

L.A. IMMANUEL

TROY
ZANDER
AND THE
SIGN OF THE
UNSEEN

ONLY WHEN YOU DIE TO YOUR FEARS
WILL YOU RISE WITH YOUR TRUE
POWER

TROY ZANDER
AND THE SIGN OF THE UNSEEN

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For my Everything

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1 THE FOUR COLONIES

In the vastness of the ever expanding universe, lies a galaxy named the Milky Way. In a distinct corner of this breathtaking galaxy is a planetary system revolving around a yellow star and among those planets is a tiny planet brimming with organic life, called earth. A long time back, it had been lovingly referred to as the blue planet and also had been the home to one of the most intelligent life forms in the universe, *Homo sapiens*, a tiring nomenclature referring to the humans, devised by an extremely bored scientist, who with nothing else to do, created names for every living thing that sounded like awfully bad magical spells.

Homo sapiens had come forth as the most advanced life form on the earth after the fifth mass extinction, which had wiped out the then dominant species, dinosaurs, (may they RIP!) from the face of the earth and ruled the planet for nearly twelve thousand and five hundred years, before our story starts.

Starting out as simple hunters, then to take up farming, various other skills and then go on to acquire a never ending understanding of the sciences, the humans had made most of their short time on the planet (the size of the human population would also vouch for this fact.) Human culture and traditions evolved over time and were highly diverse in terms of color, newer ways of discrimination and every other possible way of separating humans among themselves. Originating from Africa, with time humans spread out to the ends of the globe, stamping their mark on every landmass and their authority over every living creature on the planet.

Human technology had become very powerful as the 21st century A.D. had come to an end but at the same time, the humans began facing another problem. A problem they had to solve quickly. The problem of dwindling space and diminishing resources. The human race was rapidly outgrowing the earth's ability to accommodate and feed it.

The humans were however prepared for this scenario. Their advanced understanding of the universe and their ever evolving technology allowed them to contemplate setting up colonies in so called "potentially habitable" planets, while a significant chunk of the society took the perfect liberty of going onto the streets predicting the end of the world with giant signboards that read, "Hell or

heaven? Choose now! Before it's too late!"

This also resulted in the geek community taking off to the streets, with their share of giant signboards that simply read, "Sod off!"

"Eff yourselves!"

"I choose earth!"

However, these new mission plans weren't cheap. Government resources weren't enough to fund the colonization research and in order to be continued it had to be funded by private parties, which were none other than the richest people on the planet.

Soon, work began on the moon, followed by on the Mars to create human colonies. However, because of the political foul play, very few made it to those colonies, leaving the majority of the human population to die on earth.

Protests soon followed on the blue planet, demanding equal rights to the space colonies. It wasn't long before governments started falling and chaos started spreading everywhere (naturally!) Diseases which would have been better controlled if the governments had been still functioning spread like wildfire, due to lack of order and structure on earth.

Power hungry men with false moustaches and women with really bad cosmetic enhancements, took advantage of the situation, in their home countries and introduced false hope along with dictatorship, which lasted as long as an ice cube under the hot sun before being replaced by another, giving rise to a never ending hopeless cyclic process, blah, blah, blah.

Militias rose and fell, fighting against the gross injustice they faced but to no avail. The unrest over the violation of their right to survive provoked countless revolutions among the humans to fight for their place in the Moon and Mars Colonies. Unfortunately, the human race as such, was left to die to a slow painful death on the earth.

This restless period in the human history didn't last long as the Moon and Mars colonies soon collapsed. According to the popular cult belief of that time, those men and women on those colonies were destroyed by just sentient extraterrestrials or by 'gods' as believed in some societies, who intervened when they had seen their evil and the suffering, the rich had imposed on the people of earth. The truth, however, to this day remains a mystery.

In the following centuries, normality returned again to earth and a democratic world government sprouted up, to deal with the same problems, dwindling resources and the rising population and this time around, seventeen astronaut teams consisting of three hundred and thirty members each, were chosen to colonize seventeen different potentially habitable planets. With advanced nuclear fusion technology, that allowed them to travel at one- third of the speed of light, humans were ready to explore the universe, like never before.

Each team had been carefully selected according to the scientists' criteria, which they thought would be best to establish a seeder human colony, on a new planet, in order to ensure the continuity of the human race.

With that a new odyssey began, the mission was to set up colonies and transport the entire human population to the seventeen colonies over a period of five hundred and forty years (at least that was what was proposed to the people to calm them down and give them a sense of hope, nobody can tell what governments think!) Radio contact was the only contact that could be maintained between earth and any of the space ships till they reached their targets, which meant years between each message, to and fro. It was agreed that once the space ship reached their targets, messages would be relayed continuously, using the small superfast spaceships that travelled at the one-third of the speed of light, thus reducing the time delay.

Tragedy struck from the very beginning as the many of the astronaut team ships started going missing in the eerie darkness of space, early in the journey. In the end, only four teams made to their target planets and successfully established human colonies.

Those four planets were Kepler-298d, Gliese 832c, Kapteyn b and HD 40307 g. The phase I which consisted of building a colony was completed in around one hundred years in three of the four colonies, which made them eligible to carry out the next phase. Phase II was to relocate the human population on earth little by little to these colonies in 3 one hundred and eighty year cycles.

The human colonies were getting ready to send their carrier space ships to earth, waiting for the 'GO' command from the earth which never really came in the end. There was blackout for nearly a century, before the four colonies finally received a message from earth, which read,

“Earth has fallen. If you are receiving this message, it means that the planet has experienced a natural disaster, large enough to destroy all life on land. This is a computerized backup message, sent from an underground facility, in case of the worst happening to the earth. It is therefore commanded that no rescue mission is be carried out and phase II is to be aborted. Good luck for your future.”

It was a surprising moment for everyone on the four colonies. The men and women who had grown up in these colonies had never seen earth for real, they had only heard about their true home planet told by their parents but still they felt a great loss, as having lost a piece of themselves though they had never experienced it in their lifetimes.

Life carried on at these colonies, each of the colonies could maintain only minimum contact with each other due to the great distance between them, taking several human generations to send and receive a single message. However, to prevent future communication barriers which were bound to happen, taking the fact that languages evolve over time, the four colonies decided to maintain language homogeneity and implemented Standard Order English, controlling and directing the evolution of the English language on their planets harmoniously.

However, human life thrived on the colonies and did so for the next fifty thousand years. Slowly, the humans on these colonies adapted to the local environmental conditions of their new home planet and steadily co-evolved with it.

Over the course of time, the planet Kepler-298d was renamed as Kepler by its inhabitants, who consequently evolved into a new species, *Homo keplis*.

Kepler was a large ocean planet, with the only landmass being a large supercontinent. By the time, the humans had reached the planet, Kepler had been already filled with life. Dangerous ravenous creatures existed on Kepler and threatened the human colonization efforts. The humans had to protect themselves against the new threats quickly and in a new way as they neither had the manpower nor the firepower to continually protect themselves.

The ocean itself was a big no-no, it was literally infested with every kind of barbarous fish and invertebrate, that didn't wait even a second to rip anything to nothing but bits and pieces. Most of the marine species were documented to be voracious pack hunters, comparable to the piranha back on earth.

More importantly, deadly bacteria and viruses also started infecting the humans, which made the early colonizers take a drastic step- genetic engineering. The first generation of humans to be born on Kepler was genetically engineered. Men and women who were selected by scientists, donated their sperm and ova to be genetically modified and fertilized via in vitro fertilization and later implanted into the female's body or a specialized bionic womb machine, depending on whatever the scientists thought was fancy. This resulted in better progeny that would transmit the standardized modifications down the line. The initial standardized modification, was an alteration to their immune system, making it strong enough to evade the deadly pathogens on Kepler.

Later, more standardized modifications were introduced in the population, that included increased muscle density, higher hearing ability on par with bats, night vision, smelling sense as good as an earth dog's and titanium bones. Over the course of fifty thousand years, their blood developed healing properties and was virtually resistant to everything. The Keplers also institutionalized a license, for young adults, for pushing their physical and mental abilities to the limit, by using a recombinant DNA drug. They called that program as the *Infiniti* and it became hugely popular among the Kepler boys and girls.

The Keplers were governed by the Kepler Federation, which overlooked every aspect of the Keplers and maintained friendly relations with the other human colonies.

Speaking of the Keplers itself, they were a fascinating people. They literally came in all sorts of shapes and sizes. If you were looking for noses of every kind and eyes of every color, you were bound to find them among the Keplers. Though this might suggest comic chaos to you, the Keplers were pretty serious people, with a serious sense of seriousness. Following the early years of extensive genetic engineering to make themselves formidable to their trying environment, they later stopped all sorts of further modifications to themselves and allowed nature to take its course, without any future interference from the Keplers themselves. So, men who came with all sorts of noses, pretty and ugly fell in love with women, who too came in all sorts of shapes and sizes, without any hindrances on the part of their society, pressurizing the couples to engineer "dream" children.

Thus, love blossomed on Kepler throughout the ages. The Keplers married (and often remarried) and had a great deal of children, with varying degrees of funny noses and ears, continuing to this day.

The planet Gliese 832c was rechristened as Elveden, by its inhabitants who evolved into a new

species, *Homo elvis*. The Elveden people faced little challenge on their planet, which was comparable to earth, with a lot of green vegetation and small furry animals that posed no threat to the newcomers. As time flowed by, evolution gave the Elveden people, the power of Extra Sensory Perception, a power that was even more trained to be used to its greatest potential by the people. They soon could control lesser intelligent life forms with their minds and also control the growth of plants around them. The Elveden Eleven, a group of the wisest Elveden appointed by the people, were the caretakers of the people. In the Elveden society, the women were greatly respected, in particular for their wisdom and splendid beauty.

The Elveden were generous, pure and to cut off the long description short, they were pretty nice and beautiful but were also capable of extreme jealousy and sometimes, pride. The only flaw in their legendary beauty, one would say is that when their faces got contorted with anger, they usually resembled big pink-faced macaws. Other than that, they were just too beautiful, making any verbal or written effort futile in explaining their beauty.

Kapteyn b was home to the *Homo albeins*, who named their planet as Albein. Being the most habitable planet of the four colonies, Albein had its own biodiversity that the human colonizers had to get accustomed to. This challenging environment promoted further evolution of their brains and at the end of fifty thousand years their brains were heavier by three hundred grams compared to the average brain size of the other three Homo species.

They also arose to become the most technologically advanced of the four colonies but they weren't that inclined into genetic engineering as somehow their bigger brains had also developed bigger guilt centers, forcing them to put ethical restrictions on their genetic engineering research. So, when they had heard news of the Keplers modifying themselves, they developed a genuine distaste for them and maintained merely polite relations with them.

Their ruling government came to be called The Albein Senate, the most organized and complex government that only the Albeins could come up with. The Albeins took almost take too much pride in their knowledge and in their large brains and yes, as you may have guessed right, they were irritating narcissists.

The Albeins generally had broader foreheads than any of the other human races, a clear indicator of their bigger brains. Though the Albeins had their share of funny noses and ears, they cared absolutely nothing for external appearances but rather focused on the size of foreheads when it came to making new friends or potential life-mates. Similar forehead-sized Albeins got along with each other than with dissimilarly sized ones. If anything suggestive of any sort of discrimination existed on Albein, it was purely based on the size of foreheads. The bigger they were, the better, the smaller, well, I leave it to your splendid imagination.

Finally, we come to the planet HD 40307 g, a planet characterized by extreme cold all year round. However, the early human colonizers managed to build a settlement for themselves amidst the harsh climate.

This planet experienced great snowstorms, storms as big as the Great Red Spot on the Jupiter, which is spectacular to look at, safely far away on a telescope but a nightmare worse than death to experience personally on a daily basis. These violent snowstorms destroyed the human spaceships within months of their landing, cutting their contact from the rest of the other colonies.

The Albeins were the only people interested in them, that too, purely for research purposes, a kind word for evil curiosity. They put satellites on their planet, which they named as Aura and tried to get a glimpse of the lost humans. However, they never got any conclusive evidence for the existence of those humans. Whatever they thought was proof, failed to impress others and the whole project was shelved, the final conclusion being that the planet Aura had no live humans left but there continued to be rumors that the Aureans might have evolved into something sinister and dangerous, living underground. No evidence existed for that story, and it remains as it was, a rumor to this day.

With the exception of Aura, of which no one knew anything, life on the other three colonies went on quite smoothly. The evolved humans still were comparable to their ancestors on earth in many ways. They still had no idea about the ‘meaning of life’, spawning endless thousands of philosophers lost in thought and a huge fog of cigar smoke and drug stashes around them. There was still the clear demarcation between the rich and the poor. The rich still got fatter while the poor fancied themselves lucky if they managed to have their skeletons with them when they woke up. The ‘tall and lean’ fad still continued after fifty thousand years and men still continued to be visual creatures making no attempts to look at the ‘inner beauty’ of women, except in a ‘pun’ way.

The most important similarity, however, was that the evolved humans still were unsuccessful with contacting extraterrestrials or simply remained clueless to the fact, that they were being watched all the time.

2 THE SIGN

“Wake up, son!” cried Amanda, for the umpteenth time.

“Waaaaaaaargh!” said Troy, in his sleep, turning around cozily in his bed.

“Do you know what day it is?” said Amanda, excitedly.

“Susie!” said the honey blond haired boy in his dream.

“WHO? Who’s Susie, Troy?” cried Amanda, shaking her son.

“Mum!” hollered Troy and woke up with a start.

“Who’s Susie, Troy?” asked Amanda, her face looking very serious.

“It’s no one, Mum!” replied Troy and wiped his drool with the edge of his pajama shirt.

His mother glared at him in return.

“If you have a girlfriend, let me know, son,” said Amanda softly.

Troy looked at his mother, doubtfully.

What is she trying to get at?

He maintained silence, not knowing what to do.

“You know you can trust me,” said Amanda reassuringly.

Troy started thinking. His mother wasn’t like the others. She was the *most* possessive mum anyone could have.

She neither liked him having any girlfriends nor had allowed anyone in their family to get close to him, whom she thought, would separate her son from her. She always seemed to have the fear of losing her son, whom she considered her only treasure in the whole universe. She hadn’t always been outrageously possessive like this. Only after a particular incident, Amanda had changed completely.

Is it okay to tell her? She seems to be fine with the whole “girlfriend” thing now, judging by the way she is speaking. Or is it a trap?

Troy, however, decided to tell Amanda,

“Well, Mum.....”

“Yes, son,” said Amanda and smiled at him.

Being reassured by his mum’s smile, Troy splattered out without having any second thoughts, “Well, Mum, it wasn’t much. It was just a kiss, I honestly don’t know what to do next. I mean I think I am in love with her. I mean she’s so gorgeous that no boy in his right mind would say no to her. Seriously, mum, can I bring her home to.....”

Troy looked up at Amanda, who now stood over like a towering giant over him, her nostrils flaring red.

“You, Troy Dylan Zander are in big, big trouble. You are grounded for the whole month!” said Amanda, stressing each word so hard.

“But, Mum, I thought you were being.....”

“I am your mother, for God’s sake, Troy. How do you expect me to deal with this? Get up from your bed and brush your teeth, right now,” commanded Amanda and walked out of Troy’s bedroom, muttering that he was just like his father.

“Well, that went well,” muttered Troy.

“Good morning, Troy!” said Max, the Zander home’s AI, the voice booming off the in-built speakers in the walls.

“Good morning, Max,” replied Troy unenthusiastically.

“You seem unhappy, Troy,” said the young cheerful female voice.

“Now, did you get that from me being flushed red here?” scoffed Troy.

“I got that from your voice, it’s unnaturally low and sounds sad,” replied Max.

“Oh, go away, Max, if you only could change my mother, instead of proving to me how smart you really are!” said Troy and buried his head on the soft red jelly bed.

“As you wish, Troy, I’ll let your mother know how unhappy you really are.”

“Oh, don’t do that, Max!”

“I am sorry, Troy, your mother has requested every conversation that we have.”

“Since when did she say that?” cried Troy, in disbelief.

“On the way out from your room, Troy!” replied Max, irritatingly calm.

Troy suppressed all his anger and bit his red jelly pillow.

“Is there anything else, you need, Troy?”

“Nothing at all, Max, thank you!” replied Troy, clenching his teeth.

“Right then, Troy,” said Max.

Stupid machine, thought Troy, and Mum, totally unbelievable, she had asked Max to spy on me. I had no privacy, no life of my own. Damn it all.

Later, when Troy came downstairs into the living room, wearing a light blue tee, a button less shirt over it and dark brown pants. He looked around for his mother but there was no sign of his mom anywhere.

“Where’s Mum, Max?” asked Troy.

“She’s gone to the Federation Headquarters to meet Mr. Hugo Falcon, Troy.”

“What? I was supposed to go with her today, this was once in a lifetime chance to meet my hero!” cried Troy.

“She did mention one thing, before leaving,” said Max.

“And what was that?” asked Troy, disgruntled.

“She told me to convey you the message that this was your punishment, Troy,” replied Max.

“For kissing a girl?” asked Troy, with his eyes popping out in disbelief.

“It’s most probable.”

Totally pissed off, Troy sank on the leather couch and let his mind wander, to distract himself from the

sucky reality that he faced.

His mind hit on Hugo Falcon, more popularly known as The Falcon on his planet. He was the greatest adventurer, the Keplers had ever seen. Since, Kepler was essentially an ocean planet all of Falcon's adventures had been underwater. His triumphs included facing the darkest and the most dangerous of all the sea creatures known as the mythical Osiris that lived only in the deepest pockets of the ocean. The Osiris are described as demons, as almost the size of a medium sized space ship, with an armor that is impenetrable to all the Kepler guns and lasers and the worst part, was that they hunted in herds, not in ten or twenty but hundreds of large-sized monsters that came at you, giving you not even a fighting chance and before you realized anything, you would end up in the Osiris' stomachs in pieces.

Falcon's footage of his team being hounded by the Osiris pack and him successfully killing an Osiris, by shooting right through its eye, had become all the rage on Kepler and the most viewed video clip on Hooloo, the planet's most famous video sharing website.

Troy had first heard of Hugo Falcon, from his father, who read him Falcon's adventures at night, before tucking Troy into his bed. It seemed like a long time ago, when everything had been perfect and Troy missed him now. Just to think of the way, he had died was too horrible. Troy shifted his glistening eyes to look at his home. He tried to break his focus on his dad but the memories were just too painful and there had been someone else too. He turned around uncomfortably on the couch. As he turned, he felt the soft rich leather skin of the couch and remembered the other night with Susie, her soft skin and the taste of her lips. Troy smiled. He definitely wanted to meet her again. He didn't want to miss out on a girl like that.

Somehow, he felt that the grounding was worth it. Troy put his hands beneath his head and turned to face the ceiling. Max was playing a romantic number "You shall always be mine!" by Barbara Swing.

Troy made a funny face, and wondered whether Max had started playing the song in reaction to reading his feelings. Troy was tempted to ask but decided not to, remembering his mom and his stomach. He was hungry.

"Max?"

"Yes! Troy!"

"Hungry!"

"One minute!"

In less than a minute, a tray full of food whizzed out of the kitchen and hovered in front of Troy, before settling down on the glass table.

Almost, everything in the Zander home was controlled by Max, as it was in all the other Kepler homes by other customized AIs. All these AIs were in turn connected to each other, kind of making a global network. Everything in the home was connected to the AI and controlled, and if needed, along with a propellant system.

"Fresh green salads, bread and mermaid egg frittata, Troy," announced Max.

“I love mermaid eggs!” said Troy excitedly and launched onto the frittata. “Entertainment, Max!”

The white wall and the space in front of Troy suddenly came alive in response. A giant ten limbed blue lizard monster came running towards him being chased by men in spacesuits. With great ferocity, the monster lunged towards Troy, freezing his every nerve and letting the frittata fall from his mouth. As he watched on, spellbound, a shower of rockets shot off the movie, blasting the monster into a thousand simmering pieces that disappeared on reaching within an inch of Troy’s eyes.

“This reality render tech never stops amazing me!” said Troy, gorging on his salad happily, referring to the technology that allowed him to watch his entertainment as if it were happening right before him.

“Troy!” said Max suddenly, in an alarmed tone.

“Not now, Max!” said Troy, actively filling his mouth with frittata.

“Bad news, Troy, You got to see this!” insisted Max.

“Oh! Shut up Max!” replied Troy. “I am trying to eat here!”

Max didn’t reply. Instead, she stopped playing the movie and started displaying another video where buildings were being blown apart without any apparent attackers.

“Why did you change the movie, Max?” asked Troy, irritated.

“Kepler is under attack, Troy, The capital is being demolished. This is a live feed.”

“Holy Mermaids! What’re you sayin’?” shrieked Troy, dropping his salad bowl onto the floor.

“The attack began about fifteen minutes ago,” said Max.

“Mum!” yelled Troy, jumping from the couch.

“She is safe for now, the Headquarters has been demolished. She has instructed you to stay here, until she comes.”

“God no! Max, where is she? Show me where she is, right now.”

“She is within a two mile radius from the Headquarters, Troy.”

“Get out the Warswagger now!”

“No way, Troy, the instructions are clear. You are to stay put, until she comes.”

“God, I hate arguing with you!”

“I am sorry, Troy.”

Troy didn’t reply and remained silent.

“You are up to something, aren’t you?” asked Max, suspiciously.

“Activate Whizzling Whizzler, the magic words being, shut up Max!” said Troy, to which Max shut

down within a blink of an eye.

“I am sorry too, Max,” said Troy and ran out through the main door.

He went to the garage and pressed his password, followed by his whole body biometrics scan test. He stood at the entrance and saw the garage roof descend to the ground, revealing the pride of his youth, the Warswagger, the most definitive space bike with balls, to put it in Troy’s own words.

The Warswagger was an eleven foot long bike convertible, made with reinforced iridium. The Warswagger could reach supersonic speeds and was bloody combat ready, with full AI support of Max’s, making it the most prized bike on Kepler.

Troy mounted the Warswagger, took something from a hidden compartment in the tank and placed it in a flash inside his pant pocket. Then, he switched the bike on.

“Whizzling Whizzler! Get me Max in the Chained mode!” said Troy.

A moment later, Troy heard Max’s dry emotionless voice.

“Troy.”

“I need your help, but don’t try anything to restraint me or else my virus will shut you down again,” said Troy.

“Clever of you, really clever, I never thought you could make a virus as powerful as this.”

“No time for autographs, let’s go!” told Troy as he kicked in the gear, rolled the throttle and the Warswagger blasted out of the garage onto the lavender sky.

Within fifteen minutes, Troy started getting glimpses of the damage inflicted on Kepler by the unseen attackers.

“Talk to me, Max!” said Troy, his heart beating fervently. “Is it some sort of a coup or something?”

“No, Troy, Kepler intelligence thinks it’s an alien attack.”

“What? Aliens in this part of the galaxy, that’s impossible!”

“The Kepler Federation has kept this under wraps for the past few months but the Federation had been getting strange signals from outer space. They could neither decrypt the signals nor pinpoint the source of the signals.”

“How do you know all this?”

“It’s all over the news, Troy. I have located your mother. She’s due northwest, 1.25 miles out.”

“Thanks!”

Troy slowed the Warswagger, as he neared his mother’s location. He couldn’t see anything as he entered the epicenter of the attack.

“Max, I can’t see a thing!” said Troy, “Max!”

Max didn't reply.

"MAX!" shouted Troy to no avail.

"Wait!" replied Max, in a hushed tone.

"What is it, Max?"

"Wait for my call!"

"Max!"

"Shut up!"

"Tsokay!" said Troy, which meant the same as okay in Standard Order English.

Troy waited with baited breath, sweating and then suddenly out of the blue, Max yelled, "GO!"

Troy, at once, rolled the bike out of the smoke forwards.

"TO YOUR RIGHT NOW!" yelled Max. "AND NOW CLIMB!"

Troy pulled the handlebar towards his chest, and the Warswagger shot up into the sky at ninety degrees to the ground, nearing supersonic speed.

"Unchain me from the Whizzler now, Troy," said Max.

"Alright!" said Troy, out of fear. "Whizzler, deactivate!"

"Thank you!" said Max politely and rolled out two blasters, from the Warswagger's rear and started pumping plasma shots.

"What was that?" cried Troy.

"We are being surrounded!"

"I don't see anyone!" replied Troy, his heart beating even faster.

"That's because they cannot be seen with your eyes! You should have never come out here, Troy!"

"What are they, Max!" cried Troy.

"I don't know!"

"How do you someone's here?"

"I am getting unusual signals from this place, that's how."

"Max! Learn all you can about this attack! I'll look around for mother."

"No, I am going to call for help, Troy."

"Do as I say, Max!" said Troy while he turned the Warswagger around and looked down, the smoke was spreading fast around the epicenter and buildings were falling down as the smoke spread around

them.

“Give me a dual infrared-sonar view, I am going in. Those busters are in the smoke,” told Troy, and blasted into the epicenter.

“I would advise against it, Troy.”

“They got my mother, Max, I don’t want to lose her too,” said Troy, fighting back tears.

“Yes, Troy, I understand but...” replied Max.

Troy vroomed in, avoiding Max’s reply, looking for his mother’s identity to pop up on the screen in front of him.

There were no signs of anybody out there.

“Where are all the people, Max?”

“They seem to be disappearing, Troy.”

“Are those attackers taking them? Do you still have a lock on Mum?”

“Yes, your Mum is still here, Troy.”

“Where?” shouted Troy, out of frustration.

“The readings are fussy, something seems to be interfering.”

“Max!”

“I am right here.”

“I have had enough, Max, I am going to go into Theta mode,” said Troy, referring to the *Infiniti* protocol.

“You are joking, right?” chuckled Max.

“No!” shouted Troy in return, unable to believe that Max was in a light mood now.

“You haven’t even cleared your beta levels, how can you ever-”

“Whizzler, take over!” said Troy, defiantly.

“No, Troy, I can’t let you do this!” pleaded Max.

“I am sorry, Max,” said Troy, as he jumped out of the Warswagger.

Troy ran blindly on the ground and started calling for his mother, trying to pick up on her scent. It was too weak for him to tell him, which direction to take.

“MUM!” he screamed, coughing in between because of the smoke.

His eyes watered and his throat burned but yet he persisted.

“MUM! MUM! WHERE ARE YOU?” he yelled at the top of his voice.

Suddenly, Troy heard a whizzing sound that settled behind him.

“Mum!” he called out, “Max, is that you?”

There was no answer.

Fear started making its way around Troy’s throat and his heart, slowly choking him. Troy shook himself free, closed his eyes and remembered the Theta mode protocol and he drew the injection, that he had earlier taken from the Warswagger, from his pant pocket and stabbed himself in the left arm. He stood motionless, as he felt the stimulant travel throughout his body. Once he felt the effects kick in, a few moments later, he lunged in sideways to his right, picking his mother’s scent more confidently.

Due to his heightened sense of awareness, Troy could feel the presence of other people with him. People, he could not see. They were moving along with him, parallel, drawing close to him by each passing moment. Troy spread his arms out, to strike them but he just struck the empty smoke-filled air and then he ran onto something solid in front of him that knocked him backwards. Troy got up, and then he was thrown out even farther by an unseen force. Troy landed on top of the Warswagger and rolled down onto the ground.

“Max, are you recording this?” cried Troy, tapping the little transmitter in his right ear.

“Yes, Troy, I am,” replied Max, quickly.

“Have you got anything?”

“I’m afraid not, Troy.”

Troy placed his hands on his face, in frustration and when he opened his eyes again, suddenly saw something like a sign in black, floating in the air right before him.

“What the heck?” Troy said, looking at the sign, which looked vaguely like a ‘J’ with three dots.



Troy blinked his eyes twice and looked at the symbol again. It just seemed like vapor rising in the air. Troy extended his hand towards it and touched it, at which the symbol tied itself around Troy’s hand

like a rope and pulled him down on the floor. As Troy fell, he felt something very cold, whiz right above him and almost closely shaving him.

“TROY!!!” cried Amanda, from behind Troy.

“MUM!” cried back Troy, as the weird sign disappeared and shot in the direction of his mother’s voice. He kept running but he couldn’t find her anywhere.

“She’s vanished, Troy,” reported Max.

“NO!” cried Troy, his eyes flooding with water and controllable rage surging through his veins.

“YOU BLOODY BAS-” swore Troy, as a huge explosion threw him away like a lifeless doll.

It was a massive explosion of light and of completely a different nature. It was difficult to tell the cause of the blast but it looked as if, the explosion of light had emerged from Troy.

As Troy flew away from the ground, Max guided the Warswagger to catch him midair, before crashing onto the ground.

“Troy!” called Max loudly.

There was no answer.

Max checked his vitals, he seemed to be fine but his brain was showing some unusual activity, otherwise he had been just knocked out cold.

3 ABOARD THE ORION SWIFT

“Dr. Fry, the boy’s up!” said an excited voice of a boy named Kru, around the same age as Troy’s.

“Well, that was quick!” remarked Dr. Fry, a tall, heavy set man with orange hair, rising from his chair in his office.

Troy looked up from his transparent coffin. He saw white everywhere, with tiny lights here and there. The ceiling seemed to be so far off, with tiny circular portholes, placed very high above. He lifted his head, and looked at hundreds of beds with transparent domes, all around. Troy thought he must be in

some kind of hospital or worse that he was being experimented upon, by the attackers. His adrenaline rushing, he snatched out the nasal mask that was placed on his face, in anxiety.

“Easy there, boy!” shouted Dr. Fry, rushing towards Troy’s Teradome, the official name for the medical coffin in which Troy was lying.

Troy punched on the glass of the Teradome, and cracked it, making Dr. Fry run even faster towards him and call loudly for help.

“We need help in here! Call the other Keplers!” cried Dr. Fry.

Anyway before the Keplers could come, Troy broke through the Teradome and stood in the path, still wearing his dark brown organic pants, blue tee and a white loose button less shirt. He looked confused and pretty aggressive.

“Easy boy, we aren’t here to harm you!” said Dr. Fry, motioning his hands to indicate no harm, stopping right in his tracks at a safe distance from Troy.

Troy looked at him and the others, they looked similar to him.

Where they Keplers? No, they weren’t, but they still spoke the Standard Order English. They had to be one of the other two known colonies. Anyway, a far more intelligent alien could be using the language in order to trick him or even worse, this whole thing might be just sort of a hallucination, that the aliens were putting him under.

Troy decided to be defensive.

“Who are you?” asked Troy.

“We mean no harm, young man,” replied Dr. Fry, who held his ground a few meters away from Troy.

“I asked who you are?” yelled Troy, angrily.

Dr. Fry removed his white coat, revealing the Albein emblem that was of a constellation of seven stars, surrounding the alphabet ‘A’ shining against a violet background on the left side of his chest on his maroon body suit.

Albeins...

Troy was still not convinced.

“Do you have my mother?” he called, realizing how stupid his question was, a moment later.

“Young man, we can help you out, if only you would let us,” appealed Dr. Fry, trying to look as innocent as he could.

“Don’t come near me!” warned Troy, stepping back as soon as he saw Fry approaching him.

At that moment,

“TROY!” shouted a familiar voice, from behind Dr. Fry.

“MUM?” cried Troy, his heart skipping a beat.

Amanda rushed forth, and hugged Troy, kissing repeatedly on his forehead.

“Mum, you are alright!” cried Troy, relieved.

“Yes son, I am, thank goodness that you are too,” said Amanda, looking at her son, her beautiful face worn out by years of worry and tears.

“What happened, Mum?” asked Troy, still holding his mother tight.

Before Amanda could explain, all of a sudden, red lights and a very loud alarm went off.

“Back to the Atrium now!” cried Dr. Fry, motioning towards the mother-son duo.

Everyone rushed through the small pathway that lead from the medical bay into a landing with fifteen elevators, while some of the medical team rushed to attend to some of the Teradomes.

Troy ran with his mother behind the Albeins and the other rescued Keplers. The elevators opened onto a very large area, where hundreds were already assembled. There were a lot of maroon body suits. A small group of around a hundred Keplers were standing to their right, where Amanda joined along with Troy.

A man’s gruff voice suddenly boomed throughout the Atrium,

“It is requested of everyone on this ship that they go to their designated cabins and stay inside them. You will be notified of them at the end of this announcement.”

Amanda turned to face her son,

“It’s going to be alright, Troy,” she said and smiled.

“Don’t worry about me, mom,” replied Troy, trying to smile back.

Soon, an Albein official came by and started allocating cabins to the Keplers, with four in each room.

“Cabin 317, if you would please!” said the tall female Albein official, scratching her long pointy nose and motioning towards a door labeled 317.

Two Kepler women went in and then Amanda held Troy’s hand and proceeded to go, when Troy abruptly stopped her.

“Mum!”

“What is it, Troy?”

“I think I’ll go with the men.”

“But baby-”

“I’ll be fine, don’t embarrass me here,” he croaked, looking at others who were staring at them.

Amanda looked disturbed for a moment and then she smiled.

“Well then, Troy, go on,” said Amanda.

“Thanks!” coughed Troy gratefully.

“Troy! I just want you to know, that the Falcon is here too,” said Amanda.

“Wow! Great!” grinned Troy happily, forgetting for a moment all that had happened in the past few hours.

The Albein official flashed a smile at the duo and looked at the rest of the Kepler contingent.

“If the rest would follow me now, please!” she said politely and moved on

As the women were being assigned cabins, Troy joined the Albein official at her side.

“Ma’am, can you tell me where Mr. Hugo Falcon is?”

“Mr. Hugo Falcon?” asked the official doubtfully, as she walked.

“Yes! Mr. Hugo Falcon! My Mum said he’s here in this ship, but he’s not here in this group.”

“Oh! It must be that ill-mannered scallywag!” she hissed.

“Excuse me?” said Troy, completely oblivious to what she said.

“He is with the Kepler Premier on the Command Bridge,” she said and forced a polite smile.

“Can I...can I join him?” Troy stuttered, knowing the answer even before he asked.

The official glared at him in return and she stopped to assign another cabin, before she turned to say,

“Obviously not!”

Troy hung his head in dejection and trudged along.

It wasn’t long before he was given a cabin with three other Kepler men.

The cabin was huge and Troy was amused by the size of it. The cabin was big as his bedroom back on Kepler. There were four beds in the four corners of the room, with its own bedside table.

The cabin was snow white as was everything in it and the white light that bathed the room came from above the translucent ceiling.

“Welcome aboard the Orion Swift, an Albein Transporter Space Vessel,” announced the male voice of an AI. “Meal time will be announced shortly. In case of any clarifications or doubts, you can get my help from your DeskComs.

“It is referring to the bedside tables,” said a bearded man in a tattered yellow shirt, looking at Troy.

Troy nodded sheepishly.

Why does everyone treat me like a small kid?

Troy sank on his bed in the corner. The bed felt too good to be true. It felt as if the bed were massaging him.

These Albeins and their technology...

Troy lay down and allowed his senses to float, in the ecstasy offered by the bed.

“This is good, really good,” Troy said to himself.

“You are Dylan’s kid, right?” asked the bearded man.

Troy squeezed his eyes shut. He hated conversing with people as a general rule. He made friends and most of his conversations as a consequence and never by choice. So he wasn’t really looking forward to this conversation, either and that too, involving his dad.

“Yes, I am. Troy Zander, by the way,” replied Troy, sitting up, reaching out his hand to the bearded man.

“Jim Bobbers!” said the bearded man, shaking Troy’s hand.

Troy managed a polite smile.

“You are not really the talking type, are you?” asked Jim, grinning at him.

Troy just grinned in return.

“Not really!” said Troy.

“Your father was a great man. Such men are the ones needed in crisis times like this.”

Troy shook all over and hung his head, to not let his emotions show.

“I am sorry, boy! I am sorry, I didn’t mean to-” panicked Jim, placing his hands on Troy’s shoulders.

“Leave the kid alone, Bobbers, we got more important stuff to deal with,” called a mean middle-aged man, whose bed was near the door.

Jim looked guilty as he took one look at Troy and turned. Troy sunk back on his bed and turned to face the wall.

Why? Why these people had to always do that?

Troy squirmed.

All of these events were yet unexplained. What about Kepler? What about the other people? Jim was right, had dad been around, things would have been different, totally different.

Troy could hear the three Kepler men speaking in hushed voices, as if they didn’t want him to listen as to what they were speaking. Troy kept turning uncomfortably in his bed, till suddenly it was meal time.

“It’s supper time. Follow the luminescent green arrows along the surface, outside your cabin to the dining hall,” announced the AI.

The instructions proved needless as an Albein official, opened the door, waiting to escort them to the dining area.

Supper proved to be uneventful. Troy looked around for his mother in the dining hall, but she was nowhere to be found. He settled at one of the hundreds of long tables with tiny hemispherical projections that were present in front of every diner. It sprang to life every now and then and resulting in trays magically appearing and disappearing on the tables all over the place.

“Teleportation,” muttered Troy and chuckled to himself.

Well, it was expected of the Albeins to be this advanced. Troy didn’t feel anything odd about it, as did many of the other Keplers. Teleportation technology was common back on Kepler too, but it was rarely used in such dramatic ways like the Albeins. So, there were naturally a few, who were totally unsettled by it, like one Kepler woman screaming her head off on seeing her plate disappear, on the next row next to Troy’s.

The only thing that Troy noticed odd was that a tall lanky young Albein around his age, who was arguing with other older Albeins, constantly motioned towards him, with his hands, throughout the entire meal. Troy avoided looking at them and kept his head low, avoiding those Albeins’ gaze, whenever they turned around to look in his direction.

Feeling slightly depressed and uncomfortable in a new place, Troy ate very little of the crispy bread and dark green soup that had been served and returned to the cabin area.

He wanted to see his mother and thought he would go to her cabin but decided against it, on the way back and went to his room and fell on the bed again. He didn’t know what to do. Feeling bored, Troy activated his DeskCom. A holographic user interface popped before him, with the Orion Swift as its wallpaper.

“Hi!” said the AI. “How may I help you?”

“Is there a porthole in this cabin?”

“Yes but I am afraid that I can’t open them right now, sir!”

“Why not?” questioned Troy.

“I am sorry, sir, but I am not allowed to, right now.”

Damn it...wish I had the Whizzler now...Whizzler!...Max!... my Warswagger!

Troy felt his right ear where he had had the transmitter. It wasn’t there anymore.

Of course...

They had removed it from him. Feeling completely messed up, Troy found it too much to deal with his losses today and thought that it would be better to sleep. He shut his eyes and hoped sleep would

take him over.

Thankfully for him, that one wish was granted quickly.

Later, suddenly in the dark, Troy felt being shaken by his shoulders by someone. As his typical reflex action, Troy grabbed his nighttime visitor by the wrists and locked them in a painful position.

“Oooowww!”

Troy could see him in the dark. It was the same guy that he had seen motioning towards him, at supper time.

“What do you want?” Troy hissed.

“I mean no harm. I am Kru, by the way,” giggled the boy, at how Troy was startled.

“What do you want, Kru?”

“I am here regarding something.”

“What?”

“Um…”

“Tell me!” commanded Troy.

“It’s about your vehicle.”

“The Warswagger! Do you have it?” asked Troy, excited, to finally hear news of his beloved machine.

“Yes, we do!”

“What about Max, is she still functional?”

“Yes, yes, yes, but now please let me go now or else my wrists are going to snap if you keep holding that way!” pleaded Kru.

“Alright! Alright!” whispered Troy loudly, letting go of him.

“Follow me!” said Kru as he felt his way out of the room followed by Troy.

Both of them emerged outside the room and Troy could look more closely at Kru. He was as tall as him, but looked lankier. He had a boyish face with loads of curly brown hair and a look like that of a toddler’s.

“Your vehicle has been kept in the Arkylum,” whispered Kru and by ‘Arkylum’ he referred to the Archives.

“How did you even-”

“Be quiet and follow me, we’ve only got a three minute window.”

Troy raised his eyebrows and stopped him.

“What do you think you are doing?” asked Kru, growing anxious by the minute

“I want some answers now!”

“You’ll get your answers down in the Arkylum, trust me,” reassured Kru. “As for now, follow me.”

Troy kept silent and ran behind him. There was no one in the path they were taking. They took the elevator to the deepest part of the ship. Lights turned on, as they exited the elevator.

A giant gray circular door was before them. A giant plate above the door read Arkylum.

“Just give me a moment!” said Kru and he muttered something onto his transmitter.

In less than a moment’s notice, the giant circular door huffed and puffed, and opened with a lot of white gas diffusing towards them.

“Avoid breathing that gas, it can make you dizzy for a while,” said Kru as he held his breath and went through the mist into the Arkylum.

Troy followed him into a very large bay, which reminded him of an ancient history museum back on Kepler. They seemed to be an unlimited number of rows and columns distributed over the length and breadth of the place. There were twenty floating platforms right above each other in each column, each hosting objects locked inside transparent boxes.

“Your vehicle is in B 99,” announced Kru. “It’s quite close by, we don’t need to use the flying scoos.” gesticulating towards a line of what seemed to be wheel-less bikes, on their right.

Troy was tempted to ask what they kept here, but then realized that he had a horde of other important questions to ask first.

“Why are you helping me?” asked Troy.

“Because I think you are interesting!”

“WHAT?” said Troy, taken aback by the answer.

“I mean, I mean, tsokay, I’ll start over. Your biology isn’t like the other Keplers, the Teradome-”

“Tera what?”

“It’s the medical apparatus that you broke today!”

“Oh! Yes!”

“The Teradome picked some unusual signals from your brain and the presence of an uncharacterized drug in your system.”

“It’s not a drug, it’s a stimulant.”

“Stimulants are drugs.”

“I see.”

“You are different.”

“Tsokay! Fine!” Troy said, feeling weird about the way their conversation was going. “What really happened today?”

“The four colonies are being attacked by yet an unidentified alien force. We couldn’t save our planet but as figured as much we’ll save the others.”

“We have no idea about them?”

“No, not yet but I think we can get an idea from your vehicle.”

“Really?” asked Troy, in disbelief.

“I believe that the aliens attacking us are invisible to us because they have somehow found out as how to manipulate dark matter, which is also invisible to our eyes. Dark matter only interacts with gravitational forces and nothing else,” said Kru, looking very serious. “Just a few minutes before we rescued you, our ship picked up a distorted gravitational field from the place you were found. Since we couldn’t send a ground team to rescue you, we teleported you along with your vehicle and when I ran diagnostics on your vehicle, I found that your AI system had a video corresponding to the time, when we had initially picked up the peculiar readings.”

“So you think the video might give us an idea about the attackers?”

“Yes, I think the blast which disrupted the gravity force could also have messed up the dark matter technology, which I guess the aliens were using as some sort of an invisibility shield. I am not completely sure, it’s just all a big guess,” stated Kru.

“Right!” said Troy. “You didn’t tell any of the other Albeins about this?”

“No!” said Kru nervously. “I wanted to be sure of it myself, that’s why I called you. I can’t get your AI to show me the video. It asked for your authorization.”

“And I thought that you thinking that me being interesting, was the reason you brought me here,” joked Troy, before he realized how weird it sounded.

“Yes, you are, after all, you are the only thing explaining the disruption in the gravitational field with that drug in your system and your unusual brain activity.”

“Or the brain activity could be just a side effect of the drug and the disruption due to something else completely different,” said Troy coolly.

“Yes, that’s possible too,” said Kru, getting confused.

“Let’s just for now focus on the task at hand,” said Troy and smiled.

They reached B 99 soon. Troy looked up at the Warswagger, on the penultimate floater from the top.

Kru pressed an imaginary button in front of him.

“What are you doing?” asked Troy, amused.

“The computer is in my eye lens,” he explained grinning, pointing to his eye lenses. “It reads my hand movements.”

“Weird!” Troy cooed.

“It’s super cool! You must try it sometime!” Kru said enthusiastically as the floater holding the Warswagger moved forward from its position and descended softly, without even making a hissing noise.

“Max!” called Troy, as he jumped onto the floater before it had even descended completely.

“Hi Troy!” said Max, as the Warswagger was activated by Troy’s voice.

“There you are!” grinned Troy, feeling the battered Warswagger.

“Here we are.” replied Max happily.

“What about this attack, Max?” said Troy, turning serious.

“Yes, Troy, I have collected information as you requested.”

“Does the video show anything?” asked Troy with bated breath, as Kru joined him.

“Yes, Troy, there is something in the video you need to see,” replied Max.

“Show us!” said Troy, his curiosity spiking like a hot spring, gushing fresh from the ground.

Max projected the video as a holographic projection, from the Warswagger. The video started with two blasters emerging off the rear of the Warswagger and shooting bullets at the centre of the smoke filled epicenter. The video continued to show Troy jumping out of the Warswagger and running madly and then, there was it, the explosion but it was all over in just under a second.

“Max!” called Troy, afraid that the video almost virtually showed nothing important.

“On it!” replied Max, as she slowed down the video and replayed the explosion.

The video now showed, Troy floating above the ground, before a huge ring of white light exploded around his body. The explosion seemed to disrupt the air around, sending lightening blue electric sparks, everywhere and then they saw it. A grayish form, just in front of Troy, projecting out what seemed to be like a hand and as the video progressed, something turned towards the camera. It was a head, smiling maliciously, at the camera, as if the alien knew that he was being filmed.

“It’s human!” gasped Kru.

“Dad?” whispered Troy, frozen as he felt his world crash in grossly from within.

4 THE HUNTER FLEET

There was fire everywhere and there was blood shed. Elveden was under attack from invisible aliens. The drifting mansions in the sky that the Elveden had built were falling down like shooting stars and chaos reigned everywhere.

“Sephora, what do we do now?” asked Torus, an elderly bearded man of the Elveden Eleven.

Sephora turned away from the holographic video display showing the horror outside.

“We do our best to save our people and continue to hope, Torus,” she said, as Torus nodded his agreement even before she had finished. “And the Elveden Eleven need to meet again now. Make arrangements.”

Torus immediately bowed his head and made out of the room. Sephora turned around to look through the window. Her face was troubled and looked as if she had aged ten years overnight.

Over the years, she had been hardened by her experiences but now even that hard shell that she had built around her wasn't enough to protect her from the impending doom that awaited her people.

She had failed to see this attack coming and now it was all going to get over, when the invasion once reaches their last refuge.

“Madam Argylwd, they are ready,” announced Torus, who arrived again in her presence after a couple of minutes.

Sephora snapped back into reality.

“I am coming,” she replied, in her warm, beautiful voice.

Sephora walked elegantly, as her white glowing suit transformed into her official dark blue robes, with the Elveden emblem of a majestic star nested atop a snow capped mountain, and the words Una Sempiternum written above the emblem, on the back of her robes.

Sephora entered the small grey room, where the other Elveden leaders were waiting. The air in the room seemed to be musty and suffocating but the people didn't seem to be affected by it, they were focused on much more grave matters at hand. Some of the leaders were pacing anxiously around the room, while the rest were talking loudly with each other.

“The Elveden Argylwd!” announced Torus, as Sephora made her way into the meeting room. The other leaders immediately formed two lines on either side of the room, making a way for Sephora to

walk through. Sephora went past them and turned to face them.

“My dear Elveden, how are we holding up at this hour?” asked Sephora.

“Our Elveden troops are being crushed at this moment, Madam Argylwd, it’s only a matter of time before the attackers reach us,” replied a short dark haired man.

“What about the evacuation efforts?” asked Sephora.

“All of the transporter space ships have been brought down by the enemy, Argylwd,” replied woman, called Fria.

“How many of our kind are alive?” pressed on Sephora, getting more disappointed with every passing answer.

“Less than a hundred thousand, with more falling by the minute,” said Mahon, a middle aged man with a thick golden moustache.

“What about the people in the underground escape routes?” Sephora asked.

“The enemy attacks are so strong that many of the underground escape tunnels have collapsed, Madam Argylwd,” said Eqqus, Sephora’s nephew.

“How many do we have here, under our protection, Eqqus?” asked Sephora, turning to him.

“Fifteen hundred and thirty two excluding the Elveden Eleven, Madam Argylwd,” replied Eqqus.

“Pardon me, Argylwd but I fear that this be our end,” said Fria, in a worried tone.

“No!” snapped Sephora, at her and then turned to the others. “What about the other colonies?”

“No contact, so far, Madam Argylwd,” replied Torus.

Sephora blinked fast to get rid of her tears, which had been building up since the meeting had started and said, “Let’s just keep hoping. We’ll defend the last of our Elveden people with our lives.”

“Argylwd, I think we should-” argued Mahon.

Sephora interrupted him and said, “We got to save what is left of us, Mahon. We will make one last effort to get the Elveden people out of this place to a safer place. It’s the only choice, we have!”

“Do you want us to carry out another evacuation, especially after those failed attempts?” asked Mahon.

“Yes, unless you have a better idea, Mahon,” Sephora said, looking at him in the eye. “This is our only chance. If we stay, we die. We have to get out and make contact with the other colonies.”

The other leaders discussed among themselves for a moment.

“So, everyone’s in agreement?” asked Sephora.

The others nodded their heads in agreement.

“Good!” said Sephora. “Eqqus, how much time do you estimate before the attackers reach us?”

“About seven hours, Madam Argylwd,” replied Eqqus.

“We leave in four hours,” said Sephora and walked out of the room.

As she walked by Torus, Sephora told him, “Torus, please tell my daughter to meet me upstairs.”

“Yes, Madam Argylwd,” said Torus and bowed deeply before her.

Sephora retreated to her quarters, a plain room with a bed. Sephora hadn't been a big fan of technology from her childhood and thus, kept her room, free of any sort of technology, though she couldn't completely eliminate it from her life as she had to wear nanobot clothing for security purposes.

As the invasion drew closer to the place to where she was standing, alone in her room, Sephora thought of the day when she had been first inducted into the Elveden Eleven. She had been the youngest Elveden to be appointed at the age of twenty one, in history. Within twenty years, she had become the Head of the Elveden Eleven with the title of Elveden Argylwd bestowed upon her. The journey hadn't been smooth. She had had her share of rebellions, troubles, envy and betrayals, including a betrayal that had almost killed her and had threatened her status as the Elveden Argylwd.

Sephora wiped the lone tear from her left eye. Her daughter had been the reason that she could recover from such a deadly blow to her life. Emilie was the reason she was alive and that too, still with a purpose. Suddenly, Sephora felt Emilie coming her way. At once, she made herself ready as Emilie entered the room.

Seeing her daughter, brought an instant smile to Sephora's face, her lips spreading apart in happiness.

“You called me mother?” asked Emilie, smiling.

“Yes, honey!” gasped Sephora, unable to control herself.

“What is it, mother?” asked Emilie, troubled.

“I just wanted to see you, darling,” replied Sephora, tears bursting forth from her eyes.

Emilie rushed towards her mother, and held her hand while wiping away her tears with the other.

“It's tsokay, mom,” consoled Emile. “Everything will be alright.”

Sephora hugged her daughter and sobbed.

“I am scared for Elveden, Emilie.”

“As you always say, mom, fear is our only enemy. Don't you remember?” pacified Emilie.

“Did I bring this upon our people?” asked Sephora, feeling a sudden pang of guilt.

“You know the answer, mom. There is no way you could have known, even with all the powers we possess. These attackers are more advanced than our civilization.”

“Thank you, Emilie,” said Sephora sniffing. “You’ve always been kind in light of my failures, right from your dad to this day.”

“Mom!” exclaimed Emilie, as if she were warning her. “I have told you on multiple occasions not to take the blame for what he did! And today is obviously not your fault! You just want it to be so that you can actually think that you had a sense of control over everything, which isn’t the truth at all. Certain things are out of our hands, mom. Please understand that!”

“Mmmm…” said Sephora, still looking unconvinced.

“I heard we are leaving in four hours, mom,” said Emilie, looking at Sephora, trying to distract her.

“Yes, what are the people thinking of it?”

“Mahon is going around, telling people it’s a suicide mission,” said Emilie and smiled.

“Well, practically, it is one,” smiled back Sephora, thinking about the pathetic odds that they had, of surviving the attack.

Emilie and Sephora looked at each other for a moment.

“I’ll stay with you, mom,” said Emilie, breaking the silence.

“Thank you, honey,” said Sephora gratefully.

Meanwhile, the Elveden space vessel, Hunter Fleet, was getting ready to carry out another outer space evacuation. The Hunter Fleet lay hidden behind the Jelantin Hills near the frigid South Pole of Elveden. The Hunter Fleet had been built as part of the Exodus Mission. The Exodus Mission was an ancient mission, whose sole purpose was to aid in evacuation of the Elveden from the planet under dire circumstances. This Mission also commanded extensive wide underground highways to be built, leading to the Exodus Stations housing transporter spaceships, to aid in retreat of the people from all over Elveden.

The early Elveden having understood the fragility of their planetary system had initiated the Exodus Mission to provide a route of escape, when the appropriate time came. There had been two other stations set up after the Hunter Fleet in similar uninhabited environments which were the Grus Velocie at the North Pole and Unger Run in the middle of a desert near the Elveden equator.

The first two evacuation missions had failed when these two space ships were shot down by the alien assailants, just a few hours before the Hunter Fleet had been commissioned to go on the final evacuation mission.

The Elveden Eleven, along with their families and major leaders in the Elveden government had been escorted to the Hunter Fleet at the slightest hint of an extraterrestrial attack, twenty one hours earlier that in Elveden terms, was almost exactly a day earlier. The influx of refugees had been heavy to the Grus Velocie and Unger Run stations in the wee hours of the attacks, owing to the closer distance from the densely populated cities, resulting in the early departures. The Hunter Fleet had almost been exclusively reserved for the Elveden government, due to its better security and seclusion from civilization. Now having two failed evacuation missions, the Elveden government sent messages all

over the globe, inviting the Elveden people to the Hunter Fleet station, though it seemed too late. The weapons of destruction employed by the aliens were so powerful that they destroyed many of the underground tunnel networks as well, though they were at depth of 7.5 miles from the surface.

At the close of three hours, only a little less than a hundred Elveden had made through to Hunter Fleet. The loading protocols and last minute diagnostics were running while the Elveden people refugees were assigned their cabins in the Hunter Fleet.

“Madam Argylwd!” called Eqqus, at the entrance to Sephora’s room.

Sephora and Emilie, who were sitting on the bed, looked at the young good looking lad.

“It’s time,” said Eqqus.

Sephora nodded and rose, with her daughter to leave.

Soon, Sephora along with the other Elveden Eleven members were ready to board the Hunter Fleet.

“Where are our troops?” asked Mahon, grunting at the lack of any personnel near the ships

“Where do you imagine they are, Mahon?” replied Torus.

Mahon looked away, avoiding Torus’ piercing gaze.

“Don’t look back now, Emilie, the future lies ahead of you now,” said Sephora, placing her hands on Emilie’s shoulders.

Emilie managed a weak smile and nodded. The Elveden Eleven moved in and the door was directed to close behind them, when Emile suddenly said, “Stop!”

“What Emilie?” Sephora asked gently.

“I said stop!” cried Emilie and darted towards the closing door and jumped off the ship, much to everyone’s surprise.

“EMILIE!” Sephora shouted, behind her daughter. “COME BACK!”

Eqqus at once, instructed the ship captain via telepathy of the current situation.

The door stopped moving and started moving in the reverse direction. Sephora and the others ran towards the door.

“What the hell does your daughter think she’s doing?” battered Mahon.

Sephora avoided his rude gaze, closed her eyes and read Emilie’s mind.

“She thinks someone might be in the tunnels now, she doesn’t want them to be left behind in case, they are Elveden,” declared Sephora, as she jumped off the edge.

“AND WHAT IF THEY ARE NOT ELVEDEN?” shouted Mahon, behind her.

“What are you picking up?” asked Sephora, as she joined her daughter in the icy weather below.

“I can sense someone in the tunnels leading up to here, I can’t make out who they are yet, Mom,” said Emilie, trying to concentrate hard.

“You do realize how dangerous this is right, hon. What if they are the aliens?” reasoned Sephora.

“And what if they are our people, mom? Can you live with the guilt?”

Sephora looked stunned for a moment.

“Are you sure, you aren’t picking anything, mom?” asked Emilie.

“No darling, I’m afraid I’m not!” replied Sephora.

“What the hell are those two doing there?” shouted Mahon, on the ship.

“They are making sure that no one is left behind, Mahon, unlike certain others who are all bent on saving their own asses,” said Torus in a cool manner, looking at the frigid weather outside.

Mahon shut his mouth in return.

“The signals are getting stronger, mom,” said Emilie.

“Alright, honey. Can you see them?” asked Sephora, in a calm voice.

Then suddenly as if she had woken up from a really bad nightmare, Emilie abruptly opened her eyes wide, panting like an animal and looked at her mom, horror-struck,

“IT’S THEM, MOM! RUN!” screeched Emilie.

Sephora grabbed her daughter’s hand and ran. Eqqus read the situation from Sephora’s mind and instructed the pilots for a quick take off.

The ground beneath them began to rumble, as Emilie cried, “Faster, mom, they are almost here!”

Eqqus took off in a Levitransporster, an Elveden version of an exploratory flying car with an open hood from the bay and went to collect them. As Sephora and Emilie climbed onto the Levitransporster, the station behind them exploded.

“Quick!” cried Sephora, as Eqqus maximized the car’s acceleration.

The Levitransporster shot forward like a fireball towards the Hunter Fleet.

Close the doors now, Eqqus commanded the captain telepathically.

The Levitransporster drew close to the ship when the car’s rear unexpectedly was shattered violently and the car started slowing down.

“My goodness!” cried Sephora.

Eqqus pulled the car up, so much as to get a trajectory enough to land inside the ship.

“It’s not going to be enough. We have to jump off the car now!” yelled Eqqus, as he quickly grabbed

Sephora and Emilie by their hips.

“No way, Eqqus, that’s not going-” squawked Emilie, as Eqqus shouted back.

“JUMP NOW!!!”

The trio jumped off the hood of the Levitransporster but midway in the air, something wrapped around Eqqus’ neck tightly and pulled him back.

Eqqus reacted with lightning fast reflexes. He pushed Sephora and Emilie forward, knowing that his own game was up.

Before both of them could turn to look at him, Sephora and Emilie crash landed inside the ship, sliding along the smooth surface of the closing door.

“Eqqus!” cried Emilie, too shocked to move, getting up at once to look at the closed doors.

The Hunter Fleet took off with a dull lift off the ground and Sephora sprinted towards the Levalator, an elevator that worked on magnetic levitation.

BRING ALL OUR DEFENSE SHIELDS INTO EFFECT NOW! Sephora told the captain via telepathy as she dashed inside the Levalator.

“TO THE COMMAND BRIDGE!” spat Sephora out, much before the AI could ask her.

The Levalator doors closed and took her to the Command Bridge in a couple of seconds. Sephora rushed out.

“Captain, how are we doing?” asked Sephora in a frantic voice.

The captain, who was a handsome man with a golden beard, replied,

“Madam Argylwd! We have employed all our defensive shields. The five layer shield is holding up well so far. Another ten minutes and we will be in space.”

“Are the computers picking up signals of the aliens?”

“I’m afraid not, Madam Argylwd.”

“These aliens are invisible. You know that right, captain?”

“Yes, I do, Madam,” replied the captain, patiently.

“You know why I am so anxious, Perrell,” breathed Sephora.

“Yes, Sephora,” replied Perrell softly, with a knowing look.

The captain and Sephora had known each other since their schooling days.

It was common knowledge that captain and Sephora had been close, closer than friends, when they were young.

It felt like those times again now. No one was there to be for her and comfort her, except him. Perrel

reached for Sephora's hands and held them. Sephora smiled but Eqqus' death hit her mind then and the smile faded away.

Perrell had never understood many of the things she told him about philosophy and biology back then. He had only always known how to fly and he was pretty much a dud in everything else but he had always admired the way she spoke and thus, spent hours on end listening to her, though he understood mostly nothing. He thought of the relationship they shared, which were the sweetest times of his life, until a particular person came along and he realized that he couldn't love her anymore. Perrell abruptly snapped back into reality. He withdrew his hands with a fake smile.

"Take your seat, Madam Argylwd," said Perrell, as his captain's seat came drifting by.

Sephora sensed the sudden change in Perrell and her smile disappeared as quickly as steam from a kettle.

"No, thank you, captain but I will stand," said Sephora defiantly.

"Alright!" muttered Perrell, looking down at the floor.

The bitter feelings that Perrell was feeling suddenly were replaced with fear as they heard a sharp detonation outside the ship making the Hunter Fleet almost rock like a cradle.

"What's happening?" yelled Perrell at his sub-ordinates.

"There was a large explosion on the starboard side, sir!" replied Allyson, one of Perrell's sub-ordinates.

"The shields?" asked back Perrell.

"Layers four and five are out on starboard side, sir," replied Hammun.

"Damn it!" Perrell bellowed. "We need to get offensive now!"

"Sir, we neither have any reading on their location nor the ability to read their movements!" said Allyson.

"Sephora!" said Perrell. "Emilie could read their movements, right?"

"Yes-" said Sephora and before she could say another word, Perrell began barking orders.

"Get Madam Argylwd's daughter here now and get the nuclear blasters out through the shields and start shooting sporadically."

Turning towards Sephora again, Perrell said,

"Don't worry for your daughter's safety but she is the only chance we've got. What Eqqus told me was amazing, that Emilie was able to read their movements."

Sephora didn't reply.

“Where is Eqqus by the way?”

“He is dead,” mumbled Sephora.

“What?” asked Perrell

“He is dead, Perrell,” said Sephora, with frustration and irritation mixed in her tone.

“My goodness!”

“Sir, we are being battered on every side, layer four is out and layer three is almost gone,” reported Allyson.

Perrell grimaced. This whole thing was finally starting to get to him.

“How much time till we make it into space?” asked Perrell.

“Eight minutes, sir,” replied Allyson. “But I believe that is where all our problems lay, sir.”

“What do you mean?” asked Perrell.

“Our Elvex bolometers are picking up massive dark matter readings from the space surrounding Elveden, sir. We also had unusually high dark matter readings from all over the planet where there were active attacks.” Allyson stopped to catch her breath. “I think they are invisible because they are using advanced dark matter technology, so this much dark matter outside our planet means that we have no chance whatsoever.”

Perrell heaved and his head seemed heavy all of a sudden.

If what Allyson told was true, the Hunter Fleet was going to end up like the other two space ships, thought Perrell.

He trudged towards the Communications and Alarm centre on the right side of the semicircular bridge and asked one of his officers,

“Where were the other two spaceships when they were compromised?”

“Just outside our atmosphere, sir,” said the officer, after checking his data on his computer.

Perrell sighed and looked at Sephora. She was standing there white with fear and head bowed down.

It seemed as if she already knew.

Meanwhile, Emilie had made to the Command Bridge along with Torus and other crew officers.

“Mom!” cried Emilie and ran towards Sephora, and held her hands.

“Emilie!” called Perrell. “There is something that is required of you now”

“Yes!” said Emilie, clasping her mother’s hand tightly.

“Can you read the alien movements?”

“Yes, I can-”

“Then why didn’t you tell us before?” questioned Perrell.

“Oh shut up, Perrell! She’s only a girl,” defended Torus.

“Alright,” said Perrell, glaring at him.

“I didn’t tell because it was of no use, we were being battered from all sides,” said Emilie, her pretty face stained with dry tears.

“We need you to read their location and movements now, when we make it out of Elveden atmosphere. Hopefully, we can hold off till we can escape them,” said Perrell and looked at Sephora, again. She looked devastated.

“Tsokay!” agreed Emilie, swallowing.

“One minute to go, sir,” reported Allyson.

“Instruct everybody to change into life support suits!” yelled Perrell and looked at Emilie. “Start away!”

One of the crew members handed Emilie a couple of small compact white cans, which were about five inches long each, that she placed at the side of her hips. Her nanobot dress, which had been assembled as a lavender suit absorbed the cans and reassembled into a dark gray life support suit, with a facial mask with an internal projected display that almost gave a realistic view, as if watching with one’s own eyes and without a mask on.

Once done, Emilie closed her eyes and concentrated on the alien signals.

She couldn’t get any. She tried harder and concentrated, she received a lot of noise and then she realized that she needed to get clear of the Command Bridge.

“I need to get out of here, from all of this unwanted noise signals. I need to get out,” said Emilie.

“Ten seconds to go, sir!” announced Allyson.

“Make it sixty!” Perrell commanded, “Take Emilie to the Gallery Deck now!”

Two male officers immediately ran towards the Levalator and Emilie ran behind them. They reached the Gallery Deck in five seconds and Emilie ran out on to the enclosed area, which had been built for viewing the cosmos, when the Hunter Fleet was in motion.

I am ready, Emilie told Perrell telepathically.

Emilie looked outside through the transparent aggregated diamond nanorods enforced glass. It was dark and seemed peaceful. It was quite hard to believe that somewhere out there lurked aliens who wanted to kill them so badly for no reason.

Emilie focused. For a moment, everything seemed smooth and then as the Hunter Fleet emerged out of Elveden’s atmosphere. Emilie felt a bolt of revelation and her mind saw the alien force, waiting to

slaughter them. She saw huge monumental black space ships that were thrice as big as the Hunter Fleet and there weren't just one or two. They were everywhere. Emilie was terrified at what she saw and she frantically searched for a way out. There were none, all the massive dark ships had closed in on them from all directions.

WHAT DO YOU HAVE? screamed Perrell in Emilie's mind.

They are everywhere! Emilie communicated back.

This can't be, were Perrell's last thoughts, as the aliens started raining their deadly ammo on the Hunter Fleet.

5 KRU'S SECRET

"Are you alright?" asked Kru, as the holographic projection faded away.

Troy wasn't able to move. Kru shook him by the shoulder.

"Hey!" called Kru.

"Yes!" said Troy, as if he had just come out of a delusion.

"What happened?"

"Nothing!" whispered Troy.

"I think we should tell them," said Kru.

"No!" said Troy and grabbed Kru's arms.

"Why not?" asked Kru, wondering why.

"We don't need to tell now, please understand!" insisted Troy.

"What's really going on?" inquired Kru, his suspicions rising.

Troy looked away to avoid Kru's stare.

"Tell me away!"

"It's tsokay, Troy, tell him," coaxed Max, as she abruptly entered the conversation.

"I don't want to!" coughed Troy, placing a hand on his mouth.

“Let me tell him, then,” said Max.

“No way, Max!” cried Troy, in horror.

“Troy, you have to entertain other possibilities too, it necessarily need not be the one possibility you came up with,” told Max, as Troy squirmed.

“Do you know that person who just came up on the video?” asked Kru, his eyebrows raised in suspense.

Cold sweat broke out on Troy’s forehead and palms and he swallowed his spit.

“No!” whispered Troy.

“You’re lying!” accused Kru.

“I’m not!” muttered Troy, as he collapsed onto the floor.

“Troy!” cried Kru and went closer to him, but Troy held up his hand indicating he needed no help.

“It was my father’s face that came up in the video,” announced Troy, at last.

“What?” cried Kru, “That’s impossible!”

“I don’t know what to think!” confessed Troy, his regular handsome voice having returned.

“It can’t be your dad, Troy,” said Max confidently.

“How?” asked Troy, anger boiling within him, for reasons he didn’t clearly know.

“Max! How many possibilities are possible for the current evidence under question?” asked Kru.

“Seven, Kru, the most relevant being the aliens possess some sort of a morphogen technology,” replied Max.

“What are the odds that it may not be dad, Max?” asked Troy.

“It’s almost impossible extrapolating from the data, I possess,” said Max.

“Run diagnostics, find whether it is dad or a morph,” instructed Troy, getting up.

“I already did. It’s a hundred percent match using facial recognition, Troy.”

“The authorities might have trouble with that little fact, even though you say that your father is no more,” said Kru, looking nervous.

Troy kept silent.

“Does this mean that your father might-” said Kru.

“NO!” snapped Troy and looked at Kru, with a blazing look.

Kru looked intimidated and he hung his head.

“What about his infrared signature?” asked Troy suddenly, trying hard to think of ways to alleviate his fears.

Max vanished for a moment.

“His temperature is eight degrees Celsius,” announced Max.

Troy felt a huge weight disappear from his heart, on hearing Max say that. He knew for certain, it had to be an alien and he didn't clear understand as how to they got to morph. Troy relied completely on this logic and felt safe inside that wall of reason. Meanwhile, he kept hoping that it wouldn't be anything else.

Kru looked astonished as well.

Troy looked at Kru and said, “You were right. We should tell the authorities.”

“That was just brilliant!” praised Kru, his twenty eight teeth all showing.

“Thank you, Max,” said Troy, controlling his emotions and looked at Kru. “It happens.”

“Wow,” mumbled Kru to himself, relieved that his partner wasn't compromised in any way anymore.

“This only tells how complex those aliens are,” said Troy, darkly. “Either it was a huge coincidence that I came face to face with an alien that looked exactly like my dad or the aliens are too advanced, that they can read our minds and morph too, so as to confuse us.”

“Right,” Kru said. “It is very confusing thinking of which could have been true. Either way, we're screwed.”

“If it's the latter thing, then we're more than screwed, we're doomed,” said Troy gravely.

“Hmm...” said Kru, lost in thought.

“Kru, I need Max. Can you give me one transmitter and load Max onto one of those eye lenses?” asked Troy, breaking his line of thoughts.

“Yes, Troy!” said Kru and nodded with a smile.

“We should get going,” said Troy. “Max, see you soon!”

“Sooner than you think, Troy,” replied Max.

Troy smiled. Kru knelt at the Warswagger to get some data from Max. He was done in less than a minute.

“Let's go!” said Kru, as he jumbled with the stuff he had pulled out from his pockets.

They reached the elevator. Kru muttered again something into his transmitter and the giant heavy circular door closed.

“Who do you keep muttering things to?” asked Troy.

“Ah! That would be my sister. Her name is Lena,” said Kru.

“Tsokay,” said Troy, clearing his throat.

“Where are we going now?” asked Troy, as they kept walking.

“We are going to meet up with my sister, on the Command Deck!” said Kru and beamed at Troy.

“Your sister is on the Command Deck?” asked Troy, astonished.

“Yes!” said Kru gleefully, rubbing his hands.

“She your bigger sister?” asked Troy, cocking his eyebrow.

“No, no, she is my younger sister.”

“How old is she?”

“She is fourteen but she is the best computer analyst ever. They recruited her last year.”

Weird Albeins... Troy wondered.

“Just wondering, when do you guys normally finish school and college?”

“Oh!” said Kru, as they emerged out of the elevator, “School finishes at twelve and college in two years.”

“Massive!” said Troy with a sarcastic tone.

“Ah! It seems that she has already gotten the attention of the Albein authorities,” said Kru, suddenly.

“Well, that’s proactive on her part to call them right away!” said Troy.

“I mean she’s been caught!” said Kru coolly.

“Oh!” said Troy, stopping right in his tracks.

“I thought you told me she was the best!” muttered Troy, alarmed by what Kru had told him.

“She is and that is why she let herself be caught. It’s much faster getting their attention this way.”

“How?”

“Well, it’s a time tested strategy that works when you’re not in a position of authority and you have some important intel to convey.”

“Are you sure?” asked Troy, who was totally unconvinced. “This sounds retarded.”

“Trust me. I’ve done this plenty of times before.”

“Before?” asked Troy, choking at what he had just heard.

“At school and uni!” replied Kru, looking quite lost as he remembered those days.

“Right!” smiled Troy awkwardly and resumed walking. “What do we do now?”

“We simply walk in there,” said Kru calmly.

“That’s it?” asked Troy doubtfully, thinking whether the plan was actually going to work.

“Well, they might knock us out first before interrogating us. Don’t worry! It’ll sting just a bit.”

Troy gulped and kept walking and when it suddenly it hit him.

“Why are you doing this?” asked Troy.

“What?” asked Kru, a bit shaken by Troy’s question.

“Why are you doing this? With me?” asked Troy again.

“Well,” said Kru, when swiftly four flying patrol spherical bots closed on them, handcuffed them and lifted them, all within a couple of seconds.

“What the-” cried Troy.

“Shush! These bots are nasty they’ll zap if you don’t keep quiet!” whispered Kru.

Troy grunted in return and hung his head. The bots flew away in a single line, with a bot in the front and rear of the formation and two bots carrying the boys in the middle.

When the bots reached the Command Bridge, the captain, the security head and Lena were already waiting, surrounded by combat bots and other Albein officers and the two bots dropped the boys onto the floor, right in front of them.

“Explain yourselves!” roared the captain, who was almost a giant of an Albein, six and a half feet tall with a trimmed black beard.

“Isn’t that the other boy a Kepler?” pointed out the security head, with disdain in his voice, a tiny wrinkled man left only with a few hairs sticking out of his head.

“Let them first speak!” said the captain.

Troy kept hoping that Kru would say something but he didn’t. Troy turned and looked at him, to see that he was trembling all over.

Great, thought Troy.

“Speak!” thundered the captain.

Troy tried to get up but one of the patrol bots knocked him hard on the shoulder and extended an arm to press him to the ground.

“On your knees!” commanded the captain.

Troy steamed. *This was the worst possible way to get their attention...*

“We have received intelligence that you two boys, aided by this girl went down to the Arkylum. Why did you go down there?” bellowed the captain.

“We went to investigate. My AI had captured a video with a member of the alien race responsible for the attacks,” said Troy.

“That’s impossible!” laughed the security head. “These aliens are invisible to us and all our sensor technologies. Do you expect us to believe that the lowly Keplers came up with a better technology than the Albeins?”

Troy’s blood boiled. *You bastard...*

“Shut your mouth, Quinto!” the captain boomed. “Continue boy!”

“Kru, show them the video,” said Troy.

Kru, shaking in very limb, pulled out a tiny cubicle and placed it on the floor and touched a virtual option in front of him.

The cubicle projected the video and Kru paused it when it had reached the part with the alien.

The captain squeezed his eyes looking at the face in the video and heaved.

“Dylan Zander!” exclaimed the captain unconsciously. “It can’t be!”

“You knew my father?” asked Troy, confused by what the captain had said.

The captain avoided answering Troy’s question and looked at the floor.

“Tell me!” cried Troy.

“You dare shout at an Albein officer, boy?” yelled Quinto.

The captain raised his hand towards Quinto,

“Yes, I knew your father,” he replied in a low voice. “How could he-”

“It’s not really my father. We found that the aliens might be able to morph,” said Troy, looking sharply at the captain, wondering about the connection between his father and the captain.

“What is your name?” asked the captain in a soft manner.

“I am Troy...Troy Zander.”

The captain looked lost, for a moment.

“If may I...I be all...allowed to...tu...to speak, sir,” stammered Kru. “I thi...think the aliens might be mind readers ass...as well and morph into pee...people close to...tu...to their victims, jus...just to confuse them.”

Troy got irritated by the way Kru was stammering and stepped in to speak.

“The infrared capture has recorded that the core body temperature of the alien in question is eight degrees Celsius, twenty nine degrees lesser than the average body temperature of the three known Homo species at ambient environmental temperatures, which suggests that the aliens are able to morph,” said Troy, looking hard at the captain, who was avoiding any eye contact with him.

“These kids are lying and don’t you believe that Kepler boy, Rutgers!” cried Quinto.

The captain glared at Quinto and kept glaring till Quinto backed off.

“The aliens are invisible to all our sensors. Then how did you capture this alien on video?” asked Rutgers.

“The...alie...allienss...are...soo..so-” stuttered Kru, when Troy stopped him suddenly and started explaining again.

“Kru thinks that the aliens are using dark matter technology to stay hidden to all our sensors. Kru noted that the Orion Swift had picked up signals of an unusual blast and a distorted gravitational field from which I was rescued moments later. So he thought that the blast which had distorted gravitational waves may have caused dysfunction of the alien dark matter tech, thus exposing them to us. Fortunately, my AI system had captured a video pertaining to that particular moment, when the local gravitational forces were disrupted. And he turned out to be right.”

Everyone gaped in the room while Troy took a long breath.

“And yes! If these aliens know how to manipulate dark matter, they must be the most advanced species in this universe!” confessed Troy, confirming everyone’s fears.

“Release their handcuffs!” Rugger commanded the patrol bots. “Stand up, boys! Good work! Both of you!”

“But we already speculated that they were using dark matter technology,” grumbled Quinto.

Rutgers didn’t even look at Quinto at this time, to make him stop talking. Frankly, he was tired of turning around to glare at him.

Troy and Kru looked at each other and smiled weakly.

“However, bots, escort the boys and the girl to their cabins and stand guard and see to that, that they don’t go rogue again,” said Rutgers and turned away.

Quinto let out a hissing laugh.

“What the-” retaliated Troy, before he was stopped by Kru.

“This is insane,” whispered Troy, as the bots handcuffed them again, with sleek robotic arms that protruded out of their metal bodies.

“It’s tsokay! Don’t forget to use one of the baths,” said Kru, as two bots lead him away.

Troy wasn’t sure why he said that. He stood like a statue until the bots nudged him from behind, to

move.

Such an A-hole, Troy thought of the captain, as he went out from the Command Bridge.

Troy's cabin mates were still sleeping, when Troy had made it back to his cabin. He went and lay on his bed quietly.

Why did the captain behave like that? Did he actually know dad? This is all above my head, thought Troy. *And these aliens are pretty more advanced than I initially thought...what the hell are we gonna do?*

Four hours later, Troy woke up with a start when the Albein AI had startled him with the morning alert.

“There is no day or night in space, you idiot!” muttered Troy in his sleepy voice.

“Good morning, if you wish to use one of the special baths, please follow the yellow arrows from your cabin and for breakfast which is being served at the dining hall, please follow the blue arrows from your cabin,” announced the AI.

“Good morning kid!” said the bearded guy, Jim Bobbers, enthusiastically.

Troy shut his eyes tight and pretended to be asleep.

“Kid!” called Jim. “Troy!”

“Leave the kid, you overgrown potato! Let's go,” said Vaugh, the mean guy. “Let's go before our rations run out!”

“That's not true, I am sure they have sufficient resources for all of us,” said the fourth man in the cabin, a jolly round man called Waddell.

“Ah! You don't know about the Albeins, Waddell!” said Vaugh. “They are the meanest badass junkies in the galaxy!”

“You are just making that up!” said Waddell, in return.

“No, I am not! That's the truth! Why the hell are two bots stationed outside our cabin?” complained Vaugh, as he got out of the cabin.

“There aren't any at the other cabins,” observed Jim.

“Let's just keep moving. I told you that these Albeins are creepy,” said Vaugh.

As the men's voices faded away, Troy rose up from his bed. He wasn't sure as to what was going to happen next. Feeling low, he thought it would be best to get into the routine of the place. Dragging his lazy legs, he emerged out of the cabin and looked up. The two patrol bots, were staring at him. Troy smiled sarcastically and said,

“Good morning losers!”

Then, he went along the yellow arrows and the two bots followed behind him.

“This is irritating,” mumbled Troy, then he turned around and stared pulling faces at the two bots. He pulled his lower eyelids, then let out his tongue, made farting sounds and acted like a mad chicken, before he winked at the bots just to see how irritated they were. As he looked up with a sinister smile, the bots zapped him with electricity.

“Ow! That hurt!” said Troy as he recovered from the floor. The two bots let out sounds that very much sounded like a laugh.

Stupid Albein bots, thought Troy, as he winced in pain.

Troy eventually made it to the washroom which was again very huge and impeccably clean despite the large number of people using it.

He went and stood in front of a wash basin (there were hundreds of others in rows all over the place!) and looked at his reflection in the mirror. His honey blond unruly hair was again unyielding to his efforts to be groomed. So he just let it free, to flow all over his head. He touched his nose, it was still small and sharp. Troy had always wanted a bigger nose. Then he was pouting his lips, thinking about how it would look like if he had bigger fatter lips when suddenly the mirror in front of him came alive.

“Hello, Mr. Troy Zander!” said the AI.

“How do you know my name?” asked Troy, startled.

“All the people on the ship are registered to the system database shortly after arrival, sir.”

“Hmm...Tsokay.”

“What would you like to do now, sir?”

“Umm...Brush?”

“Please come closer and place your head forwards.”

“Tsokay,” said Troy and did as the AI asked him to.

“Open your mouth,” said the AI, as two robotic arms with three fingers each, protruded from both sides of the mirror.

“AAAAH!” Troy said as he opened his mouth. One arm which had soft cushions on its fingers, held Troy’s chin in position as one finger on the other arm sprayed Troy’s mouth with a clear blue fluid. As it was spraying, another finger opened up at the tip, to reveal a rotating end which seemed to be made of a very smooth surface. It went brushing from one end to another, neatly cleaning Troy’s teeth.

“Now, spit,” commanded the AI. Troy spat in response.

“What was that thing that you used?” asked Troy, still spitting tiny amounts of the residual blue fluid.

“We used nanobristles loaded with silver atoms to cleanse your teeth and a cleaning solution of

crystalline blue water.”

“Wow!” Troy marveled. “What’s crystalline blue water?”

“Classified information!” beeped the AI.

“WHAT THE HELL?” cried Troy and burst into loud laughter.

“Seriously can the Albeins get any more big headed?” taunted Troy. “A bottle of blue water is classified information? This is completely ridiculous!”

“Sir, your tone indicates malice and a sense of mockery towards the Albeins. You are warned thereof, as in accordance with the Albein Constitution, subsection Refugee rights rule 122. 1, to check your attitude immediately,” said the AI.

“What the heck?” said Troy as he fell onto the floor, laughing, drawing the attention of others.

“You have been marked, sir, for your unruly behavior and lack of respect for your hosts, the Albeins,” announced the AI.

Troy sniffled and got up from the floor, wiping his eyes,

“Oh yeah! What is that supposed to mean eh?” said Troy, still unable to control his laughter.

“It means you have a disciplinary meeting later this day at 2100 hours,” replied the AI coldly.

“Oh!” said Troy, his laughter dying.

“Now would you like a face wash or a body wash, Mr. Troy Zander?” resumed the AI, as if nothing had happened.

“Ahem...Body wash, please?” said Troy, thinking about what Kru had told him earlier. He had been used to disciplinary hearings in school back home. This wasn’t going to be any different. Anyways, he was sure they weren’t going to throw him out of the ship or anything like that.

“Yes, sir, please proceed to Bath 19 for your wash,” said the AI.

“And hey! Do you have a name or something?” asked Troy, trying to extend the conversation

“No sir, I do not have a name for vernacular usage,” replied the AI in a boring tone.

“How unromantic!” commented Troy.

“Pardon me, sir?”

“Oh nothing! Can you just get rid of these two patrol bots, because I seriously don’t be watched naked in the bath!” said Troy, after looking at the two patrol bots hovering over his head.

“Oh don’t worry, sir, these bots will wait for you outside the bath,” replied the AI.

“Oh! Tsokay,” said Troy, thinking hard of a way to sabotage the bots from inside the bath.

“Is there anything else, sir?” asked the AI.

“Nope,” said Troy, as he turned around, walked towards the baths coolly.

He entered through the door labeled Bath 19 and the door sprang up from the floor and closed after he entered in.

“Welcome Mr. Troy Zander!” said a new female voice.

“Hello!” sang Troy, as he seemed in a mad jolly mood.

“Your standard attire will be teleported along with a towel in a moment. Meanwhile, please place your present clothes on the bowl in the corner of the bath” continued the AI.

“Cool! Tsokay,” said Troy as he stripped, revealing his medium built, strong bronze body.

Troy looked around in the bath. The interior of the bath was exquisite and was designed to look like a bath in the middle of a rainforest, with green shoots placed around the corners and orchids of every color, hanging out on from the ceiling and the walls.

Troy reached out and touched the orchids. They felt so fresh and innocent to his touch. Troy could even see the condensed water drops on the leaves, he felt totally amazed by what he was experiencing there.

“If you would like any other setting other than a rain forest, please choose from the choices available, displayed,” said the AI.

“You mean this is not real?” asked Troy, confused.

“No, this is just a simulation which feels very real,” replied the AI.

“This is too true to be true,” said Troy, before he got confused by what he had just said.

“Pardon me, sir?” said the AI.

“Nah, don’t bother, shower please,” said Troy, wondering whether he was experiencing any form of a juvenile neurodegenerative disorder.

After he completed bathing, Troy called for the AI,

“Clothes please?”

No answer.

“Hello? Are you there?”

No answer still.

“HEY-”

“Your clothes have been teleported, sir,” cut in the AI abruptly.

“Oh!” Troy said, “Thanks!”

Troy then went to check the large metallic bowl kept in the corner and saw a large white towel. He lifted it up and was about to dry himself, when he noticed that his new clothes had not been teleported alone. There was a pair of transmitters and a tiny white cuboidal box, about three inches long.

Troy smiled.

Kru, you're the best...

Troy proceeded to dry himself and wore the dark grey body suit that was beneath Kru's surprise in the bowl.

Troy opened the white box and looked inside. Two transparent lenses were floating in a clear fluid in two hemispherical hollows. Beside the two lens cavities, there was another thin cuboidal hollow.

“Please place your dominant hand on top of the cuboidal cavity, to the right of the lenses,” spoke a computerized male voice from the box.

Troy placed his right hand over the slit and blue light scanned his entire right hand up to his wrist.

“Your hand is sterilized. You may proceed to wearing your lenses.”

Troy took the box and went in front of the life size mirror, kept adjacent to the shower area and put in his lenses. Then, Troy grabbed one of the transmitters and pushed onto his right ear.

“Hello again Max!” said Troy with glee.

“Hello again Troy!” replied Max, with equal glee in her voice.

“I am being troubled by two very naughty bots, Max. Use the Whizzling Whizzler to hack them and make them my personal servants.”

“You do realize that is potentially a very dangerous thing to do, Troy,” said Max.

“Yeah, I know that,” said Troy, as he crossed his arms behind his head. “But I have complete confidence in the Whizzler and in your abilities, Max.”

“This is Albein tech, Troy. There is no way your Whizzler program can hack into them.”

“You wanna bet, Max?” asked Troy, winking at his reflection in the mirror.

“You're on, kid,” replied Max, enthusiastically.

“Hack away, darling!” grinned Troy, making a sign with his hands, with his index fingers and thumbs crossing each other and the rest of his fingers closed, making a teardrop-like shape with his hands.

“One thing,” said Max.

“What is it?” asked Troy.

“Did you bang your head anywhere?”

“No. Why?”

“You seem to be awfully happy!”

“Yep! I am! It’s as if I am high on something!”

“I thought so.”

“What?”

“It’s highly likely that these Albeins have filled the Orion Swift’s atmosphere with some sort of a drug to calm down the panic response in people.”

“What are you saying?” asked Troy, though it looked as if he didn’t give a damn at all.

“I fear the bathrooms are the place where they are releasing the drug!”

“I don’t care! I just feel too good, Max!”

“Humans....”

“You’re forgetting something!”

“Hacking into them right now!” announced Max, knowing that any further conversation with Troy was futile.

Troy closed his eyes and kept smiling, waiting for his time of glory.

“He he, Troy, I told you so!” Max said. “Your Whizzler couldn’t even activate itself, inside those systems.”

Troy opened his eyes.

Such a drag!...it was a perfect piece of code but aiming to hack into Albein tech was a bit more than just being farfetched, thought Troy, feeling a bit let down.

“Oh!” remarked Max, out of the blue.

“What happened, Max?” asked Troy.

“The Whizzler broke into them as silently as light!” said Max, in a dejected tone.

“Say it!” said Troy, with a handsome smile.

“No!”

“You gotta say it, sister!”

“You are a genius, the greatest genius of all time!” said Max dryly, in a monotonous tone.

“YEA!” cried Troy with joy, “You could use some modulation, you know!”

“Oh! Shut up!”

“Let’s get out, Max!” said Troy, jumping around in the bath.

Troy emerged out of the bath, looking triumphant and with an eternal smile plastered on his face.

“Make my humble slaves follow me!” said Troy, flourishing his arms like a lord.

“Don’t overdo it, you idiot,” said Max.

“Alright!” said Troy and beamed all that while walking towards the dining hall.

“MUM!” he shouted, on seeing his mother seated in the middle of the dining hall

“Troy!” whispered Amanda on hearing her son’s voice and she looked for him around.

“MUM!” shouted Troy again.

“What’s gotten into you, peanut brain?” hissed Max.

“It’s tsokay, Max, relax!” said Troy. “Ah! There she is! See Max! This was much faster!”

“You are gonna rub the Albeins the wrong way, Troy!” warned Max.

Troy paid no attention to Max, as he ran towards his mother and hugged her.

“How are you, son?” asked Amanda, after kissing Troy on his forehead.

“I am surprisingly fine, mom,” said Troy. “Where were you last night?”

“I was with our Premier, son.”

“So what’s up?”

“We’ve been hunted since last night, Troy. The Albeins had the ship jumping through a series of wormholes to escape the attackers.”

“Can the Albeins sense them, Mum?”

“Not that I’m aware of but listen to this, the Albein Chancellor kept alluding to that fact where they were about to be destroyed by this ginormous decision to enter into the Kepler atmosphere to save us, as it were, phew, she was just making a huge scene out of it, son, you know what I mean?” said Amanda, her face filled with creative expression.

Troy mirrored his mother’s actions as she talked tilting her head from side to side and the facial expressions she was coming up to convey her feelings.

Amanda saw that Troy was teasing her and hit him playfully on his right arm and laughed.

“I love you, son.”

“I love you too, Mum.”

Amanda smiled as she brushed her son’s honey blond hair.

“Come, eat with me!” said Amanda. “And how did you get that transmitter in your ear and why are these bots following you?”

Troy thought quickly. He knew his mother wasn’t capable of handling whatever he was going to tell her.

“Max!” breathed Troy.

“Got it!” replied Max swiftly.

Turning to face his mom, Troy said,

“It plays Albein music and oh my! Do they play punk or what! And I found it in my cabin and I don’t think that these bots are following me” and he chuckled, as Max made the two bots go in separate directions, slowly as if they were patrolling the entire area.

Amanda looked at the two bots flying away and turned to Troy, “Oh! Good! For a moment there, I was afraid that you had gotten yourself into some trouble, Troy,” said Amanda.

Max laughed heartily in his ear. Troy stifled a cough and tried to look as innocent as possible.

“Tsokay mom, see you around,” said Troy, in his excitement to get to his cabin.

“Where do you think you’re going, young man?” countered Amanda, with a stern stare.

“Umm...”

“Stay and eat!” commanded Amanda.

“Sure,” conceded Troy, looking disappointed and finished his breakfast of delicious meat gravy that kind of soothed his disappointment off.

“See you around,” said Amanda, kissing her son on his forehead, after eating.

“Bye, mum!” said Troy and turned and steadied himself to run all the way to his cabin.

“Troy!”

Troy turned around,

“Stay out of trouble,” said Amanda.

Troy wondered if she knew what he was up to and said “Sure!”, as he turned and almost ran all the way to his cabin, followed slowly his bots. He entered the cabin, the others hadn’t returned yet.

Perfect...

He dashed in and collapsed onto the bed.

“Max!” he breathed onto his transmitter, “Has Kru enabled you to let me communicate with him?”

“Yes Troy”

“Then, get me him!” said Troy, as he stretched on his bed.

“Sure, Troy!”

A moment later, Kru’s excited voice broke through Troy’s transmitter.

“Hello buddy!”

“Hey! Thank you Kru, that was just so unexpected.”

Troy could just hear him giggling in return.

“You were so quick, man!” said Troy as he continued complimenting him, to increasing giggles from Kru. “So what’s up?”

Kru stopped giggling.

“In twenty five minutes, we’ll be sending a crew entering through a wormhole to get near Elveden, to search whether any one has survived among them,” said Kru.

“Oh!” remarked Troy without feeling.

“I think we should be on that ship,” said Kru, suddenly in a serious tone.

“What?” cried Troy, “Are you out of your mind?”

“Always,” answered Kru, as if he had been told that a million times before, “This is gonna sound strange but according to my intel, the men on that rescue mission are-”

“Have you bugged the entire ship? Why the hell would you do that?” cried Troy, the effects of the anti-panic drug wearing away.

“Let’s just avoid that question for the present-”

“No way! You are insane, pal!” cut in Troy, “I’m not going to be part of some coup or a terrorist group!”

“You don’t understand!”

“Of course, I understand, you smart as-”

“Naked Mermaids!” said Kru, out of the blue.

Troy stopped whining and with his heart beating a tad faster, he asked, “Wha... What did you say?”

“God! You’re worse than those perverts from my uni,” said Kru, his voice seemed like of a person in authority. “And I should have told you this earlier, when we had met. I deeply regret it now. I am an Albein Intelligence Officer, Chief Rank, Troy and I need your help now.”

“What?” said Troy, confounded and feeling a bit dizzy at the same time.

“Troy, as much as we need to protect ourselves from the extraterrestrials it’s equally important to

prevent the system from collapsing from the inside and that is what I am assigned to do.”

Troy just wheezed in reply.

“Troy, please listen to me,” said Kru, his voice transiting completely from his usual voice to that of a deep handsome one.

“What in the name of all crap, are you telling me?” whispered Troy.

“We haven’t got much time. It’s my job that this ship continues to function as efficiently and safely as possible.”

“How can you possibly be all that you say are? You are just a kid like me!”

“Am I?” asked Kru, his voice getting deeper by the second. It felt as if his voice had a certain charisma to it, all of a sudden.

Troy’s mind went blank.

“You are a spy for the Albein government,” stated Troy.

“I’m,” confirmed Kru.

“Then why did we have to go through that drama before?” asked Troy, alluding to the earlier situation when they had a brush in with the Albein officers on the Command Deck.

“No one on the ship knows of my current status, except for the Ex-Chancellor. I was appointed by her, just prior to the alien attacks on my planet,” said Kru, abruptly choking.

“Ex-Chancellor?” asked Troy, doubting Kru’s statement.

“It was the Ex-Chancellor who appointed me. Ms. Norman took over as the Chancellor afterwards,” said Kru, his voice struggling to maintain the flow of words.

“I don’t trust you,” snapped Troy, in return, abruptly.

There was silence for a full moment, before Kru spoke again.

“Meet me in the Arkylum in five minutes. Take elevator number 3,” said Kru, in a tone completely devoid of emotion but it wasn’t a request or a statement, Troy knew for sure from his tone. It was a command.

And the line went dead.

Troy removed his transmitter, from his right ear. He didn’t want to hear Max’s opinion on the last conversation that he had just had. It was too much to take in, whatever Kru had said. It was as abrupt as a bolt of lightning on a clear cloudless day. Troy had no idea as what to do.

Troy looked up at the clean beautiful translucent ceiling and countless thoughts started bombarding him all at one time, *This guy is either mental or telling the truth...But he has helped me...Could he have done all that just to gain my trust and use me?...this is completely crazy but the past 48 hours*

have been the most craziest hours ever...No one ever saw this coming...No one knows what to expect from now on...There is nothing to do except to hope that we make it somewhere safe and live...What am I gonna do till then?...Just wait it out like others and hope that I don't end up dead?...That's just lame...Boring...On the other hand, answering Kru's call might result in something interesting...I have nothing to lose...In fact it's a perfect opportunity...I will go and follow Kru...I will take him down if he is having an agenda against the people on the ship or if he's telling the truth, I will help him to do whatever he wants to get done...I just can't stand doing nothing...And besides I hate my cabin mates...

Troy got up nervously and his mind was unclear. He took a deep breath and looked at the transmitter on the bed. He lifted it up and stared at it, wondering what Max would tell him. He knew Max would be able to give an accurate judgment of a person from the data she possesses, but he seemed unsure of trying it. He didn't want an outright answer, he wanted to find out himself, but was still a bit afraid of what he might encounter. Troy placed the transmitter back on his right ear.

“You aren't gonna go, are you?” asked Max as soon as the transmitter was in Troy's ear.

“Ummm...” mumbled Troy.

“Don't go!” screamed Max.

Troy was still thinking,

“Hey Troy, you can't do this!” said Max.

Troy finally spoke, “I think I am going.”

“There's no way you're doing this,” said Max.

“See, I'll go check out what he's doing, if he's up to something nasty I'll stop him or if he's onto something concerning the safety of everyone on this ship, I'll help him-”

“There is every possibility that you might end up in danger,” said Max, her voice being softer.

“You got to admit, Max, this is a perfect opportunity. I don't know why I am getting into this, whether because of the promise of adrenalin or even more, because it's a noble cause but I am sure I am not that noble.”

“Tsokay,” replied Max, in a low voice.

Troy sniffled and went on his way. He went to the elevator area, and took elevator number 3 and it was surprisingly empty. The doors closed up immediately after he entered the elevator, and started moving, though Troy was unaware of it, as those elevators don't feel like moving at all, due to advanced engineering. Before Troy could utter a single word, the elevator opened up in the Arkylum. Troy was surprised, he was sure it was Kru's doing. He stepped out into the floor. Kru emerged out of the darkness, from the right. He seemed taller and stronger than before, only his playful long curly hair seemed to be unchanged from before. His face looked cold and hard as if he had emerged out from facing something very horrible.

“Thank you for coming,” said Kru, his voice stiff and cold.

Troy just nodded his head as he had no idea as to what to say.

Kru walked towards him and said, “You better watch this, before we proceed, that way we’ll find it easier to work with each other,”, handing over a seven inch thin white cuboidal device, with a projector lens right in the middle. Kru turned on the device and handed over to Troy. Troy held the cuboidal plate in his left hand and looked at the video that started playing in front of him as a three dimensional projection.

Troy saw a group of six Albein officials in what looked like a meeting room. They were muttering something that Troy understood as having to do to with the Elveden rescue mission. Their conversation was suddenly interrupted by the arrival of a middle aged woman, who seemed like someone in authority. She was dressed in a maroon suit, and she had short brown hair that fell up to her shoulders. Her face was shaped like an inverted pyramid and all her features were sharp, especially her gaze which reminded Troy of pure electricity. The men in the room addressed her as Chancellor Norman. Troy’s eyes narrowed as he heard what the Chancellor said,

“This is what I want you to do,” she said in the video. “Enter through the wormhole and return without launching a rescue mission.”

“But why, Ma’am?” argued a short man, who looked like as if he regretted at once after saying that.

“Do as I tell you. You shall report to the Albein Ministry Senate that you found nothing there,” said Chancellor Norman.

“Yes Ma’am,” replied the men in unison and the video stopped playing. Troy looked at the time at which the video was taken. It was exactly around an hour ago.

Troy turned the device off and looked at Kru. His face looked ashen.

“We have to make sure that this rescue mission is not compromised,” said Kru. “Will you help me now?”

“Why can’t we expose her to your ministry Senate?” asked Troy.

“We can but she has her people infiltrated everywhere on this ship. She will destroy us, before we destroy her,” said Kru, looking at the floor.

“But she is probably gonna know anyway after this mission, Kru,” argued Troy.

“Well, that depends on whether we find any Elveden refugees,” said Kru swiftly.

“Right,” said Troy. “Are you sure you are alright?”

“Yes,” replied Kru, lifting his eyes off the floor.

“I am sorry about-” apologized Troy.

“Don’t!” interrupted Kru. “I am used to it, trust me. We’ve got work to do now.”

Troy felt his heart drop like a stone onto his stomach. He felt miserable for doubting Kru. He tried to console himself by telling himself, that he had had no idea as to what Kru was up to and it could've been anything but at the same he felt he should have trusted Kru and not have hurt him in the first place. Feeling nauseous about the way he had behaved, Troy trudged behind Kru, his head hung down in shame.

Kru opened the Arkylum and went inside the massive bay. It was fairly an empty area.

“Stop!” commanded Kru. “This place should do.”

Troy slowly lifted his head to look at Kru.

“I'll teleport us from here into that rescue mission ship, since this part of the ship is almost always neglected to be scanned for any sort of signals originating from here.”

“Tsokay,” said Troy, nodding his head.

Kru after noticing Troy's approval, set up three shiny metallic spheres with a flat surface at the bottom that allowed it to stand on its own, as three points to form a triangle. Kru opened his Holotab and initiated the Teleportation protocol. The tiny spheres came to life and tiny red and yellow lights sprang up all around the spheres. Troy had never teleported before in his life. He had heard myths about teleporting back on home planet, where it was told that teleportation rips one's soul apart, thus destroying it forever. Troy felt a shiver running down his spine, wondering whether that was true. The Albeins didn't particularly look like as if they had souls but Troy was a romantic, he believed in fairy tales, if he did possess a soul he sure didn't want to rip it apart.

“Are you sure that teleporting people doesn't have any particular side effects?” asked Troy, in a nervous tone, as the spheres were heating up.

“None in particular,” replied Kru, without turning his head to look at Troy, “Except for ripping the soul part!”

Troy's eyes almost popped out and his lungs forgot to breathe for a moment.

“So is that true?” he asked frantically.

Kru chuckled, “Just close your eyes and stand still!”

“Tsokay!” replied Troy and tried to remain calm, he was however minutely shaking all over.

“Close your eyes,” said Kru, in a calm comforting voice. Troy shut them tight.

The deatomisation process began and Troy felt himself disappearing and appearing at the same time. He expected pain as he knew that the first step in basic teleportation was disintegration but there was no pain. He had expected the nerves all over his body to scream pain instead he felt nothing absolutely nothing. It felt as he had evaporated into nothingness and then he didn't exist for a moment.

Troy gasped upon reintegration and collapsed onto his knees inside the pitch dark place they had teleported in.

“What was that?” he hollered, his eyes watering.

“SHHH...” hushed Kru as he picked him up by the shoulders. “You just blacked out for a moment, no need to extrapolate anything from that”

Troy steadied himself, shaking himself from that one terrible moment, where he experienced absolute nothingness, “Where are we?” he asked, deliriously stretching his arms in the darkness.

“Inside the target ship,” replied Kru, letting a tiny bird like drone fly out of his pocket that let out a soft warm glimmer of white light.

“How did we reintegrate in here?” asked Troy disapprovingly as he looked around the place which smelled like burnt plastic.

“I had flown in the porting spheres in here just before you arrived, since we can’t possibly enter the cruiser bay without being seen. It’s one of the most heavily guarded areas in the Orion Swift. I had to tweak my porting spheres to fly and also had to install an invisibility shield in them to escape the security.”

“What do we now?” asked Troy. “And what is that place?”

“We are inside the Cargo hold,” said Kru, as he collected the three porting spheres and his nanobot dress suddenly reorganized to form a strap belt around his waist. Kru placed the porting spheres inside along with his projecting cuboidal device that he called the Holotab.

“I didn’t plan exactly as what to do next, Troy, I have no experience in assault strategies,” confessed Kru. “Do you have any ideas?”

Troy stared at him and hoped to God that he wasn’t joking, but unfortunately he really didn’t seem to have any idea at all.

What makes you think that I may have any experience, genius? Troy thought to himself.

“You want to take them down?” asked Troy.

“If necessary, yes,” answered Kru, curtly.

Troy blinked furiously for a few seconds, and said,

“Eavesdrop on them and let me know how much time we got before they exit the wormhole again and depending on what they’re planning to do, we can form our plans. One, we take them. Two, we launch a rescue mission without their knowledge and make it back it here or three, we do nothing.”

“I think plan number one is logically most sound,” said Kru.

“How many people do you think we would’ve to face?” asked Troy.

“Cruiser ships are built for a crew of twelve, but I don’t think that the Chancellor is wasting twelve men on a mission, she doesn’t want. It’s more likely that it’s going to be the six men who were in the video.”

“Right!” said Troy, “So six men! Where would they all be?”

“Since this is just a pseudo mission, none of them are gonna do anything, I think all of them will be together on the Command Centre, as they got no reason to be anywhere else,” said Kru, after a little thought.

“It makes our job much easier then,” said Troy, “Tsokay, here’s the plan. First, we hack into the ship’s system and make sure we are the ones who are communicating with the Orion Swift. Once we cut their contact, we’ll attack them and knock them cold. Then we’ll search the Elveden atmosphere for survivors. Sounds tsokay to you?”

“Excellent!” exclaimed Kru. “Wait! I just got an update. Six minutes to launch and five minutes from then to entering the wormhole, Troy, we better get ready.”

“Alright!” said Troy, knowing that the minutes that Kru was referring to were Albein minutes, which were supposedly longer or shorter than Kepler minutes, Troy didn’t know which and he didn’t give a damn at the moment. “Where do we get the arms?”

“Oh!” realized Kru. “I’ll hack into their systems first, and then it should give us access to any weapons on board.”

Troy nodded his head in agreement. Kru took out his Holotab and proceeded to hack into the cruiser’s system. He was done in less than five seconds.

“I am done!” announced Kru, with a glimmer of his old childish self.

“That was quick!” said Troy astonished.

“I have a question,” asked Kru, in a serious tone.

“Ask away!” replied Troy.

“Did you create the virus that hacked into two Albein bots earlier?”

Troy looked shocked, wondering how Kru knew and then immediately answered, “No! Not me! That would be a genius pulling that off!”

Kru grinned. All the seriousness he had displayed earlier were all gone, he was like the first time he met Troy. “The armory is directly above this level. Let’s move out.”

Troy however felt the opposite. He hadn’t been the one to create the Whizzling Whizzler. He had absolutely no idea about computers and code whatsoever. He had lied to Max and Kru didn’t seem quite curious enough to ask further. Troy felt his throat tighten, as he thought of the person who had gifted him the Whizzler, to control Max whenever needed, whenever she was proving herself to be a smartass.

Troy gasped unconsciously and instinctively looked at Kru. He hadn’t heard him. Troy let out a sigh of relief and returned to his earlier thought automatically, as much as he tried to distract himself from that thought he couldn’t.

Christy....

“This level is clear of any drones and I have access to the security cameras. It’s just a matter of installing a simple loop of video and we’re done,” Kru muttered to himself. “Come, let’s go!”

Troy immediately dabbed his eyes and blinked a couple of times to make sure Kru wouldn’t find anything odd with him.

Kru and Troy went past a lot of old bulky material that both of them weren’t sure what and went out the door. Both of them hurried towards the elevator and took it to the level above them.

“Cruiser ships are built for combat and rescue missions. They have four levels,” explained Kru to Troy, he continued explaining as they went out the door. “The cargo hold is the ground level, which also houses a hundred fighter drones, with the armory and staff quarters above it, the beamed core antimatter propulsion engine centre is on the second level and on the third level we have the refugee quarters and the Command centre.”

“What’s the speed?” asked Troy, as they neared the Armory, still trying hard to distract himself.

“90% the speed of light,” said Kru, as he punched a projected option on his Holotab to open the Armory.

“Well, the Keplers had managed to push up to 80% light speed,” commented Troy, trying hard not to feel inferior.

“Well, ten percent makes all the difference when it comes to light speed in vacuum, if the Keplers and Albeins ever chased each other in space, we would catch up with you in no time!” laughed Kru. “Ah! Weapons! We are gonna stun them, right?”

Troy looked lost for a moment, “Of course! Of course! Stun them, right you are!”

“Well, look we’ve got all the toys here!” said Kru and giggled, as he showcased the weapons in the armory to Troy.

“Wow!” exclaimed Troy, looking at the more than hundred types of guns organized neatly in the Armory.

“Well, this one here,” said Kru, referring to a five inch gun that had ten tiny muzzles, with five above and five below and a long grip, “It’s a called a Bummer, and it stuns ten targets at a time and can be connected to an AI for faster processing.”

Troy took the Bummer and felt its dark gray body. It looked cool.

“Max!” Troy softly called.

“I am here!” replied Max as promptly as always.

“I did-”

“I know what you did!” cut in Max.

Troy squinched and let his tongue tip out between his lips.

“You are awesome, Max!”

“Don’t you butter me!” said Max sharply.

“Tsokay! Tsokay!” said Troy. “I was just telling the truth, you know?”

Max let out something that sounded like a low growl.

“Anyways!” interrupted Troy. “Can you connect with this Bummer weapon?”

“Yes Troy,” replied Max, in her usual cheery voice again.

“Well!” exclaimed Troy, looking at Kru. “What about the weapons to go gaga on the aliens?”

“Yea!” said Kru and looked at Troy. “About that, we have a lot of variety, but I recommend the Twins for this mission.”

“The Twins?” asked Troy, cocking an eyebrow.

“Yes!” said Kru, with a broad smile on his face. “The QT double barrel, colloquially known as the Cutie Twins, blasts two tiny antimatter fission bullets at once. Destruction of anything ranging from a pinhead to a medium sized ship is guaranteed, as this baby kicks both accuracy and power in one.”

“That’s great, back on Kepler, we only used antimatter in very big bombs, antimatter guns weren’t even in development!” said Troy excitedly, looking at the double barreled handgun that perfectly fitted Kru’s hand.

“This baby’s so nice, you don’t need to hit twice!” rapped Kru, making a dance with the gun.

Troy looked at him with a comic look.

Kru noticed it and grinned, “I am sorry, that was childish!”

Troy broke into a short laugh and exclaimed, “Even worse!”

Kru’s face suddenly became emotionless and dry of any feeling, “Guess that is what is keeping me in one piece,” he said in a low voice.

“What do you mean, Kru?” asked Troy, in a curious tone.

Kru snapped back to reality and dismissed it, “Don’t worry yourself about it! They’ve just launched into the wormhole!”

Guess we both have secrets, thought Troy, as he looked passively at him.

“Here!” said Kru, as he threw a Cutie Twins towards him.

“Hey wait!” cried Troy. “I don’t have anything to strap them onto!”

“AH! That shouldn’t be a problem,” said Kru. The nanobots on his left leg assembled to form a strap

belt, which Kru promptly took and gave to Troy, who accepted it after a bit of hesitation.

“Don’t worry, the nanobots sit on another pair of bionic nanomaterial, so no direct contact with my skin or whatsoever as to why you hesitated taking them.” declared Kru, slyly smiling.

Troy didn’t reply as he placed the belt across his waist and locked.

“The bots will strap the guns as they are brought in contact with them. Don’t vex yourself thinking whether the guns will get strapped if they are brought in unintended casual contact. These bots are smart and they measure the pressure, the body language the first few times you place the guns on them for strapping, among many other things to create a signature, so that casual strapping is avoided,” lectured Kru hard and fast.

Troy strapped the Bummer and the Cutie Twins and smiled, “If you are done, let’s move out!”

Kru smiled back, with a teensy teeny smile.

Together they walked out of the armory and walked towards the elevator

“Tsokay, how do we do it?” asked Kru, entering the elevator.

“Do you have any experience in combat?” asked Troy, taking out the Bummer from his belt.

“Well!” Kru said hesitantly. “You can say I do!”

“Stay behind me!” Troy commanded. “And take out anyone I miss!”

“Oh! Tsokay as you say” replied Kru and the elevator door opened on the third level.

Troy marched forward, leaving Kru behind. Kru was taken aback by the sudden action and stood immobilized for a moment, before realizing that Troy had almost made it to the Command centre.

“Wait!” he whispered, as he ran noisily, breathing heavily to join Troy panting.

“You really don’t have had any physical training, do you?” asked Troy, turning his head to look at Kru.

Kru just nodded his head sideways, to indicate no.

“Tsokay, keep close,” said Troy and stormed inside the Command centre, whose doors were wide open.

“Freeze!” cried Troy, as Max acquired all targets, aiming them via the Bummer. The men in the room were completely taken aback by surprise and Troy fired before it was too late. All the men were heavily jolted and fell down on the ground, knocked unconscious.

Troy symbolically blew over the Bummer, to showcase victory.

“That was just great!” praised Kru, who entered the room still panting.

Troy didn’t mind him and he immediately asked a question,

“What about the Orion Swift scanning this Cruiser for these men’s movements?”

“Don’t worry about that, my AI is taking care of that, so according to the Orion Swift right now, these unconscious men are still moving around here.”

“Right,” said Troy, relieved. “What next?”

“Just give me a moment!” said Kru, as he moved to the front of the command and checked.

“I am picking massive dark matter readings around the Elveden planet, about six minutes away at our maximum speed,” said Kru, his voice warped by fear.

“What about survivors?” asked Troy, in a grave tone.

Kru looked at Troy for a moment before he dived onto the controls,

“I am getting life form readings, which are disappearing rapidly, around what seems to be a fallen ship,” announced Kru, looking at a telescopic capture image.

“Set course to that Elveden ship, at maximum speed now!” commanded Troy. “And give me a spacesuit now!”

“Are you sure?” asked Kru, doubtfully.

“We came here to make sure that the Elveden get rescued, didn’t we? Then let’s not abort now!” said Troy.

Kru nodded his head and punched a few projected virtual options in front of him.

“Follow me!” said Kru. “There should be suits in the refugee quarters.”

Troy nodded and followed him. Upon entering the bunks filled quarters, Kru promptly turned a cylindrical projection on the wall by its knob to reveal several white cubes of sizes, on the other side, that perfectly fit an adult human’s palm.

Kru picked one of the cubes and held it in his hands.

“Take this nanobot cube, the suits it forms adapts for whatever environment you’re in,” said Kru, as he picked up another.

Troy took the white cube and pressed what seemed to be a little depression on top of the cube. The cube immediately disintegrated and tiny flashy white cubicles spread all over Troy up to his neck to form a dashing white body suit over his body.

“Nanobot suits were only permitted to be used by the military, as a law, back on Kepler,” said Troy, his excitement flowing through his words.

“Why?” asked Kru dryly.

“Who knows?” replied Troy, waving his hands, seeing if his suit adjusted itself on stretching. “Let me out as soon as we reach, you stay hidden and give me another Cutie now.”

Kru nodded furiously and went out of the quarters and promptly returned, before Troy could reach the entrance to the refugee quarters.

“Turn!” commanded Kru, as he placed two seven inch white cylinders onto Troy’s back. “And here is your Cutie!”

“What the-” reacted Troy.

“Oxygen cylinders!” replied Kru.

“Right!” said Troy, strapping the Cutie on his belt.

“We’re almost there!” said Kru.

“How do I get out?” asked Troy.

“Come,” said Kru and jogged towards the elevator, followed by Troy.

Soon they were on the cargo hold level, where Kru directed Troy to a tiny cylindrical chamber.

“Get in!” said Kru, shoving Troy inside the chamber.

“Tsokay! Don’t push me like that,” said Troy. “Feels like as if you’re trying to get rid of me!”

“Hug yourself! And don’t lose your mind out there! Locate the Elveden fast, I’ll keep an eye on the aliens,” said Kru, speaking fast, “Though I have a feeling we’re already been targeted by them now.”

Troy just looked at Kru with a vacant expression. The true horror was just starting to sink into Troy now.

“Uhh-” Troy started to speak, as Kru slammed the door close and quickly pressed the button on the door which in turn opened the inside chamber into the coldness of space.

Troy felt being sucked into space and thrown out in a directionless manner.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAWHHHHHHHHH!!!” screamed Troy.

“Shut up please!” replied Max, in a boring tone, “Such a wuss!”

“Help me, Max!” cried Troy, as he swayed his arms and legs hopelessly as if he were drowning in a giant cruel dark ocean.

“Stop moving, Troy, you’re not dying in any way!”

“Oh! Are you sure?” asked Troy, terribly scared.

“Seriously? Seriously Troy?” said Max. “Even a baby would whine less than you!”

Troy stopped wailing. Slowly. Terribly slowly.

“Are you done wailing?” asked Max.

“I think so!” whispered Troy.

“I have located one live Elveden, two hundred meters on your left. There is lot of debris and a lot of the bad guys surrounding our target”

“What do I do?”

“The dark matter flux gradient is too high, the gradient readings suggest that they are closing in a circle around her.”

“Give me a view of what you’re seeing in false color!”

“What?”

“Just give me a view where I can see the alien movement!”

“Tsokay,” said Max.

Troy moved with the propellant systems in his feet and palms, making way through a lot of debris that was blocking his route.

“Make sure I am dead to their sensors and senses!” whispered Troy.

“How?”

“I don’t know! Just do something!”

“Troy! You’re headed for death!” broke in Kru’s voice.

“I know!” replied Troy. “Watch and learn!”

Saying that, Troy moved slowly behind debris, inching towards his target slowly,

“Thirty seconds and the aliens will have all their hands on our target,” warned Max coolly.

“Do you have me covered?” asked Troy.

“You are dead meat, Troy, no signal of any kind! No pulse or anything emanating from you.”

“Great,” said Troy and went on at full speed towards the purple colored circular cloud that Max had projected on his visual field. He saw an Elveden floating right in the middle of the circle and took out his two Cuties.

“Max!”

“Yes!”

“Are those dead people on my right?”

“Affirmative!”

“I feel like vomiting!”

“Stay focused!”

“Right!”

With a hundred meters and closing fast at ten meters each second, Troy took careful aim at the purplish cloud and started firing mercilessly. And as he pulled the triggers, the twin barrels revolved around its axes and the cores heated up within, giving a white dazzling light before it shot two small bullets of pure antimatter fission bullets, at his targets. The cloud started exploding, like fireworks, bright white light bursting every time, a Cutie bullet made it to its target. Troy made it through the space rubble and collected the Elveden and shot straight down away from the circle.

“Quick!” said Max, “There are others on your trail!”

“Are they?” whimpered Troy, looking back. He saw a giant purple cloud closing on him from sixty percent of his visual field. “Oh! Dirty Mermaids!”

“Shoot me to the Cruiser!” cried Troy, holding the Elveden tight to his chest.

“Yes!” answered Max.

“Get us in, Kru!” shouted Troy.

“It’s not as dramatic as you think it is!” replied Kru, in a broken voice.

“The cloud is closing onto us, faster than we are moving,” Troy cried.

“We have a problem, Troy,” said Max morbidly.

“What?” asked Troy, with a buildup of irritation in his voice.

“Your nanobot suit is compromised. Everything except your oxygen supply has stopped working and uh..uh...uh.ki...kl...”

“MAX?” cried Troy, holding the Elveden closely to him.

“Ge..get...ou...ut..ge-”

Then Max went abruptly dead.

“MAX?” Troy shouted, to no response, “KRU!!!”

Troy couldn’t contact Kru either.

What the hell?....

Troy then tried moving his arms and to his shock, he found out that they were frozen. He tried moving his legs and they were frozen too.

I can’t move! The suit seems to have been immobilized! Now I am free floating in space!

Troy was glad that he held the Elveden refugee tightly in his hands though but he knew that the aliens would be closing on them both any moment now.

Troy and the Elveden drifted hopelessly, turning head over heels again and again directionless in

space. As Troy span slowly to face the direction from which he had been fleeing, he couldn't see the purple cloud anymore. With his heart banging against his chest, Troy splashed his eyes everywhere to look for them, until he finally realized that his view screen had also stopped working, along with the entire suit.

They must be surrounding us right now.....I never thought it would go this bad- What was that?

Troy had seen something sparkle like a diamond, right in front of him.

What is that?.....

Something started forming right in front of his eyes and it looked as if something was tearing space apart, as if it were only a sheet of paper and raining bright yellow light on Troy, through the torn portions.

Troy closed his eyes and when he opened again, he saw the sign that he had seen on the day that he was rescued, something shaped like a 'J' with three dots, shining and sparkling like a star.

Troy looked transfixed by it.

What's gonna happen now?

The sign just lingered on for a while, as if it were drifting along with him and then all of a sudden, it vaporized into white fumes and covered Troy and the Elveden in less than a flash.

What's happening?

Troy opened his eyes wide and looked at the dynamic shell of white light that covered them both. In less than another instant, the cocoon of white light faded away and Troy saw that he was inside the Cruiser in the refugee quarters.

Troy was flabbergasted, beyond reason.

What was that? We are saved?

However, Troy didn't have much time to think as his transmitter came live suddenly with Kru and Max shouting at the same time.

"I AM FINE!" cried Troy, in response to the nervous repetitions by Kru.

"What the hell just happened?" cried Kru, in a manic tone.

"I am in here safe, with the Elveden, Kru. Blast the engines right now!" cried Troy, rising up from the floor with the refugee still in his arms.

"OKAY!" said Kru, seeming somewhat relieved though not convinced.

"Max?" called Troy.

"Yes Troy."

"Do you have any idea, what just happened now?" asked Troy, hoping that Max would have at least a

tiny splinter of an idea.

“The aliens shut your bot suit down along with me, Troy.”

“Right,” said Troy, feeling low.

“I have no idea as to how you made here safely though, Troy.”

“I know!” said Troy, still unable to digest what he had just undergone.

He soon was lost in his thoughts.

What is that sign?

Why does it help me?

What does it want from me?

“You’re thinking too hard,” said Max.

Troy avoided Max’s comment and looked at the refugee in his arms.

“Hey!” called Troy. “Hey! Can you hear me?”

The Elveden seemed to be unconscious. Troy stared at the helmet and slender body of the Elveden, he had just saved.

He laid her down on one of the beds and looked at her.

I am just glad that I saved you...

“TROY!!!” screamed Kru in Troy’s ear. “I need you here!”

“What is it?” asked Troy. “What is it, Max?”

“The wormhole is closing!” replied Max.

“What!” exclaimed Troy, as he rushed to the Command Centre.

“Why are they closing without us returning?” asked Troy upon entering.

“I don’t think they were ever going to let this Cruiser come back. It must be Norman’s doing, easier to hide the tracks!” said Kru.

Troy tensed and looked out in the space, he could see the wormhole shrinking in size, at a distance.

“How much time we’ve got?” asked Troy.

“Less than 2 minutes!”

“Can we make it?”

“No, we need double the time to make it,” said Kru. “We’re done!”

“No, we’re not!” declared Troy. “Give me those porting spheres!”

Kru looked transfixed for a moment.

“That’s just-”

“NOW!” screamed Troy, as he grabbed the three porting spheres and ran towards the elevator. Troy rushed to the cargo hold level and placed the porting spheres inside the exit dock and opened them into space.

“Kru, Now!” said Troy onto his transmitter.

“Yes!” answered back Kru, as he stopped the ship and triangulated the porting spheres around it.

“Can we make it?” asked Troy anxiously.

“Theoretically yes! As long as there is a direct line of sight and we are within teleporting range! But but-” said Kru.

“But what?” asked Troy unnerving rapidly.

“I don’t know! No one’s done this before!” cried back Kru, as he continued to wildly punch virtual projected options in front of him.

“Don’t care!” cried Troy.

“Twelve seconds to complete closure!” reported Kru.

“How much time, did you just say?”

“Twelve!”

“Damn!” said Troy, as he started to feel the familiar feeling of disappearing and appearing at the same time and then the feeling of nothingness.

6 THE PROBE

Troy opened his eyes fast, to see where he was. He saw he was still inside the Cruiser, in the Cargo

hold.

“Where are we?” asked Troy, in a frantic tone, tapping his transmitter.

“The Arkylum!” Kru said, relieved, “We made it!”

“Really?” asked Troy, unable to believe Kru.

“Tsokay!” exclaimed Kru, after confirming that they had indeed successfully teleported inside the Arkylum of the Orion Swift.

“Good!” said Troy, with a heavy sigh. “I am coming up!”

“So what happened back there?” asked Kru. “I lost you for a couple of minutes! I was worried to death! How did you make it back to the Cruiser?”

“I don’t know,” said Troy, walking towards the elevator.

“You don’t know?” asked Kru, totally not buying the idea.

“Yes,” said Troy, between heavy breaths of air. “I have no idea as to what happened back there.”

“Tell me what you know then!” insisted Kru.

Troy looked irritated by the idea and didn’t reply him.

“Fine!” said Kru, when he knew that Troy wasn’t going to tell him anything.

“It was the Elveden,” said Troy dryly.

“What?” asked Kru.

“The Elveden teleported us in,” said Troy, entering the elevator.

“Really?” asked Kru, in an apprehensive tone.

“Yes,” replied Troy. “I don’t know how she did it, but she did it when they jammed my suit.”

“Mmm...fine,” said Kru.

Troy knew that he wasn’t convinced but he didn’t bother trying to convince him any further. He exited the elevator.

“We’ve got to deal with Norman and the Elveden girl,” said Troy, as he neared the Command Centre.

“Right,” said Kru.

Troy soon reached the Command Centre and stood near where Kru was seated near the Voidshield.

“So any ideas?” asked Troy, looking at the pale lights in the Arkylum, through the Voidshield.

“Well-” said Kru.

“Where am I?” interrupted a very charming voice at that moment, just behind the two boys.

Troy and Kru turned to see that it was the Elveden girl and they felt losing control over their senses, instantly. Both the boys seemed spellbound by the girl in their midst.

The girl was fair, fairer than any woman the boys had ever seen, yet her skin looked rich as if coated with butter. Her blonde hair fell down up to her hips in many cute little golden locks. Her eyes were ocean blue and her lips were small and baby pink. She was dressed in a lavender body suit and looked very beautiful.

“Damn!” Troy breathed, frozen in his position.

“Affirmative!” chipped in Kru involuntarily.

“I asked you a question,” asked again the blonde beauty firmly looking a bit shaken, knocking both Troy and Kru out of their trance.

“Oh! You are aboard the-” said Kru.

“We are inside an Albein transporter ship,” cut in Troy, trying to impress the girl first.

“Where are the others?” asked the girl, her voice trembling even more.

“We couldn’t save them,” said Troy in a low voice, trying to empathize with the girl.

For a moment, she didn’t reply, as she appeared to be shell shocked. Her lips quivered and her eyes instantly welled up with tears.

“You should have let me die!” sobbed the girl, on hearing Troy say that and collapsed onto the floor at the entrance to the Command Centre

Troy and Kru were lost for words, they had no idea as what to tell and comfort the girl. They looked at each other and wished they knew how to do that. After a few moments of awkwardness, Troy decided to act first. He went towards the girl slowly and tried to lift by her shoulders.

“No!” cried the girl, as she refused to get up.

“I am sorry,” said Troy, looking at the girl.

The girl continued to sob pathetically.

“Can’t we go back to see if others had survived?” she asked, wiping her eyes with the back of her left hand.

“I’m afraid not. There are too many of them. Getting you out safely was pure dumb luck,” said Troy, who sat down beside her.

“Mmm...” mumbled the girl.

“What’s your name?” asked Troy.

“Emilie,” replied the girl.

“I am Troy,” said Troy and got stuck right there. He had not the slightest idea where to proceed from

there.

“I am Kru,” broke in Kru, who came and stood near them.

Emilie looked at Kru and put her head down immediately, as tears didn't stop flowing down her pink cheeks.

“We've to move on, Emilie,” said Troy. “We'll get you back to the refugee quarters.”

Emilie didn't answer back but she got up. Troy heaved and got up too.

“Come,” he said gently, as he showed the way, while resisting every attempt to hold her hands. He knew that she needed it but he was equally afraid that she might shove them off.

Troy went ahead of Emilie and stood by her bunk.

“Is there anything you need?” asked Troy.

Emilie nodded her head to indicate no.

“Well,” said Troy. “We'll make sure that you have water and food. Stay here, we'll get back to you in a while”

Emilie again nodded to what Troy said and sat on the bunk.

Troy snapped his fingers to call Kru and walked out of the quarters back to the Command centre, which were about twenty meters apart with the elevator right in between them.

“What do we do now?” asked Troy as soon they reached the Command centre

“What do you mean what do we do?” asked Kru, cocking both his eyebrows at him.

“The girl's in shock and we've got a political situation here to deal with before we can safely introduce her to the authorities on this ship,” said Troy.

Kru didn't answer as he looked at the floor and appeared to be lost in his thoughts.

“Kru?” called Troy.

“Yes.”

“Tell me!”

“How do we bust Norman?”

“How do we?”

“We don't!”

“What do you mean we don't?”

“We don't bust Norman,” said Kru, defiantly.

“What the heck?”

“Now isn’t the time, Troy!”

“We don’t know what Norman is up to!”

“Precisely the point, Troy, we don’t know what she is up to! That’s why it’s dangerous! We don’t know her agenda, even if we bust her, she might be able to carry on whatever she is up to undeterred.”

“And you are basing this on a little incident that she didn’t want to rescue the Elveden? She might have been just overcautious, maybe she didn’t want to risk the lives of the people aboard the Orion Swift!”

“Is that why she closed the wormhole while there was still normal active transmission between the Cruiser and the Orion Swift, in absence of any kind of attack? Doesn’t that seem weird to you?”

“She could have been overcautious there too! I mean, you can’t see these alien guys, Kru and they could as well as slipped through the wormhole! Or she could have thought that the aliens somehow hacked into the Cruiser’s AI system!”

“You don’t seem like you want to bust her!”

“I want to bust her, Kru, but for doing this without the approval of all the authorities on board and letting those poor men...speaking of which, what about those men we stunned?”

“They are right here!”

“I can see that!” said Troy, looking at the six burly men scattered around the Command centre.
“Emilie didn’t notice them?”

“She must have!” replied Kru. “But I guess it didn’t capture her immediate attention.”

“We are back to square one!” lamented Troy, as he sunk on the Commander seat. “What do we do now?”

“We seemed to have used that expression awfully a lot in the past few hours,” commented Kru to which Troy let out a heavy sigh.

“How much more time before these men regain consciousness?” asked Troy, feeling guilty for stunning those men.

“Three hours, at least,” replied Kru, looking at the condition of the men.

“Tsokay,” said Troy. “This is what we’ll do then...”

“WHAT?” asked Kru loudly, as if he were deaf in both the ears.

Troy grabbed his head with both his hands and lamented, “If it were only a question of hiding Emilie, it would be no problem but we’ve got these men too! It complicates matters!”

“So it gives us only one choice that is to tell the higher authorities the truth,” said Kru confidently.

Troy looked at Kru and gave a short nod of approval.

“How are you going to arrange the meeting?” asked Troy, feeling his light stubble around the chin.

“Rutgers!” replied Kru.

“Rutgers?” asked Troy, in a tone of disgust. “That rude basta-”

“He is our only hope!” cut in Kru. “I’ll go talk with him, when I give you the signal, take Emilie and come!”

“Are you sure you want to do it in person?” asked Troy, thinking the previous incident they had shared with Rutgers.

“Yes!” replied Kru, at once.

Troy thought for a moment and said “Yes! But what if it goes wrong?”

“I don’t think it will-”

“With all due respect, you remember last time what he did to us right?”

“Yes, I do,” said Kru. “This time it’ll be different, I promise you.”

“Tsokay!” said Troy after a long drawn thought.

“Good!” said Kru. “See you in a short while!”

“I don’t understand how that’s going to work,” murmured Troy to himself, after Kru took off.

Troy looked at the unconscious men in the Command centre and huffed loudly, then he turned around and saw the refugee quarters from where he was standing. He thought his time would be better spent there.

“I better go there!” said Troy and weakly smiled.

Troy entered the refugee quarters and expected to find Emilie asleep but instead she was awake, sitting on the edge of her bunk bed. She was no longer crying but she was clearly not in a mood to talk.

Troy took a long breath and sat beside her.

After what seemed to be a long time, Troy found the courage to talk with her.

“Emilie,” said Troy.

“Mmm...” said Emilie.

“How do you feel now?”

Emilie looked at him for a moment and then into his blue eyes. Troy was unsure of what she was

doing but he suddenly started feeling pain. He felt as if his heart was taking every beat with such great effort and it felt like it were going to explode from exertion. His mind was experiencing fear, fear at a level, he had never felt before and he was filled with confusion and sorrow.

“That’s how I feel,” said Emilie, looking away.

Troy gasped and looked away to hide his eyes from her sight. They were wet with tears.

“I am sorry,” he coughed. “I truly am.”

“Don’t be,” replied Emilie.

“I’m not sure how I can help you, Emilie?”

Emilie turned, looked at Troy but this time with a weak smile, “Thank you for saving me, Troy but I am beyond being sad because I have lost more today than I have gained, a new life for old, new friends for family and a new strange place for my own.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“I lost my mother tonight,” Emilie said, speaking as if she were in a trance. “She was the only living relation I had. I don’t know what to do without her!”

“There’s no going back, Emilie,” said Troy. “I was in your state ten years ago, when I had lost my dad and sister.”

Emilie again looked into his eyes.

“I was terribly lost that day, it was all well till one day both of them went missing in space, just like that! Their ship was found six months later, floating as space junk with what remained of my dad and sister,” said Troy and sniffled loudly.

Emilie continued to look into his eyes and her own eyes started to glisten, as Troy spoke.

When he stopped talking, there was absolute silence. Both of them were lost in their own thoughts, till Troy felt a warm touch on his left shoulder.

He looked at Emilie. It was her hand. She was smiling weakly at him. Troy managed a weaker one back, then immediately wished he had come up with a stronger smile.

“There was something strange out there when I rescued you,” said Troy.

Emilie looked at him, “What?” she asked gently.

“The aliens, they didn’t attack us at all though I bet they have got better weaponry and all.”

Emilie’s face became serious and asked, “May I?”

Troy was confused by what she meant but he nodded yes whatsoever. Emilie looked into his eyes.

“You have beautiful eyes,” Troy’s tongue slipped. Emilie broke into an instant smile to which Troy grinned victoriously.

“You are right!” said Emilie. “They attacked neither you nor me. I saw them killing my people right before my eyes but they didn’t shoot at me. They could have easily killed me but it looked as if they were trying to-”

“Capture you!”

“Yes! There must be-” said Emilie, when they were suddenly interrupted by Kru.

“Troy!” boomed Kru’s voice, from the corners of the room, “Report to the elevators!”

“Don’t mind him,” said Troy, moving his pointing finger in a circular motion near his temple. “He’s a little loose.”

Emilie managed a weak polite smile.

Troy was clueless once again and had no idea as how to cheer her up, but this was no ordinary bad day, it was possibly the worst for her. It was still amazing though as to how she was holding up. He slowly put his hand around her shoulders and to his surprise, she quietly lay her head on his shoulders.

“Rose Fox,” said Emilie abruptly.

“Huh?” said Troy, failing to recognize what she had uttered.

“Emilie Rose Fox, in case you know, you wanna know,” said Emilie.

Troy flashed a broad smile.

“Troy Dylan Zander, in case, you wanna know too,” said Troy.

“Mhmmm...” said Emilie. “Thank you, Troy.”

“You’re more than welcome!”

“TROY!” shouted Kru on Troy’s transmitter.

“Yes Kru!” replied Troy, holding his head in pain.

“I’ve arranged an audience with the Albein and Kepler authorities! Take the elevator to HQ Conference. I have cleared the security for you! Quick!”

“Already? Anyways!” replied Troy. “Emilie, we’ve got to go! I’ll explain on the way!”

Troy took Emilie to the cargo hold level and exited the Cruiser.

“The current Albein Chancellor is up to something, though the Albein Senate had ordered the rescue of any Elveden refugees, she secretly met up with the rescue team and ordered them not to do anything. Kru came to know of this and we entered the scene.”

“You keep forgetting that I read your mind,” said Emilie, smiling mildly.

“Oh! That’s right! I forgot!” said Troy and as he continued walking fast, his heart froze as he recollected the things he had said about her along with Kru before he had met her. Troy took a big

gulp and kept moving.

“They entered the elevator, which was once again empty.

“HQ Conference,” said Troy, loud and clear.

Within three seconds the door opened again onto a landing. Troy and Emilie came out and proceeded into the Conference room. Kru was already waiting for them over there. Albein security androids were stationed everywhere. It was the first time Troy was seeing the Albein droids with his own eyes. They were six feet tall and covered in dark blue and grey. Their faces were metal grey with a thin lens visor and all of them were heavily armed and looked very powerful. The Albein droids approached them and stripped Troy of the weapons he had been carrying and then nudged him to go forward.

They were about twenty five Albein Senators seated in a semicircular arrangement and there was an obese man seated on a high podium that was kept right in front of the semicircular arrangement. However, there was no sign of Chancellor Norman anywhere.

Kru indicated both Troy and Emilie to stand beside him and Rutgers, on the stage, in front of the Senate. Murmurs erupted spontaneously as soon as the people saw Emilie and Troy and they didn't die till an Albein official, of the post of the Speaker started speaking.

“This emergency probe has been ordered based on information from our ship captain, Mr. Rutgers Wood, pertaining to accusations against the Albein Chancellor Ms. Norman Wall. Mr. Wood claims that he received this information from an Albein boy, Mr. Kru Yule. Now, will Mr. Kru Yule step forward and bring forth the accusations himself?”

“With all due respect, Mr. Speaker, I do not wish to start this probe without the accused present,” stated Kru, without a hint of any sort of fear in his voice.

The Senators burst into noisy talking among themselves upon hearing Kru say that.

“Let there be silence!” the Speaker's voice boomed throughout the Conference hall. “Have care how you speak, child! Your accused is our Chancellor!”

“I am well aware of that, sir but I maintain my position on that point!”

“What are you doing?” hissed Troy beside him.

“The right thing,” replied Kru.

“Kru, they are all sided with Norman, you know that well!” said Rutgers in a low voice, leaning onto Kru's ear.

“I know,” replied Kru. “But this is the only way!”

“I hope you are right,” said Rutgers. “But I am starting to regret calling for this meeting in the first place!”

“We need to make sure our Elveden refugee gets a place to stay-” said Kru.

“Mr. Yule, you’re part of an inquiry, so I suggest you pay us respect,” interrupted the Speaker.

“Yes sir, but I possess enough evidence to convict our Chancellor, so I suggest you summon her here instead of chatting with me,” said Kru, irritated at the Speaker’s attitude.

How the heck is he not stammering now? Troy thought to himself.

“What the hell, Kru?” asked Rutgers, in a bout of rage but upon seeing the expression on Kru’s face, his face lightened, “Him too?”

Kru nodded yes slowly.

“Alright, Mr. Yule, we’ll summon Ms. Norman Wall here,” said the Speaker, after looking at the rest of the authorities who were furiously consulting with each other about what Kru had told them.

Ten minutes, Norman walked into the Conference looking very mad. Troy could feel her powerful gaze, as she glared at Kru and the rest as she stood on the far end of the podium.

“Well, here she is,” said the Speaker. “Tell us now!”

“Here, is my evidence.” Kru said, “I have sent the data to your individual comps, from where you can access it. This woman here, had ordered the men assigned to the Elveden rescue mission to abort the mission beforehand in secret hiding the facts from the Senate. In addition, she left those men to die, by closing the wormhole before they return safely to the Orion Swift. This woman clearly is hiding something.”

The authorities again submerged into their talking and the Speaker spoke, “My dear boy, you are quite imaginative, if I can say so. The Chancellor has the power to do whatever she wishes to and that is why she is the Chancellor.”

“But the law clearly states every action of the Chancellor is to be evaluated by the Senate before it can be approved,” retaliated back Kru.

“The same law states that under high threat conditions, the Chancellor can do whatever she wants to ensure the protection of the Albein people.”

“Can’t you see she’s up to something?” begged Kru. “After all she’s done on our planet to grasp power. She’s nothing but a power hungry monster!”

“ENOUGH! Don’t you bring your personal feelings into this, boy!” cried the Speaker, at which Norman walked away from her position to in front of the authorities and she turned to face Kru and the others.

“So am I guilty?” she asked loudly, with a sinister smile on her face.

“No!” cried the Speaker, as if whatever Kru had told before was a very bad joke.

“Who says I am guilty, Mr. Speaker?” asked Norman, her sinister smile growing.

The Speaker turned to look at the Senate and saw no hands up. He turned and said loudly, “No one, madam!”

“Good!” said Norman. “Now, Mr. Yule, you do have a medical history of mental illness especially after your parents died, under rather unfortunate circumstances. Therefore I don’t blame you for what you have done now, it’s just the illness speaking. However, such things can’t be tolerated anyways, hence you and your friends will be taken prisoners until further notice.”

“NO! YOU WITCH!” cried Kru, as Troy recovered from the crazy truth they were facing. This wasn’t any close to the thing he had imagined or thought. This was complete nuts.

“Oh! Rutgers! You are such a fine captain! I would hate to lose you too! And who is this? Isn’t it Dylan’s son? Your mother would be so enraged at this, boy!” said Norman, in an irritating tone. “And look at whom they rescued, a young Elveden! Pity that you are going to be imprisoned for the rest of your cursed life.”

Then just for a moment, Norman’s eyes and Emilie’s eyes were locked at each other and instantly, Norman jerked as if she had just been shocked.

“GET THE ELVEDEN!” she cried.

Troy immediately bolted towards Norman out of pure fury, who was only a few meters away from them.

“TAKE THEM NOW!” cried Norman, upon seeing Troy sprinting towards her and two droids flew and knocked Troy down, before he could hurt Norman. “Strip them of all tech and put them in one cell and put the Elveden in a separate cell!”

“Max, get us help!” whispered Troy, just before the androids removed his transmitter.

The droids then overpowered all of them and dragged them to the prison bay, where they stripped them of the nanobot body suits and made them wear ordinary prison clothes, before putting them altogether in one holding cell.

“That went great!” muttered Troy to himself inside the holding cell, which was big enough to house the four of them, completely covered by transparent walls that had tiny nano spikes loaded to jolt the prisoners upon the slightest touch.

“Norman is clearly up to something!” said Rutgers, stroking his black beard.

“We’ve got to save Emilie!” said Troy, dryly sobbing thinking of her.

“But we can’t do anything from here!” said Kru. “We’re done for! Norman will accomplish whatever she’s up to now”

“What could she be up to?” asked Troy, absent mindedly, when he suddenly remembered. “Emilie knows what Norman is up to.”

“What?” asked Rutgers, thinking that he had just heard something very relevant to their situation.

“The Elveden can read minds and that is why Norman has ordered Emilie to be executed! Whatever she is up to, Emilie knows!” said Troy as he got up and proceeded towards the transparent wall.

“Don’t touch it!” Kru warned, “It will shock you!”

Troy sighed. He wanted to save Emilie. He just couldn’t let her die. His eyes were becoming cloudy, as he thought of her.

That Norman...

Then all of a sudden, Troy started hearing a voice in his head. It was Emilie’s.

Don’t worry about me! and then the voice was gone.

7 THE BETRAYAL

Three plates suddenly materialized slowly in front of the three prisoners. Each contained a bowl of porridge and a glass of water.

“Look at that!” remarked Rutgers.

Troy and Kru looked at the descending plates and sighed together.

“How long are we gonna be here?” asked Troy, after spending close to forty hours in the cell silently. The trio had avoided talking to each other and spent the time huddled in the corners.

“We might as well as start liking it here,” Kru said dejectedly, “At least the cell has a proper washroom,” referring to a tiny room within the cell.

“I wonder what they did to the girl?” said Rutgers.

“I am worried too,” said Troy, “What about your sister?”

“There is something you need to know, Troy,” said Kru.

“What?”

“Rutgers is my uncle. Lena should be safe with his family.”

“Right!” said Troy, as it didn’t seem to surprise him at all, after all that had happened to him in a short while.

“He used to be really very scary when we were little and I always used to stammer around him out of fear,” said Kru and smiled at his uncle. “I am sorry I gave you a wrong impression back on the Command Bridge, Troy.”

Troy just nodded his head in reply. He had a more pressing question to ask.

“How do you know my father, sir?” asked Troy.

Rutgers was visibly taken aback by Troy’s question. He avoided Troy’s gaze and took some time before he could answer.

“Dylan was my friend,” he stated at last.

“How could that be?” Troy asked at once, thinking of the distance between Kepler and Albein which would have normally taken several human generations to go forth and come, even at the speed of light.

“It was me,” Rutgers said, “About fifteen years ago, we were testing a newer improvised version of wormhole technology, when I got stranded near Kepler and got attacked by unidentified attackers. Your father saved my life and that of my crew that day.”

“That’s huge!” exclaimed Troy, “Really?”

“Yes!” said Rutgers. “That attack is very similar to the attacks now. We couldn’t sense anything. We were attacked suddenly out of the blue. I have every doubt that it might have been them just surveying our planets before finally attacking them now!”

Troy let out a long breath.

“Your father was truly a great man. He had great integrity. He could have easily stolen the plans for the wormhole technology since the Keplers were actively working on stabilizing wormholes though unsuccessfully except that he didn’t. If he had, it would have been death back home for us. I reported the entire incident back home, which is why my generation has great respect for your father.”

“I have heard about your father too, I simply had no idea that you were his son,” said Kru

Troy hung his head, remembering his father, when suddenly the lights went out.

“What happened?” whispered Kru.

“Wait!” whispered back Troy. “Someone’s coming!”

“Who is it?” asked Rutgers, getting up.

“Sit down!” said Troy.

“What the? How did you?” gasped Rutgers.

“He can see in the dark!” exclaimed Kru.

“QUIET!” hushed Troy, “The circular door in the ceiling has opened. Everybody move to the corners!”

There was a dull thud, as someone landed inside the cell.

Troy instinctively jumped onto the intruder and locked the intruder’s arms.

“WHO ARE YOU?” he breathed onto the intruder’s ears.

“I am here to help you!” said a feminine voice.

Troy took a deep breath from the intruder’s hair. It was such a strong sweet fragrance reminding him of exotic flower oils that he was distracted for a moment, which the girl used to free herself from Troy’s hold. She dashed onto the plates, spilling its contents. Lights turned back on, in the cell and they could all see their newest companion. Long jet black hair, olive complexioned skin, a maroon leather jacket and black attire met their eyes.

The girl’s brown eyes met the dazzled gaze of the trio.

“Holloway?” said Kru, surprised.

“Hello nerd!” replied the girl dryly.

“What’s happening?” asked Troy in a voice that trembled a bit, melting before the girl in front of his eyes.

She’s hot... Unassailably hot, he thought.

“What are you doing here, Holloway?” asked Rutgers.

“Sir, I’ve been ordered to rescue you-”

“By whom?” interrupted Kru.

“Senator Jedias!” said Holloway, giving an annoyed look at Kru.

“What’s Jedias planning?” asked Rutgers.

“An uprising, sir!” replied Holloway.

“How many have we on our side?” asked again Rutgers.

“Not too many, sir, I’m afraid.”

“What about Emilie?” asked Troy, who was burning to ask that question, ever since he knew the new girl had come to rescue them

“The Elveden girl?” asked Holloway quickly.

“YES!” replied Troy loudly.

“She’s safe!” replied Holloway and Troy let out one of the biggest sighs of relief ever in his life.

“What is-” started to question Kru before he was interrupted by Holloway,

“See, I would love to chat with you boys round the clock but we’ve got a schedule to keep, at least I do, so let’s go!”

“Wait up!” said Holloway, as she took off with the built in propellant systems in her boots.

A moment later, Holloway threw a glowing white cube inside the cell that organized into a ladder, while falling and set against the ceiling opening and the floor. The trio climbed out of the cell using the ladder. They had emerged onto a big tunnel that was lighted by yellow lights.

“This is a service tunnel,” said Holloway.

“You do realize that we know it, right?” said Kru.

Holloway simply grimaced at him in return.

“Let’s keep moving,” Rutgers said and lead the party, “Walk me through what happened, Holloway.”

Holloway immediately brushed past the boys and walked alongside Rutgers.

“Around thirty three hours ago, the Kepler Premier approached Senator Jedias with a situation. They seemed to know that one of their own, a Kepler boy was imprisoned aboard the Orion Swift and that Chancellor Norman was compromised.”

“How did they know?” asked Rutgers curiously.

“Troy’s AI had notified his mom about the situation and also provided the evidence and the intel that Senator Jedias was the only unbiased person in authority to go to. It’s quite impressive the way Troy’s AI dealt with the situation, with the limited amount of data, it had access to!”

Troy gave a sigh of relief. He felt proud of Max and himself. Holloway had herself said that she was impressed! Troy floated for a few moments before he touched ground again. He couldn’t control himself anymore, he had to know more about this girl. He poked Kru, who replied with a low roar. He seemed to be irritated.

“Who is this girl?” whispered Troy excitedly.

“My girlfriend,” replied Kru flatly.

Troy felt all the excitement die away as soon as it had come, “Oh!” he said sadly.

“Why do you ask?” asked Kru.

“Nothing!” Troy dismissed. “Is she really your girlfriend?”

“Yes!” replied Kru, irritated.

“Tsokay!” said Troy sadly but Kru seemed uninterested as to continue asking why.

“Where’s Emilie?” promptly asked Rutgers.

“She’s in the Arkylum with Jedias,” replied Holloway. “I barely rescued her! The droids were seconds away from killing her in her cell, when I broke through!”

“That’s one lucky girl!” remarked Troy.

“Sure is!” said Holloway smiling at him, and Troy couldn’t help but notice her sensual lips.

Dirty Mermaids! Troy thought to himself.

“We’re almost there!” announced Rutgers, as he opened a circular door on the wall to their left. He looked out through the door, it opened up ten feet above the floor.

“We’ve got to jump!” said Rutgers. “Holloway, weapons at the ready! Lead the way!”

Holloway nodded and jumped out the opening without hesitation. They heard shots being fired as soon as Holloway had jumped.

“CLEAR!” she cried.

“NOW!” commanded Rutgers and pushed Troy and Kru towards the opening.

Kru landed perfectly while Troy looked as if he had sprained his ankle.

“You alright?” asked Kru.

“Yeah!” replied Troy and there was a dull thud as Rutgers joined them too.

“Wait!” said Holloway. “Let me scan the area!” and she scanned the area with her eye lenses.

“Damn it!” she said, “There are about fifty droids employed at the elevator ahead along with fifteen security personnel.”

“Can you teleport us?” asked Troy.

“Negative!” replied Holloway. “They are scanning for teleportation signatures, so if we do they’ll teleport us midway just where they want us!”

“Great!” said Troy sarcastically.

“There’s no way except ahead!” said Kru.

“Right!” agreed Rutgers.

“Alright!” said Holloway. “Here are your weapons!” and handed a small black cube to each of them.

“I am sorry!” she continued. “These form only low powered weapons!”

“What’s this?” Troy asked Kru, as the black cube transformed into a small handgun.

“Don’t be fooled thinking that it shoots antimatter, it’s just as same as a Bummer, less powerful, but stuns enough for a few seconds, it’s called a Stunner.”

“Right!” said Troy.

“Just max the dial for delivery voltage,” said Kru. “And aim at the head of those droids, it should buy us around five seconds!”

“I don’t think that’s going to be enough!” replied Troy, “I’ll run ahead and take out the droids!”

“Can you?” asked Kru dubiously.

“Tsokay guys!” announced Holloway. “They know that we’re here! Run for it!”

The four started running towards the elevator, “They won’t kill us right?” asked Troy as he passed Holloway.

“I hope so!” said Holloway.

“What!” cried Troy, “Give me your two Bummers! I am faster! I’ll cover you all!”

Holloway handed away her two Bummers in exchange for Troy's Stunner. Troy took off at full speed and sprinted as fast as he could, he could feel the floor vibrating minutely indicating an army marching towards them.

Troy stretched out his two Bummers and realized he had no Max with him to guide all of his potential twenty targets,

"Nasty Mermaids!" he shouted as he looked behind, the trio seemed a long way off, by at least a hundred meters. He looked ahead then, the elevator still seemed a long way off,

How long? What am I gonna do?...

Then suddenly, he saw them as he came around a turning and backed off again hiding behind a sharp curve. Shots blasted beside him as he barely escaped them and jumped behind the shelter of the corner. He could hear the droids flying towards him. Troy started to panic and his heart started to beat irregularly fast. As he was trying to overcome his anxiety, five droids closed on him at the turning.

"Fugitive!-" shouted one of the droids, when Troy blasted his two Bummers at maximum charge, damaging all the five droids as they were left hovering in the air.

Troy quickly jumped onto two of them and pushed them towards the rest of the droid forces around the corner. The rest of the droids started shooting at Troy hiding behind the two knackered droids. Unfortunately the droids were also using Bummers, so upon jolting the droids Troy was given a massive shock and was thrown behind. However, Troy picked himself up, as if he had just been brushed back and ran towards his two battered droids, that were still hovering and providing cover for him.

"Stay back!" cried Troy as the trio arrived at the site of action and blasted his Bummers again at the droids ahead of him, severely damaging seven of them. Troy then ditched his former droids and took cover behind the newly damaged droids and shot from there, damaging another set of droids. This he continued till he had damaged all of the droids till he came face to face, with only six clobbered droids between him and the Albein security personnel. He blasted his Bummers at them but nothing shot out of it.

"Uh oh!" uttered Troy as he turned behind and ran. "Take them out! Take them out!" and in response, Kru and Holloway darted together towards the personnel.

"I don't think Kru can shoot!" remarked Troy as he passed them

"That's right!" grinned back Holloway as she ran.

"Holly!" cried Kru, his cheeks flushing pink.

"It took you all this time to call me just the way you do?" asked Holloway, in an annoyed tone.

"I just wanted to be formal in front of them!" replied Kru, pleading his innocence.

"Screw formal!" said Holloway, as she jumped and pumped her Stunners several times at the personnel before landing on two Albeins before landing on them with her knees and punching them hard till they passed out. Kru on the other hand, stayed his ground and shot at the personnel, slowly

before one short Albein jumped and grabbed him by his neck. He struggled as another personnel grabbed him by his legs, at this point Kru found his Stunner on the floor and inserted the muzzle inside the nose of the short Albein grabbing him by the neck and stunned him.

“And you didn’t tell me anything when you went through that wormhole! How did you expect me to deal with something like that?” complained Holloway

“Just like that?” said Kru, stunning another Albein and infuriating Holloway.

“You know what?” said Holloway, as he knocked out the last of the Albeins. “You are no better than anyone else!” and blasted at Kru with her Stunner and Kru crashed to the ground, crying, “WHY?”

“What happened?” asked Rutgers as he joined them panting.

“Nothing!” said Holloway. “Kru just got stunned by them, he should be up within a minute!”

Kru grunted his teeth and struggled to get up.

“That was fun!” exclaimed Troy, as he joined them. “Oh! Kru! You got yourself stunned!” then looking at Holloway, he remarked. “As expected!” and laughed. Kru just grunted more and got up by himself, in a fit of rage.

“Tsokay! Let’s keep moving!” said Rutgers, not understanding what these young people were up to.

“We’ve got more droids headed this way,” said Holloway, after an alert sprang up on her eye lens.

“Let’s make it to the elevator!” said Troy, “And Kru will make sure we reach the Arkylum without any stopping in between!”

“How do you expect me to hack into the system without any computer!” asked Kru in a mocking tone.

“I thought you Albeins had bigger heads!” Troy shot back, “Use Holloway’s!”

“No way! That’s unhygienic!” replied Kru, referring to wearing Holloway’s lens.

Troy turned to Holloway and said, “I feel sorry for you!” to which Holloway returned a pitiful look as if in agreeing with him.

“Alright! Let’s move!” roared Rutgers, as he was getting already enough of the craze.

The four rushed towards the elevators and waited for one to turn up.

“Come on Holloway, do you have any other wearable tech?” asked Troy.

“No, I don’t, except a nanobot cube-” replied Holloway.

“That’s enough, give me that!” cut in Kru furiously.

“Alright!” said Holloway and she reached inside her jacket, pulled out a tiny black cube and gave it to Kru.

“Turn it into a Holotab!” commanded Kru.

“How will she turn it?” asked Troy at once, thinking for a moment that Kru was asking Holloway to

perform some sort of origami.

“She just connects to the nanobot cube and commands it via her computer!” spat out Kru.

As Kru was speaking, the tiny cube transformed into an eleven inch transparent stick, that projected a holographic user interface. Kru started jabbing the Holotab as if he were possessed and finished with a mighty jab. The elevator in front of them opened and all of them hopped inside it. Once inside, Kru again hit the Holotab a few times and then declared,

“I have made sure that the Arkylum are unreachable by elevators once we reach there!”

“EXCELLENT!” rejoiced Rutgers and the doors opened on to the Arkylum.

They entered the Arkylum and found most of the Keplers and a few Albeins inside. The Cruiser was still there where they had left it. Troy’s mother suddenly emerged out of the crowd, rushed towards the incoming party and hugged Troy tightly.

“You’ve got to stop doing that, mom! It’s embarrassing!” said Troy.

“You lied to me!” wept Amanda, hugging her son even more tightly.

“I am alright, mom!”

“You better be!”

“Are we cool then?”

“No!” replied Amanda. “I’m not letting you out of my sight ever again!”

“You know that’s impossible!” laughed Troy.

“But I’ll try!” said Amanda.

“I would like to see you try!” joked Troy, to which Amanda playfully hit him on his arm.

“Now, Mr. Troy, how are you?” asked a voice breaking their conversation.

Troy looked at who it was. It was Senator Jedias, a tall man with a grey French beard, in his early seventies.

“I am fine, sir. Thank you for rescuing us.”

“Well, I knew this day was coming. The time to overthrow Norman and it’s finally here.”

Troy had no idea as to what to reply him, so he just nodded his head once. Then he noticed two figures near him,

“Mr. Troy!” said a rough voice.

Troy saw it was the Kepler Premier, Bantam Hall, an obese man with orange hair and a big orange mustache, but it was the person standing near him, who excited him the most and Troy could hardly contain his excitement.

“It’s happening again!” the Premier said, “You’re getting more attention than me, Mr. Falcon.”

Hugo Falcon dismissed the Premier with a wave of his hand and a handsome laugh.

“Greatest fan, sir!” said Troy, with all his twenty eight teeth showing.

“Thank you, kid!” said Hugo, brushing his short blonde hair.

“Stop it, Hugo!” said the Premier in a light-mannered tone, then turning to the rest of the gathering, he said, “You all do realize as to why we are here! Everyone is aware of the facts, I believe! Tonight we take the Orion Swift from Norman and whatever nasty plan she is up to-”

“Sir, the girl’s up!” said an Albein woman, who appeared to be a nurse. Immediately, Bantam, Hugo and Jedias went in the direction, the nurse was pointing. Troy and his gang followed behind them into the Cruiser.

“Child!” Bantam said upon seeing Emilie lying on a bunk, in the refugee quarters. “How do you feel now?”

“Better!” replied Emilie, sitting up, still dressed in the plain orange shirt and pants.

Troy rushed through the crowd, “Emilie!” he said.

Emilie instantly smiled on seeing him. “Good to see you again alive, Troy!” she said.

“I am too!” replied Troy, grinning.

Then Rutgers pulled Jedias, Bantam away for a small meeting outside the quarters and they came back after a few minutes. Troy knew what they were going to ask her,

“What is Norman up to, Emilie?” asked Bantam.

Emilie looked for a moment at Troy, who gave a reassuring nod and then she turned to Bantam and said, “She has betrayed us.”

8 LEVEL EIGHTY-ONE

“What?” asked Bantam, taken aback by pure unadulterated shock.

“While the Orion Swift was jumping through wormholes to escape the attackers, Ms. Norman had received many private messages from the Head of the alien attack-” said Emilie.

“What was it?” interrupted Jediah impatiently.

“He offered her a deal,” Emilie continued. “That in return for disengaging the rescue of the other two human colonies and for complete surrender of all people aboard the Orion Swift, he would make her the ruler of all four-”

Instantly, noisy chatter arose among the large group of people who were standing there,

“Did he say two? Aura is uninhabited, right?”

“That scoundrel!”

“Complete surrender?”

“Ruler of what? They destroyed our homes in front of us!”

“SILENCE!” Jediah cried. Then looking at Emilie, he said, “Pray continue!”

Emilie composed herself and spoke, “Norman didn’t even hesitate in replying yes to his deal.”

Another round of loud cacophony started and all the shouting Jediah could do didn’t help this time. Rutgers stepped in and commanded everyone else to go out except for the authorities. Troy stayed back defiantly, so did Kru and Holloway. Rutgers looked at the hardened expression on Troy’s face and let him say, without saying anything.

“Troy! I think you should get going,” said Hugo.

“I’m not leaving her and besides, we have every right to be here,” said Troy, blinking his eyes fast.

Bantam looked at Troy and sighed, “Alright! What do we do now?”

“Emilie, do you know anything else about the attackers?” asked Troy, not minding the Premier’s question.

“I’m afraid not!” replied Emilie. “The messages were in plain standard order English and had no indication as to who they were or anything about them.”

“That species is intelligent!” remarked Bantam.

“Must be the most advanced in the universe!” said Troy.

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Hugo said, “How can you-”

“If they can manipulate dark matter, dark energy and produce exotic matter, they are the most advanced species in the universe! I’m not saying they are the only ones, I’m just saying they are!” said Troy.

“So?” asked Jediah, inviting proposals as what to do.

“You know the answer, sir,” replied Troy. “We take the ship!”

“It’s not as simple as you think!” said Jediah.

“Everything is complex,” said Troy remembering the tip that Max taught him, while cracking juvenile

algorithms, “Until you break it.”

“So what are you suggesting?” asked Bantam, not able to believe he was asking an eighteen year old for strategies.

“We use the age-old strategy that works always,” replied Troy. “Distractions! I need to know where Norman is!”

“Let’s move to the Command centre,” said Kru. “I can project the ship’s blueprint up there!”

“Right! Let’s move!” said Troy, as he turned towards Emilie and asked, “You wanna come?”

Emilie nodded yes, Troy held her hands and helped her to get up. Everyone proceeded to the Command centre across the level.

The group moved to the Command centre where Kru immediately got to work, he projected the Orion Swift’s blueprint from the control panel as a reality render. The Orion Swift sprang up in front of their eyes, in its characteristic bluish gray color and design that resembled an elegantly designed fountain pen nib, with a huge ring surrounding the rear end of the ship that housed the powerful propellers.

“The Orion Swift has one hundred and sixty seven levels,” said Kru. “Norman’s office and quarters are on the eighty-first level.”

“Getting here to the eighty-first level should be no problem,” said Rutgers.

“Yes,” said Kru. “I can program the elevator to take us right there, but what are we gonna do from there, that is the question!”

“Show the eighty-first level,” said Troy.

Kru at once punched a few options and give an expanded detailed view of the level. The level looked quite simple in its design. The passage from the elevator opened into large opening which led into twelve passages from the small atrium.

“Tsokay!” said Troy, a little perplexed.

“This is where we should start worrying,” said Kru.

“Are there any parallel tunnels or anything?” asked Troy.

“None for human use, except there are coolant fluid ducts!” said Kru, checking the blueprint. “It should be just enough for a person to crawl through, but even if I stop and drain the coolant fluid running across this level, we are going to get around only about five minutes to make it to where Norman is!”

“Why?” asked Emilie.

“Because every level on the Orion Swift is powered by its own engine at the core of the level and these engines produce a lot of heat and lot of other stuff, which is basically absorbed by the coolant fluid, even stopping the engine, we’re going to get over two hours of gold-melting heat and other-” explained Kru.

“Yeah, yeah, I get it!” Troy interrupted impatiently, “How many are they?”

“Seven, running parallel till every last room on the level.” said Kru.

“Alright, so that’s our way in!” said Troy.

“How do you think we should proceed?” asked Rutgers.

“I will lead a personal team of four to tackle Norman, while others make sure we don’t get disturbed,” said Troy.

“Tsokay!” said Rutgers. “It looks like a good plan!”

“Except that it isn’t complete!” argued Hugo. “I think I should lead the party!”

Troy got excited about Hugo joining the team and he didn’t mind the way Hugo spoke.

“We’ll be honored!” exclaimed Troy, with a happy grin.

“If Hugo is in, we’ve got the best chances of getting this done!” said Bantam, clapping his hands together.

“Tsokay!” said Rutgers, “How to proceed then?”

“We draw all of the security over here! You’ve got to engage them in a fight! We’ve got to give the impression all of the rebels are here, it’s very important!” insisted Troy.

“It’s important that they know we’re here too,” chipped in Kru.

“Cast our holograms now and then, just so they know, complete with human infrared and bio-signatures lest the droids realize that it’s fake,” said Troy. “Meanwhile, we’ll make it to Norman’s office or quarters where ever she is on that level and take her captive.”

“Once she is captured,” said Jedias heavily. “We can expect the Senate to turn, unless there are other betrayers-”

“We know who to trust, sir,” said Troy with a mild smile, which brought a smile to Jedias’ face as well.

“Alright!” announced Hugo. “We begin in forty minutes!”

The next half an hour saw the Arkylum brimming with activity.

“Status report!” asked Bantam, looking at some of the Keplers.

“All of the one hundred and twenty seven Keplers are armed and ready for battle, sir and so are the Albeins!” said one tall Kepler man.

Troy’s mom was with Troy the whole time, after listening to her worries for the umpteenth time, Troy promptly called his new friends, unable to listen anymore.

“Mom, I get that you haven’t met my new mates!” said Troy. “This is Emilie, Kru and Holloway!”

Amanda looked a bit unsatisfied that she wasn’t able to tell Troy all of her worries and faked smiles

as she turned to exchange pleasantries with the three, but soon she forgot what she was worrying all about upon seeing Emilie.

“Emilie, is it?” said Amanda, her eyes opening wide. “You look so beautiful! And this is no dress for a girl!” she said pertaining to the prison clothes.

“Don’t worry, mom, we’ll change soon!” assured Troy.

“Make sure you get her good clothes!” said Amanda, as she smiled and tuned to Kru.

“Hallo, ma’am!” said Kru and bowed.

Amanda blushed at what Kru did, “You do know how to treat a lady!”

Holloway snorted beside Kru. Amanda noticed it and smiled at Holloway, “Oh my! You make me wish I had your body, young lady! Which reminds me of a secret! Don’t eat those fish they serve here, they are full of fat rather than proteins!”

Holloway grinned and nodded, after which Amanda pulled Troy for a private conversation.

“You aren’t in love with any of those two girls right?”

“NO MOM!” Troy almost screamed. “Don’t be ridiculous!”

Amanda looked disappointed.

“What is it?” asked Troy, on seeing her expression.

“Oh! Nothing, dear!” said Amanda. “Just be careful out there! I still don’t feel alright about you risking your life, son.”

“I got to finish what I have started, mom,” said Troy.

Amanda looked surprised at what Troy had just said. For a moment, she seemed lost as she got reminded of another person who had said those same words a long time back.

Amanda smiled at her son. She felt proud of him, she kissed on his forehead and said, “Go! Do what you have to!”

Troy smiled and answered, “I’ll see you soon!”

Then he turned and joined his friends. Within five minutes, Troy and his gang had suited in nanobot suits and loaded with Bummers. Hugo joined them and all of them went to notify Jedias and Bantam.

“Sir, we’re ready!” announced Hugo.

Troy was grinning standing beside him. He felt proud of this moment, standing side by side with us hero. It was like his greatest dream come true and he hoped that after everything was over, he would get some free chatting time with Hugo.

“Good luck!” said Bantam and nodded his head, Hugo turned and resumed walking towards the Arkylum doors.

“Can you get me Max back, Kru?” asked Troy, who was suddenly reminded of another thing he was

fond of.

“I don’t know!” replied Kru. “Max was loaded onto the chip in the transmitter they took away from you, if they had destroyed it! I can’t get her back!”

“Unless they haven’t destroyed it!” said Troy sadly.

“Guys!” Hugo started speaking suddenly. “This is so cool, ain’t it?”

Troy found a relief in Hugo as a distraction and said, “YES SIR!”

Hugo flashed a big grin in return. Holloway was checking her accessories at tail end of the group, when Emilie got chatting with her.

“I never got to thank you for saving me!” said Emilie.

“Ah! Don’t bother sweetie!” said Holloway, grinning at her sweetly.

Emilie smiled back her gratitude. Soon, the party reached the elevators and Kru stopped them to make announcements.

“Here is your gear!” said Kru, taking stuff out of his waist pouch belt. “Here is a plasma cutter, use it to cut open the duct and the walls, be careful, it gets very hot. And once you finish cutting, it’s of utmost importance that we repair the damage, because you know the coolant duct-”

“Yeah!” said Hugo and flashed a big grin.

“Alright!” Kru continued, a bit irritated at Hugo’s flashy personality. “You use these to repair”, he said, taking out tiny flat white solid circular disks, that had lines all over it, “These are transmutators, Albein tech working at the quantum level, they will bind to whatever cracks or breaks they find, transform into whatever material that it’s made of and bind them. Clear?”

“How do you-” asked Emilie.

“You place the cut out piece over the original place, and place this anywhere connecting the two pieces. It should take about three seconds for it repair and make it as good as new! And here are your transmitters, we’ll keep in contact with these! Tap your transmitter to transmit a live message!”

Everyone nodded quickly in agreement but it seemed more like they did so that Kru would stop lecturing.

“Let’s move out,” said Hugo.

Kru immediately took out a box containing eye lenses and put them on in his eyes, “Give me a few seconds!”

Kru immediately got to work, he took out a mini keyboard and stabbed at it for a while, after which he projected a few options from his eye lens and punched at it furiously fast.

“I am done!” announced Kru. “I have pinpointed the location of the rebellion by sending a witty message, and made the Arkylum accessible once again by elevators, except for one!”

“Good!” said Hugo, patting Kru on the back.

Kru coughed on being hit and smirked in return and continued speaking, “Based on my calculations, we should enter the elevator in two minutes and forty five seconds!”

“Hey! Can’t you hold the elevators till we get to take Norman down?” asked Troy.

Kru cast a not-so-sure look at him.

“Theoretically, it’s impossible, as the Orion Swift is run by the best Albein AI, which will eventually find a way to override my code, so I can stall for only a few minutes at best.”

“Mmmm...” said Troy, hanging his head.

“How much time, do you think it’s going to take, Troy?” asked Holloway, after curbing her laughter and trying to appear serious, by asking this question.

“Time is of essence here, people!” Troy said, “The sooner we capture Norman, the better! I’ve got my mother inside there! I won’t be able to forgive myself, if I let something happen to her!”

Troy’s little talk had brought the spirits out in the team. Another minute elapsed quietly, when Kru punched another button on his mini keyboard.

“Ten seconds to go!” he announced.

The elevator opened in front of them. All of them went inside.

“Four, three, two, one, zero!” said Kru as the elevator door closed as he finished his countdown. “I love the way I calculate!”

Holloway snorted heavily in response, bringing a short blast of involuntary laughter from both Troy and Emilie.

“Alright! Alright!” said Kru, crossing his arms. Soon, they were about to reach level eighty-one.

“Alright guys! Weapons at the ready!” said Hugo taking out his two Bumpers. Everybody drew their Bumpers and got into position.

“Remember, we four take out hostiles while Kru cuts out the wall!” reminded Troy. The elevator doors opened onto a passage. It seemed very quiet and was empty.

“Tsokay!” said Kru. “Let’s move out! I’ve blocked all transmissions from security cams! So we’re invisible to security!”

“Everybody! Be alert,” said Hugo, getting out of the elevators.

Quickly, the party moved to the central circular atrium, from where they had to take one of the twelve passageways, which would lead them to Norman. The atrium was also devoid of anybody.

“Well, this is turning out to be too easy!” said Hugo.

“There are people in those passageways leading away from the atrium!” said Kru.

“Is Norman still here, Kru?” asked Holloway.

Kru tapped his keyboard and looked into the distance. He was viewing the data streaming directly

onto his eye lens.

“Yes she is in her office, surrounded by thirty droids! No Albeins!” said Kru.

“Thirty!” exclaimed Hugo. “That’s quite a number!”

“Tsokay,” said Troy. “Change of plans! We will break into two teams! One team breaks inside the office and takes out the droids! The immediate action of the droids will be to escort Norman out! The other team will take down Norman, once she comes out!”

“Yes,” said Hugo immediately. “I’ll take Troy and Emilie with me and take out Norman once she comes out!”

“Tsokay,” agreed Holloway. “Let’s go!”

The party moved till they reached the passageway number seven, which lead to Norman’s office.

“Is anybody there in the passage?” asked Troy.

“No,” replied Kru, after checking his data.

“Alright,” said Holloway. “You guys keep moving! We’ll see you in ten!”

Troy nodded and proceeded along the path, with Hugo and Emile by his side. They stopped about a hundred meters before the entrance to Norman’s office, behind a slight curve and waited for Kru and Holloway.

“Two minutes out guys!” said Kru. “We are using propellers on our feet to get there!”

“Alright!” whispered back Troy impatiently.

Two minutes, Kru’s transmission broke through,

“Ten seconds to contact!”

“Baby!” called Holloway.

“Hush! Holly! They can hear us!” whispered Kru.

Emilie smiled, “It’s tsokay!” she said.

Kru turned pink with shyness and didn’t utter another word.

“Tsokay guys!” said Holloway. “We’re about to begin! We’ll alert you soon!”

“Tsokay,” said Troy with a grin.

“Focus kids!” said Hugo, who suddenly seemed to be all serious.

The trio waited for a full five minutes, before Holloway shouted in their ears, “They’re leaving, a troop of twelve! Take them out!”

“Alright guys!” said Troy. “In position!” and Troy and Emilie took flanking positions beside Hugo.

They could hear them. Troy aimed his Bummers straight ahead at maximum delivery voltage.

“Should we now?” asked Troy, as he heard the troop’s movement getting stronger

“Not yet!” uttered Hugo.

About thirty seconds later, he cried, “NOW!” and all three of them darted ahead. Troy was momentarily confused as to why Hugo had shouted, the only advantage they had being the element of surprise and Hugo had clearly spoiled it here. Nevertheless, Troy jumped around the corner to pump his Bumpers, as he saw Hugo turning around and shooting at Emilie.

“No!” cried Troy, as he slipped and crashed onto the ground but before he got up, Hugo pointed his Bumpers at him with a smirk and emptied the charge within. Troy was thrown against the wall and fell down to the floor.

“Are both out?” asked a high pitched, irritating voice. Troy had heard it before, it was of Norman’s. Troy was still conscious but he decided to play dead just so he could learn more about the situation and for the perfect opportunity to strike back.

“Though we’re known for our meddling with genetics and making ourselves stronger and handsome, no Kepler can handle such a massive shock!” laughed Hugo, brushing his short brown hair.

Troy couldn’t believe what Hugo had done. He put all his strength into not crying.

“What about the girl?” asked Norman, in an irritated tone as if even she couldn’t handle his flashy personality.

“Ah! Don’t bother about that bitch!”

Troy’s blood literally boiled at that moment, Hugo had said that and he had almost moved his body in rage.

“What was that?” asked Norman, shooting her eyes towards the place where Troy lay.

“What?” asked Hugo in his flashy voice, turning around to see where she was looking.

“Nothing,” said Norman, after a couple of moments, after she kept looking at Troy. “Thank you for accepting my proposal at such short notice.”

“Well, no problem, ma’am, I-”

“There are two more kids in my office, finish them!” interrupted Norman.

“Oh! Don’t worry they are headed this way,” said Hugo, as he pointed in the direction behind Norman. “Though personally, if you don’t mind, I would like to spend a little time with that girl before-”

“YOU BASTARD!!!” cried Troy springing from the place where he lay, his eyes wet and hands armed with Bumpers. Hugo acted with lightning fast reflexes, he went down on his knees and shot thrice from both his Bumpers, before Troy could shoot at him. Meanwhile, other droids also started firing at Troy, throwing him back against the walls.

“You bastard!” Troy wept as he picked himself and blasted his Bumpers to take out the remaining droids.

“Kill him!” hissed Norman, hiding behind the damaged hovering droids.

“You little twit!” shouted Hugo, replacing the Bummers with a tiny hand gun he drew from inside his jacket. Troy looked up, breathing hard and he noticed the weapon in Hugo’s hand.

“Why don’t you just die, boy?” said Hugo, his face contorted with frustration and rage.

Troy knew it was the end of the line. Hugo was carrying a plasma gun. A straight shot to the heart or the brain or any vital part, Troy knew it was the end.

“Suck on this!” said Hugo, as he shot Troy in his right thigh.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHH!” screamed Troy in pain.

“Enjoying ourselves now, are we?” said Hugo, talking like a maniac.

“KILL HIM ALREADY!” hissed Norman loudly.

“Alright! Alright!” said Hugo, as he pointed the gun towards Troy’s body.

Troy took a shallow breath, every breath pained like a thousand daggers stabbing his lungs all at once.

“Bye bye!” said Hugo and smirked, pressing the trigger releasing a couple of plasma bullets directed at Troy’s body, hitting his lungs and his abdomen.

Then all too suddenly, something hit Hugo’s hand blackening it and throwing backwards against the wall. Troy looked up at what it was. There were two bots that had just entered the scene.

“TROY!” cried Max, her voice coming out from those bots that Troy had had Max hack into, earlier.

“MAX!” said Troy, hugely relieved, that she was here.

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah! Don’t worry about me,” said Troy. “Take out Norman!”

“Tsokay,” said Max and jolted Norman, as she tried to escape, knocking her out, while Troy grabbed his sides and crawled towards where Hugo was thrown.

“You!” Troy howled, on getting close to him.

“YOU IDIOT!” Hugo spat back. “YOU SON OF A BIT-”

“YAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!” cried Troy, taking the plasma gun on the floor, where Hugo had dropped it and shot mercilessly, shot after shot, till he emptied twenty shots on Hugo.

“You!” wailed Troy. “You!”

“Troy, calm yourself!” said Max. “It’s tsokay!”

Out in the distance, Troy heard Kru and Holloway calling out his name, as they came running.

“Troy, are you alright?” asked Kru. “You are shot!”

“I’ll be alright! I’m not fatally shot.”

“But still-”

“Believe me, I know my body.”

Kru nodded though not completely alright with what Troy was telling.

“Handcuff Norman!” replied Troy, as he saw Holloway tend to Emilie.

“Is she alright?” asked Troy.

“Yes!” replied Holloway, “Just unconscious!”

“What happened to Hugo?” asked Kru, horrified looking at his body, riddled with blood stained holes.

“He turned,” Troy said staring at Hugo.

“Oh,” said Kru, as he squatted beside Hugo. “You seemed to have-”

“I couldn’t help it,” Troy said dryly, still staring at Hugo.

With quivering hands, Kru felt Hugo’s left wrist for a pulse. There was none.

Taking a big nervous gulp, “He’s dead!” Kru said loudly, as Troy kept looking coldly.

Holloway looked appalled as well, holding Emilie in her arms. Kru gave up after a couple of minutes,

“You killed him,” he announced.

Troy didn’t reply.

“Do what you have to,” he said. “Arrest me as well! I won’t resist! I promise you, but before that, make a ship-wide broadcast that Norman is captured.”

“I didn’t say anything about arresting you,” said Kru, looking into his eyes.

Troy sank on the floor, his face stained with tears and an insatiable anger eating at him away. Kru glanced at Holloway, who was as clueless as he was, then he took out his gadgets and began a ship-wide broadcast,

“We have taken Norman captive! Surrender yourselves now that your reason to be scared is no more!”

“Send for help, will you baby?” said Holloway.

Kru nodded and sent a transmission with their location.

“Troy,” said Kru, after sending the transmission. “It’s tsokay! It’s over!”

“I know,” said Troy, grunting his teeth. “He was scum! And from the beginning, I had idolized him!”

Kru drew near Troy and said, “Sometimes, it’s all just for good, Troy.”

“What are you going to tell them?” asked Troy.

“The truth,” said Kru simply.

“But he was idolized by all the Keplers! If you tell the truth it’s going to be morally ripping every Kepler’s soul!”

“It’s better to rip a soul by telling the truth than let it rot in lies, Troy!” said Kru. “I will tap into the video record of the security cams in this place and provide that as evidence to the Albein Senate and the Kepler Premier, that way you won’t feel guilty and slowly kill yourself and also the truth gets out!”

“Tsokay,” said Troy weakly.

“Let me bring medical aid,” said Max and sent one of the bots out.

Soon enough, the bot returned with a white package with a symbol of a red bird carrying a twig, which Kru promptly opened. He took out a couple of bottles and poured a few drops over Troy’s burnt flesh, where the plasma entered and covered them with plasters.

“You should be fine,” said Kru, taking out a small sachet from the package. “Drink this! It makes you feel better!”

Troy obeyed him without a question and drank up.

“It amazes me,” said Kru, trying to lighten up the situation. “Max is here!”

Troy smiled weakly, his mind was still on Hugo but he knew that he wouldn’t be alive, hadn’t it been for Max.

“Troy had me hack into these two bots earlier before all your adventures! Once I knew there were going to store the transmitter away, I shifted to these bot’s memory! And I’m glad I did!” said Max.

“How did you find me, Max?” asked Troy.

“I don’t know,” replied Max.

“That’s weird, coming from an AI,” said Kru, who was hearing that for the first time from an AI.

“Max!” said Troy. “Tell us what happened exactly.”

“I was flying these bots near the dining hall, when they were suddenly teleported, here. I heard your screams and I rushed in,” said Max.

“That’s weird,” said Kru, “Totally weird.”

Troy was the most disturbed of all. For some strange reason, he felt like as he was being watched.

“Let’s drop it,” said Troy, out of the blue.

“What?” said Kru, surprised that Troy wasn’t being intrigued by Max’s tale.

“Let’s not focus on that now!” said Troy. “There are more important things to do.”

“Tsokay!” said Kru, though he wasn’t convinced at all.

“These meds work fast,” said Troy and got up, stretching his body.

“Your body regenerates like hell!” exclaimed Kru, wondering at how fast Troy had recovered from a possibly fatal injury.

“Emilie has opened her eyes, guys!” announced Holloway.

“Is everyone alright?” asked Emilie, with a hand to her head, as she opened her eyes.

“We completed our mission successfully!” said Holloway excitedly.

“What did I miss?” asked Emilie.

Troy, who had then moved closest to her, looked at her and smiled.

“You know where to look!” said Troy and looked into her eyes.

9 SNIFFLES

The party waited for what seemed hours on end, in Norman’s office, with everyone getting dead bored except for Kru who was loading Max onto a chip in a new transmitter and onto two more spare transmitters, that he had salvaged from the damaged droids.

“How much more long?” asked Holloway, with a sleepy expression.

“They should be here any minute,” answered Kru. “After all, it’s chaos down there!”

Troy seemed uninterested in what was going all around him. He kept looking at the floor with a vacant expression. Emilie was beside him, holding his hand. She knew what he was going through and also knew that the best she could do was to just be there beside him.

Norman lay unconscious and unattended in a corner, with a piece of torn cloth across her mouth and her hands handcuffed.

“Can you see what’s going on, Kru?” asked Holloway.

Kru nodded and took out his gadgets, after a while he said,

“Senator Jedias and the Kepler Premier are in the HQ Conference hall, holding talks with the rest of the Albein Senate! They have arrested about fifty Albeins who were in league with Norman, including

the security head, Quinto.”

“Great!” Holloway exclaimed, giving Kru a quick kiss on his lips. “You are the best, babe!”

Kru’s ears and cheeks turned baby pink and he smiled.

“There is an incoming message from Rutgers,” he suddenly announced. “Yes uncle! Oh!...Tsokay!...Alright!.....Thank you!”

Turning to Holloway, he said, “Rutgers has sent a medical team and a droid force on its way to fetch us and Norman!”

“Everything else is alright?” asked Emilie, from across the room

“Yes,” answered Kru. “Like I said before, they should be here any moment.”

Sure enough, an Albein medical team of five and a twenty droids came to escort them soon and they were on their way to their newly assigned cabins on level one hundred and forty-five.

The four were assigned four adjacent cabins and extensive medical examinations before they were allowed to rest. The four had no idea as to what had happened to Norman and her loyal gang, but they knew everything was at rest now. Troy was however restless to meet his mother, who eventually came just before Troy was about to enter his cabin.

“Son!” said Amanda, holding Troy’s hands.

“Mum! You’re alright!” Troy said, feeling a heavy weight pulled away from his heart.

Amanda smiled in return and then brushing Troy’s soft hair, she said, “I heard about Hugo, Troy.”

Troy immediately turned his face away from Amanda’s.

“It’s tsokay, son!” she continued while hugging him. “I’m proud of you, Troy!”

Troy didn’t reply anything.

“Is there anything I can do for you, son?” asked Amanda, her worry lines clearly showing on her face.

Troy just let out a heavy sigh.

Amanda saw that he was troubled and thought it would be best to leave him alone.

“Take rest, Troy. I’ll see you later,” said Amanda.

Troy smiled back weakly and went inside his cabin quietly. Once alone inside, Troy still felt horrible and couldn’t sleep a wink. He kept awake and looked at the food tray beside his bed. He was hungry but he couldn’t eat. He was poking at the steak on the plate, when the AI suddenly alerted him,

“You have a visitor.”

“Who is it?” asked Troy.

The AI projected the camera view in front of him. It was Emilie. Troy smiled a bit but he was unsure whether he wanted to meet her or not. After a long pause, he said, “Open the door!”

The door disappeared beneath the floor, letting Emilie enter in.

“Lights!” said Troy and the pale white lights turned on in the room.

Emilie stood at the entrance, smiling, dressed in a light blue V-neck t-shirt and black pants, with a hand on the wall and looked very pretty.

“Come sit!” said Troy, slapping the bed beside him.

Emilie walked towards him and sat.

“Kru told me to give you this,” said Emilie, handing over a tiny white cuboidal box, like the one Troy had got earlier in the shower.

Troy smiled at the box.

“It’s Max!” he said, trying to sound enthusiastic

“You don’t have to lie to me about how you’re feeling right now!” said Emilie, looking at him.

Troy breathed out loudly.

“I don’t know what to do!” he confessed. “I’m not alright and why? Because I idolized a guy and he turned out to be a complete dash! It doesn’t make any sense, I lost almost everything and what else am I going to lose?”

Emilie placed a hand on Troy’s shoulder, she knew he was not done yet, “This is nuts! Complete nuts, Emilie! I wonder how people are still sane! Seriously, I wonder how I managed to be sane! They have destroyed us even before they have killed us! I can’t do this any-”

Emilie suddenly kissed him, abruptly stopping Troy from continuing any further. Troy was taken by surprise, but as Emilie’s soft lips slowly caressed his own, he let himself forget his troubles and started to kiss her back. He slowly put his arms around her, pulled her down on him. They kept kissing for a long time. Then Emilie moved to kiss his forehead and looked into each other’s eyes.

“I never thought, I mean I never ever thought, like, what to say, what I mean is-” choked Troy, trying to express his feelings.

“You never thought you would get to kiss a girl like me,” cut in Emilie.

Troy went pink in his ears and looked at her guiltily.

“I understand boys,” said Emilie, with a cute smile.

“It’s not like that entirely, Emilie,” said Troy. “It’s just that I have never felt this good with any of the other girls.”

As soon as he had said it, Troy wished he hadn’t said it.

Emilie’s smile had vanished.

“I’m sor..so sorr.. so sorry!” stammered Troy with his blue eyes dancing.

“It’s perfectly understandable that a handsome boy like you would have probably run his tongue

everywhere on countless girls.”

Troy couldn't believe what he had just heard from Emilie.

“That's not true!” protested Troy.

Emilie stared at him.

“Not entirely though!” said Troy, reacting to her expression.

“Forget it!” Emilie suddenly said. “Would you go out with me?”

Troy laughed heartily until he stopped after noticing Emilie's expression.

“What?” asked Emilie, wondering why he was laughing about.

“You do realize that there's nowhere to go out with you in space, right?”

“Bad joke,” deadpanned Emilie.

Troy raised his eyebrows, after a while and replied, “I like you very much, Emilie and it would be my honor to go out with you, even though there's nowhere-”

At that point, Emilie pressed on his lips with hers.

“Thank you, Troy,” said Emilie, looking into his eyes.

Troy nodded his head with a handsome smile.

“I do have one question,” said Troy.

“What is it?” asked Emilie.

“Why do you want to go out with me?”

“I guess we'll find out.”

“That's not an answer,” said Troy. “That's just trying to be a smart-” and stopped right there, before saying ‘ass’.

“Smart, what?” asked Emilie, trying to hide her grin.

Troy squinted his eyes and bit his tongue, to which Emilie placed her hand on his chest and said,

“You have a good heart, Troy and that is why I want to go out with you.”

“Hmmm...” replied Troy, wondering whether what she told him was true.

“You've such beautiful eyes,” said Emilie, stroking his eyebrows suddenly.

“Do I?” asked Troy.

“Yes and especially those tiny golden flecks in your eyes now!” said Emilie. “It's so beautiful!”

“I don't have golden flecks in my eyes!” said Troy, getting a bit startled, worrying whether it might be some sort of a medical condition.

“Of course! You didn’t when I saw first you,” said Emilie, to which Troy took a huge gulp and reminded himself to take a look later, after Emilie had left.

“There’s one more thing,” said Troy, looking at her.

“I know,” said Emilie, with a knowing smile.

“You do?” asked Troy, hesitantly.

“It’s all for good,” said Emilie.

“How do you know for sure?” asked Troy, looking for a reassurance.

“I don’t,” answered Emilie, within a flash. “But it’s the truth.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” asked Troy, getting even more confused than before.

“Sleep tight Troy,” said Emilie, kissing him for one last time, before she left.

Troy was left to himself after Emilie left and thought over what had just happened.

Strange!....This was beyond anything I had imagined and so spontaneous, thought Troy. But I am happy! She’s a fine girl....

Troy closed his eyes to sleep. As soon he had closed his eyes, he found himself awake somewhere else.

It was a land filled with purple trees and purple grass. He seemed to be right in the middle of a meadow. The land had a blue star, which was about to set, giving a yellowish color to the green sky.

Troy found himself wearing his old organic attire of dark brown pants and a light blue V-neck tee, but without the his customary button less white shirt. Troy walked on, never reaching the end of the beautiful meadow. A gentle cool breeze flew and Troy saw the same sign he had seen on the day, just before he was rescued by the Albeins. The J-like word with three dots, floated in front of him for a couple of moments and then flew away. Troy immediately set after it, trying to see where it was going.

The sign teased him by letting him almost catch it just before it flew even further out of his grasp. Eventually, Troy chased it up a small hill. When Troy was about to catch it at the top of the hill, the sign flew down the other side of the hill. Troy tried to jump and catch it, but as a result fell on the purple grass. Troy lay on the grass and saw where the sign had flown. The mark had reached the foot of the hill and transformed gracefully into what seemed to be very weak man, lean, diseased and in tattered clothes like that of a homeless man, with his back facing Troy. Troy looked on steadfastly. The weak man took out what seemed to be a dagger, out of nowhere and looked at it a while, before he stabbed himself in the heart and fell dead onto the grass. Troy gasped at what the man had done.

Within the next moment however, the man rose again from the place he had fallen, looking perfectly healthy and stronger and turned to face Troy. Troy was shocked at what he saw. It was him. It was Troy himself that was facing him. Fear and confusion hit Troy at the same time, like a bolt of lightning and woke up in his bed with a start with his heart beating unnaturally fast.

“What the-” gasped Troy, breaking into a cold sweat. Troy didn’t think of anything else and focused

on calming himself down. Once he had calmed down, he thought about the dream he had just had. Nothing made any sense to him then, then thinking that it would be better to ponder over it after he had woken up, Troy lay back to sleep again. Sleep was difficult to catch, as his mind kept reverting back to the dream, making him feel annoyed. Troy then started thinking about Emilie and slowly, his eyes closed in peace.

A few hours later, after Troy had gotten up from a peaceful sleep, he found himself smiling, his memory of a nightmarish dream almost wiped out from his head.

“Wow!” he whispered, touching his lips, remembering the time before he had slept.

“You have a message!” announced the AI.

“Let’s hear it,” replied Troy.

“You are requested at the HQ conference hall, sir! You are expected in twenty minutes!”

“What time is it?” asked Troy, yawning and rubbing his eyes.

“Kepler time, sir?”

“Of course! That’s what my body is accustomed to!”

“Ten-forty A.M, sir!”

“Hmm...” Troy said. “Let’s keep moving!”

Troy brushed, bathed and returned to his cabin and wore the transmitter that Kru had given him.

“Hello Max!” he said enthusiastically.

“You seem happy!” said Max, as if she had detected something fishy.

“Oh! Nothing really just that Emilie came here a few hours and we kissed, you know!” boasted Troy.

“AH!” said Max and let out a yelp. “Did you do it?”

“WHAT?” asked Troy, suddenly thrown out of balance by Max’s question.

“Did you do that?” asked Max again.

“No! Of course not!” said Troy. “Bad girl!”

Max laughed heartily in return.

“Well, you are still young and full of-” she said.

“Shut up, Max!” said Troy, grinning. “I’ve got a meeting to go to!”

“Yeah! A meeting you were supposed to be at forty minutes ago!”

“OH MY GOSH! AM I THAT LATE?” said Troy, panicking. “Are others gone?”

“Yes!” said Max. “Emilie is missing you a lot, lover boy!”

“SHUT UP! SHUT UP! SHUT UP!” cried Troy, blushing as he went out the door.

Soon, he was at the conference hall and as he entered it, the unpleasant memories of being there, the first time, hit Troy. He waited a moment outside the hall, as he shook his head as if to clear his head and entered.

He saw the Albein Senate and many Kepler officials seated in the semicircular arrangement. Soon, he spotted Kru, Holloway and Emilie seated on the other end of the semicircle across the room.

Come quickly! whispered Emilie's voice inside Troy's head, he smiled.

"VAA! If it isn't Mr. Troy Zander himself?" boomed Jedias' voice, who was standing on the stage in front of the semicircular arrangement. The high podium of the Speaker's, which had been there the last time, Troy had visited the HQ, wasn't there anymore.

Troy smiled awkwardly and genuinely wished he had been earlier to the meeting to avoid this sort of publicity.

"Come, come, my dear boy!" said Jedias, raising his arms towards Troy.

Troy couldn't believe that Jedias had such a powerful voice, for his age. He walked slowly towards the podium. Jedias put his arm around Troy's arm and said, "A Kepler young man saves the lives of Albeins and those of his own people with the help of his friends, our very own children Mr. Kru Yule and Ms. Holloway Parker and an Elveden angel, Ms. Emilie Rose Fox!"

With that, he waved his hand in the direction of the trio, calling them towards the podium. Once they came and stood beside Troy, Jedias began again.

"Today we stand alive, because of these four children," Troy squirmed a bit, on hearing Jedias refer to them as children, Emilie at once held his hand and said *You are a child!* Troy looked at her and wished he could tell her something witty, but found himself tongue-tied on seeing her.

"You are blushing!" said Max.

"Shut up!" breathed Troy, Emilie covered her mouth beside him, hiding her grin. Meanwhile, Jedias continued his oratory,

"They overcame a lot of adversaries to save us from the enemy within! And for what! To unite us to fight against the common enemy we all face now! The attackers who destroyed our families, our friends and our homes! And we're still being hunted by them. It is in times like these, when acts of courage and bravery like those displayed by these children must be saluted and encouraged in order to boost our morale and our will to survive!"

When Jedias had completed his speech, the entire Albein Senate and the Kepler contingent rose to their feet and applauded them.

"Now you may go!" whispered Jedias, slightly nudging Troy on his shoulder.

"Where to?" hissed Troy.

"To our seats," replied Emilie softly.

"Oh," said Troy and followed her. When, they took their seats, Jedias launched again into a detailed

plan of what he had in vision for the inhabitants of Orion Swift.

“Blah!...blah!...blah!” said Troy. “Do you have any idea when he is going to finish, anyone?”

“Actually, no Troy,” said Kru. “It is customary for newly appointed Chancellors to talk a lot about their vision, mission and stuff.”

“I would’ve done nothing to remove Norman, if I had known that,” said Troy. “Alright! Just wake me up, if something important turns up!”

“Ah! You can’t sleep in here!” said Kru, with a horrified expression.

“Let him sleep, Kru!” said Holloway and Kru looked away disappointedly.

Troy smiled at Holloway and then winked at Emilie.

“Soon!” he said, closing his eyes.

Ten minutes later, Emilie woke up Troy,

“Troy, wake up!” she said, shaking his shoulder.

“Yea!” said Troy, dreamily.

“They are not going to sanction a rescue mission for Aura!” hissed Kru.

“What!” said Troy and woke up with a start.

“They think there is not conclusive proof to indicate there are any *Homo aureus* present on Aura to launch a rescue mission!” said Kru.

“Well! The Alien Head himself told Norman about them! Emilie told them, right!” said Troy.

“Well, yes! But it’s not enough for them!” said Holloway.

“What about the research Albeins conducted on them?” asked Emilie.

“No conclusive proof!” said Holloway.

“We can’t give up, just like that!” said Troy, enraged.

“Well, it’s too late!” said Kru. “They just finished discussing that!”

“We’ll see about that!” said Troy, “SIR!”

Jedias and the rest of the people, turned in Troy’s direction. Once he made sure he had everyone’s attention, Troy said loudly,

“We can’t abandon Aura!”

“We don’t have conclusive proof that Aura is still inhabited, son!” said Jedias onto the microphone.

“With all due respect, sir, you heard Emilie tell you about the conversation between Norman and the alien Head! They still exist, sir!”

“It’s not wise to risk the lives of everyone aboard the Orion Swift for the lives of some, of whose

existence we aren't even sure of!"

"THEN, HOW DIFFERENT ARE YOU FROM NORMAN?" shouted Troy, in a bout of rage.

Jedias was taken aback by Troy's question and so were the others in the hall.

"I am sorry, Mr. Zander, but our decision stands firm."

"You wouldn't do this to your own family in such a situation, would you?"

"You are very imaginative, Mr. Zander but sadly we can't indulge in your little fantasies!"

For a moment, Troy and Jedias just stared at each other coldly.

"I'm only asking you to have mercy, sir, nothing else," said Troy, after a long time.

Jedias looked away, lost in thought,

"Very well!" he said, looking thoroughly displeased with his decision. "Take an away team to conduct a search on Aura! I give five hours and only five hours, Troy!"

"Thank you, sir!" said Troy and turned to his friends. "Let's go!"

"I think we should have handled the situation more delicately!" said Kru.

"I handled the situation no different than you had earlier!" shot back Troy.

"Troy did the right thing," said Holloway, walking fast beside Kru.

Emilie kept quiet, as she walked beside Troy. He turned his head and looked at her, as they kept walking. Emilie nodded her head, as if she were in agreement with what Troy had decided. Troy was reassured by her acknowledgement and lifted his chin high. Soon, they were in the Cruiser bay, suited up in black nanobot suits.

"Hey!" said Rutgers, as he joined the four beside a Cruiser, in his blue captain suit.

The four wished him back. "I heard Troy had muscled the Senate into agreeing for a rescue mission on Aura!" said Rutgers.

"Yeah!" said Holloway, looking dashing in a black body suit. "You should have heard him yell at Jedias! Boy, it was such a roar!"

Rutgers laughed loudly and looked at Troy, "I can't believe the Albein Senate aren't providing you with any help."

"I just picked up on some gossip from the hall," said Kru. "They don't want to lose any more Albein men or droids."

"We can't blame them," said Troy. "It's their job description to ensure the security of the people and maintain resources, especially when the future looks shoddy!"

Everyone nodded their agreement.

"That's right!" Rutgers agreed at last, "So what's the plan?"

“Where are we?” asked Holloway, “Just out of curiosity!”

“In the Andromeda galaxy,” replied Rutgers.

“Wow! My favorite one!” whispered Holloway, as she brushed Kru on his shoulders, grinning.

“Yes!” Kru whispered back, blushing, then turning to the others, he said, “Once we exit the wormhole near Aura, we’ll scan the planet for signs of life. So far all the satellites that we’ve put into Aura’s orbit have never worked or have never transmitted any life form readings. So if we do get any readings, we’ll pinpoint the locations and get down, taking a number of Cruisers proportionate to the reading values! Tsokay?”

“Tsokay!” said Rutgers, clapping his big hands together, producing a massive sound.

“Have you figured out as to why they don’t work?” asked Troy, tapping his ears.

“No,” replied Kru. “We don’t know! I mean Aura was the least habitable planet, to be colonized by our ancestors. The planet’s pretty unstable apart from being extremely cold!”

Troy was not satisfied by Kru’s answer, anyways, he said, “Alright! We’ll do as you say!”

“There’s one more thing,” said Holloway. “Even if we do find life there, it’s highly unlikely they will be anything like us!”

All of them looked at Holloway and realized that it was true than being unlikely. It had been fifty thousand years since the first humans had set foot on the planet, while the other three colonies had advanced technologically, the humans on Aura had disappeared from everyone’s eyes and memories. All the exploration by the Albeins had not found conclusive evidence of life but of one thing they were sure, that the humans on Aura had not certainly developed civilization.

Troy knew there was no turning point from the commitment he had made and told Rutgers, “We’re ready!”

Rutgers nodded and took his leave.

“These suits can adapt to the cold, right?” asked Troy.

“Yes, they can,” said Kru. “They can handle up to a minus hundred degrees Celsius!”

“Cool,” said Troy, as Kru received a message.

“Guys,” said Kru. “We’re about to enter the wormhole to Aura!”

“Do you think the aliens will be there?” asked Troy, having last minute doubts.

“It’s highly unlikely, which is another reason, Jedia agreed to this, Troy,” replied Holloway.

Soon, they were through the wormhole,

“I am streaming data now,” announced Kru, “Normal dark matter flux and searching for life now.”

All of them waited with bated breath, as Kru remained silent.

“Honey!” whispered Holloway from time to time, to no response from him.

Finally, he got up and said, "I am picking almost no reading! I am picking high levels of all sorts of radiation and infrared spikes, which means something terrible had happened all over the planet, not too long ago."

"The attackers must have been here too!" said Holloway.

"Almost no reading?" asked Emilie.

"The planet must be completely ravaged based on these readings," said Kru.

"You said almost no reading!" said Emilie, "Which means there is at least some are left alive!"

"It could be just some random spikes in the reading! After all it could mean nothing!" said Kru.

"We can't come to that conclusion just like that!" argued Emilie.

"I am telling you, it's highly probable that it's just an artifact reading."

Troy stepped in the conversation at this point, "Emilie!" he said, "Is there any way you can confirm that there are still people alive on that planet?"

Emilie looked at him, thinking while Kru and Holloway regarded Troy's question as completely ridiculous.

"That's totally absurd!" cried Kru. "What are you thinking, Troy?"

Troy didn't mind him and showed him his palm.

"That's rude!" muttered Kru.

"That's cute!" said Holloway, grinning.

"Tell me, Emilie!" Troy asked again.

Emilie seemed unsure of what to tell, "I think I can," she said finally.

"Show her the origin of the readings!" said Troy.

"It's fluctuating!" said Kru.

"Just show her!" said Troy, getting annoyed.

Emilie looked at the weak pulsating red spot on Aura. "There's a snowstorm in that area!" said Kru, still streaming data.

"Tsokay!" breathed Emilie. "I have to have some sort direct contact with the planet visually at least!"

Troy looked at Kru, which made him fidget a lot and then he told, "We can view it from here we've got portholes in here."

"Tsokay!" said Troy, lifting his eyebrows at Emilie.

Kru led them through behind lines of Cruisers to the wall, where there were large rectangular portholes. The four could see the spectacular space beyond the safety of the Orion Swift. Brilliant glimmering stars dotted every inch of space with a few brilliantly colored galaxies here and there.

“It can’t be a natural disaster! I mean, look at that!” exclaimed Holloway, and right in front of the four was a small globe, covered in white clouds and dotted with large ugly black spots over a white background.

“It must’ve been only a few hours,” said Kru, as Rutgers broke through in Kru’s ear.

“Are you looking at this, Kru?” shouted Rutgers, almost screaming.

“Yes, uncle, I’m, I’m!” said Kru, repeatedly so that he would stop.

“The Senate has cut down your rescue mission duration down to forty-five minutes only!”

“But whoever attacked them isn’t here anymore! I mean look at the flux readings!”

“That’s why the Security Advisors and the Senate believe it’s the perfect trap!”

“But uncle-”

“It’s out of my hands, Kru!” interrupted Rutgers and cut out his transmission.

The other three looked at him intently and Kru looked at them with a sorry look,

“The mission’s down to forty-five minutes! They’re not budging!”

“It should be enough!” said Troy, looking at the frigid planet and touched Emilie’s hand.

Emilie turned, took one long look at the planet and closed her eyes. In her mind’s eye, she searched for life as she floated over the planet’s ice cold surface. As she moved over icy mountains and valleys, she heard sounds coming from her right, the sounds were largely grunts, low roars and then she heard a baby crying. Emilie snapped back into reality, taking a huge breath and almost collapsing onto Troy beside her. Troy held her and asked her, “Emilie?”

“I heard a baby crying,” said Emilie.

“What’s the location?” asked Kru, taking out his mini keyboard.

“Show me a tactile responsive map of Aura,” said Emilie.

Kru nodded quickly and projected the planet from a tiny cube that he placed on the floor, after punching a few keys on his keyboard. Emilie quickly turned the globe and expanded a tiny part in the centre of a large landmass. Once she did that, she tried expanding further to get a surface view, to no success.

“I’m sorry, our probes never made to the surface, this is as much as you get.”

“Tsokay! This is it then,” said Emilie, pointing at the base of a lone mountain.

“Are you sure?” asked Holloway.

“Yes,” replied Emilie quickly.

“Are there others?” asked Troy, with his fist on his lips.

“None, that I could pick up,” replied Emilie.

“Alright!” said Troy. “Let’s get down to Aura!”

The four quickly made it to a Cruiser in their shining black body suits. Kru handled the communication between the Command Bridge and them and cleared their Cruiser for lift off.

“It’s great that you know how to fly one of these things alone,” said Troy standing beside Kru who was seated in front of the control panel in the Command centre.

“I did advanced warbirds for my dissertation, Cruisers were one of the seventy five different Albein ships I studied,” said Kru, with pride written all over his face.

“Right,” said Troy and wished he hadn’t asked him that.

“We’ll be arriving at the Emilie’s coordinates in seven minutes! We got really bad weather here! So I suggest everybody take a seat and put your belts on,” said Kru loudly.

The other three quickly took three other seats in the Command centre and put their seatbelts on, as they lifted off. Their Cruiser rocked like a cradle hanging from a tree, as they entered Aura’s atmosphere. The ship stabilized after a while, as they descended very close to the surface.

“Holly, get oxygen cylinders and long-range Palsers for everyone,” said Kru.

“Alright, baby!” said Holly, as she removed her seat belt and got going.

“What’s a Palser?” asked Troy.

“It a paralyzer that shoots bullets loaded with a high dose short term paralyzing drug.”

“Oh! That sounds non-offensive and good,” said Troy, looking straight ahead through the glass. It was pitch dark outside the Cruiser but the Cruiser’s AI captured the outside terrain data and projected the data in false color and in real time, enabling Kru to maneuver between the obstacles.

“We don’t know what to expect here! I’m sure Bummies won’t work under these conditions!” said Kru, as he kept moving a joystick like instrument and punching commands on his left simultaneously.

“Hmm…” said Troy, his eyes following Kru’s complex movements.

“Two minutes to destination!” said Kru, checking the data from the control panel.

“Tsokay,” said Troy, scratching behind his ear. “Land the Cruiser once we get there!”

“WHAT?” squealed Kru, “WHY?”

Troy gave a scrutinizing look at him and said, “Because we’re all going out there!”

“You want me there too?” said Kru, breaking into a sweat.

Holloway entered the scene right then, carrying small oxygen cans and Palsers for everybody,

“What’s up with him, Holloway? He doesn’t want to come,” said Troy, pointing towards Kru.

“Oh!” said Holloway and smiled, distributing the cans and Palsers. “He’s afraid of the dark!”

“Great!” said Troy sarcastically. “Stick with me, everything will be alright.”

Kru seemed not even a bit okay with that plan. Holloway and Emilie sniggered, as he grunted and turned behind to look at the controls.

Shortly they arrived at the base of the mountain, where Emilie had pinpointed earlier.

“What about light?” asked Emilie, looking at the darkness outside.

“Leave it to me,” said Kru, rushing through them. “I’ll meet you at the exit!”

“Okie!” said Emilie cutely.

The trio went down to the cargo hold level and waited for Kru at the exit. Soon, he came holding an inverted transparent dome, with a thin plate fixed on top of it, about the size of Kru’s palm.

“Lights!” he said, as he hotfooted towards them, from the elevator.

“Open,” Troy told Holloway and she opened the exit door onto the icy bone-chilling weather. Almost instantaneously, the black suits of the four transformed into white and a slim helmet grew over their heads, thus completely covering them from head to toe.

As they stepped out of the Cruiser, Kru let the inverted dome fly. The inverted dome flew vertically high above their heads and suddenly gave out soothing white light covering a total of a hundred meters in all directions around them.

“Nice light!” said Troy, looking at the light around them.

“Emilie, guide us now,” said Kru, slightly shaking in every arm.

“Okie,” said Emilie, who was at the front of the party, closely flanked by Troy, Kru and Holloway.

They kept moving slowly away from the Cruiser.

Troy was tempted was to ask Emilie whether they were any close to the target, every ten steps they took but decided not to, after thinking that he might actually piss her off.

“Wait!” said Emilie, suddenly with her voice slightly quivering.

“What is it?” asked Holloway, at once.

“There’s something coming at us!” said Emilie.

“From where?” asked Troy.

To that, Emilie lifted her finger to show the direction in which they were walking.

“Alright! Kru, come with me,” said Troy, moving ahead of Emilie and others.

“Are you sure about this?” asked Kru, taking tiny baby steps towards Troy.

“Are you still afraid? We’ve got light now,” said Troy.

“But there’s darkness beyond!” said Kru, his voice quivering a bit.

Troy sniggered and said, “Alright! Emilie, anything?”

There was no response. Troy turned around to see that both Emilie and Holloway. They were gone.

With one arm he grabbed Kru and said, "Palsers at the ready, pal!"

"Where did they go?" Kru breathed, drawing out his Palser slowly.

"I don't know!" said Troy. "EMILIE! HOLLOWAY! WHERE ARE YOU?" he shouted onto his transmitter.

"Don't do that!" said Kru. "That's a very bad idea!" and he projected a real time map from his left arm, right in front of them. The map showed two red dots right in the middle of the map.

"These two red-" said Kru.

"I get it!" snapped Troy. "But what's that big dot?" pointing at a very large red spot coming fast towards them from behind.

"Uh oh!" cheeped Kru.

"FIRE AWAY!" cried Troy and turned behind, shooting without a break. "Keep moving back!"

As they kept moving backwards, abruptly out of the darkness, beyond the light, jumped an enormous white furred animal towards them.

"SHOOT!!!" cried Troy, shooting away like crazy at the tremendous creature, which landed in front of them, throwing a wave of snow all around. The Palser bullets apparently had no effect on that beast. It looked at them and roared, opening its terrifying mouth, revealing its entire dagger like teeth.

"Run!" cried Kru and tugged at Troy, who looked transfixed by the creature. "What are you doing? Let's go!"

"Look at it!" said Troy, extending an arm towards it. "I don't think it's-"

At this point, the creature smacked Troy with the back of its hand, throwing far away to his left, far into the darkness. Troy immediately got up to see that Kru was running and the inverted dome was moving along with him and the animal was almost onto him.

Troy sprinted towards the creature, crying "Hey! I'm here!"

After a few shouts, Troy had succeeded in getting the creature's attention, it stopped pursuing Kru and darted towards where Troy stood. Troy prepared himself, as light faded from his eyes and his night vision set in. Through his eyes, he saw a white figure running towards him on all fours. He observed that the creature had almost a human face, with most of it covered by fur, making it look more like a beast than human. Its eyes were the only thing that still linked the creature to its human ancestry. It still had beautiful human eyes.

"*Homo aureus!*" whispered Troy as he jumped to break the impact. The creature and Troy clashed mid-air and fell on to the ground, rolling, the creature clawing madly at Troy, who was thankfully protected by his bot suit.

"We're here to help you!" cried Troy several times. He could only hear the creature make noises that sounded like a grunt. Then he realized out of the blue, that it was making vocal sounds. The creature slowly stopped struggling and seemed as if it were going into a deep sleep. Troy immediately got off

the creature and softly tapped the creature's cheeks, trying to get it back. The creature then finally gave a long howl and died. Troy tried resuscitating immediately by banging its chest but to no result. Soon, he heard another howl in response to the howl, the dead creature had made.

Troy tapped his transmitter and said, "Kru, have you found Emilie and Holloway?"

"No!" said a very frightened voice.

"Do you have my location?"

"Yes!"

"Follow my dot," Troy said and shot in the direction of the howl, he heard before.

"Max!" called Troy.

"Yes Troy!"

"Can you get Emilie and Holloway's location?"

"Negative!"

"Alright! Standby then!"

Troy made it through the darkness, soon enough he was lost, unable to make out the origin of that howl. Troy squatted on one leg and strained his ears for minute sounds. He heard the icy wind gushing about him and then, he heard Kru's running steps towards him and he strained even further, concentrating on feeble sounds. He heard low wails coming from a place close by. Troy slowly moved in that direction and suddenly it died away too. Troy was getting frustrated, but he kept moving slowly. Then as he reached the edge of his patience, he started shouting, "EMILIE! HOLLOWAY!"

Troy heard his name called out back faintly from a distance, he rushed ahead and recognized that the voices came from below the ground.

"EMILIE! HOLLOWAY!"

Troy then heard Emilie's voice in his mind.

Come down.

How? Troy thought back.

Just a little ahead.

Troy took a couple of steps ahead and suddenly, without any warning, he went down a hole in the ground. Troy coughed up the snow that got into his mouth and opened his eyes. He was inside a burrow, lighted by a crude candle made from animal fat. Emilie helped him up to sit.

"Why didn't you contact me before?" asked Troy.

"I'm sorry!" Emilie apologized. "We weren't in a good position," and shifted her eyes towards the corner of the burrow, where another of the creatures Troy had seen before lay. Troy saw it was a female and its kid lay on its chest. The female seemed not to be doing too well.

“She’s dying,” said Emilie.

“Why?” asked Troy.

“They seem to have been exposed to some sort of poison,” said Holloway.

“I met with another one outside, he died after he came at me,” said Troy.

“It must have been her mate,” said Holloway.

“She’s not got much time,” said Emilie and crawled on her knees towards the dying creature. She sat by her side as the female moaned lowly in pain. Emilie held her hands and looked into her eyes. Tears went down Emilie’s face as she got to know what she and her family had gone through. Then, the female slowly lifted her sleeping child and gave him to Emilie, who was surprised by her move.

Emilie took the kid in her arms, holding him close to her breasts. The female stooped to place a final kiss on her child’s forehead, then she looked at Emilie, spread her lips in what appeared to be a smile and closed her eyes. Emilie stayed unmoved there in that position, unable to take in the gravity of the situation. She remained deaf to Holloway’s and Troy’s calls.

Troy then crawled towards Emilie. “Hey!” he whispered.

“They were the last of their kind,” said Emilie as tears didn’t stop rolling down her cheeks.

Troy was at a loss for words. He had no idea as to what to tell her. He remained silent, but soon enough, Emilie turned to him and said, “Let’s go!”

The trio made it out of the burrow, along with the sleeping kid. Kru was standing there, looking very confused and angry.

“Where were you?” he almost shouted.

Troy put his hand on Kru’s shoulder and said, “Inform the Orion Swift that our mission is complete!”

“What’s that thing?” he screamed.

“It’s a baby, Kru,” said Holloway. “And don’t be so rude!”

“What?” said Kru, with a look of disgust on his face, “That little hair ball!”

Holloway had had enough of Kru’s mean comments. She showed him both her fists, Kru understood the reference and walked the rest of the way to the Cruiser quietly. Once they were inside the Cruiser, Emilie said, “I’ll take the baby to refugee quarters.”

“I’ll come with you,” said Troy voluntarily while Holloway and Kru went to the Command Centre.

Inside the refugee quarters, Emilie didn’t lay the kid down, on the bed, she continued to hold him in her hand and slightly brushing the fur on the baby’s head.

“What’re you going to name him?” asked Troy, sitting on the bed opposite to Emilie and the baby.

Emilie cast a quick glance at Troy and then looked back at the baby in her arms, smiling at his cuteness.

“This is the cutest thing I have ever seen in my life!” she said, and then as she stroked him, the baby sniffled and brought his tiny little hands to tap his wee nose.

Emilie let out a big smile, then looked at Troy and said, “Sniffles!”

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Troy smiled back at Emilie and said, “That’s a great pet name!”

Emilie seemed offended and she asked, “Are you referring to Sniffles as a pet or anything like that?”

Troy immediately pleaded his innocence, “No! No! No! No! What I meant is that it’s a great pet name, like the name they are affectionately called in the family!”

Emilie’s face had lost that cuteness, staring angrily at Troy and asked, “Is that right?”

“Yes!” Troy shot back the answer, without a moment’s delay. “Which brings us to the next question, what’s his official name?”

“Sniffles!” Emilie fired back the quick reply.

“What?” Troy nearly shouted.

“What’s wrong with that name?” asked Emilie.

“It doesn’t sound official, Emilie!”

“I want his life to be innocent as his name, Troy, unlike that of his parents, something as innocent as a snuffle.”

Troy gave a brooding look and nodded.

“So what really happened to Aura?” he asked.

“The worst,” answered Emilie. “They were there, Troy! Just a few hours ago! They mercilessly killed every one of Sniffles’ kind!”

“While we were busy fighting a civil war,” commented Troy.

“What happens next?” asked Emilie.

“I wish I knew the person who knows that!” said Troy, grinning at her.

Emilie flashed a quick smile.

“I am worried about little Sniffles here! I don’t know how he’s gonna react when he wakes up, Troy!” said Emilie.

“I think I should handle when he’s about to wake up! He might hurt you!”

Emilie smiled at Troy in return and he knew that smile meant he better shut up.

“About the time in my cabin-” said Troy slowly, alluding to the time Emilie had kissed him in his room.

“You’re not ready yet, Troy!” said Emilie, casting a sad smile at him.

“Right,” Troy said, having no idea about what she was talking about.

“We’re due in two minutes!” announced Kru through their transmitters.

“Great,” said Troy, as he got up from the bed.

“Look Troy!” exclaimed Emilie suddenly. “He’s getting up!”

“Uh oh!” said Troy, freezing where he stood, as Sniffles started moving around, squeezing his eyes and flailing his arms.

“Hey baby!” said Emilie, cuddling Sniffles and making smile in his drowsy state.

“Mmmmma!” Sniffles said, drooling.

“Did you hear that?” Emilie almost screamed with excitement.

“What?” asked Troy, taken aback by surprise.

“Sniffles spoke!”

“It can speak?” asked Troy with a dirty look at Sniffles.

Emilie stared at him at which Troy backed down and said, “He can speak?”

“Yes,” replied Emilie.

“I’m sorry!” said Troy.

Emilie didn’t reply and turned slightly away from him.

“I said I’m sorry, Emilie!”

“You can apologize to him when he’s fully awake!” Emilie said, looking at Sniffles.

“TO HIM?” cried Troy.

“In my presence!” said Emilie in a firm tone.

“EMILIE!” exclaimed Troy, spreading his arms.

“He’s a child, Troy!” said Emilie. “How can you say like that?”

“I don’t know! It looks like one big hairy animal!” said Troy, grinning, trying to cool down the situation and then he noticed Emilie, staring at him even more angrily.

“I better get out now!” he said.

“You better, mister!” warned Emilie, as her stare got even harder. Troy turned around quickly and walked out of the quarters.

“Hey!” said Holloway, who was coming towards him from the Command centre. “How are Emilie and the baby?”

Troy threw his thumb over his shoulder, in the direction of the refugee quarters.

“What happened?” asked Holloway suspiciously. “Why are you acting so-”

“Whatever you do, don’t mention that baby as an it! It drives her nuts!” said Troy.

Holloway sniggered and started towards the quarters, as Kru caught up with them.

“Where’s Emilie and the- the-the baby?” he stammered.

“I’ll bring them, you two go on!” said Holloway, as she kept walking.

“Tsokay,” said Kru, as Troy put a hand on his shoulder, leading him away.

The two emerged out into the Cruiser bay, aboard the Orion Swift. There was quite gathering of about forty Albeins and a few Keplers outside their Cruiser, apparently waiting for them.

“What the?” said Troy.

Kru just stared at them. Troy nudged him back and hissed, “What are they doing?”

“Who knows?” answered Kru.

They kept standing silently until one Albein from the crowd, asked,

“Did you find anything?”

Troy and Kru exchanged glances at each other and was unsure of what to answer.

“Well-” began Troy.

“We found a baby!” said Emilie, as he brushed and made way between Troy and Kru, carrying Sniffles wrapped completely in a white towel.

“Clear the way!” shouted Holloway, who was behind Emilie. Then onto her transmitter, she muttered, “Requesting security force to escort rescue team and Aurean refugee!”

Within a minute, a droid force of ten was at their location in the Cruiser bay to escort them. The droids formed a formation around the five and escorted them to Security headquarters on level twenty-one. They entered it and were stopped at the reception.

An Albein woman was in charge over there. It was the same woman who had allocated cabins to

Troy and the rest of the Keplers on the day they were rescued. She was flanked by three officers on her either side, all of them standing at ease in front of the reception desk.

“Welcome back!” she said. “I am Major Ann, Head of Security. Now if you don’t mind we have to clear you all and especially your refugee before you can meet the Senate.”

“Why? What happened?” asked Holloway.

“You’ll know shortly, ma’am!” Ann said, as she turned to direct her officers. “Please do as my officers tell you!” and she left them and went inside the office on her left.

“Quinto’s been replaced?” hissed Kru to Holloway.

“I think Jedias has been very busy,” said Holloway.

“Follow me,” said a young man of about thirty, dressed in a red suit with the Albein emblem shining on his left breast pocket.

“Please hand over the refugee, before you move on!” said another official, also dressed in red. Emilie seemed hesitant in giving Sniffles to the woman, but Holloway assured her, after which Emilie gave Sniffles, who was still sleeping, over to the official.

The official took him in her arms and joined behind them. They were led into a small passage that led away from the reception on their left. The passage opened onto a very large space, where many more security officials were present and many were present with arms.

“Hand over any weapons and any personal tech that you possess now,” said the young official, standing apart from the file.

Troy, who was at the head of the party, took out the Palser attached to his waist belt and the transmitter, out of his ear and handed them over.

“You can proceed now!” said the official, who promptly put them a box and gave it to another official standing close by. Troy went ahead and he saw another security official waiting for him, beside what seemed to be a hole on a wall. Troy reached, stood in front of the hole and looked at him.

“Please stand aside, sir,” said the young female official politely, as she turned to the wall, which came alive at her voice. The entire wall surrounding the manhole was suddenly filled with information.

“Mr. Troy Dylan Zander? Is that right?” asked the official.

“Yeah!” replied Troy, who was wondering about all this.

“Tsokay!” said the official and typed in his name. Then, out of the hole, slowly came out a plain stretcher. The official walked towards Troy and touched his chest with a black glove that she was wearing. The nano bots quickly reassembled from across Troy’s body on her glove and formed a cube, leaving Troy in his bionic white underwear.

“Now lie on it, sir,” said the young woman, pointing towards the stretcher.

“What’s going on?” asked Troy, going pink in his ears.

“We’re just checking if you are who you say are. This is a Signature Circuit, it maps everything that you are and compares it if needed with earlier data. It shouldn’t even take two minutes, sir.”

“Alright!” said Troy and jumped on the floating stretcher. The woman smiled and turned to the wall and started the protocol.

The stretcher went slowly back inside the hole. Though it was pitch dark inside Troy could see that he had entered a large area, where robotic arms shot out grabbing his arms and limbs. An AI’s voice repeated itself and again.

“Please try and relax, sir.”

Then a robotic arm fixed with a soft binocular pad covered over Troy’s eyes and he felt his body go warm, cosy warmth as a strong blue light scanned his body. Then the stretcher moved even further into the darkness where Troy started feeling a little funny, as if he were being massaged all over and then the stretcher made out of the hole, where the official was waiting with a pair of clothes and she said,

“Thank you, sir, for your cooperation and patience!”

Emilie, Holloway and Kru were waiting there and Troy grabbed the clothes on seeing Emilie and ran towards the dressing area, nearby.

He dressed up in the light blue suit and pants and emerged out of the dressing room, where another female official was waiting outside.

“Please follow me, sir!” she said.

Troy followed her into a waiting room, where he sat in one of the floating chairs. Soon he was joined by Kru, Holloway and Emilie who arrived within five minutes of each other.

“So any of you guessing what’s going on?” asked Holloway but before anyone could reply, Jedias walked in, flanked by Rutgers and Major Ann.

“Seems that after all, the humans did survive!” said Jedias.

“The results are back?” asked Emilie frantically.

“Yes!” replied Jedias. “It’s confirmed the Aurean refugee is of human descent and is in good health.”

“Thank goodness!” muttered Emilie under her breath.

“Mr. Troy,” said Jedias, looking at him.

“Chancellor,” replied Troy.

“Your popularity has been growing exponentially among the three thousand Albeins aboard the Orion Swift by every second!”

“It was never my intention-”

“Now, my boy!” interrupted Jedias. “Don’t trouble yourself! We need people like you in times like these!”

Troy just nodded his head in return.

“Now, as young as you are, we think you all have had enough of risking your lives-” said Jedias.

“But, sir-” protested Kru but Jedias put his hand on his shoulder and looked at him as if he wanted Kru to listen and let him do the talking.

Kru looked disappointed at not being able to give his opinion and he had calmed down, Jedias looked at the rest and spoke, “As I was telling, as young as you are, you’ve had enough of putting your lives on the edge. As you can see now, we’ve got everything under order, thanks to you four-”

“So Chancellor, you’re plainly trying to tell us to sit in our cabins quietly?” interrupted Holloway, looking annoyed.

“Well! In a way yes!” said Jedias. “This is no job for youngsters like you! Had you done what you had done back on our planets, you all would have been seriously censured!”

“But the threat is still out there, sir,” said Troy.

“Which is why you should leave this to adults like us,” said Jedias, with the great patience that is only showcased by some, as the four looked at each other. “Now if you please, all of you can go back to your cabins.”

“What about Sniffles?” asked Emilie out of the blue.

“Who?” asked Jedias, confused.

“The Aurean,” said Troy, who looked totally depressed by the way Jedias had spoken.

“Ah! He’ll remain under observation for forty six hours in the medical bay and then a decision will be taken as to where he would be kept,” said Jedias.

“He’s not an animal to be kept anywhere!” said Emilie bitterly.

“You can leave that worry to us, Ms. Fox,” said Jedias, turning back from the four.

“When did he turn into such an A-hole?” hissed Holloway.

“Well, Rutgers, are you coming?” asked Jedias.

“In a moment, sir!” replied Rutgers.

Jedias replied, “Umph!” and made out of the room along with Ann.

After Jedias had gone out, Rutgers pulled the four together for a secret conversation.

“Jedias has been cracking his whip ever he since got into power, guys,” said Rutgers. “Everything is alright now, you shouldn’t worry!”

“Something’s amiss, uncle,” said Kru, looking intently at Rutgers.

Rutgers looked back at him guiltily and said, “Nothing’s like that, son! It’s only for your own good! Look at the security measures and all, it’s enough proof!”

“Of what?” shot back Troy.

“Of better administration!” said Rutgers.

“I don’t think so!” said Troy.

“What did you say?” said Rutgers.

“I think something’s happened,” said Troy.

Emilie, Kru and Holloway looked at Troy surprised as Rutgers turned pale.

“What is it, uncle?” asked Kru.

“I can’t involve you all again!” exclaimed Rutgers.

“With all respect, sir! I don’t think we can be more involved than this!” said Holloway.

“Norman has been assassinated in her cell,” said Rutgers.

“Norman was killed?” said Troy, taking a step back.

“What the hell?” gasped Holloway.

“Who?” asked Kru, his eyes wide open.

“That’s the part, I don’t like, we don’t know who?” revealed Rutgers, dabbing his huge forehead with the back of his hand.

“When did this happen?” asked Emilie.

“Right after you had left for Aura,” replied Rutgers.

“What did the death report say?” asked Holloway.

“She was killed by internal bleeding,” said Rutgers.

“What?” exclaimed Kru. “Did she die from the injuries she suffered when we extracted her?”

“No!” said Rutgers. “Her killer cut her aorta open from the inside!”

“The big artery that comes out from top of the heart?” asked Holloway, touching her own chest.

“Yes!” said Rutgers.

“How’s that even possible?” asked Troy.

“Are you sure about that?” asked Emilie.

“Yes, the autopsy showed a clear surgical cut across the aorta,” said Rutgers.

“An internal cut without an external one,” muttered Kru.

“There must be a killer onboard!” said Emilie.

“That’s why you kids must do as Jediah tells you to!” said Rutgers.

“We have to find out who it is!” said Troy.

“No!” said Rutgers. “I told you so that you would step aside and let the concerned authorities handle this!”

“But-” protested Holloway.

“Now everyone!” said Rutgers firmly. “To your cabins now!”

Dejectedly, the four turned and went out of the waiting room, followed by Rutgers.

“Who do you think it is?” whispered Holloway, on the way back.

“I don’t know!” muttered Kru nervously.

11 GHOST

Shortly, after the four had reached their cabins, they had gathered back in Troy’s room.

“What do we now?” asked Kru, sitting in the only chair in the room.

“I think we should be normal, I guess,” suggested Troy, pacing around the room.

“Seriously?” asked Holloway, lying on the bed with her arms below her head.

“I mean,” said Troy. “We’ve done a lot since we all came aboard the ship. Wild, wild things, it’s time we give the authorities to work this out!”

“I just can’t believe you said that!” snapped Holloway.

“Look!” argued Troy. “We’re just a bunch of kids who-”

“What’s gotten into you, hero?” cut in Holloway.

Troy got frustrated and gave up talking on hearing Holloway’s tone.

Emilie, who had been listening to their conversation sitting beside Holloway, suddenly said, “Why don’t we all take a break for a while?”

“You too?” said Holloway, her mouth wide open.

“It’s not like that,” explained Emilie. “I’m suggesting we lay low for a while. Norman’s assassination is a cause for concern but there are proper people now to investigate her death and protect everyone

aboard the ship. It isn't like that when Norman was in charge anymore.”

“That's true,” said Holloway sadly.

“You're all forgetting one thing!” said Kru smiling and sitting comfortably in chair.

The other three looked at him unenthusiastically. Kru looked dismayed by their lack of interest but however he waited for one of them to ask what it was.

“Are you going to tell us or what?” asked Holloway, irritated.

Kru smirked at her and said, relishing every word “You're still forgetting that I am an Albein Intelligence Officer, Chief rank.”

“Of whom no one is aware aboard the ship,” said Holloway dryly.

“After all I am supposed to be a secret spy!” snapped Kru.

“So what?” asked Troy, looking away at the white translucent ceiling.

“So,” said Kru. “I say we investigate! It's not like we've got anything better to do!”

“I need to go and see Sniffles!” said Emilie, squirming.

“We can arrange that!” said Kru enthusiastically.

“Really?” asked Emilie, happily.

“Look into my eyes and tell me whether I am lying,” replied Kru.

“So what are you suggesting?” asked Troy, crossing his arms across his chest.

“We start with the video grabs,” said Kru and pulled out a seven inch cuboidal device from his pant pocket. He placed it on the ground and switched it on. The device projected the holographic user interface in front of him.

“Let's begin!” he said, typing on the holographic projection, “Accessing server! Locating files! And we're here!” and he punched a holographic file icon. The file didn't play and instead it displayed the word, ‘Classified’.

Troy grunted on seeing that, but Kru quickly said, “Ah! That's not a problem!” and he quickly accessed the classified file with ease.

The file started playing. Troy and Emilie bent to see the video on either side of Kru, while Holloway seated herself on the arm of the chair, resting her elbows and chin on Kru's shoulder.

The video showed Norman pacing around in her small cell. The cell had thick walls and looked very compact.

“What are the walls made of?” asked Troy.

“Amorphous fullerenes, stronger than most metals!” said Kru, not lifting an eye off the video.

Norman continued pacing around her cell in the video, when all of a sudden she collapsed onto the

floor.

“Looks like as if she died from some sort of sudden death!” said Holloway.

“It doesn’t look like a murder at all!” said Kru.

“Except for the fact that it is!” said Troy.

“But it sure doesn’t look like one,” said Holloway.

“Any anomalies in the cell environment?” asked Emilie.

Kru at once, subjected the video to an in depth analysis and tried to retrieve more information from the camera that had captured the video.

“No,” he said, after about two minutes. “Infrared and motion sensors picked up no anomalies. Wait a sec!”

“They picked no DNA or any organic remains as well at the site, except for Norman’s,” Kru announced, after diving onto the data again.

“It looks just like a freak accident to me,” said Holloway.

“Or suicide,” said Emilie.

“You’re overlooking the fact that her aorta had been cut,” said Troy aggressively. “I’m yet to come across suicides like that!”

For a few moments, silence descended on all the four.

“We’ve no conclusive evidence to hypothesize anything,” said Kru, breaking the silence.

“We’ve nothing,” said Troy.

“Well, who could it be?” asked Emilie. “Who would want Norman dead?”

“It could be any Albein or Kepler who’s pissed at her!” said Holloway.

Troy thought of divulging a thought but decided against it, because it sounded too depressing and felt Norman kind of deserved it.

“You’re right!” said Kru frustrated, looking at Troy. “Let’s take a break!”

“We can go and meet Sniffles!” suggested Emilie, bright-eyed.

“Are you sure they’ll allow us?” asked Troy, shrugging.

“Let’s at least try!” pleaded Emilie.

“There’s Dr. Fry, who’ll help us!” said Kru, getting up from his comfy chair.

The four soon made it to the extensive medical bay but were barred from entering it, by security personnel who were posted there.

“That’s security!” said Holloway.

“Didn’t you hear what Jedias had said before?” asked Kru, cocking an eyebrow. “We’re famous! Sure thing that these guys are gonna let us walk through!”

“I’m not so hopeful,” commented Troy pessimistically.

Kru looked dejected at what Troy had said and then he turned to Holloway and said, “Holly! Am I not being right?”

“Those guys in Security are total jerks, Kru. Even if you are God, they ain’t gonna give a damn!” said Holloway.

“Right,” said Kru. “We’ll see about that!”

With that, the three walked to the two security personnel right in front of the medical bay.

“Let us in!” said Kru. “We want to see Dr. Fry!”

“I am sorry, sir, please return to your cabins. You and your friends are not permitted on the medical bay,” said a middle-aged man in a red suit, holding a large gun.

“Why not?” asked Kru, looking annoyed.

“You don’t have a medical reason! Nor is any of your family here, young sir!” said the officer.

“Is that so?” said Kru, with a cunning look. As he turned around, he reached inside his pant pocket and pulled out what seemed to be a miniscule glowing white cube and he muttered something onto his transmitter. The tiny cube in his hand transformed into a flashing one-sided blade.

“What are you doing?” hissed Holloway, her eyeballs threatening to come out of their sockets to get at Kru.

“Making a way in!” said Kru, as he turned towards the officials and cut across his left wrist with the blade. Bright red blood spouted out from his veins and the security personnel rushed forth towards him.

“Are you out of your mind?” yelled the middle aged official, holding Kru’s bleeding arm.

“RUN!” shouted Kru, breaking free of the hold of the officials. Troy took off at fleeting speed, holding Holloway and Emilie, knowing that they were totally distracted by Kru’s little drama. As Troy ran dragging the girls, Kru outran them and dashed onto Dr. Fry’s office.

“You’ve got to help me!” he panting, holding his bleeding wrist.

“Devils in bikinis!” exclaimed Fry, on seeing Kru crash against his table. “What happened, Kru?”

“They wouldn’t let me in!” Kru explained as Troy and the girls made to the office, followed by the security personnel.

“Sir!” said the middle aged officer.

“Everything’s under control here, officer!” said Dr. Fry, bandaging Kru’s wrist. “They are my friends and are here at my request!”

The officer seemed unsatisfied but he couldn't argue with the doctor's statement. He called off his partner and went away from Fry's office.

"Explain yourselves!" said Fry, once he was done bandaging and applying a lotion over the bandage.

"You've got the Aurean baby here, right?" asked Kru, holding his bandaged wrist delicately.

"Yes! We do," replied Fry, looking confused.

"We've come to see him," said Kru.

"You cut your wrist to see the baby?" asked Fry, wondering whether Kru was in his right mind.

Kru nodded his head delightfully and smiled at him.

"Unfortunately, I can't show him to you," said Fry.

"Why not?" asked Emilie, looking desponded.

"You are the Elveden girl, aren't you?" asked Fry, with a sense of wonder.

"I'm!" said Emilie. "The baby's mother died after handing over him to me. I need to see him and need to make sure that he's alright."

"I can assure you that he's been treated well here, Miss," said Fry.

"I need to see him, please sir," pleaded Emilie.

Fry looked cornered and looked at the four. He noticed Troy and looked as if he wanted to have a conversation with him but knew it wouldn't be appropriate. The only way to satisfy his curiosity about the four's adventures was to satisfy their desire.

"Alright!" said Fry benevolently. "Come with me!"

Emilie instantly flashed a beautiful smile at Fry and the others in her happiness.

As Fry led the four to where Sniffles was, he began his conversation.

"Well, you four already on your way to become legends!" he said, flanked by Kru and Emilie by his sides and Troy and Holloway following behind them.

"That's an overly exaggerated statement, doctor," said Holloway.

"No! It's not!" said Fry, leading them along a path along which giant black and white tubes and machines and rows of microscopes and medicines lay. "Your exploits are no secret!"

"Well! We all have to thank Kru for that!" said Troy, joining in the conversation.

Kru immediately turned back to look at Troy and made the 'kill' gesture at him, afraid that Troy might let slip the fact that he was a secret spy.

"What?" asked Troy loudly, drawing Fry's attention, at which Kru slapped his forehead and turned to face ahead.

"Now! Mr. Troy!" said Fry. "I remember the first day we met!"

“We met?” asked Troy, a little doubtful.

“Yes! By the Great Bear’s Tail! We did, sir!” exclaimed Fry happily. “I remember how you acted like a raving madman when you woke up in the Teradome!”

“Yeah!” said Troy sadly, as Emilie sniggered.

“Ha! That was a blast of an experience!” said Fry, as they entered a tiny room. The tiny room was dark, except for a soft soothing light that came from the corners of the room. In the middle was a circular wall made of carbon fiber. Inside the circular wall, was a bedding of the softest nature, which was warm and cozy. On this bedding, lay Sniffles sleeping and sniffing occasionally.

“This is an incubator adjusted especially for him,” said Fry.

“Oh! Baby!” said Emilie, as she drew near Sniffles and stroked his rich fur.

“He’s not got up yet!” said Fry. “And we have no idea, what to expect when he does so!”

“He’s getting-getting up!” stammered Kru, pointing at the incubator, where Sniffles was flailing his arms and stretching.

“Uh no!” said Fry. “Let me call the nurses!”

“Don’t!” exclaimed Emilie. “Let me handle this!”

“But-But!” said Fry but no one paid him any attention, as everyone gathered around the incubator, looking at Sniffles.

Sniffles made cute noises as he squirmed inside the incubator and as Emilie’s warm hands enveloped around his body. He opened his large round beautiful green eyes and looked at Emilie innocently before he broke into a loud pitched cry.

“Acho!” said Emilie as he picked him quickly and held him closely against her body, patting him back. Sniffles’ cry slowly died down and Emilie continued to hold him in her arms. Sniffles looked at Emilie’s eyes and both of their eyes were transfixed for a while, before Holloway broke the spell by touching Sniffles.

“Here! Little boy!” said Holloway, cuddling him under the arm.

Sniffles smiled beautifully and laughed as Holloway continued to cuddle him.

“It’s a wonder!” exclaimed Fry. “How did you pull that off?”

“He doesn’t remember anything. He doesn’t remember the horror his parents went through.” said Emilie, her eyes glistening, as he continued to look at Sniffles’ laughter.

“Then what does he remember?” asked Fry.

“Us!” replied Emilie. “We’re his family now.”

“How did you do that?” asked Kru.

“I told him so,” said Emilie.

Sniffles looked up at Emilie, at once and placed his tiny palms on her cheeks. Emilie smiled and kissed him on his forehead.

“Mmmmma!” said little Sniffles, giggling.

“He speaks!” said Fry, unable to believe his ears.

“Yes, he does!” said Troy, as he came close to Sniffles to look at him and touch him.

“I’m sorry, little guy!” he said and smiled at Emilie and she smiled back, nodding her head.

On seeing Troy touch Sniffles, Kru felt tempted to do the same and he came to touch him, when Sniffles suddenly agitated and said, “Bua!”

“What?” exclaimed Kru, keeping his fingers above Sniffles.

“Bua!” said Sniffles again, looking scared.

“What did I do?” asked Kru, looking at Emilie.

“You’re scaring him, that’s it!” said Emilie, smiling.

“Oh! Big bad boy scared my little baby, did he?” said Holloway as she nuzzled Sniffles and the baby laughed.

Kru moved back disappointed and told Troy, “I thought I would be the only one called baby by her!”

Troy patted him on his back and said, “Girls.”

“Yeah!” agreed Kru.

“Tsokay! We’ll keep moving then,” said Troy, abruptly when he got reminded of Norman’s gruesome assassination.

“You guys go on. I’ll join you later,” said Emilie.

“Yes! She better be here!” said Fry. “She’ll be a great help assisting us in attending to him.”

“Alrighty! See you ‘round Emi!” said Holloway and the three exited Sniffles’ room.

As soon as they made it to their cabins, all of a sudden the red lights went off in the corridors along with an emergency announcement.

“All residents are requested to return and stay inside their designated cabins right away,” said a strong male voice. “I repeat, all residents are requested to clear the corridors and public areas and immediately return to their cabins right away!”

“What’s happening?” asked Holloway, throwing a glance at Kru, who looked clueless.

“Emilie,” said Troy and shot off in the direction of the elevators.

“Come back! She’ll be safe in the medical bay!” cried Kru, behind him.

“Stay inside your cabins! I’ll call you soon!” cried Troy, as he stopped for a while.

Kru looked at Holloway for a moment and both of them darted behind Troy.

“Wait up!” cried Holloway, catching up with Troy at the elevators.

“Why are you so worked up?” asked Kru. “It’s just an announcement to get us inside our cabins!”

“Along with a red alert, which means something big has happened and one of us is out there alone. How do you exactly want me to react, Kru?” asked Troy, looking in his eye.

Kru remained silent as the elevator opened up in front of them, and people spilled out of it. The trio then entered the elevator and took to the medical bay. The elevator opened onto a deserted medical bay.

“I don’t like this!” said Holloway, as the trio came out of the elevator.

“Let’s go in!” Troy said, entering the medical bay, where most of the lights had been switched off, and called out loudly “EMILIE!”

“Why do you keep doing that?” hissed Kru. “It’s a very nasty idea!”

Then out of the darkness suddenly, Emilie limped towards them with Sniffles held safely against her body.

“TROY!” she cried and hugged him.

“What happened?” asked Troy, holding her by her shoulders.

“Somebody’s here!” she stammered, holding Sniffles tightly, who was shivering all over.

“Let’s get out of here!” said Troy, as he led Emilie out of the medical bay.

“Kru, get the elevator!” said Holloway and Kru hurried towards the elevator.

“It’s here! It’s here!” cried Kru, who looked very nervous. Holloway took Sniffles in her arms as Troy helped Emilie get into the elevator.

“What happened?” he asked as the elevator doors closed.

Squeezing Troy’s arm seemingly in pain, Emilie recounted what had happened, in a broken voice, barely whispering, “After you all had gone, Dr. Fry too went out to get the nurses when it happened.”

“When what happened?” asked Kru.

“The lights suddenly went crazy, they were turning on and off by themselves and then came the screams. Someone had come inside the medical bay, I had made out from the screams. At once, I closed the room’s door, locked it and took Sniffles in my arms. I tried sensing who was there but I picked nothing. Everyone had disappeared leaving me and Sniffles alone. I’m not sure-” whispered Emilie, as if something had got stuck in her throat.

“Haven’t we been too long in the elevator?” said Kru suddenly. The four immediately looked at the display panel, where to their surprise and terror they found nothing displayed.

“What’s happening, Kru?” asked Troy.

“I don’t know!” exclaimed Kru, breaking into a sweat.

The lights went off then, without any warning.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!” screamed Holloway.

“Everybody stay calm!” said Troy, in the darkness.

The elevator came to a standstill and opened onto a deserted level. It was level a hundred and sixty five, one of the levels dedicated to stargazing.

The lights came back on in the elevator and white lights decorated the long passage that led from the elevator.

“Level 165,” said Kru, taking a huge gulp.

“Everyone stay inside the elevator!” commanded Troy, as he punched at the display panel, which continued to not display any options. “Somebody’s wants us out on this level.”

“Now it’s getting eerie!” said Holloway, clutching Emilie and Kru both together in fear.

“Let’s get out!” said Troy abruptly.

“What! Are you mad?” cried Kru, clawing at him.

“It’s the only option!” said Troy.

“No! It’s not!” said Kru.

“Fine!” said Troy, crossed his arms, stood his ground and looked away into the distance defiantly.

“I think we should move out,” whispered Emilie, looking at Holloway and Kru.

“I think too of the same,” said Holloway, looking at Kru.

Kru seemed unsure of the decision but finally gave in.

“Alright!” he chirped. The five got slowly and cautiously onto level 165.

“Everybody stay close!” said Troy, leading the party, throwing his arms behind him as if covering them. Soon they reached the end of the passage where it ended in a T-junction.

“Now what?” asked Holloway.

“Guys!” Kru called, “You better look at this!” pointing behind them in the direction of the elevator. They all turned in that direction to see that the lights along the corridors were going off, right from the elevators towards them.

“Move!” said Troy, nudging the other three to take off towards the left of the T-junction. The four ran towards the gallery arena where the ceilings and the walls were replaced by glass, allowing the light from the distant stars and galaxies to shine through but there wasn’t much light in the arena.

There was silence, pin-drop silence in the arena. All that the four could hear was their own labored breathing.

“Somebody’s on this ship,” said Troy.

“Thank you for enlightening us!” said Kru sarcastically.

“I don’t think it’s anyone on this ship!” said Holloway

“Or actually it could be someone on this ship who is well aware of the ship’s layout and knows how to use computers,” said Troy.

“I think it’s highly unlikely that it’s anyone on the ship,” said Kru, shivering. “The only other person I know capable of pulling such a feat is my sister Lena and I’m sure she’s not part of this!”

“Then what do you think it is?” asked Troy, who was starting to unnerve.

“I calculate it 14% of a chance that it’s a,” said Kru, as the other three waited for him to finish what he was saying, “Ghost!”

Almost instantly, Holloway landed a big fat slap on Kru’s back. “AAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!” cried Kru. “What was that for?”

“Idiot!” hissed Holloway, under her breath.

“That was supposed to be a joke,” mumbled Kru.

“Why can’t it be someone from the enemy?” asked Troy.

“What do you mean?” asked Kru, still recovering from the back slap.

“I mean looking at the facts. I doubt it might be one of the aliens that have attacked our homes.”

“It’s more than possible,” said Kru. “We’ve all been so preoccupied with a notion that it might be someone on the inside following Norman’s example that we’ve completely forgotten to take outside factors into consideration.”

“It’s just a thought,” warned Troy. “We can’t tell for sure unless we prove it.”

“But, seriously guys, I am just reminding you now that we’re hunted at the present moment,” said Holloway

“Well, there’s that!” said Troy. Then turning to Kru in the pale light, he said, “Give me something like a weapon!”

“What do you mean weapon?” asked Kru, who was clearly not in his right mind.

“You know something that can hurt!” said Troy with an annoyed look on his face.

“Tsokay! Tsokay!” said Kru and reached the insides of his pant pocket.

“What are you going to do?” asked Holloway, meanwhile.

“Get out of here!” said Troy and reached out his hand towards Kru, who handed him a glowing green dagger.

“Seriously! A dagger?” exclaimed Troy, looking at the sword which looked more like an antique toy than a formidable weapon.

“What do you want me to do, provide you with the most kick-ass weapons whenever you want me to!” shot back Kru.

“Emilie, why are you so unusually quiet?” asked Holloway, as Troy and Kru looked at Emilie.

Emilie looked at her and smiled weakly, which made Holloway feel real weird.

“Guys, I think something’s moving behind us,” said Holloway then, tugging at Troy and Kru’s arms.

As Troy and Kru stopped fighting and looked around, they saw something invisible scratching the wall behind, from the farthest corner of the arena and making red and yellow sparks fly, as it came rapidly towards the five.

“To the elevators now!” cried Troy, as he pushed the other three. The sparks grew bigger as it came towards them.

“What is that?” cried Kru.

“I WISH I KNEW!” cried Holloway, as she ran beside her. The scratching stopped as it reached the five within a distance of about meters. Troy stopped to look behind and flashed his glowing blade. The five had reached the T-junction and lights were functioning properly over there again.

“You guys keep moving towards the elevator, once you reach, tell me!” said Troy, with his back turned towards them.

“What’s the idea?” asked Kru.

“Whatever this thing is, it has go through me to get to you, I’ll stand here till you reach and you make sure the elevator gets where we want it to go.”

“Alright!” said Kru. “Let’s go!”

The other three ran all the way to the elevators, with Emilie carrying Sniffles which were about another hundred and fifty meters from them. Troy continued to flash his sword into the darkness with every one of his nerves on full alert.

Then suddenly, a screeching scream came from the passage where the four had gone. Troy turned back and saw that it was Emilie.

“Troy! It’s over here!” cried Kru, flailing his arms at him. From the elevator, the walls on either sides of the passage were being scratched with sparks flying as it came towards them at great speed. The four turned and ran back towards Troy.

Troy sprinted and knew he had to sprint faster if he were to make it. He ran as hard as he could and jumped just in time between the four as they passed him, stabbing the air and crashing onto the ground. The scratching had stopped.

“What the heck is happening?” muttered Troy. Then he motioned to the rest and cried, “COME ON!”

The five made to the elevators and Kru got to work on his Holotab.

“Let’s make it quick, Kru!” said Troy.

“YES! YES!” said Kru. “Give me two minutes to encrypt and protect our ride against any kind of bloody malware!”

“Tsokay!” barked Troy, as his grip on the sword tightened.

“That thing can jump from one to another magically!” commented Holloway nervously.

“I told you it’s a ghost!” muttered Kru, as he kept typing furiously.

“No! It’s not!” said Troy, grinding his teeth. “Emilie, can you sense anything at all?”

“No, Troy, I can’t!” replied Emilie, after a couple of moments.

“I’m almost done! Thirty seconds!” interrupted Kru.

“Good!” said Troy, when Holloway suddenly cried out, “IT’S COMING AGAIN!”

To their horror, the red and yellow sparks started flying again off both the walls, about a hundred meters from them, flying towards them at great speed.

Troy sprinted towards it with aggression, flashing his sword wildly and when he had almost reached it, he jumped onto it pointing his sword. The glowing blade splintered into a hundred pieces as if it had hit something solid like a diamond in thin air. Troy was taken aback and thrown onto the ground a few feet back in the direction of the elevator. After a few seconds of silence, sparks started flying again off both the walls, accelerating as it came towards Troy, who was now totally defenseless.

“*Nasty Mermaids!*” mumbled Troy, as the sparks closed on him.

12 THE DARK DORKS

“TROY!” cried Holloway.

Troy closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath. He tried to get a feel of his immediate surroundings. He felt the fresh air and the coolness of the air surrounding him. He felt the cold floor on which he lay. He heard Emilie, Holloway and Kru shouting his name out loud. He felt their despair and pain. He felt the immediate death waiting to pounce on him. At that instant, something pierced his mind and his body almost simultaneously. He shot up from the ground and struck at the air above him. He hit something very solid. With all his might, he punched at it again and pushed at it. He was hit back

again on the face. Troy moved his arms around the floor for support when he felt two pole-like structures on the ground.

Legs....

With one final kick, Troy kicked mightily at what he thought to be legs and made for the elevator. He jumped onto the elevator and Kru closed the doors immediately.

“I bought us ten seconds of uninterrupted service!” said Kru.

“Will we make it within that?” asked Troy, sitting on the elevator floor.

“Yeah! We will!” said Kru.

“Finally!” said Troy, feeling a bit relieved.

The elevator opened onto their level, where Rutgers was waiting for them along with a huge force of droids and security personnel.

“WHERE IN THE BLOODY GALAXY WERE YOU ALL?” hollered Rutgers.

“Can we speak in our cabin?” asked Troy. Rutgers noticed the serious look on his face and nodded.

Once they had entered Troy’s cabin, everyone took their seats. Troy started explaining everything that had happened to Rutgers.

“Good Lord!” exclaimed Rutgers, as he heard all of it.

“Yes!” agreed Troy.

“Things have got more serious,” said Rutgers. “Seventeen members of the Senate are dead!”

“WHAT?” chorused Kru and Holloway together, in horror.

“All of them dead in precisely the same way as Norman, with their aortas split open. That’s why we sounded the red alert,” Rutgers explained, “And that’s why I came for you, after you were all reported missing from your cabins.”

“We don’t know who’s behind this!” said Kru.

“I think we all know whom to point hands at!” said Troy.

“What do you mean, Troy?” asked Rutgers.

“Someone from the aliens has infiltrated the Orion Swift,” stated Troy.

“That’s everyone in the ship are thinking too!” said Rutgers despondently. “They are destroying us from the inside!”

“Whatever it is, they must be stopped!” said Troy, punching his fists together.

“I don’t think sensing dark matter flux is going to be of any use here,” said Kru.

“Why?” asked Troy, looking at him.

“Because while you were fighting him on the level 165, I checked dark matter flux gradient out of

doubt and it showed minimal flux difference as one would expect randomly.”

“So what does that suggest?” asked Holloway.

“It means whoever is here, assuming that we’re right, he or she’s too light in weight,” said Kru. “These alien guys, they are more than geniuses, they are the definition.”

Troy hung his head in thought.

“I don’t think it’s an alien,” said Troy, after a short while.

“We’ve just been arguing for nearly half an hour that it is one!” said Kru.

“I mean it could be a robot!” said Troy. “When I had brawled with it on level 165, I felt more metal and hard material than anything organic.”

“It doesn’t settle anything!” said Kru. “We know nothing of the aliens. After all they could turn out to be a bunch of badass slugs!”

“Kru’s right!” said Rutgers. “You guys be safe in your cabins! I’ll post strong security outside! I’ll meet you later!”

“How’s Lena?” asked Kru, as Rutgers got up from the comfy chair.

“She’s safe and sound with Aunt Mia,” said Rutgers as he patted Kru on his head and went out the door.

“Invisible assassin aboard the Orion Swift, this is getting too unfair!” said Holloway, hugging Troy’s pillow.

“Invisible alien assassin robot with tech, capable of all tricks in the bloody universe,” muttered Troy to himself.

“I think we should give these alien bastards a name,” said Kru. “It’s kind of getting stupid calling them aliens, in that view, we all are aliens to each other, except Holloway and me, of course!”

“We’ll call them Innuendo!” suggested Holloway.

“That sounds more like a third class secret society than a name for these bastards!” said Kru, who was thrashed with the pillow that Holloway had been hugging soon after he had said that.

“Tsokay! Tsokay!” said Kru. “Just give them a name that kind of reflects their nature and also humiliates them in some way!”

“Dark Dorks,” muttered Troy, standing against the wall.

“What did you say?” asked Kru.

“Dark Dorks,” said Troy loudly.

“That’s perfect!” said Holloway.

“Dark Dorks, it is!” said Kru, “Couldn’t have come up with a better name myself!”

“Now back to serious business!” said Troy, walking away from the wall. “How do we bring down the dark dork in our ship?”

“Well the first step is to locate him,” said Holloway. “But our dark matter flux technique isn’t gonna work here!”

“So how else do we locate the DD?” asked Kru, walking around in the room.

“I don’t think it is a living thing,” said Emilie.

“We’ve already had that conversation before,” said Holloway.

“Emilie, you can see through their dark matter tech, right? After all you showed me,” said Troy, looking at Emilie, who looked emotionless. “It’s odd that you couldn’t see through today, unless-”

Troy’s eyes widened as he realized the truth, “Of course!” he whispered. “EVERYBODY TO THE DOOR!” he cried as Emilie started melting away to give rise to a six foot black robot and Sniffles slowly transformed into a huge black gun.

“OH MY GOD!” cried Holloway, as Troy grabbed her and Kru and sprinted towards the door. The robot grabbed the gun and shot at them and missed, hitting the floor, which blasted off, throwing the trio right out of the door.

“WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT?” cried Kru picking himself up from the debris. There were about ten security droids waiting outside which immediately barged inside Troy’s cabin.

“That’s the assassin robot, we’re after!” said Troy, dragging Kru and Holloway away from his cabin.

“If that’s not Emilie, where is she?” asked Holloway, struggling to keep pace with Troy.

“I guess she must be still in the medical bay!” said Troy.

“So that means that there are two killer robots aboard the ship!” said Kru.

“Yes!” agreed Troy. “We’ve got to go somewhere where we would get an arsenal!”

“To the Security Headquarters then!” said Kru, as they hit the elevators. The heavily built black droid destroyed all the security droids that had come at it in almost no time but one of its dark matter tech panels had been destroyed in the process, leaving its shoulder visible.

The trio meanwhile had made it to the Security Headquarters on level twenty one.

“Security breach on level one hundred and forty five!” said Kru at the reception where there were officers. “It’s a big black robot from the enemy and it’s invisible”

“Then how did you see it?” asked one of the officers.

“Big story!” said Troy. “But we need weapons now!”

“Weapons are not allowed for use by residents,” said another officer.

Kru turned towards Troy and said, “We should’ve never come here!”

At that moment, the black robot appeared at the entrance to the Headquarters office and started firing,

invisible except for that small part of its shoulder. Every shot the robot blasted, completely demolished the area, annihilating the ceiling and flooring to reveal the level above and below. Troy pushed Kru and Holloway onto the tiny passage they had taken a few hours ago after landing from Aura.

“GO!” he cried. “They’ve got weapons there!”

“Did you see that?” Holloway asked, as she ran. “There was a part of its shoulder visible!”

“The tech must have been damaged by the droids upstairs!” yelled Troy. “Let’s destroy the rest of it!”

They broke through the door at the end of the passage and rummaged the huge hall for weapons. Officers who were standing there were taken by surprise and were about to shoot at the trio when the rest of the surviving officers from the reception reached there, shouting about the robot.

“There it is!” said Holloway, pointed to a large shelf on the opposite wall of the hall, about three hundred meters from their location. The three ran for it. The robot meanwhile made it through the passageway, killing and destroying anything in its way.

“Do you get that feeling that it’s after us?” said Holloway, as they ran.

“It is after us!” cried Troy.

“We should’ve never left our cabins in the first place,” said Kru.

“But we probably saved Emilie’s and Sniffles’ life by getting there in the nick of time!” shouted Troy, running as hard as he could, occasionally tugging at Kru and Holloway to make sure they were keeping up with him.

“I KNOW!” yelled back Kru.

“The robot’s broken into the hall! Quick!” cried Holloway, turning back and seeing things blow up. Troy crashed onto the big shelf built onto the wall and searched for the one offensive weapon, he knew, the Cutie Twins.

“What’re you searching for?” asked Kru, as he crashed onto the shelf beside him.

“I’m looking for the Cutie!” said Troy as he splashed his eyes frantically over the entire armory.

“Take this,” said Kru, handing a large heavy red-painted gun over to Troy. “That’s the Trojan Horse.”

Troy didn’t stop to ask for details, as he quickly aimed with a guess at the piece of shoulder moving around.

“Move!!!” cried Holloway, as she pushed Troy and Kru, clear of the shelf. Not less than a millisecond later, the entire shelf blasted off into nothing, giving out searing heat.

“You’re fighting a robot, boys!” said Holloway, sitting on top of Troy and Kru. “Their aims are accurate and they’ll keep shooting till they kill us!”

Immediately, Troy got up and aimed at the only indicator of the robot, the visible part of its shoulder. It was nowhere to be seen.

“LOOK UP!!!” cried Kru, pointing to what appeared to be a tiny black piece of metal falling towards them.

At once, Troy took aim at that piece of metal and shot. Nothing seemed to happen, the piece of metal continued to fall towards them.

“Wait for it!” said Kru, “Faces to the floor!”

As the robot had neared them, it blasted from the inside and fell on the floor as tiny sparkling embers.

“So that’s why it’s called the Trojan Horse,” said Troy, as he stroked the gun in his hands.

“Enters the target as a million micro sized bullets and reassembles inside to form antimatter explosive,” said Kru.

“I like this Trojan,” said Troy, mesmerizing over the gun while he put it over his shoulders.

“Let’s get going,” said Holloway, who was totally uninterested in guns as the boys were. “We’ve got one more robot to go!”

“We find Emilie first,” said Troy, getting up from the floor.

“I’ll contact Rutgers and tell him of the situation,” said Kru.

“Yeah, do that,” said Holloway. “And it’s time you pull out that badge of yours!”

“I’m a secret spy, Holly! I can’t go flashing my badge letting everyone know!” replied Kru, a little annoyed that no one around him understood the importance of keeping the secret that he was a secret spy.

“Oh yeah?” said Holloway, stopping and putting her hands on her shoulders looking at Kru. “Then deal with those officers yourself!”

“Drop your weapons! Freeze! All of you!” said an officer, leading seven other officers, who had arrived at their location, pointing Bumpers at them.

Troy dropped the Trojan and raised his arms and so did Kru as Holloway glared at him as she were going to eat him alive, when he said, “I’m an Albein Intelligence Officer, Chief rank.”

“Yeah! Like you wish!” said an irritating middle-aged officer by the name of Banks.

“Let me show you my badge!” said Kru, as he reached out into his pant pocket.

“I’m warning you, don’t,” said Banks, as Kru continued to move his hand towards his pocket and then suddenly Banks jolted him, dropping him to the floor, at which point, Troy and Holloway got into action. Troy took a quick sprint and jumped onto three of the officers, knocking them out with a fury of punches, while Holloway took on two other officers taking them out with a couple of elegant kicks with use of her long legs.

One of them ran away from the scene while the other two jolted Troy several times, throwing him back.

“TROY!” Holloway cried, in horror.

“I am fine!” replied Troy, trying to pick himself up.

Holloway then launched onto those two officers, somersaulting onto them and making them fall hard onto the ground and picked some of their weapons including two Cuties.

“I’m alright, I’m alright!” mumbled Kru, from where he lay.

Holloway passed right past him, towards Troy and put his arms around her shoulder, helping him to get on his feet.

“Holly!” called Kru, lying on the floor.

“Get up, you big baby!” said Holloway, as she and Troy walked towards him.

Kru struggled and got up on his own and looked sadly at the pair that met his eyes.

“You deserved it,” said Holloway, as she removed Troy’s arm around her shoulder.

“But-but-” Kru stammered, as he continued to look more sadly at her, as she came towards him.

“Bu...but-”

Holloway grabbed him and gave a long wet kiss on his lips.

“Happy now, baby?” she asked, looking into his eyes.

Kru nodded his head like a delighted child, with mouth and hands stuffed full of his favorite candy.

“Let’s keep moving, guys!” said Troy, smiling at them and picking up the Trojan Horse from the floor.

“We’ve got to get to Emilie!”

Kru and Holloway nodded and started moving. They went past the gigantic holes in the floor and walls, made by the robot moments ago and made it to the deserted elevators. They made it to the medical bay, which was deserted too.

“Where is everybody?” asked Holloway, looking around the medical bay.

“Most probably vaporized!” said Kru and got his foot stamped by Holloway for that statement.

“OOOWWW!” cried Kru, clutching his foot as Troy ran off into the darkness, followed by Holloway.

“Wait for me!” cried Kru, as he limped behind them. Shortly, after sometime, Kru reached what had once been Sniffles’ room. He found Holloway and Emilie in a tight embrace inside, while Sniffles and Troy were standing beside them.

“Hey! Hey! Hey!” said Kru, as he hopped inside the ravaged room. “Is that really Emilie?”

Emilie and Holloway broke the embrace and looked at him.

“Yes, it is,” said Troy mildly.

“Well, prove yourself!” challenged Kru.

Emilie looked at Kru,

“Well! Come on!” said Kru nervously. “We haven’t got all day!”

“Then you should probably stop thinking about Holloway’s hips now and start figuring out a plan to stop the other robot,” said Emilie, with a smile.

Kru gasped.

“By Molly’s beard!” he exclaimed, clutching his throat.

“Bad boy!” said Holloway, squinting at him and making Sniffles let out a giggle.

“Emilie!” said Troy darkly, dissolving the humor in their midst. “Where is the other one?”

Emilie closed her eyes and opened them again.

“It’s somewhere near the top, above our cabins!”

“Kru!” said Troy. “What’s up there?”

Kru looked dismayed as he said, “Higher ranking members of the Senate and the Command Bridge above it!”

“QUICK!” cried Troy, “TO THE ELEVATORS!”

Sniffles cried, “Bua!” and ran towards Emilie, who lifted him and ran out of the medical bay with the others. They got to the elevators. Holloway handed a Cutie over to Kru and to Troy, who handed over the Trojan to her, as Cutie Twins were supposedly long range weapons and to be used with suitable protection, due to the antimatter bullets being used.

“What about you?” asked Emilie, holding the heavy Trojan, in one hand Sniffles in another.

“I’ll use my hands!” said Holloway, displaying her fists.

“Does Sniffles need to be a part of this?” asked Kru.

“He has nowhere else to be safe,” said Troy and looked at the rest. “The plan is simple, we get onto the floor where the invisible robot, Emilie locates and fires and we fire at what she fires.”

The elevator opened onto scorching heat and a heavy downpour of white snowflake like material.

“Let’s go! Let’s go!” cried Troy, running through the fire trying to lick them from the walls.

“Holly, get the baby!” said Kru and Holloway picked up Sniffles and kept at the tail of the party.

“Lead us!” Troy told Emilie and she went ahead of him.

“He’s in Jedias’ room!” she cried, making way through the heavy snow like conditions and fire that lashed at them now and then from unpredictable places.

Emilie broke into Jedias’ room and immediately backed out, crashing onto the rest of the party.

“I’m sorry!” she cried as she got off Troy’s chest.

“What happened?” asked Troy, getting off Kru. Holloway just caught up with them then.

“The robot was pointing the guns at me when I went in,” said Emilie, turning behind, crouching near the entrance to the room.

“Of course, it knew, it’s a walking sensor!” muttered Kru.

“Move away from the walls!” cried Holloway excitedly, as if she knew what exactly was going to happen next.

“Why?” asked Emilie.

“JUST MOVE!” she shouted and as the three moved away the wall behind them blasted into nothing, putting them off balance.

“EMILIE! NOW!” cried Holloway, holding Sniffles tight and stepping back from the site of action.

Emilie turned behind to see a six foot, black droid that looked more like a piece of art than a real robot, with its smooth surface and smooth curves. Emilie took a quick aim and blasted the Trojan at the weapon the robot was holding and as soon as she had pulled the trigger, she pulled it a second time this time aiming at the body. The robot and its weapon blasted into nothingness, shattering into a million pieces of sparkling ember, showering over them in addition to the anti-fire snow flaky material.

“I’ll go check if Jedias is alright!” said Troy, jumping out of his cramped position, running into the room.

He found Jedias, lying in a corner, almost not breathing.

“Sir!” said Troy and shook him. “Are you alright?”

Jedias seemed unresponsive to him.

“Help here!” Troy shouted and the others came running over there.

“Leave him to me!” said Emilie, as she put her hand over his face and closed her eyes.

She opened them again after a moment and said, “He’s alright! He’s just fainted from the shock!”

“Thank goodness!” Holloway exclaimed collapsing on the floor, with Sniffles on her lap, “We’ve destroyed them both!”

“This isn’t over yet,” said Kru darkly.

“Oh! Come on! What’s with all that pessimism?” said Holloway disapprovingly.

“This is just the beginning,” stated Troy.

“You too?” said Holloway. “We don’t need all your pessimism now! At least be joyful for some time!”

“Holloway,” said Troy, looking at her. “Sometimes it’s just necessary evil!”

Holloway just stared at him, with a vacant expression. He made absolutely no sense.

13 THE VOLSKI

The combined security forces of droids and officers were soon present at the site, along with Rutgers.

“They’ve got to stop doing this to my ship!” he lamented, on seeing the extensive damage, as he made through the white snow covered floors.

“Ah! Uncle, you are here!” said Kru, grinning as he saw Rutgers enter the demolished room, after the security forces

“Is he alright?” asked Rutgers, as he kneeled near Jedias, who was lying on the floor.

“Yep,” said Troy, ruffling his hair.

“And the assassin?” asked Major Ann, standing behind Rutgers.

“There were two and they were droids and they have been taken care of!” said Holloway, stroking Sniffles.

“Are you positive about that?” asked Ann and unable to keep her long pointy fingers from scratching her long pointy nose.

“Yes,” said Troy.

“We’re safe now!” said Holloway, with glee.

“Not so sure about that,” said Troy, stretching his boy and Holloway glared at him furiously.

“Thank you!” muttered Rutgers, as a medical team took away Jedias.

“They have penetrated our ship and no one’s safe anymore,” said Emilie.

“It’s true. We are completely at their mercy,” added Rutgers.

“If they are gonna send more droids like these, we’re gonna end up stranded, dead and floating in space,” said Kru.

“Will you stop saying such dreadful things?” chided Holloway, having had enough of the negative talk going around.

“I must admit though, kids,” said Rutgers in a dismayed tone, drawing to his full height. “I can no longer hold guarantee for the three thousand odd souls onboard.”

At that moment, a young man broke into the scenario.

“Captain! The aliens have made contact!” he said, panting.

Rutgers turned to the five and said, “You all better come along too!”

Saying so, Rutgers and the five made it to the Command Bridge, where another officer made arrangements for them for the call.

The hologram projectors projected the video transmission right in front of them. The video showed a humanoid, a little shorter than Troy himself. He had pale skin and short hair that was salt and peppered. His eyes and most of his face were covered by a smooth silvery metal. Both of his eyes were each covered by a teardrop shaped silvery metal lens and the same silvery metal covered his nose and his mouth extending to the end of his jaws like a mask. His body wasn't muscular nor was it too lean but it looked well-tuned and was covered in a dazzling black armor, devoid of emblems of any kind. He was standing against a white background, where the others of his kind were seated with their backs turned, working on interfaces that looked way more advanced than of the Albeins.

“This is a warning,” the alien said with a cool accent, in Standard Order English. “Surrender before I destroy everyone one of you.”

“Who are you?” asked Rutgers, clutching his fists in nervousness and rage.

“Such petty and lowly creatures you are!” he replied, with genuine distaste in his cold, hollow voice sounding as if he were whispering.

“He asked who you are?” shouted Troy, losing his temper.

“Ah! You, little prat!” said the alien, continuing in his cold, hollow voice. “You have made quite some trouble for us!”

“You destroyed our homes, you bastard!” yelled Troy, his eyes glistening with hate.

“You have quite a temper too!” said the alien, in an irritating tone.

“Troy,” said Emilie, trying to calm him down, as she held his hand.

“And it's you!” the alien said. “You both have something that I want-”

“We'll not surrender!” interrupted Emilie, looking at the alien.

“Is that your decision? Where are your glorious leaders?” asked the alien sarcastically, “Them dead?”

Rutgers replied instantly, clutching his fists even harder, “I'm the captain of this ship and I say we'll not surrender to you!”

“You think you are brave and above all others because you resist surrendering to us, you think there is glory in it while I assure you that it's the exact opposite that's waiting for you. There were others before you who knew surrender was the wisest thing to do,” said the alien.

“We'll die before we surrender to you,” said Rutgers, with a defiant look.

“You'll die even if you surrender to me,” said the alien cruelly.

At that moment, everyone aboard the Bridge realized what the alien was after and that this alien was not a conqueror but a destroyer, that unlike conquerors who took delight in capturing distant lands and ruling over them, he took delight in destroying what he captured. He was pure evil.

“Your safety is an illusion. My droids entering your ship is proof of that. You can’t escape forever from me,” said the alien.

“Who the hell are you?” asked Rutgers, his face as hardened as stone.

The alien didn’t reply for a moment and then said, “I am Olscuro, Lord of the Volski.”

“Never heard of ‘em,” mocked Troy.

The alien erupted at his remark, unfolding four mighty dark black wings from his back and stretched out his hand as if to strangle Troy and shouted furiously, “YOU DARE INSULT ME? I’LL DESTROY YOU AND EVERYTHING YOU HOLD DEAR, SLOWLY AND TORTUROUSLY SUCH THAT YOU’LL KNOW THAT I AND ONLY I AM THE LORD OF THE UNIVERSE!”

Silence reigned throughout the Command Bridge. Olscuro pulled back his hand and his wings, then looking directly at Troy said, “I’m coming for you and I’ll destroy you like I have done a million worlds before you!”

Then the transmission went blank. Rutgers looked at the five and his officers on the Command Bridge. Nearly all of them looked scared and seemed hesitant to speak.

“I’ll talk to the last of the Senate and Jedis too, when he wakes up,” said Rutgers and went out of the Bridge.

Troy’s fury hadn’t cooled down but he left as well, following Rutgers.

“Well!” said Kru, looking at Holloway and Emilie. “We might as well as go too!”

The four couldn’t find Troy in his cabin so they all settled in Holloway’s cabin for the time being.

“Baby, can you see where he is?” asked Holloway, with Sniffles playing on her lap upon her bed.

“Yeah!” said Kru, getting his Holotab out from his pocket.

“May I use your washroom?” asked Emilie, getting from the bed.

“Yeah, sure dear!” said Holloway, smiling.

“I can’t find him anywhere on the ship!” said Kru suddenly loudly.

“What do you mean?” asked Emilie, stopping in her tracks.

“His ID isn’t showing up anywhere on the ship!” said Kru.

“Do it properly, Kru!” said Holloway, looking panicked.

After a while, he almost cried out, “I FOUND HIM! I FOUND HIM!”

“Where is he?” asked Emilie, holding the washroom’s door.

“In the gallery arena!” said Kru, showing the holographic projection which displayed Troy’s ID on the gallery arena level.

“What’s he doing up there?” asked Holloway.

“I don’t know!” said Kru disappointedly.

“He’s angry. Let’s leave him alone for a while, he’ll be alright,” said Emilie and went inside the washroom.

After Emilie had gone inside the washroom, Kru asked, “What do you think, Holly?”

“About what, baby?”

“About all this!”

“We’re lucky to be still alive, beyond that I don’t what to say!”

Kru put his head down and let out a heavy sigh.

“Mmmmma!” cried Sniffles, all of a sudden.

“Yes, little cute baby!” cuddled Holloway.

“Mmmmma!” said Sniffles again, showing all his tiny milk teeth.

“He’s so cute, ain’t he, darling?” asked Holloway.

Kru nodded and put his hand forward to hold Sniffles’ hand but Sniffles hugged himself, looked sadly at Kru and said “Bua!”

“Why does he do that?” Kru cried.

Holloway laughed, almost rolling with Sniffles on the bed and said, “He’s just scared of you!”

Kru couldn’t believe that answer, he knew he didn’t look scary at all and he asked Sniffles, “Do I scare you?”

“Bua!” replied Sniffles, his big round green eyes glistening like a puppy dog’s.

“Is that a yes?” asked Kru.

“Bua!” said Sniffles and buried his face on Holloway’s tummy.

“Cho Chweeeet, my baby is!” said Holloway, hugging Sniffles tight.

“Yea! Yea! Have your chweet little baby all day!” said Kru, crossing his arms and a bit pissed.

“Ah! Baby, no one is sweeter to me than you are!” said Holloway, looking at him.

“Ah! Is that true?” asked Kru, smiling.

“Actually, no!” said Holloway after considering it for a moment and returned to cuddling Sniffles.

“What the-” said Kru, keeping all his anger in and stomped around the room for a while and settled down on a chair and got busy with his Holotab.

Holloway laughed quietly to herself on seeing Kru do that, when Emilie emerged out of the washroom.

She looked brighter and more beautiful as she came and sat beside Holloway.

“Oh! Look at you, beautiful!” exclaimed Holloway, upon seeing her.

“I am nothing compared to your beauty!” said Emilie, modestly.

“Oh! Don’t you do that? You know the truth, sister!” said Holloway.

Kru was getting irritated in the corner where he was sitting, feeling awkward with all the beauty talk going on and so before Emilie could answer, he said, “Anyone care to talk about the Volski?”

Both the girls looked at him with vacant expressions and said, “Yes.”

“What do you want to talk about them, Kru?” asked Emilie.

“Well, they have destroyed our planets and are now threatening to destroy us too! Don’t you feel somewhat weird?” asked Kru.

“We’ve done what we could to sabotage their plans for now,” said Holloway, feeling quite content with what they had done so far.

“But that doesn’t mean we can rest peacefully here, while the enemy is actively planning to bring us down,” argued Kru, his tone getting deeper and stronger.

“Kru is right,” said Emilie. “But what do you want us to do here, Kru? Rutgers and the rest of the Senate are the ones who have to make a decision!”

“I know Rutgers, he’s not exactly leadership material-” said Kru.

“Then how do you think he became the captain of this ship, Kru?” cut in Holloway.

“He’s a good pilot. He’s the best at understanding ships and the only qualified aeronaut with experience in our wormhole technology! He was brought in as the Orion Swift’s captain not because of his leadership abilities but his knowledge of this ship and the galaxies. Since this ship had the Chancellor and the Senate on it, they thought it would be better to appoint a person with a better understanding of the galaxies than a person of leadership abilities.”

“So what’re you finally trying to say, baby?” asked Holloway.

“I’m saying Rutgers can’t make a decision on his own, with most of the Senate dead and Jedis unconscious.”

“So what about the other Intelligence officers onboard?” asked Holloway, “Rutgers can surely get their help!”

“Honestly speaking,” said Kru. “They don’t know shit either!”

“Come on! Kru!” said Holloway. “Don’t act as if you’re the only smart one in the whole ship!”

“I’m not saying that, Holly-” said Kru.

“Oh! Shut up, Kru!” said Holloway, furiously. “It’s always this thing with you, acting as if only you have brains in the whole bloody universe!”

“You’re not under-”

“I said shut up!” snapped Holloway, as Sniffles buried his face further deeper into Holloway’s tummy.

“Let him speak, Holloway,” said Emilie. “You can scold him all you want if you think that he’s still vain, after he’s finished.”

Kru seemed a bit relieved on hearing Emilie bat for him. He cleared his throat and began again,

“Three months ago, on Albein, all the Intelligence officers underwent a common test called A.M.O.E.B.I.A.C.S, which stands for Albein Module Order of Excalibur for Brilliance in Intelligence Advisory in Critical Situations-”

“Just get to the point, genius,” said Holloway, irritated.

“The point is-”

“Did they all fail the test?” asked Holloway sarcastically.

“Will you allow me to speak, Holly?” asked Kru, giving her an annoyed look.

Holloway snorted in return. Kru stared at her and began again, “Eighty-nine percent of those who took the test suggested we should surrender if we face a more powerful enemy.”

“So, what’s wrong with that?” asked Holloway, interrupting his flow of thoughts.

“Albeins are controlled by their intelligence, especially Intelligence officers rule with their heads and not with their emotions, Holly. Surrender is the most logical thing to do, even if Olscuro makes it very clear, that he’ll kill us even when we surrender. The rest, 10.99999 percent suggested we retaliate immediately with everything we’ve got-”

“That’ll surely kill us all!” said Holloway.

“What about the remaining percent?” asked Emilie, looking intently at Kru.

“I suggested that we should escape the enemy’s sight, set up a base and strike when convenient later,” said Kru.

“You were the only one who suggested that?” asked Holloway, unable to able to believe her ears.

“Yes,” replied Kru grimly.

“That’s impressive!” said Holloway, staring almost admiringly at Kru, mixed with guilt.

“Your strategy sounds good and at least it offers better hope than any other strategy,” said Emilie.

Kru just nodded his head, agreeing with her.

“So where do we suggest we go?” asked Holloway.

“Earth!” said Troy, who was standing at the cabin door.

“Troy!” exclaimed Emilie.

“How are you now?” asked Holloway.

“Better!” replied Troy, coming inside the cabin.

“You said earth?” asked Kru, straining his neck to look at him.

“Yes!” replied Troy. “That’s what on your mind too, right?”

“Yes,” said Kru, unclear as how Troy came up with that idea.

“I had been listening to your conversation for some time, and it was pretty obvious that Kru was gonna tell earth!” said Troy, looking his old self again.

“Show off!” mumbled Kru, under his breath.

“But we don’t know much about earth now, do we?” asked Emilie.

“We have pretty crude data about earth, from what my dad had told me years ago,” said Troy.

“What is it?” asked Holloway, as Kru looked at Troy with all his concentration.

“That earth was populated again, from what my dad had heard, he didn’t say who, but now I believe it was the one of the Albeins,” said Troy, casting a look at Kru. “And it had become the home of something called the Rippers.”

“Rippers?” gasped Holloway. “You’re not making up that, are you?”

“No, I’m not!” assured Troy. “But, according to the Albein mission, earth is fertile again after what had devastated it allegedly, the meteorite Omega 1950DA.”

“That last mission to earth was lead by Rutgers, a top secret mission that was sanctioned after we had successfully tested our wormhole technology,” said Kru.

“Earth is our best shot then!” said Emilie.

“Except for the Rippers!” cautioned Troy.

“What are they?” asked Holloway.

“I wish I could tell you but the details of the mission were back on Albein,” replied Kru.

“Why earth?” asked Holloway, after some thought. “There are a million other worlds throughout the galaxies!”

“Earth has got everything we need, oxygen, water now and plenty of other resources that we need to build a military base now,” said Kru.

“Are you sure about that?” asked Holloway.

“I’m positive about that report!” said Kru.

“I think it’s time we tell Rutgers then,” said Emilie, getting up from the bed.

“Right!” said Troy, extending his arm towards Emilie.

14 THE VOTE

Rutgers was in his office, sitting with his head covered by his hands at his desk. He was frustrated and daunted. He slowly lifted his head, spread his arms and put them on the transparent floating desk. He sniffled and stroked his trim black beard. He knew he had to take a decision quickly and it had to be the best decision he had ever made in his life. The last of humanity’s hope lay in his hands but he didn’t know whom to turn to for advice. With most of the Senate wiped out, he solely had to take the advice of the fifty odd Intelligence officers onboard but he was unsure of that too. Even in all that, it was he as the captain of the Orion Swift who had to make the final call, even if it was based solely on his gut feeling. He took a deep breath and tried to relax. He made his desk project the Orion Swift in front of him. As he got deeper into his thoughts, his fingers turned the Orion Swift around.

Rutgers slowly took stock of the situation. He knew that the Volski were a more advanced and powerful race than the Albeins, Keplers and Elveden put together. In such situations, he also knew that it was text book to surrender as it was the only strategy available to save most of the innocent entrusted to the one in charge but Rutgers wasn’t willing to surrender. He wanted to do something courageous and something great but knew it was impossible to win. Whatever much of a fight, he could manage to put in, the Volski will prevail, since they were in space and the enemy had more formidable weaponry and technology. Rutgers started panicking and dabbed his huge forehead with the back of his hand. He clutched his fists and got up from his chair.

If we are to have a fighting chance, we should organize and attack...but even this idea would seem madness to everyone on the ship, I know it’s next to impossible to escape from the Volski, and moreover, still hope to have enough time to plan an organized attack against them, thought Rutgers, furiously pacing around the room.

Then he started looking at the data, they had procured of the Volski, everything they could scratch from the chases across the galaxies, the video transmission and the damage made to the ship from their weapons. All that data had been processed by the AI present onboard and the results were being projected from the desk. As Rutgers carefully read every data point, there was one that deeply interested him and almost brought back the feeling and the will to fight back.

At that moment, the AI suddenly announced that a group was waiting to meet Rutgers outside his

office.

“Who is it?” asked Rutgers.

“Four Intelligence officers of Chief Rank and Senator Ira, Senator Huria and Senator Uzin are here to meet you, sir,” replied the AI promptly.

“Let them in,” said Rutgers, as he walked back to his chair behind the floating desk.

Four men and three women walked in, out of which four were dressed in full black suits with the shining Albein emblems and the Senators were in black and white suits.

“Rutgers,” said Huria, an old man, with a grey beard and white hair, clasping both his hands together.

“Senator,” said Rutgers, giving a brief nod.

“We’ve heard that the enemy has made contact,” said Senator Ira, a middle woman, with long brown hair neatly tied into a bun behind her head.

“Yes, ma’am, that is right,” said Rutgers, in a voice that sounded as he were holding his breath and speaking.

“We’ve briefed the Senators on the video call that you had with the enemy head,” said a middle aged bald headed Intelligence officer by the name of Jagger.

Rutgers just looked at the seven people awkwardly. Senator Uzin, a young red headed man, noticed Ruggers’s behavior and asked, “Captain, what do you make of the whole thing?”

Rutgers looked at him and said, “I’ll do what the Senate wants me to do.”

“Captain!” said Huria, letting out a gasp. “We’re all that’s left of the Senate.”

“Honestly senator, surrendering or fighting back would mean certain death for everyone aboard the Orion Swift.” said Rutgers.

“Surrender is the only logical option,” insisted Jagger.

“The Volski are inter-galactic conquerors,” said Rutgers. “There’s no telling for sure what they would do to us even if we surrender.”

“But it seems like the better option than fighting back, doesn’t it captain?” said Ira, adjusting her hair bun.

“There’s a third option,” said Rutgers, his hands on his hips.

“What is it, captain?” asked Uzin, looking sharply at him.

“We escape to another part of the galaxy, where we can organize and plan an attack on the Volski.” said Rutgers.

“Escape the Volski?” scoffed Uzin.

“It’s quite difficult but I think I can make it happen,” said Rutgers.

“But they will come right after us, won’t they?” asked Ira.

“Yes, we’ve been jumping through wormholes to different galaxies to escape them, but they’ve always found almost immediately,” said Rutgers.

“How much immediately, captain?” asked Huria, squinting his eyes and leaning forward towards Rutgers.

“Within twenty to thirty minutes of our Albein time, Senator,” replied Rutgers.

“So they have a way to figure out where we went even if we use wormholes?” asked Huria.

“Yes, they do, sir,” said Rutgers.

“It sounds outlandish whatever you are suggesting, captain,” said Ira, after a couple of moments of thinking.

“But ma’am, this way there is at least a fighting chance for us and for our future,” said Rutgers.

“I’m not sure, Mr. Rutgers, about this plan,” said Ira. “Surrender seems more favorable for us.”

Rutgers blood boiled. He wished he could make these people believe in something bigger, but clearly they were being stubborn. Unintentionally or intentionally, he didn’t know but he certainly hoped not that they did this on intention.

You useless idiots, thought Rutgers.

“And just for argument’s sake, let’s just we agree to your plan. What is that you’re proposing,” asked Uzin, in a tone that irritated Rutgers.

Rutgers tried his best not to glare at him and said, “Time dilation.”

“What?” Uzin scoffed again.

“We usually seal the wormhole on one side once we enter it, to prevent the others from entering it,” said Rutgers. “But the interesting point is this, while I went through the data we had, I found out that the Volski always opened the same wormhole that we had created at the exact location in space every time to follow us. In other words, I would say they know how to detect recent wormholes and open them. This is technology beyond us, I admit but this is something we can use to our advantage.”

“How, sir?” asked Huria, who seemed like the only one interested in what Rutgers was telling them.

“Next time we escape through a wormhole, we’ll leave it open and time dilate the wormhole, that is essentially accelerate one end of the wormhole with respect to the other-“

“So if they choose to come through our wormhole, it would essentially be years after we had gone through it and it would give us enough time to plan an attack when they come through!” said Huria, clicking his tongue in a tone of happiness as if he had figured out a hard problem in physics at school.

“Yes sir!” said Rutgers, enthusiastically.

“That’s a good plan!” said Huria, returning the enthusiasm.

“Albeit it’s filled with untested assumptions?” asked Ira grimly.

“What makes you think that the Volski will take an open wormhole and what makes you think they won’t detect the cheap trick you have in store for them?” asked Uzin harshly.

“The Volski seem to be an arrogant race, that is what gives me the gut feeling that they will take this trap,” said Rutgers confidently.

“Don’t you talk to me about gut feeling! And you’re assuming that the Volski are arrogant from the single video call you had with their leader? I wouldn’t call that arrogance, I would call that brilliance!” said Uzin.

“It surprises me you claim to not know arrogance,” said Rutgers smoothly.

“You!” blasted Uzin. “Idiots like you will kill us all!”

“Now, now, Mr. Uzin,” said Huria, extending his arms to hold Uzin. “The captain is only proposing a way out and it seems pretty good to me.”

“Huria!” said Ira. “Don’t you entertain this! Even if we successfully buy a few months or years by Rutgers’ plan, how do you think we’re going fight them off then?”

“My dear Ira!” said Huria. “You’ve got to have a little faith-”

“Huria!” cut in Ira. “This is madness! And I’m not going to be a part of this!”

Rutgers breathed out heavily. He had failed to convince them all but there was some hope for him to pull off this plan, so he said, “Let’s put this to a vote!”

“Are you stark raving mad?” asked Uzin, looking at him with burning anger.

In turn, Rutgers looked at him and said, “Everybody on this ship deserve to determine their own fate and know best not put it in the hands of a mad angry man.”

Uzin just glared at him in return, while Huria said, “Rutgers is right in putting this to a vote. We have two plans, let the people decide.”

Rutgers nodded his head at Huria, who returned with a smile. At this point, Jagger entered this conversation.

“Sir,” he said. “It would be most unwise to put this decision into the hands of the people, who would be blinded by some misplaced notion of courage in such a situation.”

“Dear sir,” said Huria. “Courage is never misplaced in the light of adversity.”

Jagger breathed out heavily and didn’t try to hide that Huria’s statements were frustrating him.

“This is a most peculiar situation,” said Ira, “Which I am very unclear as how to handle.”

“If I can get your approval, I can start the voting process across the Orion Swift and arrive at a decision at the earliest,” proposed Rutgers.

Huria looked at Ira, who avoided him and then at Uzin, who stared as if he were filled with hatred.

“We don’t have much time, I’m afraid,” said Huria. “With Jedias slipping into a coma, it’s up to us three to make a decision.”

Ira kept staring at the floor and said, “I am unsure but let’s put this to a vote.”

“Thank you, Ira,” said Huria. “What about you, young sir?”

“No,” said Uzin, clenching his teeth.

“Well, I vote yes,” said Huria, much to Uzin’s displeasure. “That makes the majority of the remaining Senate, so captain, please go ahead and get the results as earliest as possible.”

“Yes, senator,” said Rutgers and saluted him.

“Let’s go,” said Huria and turned to leave, followed by the rest. Uzin gave one hate-filled stare at Rutgers before he left his office.

Rutgers just returned the stare and went back to his desk, to make arrangements for the vote.

Soon, ship-wide announcements went booming off the speakers.

“Attention! Residents of the Orion Swift! We’re facing a critical situation at hand, in light of recent events. We are being actively pursued by a superior alien race, who call themselves the Volski. They have asked us to surrender, which has lead the Albein leadership to consider two options, one being surrender as the Volski demand and the other being, escaping from the enemy momentarily in order to give us a fighting chance, even though we are outgunned and outmatched in almost every way by the Volski. However the ultimate decision, decision has been put forward to every resident above the age of twelve years, as a vote. Log in from your respective DeskComs, to cast your vote within the next one hour. Depending on your vote, appropriate action will be carried out. Thank you for your cooperation.”

“Did you listen to that?” asked Troy, as the five were moving towards Rutgers office.

“They are asking us to vote on whether to surrender or fight back!” said Kru.

“This is good news and bad news,” said Holloway, by whose side Sniffles was walking, swinging his free arm as if they were all out for a jolly walk.

“It is,” said Troy. “We’ve got to clear this up with Rutgers.”

Soon, they were in his office.

“Kids!” said Rutgers, with a smile.

“Uncle!” said Kru. “What’s that they have planned?”

Rutgers explained the whole story to them.

“Bua!” said Sniffles, clutching his fists, when Rutgers was finished.

“You thought of this?” asked Kru, unable to believe his ears.

Rutgers looked at him and nodded yes.

“Great!” Kru muttered, cocking his eyebrows.

“The point is, we also thought of the same, and to hear that you have also arrived at the same conclusion is a great relief,” said Emilie.

“Is it?” asked Rutgers, surprised.

“Yes sir,” said Troy.

“Well,” said Rutgers. “It seems we’re all on the right track then.”

“Where are we going, then?” asked Holloway.

“Now, that’s left to the people to decide,” said Rutgers, shrugging.

“Just in case, they choose the plane we have, what then?” asked Holloway.

“Then in that case, we need to decide,” said Rutgers, sitting in his chair.

“We thought earth would be a good option,” said Kru, slowly.

“Earth?” said Rutgers, looking a bit hesitant.

“Yes,” replied Kru.

“I-I don’t know,” stammered Rutgers.

“You went to earth, uncle, seven years ago and it’s basing on your report that I’m suggesting it. Lush vegetation and a suitable environment for humans, that’s what you said,” said Kru.

“Yes, son,” said Rutgers, scratching his head. “Earth is again habitable after the Omega meteorite incident, but you forgot what I had told about the present dominant species, Kru.”

“But, uncle, earth is the only place we know to be safe. Though there are a million other unexplored worlds out there, we simply don’t have any time to check ‘em out when we are being actively pursued.”

“You got to know that the earth mission was a disaster, I lost three-fourths of my crew, did you know that? And all we had done was just place our feet on the planet!”

“There is no need for us to go down to earth,” said Kru. “Let’s just orbit the earth.”

“Hmmm...” said Rutgers, “Let’s see, earth would be the best option, only the Rippers bother me, anyways let’s see what people want.”

“Does Sniffles get to vote too?” asked Holloway, a bit hare-brained.

“I’m afraid not,” said Rutgers, his lips moving apart to reveal a little smile, “and you all can cast your vote here from my DeskCom.”

Except for Sniffles, everyone else cast their vote from Rutgers’ big DeskCom.

“Alright then!” said Rutgers, after they had finished, “That’s five votes for the escape and strike plan, we should get to know about how many more support us in the next hour or so.”

Troy nodded at Rutgers and said, “We’ll be waiting.”

“Sure!” said Rutgers.

Saying so, the five turned to leave, when Rutgers stopped and said, “Meet me when the results are announced back here in my office, no matter what the result is. Alright?”

“YES!” chorused the four happily, excited at the promise of adventure.

“Bua!” joined in Sniffles, happily and showed them all his milk teeth.

15 THE VALKURIE DARKSTARS

“Captain!” said a young male orange haired Albein officer, as Rutgers entered the Command Bridge.

“Yes, Gingerpotts!” called Rutgers, “Status report!”

“We are currently in the Orion belt system, sir and the Volski are getting slower in catching up with us, sir.”

“Good,” said Rutgers, looking through the front window, known as the Voidshield, at Rigel, the brightest star in the Orion constellation.

“And the Vote results will be available in a minute,” said Gingerpotts, looking at the Holotab in his hand.

“Bring them up to me in my chair,” said Rutgers, as he walked to the captain chair in the middle of the Bridge.

“Yes sir!” said Gingerpotts, saluting him with three fingers and his thumb closing on his pinkie at the second knuckle.

As soon as Rutgers reached his chair, he received the results. He gulped as soon as he saw it. Out of the 3543 people onboard, 3179 had chosen to fight back, in other words they had chosen Rutgers’ plan over surrender.

Rutgers covered his mouth with his hand, trying to hide his surprise and continued to look wide-eyed at the results for a couple of moments.

“Rutgers!” broke in Huria’s voice, on his transmitter.

“Yes sir!” replied Rutgers.

“You are requested on the Cruiser bay,” said Huria.

“Right away, sir!” said Rutgers, getting up from his chair.

Soon, Rutgers reached the Cruiser bay, the home to three hundred and fifty Cruisers. Huria along with Ira and Uzin were waiting for him.

“Captain,” said Huria, with a twinkle in his eye. “You are well acquainted with the results now, I believe.”

“Yes, sir,” replied Rutgers.

“Well, Ira and Uzin are both here to speak on behalf of the three hundred and sixty four people.”

“Tsokay sir,” said Rutgers.

“We require ships,” said Ira.

“We can provide you with as many as Cruisers you may need,” said Rutgers.

“What’s the carrying capacity?” asked Ira.

“Cruisers are built for a crew of twelve and a refugee capacity of twenty-two and going by that number, you’ll be requiring eleven Cruisers.”

“Tsokay,” said Ira.

“Pardon me, ma’am,” said Rutgers. “What is that you’re exactly gonna do?”

“That’s none of your business, soldier!” snapped Uzin, out of the blue.

Rutgers looked at him and weakly smiled.

“In that case,” said Rutgers. “I’ll make arrangements for your immediate departure.”

“Thank you, captain,” said Ira, in a tone that suggested a lack of interest.

Rutgers smiled handsomely at her and talked into his transmitter, “Gingerpotts?”

“Yes, sir,” replied Gingerpotts promptly.

“Alert those people who have voted to surrender, to gather in the Cruiser bay in the next twenty minutes with everything that belongs to them,” Rutgers said, then he looked at Uzin and said, “And Gingerpotts, just ask them to think over their decision again before they decide to leave the Orion Swift for good.”

“Yes sir,” said Gingerpotts and went off the line.

“We happy?” asked Rutgers, looking at Uzin, who smirked at him in return.

In exactly fifteen minutes, about three hundred and fifty people had gathered in the Cruiser, out of which most were Albeins and a dozen Keplers.

“Listen up, people!” announced Rutgers, “You’ll be all taking Cruiser ships and following Senator Ira and Senator Uzin’s instructions from now on. If anyone still wants to change their mind about this decision, this is your last chance.”

No one spoke anything and then Uzin stepped forward and spoke to Huria, “We would like those eleven ships now.”

“He’s the captain, Mr. Uzin,” said Huria, pointing to Rutgers, who was smiling.

Clenching his teeth, Uzin asked Rutgers, “The ships, captain?”

“Alright!” replied Rutgers and spoke again into his transmitter. “Gingerpotts, the Cruiser bay officer!”

“He’s right in that gathering, sir!” replied Gingerpotts.

“Oh!” said Rutgers and called out, “Mr. Farrow?”

An obese Albein official stepped out of the crowd, looking guiltily at him.

“Yes, sir,” said Farrow, looking down at the floor.

“You know what to do,” said Rutgers. “Send your final report before leaving to Gingerpotts.”

“Yes sir!” said Farrow and made the three-finger salute.

Rutgers turned to Huria, nodded and left the Cruiser bay.

“Gingerpotts!” said Rutgers onto his transmitter.

“Sir!” replied Gingerpotts nervously.

“What is it, Gingerpotts?” asked Rutgers.

“Some of our crew are also in that group, sir!”

“Are we missing any important people?” asked Rutgers coolly, as he walked towards the elevators.

“Well, yes sir!” replied Gingerpotts. “We’re lacking the entire Intelligence division, sir!”

Rutgers snorted in return.

“Sir?” asked Gingerpotts.

“Don’t you worry about that, Gingerpotts!” replied Rutgers. “For now, track all the Cruisers and take the Orion Swift as far as you can, from this place.”

“Aren’t we gonna jump through a wormhole, sir?” asked Gingerpotts.

“No, young man,” replied Rutgers. “First, I want to know what they’re gonna do to them.”

“Yes sir!” said Gingerpotts.

“And meet me in my office, as soon as you’re finished, I want you to meet my new Intelligence team,” said Rutgers.

“Aye cap’n!” said Gingerpotts enthusiastically and got off the line.

Rutgers smiled to himself and called Kru next on his transmitter,

“Dear nephew!” he said. “How are you?”

“Bored to hell! What’s going on?” said Kru, wondering about Rutgers’ way of speaking.

“I have a new appointment for you all, meet me in my office right away!” said Rutgers and hung the call.

“What is it, Kru?” asked Holloway, who was beside him, in Troy’s room.

“Rutgers said he has a new assignment for us all and has asked us to meet him in his office now,” said Kru, still wondering.

“Oh!” said Emilie. “That’s interesting!”

“THAT’S SUPER EXCITING!” exclaimed Holloway, waving her hands.

“What about the people who voted to surrender?” asked Troy, who seemed unmoved by the latest development.

“Yeah! So the results are out?” asked Holloway.

Kru looked at them both, took a deep breath and logged onto his Holotab.

“The Cruiser bay cameras are showing Cruisers taking off.”

“Hmm...” said Troy, sitting down beside Emilie on the bed.

“How many?” Holloway asked, biting her nails.

Kru checked and told, “Three hundred and fifty three people.”

“I wonder what’s gonna happen to them?” said Emilie.

Everyone looked at her and wondered the same. Kru closed his Holotab and let out a heavily audible sigh.

“Bua?” said Sniffles, lifting his head from Emilie’s lap.

“I am scared, guys,” confessed Kru, his chin held low.

No one spoke but continued to remain silent as they pondered over their own fears. Emilie broke the eerie silence by saying, “Troy’s face is becoming more serious by every passing minute!”

Troy looked at her and smiled, “I just feel a bit grown up.”

“Don’t we all feel like that now?” said Emilie, rubbing Troy’s back.

I wish I could tell you how I feel, thinking about what Olscuro had said earlier, thought Troy, looking at Emilie.

I am no stranger to your true feelings, Emilie replied telepathically and smiled reassuringly.

Troy smiled handsomely back at her and felt a cozy warmth building up inside his chest.

“Guys, I can’t really wait, shall we go now please?” asked Holloway, with puppy dog eyes.

“Alright!” said Troy, getting up.

“Guys, do you remember what I said?” asked Kru, from the corner where he was seated.

“What?” asked Troy, bringing his hands for a mighty clap.

“I said I was scared,” said Kru, hugging his Holotab.

“Come on, get up big baby!” said Holloway, pulling at his arms.

“But...but...but” stammered Kru, resisting Holloway’s efforts to get him up.

“Come on!” said Holloway and pulled Kru onto his feet.

“We’ll meet you both at Rutgers’,” said Troy, leaving the room with Emilie and Sniffles, as the results of the Vote were being announced throughout the ship.

Shortly, they were all at Rutgers’ office.

“Welcome kids,” Rutgers said, as he got up from his chair behind his big DeskCom.

“What’s up, captain?” asked Troy.

“I guess you are aware about the people leaving the Orion Swift to surrender to the Volski, yes?” asked Rutgers, placing his hands on his DeskCom.

“Yes sir,” said Holloway, giving a quick affirmative nod at him.

“I want to know what the Volski are going to do to them,” said Troy, crossing his arms across his chest.

“I am curious too,” said Rutgers and brought up a holographic video feed showing eleven Cruisers waiting in the darkness of space, on top of his DeskCom.

“We’re about fifteen minutes from those Cruisers at the speed of light,” said Rutgers. “So obviously, the video lags by fifteen minutes behind real time.”

Then suddenly a holographic screen appeared in front of Rutgers. He read it and said, “They’ve contacted the Volski.”

Everyone looked raptly at the video, at the eleven stationary Cruisers.

Rutgers announced, “The Volski have replied affirmatively to their request.”

“What?” said Holloway, feeling quite oddly surprised.

“That’s not it,” Rutgers said, his tone getting bitter by the second. “The Volski have expressed their thanks and congratulations to the surrendering people for making the right choice!”

“It sounds mad,” said Troy, cocking his eyebrow, unlocking his arms.

While everyone in the room thought it was ridiculous, Rutgers realized he had made a mistake and

took a step back from his DeskCom and looking confused.

“I made the wrong choice?” asked Rutgers guiltily, looking at the five.

Emilie knew where this was being headed and she stepped in quickly, towards Rutgers.

“No, Rutgers, you made the right one.”

Rutgers didn't look convinced and he sank onto his chair lost in his morbid thoughts, with his head sunk onto his chest, making Troy move instinctively move closer to him.

“I think we should-” said Rutgers.

“Uncle!” cried Kru, and pointed towards the holographic video. “I think you should look at this.”

Rutgers lifted his head and looked at the DeskCom.

The sight of Cruisers blasting into pieces met their eyes. Rutgers instantly calmed down and his pupils dilated as he had been dosed with a sedative.

“Let's get out of here!” hissed Troy.

Rutgers nodded and called Gingerpotts.

“Yes sir,” replied a trembling voice.

“Initiate the plan as we had discussed,” said Rutgers, in a raspy voice.

“Right away, sir,” said Gingerpotts.

Emilie continued to look at the Cruisers burning up, as fear chilled her every bone.

“I am sorry, that was a really bad case of severe anxiety,” said Rutgers.

“Don't sweat it,” replied Troy, managing a very weak smile at him.

Rutgers closed the video feed, releasing the other four from the spell.

“I am sorry for what happened right now,” said Rutgers and quickly regurgitated the whole escape plan that he had come up with.

Only Troy seemed to be paying attention at all to Rutgers, while the others picked up on bits and pieces here and other as the images of blasting Cruisers kept flashing before them.

“Are we cool with that plan?” asked Rutgers, once he was finished.

“Yes!” said Troy, instantly without any hesitation.

Rutgers looked at the others, who looked at him back with vacant expressions.

“Say something,” urged Rutgers.

“Yeah, it's a good plan,” said Kru, at last.

“The Volski are pure unmatched evil,” said Holloway, her eyes dry from the horror she just

witnessed, out of the blue.

The rest looked at her and seemed to agree with what she had said. Rutgers then spoke, “As you may not know, we had just lost our entire Intelligence team out there and there’s no current team aboard the Orion Swift to take their positions.”

“So?” asked Emilie, looking not much interested in what Rutgers was saying.

“Therefore, I want to appoint you four as my new Intelligence team,” announced Rutgers, clasping his hands together.

“Is there even a need for us?” asked Kru, with an exasperated look.

“You, four, have played a huge role in recent events and have saved the lives of everyone aboard this ship and it’s time that you are legally enabled to save everyone.”

“I don’t think we are-” began Troy, when he was interrupted by the entry of Gingerpotts.

“Captain!” said Gingerpotts, looking pale.

“Yes Gingerpotts,” said Rutgers.

“I have done as you had requested,” said Gingerpotts. “But everyone’s morale is in the toilet.”

“Don’t you worry about it, son!” said Rutgers. “Focus on what we must do now to survive, meet our new Intelligence team.”

Gingerpotts looked awkwardly at the four eighteen-year olds at his sides and looked back at Rutgers.

“These are the people who have been making the news rounds across the ship,” said Rutgers.

Gingerpotts reached out his hand at Troy and shook his hand gingerly, “Troy Zander!”

“Gingerpotts!” replied Troy and sniggered, who found his name to be extremely funny. “I am so sorry! It is just that I have never come across any man with the name Gingerpotts ever before.”

Gingerpotts gave a geeky smile, going pink in his ears, shaking the hands of the rest and even tried to shake Sniffles’ hand, who bit him and hugged Emilie’s legs tightly after that.

“Ow!” said Gingerpotts, clutching his pinkie in pain.

“I am so sorry about that!” said Emilie. “He’s just a baby!”

Rutgers smiled and said, “Alright folks! Time to pay attention! In about five minutes, we’ll enter into the solar system of which earth is a part of! And if everything goes according to plan, there will be a time gap of at least twenty years before the Volski reach us through that wormhole!”

“What if they don’t take the wormhole and find us somehow?” asked Holloway.

Rutgers looked disturbed and muttered, “Let’s just hope that they do!”

“Tsokay!” chorused Kru and Troy together hesitantly.

“Gingerpotts, you can show them their new office!”

“Yes sir!” said Gingerpotts, giving him the three finger salute.

“You guys can report to me from there and if I have any missions for you, I’ll let you know,” said Rutgers.

“What about this young Aurean, sir?” asked Gingerpotts.

Rutgers looked hesitant but then looked at Emilie who gazed back at him sadly, “Well, it’s up to Sniffles’ guardian, I suppose!”

Emilie smiled beautifully at him, conveying her gratitude and followed Gingerpotts out of the office.

“The Volski!” muttered Holloway, as the six walked down the passageway.

“It’s alright, Holly,” Kru comforted her, holding her hand, as they walked slowly side by side.

“We’ve survived so far and we’ll continue to do so against them, Holloway,” added in Emilie.

“You guys are so famous!” said Gingerpotts excitedly, as he kept working on his Holotab and who was currently amnesiac of the Volski’s attack on the eleven Cruisers and was completely enthralled by presence of the five.

Only Troy entertained Gingerpotts’ remark and asked him why.

“Do you know that the level on which your cabins are present, are out of reach to anyone except Rutgers, the Senate and only the Chief Security Officer?” said Gingerpotts.

“Tsokay,” said Troy, trying to be as modest as he could. “We never knew.”

“People are so crazed about you, folk, even Sniffles,” Gingerpotts continued to speak enthusiastically. “I can vouch that you guys are the reason that most of the people aboard the Orion Swift have chosen to fight back against those tyrants!!!”

“That’s nice to hear,” said Emilie, smiling.

“Yes, it is,” said Gingerpotts, as they reached the elevators.

“I think we should have a name,” said Emilie, as they filled in the elevator number seven.

“Seriously?” asked Kru, who thought that the idea was ridiculous.

“I think it’s a brilliant idea!” said Gingerpotts.

“I think it’s a good idea too,” added Troy, smiling and agreeing with her.

“Don’t you guys think we should be at least a bit scared right now?” asked Holloway.

“Holloway, those Dark Dorks are gonna come after us anyway and feeling scared isn’t going to help at all, of all the people here, I would expect you to be the most fearless,” said Troy.

“You’re so charming, Troy, with your words too,” smiled Holloway, much to Emilie’s jealousy.

“Troy is right,” said Kru, as they exited the elevator on level fifty-five. “We’ve got to be what now we’re called to be.”

“I was thinking we should ourselves using bits and pieces of the names of the places where we come from,” said Emilie.

“That’s actually a very nice idea,” said Troy.

“Bua!” said Sniffles, grinning.

“So, I thought Valkurie,” said Emilie, “V from Elveden, A-L from Albein, K from Kepler and U-R from Aura.”

“It sounds really cool,” said Holloway, trying to smile and return to normalcy again.

“Wow!” exclaimed Gingerpotts. “That’s a great name! People would love it.”

“Thank you!” said Emilie generously.

“And we’re here at your office,” announced Gingerpotts.

Gingerpotts stood in front of the room, which possessed a very small door, just enough for a person to pass through.

“Please stand back!” cautioned Gingerpotts, as he took a step behind. “This door is of a slightly different nature.”

“Why?” asked Troy and before Kru cleared his throat and was about to answer, Gingerpotts replied, “The Intelligence office is one of the most important areas in the ship, it houses all of the sensitive and most important intelligence reports and data and the security for this office is the highest.”

“Tsokay?” said Troy.

“So you can say this is the most secure area in all of the ship but yet you will find it paradoxical,” said Gingerpotts.

“Why?” asked Troy.

“Because of the Disappearing Door,” said Kru, who looked relieved that he finally said something before Gingerpotts could.

“What the heck?” said Troy and laughed.

“It’s true,” said Gingerpotts. “The door disappears on successfully recognizing you as well as when it doesn’t recognize you.”

“So?” asked Troy, looking a bit uneasy.

“So when someone tries to enter through the Disappearing Door, he will be spared if he’s a recognized authority or…” said Gingerpotts.

“Or?” asked Troy impatiently.

“Or be shredded to pieces by powerful lasers on the spot,” said Gingerpotts.

“So what if the bad guy teleports inside of the office inside, instead of using the door?” asked Troy.

“Teleportation is impossible on this level, there are Jumbler installed here, machines that, how to put in lay man words, ah, yeah, that jumbles up any teleporting thing, so that a human basically ends up teleported with his insides turned out on this level.” replied Gingerpotts.

“Yew!” said Holloway, clutching her stomach.

“Yea!” said Gingerpotts, “And now don’t worry, I have authorized entry for all five of you.”

“Tsokay!” said Troy. “Just a teeny weeny doubt before we enter.”

“Yes,” said Gingerpotts and smiled courteously at Troy.

“So what if the AI system commits a mistake and doesn’t recognize me, even though I am an authorized person?” asked Troy.

“In that case, you’ll be incinerated, like I told you before!” said Gingerpotts.

“That’s great!” said Troy sarcastically.

“The odds are astronomical, don’t you worry about it!” reassured Gingerpotts and proceeded towards the narrow door.

The white door with the shining Albein emblem disappeared like smoke as Gingerpotts came with an inch of it.

“Test of faith,” muttered Holloway, as Gingerpotts put his left leg forward inside the office. Nothing happened. Gingerpotts went inside, turned around and signaled the rest to come in. Troy went in first, followed by Holloway, Kru, Sniffles and Emilie.

“That was easy,” said Emilie, “Very thrilling though!”

The room they had entered into was the size of their cabin, plain white with a central desk and the five seemed rather disappointed.

“Don’t let size disappoint you!” said Gingerpotts. “This room is much bigger than you can imagine.”

“Thank you, Gingerpotts!” said Troy and bit his lips after saying his name, to avoid another gasp of laughter.

Gingerpotts nodded happily and said, “I guess by now, we have entered the solar system and are somewhere near the earth’s moon.”

“Great!” exclaimed Holloway, “I can’t wait to see what it’s like on earth.”

“We won’t be landing on earth, as we had discussed earlier, Holly, it’s too dangerous,” reminded Kru.

“Now what about the name?” asked Gingerpotts enthusiastically.

“I think we should name ourselves the Valkurie DarkStars,” suggested Holloway.

For a moment, everyone exchanged glances all around and Gingerpotts nearly shouted, “IT’S PERFECT!”

And at that moment, very much like a spoiler, everyone received an emergency notification on their transmitters.

“Uh ho!” said Kru, his heart beating fast, after listening to the grave message.

“They got to us?” gasped Holloway, in horror.

16 THE VOLSKI LORD

“My Lord!” said a young black haired Volski male, in H’uara, the language of the Volski. He was pale skinned with an upturned nose, canine teeth, with vertical pupils and golden brown eyes like the rest of the Volski were and was dressed in a dark grey body suit with the glowing Volski emblem showing Olscuro standing majestically with his wings covering his entire body except for the head, which was facing upwards a bright light source.

“Yes, Nori,” spoke the cold, hollow voice from the depths of the darkness in the room. The room was dark and devoid of lights of any kind, Nori could only make out the rough outlines of the furniture that lay between him and his Lord.

“They are ready, my Lord,” said Nori, bowing down at the sound of his master’s voice, at the room’s entrance.

Out of the darkness, emerged Olscuro, his hands behind his back.

“You seem disturbed, Nori,” stated Olscuro, looking at him through his opaque silvery teardrop lens.

“No, my Lord,” said Nori, his voice quivering.

Olscuro drew close to Nori and it seemed as if he had drifted over the floor rather than walking and placed a hand on Nori’s shoulder.

“You have to understand two simple things, young Volskian,” breathed Olscuro, “One, never to deny what I say.”

Olscuro then slowly held Nori's left arm as Nori panicked and cried, "No, my Lord, please don't, please forgive me in all your mercy."

"Mercy isn't in my blood," said Olscuro and broke Nori's arm like breaking a twig.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!" cried Nori in agony and fell to the ground.

"And secondly, that though your tongue can shamelessly lie, your eyes betray you," said Olscuro, as he set the broken bone, increasing Nori's agony.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!" cried Nori, even louder as tears flowed endlessly from his golden brown eyes.

"Pain is a wonderful teacher, harsh but teaches in such a way we never forget," said Olscuro, as he walked away from Nori leaving him to his suffering.

As Olscuro went past his fellow Volski outside the dark room, everyone stopped doing whatever they were doing and kneeled on one knee, heads bowed low and didn't straighten up till he had disappeared from their view. Olscuro walked majestically, looking straight ahead. He went through the grandly designed Volski ship, going past the intricately designed interiors based on the Volski culture.

The entire ship seemed more like a museum with Volskian art, which was beyond beautiful. Volskian animals like the Renee, six limbed sentient large black wolf-like creatures and the Fenoï, formless magical creatures, decorated many parts of the ship. Though the Fenoï were considered formless by the Volski, these intelligent life forms were depicted like small beautiful sparkling white furry tufted eared squirrel-like creatures in Volskian art.

Olscuro entered the large yellow lighted Command Bridge, where seventeen Volskian officials were waiting for him, beside the other Volskian officers at work there. They all kneeled down before him and didn't rise until they heard Olscuro's hollow voice commanding them to straighten up.

"Rise!" said Olscuro, walking around the Bridge and looked closely at each of the seventeen Volskians in shining black suits, standing in the Bridge.

"The humans have defied my command, the command of the most powerful person in the whole universe, Olscuro J'ahason," breathed Olscuro loudly. "Of all the worlds and peoples I had destroyed before, no one has stood up to me like the humans have. They have dared to stand up to me and I'll personally destroy every last one of them and have my foot upon their dead heads."

The Volskians trembled at the wrath with which their Lord spoke and no one dared to even breathe with Olscuro so near. Olscuro turned around and faced all of the Volskians in the Bridge.

"The pathetic human scum might escape to a distant part anywhere in the universe but we must not let them escape. Scan every solar system where the scum might land."

"Yes, my Lord!" chorused the seventeen Volskian officers together.

"And then send in the Wingers to take them out," said Olscuro.

"Yes, my Lord!" chorused the seventeen Volskians once.

“First, we’ll test their strength against our wingers, though I believe it’ll be more than enough,” said Olscuro, laughing sinisterly.

Then relishing every word, he continued, “To bring them down, to bring HIM down.”

The Volskian officers didn’t dare move a muscle as Olscuro finished his talk.

“Does anybody have anything to say?” asked Olscuro, challenging his officers to stand up to him.

Silence reigned as Olscuro growled at the lack of good game. “Come on, you fat smart Volskian cream! Speak your minds!”

Everyone stood like a wax statue, their stature and lips all glued together.

“My Lord!” said an old male Volskian official in the lineup.

Olscuro let out a low growl of satisfaction and turned towards that man, “Aden! Do tell me!”

“My Lord, I would like to ensure their destruction with our full force rather than rely on our Wingers team alone,” said Aden, his face bowed down before Olscuro.

“Are you questioning my move, Aden?” asked Olscuro menacingly.

“No, my Lord, I’m not,” said Aden, his voice steady and calm. “I am only doing as my Lord had commanded me, to speak our minds.”

Olscuro let out a sound that sounded as if he had snorted.

“I have appointed the Wingers for a special mission and once they finish that, I’ll destroy what’s left of the humans.”

“I didn’t know that, my Lord,” said Aden.

“You never know anything, Aden,” said Olscuro and to face another Volskian official, who was to his left.

“Gingale!” called Olscuro, to which a Volskian female in the officers line up responded by stepping out of it.

“Yes, my Lord,” said Gingale, a middle aged, black haired, lean woman in a smooth gray armor, kneeling before Olscuro.

“I wish to speak with you privately,” said Olscuro and left the Bridge. Gingale looked frustrated and distraught, as the Volskians helped her stand.

“It’ll be alright!” comforted another female Volskian officer, by the name of Odi.

“It’s just that-” choked Gingale, her hands furiously wiping her rapidly flowing tears.

“It’s tsokay! Go before, you anger His Lordship!” compelled Odi, helping her stand up.

“Alright!” whispered Gingale, as she got up and went in the direction in which Olscuro had earlier gone.

At last, she got up with him, near a giant porthole that looked into the vastness of space and the pink nebula which took most of the view.

“My Lord,” said Gingale, kneeling down and her head bowed down.

“How are you, my dear sister?” asked Olscuro, his cold voice hinting a bit of warmth.

“I am doing good, my Lord, by your favor,” replied Gingale, her head bowed low.

“You have come a long way from the time when I had saved you as a girl from the ditches,” said Olscuro, as he circled her, like a predator circling its prey.

Gingale just breathed out heavily in return.

“The bond we shared had crumbled over all these many years so much that you along with that filthy mate of yours tried rebelling against me!” said Olscuro, as he placed his cold hands on her head, stroking her hair.

Gingale trembled as she felt his cold hands swipe over her head.

“Don’t be scared, little sister, I won’t kill you like I killed Ezil,” said Olscuro, continuing to stroke her hair as Gingale broke into a steady stream of tears. “You, I have spared, only because I still have work for you, dear sister.”

As he spoke each word menacingly, his grip on Gingale’s hair tightened and by the time he was finished, he held her hair in a tuft painfully.

“Aaaaah!” cried Gingale, resisting her impulse to resist Olscuro. She clenched her fists in pain and kept them steady by her sides.

“Good!” Olscuro breathed into Gingale’s ear, as he saw Gingale not resisting him and he tightened his hold over her hair, doubling her pain. “I’ll call for you again very soon, sister.”

Once he had said that, he relaxed his hold over Gingale’s head and left the place, leaving Gingale behind to be mauled alone by her fears.

17 CRASH!

The Orion Swift slowly made out of the wormhole, near the earth’s moon. The majestic ship

continued to move towards the earth and started orbiting the blue planet.

After getting the emergency notification in the Intelligence office, Gingerpotts rushed returned to the Command Bridge, already feeling tired because of some medical condition he possessed, getting him out of work most of the time. The only reason he was being tolerated for his medical condition aboard the Command Bridge, was because he possessed a very large forehead, just a tad larger than Kru's.

"Captain!" said Gingerpotts, suddenly alarmed as Rutgers made a dramatic entry into the Command Bridge.

"Status report, officer!" said Rutgers, proceeding towards the Voidshield, looking at earth which looked as healthy as it had once been fifty thousand years ago.

"We have successfully arrived at our target location and also are successfully accelerating one side of the wormhole to achieve time dilation."

"Have the Volski taken the trap?" asked Rutgers.

"It's not clear, sir," replied Gingerpotts.

Rutgers breathed out loudly and asked again, "How much of time dilation have we achieved?"

"We are currently at six months, sir."

"Tsokay," said Rutgers, scratched his head and sat on his chair. "Just keep all our sensors peeled!"

"Yes sir!" said Gingerpotts and furiously worked on his Holotab.

The environment was tense. All the officers on deck seemed completely drowned in their work, while Rutgers nervously tapped his feet on the floor.

"We're detecting anomalies in the dark matter flux gradient, sir," announced Gingerpotts suddenly, with an alarmed expression.

"They're here!" said Rutgers and sprang up into action.

These people must be really smart!"

"What do we do now, sir?" asked Gingerpotts.

"Do we have the time to escape through a wormhole?" asked Rutgers.

"No, sir!" replied Gingerpotts. "The two anomalies in space are moving towards us at twice the speed of light and will reach us in less than three minutes, we have no chance of escape, sir."

"Then we have to fight," yelled Rutgers. "Start firing!"

"Sir! Yes sir!" chorused the officers on the Bridge and set to work.

"You do know it's impossible to shoot them down, sir," said Gingerpotts dismissively.

"At least it gives us some hope!" said Rutgers. "There's no choice left to us, but to fight albeit in face of sure death."

"Sir! I got a visual!" reported a young Albein officer.

“Put it front of the Voidshield for everyone to see, officer!” replied Rutgers, clutching his fists.

The officer brought up the visual in front of all. The video showed two small black ships shaped like drones, with a drooping back, standing stationary about some distance from the Orion Swift. Those enemy ships were a little larger than Cruiser ships that the Albeins possessed.

“They reached much faster than I had anticipated,” gasped Gingerpotts, looking at the visual feed.

“Those are Volskian ships?” asked Rutgers, breathless.

“Affirmative, sir!” said Gingerpotts. “I mean, it has to be them.”

“Sir!” said another officer. “What do we do now?”

“Stand by for your instructions, officer,” said Rutgers, his voice raspy as he drew near the holographic live video feed showing the two spaceships.

The black drone-like ships didn’t seem to contact them or shoot any weapons at the Orion Swift. They just remained stationary.

“What’re they waiting for?” muttered Rutgers and then suddenly without any warning, one of the Volskian ships sprang into action. A white glowing light shone from the navel of the Volskian ship, before it reached its maximum luminosity and fired a fiery white projectile at the Orion Swift. The white projectile looked like a comet with a head and a tail, reaching light speed. Everyone aboard the Bridge gasped in disbelief as the white projectile made towards them with great fury and speed and before Rutgers could shout any commands, the white projectile hit the Orion Swift’s energy shields.

It looked as if the Volskian weapon had hit an invisible shell and the white projectile broke up to cover the Orion Swift’s entire energy shield in glowing white for a couple of seconds before the energy shields blasted, rocking the Orion Swift like a cradle.

“We’ve lost all our energy shields, sir!” reported a young Albein female officer aboard the Bridge.

“All of them?” coughed Rutgers in disbelief.

“Yes, sir!” replied the officer with a look of desperation.

At that moment, Rutgers’ mind seemed clotted and he clutched and freed his fists repeatedly as he was trying to come up with a decision.

“FIRE ALL WEAPONS!” cried Rutgers at last.

“But, sir-” said Gingerpotts, before he was interrupted harshly by Rutgers.

“JUST DO IT, SON!!” he cried.

The Orion Swift aimed all of its weapons and unloaded a dozen of their best weaponry at the two small Volskian ships, which seemed to have again slipped into a period of inactivity. Rutgers expected the two tiny ships to blow up as their dozen warheads made it to their targets but instead they all hit their targets like a paper plane hitting a stone, crumbling in the process.

“What just happened?” heaved Rutgers, flailing his arms helplessly at the hologram.

“Our weapons seem to have been neutralized, sir!” said Gingerpotts, who looked like as he was fighting with his Holotab as he spoke.

“Sir, look at that!” shouted one of the officers nearby, almost with joy.

Rutgers turned to look at the hologram. It showed one of the Volskian ships attacking the other with shots.

“What’s happening?” breathed Rutgers, his heart beating a little slower. “Take us out!”

Gingerpotts looked at him with a wide eyed expression and asked, “Do you want us to open another wormhole?”

“Yes!” replied Rutgers swiftly, without thinking.

“Time is not on our hand-” argued Gingerpotts.

“Will you stop questioning me and do what I tell you!” yelled Rutgers, his face red with rage.

“Will do, sir,” replied Gingerpotts, his head hung down.

The two Volskian ships started chasing each other in the space around the Orion Swift.

“Make it quick!” yelled Rutgers at everyone on the Bridge.

The officers aboard the Bridge, jerked as if jolted with electricity and worked fast to get the wormhole open.

“Destination, sir?” asked Gingerpotts timidly.

“SOMEWHERE SAFE!!!” shouted Rutgers, like a mad man.

Gingerpotts knew that this was the worst situation that any captain feared the most in their entire lives, the fear of certain death and the helplessness that comes piggybacking on it.

He selected the Sombrero galaxy as their destination and forwarded the choice to the other officers. Shortly, in a matter of seconds, the work was done and a tiny wormhole started to develop below the Orion Swift. The Volskian ships seemed to be still busy fighting off each other.

Rutgers sweated heavily, the salty water pouring down his face in waves.

“COME ON, COME ON!” muttered Rutgers to himself, as he kept his eyes fixed on the hologram, which was showing the developing wormhole.

“Four minutes to enter the wormhole!” announced one of the officers.

“Good! Good!” muttered Rutgers again to himself, comforting himself with the little details.

“Two minutes to enter the wormhole,” came shortly the next announcement.

“We’ve got trouble, captain!” announced Gingerpotts.

Gingerpotts brought up the two Volskian ships on the hologram. One of the ships seemed to be damaged and stationary, while the other one was as damaged as the other one but it was moving towards them.

“Damn!” said Rutgers. “Are our shields up?”

“Yes sir!” answered Gingerpotts.

“That’s the ship that was helping us?” asked Rutgers, pointing towards the damaged ship.

“I frankly don’t know,” confessed Gingerpotts. “They both are identical.”

The Volskian ship fired again. The fiery white projectile hit the Orion Swift’s energy shields and destroyed them like it had done before.

“If they hit again before we can regenerate our shields again, we’re goners!” said Gingerpotts, holding the captain’s chair for support as the Orion Swift rocked again.

Rutgers instinctively looked at Gingerpotts’ Holotab, it showed forty seconds to regenerate the energy shields and then he looked at the Volskian ship, whose core was heating up again to fire.

“FIRE AWAY!” yelled Rutgers at the top of his lungs.

Another dozen anti-matter nuclear warheads shot from the Orion Swift towards the tiny Volskian ship. The fiery white projectile shot forth from the ship, making it through the Orion Swift, by making it through the gaps in between the oncoming warheads.

“We’re done!” gasped Gingerpotts, hugging his Holotab to his stomach.

In a split second, before the white projectile could hit the Orion Swift, something moved in front of it, to take the hit.

Before he closed his eyes, Rutgers had expected the Bridge to blow apart and throw his lifeless body across the endless space along with the others, but when he opened his eyes again, he found that nothing like that, as perceived by his overly active sinister imagination, had happened.

The hologram showed the other tiny Volskian ship that had been playing their savior ever since they had reached this place. With its core damaged and the starboard side completely crushed, this tiny space vessel looked as if it had done more than its capacity to protect the humans’ lives. It started firing at the other Volskian ship, with something that looked like black vapors that moved faster than light. The black vapors seemed to have a devastating effect on the other ship, as sparks started to fly from the damaged parts of the vessel. In desperation, that ship locked all its weapons at the Orion Swift and let go of a triple dozen different weapons.

Some were black vapors, while some were small white comet like-projectiles, while the rest were tiny glowing yellow pyramids. The battered Volskian ship that stood in front of the Orion swift moved quickly to neutralize all of the weapons but it seemed too much at last for that tiny vessel. Some of the

white projectiles made it past the savior ship, along with some of the black vapors and hit the Orion Swift, scourging the energy shields and smashing onto the Orion Swift.

“We’re hit!” cried one of the officers aboard the Bridge.

“STATUS REPORT!” cried Rutgers as he hugged onto his chair for support as the ship started to fall down towards the earth.

“Levels seven to thirteen are out, sir,” reported an officer

“We’ve lost our main engines, sir, we’re in free fall!” reported another officer.

“Break the fall! Switch to auxiliary engines and initiate the crash landing protocol seven O one!” cried Rutgers.

“AYE CAPTAIN!” answered a couple of officers together harmoniously.

“Gingerpotts!!” called Rutgers, straining his neck sideways, to look at him.

“Yes captain!” replied Gingerpotts, as he held tightly onto Rutgers’ chair.

“What about the vessel that was helping us?” asked Rutgers.

Gingerpotts looked confused at Rutgers’ question, and answered, “I don’t under-”

“Just answer the damn question, Potts!” snapped Rutgers.

“It’s in free fall, one and a half miles away from us, the distance could be more than a thousand miles by the time we reach the ground,” answered Gingerpotts, looking at his Holotab.

“When we land, send our Intelligence team to investigate the ship!”

“But sir, it could be probably very dangerous-” debated Gingerpotts.

“Do as I say!” cut in Rutgers again very rudely.

“Right, sir!” said Gingerpotts, commenting no further.

“How’re we doing?” asked Rutgers, as the ship seemed quite stable.

“So far so good, captain! But we’re still going to hit the ground with a thud!” replied one of the officers.

“Damn!” swore Rutgers, “How much damage we’re looking at!”

“It’s not going to be any greater than the damage we’ve already received, sir!” replied the dark haired officer.

Rutgers rested back on his chair and breathed out heavily.

“Fifteen thousand meters to impact!” announced a blonde officer.

“Gingerpotts!” said Rutgers. “Instruct the residents to stay within their cabins!”

“Yes captain!” replied Gingerpotts, leaving his side.

“Twelve thousand meters!”

“We need to slow down even further!” said Rutgers.

“We’re maxed on our available engines, captain!” announced the dark haired officer.

Rutgers didn’t say anything anymore. He finally got his seatbelt on. It was a X shaped seatbelt across his torso, with the Albein emblem at its crux.

“Nine thousand meters!”

“Five thousand meters!”

“Two thousand meters!”

With a mighty thud, the Orion Swift crashed onto the hard earth, creating a huge epicenter.

Rutgers was thrown out of his seat and fell onto the hologram projector, breaking it.

“Is everyone alright?” he asked, lifting his burly body.

“Yes sir!” replied Gingerpotts who was a few feet away from, across his left.

“Report!” coughed Rutgers.

“We’ve got a situation in the Arkylum, captain! Other than that, we’ve no resident casualties!” replied Gingerpotts.

“What about the enemy ship that shot us down?” asked Rutgers, tapping his huge forehead.

“It’s nowhere on our sensors, captain!” replied Gingerpotts.

“The other one?” whispered Rutgers, at once.

“Nine hundred miles from here, captain!” said Gingerpotts.

“Send the team in,” said Rutgers, standing to his full height.

“Tsokay, sir!” said Gingerpotts, in an apprehensive tone and ran out of the Bridge.

Soon, on level fifty-five, the five were assembled inside the Intelligence office along with Gingerpotts. It had taken him a good ten minutes to explain to all of them what had exactly happened.

“We’re as good as dead then!” exclaimed Holloway, on hearing Gingerpotts’ version of the truth.

“Heroes are neither born nor created but resurrected,” said Kru, with a serious look, recalling the line from a famous Albein story, called ‘Heroes among the Villains’.

Holloway let out a blast of hysterical laughter, the kind that mental people often come up with.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean, Kru?” she asked.

“Are you implying we’re heroes?” asked Troy, while at the time, trying to control his laughter.

Kru seemed embarrassed and hung his head.

“It’ll make sense soon,” he mumbled.

“Alright!” interjected Gingerpotts. “Your mission is to locate this Volskian ship, investigate thoroughly and take captive if possible.”

“You’re joking, right?” asked Troy.

“No, I’m not!” replied Gingerpotts, with a serious look.

“When do we start?” asked Emilie, who seemed the only person paying any attention to Gingerpotts.

“Now!” replied Gingerpotts. “Are you sure you want to take along the little guy as well?”

Sniffles understood the reference and tightly clung to Emilie’s legs and cried, “BUA!”

“I’m afraid so,” replied Emilie. “He’s attached to us now.”

“This is a dangerous mission,” insisted Gingerpotts, almost staring at Emilie.

“No where’s safe, Gingerpotts,” said Emilie.

Troy sniggered. “Sorry, your name is exceedingly funny!” he apologized.

Gingerpotts gave a cold look at Troy and he left the office.

“Let’s start, shall we?” asked Kru, who was lost in the excitement of the mission, getting stuff inside his waist pouch.

“Troy and Holloway, you two have to learn manners!” said Emilie, with a faint smile and left the office with Sniffles. “See you in the Cruiser bay!”

Troy and Holloway exchanged grins and followed Kru out of the room, allowing the Disappearing door reappear behind them.

Emilie was waiting beside Cruiser number thirty four in the Cruiser Bay, by the time, the other three had made it there.

“I like this Cruiser!” said Emilie, in a surge of excitement on seeing them.

“All are the same!” said Kru disapprovingly, with a confused look.

“Seriously, how did you fall for this guy?” asked Troy at Holloway.

“Looking back now,” said Holloway. “I seriously have no idea!”

“Well, he’s a machine, I guarantee you that,” said Troy, shaking his head as they neared the Cruiser 34.

“Yes, he is,” whispered Holloway seductively, “My love machine!”

Troy felt a wave of weirdness travel down his spine, upon hearing Holloway say that and instinctively shut up.

Kru meanwhile, opened the Cruiser door and made into it, followed by the rest. He and Holloway took their seats in the Command Centre, while Troy, Emilie and Sniffles stood behind their seats.

“I have the location of the fallen Volskian ship, about nine hundred miles north-west from here, we should be there in less than five minutes,” said Kru, setting his Holotab on a dock beside him and activating the ship.

“I think we should have a look around, before we leave,” suggested Troy.

“Are you out of your mind?” snapped Kru. “This is not the time to play!”

“Dude! It’s the earth, the planet where we all originated from! Don’t you have any curiosity? Even about the life forms here? What about the dominant species, Rutgers was talkin’ about, huh?” said Troy, squeezing Kru’s shoulders.

“I can’t believe Rutgers made you a part of this team!” mumbled Kru, as he squirmed in pain and eventually slapped Troy’s hands, when he couldn’t bear the pain anymore.

“Take us out, then cap’n,” said Troy sarcastically, “To the Wild, Wild West!”

“North-west!” corrected Kru, as he punched in the launching protocol.

“Machine!” muttered Troy with disgust.

The Cruiser number thirty-four took off gently from its parking area and hovered towards the take-off lane.

Kru tapped his transmitter and said, “This is Cruiser number thirty-four requesting take-off, by the order of the captain.”

“Granted,” replied stiffly the person from the other end and the large Cruiser Bay door opened onto bright sunshine. Sunlight flooded the Bay with all its warmth and for the five, who hadn’t seen sunlight in days, it was a welcome sight. The Cruiser blasted onto the outside, onto the black earth.

“That’s disappointing!” said Holloway, upon seeing the black-brown earth.

“We’re in the crater,” reminded Troy.

“Oh! Yeah!” exclaimed Holloway. “I forgot!”

Kru pulled the Cruiser up as they exited the large blackish brown crater, which the Orion Swift had created upon its crashing. Plush green grass and isolated trees met their sight for a hundred miles in every direction.

“It’s amazing!” cried Emilie, lifting Sniffles to show the scenery through the Voidshield.

“It’s such a beautiful meadow!” said Holloway, temporarily forgetting everything else in the light of the beauty that faced her. Troy was dumbstruck at what he saw, it was almost like Kepler. Almost.

“Tsokay!” interrupted Kru, and punched in hypersonic speed. “Holiday’s over!”

Holloway let out a low growl as the Cruiser took cannonballed into the pristine blue sky.

“We should be arriving at our location in forty seconds,” announced Kru and relaxed back on his chair.

“We don’t have any sort of plan!” said Holloway, realizing it suddenly.

“Well, Troy’s the strategist!” said Kru.

Troy grimaced wryly at Kru, standing behind him and grudgingly said, “There’s no plan.”

That was enough to jolt Kru, out of his seat.

“What do you mean, there’s no plan?” asked Kru, looking at him with wide open eyes.

“What kind of plan do you want for this?” said Troy, shrugging his shoulders. “It’s a simple op, let’s keep it simple! By the way, we’re almost there, cap’n.”

Kru turned his head back hurriedly and started jabbing the controls, preparing the Cruiser for a landing.

“There it is!” said Holloway, pointing at the fallen, almost flattened black Volskian ship, right in front of them, resting in a small depression, surrounded by only dust and hard rock.

“Emilie, can you read the area for any live Volskians?” asked Troy, looking at her.

Emilie nodded and concentrated hard. After about a couple of seconds, she said, “There’s one alive!”

“Alright! Let’s suit up!” said Troy. “Holloway, come with me! You three stay here!”

“Why Holloway?” asked Emilie, with a pinch of jealousy.

“She’s the one who’s trained in combat and it’s not safe for you and Sniffles to come along,” said Troy then turning to Kru. “Stay safe.”

Troy and Holloway went down to the Armory and fitted themselves with a couple of Bummers and a new gun that Holloway introduced to Troy as the Blaster. Troy felt it was the coolest looking gun ever, with its cool black design and heaviness. She described it to him as a fast unloading gun with a load of two thousand rounds of exploding arsenic bullets.

Soon after getting their weapons, Holloway got a pair of black nanobot cubes from somewhere deep inside the armory.

“What’s this?” asked Troy, taking one of the cubes in his hands.

“It’s the official Albein armor suit for soldiers,” replied Holloway, with a smile.

“Cool!” said Troy, as he toyed with the cube for a while. Then he turned away from Holloway, took out the tiny transmitter from his pocket and put it on his right ear.

“Hello Max,” he whispered.

“It’s been some time, eh?” said Max, her voice as vibrant as ever.

“I’m sorry,” said Troy guiltily.

“Why do you apologize? I’m just an AI system,” said Max.

“But there are times when I do wish you were real,” said Troy.

“Enough with the butter, charmer,” said Max. “What do you want?”

Troy quickly explained the situation to Max.

“You’ll need your lenses for this,” said Max.

“Tsokay,” said Troy and reached inside his pocket again and got out the small lens box and wore the lens.

“Can you see?” asked Troy, as he rolled his blue eyes in all directions.

“Stop doing that,” chided Max. “I can see.”

“Great!” said Troy and turned around to see Holloway standing with her back turned towards him and in her inner wear.

Troy turned around as soon as he saw her, his heart palpitating and his mouth dry.

“Wow!” teased Max.

“Shut up!” said Troy, his face flushing with blood.

“She’s so.....” teased Max.

“SHUT UP!” shouted Troy, getting Holloway’s attention, who turned around to face him.

“Ow! Wow!” cried Troy, fluttering his eyes at Holloway who was still wearing her translucent bionic bra and panties.

“What is it?” asked Holloway, with an innocent face.

“I..I..am..gonna go..gonna outof..out of here,” stammered Troy, his eyes fluttering faster than before.

“Look at that body, dude!” teased Max.

Troy snatched the transmitter out from his ear and dragged himself out of the armory. In the mild white light, just outside the armory, he put the transmitter back on.

“Tsokay, stop doing that, Max!” said Troy.

“Tsokay! Tsokay! Lover boy!” said Max. “What is it? You can’t cheat on Emilie?”

Troy let out a sigh, “This isn’t cheating!”

“Well! How am I supposed to know, I’m not the one in love!” teased Max.

“I don’t know, she kissed me after all and I don’t know, she’s kind of into me,” said Troy, not making much sense at all.

“So?” asked Max curiously.

“So,” explained Troy. “I don’t know, doesn’t that kind of bind me to her?”

“No, it doesn’t,” replied Max in a flash.

“I don’t want to do that to her, she’s a nice girl, very nice actually,” said Troy, smiling as he thought of her.

Max didn’t reply to that.

“Max?” called Troy. “Max?”

Slowly in the background, Troy could hear music playing and its volume rising every second.

You swept me off my feet and made me fall in loooooovvvveeee with you....and now you shall always be mine.....

“Shut up, Max,” said Troy blushing.

“Barbara Swing totally got your love story in a one liner,” said Max, as in adoration.

“Troy?” called Holloway, as she emerged out of armory in a stunning black suit.

“Yes!” replied Troy.

“You still haven’t changed?” asked Holloway.

“Oh yeah!” said Troy, flushing again. “I forgot, give me a sec.”

“Sure!” said Holloway cutely.

Troy went inside the armory and came back in the stunning black suit same as Holloway’s, with all the weapons strapped on their waist belts.

“Here take these!” said Troy, handing a couple of oxygen cans.

“Do we need this?” asked Holloway.

“Just in case,” said Troy and moved towards the elevator.

The duo emerged out of the Cruiser, on to the dry earth, in black smooth skin armored nanobot suits. The place they were in was radically different from the place where the Orion Swift had landed. It was an arid area with large boulders here and there.

“I am feeling dizzy, Troy,” said Holloway, her legs going awry.

Troy immediately caught her from falling.

“Careful,” whispered Troy. “Put on the mask.”

Holloway transmitted the command onto her transmitter and the bots rearranged from her neck to form a sleek black helmet with a thin visor.

“It’ll take her some time to adjust to the earth’s conditions,” said Max. “Make her sit, for a while.”

“Right!” said Troy and made Holloway sit on the hard, cruel ground.

Troy then looked at the Volskian vessel about a hundred meters from them. He took the Bummer in one hand and the Blaster in the other.

“Wait!” said Holloway.

“Cover me from this position!” said Troy, moving towards the vessel.

Be careful! said Emilie, in his head. Troy turned and looked at the Command centre of the Cruiser and nodded his head on seeing Emilie, gazing at him.

He proceeded towards the vessel with bated breath.

“Max! I want you record everything and give me maximum data!” said Troy, as he closed onto the Volskian ship.

“Yes,” said Max. Troy reached the Volskian vessel and looked for an opening.

“Max, where’s the opening?” asked Troy.

“I’m still scanning, wait!” replied Max.

Troy looked at the ship. He was facing the belly side of the vessel. He saw the circular disk that was

used to fire the fiery white comet-like projectiles. The whole vessel was curved and shaped exactly like a drone. Troy noticed that the right side of the vessel was completely smashed in. The vessel seemed to be totaled.

“Max, are you done?” asked Troy.

“Yes, it’s on top of the ship, like a rabbit hole,” said Max.

“Such a small entrance for such a big vessel?” asked Troy.

“The main entrance is destroyed,” replied Max, “Now, quickly on the other side!”

“Right!” said Troy and went over to the other side of the ship.

“How do I open it?” asked Troy, looking at the small circular depression on the top-side of the ship.

“You don’t,” said Max.

“Then what?” asked Troy, agitated by Max’s tone.

“You wait!” said Max.

“I got no time for that!” said Troy and strapped both his weapons to his belt and went closer to the circular depression. As soon as he came within the distance of a foot, the circular door opened, revealing darkness inside the ship.

“Be careful!” warned Max.

“What! Did you get anything?” asked Troy.

Then suddenly out of the blue, Emilie screamed in Troy’s mind, **MOVE OUT!**

As soon as she was done screaming, something whizzed out of the dark hole, knocking Troy over.

“Oww!” yelled Troy, as he grazed the ground. He immediately got up on his feet to face the alien.

The alien stood against the sun, with outspread wings and Troy couldn’t see a thing.

“SHOULD I SHOOT IT?” cried Holloway.

“NO, DON’T SHOOT!” shouted Troy, tapping his transmitter.

The alien gradually came down and landed a few feet away from Troy. Troy saw that the alien was a female and just a little older than him. She was about his height and had the physique of a soldier. She was covered in heavy black armor. She had short curly brown hair, golden brown eyes and looked exotic in every sense of the word.

“Who are you?” asked Troy.

“H’ashith mei hura Hyangusha eth y’vei heith Humons,” said the alien.

“What?” exclaimed Troy, as he hadn’t understood a word that the alien had just spoken.

“I am Eva,” said the alien upon realizing her mistake, in a crude Standard Order English accent.

“May I ask what you are doing?” asked Troy, his hands on the Blaster and the Bummer.

The alien saw Troy’s nervousness and said, “Don’t be afraid, I’m here to help you.”

“How can I trust you?” asked Troy, his hand clasping tightly around the Blaster and Bummer.

“Well, I saved you from the other ship, didn’t I? Isn’t that proof enough?” asked the alien.

“No, it’s not,” said Troy. “You probably fought with the other vessel, so that you can bag the bounty for bringing us down.”

“You have a very vivid imagination,” replied the alien.

Troy looked apprehensively at her but felt something in his guts that she was not harmful. He relaxed his hold over the weapons.

“I am Troy,” said he, taking a step closer towards the alien and extended his hand.

“Troy?” asked the alien doubtfully.

“Yes, Troy,” replied Troy.

“What’s your full name?” asked Eva, looking inquisitively at him.

“Troy Zander,” replied Troy.

“Your full, full name!” stressed the alien.

“Troy Dylan Zander,” replied Troy, wondering why the alien would bother with something as simple as a name. It wasn’t like she was going to identify him or something, for all he knew, she probably came from a galaxy from the other end of the universe.

“Your eyes,” said Eva, looking transfixed and almost adoringly at him, “Those golden flecks!”

Troy felt his eyelids and said, “Yea, it’s been there for some time.”

“They are actually glowing,” said Eva, still looking adoringly at him.

Troy quickly changed the topic and said, “We would like to ask a few questions before we take you into custody.”

“Do what you have to do,” said the alien calmly.

Troy was taken aback by the alien’s behavior.

“It’s very important that you take me along with you.”

Troy huffed in confusion, by that time, Emilie, Sniffles, Kru and Holloway made it there.

“She’s safe!” said Troy, as he heard clicking of weapons behind him. Then he turned towards Eva and asked again, “Why are you helping us?”

“I am Eva, a member of the Hyangusha, a rebel force fighting against Olscuro,” said Eva.

As Eva was speaking, Troy signaled Emilie to read her mind as to see whether she was speaking the truth.

“How did you find us?” asked Kru.

“The Hyangusha is spread across the galaxies and have been keeping an eye on all of Olscuro’s actions. We try to save what we can when he goes on a rampage destroying worlds.”

“Hyangusha?” asked Holloway, toying with its strange pronunciation.

“The Hyangusha was formed thirty years ago of your time, when Olscuro became the Volski Lord. There were hundreds of thousands in the Hyangusha then, but we’ve been reduced to hundreds now,” said Eva, in a bitter tone.

“What do you know of Olscuro?” asked Troy.

“No one knows anything definite about Olscuro’s origin,” replied Eva. “But he’s the most powerful Volskian who ever lived.”

“Will you help us fight the Volski?” asked Emilie.

Eva turned to look at her and said, “Of course, that’s what I’ve been doing all my life so far.”

Troy was unsure of making a decision, especially that of taking back her on the Orion Swift. He had no idea as to what she may be up to. He exchanged glances with Emilie, Kru and Holloway, but it didn’t help him make any decision.

“Do you have any plans?” asked Troy.

“Yes,” said Eva.

“Then do tell,” said Troy.

“Let’s take shade first,” said Eva and went past all of them. She went and stood under the shade thrown by the Cruiser.

“Tsokay, come on!” Troy called the others, in a sarcastic tone. “Our savior is waiting!”

When they all had gathered under the shade, Eva spoke, “According to all that I know, Olscuro is bent on making the last of the humans kneel before him and kill them.”

“Tsokay,” said Troy. “I guess we know that already.”

Eva gave him a cold look and continued, “Some time ago, the Volskian Leadership sent out a message to all its posts throughout the galaxies. The mission was to zero on the location of the last human mothership and report the location. My crew intercepted the message and to our luck we found that you were close by-”

“Where were you then?” interjected Kru.

“We’ve got a temporary rebel camp on the red planet-” answered Eva

“Then where did the other Volskian ship come from?” interrupted Kru again.

Eva took a brief deep breath.

“Volskian patrols and outposts are common in these parts of the galaxy, searching for the last of Hyangusha. It was from them, we salvaged this ride,” said Eva, pointing at the demolished Volskian vessel.

“So what do we do?” asked Holloway.

“We have to find the other vessel and take over it, before they confirm your location to the Volskian Leadership,” replied Eva calmly.

“I think they might’ve already done so,” said Troy. “It’s of no use!”

Eva looked at Troy and said, “I didn’t finish telling you the whole message.”

Troy stared back at her, “What is it?”

“The confirmation of your location isn’t a signal, sent from starships,” said Eva.

“Then?” asked Troy, not taking his eyes off her.

“It’s your capture along with the blonde girl,” said Eva. “*Alive.*”

“That’s nonsensical!” snapped Troy, turning away from her.

“What happens when we get captured?” asked Emilie.

“Once the Volskian patrols capture both of you, Olscuro will come to destroy the rest,” said Eva.

“What would Olscuro want with us?” asked Emilie, looking confused.

“It kind of makes sense,” said Troy, as he began to think. “The Volskians didn’t kill the both of us when they had the chance, but tried to capture us. Olscuro would only be after us, if he wants something from us.”

“So what is different about you, two?” asked Eva, though she almost already knew the answer.

“I can see the Volski and he is different, different in a very different way, that I can’t explain,” said Emilie, after some time, looking as if lost in another world of thought.

“Are you sure?” said Eva and then suddenly realized what Emilie was talking about.

“So they’re after some sort of a special ability that we possess?” asked Troy.

“Whatever Olscuro after is much greater!” said Eva. “I can’t let them get to you both! I have to come with you!”

“How can we believe you? We have no guarantee that you may not turn against us, once we take you

inside,” stated Troy, his hands on his hips, looking like a serious detective.

“Troy!” said Eva, with sudden passion. “He’s after the Chi’kara!”

“Key-kara?” repeated Troy unsure of what she meant.

“Chi’kara!” said Eva.

“What is that?” asked Troy.

“No time to explain! But it explains everything that may be happening to you, Troy! Now, quick! Back on your ship!” said Eva.

“How do you know-” jumped Troy at hearing what Eva told.

“The golden flecks in your blue eyes, it’s unnatural and only seen-” said Eva when she was suddenly interrupted by large noises sounding like roars, from far away in the distance.

“What was that?” asked Holloway, looking a little shaken by those noises.

“Let’s go!” insisted Eva.

Troy cast a quick glance at Emilie, who gave her approval.

“Alright!” said Troy, “Let’s go!”

“What if this was just an elaborate deception?” whispered Kru to Troy as they entered the Cruiser.

“It’s fine,” whispered Troy.

“What was that noise?” asked Holloway again. “It sounded frightening!”

“Those are the foul creatures that roam the earth now,” answered Eva.

“The Rippers?” muttered Kru, punching in their destination level on the elevator’s display hologram.

“Must be,” said Troy dryly as if the Rippers were the last thing in the universe that would bother him, now. Right now, Olscuro and a strange word Chi’kara captivated his attention.

The six got out of the elevator and made it to the Command centre, where Kru got the engines roaring.

“Arrest me,” said Eva, facing Troy as Kru and Holloway were working at the controls.

“Why? There’s no reason to do so,” replied Troy.

“It’s much simpler this way,” explained Eva. “Your people are going to make a drama out of this anyway. You can get me out once you calm them down”

“Tsokay!” said Troy, chuckling. “That’s very smart actually.”

“Just don’t let them kill me,” said Eva and smiled.

“We got you covered,” assured Troy, though he didn’t return the smile.

“About what you were telling earlier?” asked Emilie, as Sniffles hid behind her legs looking at the stranger in their midst.

“Now isn’t the time, I think,” said Eva.

“What about your crew?” asked Troy.

“They are dead,” said Eva dryly, with no signs of any emotional reaction. “And my mourning isn’t going to fulfill their destiny.”

“Forty seconds to the Orion Swift,” announced Kru, as the Cruiser slowly lifted from the ground, in a spiraling motion before it stopped briefly and shot into hypersonic speed.

“Chi’kara, eh?” whispered Troy to himself, thinking about what Eva had told him earlier.

At that precise moment, Max suddenly came alive and said,

“I have a message for you, Troy.”

“Who is it?” asked Troy casually.

“Your dad,” answered Max crisply.

“What!” jerked Troy, as his heart skipped two beats.

“I’m not joking, Troy,” replied Max.

19 CHI’KARA

The Cruiser streamed across the pristine blue skies towards the Orion Swift. The weather was pleasant and beautiful. The earth looked again fresh and fertile and full of life. All the wounds that the humans had brought upon their home planet seemed healed and the scars faded but the scars inside Troy’s head gave way to wounds once again, upon hearing Max’s statement.

“What do you mean?” asked Troy, as dizziness got hold of him.

“I’ll explain later,” said Max, in a voice devoid of any emotion. “Open the message once you get back

to your room.”

“I want to know now,” said Troy, holding onto Kru’s seat, as the others looked at him curiously.

“Are you alright, Troy?” asked Emilie, who was standing on his right.

“I’m fine,” gulped Troy.

“I’m sorry, Troy,” said Max. “I didn’t mean to startle you, but-”

“BUT WHAT?” shouted Troy, as he lost his temper.

“Don’t shout!” said Max calmly. “It’s just a pre-recorded video that your father made, regarding the Chi’kara.”

“Troy!” said Emilie and rushed towards him.

Why didn’t you tell me before?” asked Troy, teary-eyed.

“Your father programmed this message to be available only when the time was right. I wasn’t aware of its existence till now,” said Max.

Troy just let out a deep breath in response and tried to compose himself.

“I’m sorry,” said Troy, blinking fast to get rid of his tears.

“It’s tsokay, Troy,” comforted Emilie, as she stroked his back.

“Are you alright?” asked Eva, looking inquisitively at him.

Troy nodded in reply as he couldn’t find his voice any more.

“We’re there!” announced Holloway.

“This is Cruiser thirty-four requesting entry,” said Kru, onto his transmitter.

“Permission granted,” replied the officer from the Orion Swift.

“Cuff her,” coughed Troy, as he exited the Command centre.

Kru looked innocently at Eva, who looked tyrannizing to him.

“That’s alright,” assured Eva, extending her hands to Emilie.

“The cuffs are in the armory, we’ll cuff you when we get out,” gulped Kru and turned back.

Holloway steered the Cruiser inside the Orion Swift and landed it on the space marked with the number 34 in large fonts.

The six came out to be greeted by a team of droids and security personnel.

“Do you have any captives?” asked Major Ann, on seeing Troy emerge out of the Cruiser.

“Yes,” Troy answered curtly.

“Oh! Good!” said Major Ann, who seemed surprised.

“Keep her safe,” said Troy. “She’s on our side.”

“You can leave that worry to us, young man,” said Ann, annoyed listening to Troy lecture her.

“Just keep her safe,” repeated Troy and went past her.

“Where is he going?” asked Eva, coming out of the Cruiser, her legs and hands cuffed by a black manacle.

“He’s upset,” said Emilie. “Don’t worry! He’ll back to you for learning more about the Chi’kara.”

“You have quite a gift, young Elveden,” said Eva, generously smiling at her.

“We’ll take it from here,” said Ann, holding Eva’s hand.

“Alright,” replied Emilie, letting go of Eva.

Meanwhile, Troy had made it to the elevators, his mind racing against itself. In a fit of hurry, he kept punching the hologram display beside the elevators.

Soon, elevator number four opened up at which Troy barged in, without any delay. He chose his destination. The elevator door opened in another three seconds and he rushed out of it and made it to his cabin.

“Troy?” called Max, cautiously.

“Shut up!” replied Troy angrily.

“Tsokay!” said Max in reply.

Troy broke into his cabin and collapsed onto his bed.

“Tsokay!” breathed Troy hotly. “Show me the video!”

Max immediately hacked onto the cabin’s AI system and projected the video from the cabin’s in built hologram projectors.

The video showed a young Dylan Zander, who was grinning at the camera.

“Hello son!” he said in a light tone. “If you’re watching this video then it means the time has come, the time for you to understand your true potential.”

Troy just stared at his father. He was angry and confused and he had a lot of questions, he wanted to be answered, but his dad wasn’t here anymore and all he had was a pre-recorded video before him. This made him very angry. Very angry indeed.

“You have no right to do this to me,” said Troy, stressing each word with anger.

“I know you would be so mad at me for doing this,” Dylan said, his tone changing to that of a more serious tone. “But this was the only way to keep you from destroying yourself.”

“Destroy myself?” asked Troy, getting confused by what his dad had just said.

“Let’s put it this way, you have a certain ability, son. An ability that, I am quite sure that no one else in the universe possesses, because it’s the first of its kind. An unknown force, a mysterious power and an undefined strength about which there is too little knowledge.”

“What’re you getting at, dad?” muttered Troy to himself.

“I made this video in case of the worst possible outcome, son and if you’re watching this video, it means that even worse things are to happen.”

Troy clenched his teeth and tried hard not to cry.

You left me to myself...leaving mom and me alone...there’s nothing worse than that...

“Olscuro,” said Dylan.

Troy’s train of thoughts came to an abrupt stop.

WHAT???...HOW DO YOU KNOW HIM?

“Olscuro, he is the Lord of a very powerful people known as the Volski. Olscuro seeks what you have, that unknown force, that mysterious power you possess.”

Troy was transfixed looking at the video, forgetting even to breathe.

“Don’t ask me how come you came by to possess that power, son. I’m afraid I’ll never be able to tell you. It kills me, every time I think of telling you the truth because I’m afraid I may lose you, should you choose never to forgive me for what I have done to you.”

Troy didn’t know how to react. He just waited for his father to complete whatever he was talking about.

“I’m sorry for not talking exactly in a very comprehensive way, son. I’m just too nervous, I guess. It is of utmost importance that you protect yourself from falling into the hands of the Volski. Escape from them at any cost, because Olscuro must never get to you and if he does, it’ll be the end of all humanity and the beginning of the never ending reign of the Volski over the cosmos.”

I still don’t understand what you’re referring to, dad...I’ve always been a normal kid...

“The thing that you possess is known as the Chi’kara. All I could gather, in all my missions, is that the Chi’kara is the perfection of the body and mind. I know it doesn’t make any sense but...I wish I could tell you more...but I’m not sure you’ll understand the gravity of what I am saying, son...it makes me feel frustrated, please, please don’t let them get to you...”

The video went blank after that. Troy was as blank as a sheet of paper as well. He had no idea as to what his dad was trying to tell him.

“There’s one more, Troy,” said Max.

“Tsokay!” said Troy softly.

Another video started playing and it showed his father in a tight white space armor suit inside a space vessel. It looked as he was in a great hurry to get the video captured and there was his sister too.

“Christy!” gasped Troy.

The video showed the date signature, dated 15/Qui/A.X 9447, which corresponded to the date when Troy had last seen them.

The last mission....the one from which they never returned...

“Troy!” said Dylan, trying to look cheerful. “This is the most important video I ever made. I just made this video to tell you that I love you and your mother very much.”

“I love you more, little brother!” said Christy, as cheerful as possible, interrupting Dylan’s little speech. Troy looked at his then eighteen year old tear-stained face of his sister. His eyes burned and his mouth went dry.

No!.....

“Take care of your mother for me. You know what to do now, Troy. I love -” said Dylan.

The video went abruptly blank after that.

“NO! NO! DAD! NO!” cried Troy, falling on his knees. “DON’T GO! PLEASE! I BEG YOU, DAD! DON’T GO!”

He sobbed till he could no more and collapsed against the side of his bed, tired and in deep sorrow. About an hour later, he got up. He was still angry but he looked more composed now.

“Are you fine now, Troy?” asked Max.

“I’m tsokay,” replied Troy.

“I’m sorry, Troy,” said Max.

Troy got up, wiped his face with his hands and said, “I got to know more about this Chi’kara, Max.”

“I have nothing on that subject, I’m afraid,” said Max.

“Eva,” said Troy, as he walked towards the door.

“Are you sure you want to ask her?” asked Max.

“She’s fine, Max,” said Troy, closing his eyes. “Emilie read her mind, whatever she’s told us is true.”

“It’s always wiser to exercise a little caution,” counseled Max.

“Hmmm...” said Troy, “Get me Kru.”

“Tsokay,” replied Max and Kru on the line.

“I want to meet Eva,” said Troy, as soon Kru came on the line.

“Hey Troy! How are you? Everyone’s been so worried about you!” spoke Kru without a break.

“What? You wanna meet Eva?”

“Yes,” answered Troy.

“Why-” asked Kru back.

“No time to explain,” cut in Troy, his voice brimming with impatience.

“Alright!” said Kru, after a moment. “I’ll get you cleared with Rutgers, so that Ann doesn’t create a problem.”

“Thanks, Kru.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Soon, Troy was on at the Security headquarters, being escorted to the cell where Eva was being held captive.

“Eva,” said Troy, upon seeing her.

“Troy,” said Eva, walking around in her cell, covered by transparent laser bars.

“Did they question you or anything?” asked Troy.

“Not yet,” answered Eva.

“They won’t,” said Troy. “I’m walking out of here with you.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep,” said Eva, smiling at him.

“I’m not promising you anything,” said Troy. “I’m just telling you what’s gonna happen in a while.”

“You know that this little drama is being played only so that your Security guys and your government guys don’t get freaked out!”

“Don’t worry about that,” said Troy. “Olsкуро’s killed most of our government and as we’re speaking, my other team members are convincing the Security Head of your innocence and the pact we made.”

“Then all this fuss was just for one lady?”

“As you can see, we’re kids,” said Troy, shrugging his shoulders. “No one likes kids doing anything.”

“That’s sort of true,” agreed Eva. “Now what is that you’ve come to ask me about?”

“You know what I’m going to ask. What’s the Chi’kara? And how come Emilie and I possess it?” asked Troy.

“Only you have the Chi’kara, Troy,” answered Eva.

“Then Emilie doesn’t?” asked Troy, baffled thinking of what Emilie possessed then.

“No, she doesn’t. She is special in another way that is important to Olscuro. What you possess is beyond everything.”

“Yes,” said Troy impatiently. “So what is it?”

“I don’t know,” answered Eva simply.

“What?” said Troy, “This doesn’t make any sense! How can you say that I possess the Chi’kara if you don’t know what it is!”

“I promise you that I know absolutely nothing definite about the Chi’kara.”

“This isn’t time to play games, Eva.”

“I agree, Troy,” said Eva. “But if I do know about the Chi’kara, then everything that you’ve built over in your life would be irrevocably demolished.”

“What do you mean?”

“All that you’ve known and regarded as the truth in your life is a lie, Troy.”

“Just tell me what I need to know,” said Troy, getting irritated at the way Eva was speaking with him, in such a clichéd fashion.

“All you need to know now is that, in order to know about the Chi’kara, you need to harness it first.”

“Hasn’t anyone done it before?” asked Troy, jittering at the idea what Eva was giving him.

“No,” replied Eva.

“Tsokay,” said Troy cautiously. “How do I harness it then?”

“It’s up to you,” replied Eva coolly.

“This is just great,” said Troy sarcastically. “You tell me I possess some sort of unknown power and you tell me that you don’t know how to use it?”

“See, Troy, I am as new as to the Chi’kara as you are,” said Eva.

“This is the worst day of my life,” grumbled Troy to himself, punching his fists.

“Troy?” called Eva.

“Hmmm?” asked Troy, who was still pissed at her.

“The Chi’kara is strongly tied to your emotions.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means that the Chi’kara comes out whenever you are emotionally charged.”

“Tsokay,” said Troy. “So?”

“I just observed that now.”

“What?”

“Those golden flecks are glowing brightly right now.”

“Oh!” said Troy, stopping for a moment to think.

“You’re angry, right?” asked Eva, with a chuckle.

“Sort of,” replied Troy curtly.

“It’s completely in your hands, Troy, to bring out the Chi’kara.”

Troy just nodded his head in response.

“I think I should get out now,” said Eva.

“Just give a moment for the guys here to calm down, Eva.”

“Right!”

“Is there anything else I need to know?” asked Troy, biting his nails.

“One baby step at a time, Troy,” replied Eva, with a look that reminded him of how his mother looks at him every time, with affection.

Stupid Mermaids....

“Do you know me, Eva?” asked Troy curiously.

He knew it sounded nuts but he felt a sudden urge to ask her that.

Eva was shocked by Troy’s question. Troy could see it in her eyes.

“Do you know me?” repeated Troy.

Eva just looked guiltily back at him.

“Answer me!” said Troy, realizing that she was in fact hiding something from him.

Eva didn’t reply but instead hung her head as in shame.

“I can’t work with you, if I can’t trust you,” said Troy. “And in order to trust you, I need to know that I can trust you and for that to happen, you shouldn’t be keeping any secrets from me.”

Eva continued to be mum.

“Answer me!” said Troy, almost angrily.

Eva didn’t answer and as Troy stomped the floor in anger, the duo suddenly had company.

“Troy!” said the well-known deep voice.

“Rutgers,” said Troy, looking at him.

“Are you alright?” asked Rutgers, looking at Troy’s flushed face.

“I am,” replied Troy. “This is our ally, Eva.”

“She’s one of them, right?” asked Rutgers, looking with eyes full of curiosity at her.

“Yes,” replied Troy.

“Kru briefed me outside on what happened,” said Rutgers. “So do you trust her?”

Eva slowly lifted her head to look at Troy, who seemed reluctant to answer that question.

“Troy?” said Rutgers.

“I said she’s an ally,” said Troy at last, after a couple of moments. “We can trust her.”

“Good,” said Rutgers. “Then there’s no need for this cell.”

“Right,” Troy said and muttered on his transmitter to Kru asking him to disable the laser bars.

“I am sorry, Eva, about this treatment,” said Rutgers, extending his hands towards Eva inside the cell.

“We have to be extra cautious about whom to trust now, after what Olscuro had done to us.”

“I understand,” replied Eva, stepping out of the cell.

“I am Rutgers, captain of the Orion Swift,” said Rutgers, extending his hand for a wristshake towards Eva.

In return, Eva smashed her cuffs on her hands, abruptly scaring Troy and Rutgers and extended her cold hand towards the shivering hand of Rutgers.

“I’m sorry!” Eva apologized quickly, on realizing what she had done, “Force of habit.”

Rutgers laughed it off and grasped her by her just a little beyond the wrists and wristhook heartily with her.

“So, I guess it’s time for a strategy meeting!” said Rutgers, who looked quite relieved.

“Yes, there are some things that you need to know, captain,” said Eva.

“Is that so?” asked Rutgers, his face showing a change of expression.

Eva nodded her head and looked at Troy, who instinctively looked away.

“We have to locate and destroy the other Volskian ship, before they get to us,” said Eva.

“Tsokay,” said Rutgers. “I’ll arrange for the meeting in ten.”

“That should be great,” said Eva, giving an assuring smile at him.

“Troy, get her to the Conference arena,” said Rutgers and left the duo to themselves.

“You have a lot to answer me!” said Troy and stomped out of the room as well.

Outside in the small passageway, he met the other four coming towards him.

“Is she alright?” asked Holloway, who was at the head of the group.

“Yea!” Troy said softly, so softly that he himself couldn’t hear what he spoke.

“Are you alright?” asked Holloway, casting a doubtful look at him.

“I am fine,” said Troy and brushed past her.

He passed Kru, who looked clueless at him and Emilie, who stopped him by her stare. The two looked at each other for about a second, after which Emilie said, “Don’t run to your room again, like a baby and I mean it!”

“Bua bua!” said Sniffles in addition, who was hugging Emilie’s legs as usual.

Troy smiled at both of them and nodded his agreement.

“Good boy!” said Emilie, smiling at him before she went on her way.

Troy’s smile faded away as soon as Emilie’s eyes left his and he let out a deep breath and continued on his way out. Troy wanted answers to the apparently innumerable number of questions that were building inside of his head, threatening to explode at any moment.

He clutched his fists and relaxed them and repeated that over and over again.

“That’s not going to help you, Troy!” said Max.

“What do you want me to do then, Max?” asked Troy, feeling eased to have Max as a companion.

“I don’t know!” said Max, “Ask her again?”

“I don’t want to!” said Troy, overcome with a wave of disappointment at Max’s suggestion.

“Then what do you propose we do?” asked Max.

“I don’t know!” replied Troy, clutching his head.

“Are you alright, Mr. Zander?” asked a young female Security official, who was passing him by at the reception.

“I am fine, thanks,” replied Troy, taking his hands off his head.

After a while, as he reached the elevators, Troy started lamenting again.

“Ah! I don’t know what to-”

“TROY!” interrupted Max.

“What?” asked Troy, annoyed that Max had interrupted him, while he was going to lament.

“We’ve got trouble!”

“Is that Volskian ship back?”

“Even worse!”

“What could be even worse than that-” Troy said, after which he suddenly realized, “*Rippers!*”

20 THE RIPPERS

Troy’s heart froze for a moment, before he returned to normality.

“We know nothing of the Rippers,” stated Troy, his fear vaporizing all of a sudden.

“We do now,” said Max and flashed an image of the Rippers outside around the Orion Swift, on Troy’s eye lenses. A big gasp escaped Troy and he cried, “Dingy Mermaids!”

“There are about hundreds of them surrounding the Orion Swift right now,” reported Max.

“I want specifics now, Max!” said Troy, as he continued to stare at the black monsters that lay before his eyes.

“On it!” replied Max.

“No wonder they are called the Rippers!” said Troy, as he looked bewitched by the image.

“They are about two meters tall and five meters wide, with their tail alone making three meters of their width.”

“There are massive pack hunters,” breathed Troy. “Call the rest of the guys right now.”

“Yea!”

“We’ve got a situation! We’re surrounded by Rippers right now! Report to the Bridge right away!” said Troy onto his transmitter.

“Tsokay!” chorused Kru, Holloway and Emilie together.

“What about Eva?” asked Emilie, just before Troy was about to end the call.

“I don’t think the people are ready for her yet. Make her comfortable in your room. Meet you on the Bridge,” answered Troy.

Troy caught an elevator and made it to the Command Bridge, where Rutgers was as usual barking orders at everyone.

“Captain!” said Troy, as he neared very close to Rutgers.

He didn’t respond.

“CAPTAIN!” yelled Troy, at the top of his lungs, to which Rutgers looked at him as if Troy had committed the worst crime in the galaxy.

“Rippers!” cried Rutgers, “Nasty creatures! They are trying to sink their stinkin’ teeth on my Orion Swift!”

“Our energy shields?” asked Troy.

“All of our energy shield generators are gone!” said Gingerpotts, who emerged apparently out of nowhere upon seeing Troy. “And so are our proximity sensors, giving us no idea about the Ripper attack till just a few moments ago, when the Security patrols had alerted us.”

“Given some more time, they’ll enter the ship from the badly damaged parts!” said Rutgers.

“That’s too bad!” commented Troy.

“That’s the worst!” exclaimed Rutgers, “Enemies everywhere! Oh Boy! This is the Dream!”

“We need to lead them away from the ship!” said Troy.

“Our security forces are already on that with no success!” said Gingerpotts. “We have absolutely no idea as how to deal with these creatures!”

“Let me try, with my team!” volunteered Troy.

“What’re you gonna do?” asked Rutgers.

“I have no idea!” admitted Troy.

“There are hundreds surrounding the length and breadth of this ship!” said Gingerpotts.

“We have to do something!” said Troy and at that point, Kru, Holloway and Emilie and Sniffles had made it to the Bridge.

“So what’s up?” asked Holloway, in her usual carefree way.

Gingerpotts brought up the live hologram video feed in front of the captain’s seat, showing the Rippers trying to tear open their way into the Orion Swift and the Albein security forces shooting at them from the Cruisers hovering above them.

“They move very fast, avoiding our shots and we can’t bomb the area without compromising our already damaged ship,” said Gingerpotts.

Everyone looked as if hypnotized at the live feed, showing large black creatures that had dog like heads with slightly elongated snouts that came with very powerful jaws, studded with strong yellow incisors. The creatures also had strong muscular forearms that were akin to that of a human, but only more stronger and devilish to look at and complete with claws. The creatures had very large muscular legs lined with claws. The creatures were bipedal, using only their disproportionately larger hind limbs to move around. The creatures also possessed large muscular tails were longer than their own bodies. In all, they were truly fearsome terrifying creatures.

“They’re gruesome!” exclaimed Kru, swallowing his spit.

“Emergency message!” announced Gingerpotts, as he received a message on his Holotab. “Damn!”

“What is it?” asked Rutgers, looking desperately at Gingerpotts.

“Security is reporting hundreds of more Rippers, headed towards us, sir!” said Gingerpotts, his voice shivering, as if he were in a frigid climate.

“Let’s get on a Cruiser and get out!” suggested Holloway.

“And do what exactly?” argued Kru. “Let’s first have a look at the weak areas where the Rippers might break in.”

Saying that, Kru motioned Gingerpotts to show them the data. Gingerpotts immediately dived onto his Holotab and brought up the data on the hologram in front of them. The hologram now showed the Orion Swift in green and the damaged areas in shades of red, which were at a higher risk for break-ins. The darker the shade became, higher went the probability that the Rippers were going to break in.”

“We need to station our Security forces everywhere along the red areas inside our ship, in case, there is a break-in,” said Kru.

“All our security personnel are stationed to the Cruisers fighting the Rippers,” said Rutgers gruffly.

Kru seemed disappointed at the decision that his uncle had made, sending out the personnel instead of the droids, to fight the Rippers.

“We’ll get the droids then, to line them up in these areas,” said Kru, looking at everyone.

Gingerpotts looked at Rutgers for his approval, who promptly nodded his agreement with the plan.

“My head just feels like it’s going to blast in situations like these,” complained Rutgers.

“No time to lose!” stated Troy and turned to get off the Bridge.

Rutgers looked at the rest and said, “Well, GO!”

Troy stopped just outside the Bridge and stopped the four as they came out.

“Get Eva!” Troy told Holloway. “She must be having some knowledge about these creatures.”

“What’s exactly your plan?” asked Kru.

“Get on a Cruiser,” said Troy coolly.

“Are you out of your mind?” asked Kru, completely pissed off.

“I’m not!” said Troy strongly. “If you want in, come with me or else feel free to stay behind.”

Kru looked dumbstruck for a moment.

“We aren’t going to be of any help being aboard the ship, Kru,” said Emilie.

Kru looked unrelenting at first but then started walking towards the elevators as soon as he realized that was indeed the truth.

“Where are you going?” asked Holloway.

“To the Cruiser bay,” replied Kru.

Troy then turned to Holloway and said, “Eva! Quick!”

Holloway took long steps immediately to join Kru at the elevators.

“I’ll meet you guys in the Bay,” said Holloway as the other four boarded elevator number eight.

“Sure!” answered Troy, as the elevator doors closed.

Soon, the doors opened onto the Cruiser Bay.

“I’ll go get the Cruisers ready,” said Kru, jogging away from the elevator.

“I believe in you, Troy.” said Emilie abruptly without any correlation.

Why would she say that? Troy thought and glanced at her thoroughly confused.

“You’ll need it,” said Emilie, nodding her head as usual.

Troy felt he needed to ask her why so, immediately but when he had turned she was busy attending to Sniffles, who was actively sniffing and digging his nose with his pinkie finger.

Meanwhile, Kru was done talking with one of the officials in the Bay.

“We’ve got the last of the Cruisers, 123 and 124 are ready for launch,” reported Kru.

“Wonderful, we’ll take them,” said Troy

“WAIT UP!” cried Holloway, from near the entrance to the Cruiser Bay.

Soon, Holloway and Eva caught up with the four, near the Cruisers 123 and 124.

“Tsokay!” said Troy. “So Kru and Holloway take the 123, Eva, Emilie and myself, we’ll take the 124.”

“That’s completely foul and unfair!” accused Holloway, staring at Troy angrily.

“Then I guess, you could have Sniffles too,” said Troy seriously.

Holloway’s angry stare just grew more terrible with that statement.

“I think Sniffles should go with you, Holloway,” Emilie said, hinting at Holloway with her eyes. Holloway got it and accepted without any further complaints.

“Bua?” said Sniffles, looking sadly at Emilie. Emilie immediately got down on her knees and looked into his big beautiful eyes. Sniffles then smiled cutely at her, kissed her on the cheek and went towards Holloway and took her hand.

“You know the mission,” said Troy. “Take down as many as Rippers as you can. Let’s go!”

“Why do you want me?” asked Eva, as they were to board their Cruiser.

“You need to talk,” said Troy.

“About what?” asked Eva.

“The truth, you’re hiding from me,” said Troy.

“I’m not hiding anything,” insisted Eva.

“Well, then that’s fine!” said Troy and went into the armory to arm himself.

He soon emerged out wearing the Albein soldier nanobot suit in black, with a couple each of Cuties, Trojans, Blasters and a nanobot cube for Emilie.

“Take ‘em!” said Troy, motioning the two to take the weapons from his hands.

Eva took one of each without raising any question, even though she had a lot to question about the weapons, but she kept quiet instead of sparking of another conversation with Troy, who seemed really mad at her.

Up in the Command Centre, after Emilie and Eva reached, Troy activated the Cruiser’s engines. The two girls looked on curiously at what he was about to do.

“Max!” said Troy on to his transmitter, tapping it. “Take over this Cruiser!”

“Will do, Troy!” said Max.

“You know what to do, Max.”

“Kill the Rippers.”

“Ram them and hit them, Max,” said Troy and turned to face Eva, behind him. “Now we can talk.”

Eva cocked her eyebrow.

“I think we have a greater situation at hand to worry about,” said Eva.

“I need to know, Eva,” said Troy, showing unusual patience that was usually beneath him.

Eva remained silent to Troy’s queries. Troy let out a heavy breath and asked her again.

“At least tell me, why would you not talk?”

“It’s to protect you,” said Eva strongly, looking at Troy.

“Protect me?” said Troy, as their Cruiser swept along the ground and rammed onto the Rippers throwing them in all directions. “Why would you want to protect me?”

Eva became silent again. In desperation, Troy turned to Emilie, “Emilie, I have a right to know! Tell her so!”

Emilie looked at him, unsure of what to answer.

“Fine!” exclaimed Troy, in white hot temper, “Let’s at least kick some Rippers’ nuts!”

Troy then disengaged Max and took manual control of the Cruiser and crashed onto the oncoming Rippers, grinding them against the hard ground, beneath the green grass.

He opened fire wildly at the Rippers who were jumping as high as thirty meters into the air.

“Be careful, Troy!” warned Max.

Troy paid no attention to Max and pulled the Cruiser up on itself to turn behind and proceeded towards the Orion Swift.

“Troy!” called Emilie, to which Troy didn’t reply.

“Listen to me, Troy!” called Emilie again, to no avail.

Troy was overcome by his anger and seemed lost inside his wrath. He was angry at his father. He was angry at Olscuro. He was angry at Eva. Nothing in the world seemed to make any sense to him. All that mattered to him was to take out his anger on something and right now, the Rippers seemed the right choice. He drained all of the Cruiser’s beam shots on the Rippers surrounding the Orion Swift.

Looking at what Troy was doing, getting out of control, Eva looked at Emilie and motioned her to read her mind. Emilie refused to do so but Eva persisted asking her to do so. Reluctantly, Emilie looked into Eva’s golden brown eyes and read everything she wanted to let her know. Emilie couldn’t take in what she saw. It took her more than a few moments to recover from the shock of her new found knowledge regarding Troy.

“Troy!” interrupted Max, on his transmitter.

“Yes,” replied Troy dryly.

“You’re moving too dangerously close to the targets of the other Cruisers.”

“Never mind,” said Troy, continuing his crazy maneuvers and his even crazier shooting.

“Troy!” called Eva. “I’ll tell you everything! Don’t do this yourself!”

Troy accelerated the Cruiser even to a greater speed on hearing her speak.

“Please Troy!” pleaded Emilie. “Whatever is that you possess will kill you if you don’t control yourself now!”

Troy seemed totally undistracted by the cries of the two girls but it didn’t last for long. Out of the blue, a stray beam shot from one of the other Cruisers hit their Cruiser’s engines.

“Pull over for a landing, Troy!” said Max calmly.

Troy panicked as the Cruiser went out of his control. The Cruiser went in hoops through the sky, before it plummeted down to its destruction.

Troy tried to pull the Cruiser as up as possible, as Eva and Emilie held on to their dear lives. Their Cruiser pulled up from certain death, at the last moment but before Troy could sigh in relief, the Cruiser’s underside scraped against a sharp boulder that Troy hadn’t noticed in his anxiety. Troy lost control for a couple of moments at which the Cruiser crashed onto the ground, right in the middle of all the Rippers.

“Exit the Cruiser right now!” warned Max. “It can blow up any minute!”

Troy looked at Eva and Emilie. They were both on the floor but they looked fine. He immediately pulled out his Cutie Twins and shot at the Voidshield.

“Warn me when it is set to blow, Max!”

“It’s too dangerous in here!” said Max.

“It’s much more dangerous out there! Do the math!” replied Troy.

“Alright!” agreed Max.

“COME ON!” cried Troy, helping both of them to get up, but no sooner than the Voidshield had been broken, several Rippers jumped onto the Cruiser trying to get inside it. One such Ripper jumped right inside the Command Centre, a couple of meters away from Troy. The dark horrible monster growled sinisterly at him and the two girls. The dark creature bared its mouth to reveal its dirty yellowed stone-like teeth.

Two more Rippers joined it, by its side. Troy without any hesitation, pulled his Blaster and started shooting, spraying those arsenic bullets like showering a garden. One of the Rippers jumped onto the three, while Troy was still shooting the other two however, Troy took Emilie’s Blaster with lightning speed and shot him. The big ugly Ripper was dead but it came falling on the trio. Troy immediately extended his two legs and kicked the Ripper with all his might and the dead Ripper landed at the feet of the other two Rippers. Troy continued shooting at the remaining two Rippers who were momentarily distracted by the dead Ripper in front of them.

Shot after shot sunk into those thick skins and those ugly creatures moaned for a few moments before they died from the effect of the exploding bullets inside their fearsome bodies. Realizing that this was the only chance to get out, before the other Rippers could barge in, Troy took out his Cutie and shot it

at the hood of the Cruiser.

The hood disappeared into nothingness and hot radiation surrounded the area. Troy didn't mind the danger, associated with the radiation and stood on the broken Voidshield, holding both Eva and Emilie.

“Can you fly us to safety?” asked Troy, looking desperately at her.

“These beasts can jump really high! They'll take us down, if I try to fly!”

“Got it!” said Troy, taking out the Cutie in one hand and the Blaster in the other. “We stay here, so that we are safe on our back. Start shooting!”

“Max!” cried Troy, amidst all the shooting. “Send a distress signal to Kru or any other Cruiser nearby!”

“I already did! There has been no reply of yet!” spoke Max, from the speakers in the Command Centre. “But now all the Cruiser's comms are out and your transmitters are damaged from the Cutie's radiation blasts.”

“Great!” replied Troy, in frustration while emptying his weapons at a faster rate than before.

“I'll tell Kru and Holloway,” said Emilie, when she had heard their conversation.

“Okay,” said Troy, feeling a bit relieved.

The trio kept shooting, double guns at the same time. Row after row of Rippers tasted the earth, as Troy and the girls blasted them with deadly shots and some of the many other Rippers exploded into nullity as they were struck by the Cutie bullets.

“LOOK OUT!” cried Emilie, suddenly as four Rippers jumped from somewhere in the crowd towards them.

“COVER ME!” cried Troy, as he took careful aim and shot at them. Two of them exploded in mid-air and while the other two crashed onto the Rippers.

“I'M OUT OF AMMO!” shouted Eva.

“Use mine!” Troy said, handing his Cutie to her. “I'll be back with more guns!”

With that, Troy rushed back into the Cruiser and went to the elevators and tapped his transmitter.

“Max! I need the elevator!” said Troy.

“I have lost control of almost everything, aboard the Cruiser!” said Max.

“The elevators are still under your control, right?” asked Troy, losing his patience.

“Yes,” replied Max in a dull voice.

“Take me to the armory! Quick!” said Troy.

Max activated the elevator system and it opened right before him.

“Good!” said Troy, as he exited out of the elevator into the armory. He couldn’t find anything like a trolley or anything, so he took one of those black nanobot cubes and placed it on the ground.

“Max, turn it into a sack.”

“Alright!” said Max, amused by Troy’s instruction.

The nanobot cube spread it like a square sheet, spread three by three feet. In the meantime, Troy went around gathering weapons and loaded them onto the black sack. He tied it and dragged it onto the elevator.

“How far are we from the others?”

“According to my data, just before the crash, we’re twenty-seven miles from the nearest Cruiser and a good sixty-two miles from the Orion Swift.” answered Max, her voice booming throughout the Cruiser.

“That’s bad,” Troy said heavily.

“These Rippers are behaving like a plague,” commented Max.

Troy dragged the heavy sack out of the elevator and ran towards the Command Centre.

“Faster! Troy! We’re almost out!” cried Emilie, on hearing him.

Troy immediately opened the sack and threw the new Blasters and Cuties towards Eva and Emilie, before arming himself. Then he reached deeper into the sack and pulled about a dozen black spheres. He ran next to join Eva and Emilie at the broken Voidshield and threw all the black spheres all around him after activating them.

Those dozen grenades took out more than a hundred Rippers, maiming most of them.

“NOW SHOOT!” cried Troy, pumping his twin Blasters at the endless legion of the Rippers.

“They seem to be innumerable!” said Emilie.

“We’ve got no chance but to fight!” said Troy, while still endlessly shooting at the Rippers.

The trio continued battling the Rippers for a further quarter of an hour of the earth’s time.

Then, as Emilie’s guns were about to run out of ammo, she turned back to see a group of Rippers drooling at the trio, inside the Command centre, very close to where the weapons were.

“Troy!” Emilie breathed, nudging Troy to look at them.

“What is it?” asked Troy, as he turned behind to see more than a dozen Rippers slowing walking towards them.

“EVA!” cried Troy as he positioned his guns at them. “Take Emilie and jump NOW!”

The Rippers let out a low growl and were about to jump on him.

With that, Troy pulled the triggers, punishing every Ripper inside the Cruiser, with a rain of bullets and at last, shot at the last of the spherical grenades in the weapons sack, before he jumped himself. The Command Centre blasted, throwing Troy hard onto the ground outside, beside Eva and Emilie, who were busy firing at the Rippers.

“ARE YOU ALRIGHT?” cried Emilie.

“I’M!” shouted Troy back his answer.

“I think something’s strange,” said Emilie.

“Why?” asked Troy, aiming at the Rippers around them, who suddenly seemed disinterested in them.

“The beasts are running away from us,” stated Eva.

“Why would they suddenly behave like this?” asked Troy, lowering both his Blasters.

“I know,” said Emilie.

“What?” asked Troy, as both Eva and Emilie looked shell shocked at the seemingly plain sky.

Then, within a couple of moments, Troy came to know why, as the Volskian ship lowered its dark matter shield.

“Homicidal Mermaids!” gasped Troy.

21 THE AWAKENING

“Behind the Cruiser!” cried Troy, grabbing Emilie’s hand and running to the other side of the Cruiser.

“It’s no use!” muttered Eva, spreading her majestic black wings.

“What the heck is she doing?” asked Troy, from behind the Cruiser, as Eva shot into the skies with a graceful blast of her wings.

“Saving us,” breathed Emilie, beside him.

Eva shot towards the Volskian ship, which started firing those black vapors at her. Eva gracefully avoided them and aimed the Cutie that she had in her hand, at the ship.

Just before she could fire, one of the black vapor shots struck her on her shoulder plate and she fell on the green grass with a dull thud.

Troy and Emilie were aghast seeing Eva crash onto the ground.

“She’s fine,” said Emilie, after reading Eva’s condition instantly.

“Those bastards!” cried Troy and started shooting his Cutie and his Blaster at the ship, which moved incredibly fast, staying clear of all of Troy’s shots, even with that amount of heavy damage, it had undertaken from the earlier battle. Their energy shields seemed to be down, allowing those shots fired by Troy, to dangerously fly past them.

“COME ON! TAKE A SHOT!” said Troy, grinding his teeth in frustration, as none of his shots so much as ever scraped the Volskian ship.

“We should get back a little now!” said Emilie, with sudden alarm in her eyes.

“Why?” asked Troy, with unrelenting firing at the Volskian ship.

“I think they are going to get rid of the Cruiser!” said Emilie, tucking hard at Troy’s arm.

“Whoa!” said Troy, as he lost balance and fell on his back.

“Quick!” cried Emilie, as she pulled hard at him, not realizing that she was not helping him get back on his feet that way. However, Troy didn’t tell anything to her and struggled, with her pulling him and still managed to get back on his feet.

At that instant, they heard the Volskian ship firing a noisy shot directed at the Cruiser.

“Down!” cried Troy, and pulled Emilie down with him, falling on the fresh green grass in a tight and protective embrace.

“When I say go, run towards Eva!” whispered Emilie as soon as they fell down.

“What?”

“Do as I say!” said Emilie, in a commanding tone.

“Why?” argued Troy, as Emilie pushed him away.

“NOW!” she cried, taking out the Cutie and Blaster from her side and shooting the Volskian ship which was now hovering right above the smoky remains of the Cruiser.

Troy took flight and sprinted as fast as he could, using the dense smoke from the Cruiser as a screen to hide his movements.

He broke his speed and falling on his knees and came to a stop, just near where Eva lay.

“TROY!” cried Eva. “Don’t let them get you or Emilie! Awaken the Chi’kara!”

“I don’t know how to do that!” said Troy nervously, as he pressed on Eva’s wound tightly to stop the bright red blood from flowing.

“The Unseen will guide you, Troy!” said Eva, taking laborious breaths between each word.

“The who?” asked Troy, in a panicked tone, worried about Emilie, whom he had left behind, at the mercy of the Volskian ship and Eva’s condition, who was right before him and looked pretty bad.

At that, Eva pointed towards the symbol, with her soiled left hand. Troy saw a symbol, dug on the earth beside her with her fingers. He was surprised at what he saw. It was the same symbol that he had seen in his visions before and in his dream.



“The Sign of the Unseen,” whispered Eva.

Shots abruptly distracted Troy from his path down his memory lane. Troy instinctively looked back, for Emilie but he found nothing and his worry grew exponentially. The Volskian ship and Emilie seemed hidden from his point of view, behind the smokescreen rising from the bygone Cruiser.

“The Unseen, known as the Fenoï, are ancient magical Volskian beings who bind tightly only to a worthy Volskian soul.”

“Volskian?” asked Troy, confused about the Volskian, thinking he might have heard it wrong and his interest was waning at the same time, as his worry for Emilie grew more and more with every passing moment.

“Yes, they have chosen you, Troy.”

I am fine, keep going! burst in Emilie’s voice inside Troy’s mind. Her voice strengthened him and he felt his confidence boosted up again.

“Why me?” asked Troy. “I’m not Volskian!”

“You are half-human and half-Volskian, Troy,” said Eva, her guilty look coming back again.

Troy literally felt his physical world shudder for an instant, before he came back to reality.

“What!” exclaimed Troy, his head spinning like a top, knowing not how to react to that at all.

Help me, Troy! cried Emilie, inside his head, at that moment.

Troy immediately took his hand off Eva, and placed her non-soiled right hand on her wound.

“Press tight!” said Troy. “I’ll be back! And play dead!”

Eva nodded slowly and held his hand just as he was about to leave.

“Awaken!” said Eva, for one last time and she let go of him.

Troy gave a brief nod and shot like the wind towards where Emilie was. He sprinted and got past the smoking Cruiser and saw Emilie at last, about a hundred meters away from him. She was lying down unconscious.

“EMILIE!” cried Troy, on seeing her lifeless on the ground. The Volskian ship seemed to be using some sort of a yellowish beam to teleport her aboard their ship.

“EMILIE!” shouted Troy and ran madly towards her, as she deatomized right before his eyes. With a surge of uncontrollable rage, Troy took out his Cutie and shot at the Volskian ship. The twin bullets containing the antimatter suspended in vacuum whizzed through the air and blasted as it reached its target, tearing open one side of the Volskian ship.

Troy’s nanobot suit reacted with a quick reflex and formed a protective helmet over Troy’s head. The Volskian ship started spinning on its own, slowly spiraling to the ground. The Volskian ship finally rammed onto the ground, sinking a bit into the soft earth.

Troy started firing, running around the ship, blasting open the walls of the ship, trying to get Emilie’s location. He, at last shot near the dark tinted windows at the front of the ship, which revealed Emilie being held captive by the Volskians, who were dressed in black armor and black helmets. Their helmets had no visors and the helmets had two large vents at its sides. They were seven Volskians on the level where Troy had exposed them. Three of the Volskians immediately spread their wings and flew towards Troy, shooting vigorously at him. Troy jumped, taking turns to shot and roll. His shots didn’t make any impact on two of the three Volskians coming. However, Troy got the third Volskian, the one who was the closest to him and who looked like he had a leaky armor, with greyish vapors coming off from the sides of his abdomen. That Volskian exploded in midair with the shot from Troy’s shot. Troy used that Volskian’s explosion as a distraction and ran towards the smoking Cruiser, to take advantage of the smokescreen that it provided.

“Max! Help me!” whispered Troy onto this transmitter, taking cover behind the smokescreen.

“What do you want me to do?” asked Max, at once.

“Give me the location of the Volskians beyond the smokescreen, right now!” said Troy.

“I can’t do that!” said Max promptly and with a touch of nervousness to her voice.

“Why- Damn! Forget it!” said Troy. “At least get this helmet off me!”

Then he shot both his Blaster and his Cutie randomly through the smokescreen, breathing the fresh air, as the helmet retracted back. Suddenly, he saw two shadows fall on him, as if something had passed over him.

They're here...

“Oh! Dear Mermaids!” muttered Troy to himself and twisted his body to shoot at the Volskians who had passed over him, to attack him from behind him.

He expected the Volskians to get to him first, but he was stormed by what met his eyes. He saw Eva standing over the bodies of those Volskians who had passed him just a few moments ago, with her hand over her wound and looking extremely pale.

Eva then threw two small grey guns, she had salvaged from those Volskians. The guns had unusually long muzzles and rest of the gun almost straight except for a little bend at the end, for holding.

Troy caught those two guns and looked at her. Eva motioned towards her wound. Troy understood the reference. Only Volskian weapons can penetrate Volskian armor.

Troy held the weapons with some difficulty and slowly proceeded through the smokescreen. Troy had no idea as how to proceed, he didn't want to run towards them, as it was the stupidest thing he could do to get himself killed very easily. He had to get a distraction. He looked around in the smokescreen aimlessly for a distraction. As Troy was unsuccessfully trying to get an idea for distracting the Volskians on the ship, he felt something whiz past him, in the direction of the Volskian ship. In a flash, Troy realized who it was and ran out of the smokescreen.

“NOOO!” he cried, as he saw Eva take shot after shot, before she fell limp to the ground with a heavy thump. Aspiring to not let her death be in vain, Troy used those two Volskian guns to shoot at the four Volskians aboard the ship in quick succession. Only one was killed on the spot, while the other three took shelter in the darkness of the ship, dragging Emilie along with them. Troy immediately ran towards the ship strapping those two Volskian weapons to his waist belt. On the way, he saw a Cruiser coming towards his location. Paying no attention to the approaching Cruiser, Troy jumped onto the ship and started climbing using the rough edges of the ship to get to what seemed to be the Bridge of that Volskian vessel, where they were hiding.

The Cruiser landed as Troy made to the top level of the Volskian ship. There were no lights aboard the level. Sunlight bathed the place, where he stood with its warm glowing light. Troy looked around him. It was very silent. It was completely dark, beyond half a dozen footsteps from his location, in any direction. There was debris everywhere and the body of the dead Volskian at the edge of the darkness. He kept his weapons at the ready.

From the ground, he heard familiar voices calling out to him.

“TROY!”

“EMILIE!”

It was Kru and Holloway, who were outside their Cruiser, about halfway between the smoking Cruiser and the Volskian ship. Troy looked at them and motioned towards them to be patient and to

stay where they were.

“What the hell is he doing?” asked Kru, looking at Troy showing his palm from atop the Volskian ship.

“Shouldn’t we go and get him?” asked Holloway, fidgeting beside Kru.

“He told us to wait here,” said Kru. “Let’s go in, if things go out of hand.”

Meanwhile, Troy took careful steps, towards the darkness searching the dark for Emilie and the Volskians who held her captive. He couldn’t see them anywhere.

“Where are you, Emilie?” muttered Troy to himself, as he frantically searched the level.

Then, abruptly Troy was caught, as a Volskian jumped at him from the ceiling, nailing him to the ground.

The Volskian smashed Troy’s head with many blows, until blood broke forth from the cuts he had sustained to his head. The Volskian then made him stand and punched him repeatedly again and finally ended with a couple of undercuts to the jaw to knock him out.

“Stop before you kill him!” said a low, grim voice from atop the ceiling. “The Lord desires him alive.”

It was the voice of the Commander of that Volskian ship, who emerged slowly from the dark ceiling along with the other Volskian, holding Emilie in his rough hands. He was burly and taller than the other two Volskians with him. He asked them in the Volski tongue to wake Troy up and put him on his knees. The Volskian, who had brutally attacked Troy, shorter compared to the other two Volskians, then slapped him to wake him up and made him kneel before the Volskian Commander, after he stripped him of all his weapons and tied him with a sparkling black cord on both his hands and feet.

“Look!” spoke the Volskian Commander, whose name was Tez Ohnal, in crude Standard Order English. “We have you and this girl! We have captured you!”

With drool falling out of his mouth and blood dripping from the cuts above his eyebrows, nose, ears and mouth, Troy looked at Emilie, who was sobbing very bitterly, at his sorry sight.

“Shut up!” said Tez and struck Emilie on her head, to stop her wailing.

Troy’s blood boiled at Tez assaulting her but he couldn’t do anything, his head felt completely messed up and felt no longer in control of his body.

“We see your friends have come for you in a nice ship. We need it,” Tez continued in his very crude accent. “Tell your friends to surrender as well so that they can take us to our station in space.”

Troy just looked at him, still drooling and his eyes half-shut.

“Are you listening to me?” shouted Tez, tightening his hold on Emilie’s hair, making her scream in pain.

Troy growled and said, “Or else what?”

“What did you say?” roared Tez, removing his helmet with fierce ferocity and throwing it away into the darkness. He looked atrocious with cruelty and terror written all over his face, with his bald head and one side of his face completely tattooed white and yellow.

“OR ELSE WHAT, COWARD?” said Troy and spat his blood on the floor.

Tez’s golden brown eyes threatened to pop out of their sockets and he commanded the other Volskians under his command,

“FETCH THOSE SCUMS THAT HAVE COME FOR HIM!”

The two Volskians flew at once towards where Kru and Holloway were.

Troy coughed up blood and wished he hadn’t flared up the conversation. Tez stared furiously at Troy until the Volskians returned with Kru and Holloway completely stripped of their weapons and tightly bound in the same sparkling black cord that bound Troy’s hands and legs. The Volskians threw them on the ground, beside Troy, while they went and stood on either side of their Commander.

“Now, look here!” Tez roared again, this time at Kru and Holloway. “Get us where we have to go!”

“What if we don’t?” spoke Kru, quite boldly, as if he had faced situations like these before.

“WE KILL YOU, SCUM!” bellowed Tez, tightening his hold even more strongly over Emilie’s hair, making her moan loudly.

“We’ll die before we help you!” said Kru and looked at Holloway, who burst into tears on seeing him.

“Is that your final decision?” thundered Tez.

“Yes,” replied Kru, Troy looked at him and nodded ambiguously.

Kru nodded back and faced Holloway.

“It’ll be alright, Holly,” whispered Kru. “I promise.”

“Your friends are greater fools than yourself,” mocked Tez. “Kill them!”

The two masked Volskians drew their weapons and shot at Kru and Holloway, who closed their eyes to accept their fate.

Troy acted faster and fell in between the shots and his two friends, taking their fate upon himself, succumbing to those shots. He died even before he hit the cold floor.

“YOU IDIOTS! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?” cried Tez, on seeing Troy lying dead before his eyes. “Our Lord will have us for this!”

Emilie, Kru and Holloway were more than shocked to see Troy lying motionless and bleeding before their eyes. Emilie ran towards him, shaking him as if she were trying to wake him from a deep sleep, as the Tez started slamming the other two Volskians for what they had done.

“We at least have the girl alive, Commander,” argued the shorter of the two Volskians.

“But the boy was the real deal!” shouted Tez. “Go and fetch the girl from that carcass now!”

The masked Volskians started towards Emilie and tried to take her, as she kept hugging Troy’s lifeless body, sobbing and refusing to let go of him.

“Let go!” said the other masked Volskian, hitting her so as to make her let go, but Emilie refused to let go of Troy. Kru and Holloway looked on, dumbstruck and totally unable to move because of the horror that faced them.

“LET GO!” shouted both the masked Volskians and pulled Emilie, who continued to hold Troy’s body tightly and at that moment, some sparkling purplish dust floated inside the Volskian ship from outside with a gentle cool breeze. Emilie saw the purple dust and calmed down. The masked Volskians were surprised at what they saw and stopped what they were doing. The purple dust slowly landed on Troy’s forehead and got absorbed within him.

“Commander! Something’s strange happened right now!” said the short Volskian.

“I saw it,” said Tez, his voice a little shaking. “It was the-”

A sudden dazzling purple blast blinded everyone for a couple of moments.

“What happened?” asked Tez, blinking.

The other two masked Volskians looked around and the shorter one reported, “The girl and the other two are right where they were before the blast!”

“What about the boy’s body?” asked Tez, looking at his fellow Volskians.

“It’s not here!” replied the short Volskian.

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN IT’S NOT HERE?” asked Tez, fear and fury mixing together in his voice.

“It’s really not here!” insisted the shorter Volskian. Emilie, Kru and Holloway were alarmed too on the disappearance of Troy.

“WELL! DON’T JUST STAND LIKE STONE STATUES! SEARCH THE SHIP!” commanded Tez, as he withdrew slowly back into the darkness.

“HE’S BEHIND YOU!” cried the shorter Volskian suddenly, at which everyone looked at the place where the Volskian had indicated. Tez also turned around to see. Out of the darkness, came out Troy completely bare. As he emerged onto the sunlight bathing the battered Volskian ship, he tied a torn black cloth around his waist and tightened the knot.

“YOU!” said Tez, completely shaken on seeing him. “How did you-”

Troy ended Tez’s question prematurely by landing a hell of a right cross across his cheek. Tez fell onto the floor, spitting blood. By then, Troy was completely in the sunlight. The sun bathed his well-cut young body and made it look glowing. All his head wounds seemed completely healed and he looked perfectly healthy again. The other two Volskians started shooting at Troy at which he jumped onto them and knocked them unconscious with single blows to each of them.

Emilie and the others were flabbergasted by what they saw. Troy was alive and looked absolutely

alright. They had no idea as to what had happened but they were glad that it had happened.

Tez, by then had recovered and tried to smash Troy's head with a heavy pole that was lying among the debris. Troy stopped the swinging pole with his hand, pulled it from him and struck him across Tez's temple with it. Tez didn't speak again, as he lay still on the floor.

Then Troy turned to face the three and as he had turned, Emilie sprang onto him, hugging him and kissing him passionately. Troy held her tight and buried his face on her shoulder, taking a deep breath of her fragrance. To him, it seemed right then, like the sweetest fragrance in the whole world.

"I love you!" he whispered onto her ear, lightly kissing and nibbling.

"I loved you first!" replied Emilie, tears bursting forth with a smile, looking into his ocean blue eyes, which still had the golden flecks.

Troy chuckled at her reply and kissed her back.

"You came back!" shrieked Holloway. "You saved us!"

Troy and Emilie looked at her and smiled in response.

"What happened?" asked Kru, grinning and his hands rubbing his back as he came near the happy couple.

Troy looked at him and answered, "I awakened the Chi'kara."

"How?" asked Holloway, who was wiping her tears too.

"I could never awaken the Chi'kara on my own, I needed to die first willingly to harness the Chi'kara, and then I needed the help of the Fenoï."

"The what?" asked Kru, getting baffled at the name 'Fenoï' being mentioned.

"Fenoï are formless magical Volskian beings that, in certain instances, bind themselves to a worthy Volskian soul," replied Emilie, much to the surprise of Troy.

"You knew all along?" asked Troy, looking at her.

"Eva insisted that I know the truth," replied Emilie.

"Wait! Are you saying that it was the Fenoï that stripped you of your clothes and made to appear just behind that Volskian bastard?" asked Kru, hesitantly.

Troy nodded positively.

"Which means you're Volskian? That's completely nuts!" said Kru, aggressively.

"According to Eva, I'm half-human and half-Volskian," said Troy. "And it wasn't an illusion of any kind, me popping just behind that Volskian Commander. I just don't know how that happened!" said Troy.

"So, are you half-Volskian?" asked Kru, his curiosity peaking.

"I have no idea," said Troy, in a darker tone. "Guess I'll have to find the truth behind that."

Troy looked at Emilie, hoping that Eva had shown her that too, but Emilie nodded her sideways slowly, indicating no.

“So you’re saying you died and came back from the dead?” asked Holloway, her brain picking up a little late on the current conversation and also unable to close her mouth looking at Troy.

“Something like that,” said Troy, smiling handsomely at her.

“I’m finding this really hard to believe,” said Kru, tapping his temple. “It’s too much to take in.”

“It is,” said Holloway. “And I also mean that you have such a well-cut body, Troy.”

Kru got alarmed by the direction in which his girlfriend’s conversation was going and quickly scrambled his waist pocket that was lying beside the pile of their weapons and banged a small silver cube onto Troy’s chest. The nanobots rearranged to form a silver body suit over Troy’s body. The suit had the word Valkurie written on the left chest side of the suit, with a coolly designed dark star glowing above it.

“I made it in my free time,” said Kru, looking proudly at the suit he had designed and the fact he had stopped Holloway’s admiration of Troy’s body.

“It’s very cool!” complimented Emilie, looking at the design of the suit and their logo.

“Thank you,” said Kru, going all grins.

“It is much more than cool!” said Troy, feeling its smooth texture.

“Ah! The most important question-” said Kru, only to be interrupted by Emilie,

“Where’s Sniffles?” she asked frantically.

“He’s asleep in the Cruiser,” answered Holloway.

“That’s a relief!” said Emilie. “He’s safe!”

Kru finally got to ask his question then, “Did you find what the Chi’kara is?”

“No, I still don’t know,” said Troy, in a flash, shrugging.

“Then what was all that drama of dying and coming alive again for?” asked Kru.

“Heroes are neither born nor created but resurrected,” said Troy. “You said it yourself, Kru.”

“Tsokay, now that’s sounds so narcissistic coming from you!” replied Kru, playfully.

Troy chuckled and looked at Emilie, for her to explain it to Kru.

“Only when you die to your weaknesses, will you rise, Kru,” said Emilie.

“Rise where?” asked Kru, who was bad at understanding metaphors.

“Rise towards your true power,” said Emilie.

Kru didn’t understand what in the world they were talking about yet, but he didn’t dare to ask any more questions. It made some vague meaning but beyond he was still confused, all that they had said,

it felt almost like a fantasy. He looked at Holloway, who looked as puzzled at him.

“Like I said, the Chi’kara could never be unleashed unless I died. I had to trust in it to unravel itself in my death,” said Troy, suddenly everything starting to make sense to him, remembering his strange dream of the Fenoï.

“How did you know that you had to die to get the Chi’kara?” asked Holloway, still wiping her eyes.

“I didn’t,” replied Troy, making his friends, wander in suspense for about a moment, “Until after I had died.”

The other three looked at him and felt a difference in him, though what he had just said sounded insane. There was something different about Troy, all of a sudden. It was as if he was suddenly magical.

“Did you see anything, if you know what I mean?” asked Kru, curiously, referring to the other side.

Troy smiled at him and replied, “It’s the same side.”

“Which means...” said Kru, lingering on for Troy to complete the sentence and satisfy his insatiable curiosity.

“Let’s get down to Eva and Sniffles,” said Troy smiling, smashing his hopes and climbed down the ship, in a couple of swings, landing majestically on his one knee and one hand.

“Bummer,” muttered Kru, looking disappointed.

“Wow!” exclaimed Holloway, looking at Troy’s crazy feat, getting down along jagged ends of the ship.

“How does he expect me to do that?” asked Kru, getting frustrated that he can’t do the same thing to impress Holloway.

“We can fly, darling!” said Holloway, tapping gently on Kru’s chest.

“That’s right,” said Kru. “I forgot!”

“Come on!” urged Emilie, as she jumped off, from the ship.

Meanwhile, Troy ran to where he last saw Eva fall and lifted the body.

“It’s not her?” said Troy, relieved and confused at the same time.

“I’m here,” coughed a faint voice, from some distance beyond him.

“She’s over here, Troy!” said Emilie, as she flew over him, pointing towards the burnt remains of the Cruiser.

Troy at once, jetted towards the place where Emilie was pointing to.

“You’re alright?” asked Troy, looking relieved to see Eva, who was able to sit up with Emilie’s help.

“I’m still in one piece, if that’s what you mean,” replied Eva, smiling beautifully at him, holding her wound which seemed to have stopped almost bleeding

“Thank you, Eva,” said Emilie, expressing her gratitude.

“I think we should all thank Troy,” said Eva, in return, looking at him with that motherly look.

Troy looked a little uncomfortable but he managed with a smile.

Holloway and Kru arrived at this time, with Sniffles and a tiny medical box.

“Let me apply this,” Holloway said, taking a small ointment from the box and applying it over her wound.

“This is good medicine,” said Eva, immediately. “It’s feeling better already.”

Holloway smiled at her and Sniffles found his way back to Emilie’s long legs.

“Sweetheart!” said Emilie, kissing him and lifted him.

“MMMMMMMMMA!” said Sniffles, grinning and showing off all his teeth.

“Seems like you awakened,” said Eva, smiling at that happy scene and while at the same time, taking their conversation to a more serious level.

Troy gave a short serious nod. He had saved the day but he knew this was just the beginning of the end.

“They are coming,” said Troy, walking away from the others and looking at the blue sky. “Olsкуро is coming.”

“It means war is coming,” said Kru. “But we neither have the technology nor the resources to fight such a superior race.”

“The fight isn’t against an entire race, Kru. It is against one Volskian. Olsкуро,” said Troy, looking deep into the sky.

“We will take him down at any cost,” said Eva, getting up, as she already started feeling better.

“What do we do, Troy?” asked Emilie, coming and standing beside him.

“We arise,” said Troy, taking her hand and merging it with his own.