turned on. There was a live feed being broadcasted from the base. There were aliens all over the place there. It might be a good place to look for Mandy, Radar and Farrow.”

“Good call. Let’s get Fritz and make our way there now.”

Chuck and I ran back through the trees and to the path where D.R. Fritz was.

“Let’s go, Fritz.” I said. Chuck and I started to walk the path, but stopped when we noticed Fritz hadn’t responded or moved. “Fritz?” I said again, walking back to him. He seemed gone – totally inanimate.

Chuck came up behind me and knocked on the robot’s head a couple times. Fritz stared straight ahead with his weird glass eyes. It was eerie. We didn’t know what was going on.

“Professor?” I asked.

What?

“D.R. Fritz isn’t responding. What do we do?”

Nog was quiet for a minute. I assumed he was checking into it. He finally returned:

For some reason, he’s not responding.

Duh...

I’ll try to work on it a little more. In the meantime, keep moving boys. Make me proud.

Chuck and I turned, armed ourselves, and continued down the path in the direction Chuck believed the next base was.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

No More Green Cheeks For Homeless Harry

I.

The cloudy overcast held in the summer-like heat. It was freaking hot, man. I kept wiping the sweat from my brows, and then kept getting annoyed when the sweat would smudge my glasses. I saw Chuck was having the same problem.

“I need a break, Scout,” Chuck said, sitting down on a tree stump just off the path. I joined him and looked around, taking in the experience.

I looked at the trees - which were so abnormal. I studied the red trails, the giant flowers, the gray skies...but there was only one thing still on my mind – I killed aliens!

“I can’t believe I killed those aliens, man,” I said.

“I know,” Chuck said, taking a sip of water from his canteen, which Nog had packed in our backpacks. “You were so cool. How about me, though? I blasted that one really good too.”

“You got lucky. You didn’t know that guy was a criminal at the time. For all you knew, you committed intergalactic murder.”

“Is that a thing?”

“It might be,” I said. We both thought about it for a moment.

“Like, could I go to jail for something like that?” Chuck was getting a little worried.

“I don’t know, maybe.”

“Oh God.” Chuck started to panic.

“Calm down, man. I don’t think -” I was interrupted by a strange sound. It sounded like heavy footsteps - *a lot* of heavy footsteps. “What’s that?”

Chuck and I looked around, and then I noticed something. There was a lot of movement coming from up the trail a bit. It was a bunch of aliens coming our way. “Hide!” I yelled. Chuck and I hopped back into the woods and hid behind a giant flower. The footsteps were getting closer, and it started to sound more and more like marching. I peered out from behind the flower.

There was a long line of about fifteen of the skinny, green aliens walking in a straight line. They were all chained together at the necks. Behind the line were two armed Frooginites. Did they capture these guys?

Chuck and I watched quietly, hoping we weren’t spotted, as the marching line of creatures went by us. As they passed, and headed in the direction we just came from, I couldn’t help but notice the green aliens’ butts. They looked like bare cheeks, only green. They were hilarious!

The line, quarterbacked by the two Frooginites, finally disappeared around the corner of the trail, and Chuck and I stepped back out onto the path.

“Did you see their butts?” I laughed. Chuck laughed too, agreeing with me that the alien butt parade was classic.

We started back on the trail and walked for another fifteen minutes or so before coming to another clearing. There was something different about this clearing; something familiar. Something that gave us hope in finding the people we came for.

A large green dumpster sat in the middle of the clearing. On the front of the dumpster were white-stenciled letters that read: ‘Property of The King’s Playground.’

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” I laughed. We ran over to the dumpster. “This is a good sign, Chuck.”

Chuck smiled. We had to have been getting close.

There was a loud THUD that came from in the dumpster, which startled Chuck and I back into a defensive position. We held our laser guns out and prepared for the worst.

The lid to the dumpster slowly raised, and coming from the darkness inside of it, I could see a pair of eyes.

“Come out!” I ordered, my gun raised and aimed.

The lid was pushed open more and revealed a bearded weird-man; a human.

“Hey, don’t shoot, alright? I’m innocent, alright?” the man said. He slowly climbed out of the dumpster and we got a good look at him. He was a tall man with old dirty jeans on. He wore a torn brown coat and his face was covered by an overgrown beard and mustache. His hair was long and stringy and it held onto leaves and pieces of trash.

“You’re human?” I asked.

“Yeah, alright? I’m human, alright?” the man said.

“Us too.”

The man stared at us for a second, and finally realized we were cool.

“Where are we?” he asked. “Because if I have to see one more alien butt parade come through there, I’m gonna vomit, alright?”

I laughed. “We saw that too. That happens a lot?”

“That’s at least the third group of those green things I’ve seen escorted out of the base that’s just up the trail there. Where did you say we were again?”

“We’re on a planet called Bethani. It’s in the Crab Nebula. You’re about 6,500 light years away from Earth,” I explained. “You got stuck in the crossfire of a teleportation device and you ended up here. You were...were you in that dumpster behind The King’s Playground?”

“It’s my home, alright?”

“Alright...”

“Are you going to save that other kid too? That punk lookin’ guy?”

Was this homeless chap talking about Radar? “What kid?”

“After I arrived here, I opened my lid to look around and then this hoodlum kid just popped up outta nowhere, man, screamed like a little girl and booked it that way – towards the base.”

I looked at Chuck. “That must have been Radar.”

“We need to check that base,” my buddy said.

I approached the homeless man and extended my hand. “I’m Scout. This is Chuck.”

He shook my hand, and then Chuck’s. “They call me Harry. Homeless Harry.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Harry.”

Suddenly, a thunderous roar shook the area, knocking all three of us to the ground. I looked around and saw the tail end of an explosion near the edge of the clearing we were in. I heard the squeal of a rocket of some kind and saw it barreling down on us.

“Move!” I yelled as the rocket came swirling through the trees and in our direction. I grabbed Chuck and Homeless Harry and we hit the deck behind the dumpster as the rocket hit the ground near us, exploded, and sent dirt and shrapnel soaring into the sky.

“What’s going on!?” Chuck shouted. I peered around the dumpster and saw a group of five Frooginites rush into the clearing, firing their machine gun lasers at us. I ducked behind the dumpster again as a couple laser beams grazed off the ground next to me.

“We’re dead!” Harry yelled.

“Calm down, Harry!” I screamed back. “You’re not helping anything here!”

Chuck had a crazed look in his eyes. I wondered what was going through his mind. He smiled wide. “I’m going in!” he said, all heroically.

“Chuck, wait!” I reached out for my pal but it was too late. He ran out from behind the dumpster and opened fire on the aliens. He hit the ground and rolled into a somersault for some reason. When he popped back up, he fired lasers like a madman! Chuck was killing it! He was dominating!

“I got one! Hey, Scout I got one!” Chuck screamed in a laugh. I looked around and saw one of the Frooginites on the ground, smoke coming out of its’ face. I excitedly looked at Harry:

“Watch this!”

I rolled out from behind the dumpster and began blasting. I aimed for the faces and made contact with one. Another Frooginite hit the dirt hard. I smiled – this was really happening!

I turned my attention to another Frooginite and tried to aim carefully, but their return fire was too much. I had to duck back behind the dumpster. I saw Homeless Harry scoping my piece.

“Where’d you get that gun, *Star Wars*?” He asked.

“Yeah,” I said sarcastically, “I got this gun from *Star Wars*.”

“I doubt it,” Harry said, obviously not getting my sarcasm.

Chuck shouted from the battlefield: “I got another one, man! You want to get back in on this?”

“Aw, yeah!” I yelled, running back out. Three Frooginites were down for the count and there were only two left. Chuck and I had this. We fired laser after laser, igniting such a legendary firefight that it would, from here on out, define everything that was awesome in the universe. In that moment, we were invincible...

Scout, are you there? Scout?

I opened my eyes and slowly came out of a heavy daze. I blinked frantically, trying to regain my vision. What just happened? Once the initial blur went away, I noticed I was in some sort of cage, or holding cell, against a wall in one of the tall structures, like the ones we were in earlier.

I jumped to my feet. Crap! I was captured. How could that be? Chuck and I were kicking so much butt!

To the right of me, there was another holding cell. Chuck was there, propped up against the wall, but hunched over. He appeared to be unconscious again.

“Chuck?”

He didn't answer.

Scout, you're awake! What's going on? I haven't' been able to reach you for hours.

“I don't know what happened. One minute we were in battle, next minute... we're locked up.”

I looked around the giant building. There were two Frooginites on the far side with their backs to us, looking at computer screens. To my left was another holding cell. Harry was in it, also unconscious.

What do you see, brotha?

“We're trapped,” I spoke quietly so the aliens wouldn't hear me. “There're two Frooginites in here with us. Chuck and I are locked in holding cells, and this homeless guy we found is locked in here with us.”

Homeless guy? Do you see any signs of Farrow, Mandy or Radar?

I looked around again, but that was all I saw. “No. They must be in another building.”

I'll tell you what we gotta do, Scout. We gotta get you out of there.

“I know that...”

I looked around, desperately searching for ideas for how to escape. It had to be something cool. Like in the spy movies where they have a paper clip under their tongue and when the bad guys aren't looking, they use it to pick the lock.

Or, if there was like a hot female alien, I could try to seduce her like I did with Kristen back home. Maybe work my magic a bit and she'd let me out.

Or...I could fake my death and then when they come in to see what's up, I swipe their gun, blast them down to the ground, bust out my buds and escape. That's the one I'll go with.

“Professor, I'm going to try something. Bare with me.”

I took a step back and coughed real loud, grabbing the attention of both Frooginites. They looked over at me, and then returned to their business. I needed them to keep looking at me.

I coughed again, even louder this time. They both looked at me again and I made my move quick. I collapsed to the ground in a fake coughing fit. I began to thrash around wildly on the floor.

Homeless Harry woke up and stood to his feet, staring at me. “Stop that, kid! Those things are going to come over here!”

“That's the plan,” I managed to tell him in between my phlegmy coughs.

“That's a dumb plan!” he shouted.

This guy was going to ruin everything. I rolled over and faced Chuck, coughing and holding my chest. I looked out of the cell and saw the two Frooginites were coming my way. Perfect; time for phase two.

I stopped coughing and went still. My eyes were closed tightly and I was just waiting for the sound of the cell door to open.

“IT’S GOT A DISEASE,” one of them spoke all robotic-like.

“MOVE IT TO THE CONTAINMENT FACILITY.”

The cell door opened and I felt them get close. It was time. I jumped up to my feet as fast as lightening and threw a dead-on punch to one of the Frooginites abdomens. I heard my knuckles crack against the armor.

“Ow!” I cried, holding my hand. It hurt so bad.

“IT’S CRAZED. SECURE IT.”

One of them reached out for me. This wasn’t going the way I planned! Without thinking, I reached for one of their holstered guns. I grabbed onto it, but the towering beast grabbed me by the neck and lifted me up. I was face to face with it. I stared into the pitch-black visor on its’ helmet, wondering like heck what these things even looked like.

“IT NEEDS QUARENTINED.”

Gripping my neck tightly, the Frooginite turned and started to carry me through the building.

“Scout!” I heard Chuck call out, but the grip was so tight around my neck that I couldn’t turn to look or even say anything. I started to kick my legs frantically. My constant squirming felt like it was loosening the grip. About halfway across the room I kicked it up a notch and began to flail my arms and legs about as wildly as I could.

The grip loosened quiet noticeably and then I took the palm of my hand and shoved it into the side of the aliens’ helmet.

With a loud grunt, the Frooginite dropped me and I hit the ground hard. Immediately I reached up to its holster and swiftly extracted the laser rifle. I didn’t aim - I just pointed it upward and fired a shot. The laser beamed through its’ chest and the beast went down, spurting green blood everywhere. I swung around to the other creature who was walking close behind and pulled the trigger three times, blowing its’ head off. Again, green slime showered down and splashed on the floor.

Chuck and Homeless Harry cheered and clapped.

“Scout, get us the heck up outta here!” Chuck yelled, gripping the bars on the cell door. I dropped the gun into the pool of green blood and dashed back to the holding cells. I looked at the locking mechanism and was surprised to see it wasn’t difficult to understand. There was a silver button in the middle of the lock, which I pressed and held it into place as I was able to then lift the latch above it. I let Chuck out and then did the same for Harry.

Once I had Harry out, I turned to look for Chuck. He was across the room, grabbing our backpacks and guns, which were hung up on hooks on the wall.

We strapped them on and geared up.

“We’re out, Nog.”

Good, boys. Now find the others. They have to be in the area.

II.

The door ‘whooshed’ open and Chuck and I slowly lead Harry out of the building. We hugged the outside wall, closest to the edge of the woods. An odd humming sound caught my ear, so I peered around the corner of the building to see what the deal was.

It was set up just like the other base - three buildings in a triangle formation and the pitchers mound deal in the center. Only this pitchers mound was different. It was the portal we were looking for. The two space light bulbs on the narrow black slab were lit a bright white, and above it was a large blue-tinted sphere. It must have been about ten feet tall and maybe the same in width. The interior of it was trippy – it looked very watery with a ripple, almost wave-like effect. The Frooginites must just walk through it and appear at a carefully coordinated location back on Earth.

There must have been like, a dozen or more Frooginites hanging around the base. This one was heavily guarded. That was a good sign for finding the others.

I turned back to my guys. “We found the portal. We just need to figure out how to destroy it.”

Chuck looked over my shoulder and saw the portal where the humming sound was deriving from. “Should we check these buildings for the others?”

“Yeah, man,” I said. “that’s the whole purpose.” I turned to Harry. We didn’t need a third wheel slowing down our mission. “Harry, I need you too hang out in these woods until one of us comes back for you.”

“You’re coming back, right? You can’t leave me here, alright?” Harry stuttered.

“Yeah, man. I promise. I’ll come back and get you myself.”

“Cool, cool. I’ll just hang out here, alright?”

“Yeah...”

Homeless Harry hopped over a few bushes behind us and ducked down behind another one of those obnoxious giant red flowers. It irritated me that they were so big. There was no need, but it did seem otherworldly enough that it kind of made sense.

“Chuck, we’ll stick together this time,” I told him bluntly. “Let’s check this building first.”

All sly-like, we shuffled across the gap between the buildings without being spotted by the dozens of Frooginites at the center of the base. We slid up against the wall and stepped in front of the door, which inevitably *'whooshed'* open.

We stepped inside, holding our laser phasers out in front of us. There was no immediate sign of any Frooginites, but we did notice the dozens of holding cells lining the walls. Inside all of them were some of those naked green alien guys.

As we walked through the building, looking into the cells, we noticed most of them were unconscious. At the end of the line of cells, one of them stood out to me.

“Blorf?” I asked. Blorf was sitting against the wall, but stood up when he saw me.

“Scout? What are you guys doing here? Did the Frooginites see you?”

“I don’t think so. What’s going on? Why are you guys in here?”

“The Frooginites are trying to take over the planet. They’re exterminating us. They lead us out into the woods, shackled, and I’ve heard that they kill us, pile our bodies into a heap, then burn us. This isn’t good, man.”

“We gotta get you out of here,” I went in for the locking mechanism and did my thing. The door unlatched and Blorf scurried out and across the room, his bare cheeks in plain sight,

where he grabbed his glass spear with the circular glowing purple top. He jogged back over.

“We have to release the others too,” Blorf said.

“THERE THEY ARE!” a robotic voice spoke from the doorway. We all turned and saw Frooginite after Frooginite file into the building, laser guns locked and loaded.

“Quick, follow me!” Blorf cried out. He ran for the center of the building where there was another one of those little grate drain things on the floor. Blorf lifted it up. It was a way out!

Chuck and I ran for it just as Blorf jumped down inside.

We splashed down into a long, dark and drippy cave sewer, where the muddy water came up to our kneecaps. I looked around. It was long and narrow with the occasional torch on the walls giving the whole tunnel a dull, flickering quality.

“Aw crap, man,” I said, my voice echoing through the cave. “Nothing good ever comes out of creepy cave sewers.”

“These cave systems are pretty much harmless,” Blorf said, reassuring us.

I sighed in relief.

“Except for the giant snake-eels,” he added.

Gulp.

“Snake-eels?” Chuck shouted.

“Shh! They’ll hear you!” Blorf whispered. “Follow me, guys.”

We followed Blorf down through the cave sewer tunnel, wading carefully in the disgusting water. It had a strong odor to it; like a big dude with bad B.O. who’s been baking in the sun too long after not showering for months.

The drips from the ceiling, into the water below, were creepy. It was the only sound down there aside from us walking around.

“Where do these tunnels lead?” I asked.

“They connect all of the Frooginite bases. There are also motor systems down here that run the portals in the bases.” Blorf said.

“Oh, so if we can destroy the motor systems, we can shut the portals down?” I asked.

“I guess. I wouldn’t know how to power them down, though.”

“I don’t want to power them down,” I said. “I want to blow them up.”

III.

We came to a junction a few minutes later that forked off into two other directions. Blorf hung a right. “I’m pretty sure the portal motors are this way.”

Chuck and I followed Blorf down the right cave tunnel. Up ahead, I thought I saw the motor system. There seemed to be blinking lights coming from some kind of panel built into the wall.

Blorf noticed it too. "Yeah, it's up there for sure."

Then, up ahead, the water started to ripple.

"Everyone stop," Blorf instructed, holding up his spear. The purple globe on the top started to glow.

"What is it?" Chuck started to panic. "Is it a snake-eel?"

"Sure is, guy."

The ripples in the water then started to shoot quickly in our direction. Blorf turned and started to run back the other way through the water without saying anything. Chuck and I took note and quickly followed him.

"Oh, God! Snake-eels!" Chuck shouted. He tripped and fell face first into the muddy water and disappeared into the foginess of it.

"Chuck!" I stopped and looked into the water. It was too murky to see anything. "Chuck!"

"Oh, for crying out loud!" Blorf yelled, irritated at us. He waded back to me and started feeling around in the water for Chuck. "Is this him?" he asked, pulling Chuck above the surface by his hair.

Chuck coughed out some mud. "Thanks, man."

Blorf released Chuck's hair. "You're welcome. Now quick, follow me!"

Before Blorf had the opportunity to turn and start running again, a gigantic snake-eel launched itself out of the water and wrapped itself around him. This crazy brute was huge! Maybe the size of a stretch limo, it was slimy, dark green in color, it had glowing yellow eyes, and its' open jaws were home to thousands of needle-sharp teeth. It started to constrict itself around Blorf. The pressure forced Blorf to drop his glass spear, which shattered against the wall.

"My sphere spear!" Blorf yelled, reaching for this broken piece of equipment.

"Let it go, man!" I yelled at him as Chuck and I aimed our phasers at the gigantic creature. "What do we do?"

"Aim for the -" Blorf tried to get out before the constricting got too tight. The snake-eel roared like I imagined a monster would, and then pulled its' head back in a striking manner.

Knowing I had no time left, I started to fire at the monster. Chuck and I both did – our lasers penetrated the slimy skin of the creature and it screeched in pain, dropping Blorf from its' grip. Blorf splashed down into the water and the snake-eel launched itself at Chuck and I, but we dodged out of the way.

The beast splashed into the water and turned around quickly, raising itself up and snarling ferociously. As it pulled its' head

back one more time, preparing to attack, I had an idea. I ran for the beast just as it struck towards me. It hit the water again, but this time I climbed onto the things back, close to its' head.

It began to thrash around in the water, splashing mud against the walls.

“You’re the man, Scout!” I could have sworn I heard Chuck yell. Hopefully that’s what he said, cause I was pumped now! I began to buck on the creature like a bull, and finally put the barrel of my gun to the top of its’ head and pulled the trigger.

The creature went down hard and fast, but not before throwing me off of it. I hit the wall hard and splashed down into the muddy water.

I stood up, shaking the water off my hair like a wet dog, and the water settled. The snake-eel was dead; it was just floating there in the water. Dark blood oozed from the smoking wound on the top of its’ head.

“Dude!” Chuck said with a smile. We hugged it out. “You were awesome, bro!”

“Thanks, man!” I said back, completely satisfied with my latest kill. “Where’s Blorf?”

We looked around and Chuck pointed to the calming waters surface about five feet away from us. “Is that him? That frog thing?”

I looked and just saw the top of Blorf's green head sticking out above the water. His eyes shifted back and forth. He then popped up quickly from the shallow depths.

"Good job," he said. "Those things don't usually go down so easily. You guys are pretty cool at killing things on my planet."

We all regained our composure and then Blorf lead us down the cave to the portal motor system.

It looked like a panel to a circuit breaker on the wall. There were flashing lights lining the panel door. Blorf studied it and then reported back.

"Ok," he said, "I don't know much about these things. But I'm pretty sure if we open this door up, mess around with the -"

I interrupted Blorf by aiming my laser gun at the panel and blasting it three times at close range. The panel sparked and surged a few times, before catching on fire.

"That should do it," I said.

"Well, let's see," Blorf said, leading the way down the tunnel a little more. There was a metal ladder built into the wall that lead up to another one of the metal grate drains. We looked up through the barred drain and I could see that above us was another one of the buildings at the base. I had my fingers crossed that it was the one our hostages were being held in.

Blorf, Chuck and myself all climbed the ladder. Blorf slowly lifted the gate above us and peered into it.

“It’s chaos up here, boys,” he said back down to us. “There are like six or seven Frooginites running around like crazy.”

I could hear the commotion Blorf was speaking of. I could even hear some of the Frooginites. “THE PORTALS ARE DOWN,” they kept repeating to one another.

“They’re all leaving,” Blorf said, as the Frooginites all left the building. “And I think I see your things!”

My eyes went wide, as did my smile. I looked back down at Chuck on the ladder under me. “They’re here! They’re in this one!”

“Okay, can we go then?” Chuck panicked, “I don’t want another one of those snake-eel things to come swimming up around here.”

I looked back up and Blorf was already climbing into the room. I follow him, and Chuck followed me.

When we all stood up in the room, my immediate attention was brought to the holding cells against the wall. The first one held Mandy Lee, the beautiful girl who was the real reason behind me coming here. She was standing with her hands clenched around the holding cell bars, watching the door where the Frooginites just left.

The cell next to her had a man who appeared to be in his forties. He was standing as well, looking towards the door. He

was bald, wore a lab coat like Nog's, and wore a pair of narrow glasses. That must have been Farrow.

Next to Farrow's cage was Radar. He was sitting in the corner, scrunched up in a ball, rocking back and forth. It looked like he'd been crying. His mohawk still looked dumb.

I ran to Mandy's cell first. "Mandy!"

She turned and looked at me in a quiet surprise. She couldn't believe I was here. Chuck ran to Farrow's cell and Blorf stood back, keeping an eye on the door.

"Who are you, kids?" Farrow asked.

"I'm Chuck Taylor and this is Scout Brooks. We're from Earth. Professor Nog sent us to save you guys."

"Nog sent you?" Farrow cried. "My God, I am so happy to see you guys!"

Radar climbed to his feet and looked at us. "Chuckles?" he said. He then looked at me as I unlatched Mandy's cell door. "Scout?"

We ignored him for a moment as we let the more important people out first. Mandy walked out of her cell – she still hadn't said anything. She just gawked at me, wondering what was happening.

"You..." she began to say, "you came for me?"

“Of course,” I said. “I wasn’t going to let you be abducted and not do anything about it. I’m here Mandy. And we’re going to get you home now.”

An appreciative smile graced her face and she threw her arms around me and hugged me like a bear. It was the best feeling in the world.

Chuck unlatched Farrow’s cell and let him out.

“You guys are in the E.I.A.?” Farrow asked.

“Yes, sir,” Chuck said. “We have the I.P.S. waiting to take us all home.”

“The I.P.S.?” Farrow pondered. “That son of a gun actually built the I.P.S.? This is great news, kids! The E.I.A. might actually finally be able to get the funding we’ve been asking the President for!”

Farrow seemed genuinely happy and excited.

“Are you nerds going to let me out too, or am I going to have to start cracking bones?” Radar obnoxiously yelled.

I shook my head hard, but knew I had to let him out, even though it’d be awesome to just leave him locked in there. Chuck, Phil and I would never have to worry about this guy again. I walked over and quickly unlatched his door. He came out and grabbed me by the shirt and lifted me off the ground.

We were face to face. “I should kill you, Scout, for what you did to me. You zapped me to another dimension and ruined my

Battle of the Bands performance. When we get back to Earth, you're a dead man."

"Put 'em down!" Blorf screamed as he dashed over and slide-kicked the feet right out from under Radar. We both hit the ground hard, but I was the first one to stand up. Radar stumbled to his feet and looked at Blorf.

"What the heck are you?" he asked, disgusted.

"I'm Blorf, a native of this planet."

"What the heck is a Blorf?"

"It's a me! Now go with Scout and Chuck, and the rest of ya's, and go home."

Creeped out, Radar squirmed his way around Blorf. The noise outside of the building was growing louder. There was a sense of panic and frustration from the Frooginites due to us shutting down, or destroying rather, their portals. I grabbed Mandy's hand and we all ran for the door. As you can imagine, it *'whooshed'* open, and the six of us ran out of the building.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Rhyming Arsenal of Death

I.

The Frooginites were everywhere. A bunch of them turned and looked at us. We all held still.

“THERE IT IS. THE DISEASED ONE!”

I assume they were talking about me. “Let’s go!” I yelled to my platoon and we dashed back towards the trail in the other direction. The Frooginites began to open fire. Laser beams flew by us at warp speed, pounding the ground around us and burning holes right through the trees.

“What is all this!?” I heard Radar start to cry from somewhere behind me.

“Everyone keep moving! Don’t look back!” I shouted, keeping my eyes forward. We needed to get back to the I.P.S. as quick as possible.

Scout!

“What is it?”

Something’s wrong with D.R. Fritz. It’s like he was reprogrammed. Whoever messed with him before blast off must

have programmed a new mission to start at a certain point during the journey.

“What’s wrong with him?” I was breathing hard, trying to keep a good pace as the lasers were just barely missing my head.

He’s heading back to the shuttle. I can’t stop him. If he makes it there, he might take off without you.

“Crap!” I yelled. “Everyone hurry up! We don’t have much time!”

We finally hit the dusty, red path. I vaguely remembered what direction we came from, so I was crossing my fingers and hoping I was right. Otherwise we were screwed.

The Frooginites were hot on our tails. I turned around every few seconds and saw they were chasing after us, still firing their lasers. Luckily for us, they seemed to be bad shots. Nothing had made contact with any of us yet. I saw Chuck, every so often, aim his laser phaser back and fire off a couple beams.

We eventually hit the first base that Chuck and I had investigated. We ran through the center of it and saw the remains of the two Frooginites that I had awesomely killed earlier, still steaming by the black slab in the center. I stopped for a second and aimed my gun at the light bulbs on the slab. Now that I knew they were possibly a power supply for the portals, I fired on them and shattered the bulbs.

“Keep moving!” I yelled, latching back onto Mandy’s hand. We took off down the path that would lead to the shuttle. I glanced behind me to make sure everyone was still with me. They were. Chuck was right behind Mandy and I. Farrow was huffing up a storm right behind him, and Blorf and Radar were the caboose.

Radar seemed to keep running out of breath and slowed down a little bit.

“C’mon, Radar! Pick up the pace!” I shouted over the sound of the Frooginite laser barrage.

“Don’t tell me what to do, nerd!” he barely managed to yell back.

“Wait!” Blorf called out. I came to an abrupt stop and looked. Blorf was trotting off into the woods.

“Where are you going?” I said.

“Just wait a minute!” he said again.

“Everyone take cover!” I shouted as we all jumped behind the giant trees. A line of Frooginites came rushing up the path behind us. Chuck and I leaned out from behind the trees and opened fire on them. I took one or two out, and so did Chuck, but the line of them seemed to be never ending.

I searched the woods to my right, looking for Blorf. I saw him come rushing out of a dark green grass hut or something. It seemed to blend in perfectly to the atmosphere of the forest. It

must have been his house or something. He had another ‘sphere spear’ in his grip. The ball-like top was glowing purple again. Were those things weapons or something?

Chuck and I ducked back behind the trees as the Frooginites kept coming. Blorf hopped out onto the trail and pointed his glass spear towards them, purple end first. He began to take laser after laser to his body as his spear illuminated quickly and then with a large and loud boom, a blasting wave of purple energy flew out and knocked over all of the Frooginites in sight.

They all hit the ground and didn’t get back up. The woods became quiet again and the current threat was over. Chuck, Mandy and I came out from behind the giant tree. I saw Farrow and Radar do the same from another moss covered tree base.

We all looked at Blorf, who wobbled upright for a minute before falling backwards and slamming into the dirt.

Chuck and I rushed to his side. He was bleeding out from countless, smoking laser impressions. “Are you okay, man?” I asked, knowing he wasn’t going to make it. The damage to his scaly body was just too much.

“Of course not,” Blorf coughed. “I’m dying. I’m dying pretty bad.”

“I can see that. What can I do?”

“I said I’m dying, man. There’s nothing you can do.”

“There has to be something?”

“There’s not! Don’t make me mad, Scout. I don’t want my last moment here to be me being pissed off.”

“Ok,” I said. I didn’t know what else to say. Mandy, Farrow and Radar gathered around to show their sympathy. Chuck and I awkwardly kneeled over the dying alien. “Thanks for everything you did for us, Blorf. You really helped us out.”

“I know,” he said. He lifted his arm, the one that wasn’t hanging on by tendons, and handed me his sphere spear. “I want you to have this. It’s to show you my appreciation for standing up to the Frooginites, who treat my kind like were nothing, and for busting me out of that holding cell.”

“You got it,” I said, grabbing the spear.

“Now if you’ll excuse me...” Blorf muttered as he exhaled for the last time. His body lay there motionless. Blorf was dead.

I stood up, gripping the sphere spear in one hand, and my laser phaser in the other - my rhyming arsenal of death – and then lead the way as we quickly continued down the path.

II.

Fritz is in the shuttle, Scout! How close are you?

“Pretty close, Professor,” I responded. I knew where we were because I saw the blood and guts-covered red flower where Chuck had murdered Hoogort.

“It’s just around this corner!” I called back to everyone. We all picked up speed and turned the corner to the clearing in the woods and immediately heard the loud, thumping sound of the shuttles roaring engine.

“No!” I called out, seeing D.R. Fritz sitting in the cockpit.

“We’re supposed to ride on *that* thing?” Radar complained as we all came to a stop in front of the shuttle.

“Scout...” Mandy was worried. So was I. I looked at Chuck and we both shared the same thoughts – what on Earth do we do now?

I can't override him!

The ground began to shake, forcing all of us to try and keep our balance. Farrow looked on at the I.P.S. “It’s magnificent!” He was admiring our only way off of Bethani.

“What do we do if it leaves?” I asked him, a hint of massive concern coming through in my voice.

He just shook his head without saying anything. We were doomed...

The I.P.S. jolted violently and then started to roll towards us.

“Duck!” I yelled. We all jumped out of the way of the shuttle, which was heading right in our direction. It passed by us, picking

up speed, and started to rip down the trees as it slowly lifted off the ground.

I wanted to cry as I watched our only means of intergalactic transportation lift away into the sky. The nuclear thrusters exploded and a massive fireball came rushing back in our direction. We all shielded our eyes and felt the heat on our faces. When I moved my hand and looked again, the canopy of the forest was on fire and the I.P.S. was blasting fast out of Bethani's atmosphere. It disappeared through the thick clouds and out into space.

I wanted to cry so badly, but tried to hold it together so I didn't embarrass myself in front of Mandy. She crawled through the dirt and sat by me, grabbing a hold of my arm. I sat there in shambles. I was completely drained of energy. Chuck and I traveled 6,500 light years to save three peoples' lives, but instead, we failed. Now four high school freshmen and some weird acquaintance of Nog's were stranded on another planet.

"Professor..." I said.

Scout? Did you make it back to the shuttle?

"No. Fritz took off. We failed."

There was silence on Nog's end of my head. He didn't know what to say or what to do.

Suddenly, the piercing sound of a laser beam sliced through the air and hit Radar in the leg.

He screamed and tried to stand up, but fell back over. The rest of us stood up quickly and looked around. There were three Frooginites dashing towards us.

Chuck and I stood up fast and started to fire at them. “Someone get Radar and head that way!” I instructed, seeing the path head in the other direction across the clearing. Farrow tried to pick Radar up, who was screaming and crying like a little girl. Chuck and I did our best to hold off the beasts, but their firepower was too much.

“Run!” I yelled. I grabbed Mandy by the hand again, and followed Chuck towards the path. Farrow was having a hard time with Radar. He couldn’t quite hold him up right.

A green beam of laser burned through Farrow’s lab coat and out the other side, just missing his groin. “Whoa!” Farrow cried, dropping Radar and galloping away in fear that his parts were just almost blown off.

“Don’t leave me!” Radar called from the ground, reaching out for Farrow who was hopping in our direction. Chuck and I stopped and fired a couple more shots at the Frooginites. Two of our lasers hit one of their heads at the same time and blew it completely off. The body hit the ground and the beast’s guns hit the dirt.

“Scout!” Chuck said, getting an idea. “What if we grab their teleporting gun and blast ourselves out of here?”

Chuck was a genius! But not really...

“They look like they’re all programmed to teleport things to Bethani, not Earth. But you’re definitely onto something!” I said, reaching into my backpack and pulling out Nog’s nameless vanishing device. “He said this will teleport any otherworldly beings back to their planet of origin. Technically were otherworldly here, right?”

“You guys are right! That should work, in theory,” Farrow added, holding on tight to his groin.

“Alright, everyone gather around!” I said, prepping the device.

“What about Radar?” Mandy asked. We all looked at him and he was on the ground in pain, reaching out for us, still crying like a baby.

“I’ll get him,” I volunteered, as the two remaining Frooginites were closing in. “Chuck, hold this.” I handed the vanishing device over to Chuck and jogged towards Radar. The Frooginites didn’t waste any time firing on me. I hit the deck hard, dropping out of the way of the oncoming death beams.

I looked up and saw the Frooginites were standing right over top of Radar.

“Scout! Help me!” he called out frantically. I couldn’t get any closer. Behind them, coming up from the path, was another troop of Frooginites. They were charging into the clearing fast, aiming their guns.

“Scout, come on! We gotta go!” Chuck shouted. I tried to stand up again to head for Radar but I pretty much became a target. All the Frooginites were firing at me.

“Scout, don’t leave me!” Radar yelled one more time before the Frooginites started to club him repeatedly with their guns. I did what I had to do – ran back to my group fast.

I ripped the vanishing device from Chuck’s hand and hovered my finger over the red button. I glanced back one last time as Chuck, Mandy and Farrow hurried me to press the button. Radar was eating dirt. The Frooginites were bashing all up on him. The army of aliens behind the beating was getting closer, spraying lasers in every direction.

“You’re a dead man, Scout! You’re dead!” I heard Radar scream one last time as I made the inevitable decision to press the button. Everything got real bright and I couldn’t see anything. The world around us was spinning like mad, and I remember seeing glimpses of space, dizzying spirals of light and flashing lights peppering my vision before everything went black and quiet...

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Oops

I.

We all seemed to materialize, fragment by fragment, in the middle of Professor Nog's barn. It hurt; it felt like thousands of tiny needles sticking me in every part of my body.

When the materializing stopped, I looked around the barn. The I.P.S. wasn't there, but Nog, Jakon and Principal Smidgeon were. They were rushing into the barn from outside.

"Guys!" Nog shouted as he rushed to our aid. Chuck and I plopped down on the straw covered floor, completely exhausted. Mandy walked around in a daze, still coming to grips with what had happened to her.

"Farrow, my brotha," Nog said as he and Farrow exchanged a pretty in depth secret handshake followed by a jumping chest bump.

"I've seen the other world, Ed," Farrow said to him. "I've seen the intergalactic space jerks we've been fighting. I've seen their technology and I've slept in their cages. I have a ton to tell you about."

"I can't wait to hear all about it."

Jakon came over and helped Chuck and I to our feet. I felt disgusting, as I assumed Chuck did too. I was still soaked in the muddy cave water; I had bumps and bruises all over my body and on my face taking the shape of dirty pound signs. My backpack straps were torn, my pants were shredded at the knees, and my laser phaser had seen better days. In my left hand, I held the vanishing device. In my right hand, I still clenched Blorf's sphere spear. The purple glow at the top had faded away and lost all of its hue.

"Where's Radar?" Principal Smidgeon asked.

Chuck and I exchanged looks, not sure how to explain my cowardly dash back to the group instead of helping a fallen bully.

"He didn't make it," Farrow stepped in. "He was shot in the foot or something, and when I was trying to help him up, one of the creatures fired on me, getting a little too close for comfort to my parts, so I ran away and left him there. Scout went back like a hero, but the firepower was too much. We had no choice but to leave him."

Nog and Smidgeon nodded, unsure how to feel. On one hand, there was nothing that we could have done. On the other, we were all somewhat responsible for leaving Radar on another planet.

"Well, I'll figure something out," Nog spoke softly.

Mandy came to my side and hung onto my arm, I assume feeling comforted. I looked at Nog. “Where’s the I.P.S.?”

“We lost the signal,” he said. “It’s somewhere out there in the blackness of space. We need to open an investigation to find out who’s been infiltrating the E.I.A. and messing with our stuff. It’s pretty clear the intent was to leave you all stranded there. And that’s not okay with me. Not one bit.”

Nog turned and walked out of the barn. The Smidge followed him.

“I’m glad you guys are okay,” Jakon said.

“Thanks, man,” Chuck and I both said in unison.

I grabbed Mandy’s hand and we all walked out of the barn.

II.

I got home around 11:00 PM. We were gone for almost two full days – Earth time. It was Sunday night, and I had to be back at school the next morning.

I snuck up the stairs quietly, hoping my mom and brother wouldn’t hear me. I closed my bedroom door and opened my closet door. I leaned the sphere spear against the closet wall and covered it with hanging clothes.

There was a quiet knock on my door. I shut the closet and sat on my bed. “Come in.”

Mark opened the door wearing nothing but red-spotted boxers. He rubbed his eyes; he’d obviously been sleeping.

“Where have you been all weekend, man?” he asked groggily.

“Um...”

“The fridge said something about going to Europe? Was that your handwriting?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you go to Europe or something?”

I shook my head.

“Where were you?”

I didn’t know what to say. How could I explain being gone all weekend without spilling the beans?

“Was mom mad that I was gone?” I asked.

“A little. She assumed you were rebelling and went to stay with your friends or a girl or something.”

“A girl?” I nervously laughed. If my mom thought I was rebelling, why wasn’t she more concerned about my whereabouts?

Mark looked at me and widened his eyes. “A girl...you were with a girl all weekend?”

I smiled. If he and my mom would believe that, then I'd roll with it. I'd be willing to suffer the punishment or even 'the talk' if it meant I could still keep the space mission a secret.

"Maybe..."

"Aw yeah, Scout! You were hooking up all weekend? I didn't think you'd start jumping someone's bones until at least your junior year!"

Oh, so that's what 'jumping bones' meant?

"Is 'Europe' your secret code word? 'Europe, here I come!' Scout, you dog!"

I laughed. I saw him notice my disgusting appearance.

"Why are you so dirty? Why do you smell so bad, man?" he asked, covering his nose.

"It's been a long weekend, bro."

He smiled real big and pointed at me. "Yeah it was!"

Mark shook his head laughing and left my room, closing the door behind him. I quickly got up and locked it. I didn't want anyone else coming in tonight.

I undressed down to the nude and lay in bed. I knew I should've showered, but I was too lazy. I just fought an epic space battle. I deserved a little rest. I was thinking about everything that had happened. The space training, the blast off, killing aliens, rescuing hostages, watching Blorf die before my eyes. It was a crazy weekend.

I leaned over and pulled *Dragon Wind* out of my backpack. I leafed through the pages and found the spot I left off at. I actually couldn't wait to finish reading it. I was excited to see Phil, and I wanted to tell him everything, but I couldn't.

Before I finished Phil's book, I thought back to Bethani for a moment. Radar...there had to be more I could've done. How could we explain his absence? What were his parents going to think? He literally disappeared from this world without a trace. I had a feeling nothing good was going to come of this.

All I could see in my mind was Radar being bashed to a pulp by the Frooginites. Why didn't they kill him? They chose to just beat him up instead. That made me curious.

III.

The bell rang to start the day at school. I sat in Mr. Watson's homeroom, freshly showered and clothed. It felt nice. Mr. Watson began to intensely fire off the roll call. As he angrily shouted kids names for no reason, I turned and looked to the back of the classroom where Chuck was sitting. He was nervously clicking his pen again and staring in a daze.

After homeroom let out, I waited in the hallway for Chuck to come out. When he did, I put my hand on his shoulder. "You okay?"

“I guess,” Chuck said blandly.

Something was bothering him. “What’s wrong?”

“There are police in the school today.” He said, looking past me and pointing. I looked down the hall and saw two police officers standing in front of the school office, talking to a well-dressed Smidgeon.

“What are they here for?”

“They talked with me this morning and I had to lie. Radar’s parents filed a missing persons report. They said he never came home Friday night from the Battle of the Bands. The police are interviewing people at the school. They asked me questions because of when he strung me up on the flag pole.”

“What did you tell them?”

“I just said that we were at Battle of the Bands that night, but Radar never took the stage. I played it off like I didn’t know anything.”

Chuck checked his watch. “I have to get to History. See you later, Scout.”

“You want to come over to my house after school? Me, you and Philly can hang out?”

“Sure.” With that, Chuck walked away. I looked back at the police one more time, and then headed for my next class.

I sat in Astronomy and stared at the back of Mandy's head. I was so happy that we were able to save her, but I hope she wasn't too traumatized from being kidnapped by aliens. She turned around a couple times to look at me, but was barely able to get a smile out.

Professor Nog was in front of the class preaching about Saturn's moons or something pointless like that. He went back to his desk and pulled out a stack of papers.

"Alright everyone, let us pop a quiz on the Crab Nebula."

Everyone groaned and I saw him wink at me. He'd warned me about this quiz. That jerk.

After the quiz was over, I was pretty sure I failed. Even though I was in the Crab Nebula, that didn't mean I knew anything about it. The bell rang to end Astronomy and the class filed out. I hung around before the next class started and approached Nog at his desk.

"Any word on the I.P.S. or D.R. Fritz?" I asked.

"No. I had Jakon check my computers this morning before he opened his shop. He called and told me that there was still no sign of them."

"Do you have the slightest idea of who this 'ghost' is?"

"No. But it has to be someone we know. They came into my classroom, your house, and broke into my barn to alter D.R. Fritz's mission plans. Farrow and I are going to really look into

this. Scout,” Nog got all serious, “Someone didn’t want you guys to come back from Bethani.”

I thought about that for a minute. Nog was right. Someone reprogrammed Fritz to shut down at a certain point, waited for us to wander off and then leave us stranded on Bethani. Luckily we had that vanishing device. Otherwise, we’d be chilling out amongst the stars still.

Chuck, Phil and I sat around the lunch table. I sucked down a Root Beer and chewed my way through a ham and cheese sandwich. Chuck picked the pepperonis off of his cold pizza and ate them. He still seemed worried. Phil was scarfing down his PB&J and piling Cheez-its into his mouth.

“I’m glad you were able to work everything out with Mandy,” Phil said with his mouth full. “All it took to get her back in the states was a quick bone-jumping. Good work, Scout.”

“Thanks.”

“Did you guys remember to bring me a souvenir?”

“Um...yeah,” I said, having no idea what to give him that could have been from Europe. “I’ll give it to you when you come over after school.”

“Thanks,” he said. “What do you guys think happened to Radar?”

Chuck looked at me, but to avoid suspicion, I didn't look back.

"I don't know. I hope he turns up," I said.

"Did you get to read *Dragon Wind* on the plane?" Phil was asking random question after random question.

"Yeah!" I said, perking up. I had forgot to tell him that. "It was good, man. I can't wait to read the rest of them."

"Well, brace yourself, Scout. They get a little crazy," Phil was obviously proud of his work.

I noticed Chuck look over his shoulder. The police were standing against the wall, watching over the crowd of students eating lunch. I wondered if they suspected something.

IV.

After school, Chuck and Phil came to my house and we hung out in my room, playing Xbox. I only had one controller, so we had to take turns. Chuck was playing first. He seemed to be in a slightly better mood now that we were out of the school with the constant police presence.

"So where's my souvenir?" Phil asked.

My brain scrambled like eggs to try and think of something to give him. Then it struck me. I hopped off the bed and went to my closet, pulling out the glass spear. I handed it to him.

“Here ya go, Philly.”

Phil accepted it in a curious, yet excited way. “What is it?”

“It’s a...uh...European Sphere Spear. From Europe,” I came up with.

“Oh,” Phil said, looking the weapon up and down. “Cool. I’ve always wanted one of these.”

“Yeah?”

“Hey guys, we should go to Father Peanuts for a bite to eat later,” Chuck said, leveling up his Warlock character.

“I could get down with something like that,” Phil said, pouring a soda down his throat.

I watched as Chuck’s Warlock was stabbed in the back with the Sword of Eternity, and then his corpse was melted by a level seven Elf-Lord with a fire mana-extinguishing spell. Frustrated, Chuck handed the controller to Phil.

“You’re up, Philly. Let’s see what your Orge-loving, artifact-enhancing Wraith Night Walker is made of,” Chuck said, standing up from his Indian-style sit.

Phil grabbed the controller and loaded up his profile as Chuck walked towards the door. “I have to leak, boys. I’ll be right back.”

Chuck left the room, and Phil immediately paused the game. “Scout, I have something I want to show you. I know how freaked out Chuck gets about things, so I don’t want him to see it yet.”

“Okay...” I was a little concerned. What was he talking about?

Phil reached into his Velcro wallet and pulled out a folded piece of paper. He unfolded it several times and showed me a short, typed message. I read it:

Phil,

Your friends, Scout Brooks and Chuck Taylor, are not who you think they are. Keep a close eye on them.

I looked up at Phil, my heart picking up some heavy beats. “Who gave you this?”

“I don’t know. It was stuffed in my backpack.”

I looked back down at the note. Could this be the same person who tried to sabotage our space adventure?

“What is it referring to, Scout?”

I looked Phil in the eye. I couldn’t tell him. I had to play dumb.

“I have no idea, honest,” I handed the note back to him. I heard the toilet flush from down the hall. “Just get rid of this before Chuck sees it. He’ll freak out. Throw it in the trash or something.”

Trash...garbage...dumpster...Homeless Harry! Aw, crap! I forgot about Homeless Harry! I promised him I’d go back to get him!

Now there were two people, Radar and Homeless Harry, out there in the cold, dark corners of the universe, probably really pissed off at me.

I really dropped the ball on that one.

Oops.