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**THE**  
**HYPERSCAPE**  
*THE AWAKENING* **PROJECT**



**DONALD SWAN**

BOOK ONE

# **THE HYPERSCAPE PROJECT**

BOOK ONE

*The Awakening*

By

Donald Swan

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# CONTENTS

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

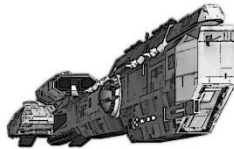
[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

*Enemy activity had fallen into an eerie calm, but everyone felt the coming storm—a terrible storm, poised to unleash its fury upon the galaxy. It seemed as though the entire universe was holding its breath. Waiting. Whether waiting for the salvation of mankind or its demise was yet unclear.*

## PROLOGUE



*In some distant part of the galaxy....*

Nick released a long sigh as he gazed down at the worn Tri-tanium deck of the ship. A voice recorder sat poised before him on a sturdy metal table, its crude silver casing dimly illuminated by a single overhead light. He'd been awake for hours, struggling over how to begin. A few months ago he had set out from Earth to prove his hyperspace theory. Now that endeavor haunted every moment of his miserable existence. It seemed only yesterday he was in orbit around Earth, staring down at the wondrous blue planet he called home. But that was before the accident. Now the closest thing he had to a home was this ship and its odd array of alien life.

*Alien life.* The very thought of it boggled his mind. Here he was, the first person to discover sentient extraterrestrial life, and no one on Earth may ever even find out about it. If it was his fate to be marooned here in the deep vastness of space, never to see his home or another human being again, then he could accept that. But the situation was worse. Far worse.

Nick shifted his weight in the chair, his blue-eyed gaze fixed on the battered floor at his feet. The skeptics back on earth hadn't exactly embraced his hyperspace project. In fact, Gerste, the leading German scientist, had been very vocal about calling the whole idea ludicrous. On national television no less. If only he could see the look on their faces now. He had proved them wrong, but the price of that victory was almost too much to bear.

Finally summoning the strength to begin, Nick somberly reached out and pressed the record button.

"Personal Log, Nick Bannon. I'm sending this to Earth, to anyone who will listen.... And you damn well better listen, because it could very well save your ass. *All* your asses. My experiment was a success. Hyperspace really *does* exist. I'm living proof of that. I only wish that I had stopped to consider the consequences of my actions. If I'd had any idea of the dangers involved...hell, I would've scrapped the whole damn project and gone back to what I like best—

flying. But I never expected *this*. How could I have *possibly* known something like this would happen?" Nick's forehead wrinkled in anguish at the thought of his terrible mistake. He closed his eyes and continued, his solemn voice echoing his regret. "Maybe I was a little too cocky or shortsighted. Something. Bottom line...I screwed up. Because of me, Earth may be facing the greatest threat mankind has ever seen. And I may be the only one that can stop our planet's total destruction. I don't know—"

A voice coming from the doorway cut him off mid-sentence. "It's time."

"Be right there, Karg." Nick turned his attention back to the recorder.

"Listen, I'm out of time. I don't know if this will ever make it to you, but I have to try. We...mankind...um.... Jesus, how do I explain this? Under no circumstances should the *human race* venture into hyperspace. It must be avoided at all cost. There are *other* races...*beings* out here...vastly older and more powerful than we are. Earth wouldn't stand a chance against them. If humans begin exploring hyperspace, it will only draw alien attention towards Earth, and *billions* will die."

Nick paused to collect himself. Who knew if any of this would get through to the hard-headed military types back home. But he had to try. If he didn't fix this, it could mean the end of the entire human race. Uncertain of what lay ahead, he sat quietly in the dark metal compartment he now called home, the sound of his heart pounding over the faint hum of the ship's engines, like a distant war drum calling him to action.

He drew in another ragged breath and forced himself to continue. "In my ignorance I have handed these malevolent beings the power to destroy entire planets. Hundreds of billions of lives are in danger, and it won't be long before they find their way to Earth. I'm going to attempt to right the wrongs I have done. To erase all signs of this hyperspace technology, and with it, any hope I have of getting home. I only pray that I'm not already too late. God help us all."

Nick reached down, shut off his make-shift digital recorder, and removed the diamond memory card he had salvaged from his camera. He held the small crystal-embedded card between his fingers, allowing the light to dance off it as his thoughts drifted home. The fate of his entire species was in his hands, and time was running out. Chances were he wouldn't survive the next few hours. But he was out of options. Live or die, the Mok'tu had to be stopped. His life, or the lives of billions? The choice was clear.

Nick stood up and headed out the door, running face-first into Arya as she rounded the corner of the corridor.

Startled, Arya's hand landed against Nick's chest as they collided. "There you are. I was looking for you." She pulled away from him slightly, but with obvious hesitation. Her hand lingered long on his chest as she looked into his pale blue eyes.

"Arya," Nick sputtered. "I was hoping I would see you before I...go." He paused, not wanting to acknowledge the deadly reality of his plan. "If I don't make it back, I just wanted to thank you. For everything."

Something more was gnawing at him. It was silly, really. But if he didn't say it now, he may not get another chance. "You know, I've been wanting to tell you what the word *Aria* means on my world, but I just never seemed to get the chance. It refers to a beautiful song. A graceful melody that floats on air and delights the senses. It's a fitting name for you."

Arya stared up at the strange creature she had come to know as friend. If only she were stronger, she could force back the tears she felt forming on her lashes. But for some reason when it came to Nick, she had very little strength. Through her tears, she smiled. If only there was more time.

The gift in Arya's pocket shifted slightly, pulling her back to the cold reality of their situation. She reached down and plucked a small, gold amulet from her pocket and held it out. "Here, I want you to have this. It is considered by my people to be lucky." She held the necklace up, letting the exquisitely crafted amulet dangle in front of her. "This amulet is said to contain water that was blessed by the very first Queen of Aris. I've had it since I was a child."

Nick looked into Arya's sad, green, alien eyes as she placed the amulet around his neck. She stood so close he could feel the warmth of her body, smell the subtle fragrance of perfume that drifted from her neck, drawing him silently towards her. He resisted the urge to reach out to her and instead only muttered an awkward "Thanks."

Her eyes locked with his and they stared silently at one another. This could very well be the last time they would ever see each other, and words were simply too inadequate to express the depth of emotions they held inside.

Nick finally broke the gaze. "I'm ready. You know what to do with this." He held out his hand and opened his fingers to reveal the diamond memory card containing his recorded message.

Arya took the card and cradled it in her hand. "Don't worry," she reassured him. "We will launch the hyperspace probe along the coordinates you specified. It will transmit your recording into hyperspace repeatedly for months before running out of power. I'm sure your people will get the message."

Nick's plan was a long shot at best. He hoped Earth would be conducting more research based on the data he'd collected during his first mission. With luck, a pilot from a follow-up mission could track the signal, find the probe and retrieve the data crystal. From Nick's calculations, hyperspace should amplify the radio waves, extending the transmission's range and increasing the odds of them locating the probe. The information on the crystal should be sufficient enough to scare the military into thinking twice about continuing their Hyperspace research program.

Arya watched as Nick turned and marched down the long corridor toward the hangar bay and his uncertain future. Her heart sank as he rounded the bend at the far end of the hall. She felt her mouth form his name, but only a whisper left her lips. The tension in her throat would allow no more. What was wrong with her? She couldn't seem to think straight. This strange human creature called Nick had her emotions running rampant. Emotions she had never felt before. All she could think of was how she just couldn't bear to see him die.

She fought the desire to run after him, stop him. If only there was another way, any other way. But she knew this was the only hope they had of saving her people and countless millions of lives on other worlds. She had no choice. No choice at all. Brave Nick. One day they would erect monuments in his name and rejoice. But not today.

Helmet in hand Nick hurried through the doors of the hangar bay. The hyperspace module sat prepped and ready for his departure. Rows of bright lights along the broad curved ceiling of the hangar gleamed off the alien propulsion system that had been recently retrofitted

to the back of his craft. The golden hue of the new tri-tanium engine casings stuck out like a sore thumb against the module's white exterior. It wasn't pretty, but the new engines sure beat the pants off the old chemical rocket propulsion for both speed and range.

Nick started around the module then stopped abruptly. A smile broke over his face as he stared at the module's nosecone. Karg's massive alien body rose up from behind the craft. A splotch of red paint clung to the side of his cheek. Nick stared at the paint.

Karg raised one boney brow. "What? Don't you like it?"

Nick grinned from ear to ear. "It's perfect. Thanks, Karg."

It was an Earth tradition for war planes to have painted nosecones. His father's old Starfighter was no exception. Nick had taped a photo of the Starfighter to the dash of the module, in honor of his father, and in hopes that some of dad's luck would rub off on him. Karg had always been fascinated by the picture of that old Starfighter, and had taken it upon himself to replicate the ship's markings. In pretty good detail, too. An open mouth full of sharp teeth now adorned the front of the module, making it look like a big, fat great white shark. It was a nice gesture. One that made Nick feel a little closer to home. At least it helped diffuse the tension of his final moments, and for that he was grateful.

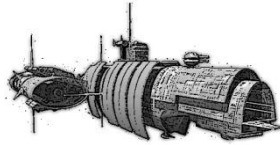
A voice crackled over Nick's com-badge. "If you're going, you better go now. We've just been spotted, and they're moving to intercept."

"Yes, Captain. Launching now. As soon as I leave the bay, get the ship clear of this area. You don't want to be around when I light this thing up."

"Understood. Good luck, Bannon."

With a pat on Karg's back, Nick climbed into the module and strapped himself in. He closed the cockpit canopy and roared out of the hangar bay to face the Mok'tu's massive Star-Killer ship. Alone.

## CHAPTER ONE



*Three Months Earlier....*

Nick Bannon sat in the cramped, one-man cockpit of his Hyperspace vehicle at the designated test coordinates between the Earth and the moon. From his vantage point in space, the view of the Launch complex on the moon was breathtaking. But Nick didn't have any time to enjoy it. He was busy going through his mission checklist. Today was a big day for him. It marked the culmination of years of preparation. This was the only shot he would have at proving his hyperspace theory. The military big-wigs had only allocated enough funding for one mission. If he didn't obtain some positive results from this test-flight, he wouldn't get another chance.

Nick reached to flip the final switch in preparation for the flight and accidentally bumped his elbow on the side of the tiny cockpit. Pain shot down his arm and buzzed to his fingertips. He winced but remained focused on his task. He was accustomed to the cramped conditions. Nick practically grew up in one cockpit or another. As a kid on his father's knee, the inside of a fighter cockpit seemed as big as his childhood dreams. Not so much anymore. It would be nice to have a little extra elbow room, but that kind of luxury wasn't in the budget. For now, he'd just have to deal with the cockpit's small size.

Hoping that all the equipment worked as planned, he took a deep breath and radioed mission control. "Serenity Base, I am go for hyperspace deployment."

"Roger, Hyper One, you are clear for field deployment. Godspeed."

After a final check of his instruments, Nick flipped the switch that armed the field generator. "Switching on telemetry now."

"Telemetry looks good, Hyper One."

Nick glanced over at the photo of his father that he had stuck to the console earlier. It was his favorite picture. There was good ol' dad, standing proudly in front of his Starfighter, flight suit zipped, helmet under one arm. The picture had been taken shortly before the Moon War. "I wish you were here to see this, dad."

He looked out the window one last time at the thin veil of atmosphere surrounding the planet below and once again tried to quell his uneasiness. "Piece of cake. Be home in time for dinner."

"Say again, Hyper One. Your transmission was garbled."

"Sorry, Serenity. Just talkin' to myself." Nick took another deep breath and focused back on the mission at hand. The smell of cold, oxygenated air filling his lungs was somehow



comforting. It took him back to a simpler time, back when his father used to let him pretend to be a fighter pilot. He smiled at the picture on the dash. Those were the days. But there would be time for reminiscing later. Right now he had a job to do.

“Initiating hyperspace field in three...two...one....” He threw the last switch. A strange bluish glow danced outside the windows and lit up the cockpit as the instruments began collecting data.

“Serenity, you seein’ this?”

“Roger, Hyper One. Data looks good. My God, this is incredible!”

The sound of cheers rolling through the mission control center erupted over Nick’s headset. Flight control team members chattered in the background as they worked furiously to make sense of the readings. Then a familiar calm voice came over the channel.

“Don’t lose your head, Bannon. How does it look for phase two?” It was Phil, the flight director.

“I’m on it. Adjusting field strength for optimal insertion. Window now at optimal.”

“Go on phase two,” Phil replied over the radio.

“Launching probe now, Serenity.” Nick reached for the launch button. Just before he hit the switch, a loud warning signal went off. The sudden sound scared the living daylight out of him. Startled, he jerked back, accidentally hitting his hand against the cockpit window.

“Son of a bitch!” Regaining his composure, he looked down at the single red light flashing rapidly on the instrument panel.

Serenity Base broke in. This time Phil’s voice had a tone of concern. No one else would have caught the minor inflection in his voice, but Nick had heard this tone before. Something was wrong. “Hyper One, we’re reading an incoming solar flare. Do you copy, Hyper One?”

“Yeah, copy that, Serenity.”

A solar flare could burn out the instruments, and his project would literally be toast. He reached for the abort switch when suddenly the blue glow outside turned into a blinding white light, obscuring all view of the cockpit switches.

“Damn!” Adrenaline surged through Nick’s veins as he fumbled blindly in the direction of the abort switch. Then everything went black.



Nick pried one eye halfway open then let it fall shut again. *Where the hell am I?* He struggled to sit up, but his arms and legs just lay there like limp, wet noodles.

His brain scrambled to make sense of what had happened to him, but the screaming pain in his skull made it impossible to focus. *Ah, geez, it feels like my skull's going to explode.*

Nick reached his hand toward his aching head.

*Clank!* The sound of his space suit glove hitting his helmet startled and confused him.

“What the hell?” One eye opened fully, then the other. He jerked himself upright. “Crap, I’m in space!”

Suddenly bits and pieces of the mission wiggled their way into his conscious mind. The launch. The warning signal. The white light! He must have blacked out.

Struggling to overcome his spinning head, Nick radioed mission control. "Serenity Base.... Serenity, come in."

Only an eerie silence answered his plea. "Serenity?"

One flip of the radio dial confirmed his fears. Not a sound on any channel. Not even the usual satellite telemetry.

"Great, the radio's fried!" Trying to calm himself, Nick sucked in a tense breath then slowly released it.

A red glow emanating from outside drew his attention. "What the *hell*...." Outside the cockpit window, he could see...something. But it wasn't space. Or at least not any space he'd ever seen before. The only thing visible in every direction was an odd, pulsating, reddish hue. No stars, no Moon.... No Earth!

"Shit!" He could handle just about anything fate threw at him, but this? Red as far as the eye could see, and no Earth? "Damn, that ain't right. Serenity?"

He made another frantic check of the instrument panels. "Serenity, please respond." Again, nothing but static answered.

The cold, hard truth of his situation crept slowly into his brain. "I must be in hyperspace!" He stared at the pulsating crimson hue beyond the window. "This...*has* to be hyperspace." If he wasn't so damn scared, he'd be excited. For years he had dreamed of seeing the inside of hyperspace. But right now it was the last place he wanted to be.

He wasn't even sure if anything could survive in hyperspace. Little was known about hyperspace at all. One theory described it as a second dimension overlapping the known universe. Two dimensions existing in the same place at the same time. That theory—similar to wormhole theory—would allow communication, or even space travel, in a fraction of the time. A shortcut in space-time, theoretically. It would explain why entangled particles appeared to interact at speeds faster than light. And here he sat, smack in the middle of that big ole theoretical dimension.

"It's no theory anymore," he muttered. Another sigh heaved from his lungs as he let his head drop back against the headrest. He could just see the headlines now. *Boy Wonder makes history by discovering hyperspace, dies before he can tell anyone.* "Yeah, just brilliant, Nick."

Overwhelmed by thoughts and fears, he stared out of the window at the barren red dimension surrounding him.

*Oh God, what if I'm dead?* Nick gave his head a quick shake. "Snap out of it!"

"Think, Nick, think." He could clearly see that the hyperspace generator had been turned off. According to the readings, he had managed to hit the abort, but it was too late. The module had been sucked into hyperspace before the generator could shut down. The added energy from the solar flare must have opened the window enough for his ship to be pulled in.

Just a few moments ago he'd been safely cruising the Lagrange point between Earth and the Moon. Now he was lost in a sea of undulating red hues. How the hell was he going to get home? Was it even possible to get home? One thing he knew for sure, he was on his own. There was no hope of being rescued from hyperspace. He hadn't prepared for this contingency. As if he *could* have prepared for this. The ship's supplies were limited. A bottle of water, a protein bar, and enough oxygen for a short mission. That's all he had. He would only last hours, at most a day, if he couldn't find a way out of this hyperspace wasteland.

He tried to remain calm as he pondered his own mortality. What a stupid way for it all to end. But Nick had never been one to give up easily. After thinking over his options, he took a deep breath and flipped his helmet visor down. The only thing he could do now was attempt to open another window. A window back to normal space-time. Maybe. Hopefully. He wasn't sure of anything at this point. This was all new, and so very little was known about hyperspace. Was it even possible to open a window from within hyperspace? Would it be big enough to get through?

The unique sound of Velcro broke the silence as he pulled the flap on the chest of his spacesuit. He reached into his pocket and rubbed the lucky coin that he had safely tucked there before the launch. The familiar feel of the good luck charm between his fingers somehow helped him gather his courage.

"Better to die quick than suffocate in hyperspace."

Deciding he had no other option, he turned the hyperspace generator on to full intensity. To his surprise a circular disc appeared in front of him. The spiraling disc expanded rapidly, opening a huge hole in the center as it grew. Stars peeked through from the other side of the open hole.

"Thank God," he sighed, relieved to see something familiar again. "Please let this be my ticket home."

Suddenly the radio came to life with the chatter of multiple voices. "*Grhorykz satyra komas terok ka nok.*"

Nick turned up the volume and listened carefully to the strange voices. "What the...? What language *is* that?"

Nick was only fluent in English. But he'd been exposed to quite a few languages during his stint with the International Space Alliance. What he was hearing on the radio was unlike anything he had ever heard before. It sounded like Russian, only backwards.

"Hjasd kuscv kasemd."

*What the hell language is that?* He tried the radio again, hoping to hear a familiar voice. "Serenity Base, come in. Serenity, respond please."

As his module neared the window into normal space, he caught movement out of the corner of his eye. Something large and fast had entered the window from the top left and was on a direct collision course with the module! He instinctively rolled right, punched the throttle, and cleared the window just in time to avoid getting hit. A shadow passed over his module as the massive object blocked out the sun.

"Damn that was big!" He banked the ship to get a better look.

As he came around, the view out of the cockpit window almost left him speechless. "Uh, Serenity? Serenity, are you reading this?" he stammered in disbelief.

*This couldn't be possible!* But there was no denying it. A large alien spaceship had plunged halfway into the hyperspace window. A really *huge* ship. The kind of ship that made Earth's biggest transport ships look like mosquitoes. Nick stared with his mouth wide open. Following close behind the massive ship was a second, slightly smaller vessel. The two were locked in battle, exchanging weapons-fire. Brightly colored flashes blazed across the inky backdrop of space, exploding on impact with their intended targets. It all looked like a scene from the old sci-fi archives he used to watch—that vid of rebels fighting against the evil empire.

"I must be dreaming," he muttered, still staring slack-jawed at the massive ships. Nick figured that any second he'd wake up all sweaty with his dog Mooch slobbering on his face, wanting to go for a walk. "Yeah, that's it, just dreaming," he said, hoping to convince himself.

*Boom!* A bright flash of green light washed over the cockpit. The module shook violently, jarring Nick out of his daze. Sparks flew from the console as a ship not much bigger than the module buzzed by at blazing speed.

*Kaboom!* A huge explosion, the magnitude of a nuclear blast, came from the direction of the large ships. The blast lit up the module's cockpit with an intense yellow glow. Nick jerked his head around to see what had happened. The hyperspace window had collapsed with one of the ships partway through it. The immense forces tore the giant vessel to pieces in a second. Hit by the debris, the second ship broke in two. Waves of explosions rippled across the torn and twisted sections of the ship as they tumbled through space. A quick glance at the instrument panel confirmed his suspicions. The field generator was dead. Whatever they had fired at him had fused the circuits in the generator.

*Boom!... Boom!... Boom!* Three more blasts hit the module. "Shit!" It was all happening so fast there was no time to think. He was under attack, that much he was sure of, and he wouldn't last long if he didn't do something quick. Dammit, the module wasn't designed for this kind of pounding. No weapons, thin titanium-aluminum shell, and if those blasts hit the fuel... "I'm dead."

The module was only a science ship. Fly straight, run an experiment for half an hour, and then head home. "You would think just once one of my plans would go right," he muttered as his eyes searched the surrounding space for something, anything that would help.

Then he spotted his escape.

"Asteroids! Perfect. You bastards don't know what you're in for. You just shot at the wrong guy!" Nick Bannon was good at flying by the seat of his pants. In the past he had spent a fair amount of time hot-dogging it around the moon. Lately all he could get away with was a little free time in the flight simulator. Now all those late nights spent goofing-off in the simulator, seeing how many Gs the module could take before ripping apart, was about to pay off.

Nick steered for the asteroids. He quickly avoided one then banked and rolled around the next. There was no time to ponder who was attacking him. All he had on his mind was saving his own butt by whatever means necessary.

*Boom!* A blast of enemy fire blew chunks out of a nearby asteroid. Lumps of rock slammed into the module, causing minor damage to the starboard side. The impacts shook Nick in his seat. "That's not good." Those chunks of rock could kill him as easily as enemy fire.

*Focus. You can shake these guys.* Nick pushed the module to its limit and beyond. He knew engineers usually covered their asses by adding safety margins to their calculations, and he was betting the module could withstand more than the simulator program said it could.

The attacking ships hung in close, trying to get in a lucky shot. Sweat streamed down Nick's face as he attempted to out-fly his mysterious opponents. With a burst from the forward thrusters, he abruptly reduced speed and pulled up hard, sending the blood to his feet. The space suit squeezed his legs tight in an attempt to keep enough blood in his head to prevent a blackout. But the pursuing ships clung like beggar lice. The pilots following him were good. Too good. Maybe, just maybe, he was out-matched.

As the blood was forced from his head by the intense Gs, Nick's vision began to fade. He squeezed his glutes for all it was worth and struggled to stay conscious against the loss of oxygen to his brain. Just at the edge of unconsciousness, a bright flash lit up the asteroid field. This time the flash was orange. It could only mean one thing. One of the attacking ships had been destroyed by an impact with an asteroid.

Nick pushed back on the stick just enough to let some blood get back to his brain. His attackers were learning, adapting to his maneuvers and anticipating his moves. But one thing that they didn't count on was his unpredictability. Flying by instinct and only guessing at the outcome was what had given him a reputation as a risk taker. Some just saw him as crazy. Others thought he was some genius hot-dog pilot. His friends called him '*Bannon the cannon.*' But some at the I.S.A. liked to refer to him as '*loose cannon.*'

He rounded one small asteroid, then another. In front of him, a huge rock tumbled head-on towards him, its ice-crystal covered surface glistening in the light of a distant star. Nick smiled. This was going to be close.

The enemy anticipated his next move. They expected him to roll and pull up hard to clear the asteroid. Instead, Bannon pushed down on the stick in a last ditch effort to outsmart them. Firing the top thrusters, he attempted to clear the massive rock upside-down. Blood rushed to his head from the negative Gs. His eyes felt like they were going to leave his skull, like corks from a popgun. The straps over his shoulders strained to hold his body in the seat as the surface of the asteroid whizzed by above him. Then everything started to go red. Too much blood to his brain. He had pushed himself into a redout. It was a potentially deadly situation. Consciousness slowly began to slip away. He fought against the blackness overtaking his brain. "Just a little more." He only needed to hold it together for a few more seconds and then he'd be clear of the killer rock.

The unexpected tactic had the enemy pilots scrambling to reacquire their target. Caught by surprise, they rolled over in a desperate attempt to keep sight of the module. In the chaos, they didn't notice the small, fast moving chunk of ice-encrusted rock barreling in on a rogue trajectory. The rock plowed into the lead ship, driving the sleek craft sideways into its wingman. Both pursuing ships lost control and slammed into the huge, oncoming asteroid. The explosion was the last thing Nick remembered before passing out. And passing out in an asteroid field was the last thing he wanted to do.

He was only unconscious for a moment before a piece of debris glanced off the cockpit cowling, creating enough noise to rouse him from his slumber. Around him hundreds of asteroids floated in an ever-changing landscape, bumping randomly into each other in an unpredictable rock soup.

"Ha, it worked! You're one damn lucky son of a bitch, Nick Bannon," he crowed. He was alive, but he needed to get out of this asteroid field before his luck ran out. If he could just shake off the grogginess. Nick struggled to focus his eyes on the instrument panel. He needed to get the tumbling module stabilized before he had an up close and personal meeting with an asteroid. With a few well timed bursts from the thrusters, he was able to right the craft and proceed on course to what looked to be the edge of the massive floating cluster of rocks.

As he reached the far side of the field, he rounded a massive icy asteroid. From behind the huge, floating boulder, the silhouette of a ship came into view. "You gotta' be kiddin' me!" Would he ever get a break?

Upon second glance, the ship seemed to be lying there motionless. The unknown alien craft was large. Smaller than the huge vessels he'd seen earlier, but still much bigger than anything from Earth.

Earth. Where *is* Earth? His attention shifted to his family back home. By now, they must be worried and wondering what had happened to him.

"I guess Hank's going to win that bet, after all. He may have trouble collecting though." Nick let out a half-hearted chuckle. But his feeble attempt at humor did nothing to cheer him up. The reality of the situation was beginning to sink in. "Damn, where the *hell* am I, anyway?"

A survey of the surrounding star patterns led him to a disturbing conclusion. The lack of recognizable constellations meant he was nowhere near Earth, and the ugly truth was he could be anywhere in the *galaxy*. He could have even popped out of hyperspace into an alternate universe. Until today, hyperspace was only theoretical. No one had ever traveled through it, and he didn't have a clue about what would happen when he came out. He could have ended up anywhere, or even in any *time*.

The view of the massive ship through the cockpit window drew Nick's attention again. He was low on fuel and oxygen. He needed help and he needed it now. Still he hesitated over the crazy idea rolling around in his brain. The idea was risky, maybe even stupid, but it could be his only chance. Would he die in space, or let himself be captured by what was clearly an advanced and hostile alien life form?

"Nope. Bad idea!" Nick quickly pulled away from the alien ship. The module turned slightly and then stopped responding. He yanked the joystick over hard, trying to steer clear. It was no use, he was being drawn in. No matter how much thrust he gave it, he was caught in... something. With an almost painful slowness, his craft was being pulled closer to that massive craft. To what fate he was uncertain. If it was anything like the old sci-fi videos he'd watched over the years, he could be facing a gruesome opponent that was intent on separating his head from his neck, eating his brain, and using his spine as a wall decoration.

*Damn his indecision!* His hesitation had cost him any choice in the matter. Like it or not, he was going in. Trapped like a fly in a spider's web, he anticipated the inevitable doom that surely awaited him.

A tingle of fear ran up his spine and his gut clenched as gruesome scenarios danced through his mind. One thing for sure, he wasn't going down without a fight.

As the module was drawn closer, Nick had time to assess the massive vessel ahead of him. Smooth metal skin covered its exterior—similar to the look of titanium but with an odd golden-brown hue. It was a sleek vessel compared to those of Earth. Three pods near the rear of the craft appeared to be engines. Waves of electrical discharges rippled across a gap in the metal exterior of one engine pod, where it had obviously sustained damage. From within a gash in the side of the ship's hull, a ruptured pipe spewed some sort of green vapor into space. Several gun mounted turrets were also visible, attached at strategic locations around the ship.

Nick's mind was caught somewhere between amazement and terror as a large door suddenly opened in the side of the ship. The module was slowly being pulled toward the open door. Panic set in. There was nowhere to run except straight ahead, straight at his captors. "Like a cornered coon," he muttered.

Nick couldn't see any alternative but to get out of the module with fists swinging and hope he got lucky. Maybe he could take them by surprise. These aliens had already tried to kill him once. He wasn't about to give them another chance.

A shadow fell over the module as it steadily made its way through the gaping doorway of the ship. Once inside, the door slid closed, sealing Nick and his hyperspace vehicle in a large bay. A metal arm swooped up from below and cradled the module in a huge mechanized hand. It was as if a giant reached up and gently grabbed his ship. The arm smoothly glided the module deeper into the hangar bay. Ahead of him, some type of translucent electrical field stretched across the entire width of the enormous hangar. It looked similar to static on a vid-com when the signal was lost, only this hung in mid-air, sectioning off a portion of the bay.

Nick's heart jumped into his throat when he spotted something moving beyond the field of bluish, translucent static. As his ship passed through the strange barrier, shadowy figures took positions at the end of the bay. He peered hard into the dim light ahead of him, but he couldn't tell what he was seeing. There was definitely something there, lurking in the shadows. But what? It wasn't anything recognizable. Not humanoid, that's for sure.

Blood surged through his veins from the adrenaline being dumped into his system. He could feel his heart pounding out a message in his arteries, drumming the word *run* into his brain. Fear was preparing his body for flight. But there was nowhere to run. He was stuck like bubblegum on a shoe.

"Focus." If he was going to survive this, he needed to stay focused.

The module finally came to rest a couple of feet off the ground. To the left, a mechanical device lurched out of the darkness to position itself alongside the craft. The shiny device had three long, jointed legs with wheels attached to the bottom. It stopped abruptly and spun in place to face him. The metal machine resembled a three legged mechanical spider with some sort of creature seated in the middle. The legs of the device extended, raising it up to eye level. Sitting atop the device, a grotesque alien creature peered over a holographic display, its four eyes locked on Nick. Nick recoiled in disgust, releasing a gasp of shock and disbelief.

The slimy alien blob had four eyes and two puny arms. Each of its small hands had only three digits, which firmly gripped controls on either side of the seat. If the alien had any legs, they weren't visible from where Nick sat. The slimy blob-like thing was covered in some clear, mucus-like substance. If this had been one of those silly made-up creatures on a sci-fi vid-show, he would have just laughed. But this was real and sitting only twenty feet away. The mechanical device in which the creature rode had what appeared to be gun barrels mounted on either side, each pointed directly at Nick. The alien was definitely in a defensive posture, waiting for him to open the hatch.

A strong voice suddenly echoed from the opposite side of the module.

"Hatu katuk ragish zoktu surrik!"

Startled, Nick turned to see where the voice originated and promptly wished he'd stayed in bed that morning instead of hopping in a module to prove a theory. Standing nearby was the scariest thing he had ever seen. Twice the size of a full grown man, with four muscular arms, it was his worst nightmare on steroids.

Until this point Nick had harbored some hope. But now, looking at this monstrous alien, a little voice inside him whimpered something about his balls being in a sling. He winced at the thought of all the pain this *thing* was going to inflict on him. His plan to fight was quickly

replaced by Plan B. He would try to appear as non-threatening as possible and beg for his life. He was no wimp, but he knew there was a fine line between brave and stupid. He'd learned plenty of lessons about that. Back home, as a kid, the neighborhood gang had made him feel like a sissy running from trouble, until his father told him about the great Chinese warrior Sun Tzu, who had said: "He will win who knows when to fight and when not to fight." No matter what other people might say, a tactical retreat or surrender was nothing to be ashamed of. It was always better to live to fight another day, when things were more in your favor.

Nick Bannon, big shot astronaut, scientist, and theory-prover, reached over to open the cockpit of his experimental hyperspace module but paused momentarily to look at his hand. It was trembling. His hand was actually trembling. The surreal sight took him by surprise. He'd never had the shakes before.

Another impatient grunt from the beast outside prompted Nick into action. With some effort, he grabbed his shaky wrist and guided his fingers over to the release latch. The canopy popped open and hinged upward, leaving him feeling more exposed than ever. He released his harness, tossed his helmet to the floor, and slowly, painfully climbed out of the cockpit and down onto the deck of the hangar.

"Oh God, please let me get through this," he mumbled as his feet hit the floor.

Raising his arms above his head, he turned to face his destiny. The large creature flinched and grasped its weapon tighter.

"Huktur akak! Huktur akak!" it said in a thundering voice.

The four-armed alien appeared to be getting more agitated by the second. Nick raised his hands higher into the air, hoping the creature would understand that he was surrendering. The big alien responded with a loud snort and then took aim at Nick's chest.

Nick's eyes flared wider. So much for the standard Earth surrender posture. Apparently the act of holding his hands above his head was considered a threatening move. Cautiously, Nick lowered his arms. His heart pounded so fast that time seemed to slow. As he stood there frozen with fear, his brain raced to process the new extraterrestrial landscape before him. The alien thing standing in front of him held a rifle of some kind with its two upper arms. The large creature was bipedal like a human but looked more like a mythical Ogre than anything else. A four armed Ogre with a thick, rough, elephant-like hide. Its head was devoid of hair and twice the width of Nick's. Its ears were small and laid flat to its skull. The beast seemed to have no neck. The muscles just flowed from its head to its massive shoulders. The alien's big red eyes, protected beneath a large, boney eyebrow ridge, were trained intently on Nick. The edges of its mouth turned downward, with one lip raised like a snarling dog showing a few of its large teeth. It was easy to see this thing meant business.

"Huktur akak! Huktur akak!"

The strength and suddenness of the creature's voice took Nick's breath away. "Don't shoot. I mean you no harm."

"Huktur akak! Huktur akak!"

"I don't understand.... My name is Nick Ban—"

"Hakak uratus octu!" the creature yelled, sounding more urgent than ever.

Nick lowered his head and got down onto his knees. The creature took a couple of quick steps toward him. Nick felt the floor vibrate beneath him with each mighty footstep. He cringed, turning his head slightly to prepare for what was coming. *Oh God, this is it*, he thought.



Suddenly, powerful hands grasped Nick firmly around each of his arms and hoisted him off the floor. Much to his own surprise, Nick let out half of a scream before a third hand grabbed his throat. There he hung at the mercy of this thing, this massive alien killing machine. He tried to speak but could only manage a murmur. The beast was now face to face with him, studying him. Its powerful, hot breath blew across Nick's skin as it leaned in to examine the insignia on his suit.

"Arak turyk tomnu?" it said.

"Karou sactimous heratzu," answered the other creature that had now moved in closer.

The two looked at each other then back at Nick. The huge alien tilted its head, seemingly puzzled by Nick's appearance, as if it were trying to figure out what Nick was and where he came from. The two alien creatures exchanged a few more words and then the massive one carried him to a dimly lit room where he was abruptly dropped on the floor. The two extraterrestrials then turned and quickly exited the room.

Nick fell to his knees choking and trying desperately to take a good breath, his heart pumping furiously. At least he was still alive. As he knelt there catching his breath, he peered around at the dreary room. Nothing but a single beam of light shone down onto the center of the metal floor, obscuring the dark corners from view. Glancing over at the doorway, Nick spotted an electrical field similar to the one his ship had passed through earlier. The field filled the doorway, blocking his exit.

"A force field? Holy crap, it's a damn force field!" Nick stood up and walked toward the door, nervously looking around the dark room as he went. A sound from one of the shadowy corners spun him around in fear. He froze. *Crap, is there something else in here?* A few jaw clenching minutes later he determined that the noise had only been the scuff of his boot echoing off the wall. Relieved, he turned his attention back to the force field—keeping an ear tuned for anything that may come up from behind him, just in case.

After studying the shimmering static for a moment he noticed that the field emitter apparatus looked like it had been added recently. It appeared to have been retro-fitted to the outside of the door, and rather hastily at that.

Impulsively, he reached out with one finger and touched the field. *Zap!* Instantly, a painful shock traveled up his arm to his chest and then shot all the way down to his feet. The shock knocked him back several feet into the room and onto his ass. "Son of a...mmm...mm...dammit!" He bit his lip in pain. The shock left him rolling around on the floor in agony for a few minutes.

"Stupid son of a bitch! I gotta stop touching stuff."

Nick was busy examining his arm, hoping the tingle would eventually go away, when he heard a noise. *Zzzt.* He looked up and saw that the field had vanished from the doorway. In walked big-nightmare-alien-thing again, so big that he had to duck his head as he came through the doorway. *Now what?* Nick's brain screamed. *So much for a quick death, they're going to torture me and...*

"Whoa! What...who is that?"

From behind the huge behemoth stepped an alien so human-like that Nick's brain seized up for a second. He was in shock. It was a girl! At least he *thought* it must be a girl. She was thin and only slightly shorter than Nick. Her arms and legs were a bit longer than a human's and her skin had an odd greenish tint to it. He also detected a pattern on her skin, like that of a

Leopard, with splotches of darker green running down the top of her arms. The female alien carried two small devices with her as she entered. Nick watched her move. She was even more graceful than a human girl. Her long legs carried her fluidly across the floor. Her gait wasn't so much a walk as a glide. The hair on her head was about shoulder length and mirrored the Leopard-like markings on her skin. Most definitely cat-like. Even her big, bright green eyes looked like a cross between a human and a cat. She was absolutely stunning. Alien, definitely. But stunning.

Her eyes had Nick's attention from the moment she stepped into the room. Her gaze was fixed on him with wide-eyed wonder, like a kitten focusing on something just before it pounces. One of her pointed ears occasionally twisted to the side as she listened to noises undetectable to him. Her cute little nose twitched at the smell of the new human species before her. Surprisingly Nick didn't feel scared. In her presence, he actually felt somewhat calm. Maybe because she seemed less threatening than the other aliens, or perhaps because she was so much like a human girl, he wasn't sure. In her eyes he thought he saw a glint of compassion, and for some reason he just felt that she wouldn't harm him.

"Sharaku atpa hurakti?" As soon as she spoke, Nick relaxed even more. She had a much more pleasing voice than the other aliens.

"I am Nick Bannon. Can you understand me?"

The female tilted her head slightly and blinked her big green eyes. She held up the two devices she had carried in with her.

"Shaktu herak." She brought the devices closer to Nick's face.

Nick instinctively leaned away. "No, wait. What are you doing?"

The large alien grunted and took an aggressive step toward Nick.

"Okay, okay." Nick agreeably leaned forward again.

The female took one of the devices and held it about six inches away as she slowly moved it around Nick's head. Then she ran it down the front side of him and up the back. From a glance at the other device in her hand he could see that it must be some kind of scanner.

She turned to the big alien still guarding the door.

"Skakturu hepadite uruktu."

"Hakrutu arkinek," it replied.

Mister Ugly Ogre Face stepped over and grabbed Nick's head with one hand, turning and leaning it to the side. Nick struggled uselessly against its grip. He was like a ragdoll in its powerful hands. Quickly, the female removed some kind of device from a pouch on her hip and put it to Nick's neck. He felt a sharp sting where she pressed the device against his artery. He flinched, fear pouring into his veins like hot lava. A warm tingly sensation swept through his body. Had he been wrong to trust her? Was this alien female going to kill him right where he stood? Nick fought to control his fear. Never in his life had he felt so utterly helpless. He was completely powerless to do anything.

Then as suddenly as it started, it was over. The two aliens let go of him and stepped back.

"What did you do to me?" Nick touched his neck with his fingers, the sting now slowly fading. Were they waiting for him to fall to the floor and die? Did they inject him with something? They could easily kill him without doing that. Was he a guinea pig for some hideous experiment? What the hell was going on? His mind raced, but all he could do was sit there, his

head reeling with fear. Everything turned into a blur. His life and all the bizarre events of that day whirled furiously around in his head. Nick's eyes searched frantically around the room for something, anything that would make a difference. But there was nothing that could help him now. A tingle crept over his head unlike anything he had ever experienced before. Resigned to his wretched fate, he finally collapsed to the floor. So this is it? This is the end? He was so young, he had so many plans. He wasn't ready to die yet. He desperately wanted to see his friends and family again. Overwhelmed by it all, and too helpless to do anything, he waited.

He flinched when a hand touched his shoulder.

"Jeez!" He spun and looked up to realize it was the female. Her eyes had a look of sorrow, as if she could feel the terror he was going through. Slowly, as if deliberately trying not to alarm him further, she reached up and touched her head.

"Harak," she said.

Nick stared at her. He couldn't understand what she was trying to tell him. She touched her ears and motioned to Nick as if to get him to do the same. Nick touched his ears. The alien female smiled. She touched her ears again and said "Aeroks."

Nick replied "Aeroks?"

Her eyes scrunched into an appealing squint as a look of frustration spread across her face. She pointed at his mouth and then to her ears.

Realization dawned on Nick slowly. "Ah! Ears," he said, then touched his own ears again. She smiled and said "Aeroks."

She continued the same process with her arms and legs. Each time she would nod slightly when he said the accompanying word in English. When she had finished she handed Nick a device. He looked it over. It was small, compact, lightweight and displayed an image of a planet on a holographic screen. The planet didn't look familiar. Why was she showing it to him?

She pointed to the screen and then to Nick's mouth.

"Planet?" He shrugged, a little uncertain now.

She smiled and pushed a button on the device. A new image appeared. Again she pointed.

Nick was starting to understand. She was going through a language program. But it wasn't for him to learn *their* language. Funny thing was they didn't seem to be trying to learn *his* language either. The whole scene was puzzling, but at this point Nick was just happy to still be alive. So far he hadn't been harmed, just scared out of his mind.

Nick continued through the images, saying the identifying words as he went. When they came upon an image that was unfamiliar to him, the female pressed a button to skip them.

Just when he thought the language lesson would never end, the female stood up and went to the door. She turned and held up her hands. Nick assumed by her gesture that she intended for him to stay put. As the large alien exited the room behind her, the force field appeared across the doorway again.

Nick took a moment to again assess his situation. He was definitely a prisoner, but at least he was alive. Despite his circumstances, the female made him fear his situation a little less. Perhaps it was the compassionate way about her. *Her*...whether she was female was still a guess at this point. She sure looked feminine, but...could he really be certain of that? Hell, he wasn't certain of anything anymore.

A short time later she returned with some water and something that resembled a military food ration bar. How he loathed meal bars. They always left a bad taste in his mouth.

Nick was a beef and potatoes kind of guy, always leery of things like Tai food. But alien food? Now that was a downright scary thought. With as much diplomacy as he could muster, Nick carefully took a nibble of the bar. He held the small piece in his mouth and waited for the flavor to register on his tongue. Surprisingly, it tasted better than it looked.

"Chicken. It tastes like chicken." He grinned. Of course, if it was going to taste like anything, it would be chicken. Still, it wasn't quite chicken, was it? No. It was alien food, made of whatever alien food was made out of. He didn't even want to think about it. He wondered if he would have any trouble digesting it, but in the end the hunger won out. He hadn't had much to eat before going on the mission and quite a long time had passed since that meager breakfast. Glad to have something in his stomach, he wolfed down the rest of the bar.

"Eat."

Nick stopped chewing for a minute and stared at the female creature staring back at him. "Holy.... Did you just say...eat?"

She smiled. "Yeess, eat fraktu."

His gaze was glued to her lips. When she spoke, her mouth didn't seem to move properly. He was hearing English words, but there seemed to be muffled speech in the background. Her mouth moved as if she were saying something completely different than what he was hearing, like one of those old Japanese videos that had been dubbed over in English. He couldn't understand all the words she was saying, but at least it was good to hear something he recognized.

"I can understand you! How?"

"Whee fix you." She pointed to his neck where they had injected him.

"You put something inside me?"

"Yes."

Nick felt a lump form in his throat again. Oh, God! What had they put in him? *Shit!* His heart rate accelerated as fear rose into his chest. "What did you do to me?" he demanded.

"We put transsakor smalaturak."

"What?" Nick shook his head in confusion. "What are you saying?"

The female alien took the image device and typed something into it. She held it up so that Nick could see an image of what appeared to be microscopic robotic machines of some sort.

He pointed feebly at the screen. "You put these in me?"

"Yes. Seee."

She pushed a button and the image changed.

Nick watched as the picture zoomed out and rotated around until he could get a better over-all view. He was looking at an image of some alien brain loaded with thousands, if not millions of miniature machines.

Nick sat back in surprise. Shock and fear twisted his mind almost to the breaking point.

"My God, you put machines in my head? I have alien machines in my head!"

The female looked at him in concern, or what he thought was concern. She seemed to understand his fear. In an attempt to communicate, she quickly put her hands on her head and then pointed to the image.

He looked at her and then back to the image device. "You mean you have these in your head too?"

She looked relieved that he understood. "Yes. All have these."

Nick's brain ground around the puzzle slowly. His eyes widened as he began to understand. "Oh! They're translators, aren't they? Those little gizmos in my...our...heads...they're translator devices?"

"Yes!" She touched his forehead gently with one finger. "They learn brain. Get better more later."

"Nanites!"

The female looked at him strangely. Apparently the word didn't translate.

"Holy shit, I have nanites in my head!" Nick was familiar with nanites. He remembered studying them in school. Nano-technology had always fascinated him. Microscopic robotic machines that could do amazing things. But they'd proven too dangerous and had been banned on Earth decades earlier. Back home, nano-technology was still in the early stages, and science had done more harm than good when it came to implementing any new technologies in that field. Earth's scientists just didn't know enough to use nanites safely. Once, some of those little buggers had run out of control and killed a whole town full of people and animals before they had been shut down using a massive EM pulse.

Nick felt like he was going to wet his pants. He could only hope these aliens knew more about nanites than the people back on Earth, because now he had a head full of language-bots roaming freely through his synapses.

"That's why you look like a dubbed Japanese film when you talk," Nick muttered. "Because you *are* dubbed. By those things in my head. You're not really speaking English at all."

If he wasn't so damn afraid, he'd be amazed.

A gruff voice coming over the intercom startled him. "Kurak he ready nouy?"

"Yes he kurak ready," the female replied.

Little by little Nick could understand more words. But the knowledge did nothing to ease his fear, or answer the myriad of questions he had. Where was he? Who were they? What was going to happen to him? With the language technology implanted in his head, maybe now he'd be able to ask. But would they answer?

Zzzt. With a sound like flies hitting an electric debugger, the force field dropped again and that damn big, scary alien ducked into the room. Even worse, it looked directly at him as it stepped closer. The creature reached out and grabbed Nick's arm. Nick instinctively jerked back, but was unable to break free of the alien's strong grip. The beast twisted Nick's arm and pointed toward Nick's wrist.

"What is this ma sheen?"

Nick looked in the direction of the alien's gaze. The damn thing was pointing at his watch. His high-tech, fancy astronaut flight watch.

"It...it's a watch," he stammered. "It shows what time it is."

"How you destroy hurcyrac sheip?" The huge alien said with a booming voice.

Nick frowned in confusion. "I didn't destroy the ship. It was an accident."

"Akseedent? What is akseedent?"

Nick's brain kicked into high gear as he pondered the situation. It seemed that there was more here than met the eye. Whose ship was he on? And who were the guys on those other

ships, the ones he had accidentally destroyed? At this point he didn't know if the other vessels were friend or foe to his captors. Were they going to hold him responsible for destroying those ships? He could be in a whole heaping pile of hell if one of those ships were from this *things* race.

He immediately went into cover-his-own-ass mode. "I did not mean to destroy those ships. That is what accident means. It was unintentional, a mistake. Do you understand?"

"You come through great hole. Hole weapon. Destroy. You know about hole." The alien squeezed Nick's arm harder. The firm grip made Nick nervous. It felt like the beast could snap his bones with one hand if it decided to.

"Great hole? What great h—" Nick's eyes pulled into a squint. "Wait a minute. Are you talking about the hyperspace window?" Shit, how was he going to explain this one?

"Hole is window. I open window, but ship damaged. Hole close. Accident." *Oh great*, he thought. *Now I'm talking like them.*

The alien beast let go of Nick's arm, and it fell limply back to his side. Trying to ease the uncomfortable buzz of pain in his arm, Nick rolled his wrist and repeatedly balled his fist in an attempt to get the blood flowing again.

"You kill enemy. We thank you," the big alien said.

Nick stared at the massive beast in surprise. "They were your enemy?"

An answer came from behind him. It was the female.

"Yes, they came and killed millions our people. The ones they not kill, they enslave. Two races fight each other over territory. Our territory they take."

Nick pondered her words. He was somewhat relieved to realize that this bunch of aliens hadn't been trying to kill him. Instead, it was their enemies that had been doing all the shooting at him. The alien creatures aboard this ship were just caught in the middle of some interstellar war.

The big alien pointed to Nick's pocket. "What is here?"

Nick was momentarily puzzled, uncertain as to what the alien referred to. Then he realized. The coin. But how did the alien even know about his lucky coin? "Oh yeah. The scan, that must be how you know about it." Nick pulled the coin out of his pocket and held it in his palm.

"This is a coin. It's money, what we use to buy things. Do you understand buy?"

"Yes, currency. We also have."

The female broke in. "What your name?"

"Nick...Nick Bannon."

"Well, Nicnic Bannon, I am Arya. This is Karg." She studied him for a long moment, then reached out and touched his hair. She seemed intrigued by the texture of his hair and even wrinkled her nose a little as she rolled a few strands between her fingers. "We have not seen any like you. What species you?" she asked. The wonder in her eyes resembled that of a biologist examining some newly discovered life-form. Nick just hoped his ass never landed on a Petri dish.

"I am Human. From a place called Earth."

"Urt?" She glanced at Karg curiously. Karg looked just as puzzled.

"No, it's..." Nick started to correct her but then stopped himself. Maybe it was better if he didn't say *too* much. After all, he still had no clue who these people...er...aliens were.

“What mean this?” Karg poked the I.S.A. patch displayed on the front of Nick’s flight suit. The power of the alien’s single, huge finger knocked Nick off balance, forcing him to take a step back.

“I.S.A. is an alliance dedicated to peace. It—”

*Beep beep.* Nick’s explanation was cut off as a voice erupted from the com-badges worn by the two aliens. “Karg, Arya, I’m getting anomalous readings from the aft section. Can you go.... Wait, what....I don’t understand. I just lost engine control. I need you two to get down there. Now.”

Arya’s expression changed to one of concern as she looked at Karg. With a low growl, Karg turned and headed to the door.

“We’re on our way, Argos.” Arya glanced back at Nick as she started to leave. “Stay here.” She held up one hand, much like a human telling a dog to stay.

Nick didn’t even get a chance to spit out a response before Arya and Karg disappeared through the doorway.

The force field zapped its way back into position, leaving Nick trapped and helpless to do anything but wonder. No engines and enemy vessels all around did not sound good, and his ass was still on the line. He’d hate to be stuck in an ugly, cold room, unable to save himself should the ship go down. If these aliens couldn’t get the ship fixed, they’d all be cooked.

Feeling frustrated, Nick kicked at the force field and accidentally touched the edge enough to get a good zap that left him reeling backwards and shouting curses at his own stupidity. He hopped around on one foot for a few seconds, his injured foot held gingerly between his hands until his ass plopped onto a low bench. He put his head in his hands and sighed.

“Damn, can my day get any worse?”

## CHAPTER TWO



Faint, hollow thumps rang from a remote part of the ship, bouncing off the walls of the room where he sat. Nick dragged his face out of his hands and listened. The noises reminded him of being on Earth, listening to the sound of distant thunder rumbling through the metal aircraft hangar he'd spent so much time in. Figuring the sounds were coming from the aliens working to repair the ship, Nick decided to use the time to study his surroundings more closely. The dark, drab walls were really more like a prison cell than a room. Through the dim light, he spotted a sink in the corner with a mirror attached to the wall above it. He stood and walked toward the mirror but was startled by his reflection. He peered closer. The stress from the strange events of the day was clearly evident in his haggard face. His dark, normally neat hair stuck up every which way, his blue eyes were blood shot, and he sported a full day's stubble. He hadn't seen dark circles under his eyes like that since his dad died. He was a wreck, and he *felt* even worse than he looked. The drawn face looking back at him brought a morbid sense of reality to his unbelievably bizarre day. He had still been hoping it was all some sort of strange dream, praying that any time now he would wake up safe in his bed after a hard sleep filled with weird nightmares. But the face staring back at him said otherwise.

"You've gone and done it now. How are you going to get out of this one?" he asked his pale reflection. As the words left his mouth, he heard the sound of Arya's voice in the background. She was talking to someone as she approached from down the corridor. The sense of urgency in her voice drew his attention.

"I'm headed to pick up the alien prisoner. I'll meet you on the Bridge."

Karg answered, his voice sounding tinny and distant over Arya's com-badge. "No, Arya! We don't know if he can be trusted. Leave him and get to the Bridge."

Arya paused just down the hall from Nick's room. "Karg, if they steal our prisoner, they will find out what he knows. You know what the Mok'tu would do with that kind of weapon!"

Weapons-fire in the background punctuated Karg's response. "Alright...." *Kawpow*. "But watch him...." *Blang*. "I'm pinned down in Bay Two...." *Ping*. "Be there as soon as I can."

A second later Arya popped around the corner. Nick immediately noticed the pistol in her hand. "Come on. Quickly!" Motioning for Nick to leave the room, she pointed down the corridor. "That way."

Nick proceeded down the corridor with Arya guiding him from behind. How interesting that she called *him* alien. He had been worried about trusting them and yet all this time they were afraid they couldn't trust *him*.

"Stop here," Arya commanded.

Nick obediently stopped.



She pushed a button on the wall, and a door slid open. "Inside."

Nick stepped into the vertical transport tube with Arya behind him.

"Bridge." The tube bolted upwards, surprising Nick with its acceleration. His knees buckled for a second and he had to force himself upright again. Just about the time he managed to straighten, the tube came to an abrupt halt, leaving Nick with the odd sensation of having his stomach thrown upward toward his brains as his weight lightened. As he equalized, the doors opened, revealing a large, although sparsely occupied Bridge. The slimy alien that Nick had seen earlier was stationed off to one side, monitoring his holo-display. From a seat in the center of the room, another alien worked a small control panel. From what Nick could tell, the alien in the middle was from the same race as Arya, only this one was larger and apparently male.

"How the frek did the Mok'tu get on board?" Arya demanded in an angry tone.

Without turning around, the alien in the center of the room answered in a strong, commanding voice. "It's an advanced tactical squad. The coolant leak from engine three must have masked their approach. They came in a Stalker."

"A stealth ship with a Tac Squad? How many?"

"Typical five Mech crew. They breached the hull near Bay Two and managed to cripple the engines. We can't get past them to repair it."

Not even thinking, Nick spoke up. "Why don't you just kill them?"

The alien in the center spun around with a look of surprise and disdain. His eyes flared for a second as his gaze landed on Nick. "Arya? What is *this* doing here?"

"Sorry, Captain Argos." Arya grabbed Nick's arm and yanked him forward. "This is the alien from the hole. We can't allow him or his ship to fall into the hands of the Mok'tu or everything we have worked for would be lost."

The Captain's gaze slid back to Nick as he assessed the situation. Reluctantly, he gave Arya a barely discernible nod of agreement then it was back to business. "You better take a look at this."

A holo-display popped up in front of the Captain. With a voice command, the screen played a vid recording of the Mok'tu entering the hangar bay. From the few seconds of retrieved records, it was easy to see that the squad was searching for something. They were using some kind of small device to narrow in on their target, and that target was obviously Nick's module.

Nick's tension rose. He didn't like what he was seeing. Without that module, he wouldn't have a prayer of getting back to earth.

Upon locating the craft, two Mok'tu immediately started to scan it. A third efficiently took out the hangar bay cameras with a few quick, well aimed blasts from a rifle. Then the screen went blank.

Captain Argos uttered another brief voice command. The holographic image responded by collapsing back into oblivion.

"How did they find us so quickly?" Arya asked.

The Captain's gaze moved to Nick.

Arya turned, her brow lowering. "You! You brought them here!" She raised her pistol toward Nick. A single stride brought her face to face with him, and with astonishing strength, she knocked him to the ground. She landed on top of him, one hand grasping his collar, while

the other held the gun against his chest. Her blinding speed had taken Nick completely by surprise. "And to think I felt sorry for you!"

"Take it easy, Arya," the Captain warned. "He didn't do anything deliberately. The Tac Squad tracked some kind of fuel leak from his craft. That's how they found us."

Arya let go of Nick and stood up, leaving him lying on the floor. She stared down at him for a moment, an odd quirk to her mouth that seemed half smirk half apology. "Sorry."

Nick wasn't happy about the Mok'tu showing interest in his module, nor was he pleased to hear of the fuel leak. He would need every precious drop of fuel that remained in the module's tank to make it home. These aliens didn't appear to have the means to get him to Earth, so the module was his only chance. He sure as hell wasn't going to just let the damn Mok'tu take it.

He winced as he picked himself up off the floor. "Listen, people...er...whatever. Why are we just sitting here? You have weapons. We could take these bastards!"

The female's gaze met his, her mouth moving toward a slight grin. Nick didn't know what to make of her smile. Did she like his eagerness, or did she just think he was being stupid?

As if dealing with a small child, Arya took Nick's arm and gently pulled him aside. "Mok'tu Tac Squads have shields. You can't shoot them."

"Shields? Like the door to the room?" Nick questioned.

"No, the Tac Squad's personal shields only stop energy weapons, like this plasma pistol. Only a ship can generate enough energy for shields like your cell door, shields that can protect against a physical attack."

"So, you can't shoot them, but you can hit them with something?"

"Yes," she answered slowly. "A personal shield allows for normal movement and contact between objects but blocks energy weapons. Otherwise the soldiers would not be able to get close enough to anything to pick it up."

Nick began working out a solution in his head. Growing up as a wunderkind of sorts, he had become accustomed to making the impossible possible. For him, defeat was not an option. The Mok'tu had to have a weakness somewhere. Given enough time, he would find it.

"We could draw them out and hit them from behind. Ambush them," Nick suggested.

Clearly annoyed by Nick's ignorance, Captain Argos interrupted. "This is all pointless. Tac Squads are trained to disable propulsion and hold the area until support arrives. They are very efficient. You can't flush them out, and you can't get close enough to hurt one without becoming a splat on the deck. We don't have much time either. You can bet more Mok'tu forces are on the way." The Captain spun his chair back around and checked the sensor readings.

The sound of the tube doors opening drew Nick's awareness. He didn't even have to look to know who it was. He could tell by the vibration of the floor that Karg was entering the room.

Karg went directly to the Captain. "They're entrenched good, Captain. They have all the access corridors to the aft section welded shut, except for Bay Two."

Nick touched Arya on the shoulder to get her attention. "What about a regular gun? Would that work?"

Arya looked confused by his question. "A what?"

“Gun powder, lead bullet?” He could tell by her expression that she had no idea what he was talking about. “Um, an explosion that pushes a mass through a tube, at a target.”

“My ancestors had such things,” answered Karg. “Long ago, before plasma weapons. We have no such ancient weapons here. Plasma much more efficient, will not punch hole through hull.”

“Can we make one?” Nick questioned. “There has to be *something* on this ship we could use.”

The Captain looked at Nick sternly. “There is no time. Can you create that hole of yours again?”

Nick shook his head. “No. Even if I could get to my ship, the equipment is destroyed.”

Argos looked back at Arya and Karg with his usual commanding gaze. “I need options. If we don’t do something before their Star-Killer gets here...” The Captain stared straight into Arya’s eyes. “I will *blow* this ship before I let them take it.”

Arya took a deep breath and gave Argos an apprehensive nod. “Understood.”

Nick Bannon was not about to let himself fall into the hands of an alien race that even Karg feared. Nor did he plan on going down with the ship. He pointed at Arya’s gun. “Tell me about your plasma pistol.”

Arya looked at the Captain for his approval.

Argos nodded. “Show him.”

She walked over to a smooth, white table protruding from a wall on the right side of the bridge. Pulling the magazine from her gun, she laid it on the table and dismantled the pistol’s chamber. She held up the shiny silver ammo magazine for Nick to examine. “This clip contains the fuel pellets for the plasma reaction and the power source for ignition. Each clip contains 144 rounds.” Reaching down, she picked up the dismantled reaction chamber. “The chamber is where the Quantonium pellet is turned into plasma, which is then held by a magnetic field. The electromagnetic field drives the plasma through the barrel. It all happens very fast.”

“An electromagnetic field? Like a linear accelerator?”

“Yes. You know of such things?”

“Yeah, we use linear accelerators in our rail guns and...” Nick thought for a moment. “That’s it!” His explosive shout startled Arya, and her ears automatically folded back as she flinched. Nick was too focused to even realize that *he* had scared *her* for a change.

“Can you fire the pellet without transforming it into plasma?” Nick queried.

“Yes, but they are very small in mass. They wouldn’t—”

Nick interrupted her. “What would happen if a Quantonium pellet hit something at high speed?”

“It would only make a small reaction, not enough to hurt anything.”

“Damn.... Is there a way to transform the pellet into plasma on impact?”

Arya stared down at the dismantled weapon as she answered. “With the added energy of impact, it may be possible to use...” What Nick was postulating finally coalesced in Arya’s mind. “Ah, I see. That may work.” She quickly turned back toward the center of the Bridge where Karg and the Captain were discussing their plans. “Captain, we may have something.”

Argos turned toward her. “Go on.”

“Sir, I could modify our pulse weapons to fire Quantonium pellets coated with Corminium 80. The range would be limited though.”

Argos lowered his gaze to the floor as he considered the proposal. "That may actually work. The Corminium would add the extra kick needed for a plasma reaction. It would get through the shield and then react on impact with the armor. Good work, Arya."

"Actually, it was his idea, Sir." She turned toward Nick.

Captain Argos looked past Arya at Nick. "If we get through this, I guess we'll owe you. But don't forget it was your ship they traced here." His gaze shifted to Arya. "Get to work. They'll be here soon." Argos then glanced at the four-armed hulk of an alien. "Karg, give them a hand. But if they fail, you know what to do."

"Yes, Sir," Karg replied. As he turned to leave, he motioned to Arya. "Come on. We have to get to storage section twelve."

"But section twelve is near Bay Two." Arya sounded concerned.

Nick called out from the rear of the group as they headed for the tube doors. "Uh...aren't the Mok'tu in Bay Two?"

Without breaking his stride, Karg called back, "The supplies we need are in a room across from Bay Two."

Going down and kicking some Mok'tu butt was alright with Nick, but the team had no effective weapons yet. What were they going to do if they ran into the Mok'tu before they were ready? "Hey, why is it we don't have shields?" Nick asked.

Arya looked back over her shoulder. Nick could tell by her expression that he'd asked a stupid question.

Having arrived at the tubes, Karg opened the tube doors and pushed his bulk inside. Nick and Arya followed, cramming themselves in alongside the beast.

"Only Tac Squads have shields," Arya explained. "And nobody has ever killed or captured a Tac Squad member. Anyone that ever got that close to them didn't survive. We have tried to replicate the tech, but so far we have failed. The power requirements are enormous. Not to mention its adverse effects on living tissue."

"Wait! Did you just say that no one has ever killed one of these things? Never? Not even once?" Nick was astonished.

Arya stared back at Nick. Without her saying a word he knew she was dead serious. The situation was bad and getting worse by the minute. Nick stood in silence, not sure if he wanted to know anything more. Perhaps confronting the Tac Squad was a bad idea, after all.

"Me and my big mouth," he muttered.

Nick's knees buckled as the tube stopped on deck six. The doors zipped open and Nick was pushed out as Karg squeezed out of the tube. Nick reluctantly followed the others as they trudged down the corridor towards their fate. He wasn't so sure he could make the impossible possible this time around, but if he could...if he lived.... Damn, there were a lot of *ifs* rolling around his head.

Nick lagged behind the two. Keeping up with the alien's superior speed was proving difficult. Karg suddenly slowed down and crept up to a corner in the hallway. The beast didn't make a single sound. Even the floor remained still as Karg's feet softly met the ground with each step. How the massive beast could suddenly be so stealthy was beyond Nick's comprehension.

Karg turned and pointed to a door directly across the intersecting corridor. Hunched down to avoid notice, he slowly stepped out into the adjoining passageway, waving for the others to follow him across.

Nick peered around the corner. The hangar bay was only several yards down the hall. He could see straight into the open doorway. Inside, two Mok'tu stood guard over the module, their legs hidden from view by a few crates stacked in the way. The sight of the Mok'tu in person was a whole lot different than watching them on the vid-display. In the vid they looked as though they were wearing armor, but at this distance they appeared to be more like robots than armor clad aliens. Nick froze for a moment, worried they might spot him.

Apparently annoyed by his hesitation, Arya grabbed Nick's wrist and pulled him across the hall and into the supply room. Karg was already busy opening some sturdy containers at the back of the room. The beast carefully removed a metallic bar from one container and set it on top of a crate. Reaching over to a shelf, he grabbed a peculiar looking device out of a box and plopped it down next to the metal bar.

Meanwhile, Arya combed the room in search of something.

"What are you looking for?" Nick asked.

"Tarodine fluid. It's a green liquid in a short cylinder."

After a few minutes of going through boxes of stuff totally foreign to him, Nick found one that held numerous tubes of green liquid. An odd aroma wafted from the box, confronting his nostrils with its unusual scent. The contents smelled like a blend of wintergreen and motor oil. "Is this it?" he said, holding up a cylinder.

"That's it. Bring it over here." She took the cylinder from Nick and tossed it over to Karg.

After quickly emptying another container onto the floor, Karg placed the gathered supplies into it.

With everything they needed packed in the box, Arya eased up to the door and peered out. "Okay, come on, we need to get to the lab."

Nick followed close behind her as they crossed the corridor. Carrying the container of supplies, Karg tip-toed along behind them.

*Clink...clink...clunk....* The odd sound coming from behind them gave Nick a hefty dose of adrenaline. They all turned in unison to see a round device rolling into the corridor. The blinking light on the small orb warned of impending danger. Nick spun around and forced Arya further down the hall. "Run!"

"Plasma grenade!" Karg turned and ran, scooping up Nick and Arya in his two free arms as he raced down the corridor.

*Boom!* The blast erupted behind them, knocking Karg forward off his feet. Hot plasma flew down the corridor toward them. With one arm around Nick, one around Arya and two bracing his fall, Karg landed on the floor and slid several yards before coming to a stop. He let go of his two passengers at the same time the box of supplies he'd dropped tumbled haphazardly down the corridor in front of him. Glowing edges of red-hot plasma rolled around Karg as the explosion dissipated. Beneath his chest lay his two companions, untouched by the blast.

Nick had landed on top of Arya, and the two lay sandwiched together nose to nose on the floor beneath Karg. He stared at Arya, half shocked by the explosion and half mesmerized

by her eyes. Which one's heart raced more, he wasn't sure. He felt like a school boy, suddenly flung face to face with his biggest crush.

"You can get up now," she said softly. Nick's hesitation caused a smile to spread across her face.

"Oh, um, right, just making sure you're okay." He rolled over onto the floor. Karg was still on his knees hunched over them. As Nick looked up at him, a slight wisp of smoke rose off Karg's shoulder. "Thanks, Karg."

Karg nodded slightly.

Arya spotted the smoke coming off of Karg. "You okay, Karg?" she said in a concerned voice.

"Yeah, a little singed, but alright." He stood up and turned to look at his back. His clothes were burnt halfway off, leaving all four of his shoulder blades exposed.

"Good thing you're Rakozyan," Arya said as she studied his back.

"Yeah, they'll have to try harder than that to take me out."

After gathering up their box of supplies and heading down the corridor as fast as they could, the team finally arrived at the brightly lit lab. All sorts of high tech equipment filled the clean, white room. Consoles and apparatuses lined the walls and a row of work tables filled the middle of the room. An isolation chamber stood ominously at the far end. Karg placed the box of things they had collected onto a table in the center of the room. Arya removed the items one by one and placed them in a neat row on the table.

"Karg, can you set up the electron depositor?" Arya asked as she handed him the cylinder of green liquid.

Karg took the tarodine fluid and grabbed the metal bar from the table. "Right away." He turned and started configuring some sort of machine that stood against the wall of the lab.

Nick needed to find out more about the enemy he was about to face. "So, who are these Mok'tu anyway?"

Arya led him over to one of the consoles. Without touching it, an image displayed on the screen. "These are the Mok'tu."

Nick looked at the display for a moment then back at Arya. "But...how did the console know to bring up a Mok'tu on the display? You didn't tell it to, you didn't even touch it."

Arya sighed and turned to Nick. He had such a look of bewilderment on his face. Arya took one look at Nick's face and a grin erupted on hers. She couldn't help but let out a giggle. Even with the severity of the situation at hand, she just couldn't hold back the laugh.

"What's so funny?" Nick said, looking even more confounded.

"Nothing," she answered, letting out another giggle. "I'm sorry, you're just so cute, in an odd sort of way."

More confused than ever, Nick didn't know whether to be embarrassed or take her remark as a compliment.

Arya attempted to contain her amusement at Nick's ignorance. "I'm sorry, I know this is all new to you. You see, the nanites, as you call them, send data, only short range, to other nanites and to certain equipment. In our ships, it allows us to give commands without taking our eyes off our target. I sent the command to show this file, by thinking it. Among other things, nanites also send the language data they learn to others. That is how I understand you. After they learned your brain and language, that data was transferred to my nanites."

“So they receive information too?”

“Yes, but for security, they are limited to receiving only certain data, like language files.”

The logic and technical skill of it was impressive, but it still frightened Nick a little. It was all he could do to shake the thought of those rogue nanites on Earth. “So tell me about these Mok’tu.”

“What little we know of them has been collected from regular Mok’tu that were killed, and from the salvaged data records of ships that the Dragorans had destroyed. But the Tac Squads are a lot tougher than regular Mok’tu. They’re more heavily armored and have shields. We know even less about them because no one has ever killed or captured one. What we *do* know is the Mok’tu have redundant systems, so if they get damaged, they can continue to fight.”

“Systems? What do you mean systems?”

Arya looked over her shoulder at Karg, who was busy preparing the ammo.

Karg just grinned and cocked his head, as if he knew what Arya was thinking. “I still remember my reaction at the site of the first dead Mok’tu I came across.”

“Mok’tu are Biomechanoids,” Arya said.

“Biomechanoid? You mean living machines?”

“Not exactly.” She looked back at the screen. “The only biological part is the brain. They grow their young in artificial pods. Then remove the brain at birth age and place it into a mechanoid body. The machine body contains redundant systems to maintain the brain. Their method is highly efficient. With only a need to supply the brain with nutrients, they can extend their lifespan many times its normal length.”

“That’s horrible.” Nick was disgusted by the mere thought of it.

“There is more. They have effectively cut off the perception of pain. Their robotic parts can sense if they touch something or get shot, and then they react or act accordingly, but their brain doesn’t register pain. We feel pain so that we stop before our bodies get damaged. It’s a self defense mechanism. But they do not need the sensory perception of pain. If they get a damaged limb, they just keep fighting. They have been known to remove a limb from one of their dead to replace their own inoperable one. They will even pull off their own crippled limb to use as a weapon. Unlike us, Mok’tu will gladly sacrifice a limb if it gives them a tactical advantage. They can also go for long periods without breathing air. They are intelligent, strong, resilient, ruthless and one hetek of an enemy.”

Nick’s body suddenly felt too heavy to maintain a standing position. Overwhelmed by the bizarre situation he found himself in, he sat down heavily on the nearest object that would support his weight. This was really seeming more and more like a dream. A really long, really bad dream. Just when he thought he had a handle on this new, alien world, it got weirder. Not just weirder, but more dangerous than he could have ever imagined. They were facing an invincible enemy, one that wanted to steal his module and presumably rip his head off.

Ignoring his weak moment, Arya continued. “So, aim for the head. I don’t know how many shots it’ll take, but hopefully these new rounds will burn through the armor. If not, the heat may be enough to damage the brain inside.”

“Right, aim for the head. Always aim for the head,” Nick muttered, still dazed. “Shit. What have I gotten myself into this time?”

Arya turned her attention back to the task at hand. “How’s it going, Karg?”

“Almost done. These rounds should have enough of a Corminium coating to achieve reaction, but still fit the weapon tolerances.”

Under normal conditions, Nick would have been studying the apparatus in the lab, trying to learn more about this new alien technology, but that was far from his thoughts. He was focused on the enemy and how to get home. “Know when to fight,” he said under his breath. “And when to run.”

“Nick.”

He glanced up to see Arya tossing a pistol through the air toward him. He reached out, plucked it out of the air, and looked back at her. By her stern look, Nick knew the time had finally come to fight. He held the pistol up and gave a nod, happy they trusted him enough to give him a weapon. “Thanks.”

“It has a full clip, and I disabled the plasma converter,” Arya remarked as she loaded spare clips into her pockets.

The pistol was amazingly light weight. Even with the full 144 round clip the gun was half the weight Nick expected. He wondered how the pistol’s light weight would affect its accuracy. Guess he would find out soon enough.

On their way out, Arya stopped near the door and aimed her pistol at a cabinet across the room. With hardly a sound, and too fast to see, a round flew from the barrel and impacted the cabinet. A loud bang rang out from the cabinet, accompanied by a red flash. The blast left a nice round hole seared through the cabinet door. A small puff of smoke rolled from the hole and floated toward the ceiling.

“Just checking,” she said as she turned to leave. “At least we know they work.”

“Against cabinets,” Nick added.

Arya called to Argos on the bridge. “Captain, we’re ready.”

Argos answered back over her com. “Good work, now get those freking things off my ship. More will be here soon.”

The group made their way back to the hangar and approached the doorway cautiously.

Nick held his pistol at the ready. “What’s the range of these?” he whispered.

“With the new modifications, I’m not sure. I think they should be accurate to at least fifty urks.”

“Um, okay, what’s an urk?” Nick’s nanites weren’t translating that one.

“Oh, um...it’s about from here to the module. Sorry...your nanites don’t know how to convert things like distances or time until we give them some parameters. Then it will translate. We’ll take care of that later.” Arya paused to glance at him. “If we survive this.”

Karg interrupted. He turned to Nick and Arya, hunched over as low as he could get. “They can’t see us because of the crates. We’ll sneak in and spread out. When I give the signal, take out the Mok’tu closest to you. The more targets we give them, the less they will be able to concentrate their fire. I can only see three, so watch out for the other two.”

Nick gave the big guy a nod and tried to mentally prepare himself for the fight ahead. Arya moved left behind a row of crates as Karg went right. Nick positioned himself a short distance from where they entered, crouching down behind the safety of a crate. At least he was close to the door in case they needed to retreat.

“Now!” Karg’s thunderous voice startled Nick.

“Shit! I wasn’t ready yet,” Nick muttered to himself.



With no choice but to go into action, Nick popped up from behind the crate and fired two rounds right between the eyes of one of the Mok'tu before ducking for cover again. The Mok'tu reacted quickly, releasing several rounds from its Gatling-gun style plasma rifle. The shots landed a little too close to Nick for comfort, blowing pieces out of the large crate that protected him. He shook the debris from his hair and ducked behind another nearby crate.

From his left, the loud thunder of plasma rifle blasts split the silence again. It was easy to recognize the distinct discharge as that of the powerful Tac Squad rifles. They had a uniquely lower pitch than Karg's rifle, and considerably more power. Another exchange of weapons-fire erupted and then everything quickly fell silent. The shots seemed to have emanated from the corner where Arya had been moments earlier. The sudden silence didn't bode well.

"Arya!" A surge of adrenaline cut Nick's cry in half. Where the hell was she? Dammit! Where was she? Fearing the worst, Nick frantically swept the area with his gaze. From all appearances, these biomechanoids could rip a person in two with very little effort. He didn't like the thought of Arya meeting such a gruesome end.

Just as he was mustering the nerve to go after her, a Mok'tu soldier stepped from around the corner and into his line of sight.

"You bastards!" he yelled, his voice echoing around the huge hangar bay.

With lightning quick reflexes, Nick swung his pistol toward the approaching enemy. Before he could squeeze off a shot, the Mok'tu fell forward onto its face with a hollow metallic thud. A puff of smoke trailed up from its head, and a stream of thick red fluid oozed onto the floor from its shiny skull. The Mok'tu was dead.

Much to Nick's relief, Arya stepped out from around the corner. She smiled as their eyes met.

"It took him longer to die than I expected," she said with a thankful sigh.

Nick struggled to catch his breath. His heart was still in overdrive from the massive amount of adrenaline being pumped into his veins. The roar of the weapons and the pounding of his heart left his ears ringing with an annoyingly loud hum. He managed to pull himself together and get in a couple of breaths before spotting something moving out of the corner of his eye.

"Look out!" Nick warned, as another Mok'tu rounded the corner behind Arya. The huge mechanical soldier towered over Arya's small frame. With her so close to it, Nick would never get a clean shot in time.

Arya spun around to bring her gun to bear, but she was too late. The enemy swung its powerful arm, sending her pistol flying across the bay, and knocking her to the ground. Without a second of hesitation, the metal soldier was over her. It bent forward and grabbed Arya with its robotic arm, picking her up off the floor and raising her to eye level. Its long, cold, metal fingers wrapped all the way around to the back of her neck, clutching her tightly in an icy grip.

Arya was now face to face with the Mok'tu, staring into its unsympathetic visual receptors. As she hung there frantically kicking at it, she tried desperately to pry its huge fingers loose with her hands. It was no use, the metal monster was going to squeeze the life from her body and there was nothing she could do about it.

Nick's finger was poised on the trigger, ready to shoot, itching to kill the bastard. But he hesitated as he assessed the situation. Arya was so close to the Mok'tu that the plasma blast

from his pistol might kill her. But if he didn't act quickly, the mechanoid soldier could snap her head clean off.

"Shoot!" Arya screamed, her muffled voice barely leaving her tightly clamped throat. "Shoot the freking thing!"

Nick squeezed off eight rounds in one rapid burst. As the rounds met their target, smoke poured from the Mok'tu's metal skull, but the beast didn't move. Nick sprinted toward the towering hulk, emptying another five rounds into its head as he drew closer. The Tac Soldier seemed unaffected.

"Why isn't it dying?" Nick yelled.

The soldier just stood there motionless with Arya flailing around in its grip. Nick pushed his legs into a flat out run, planning on using the momentum and his own body as a ramming device. When he was close enough to the Tac Soldier, he lunged feet first into the beast, kicking it square in the hip in an attempt to knock it off its feet. The monstrosity didn't budge. It was like hitting a brick wall. The impact jarred Nick's spine and sent him bouncing off. He landed hard on his left shoulder. The impact pushed the air out of his lungs and caused him to bite his lip by accident. He barely missed hitting his head on the floor beneath him.

"Crap!" he cursed. The damn thing was solid as a granite mountain. No wonder everyone was so afraid of them.

Ignoring the pain in his body, he rolled nimbly and was back on his feet in seconds. With precision born of instinct and training, Nick aimed his pistol at the eight foot tall Mok'tu's head and fired another burst of rounds. A stream of hot liquefied brains flowed out of the skull and dripped down the Mok'tu's body. But the massive, silver hulk remained standing.

Arya still hung helplessly in the hulk's grip, staring at the metal soldier's expressionless face while steamy red liquid oozed down its neck and dripped onto the hangar bay deck. She struggled uselessly against the Mok'tu's grasp as the beast's metal legs began to buckle. The Mok'tu slowly collapsed to the floor with her neck still held tightly in its powerful mechanical hand. Pinned under the heavy, lifeless monster, she lay on the floor, fighting to get free. "Get this thing off me!" she screamed in a panic.

"I'm on it!" Nick pushed at the dead soldier's torso. He had to strain every muscle in his body just to push the thing off of her. It rolled over onto the floor with a metallic clank. Nick stared down into Arya's frantic face. She looked up at him in desperation, still hopelessly trapped by the Mok'tu's huge metal hand clasped around her neck. A tear rolled from the corner of her eye. She was scared. She was actually scared. Nick was surprised by her sudden show of vulnerability. Until this moment, she had always been strong and in control. He'd never seen fear in her before.

"I guess we're not so different, after all," Nick mused.

Arya whimpered as she gazed up at him.

"It's alright. I've got you," he soothed as he bent forward to help her.

Nick pried the lifeless mechanical hand loose from Arya's throat. As soon as she was free, she rolled away from the thing and lay gasping on the floor, struggling for air.

The sight and smell of the Mok'tu's liquefied remains pooling on the cold metal deck was enough to make Nick wince in disgust. The choking stench was somewhat like burnt hair mixed with vomit. He pulled away, throwing his arm over his nose to block the stomach-turning stink. "Ugh, they even smell bad." He wouldn't forget that aroma anytime soon.

“What took you so long? It could have killed me.” Arya held her throat and coughed several times, still trying to get a good breath.

“I was af—” The sound of weapons-fire stopped Nick from finishing.

Concerned for Karg’s safety, they both jumped up to see where the shots originated. They peered over the crates. Two Mok’tu stood in an open section of the bay. One of the beasts fell immediately to the floor, its skull billowing smoke. The other swung its rifle around to fire at Karg who stood nearby.

Before his friends could react, Karg ran and leapt into the air, his feet flying in the direction of his adversary. The Mok’tu released a barrage of rounds from its rifle, trying to get a bead on the advancing target, but Karg’s amazing speed didn’t give it the chance. The shots flew under Karg, one barely grazing his leg as he soared through the air.

Karg’s foot landed square on its mark, forcing his prey’s head down to the floor. His massive weight smashed the Mok’tu’s armor skull against the hangar deck, crushing it almost flat. Red gunk squirted out onto the deck from under Karg’s huge foot as the Mok’tu’s brain was squashed like a watermelon that had been run over by a tank.

“That’s four,” Arya said. She quickly surveyed the hangar. “Where’s the last one?”

Loud metallic sounds echoed through the bay, like a huge metal door being unlocked.

Arya looked around, her ears twisting as she listened intently to the strange noises. “I’ve never heard the ship make *that* noise before.” As she turned back to Nick, her eyes widened. “I have a bad feeling about...this.... Frek! Run!”

Arya grabbed Nick’s arm and pulled him in the direction of the door. “Karg, get out!” she yelled over her shoulder as she ran.

A rush of air howled through the doorway that led to the hangar, driving against them as they tried to escape. Fine grains of dirt kicking up from the corridor floor stung Nick’s cheeks as it pelted him in the face. The two struggled to reach the door, but the air’s velocity quickly increased until gale force winds swept Arya backwards through the air and over Nick’s head. He instinctively reached up, grabbed her leg, and held on tight as she floundered like a kite in a stiff breeze. The tug of Arya’s body fluttering in the tornado-like vortex yanked Nick over and onto his back. The wind dragged them toward the other side of the hangar, where Nick managed to grab onto a heavy crate in an attempt to anchor the two of them in place.

Arya pulled herself down Nick’s arm and hung onto the crate with one hand, her feet drawn upward by the violent torrent of wind moving through the bay.

Nick’s lungs hurt. The air pressure was dropping. And fast. He struggled to catch his breath in the lower oxygen level, but it was no use. The swirling sensation of lightheadedness was already upon him. If he could only get to his ship. One good breath from the module’s oxygen supply would keep him from passing out.

At least Arya seemed to be holding out. The firm grasp of her hand around his arm was evidence enough of that.

Nick struggled to maintain his grip, but he could feel himself fading fast.

Suddenly, the rush of air stopped and the two crashed to the floor.

“What the hell was that?” Nick spoke between gasps, his lungs burning for more oxygen.

Arya huffed back a reply. “The Mok’tu breached the hull to get on board. Their breaching craft must have detached, leaving a hole to space. Which means one of those

baskurts is getting away!” She looked around with a puzzled expression. “But...why did the vortex stop?”

They both stood up and stepped around the crates to see what had happened to Karg. Nick scanned the area with his gaze. The cargo bay was usually neat and orderly, but now crates and debris littered the floor. There was no sign of Karg anywhere. Where the hell did he go? And what stopped the air from rushing out of the hull breach?

Karg’s voice echoed through the vast hangar bay. “Whenever you get a chance, I would appreciate it if you could give me a hand.”

Nick and Arya looked around, unsure where the voice was coming from.

“I have no idea,” Nick said as he turned in circles. “Where the hell is he?”

“Up here.”

Looking up they spotted Karg hanging above them. Nick and Arya stood speechless, twisting their heads to get a better look at the strange sight. There was Karg with his back plastered flat against the ceiling, his arms and legs dangling down, like someone had glued him up there. The big hulk had flung himself in front of the breach, using his body to plug the hole. He was sucked tight to the ceiling, stopping the outflow of air and saving their lives.

Arya gazed up at Karg in bewilderment for a moment and then busted out laughing. It was the funniest thing she had ever seen. There was this big lug of a warrior, stuck firmly to the ceiling, helplessly waving his arms and legs.

“You’re going to be the talk of the next mess hall gathering,” she said between giggles.

“Now, is that any way to treat someone who just saved your life?” Karg called down.

“Sorry, Karg, we’ll get you down soon. But first we need to get the systems back online.”

Arya turned toward the door at the far side of the bay. “Come on,” she commanded Nick as she struggled to keep a straight face.

“Alright, but hurry up, my rear is getting cold,” Karg hollered as he watched his two shipmates head to the door.

Nick glanced once more at Karg and then followed Arya to the doorway. He had to admit it was an awfully funny sight seeing Karg hanging there with his butt out in space and his four arms dangling helpless. “Now that’s what I call seriously getting your ass in a crack. Never a camera around when you need one,” he muttered to himself.

Arya called to Captain Argos over her com-badge while she quickly made her way down the corridor to the aft section. “Did you get that baskurt, Captain?”

“No, they disabled the weapons. We couldn’t do anything but watch him fly off. We’ll have to worry about him later. Right now we need propulsion and weapons back online.”

“You’ll have it, Sir.” Arya paused in front of a thick, metal hatch. She swung the door open, ducked inside, and quickly got to work restoring power to the engines.

Nick stood watching. It would take more time for her to explain what to do than for her to do it herself, so he stayed out of the way. She was definitely proficient at everything he had seen her do up until now, and this was no exception. Nick looked around, lost in the unfamiliar alien power distribution hub. Walls full of removable control boards surrounded them on three sides. Arya quickly rearranged the boards, rerouting the power conduits with great efficiency. Nick tried to follow what she was doing, but he was still two steps behind when she slid the last control board in.

With the circuits bypassed and a final throw of a large switch, Arya was finished. Lights throughout the hub popped on and the silence in the compartment was replaced by the low hum of active power conduits. "Power restored, Captain." Arya grinned at Nick. "Now let's go get Karg down."

On their way back to the bay, Arya stopped and pulled a couple of space suits out of a locker. "Here, see if this will fit you." She tossed one of the suits to Nick.

Nick slid the suit on, watching how Arya locked her gloves and helmet in place. The suit was obviously made for someone taller, so the blasted thing ended up all bunched up around his arms and legs. Not exactly a great fit, but he wasn't about to complain.

"Ready?" Arya asked through the integrated helmet communicator.

"Ready," Nick replied, still uncertain of what she was up to.

The two entered the bay, and Arya climbed up onto a stack of crates near to where Karg hung from the ceiling. She threw a breather unit up to him and then hopped back down to the deck.

"Are you going to do what I think you're going to do?" Nick stared at Arya apprehensively, and then glanced back up at Karg. "Can he survive without a suit?"

"Rakoizians are pretty tough. With the breather, he can withstand being in a vacuum for a few chronits."

From a nearby control console, Arya sealed the access doors to the hangar. "You better hang on to something."

Nick watched Arya grab onto a girder and hold on tight. "Oh, crap." He quickly clutched the girder, wrapping his arms through the metal bars. *She's even crazier than I am!* he thought.

Arya reached over and pressed a button on the console. The huge hangar door slid open, revealing a beautiful scene of stars lying beyond the force field that protected the bay.

Nick recognized the field as the same one he'd traveled through when he'd been pulled into the ship. With all the bizarre events that had happened to him since he'd come aboard, that seemed like ages ago. In reality, it had only been a day. One *hell* of a day!

Arya tightened her grip on the girder. "Hold on."

With a beep from the panel, a warning siren squealed throughout the bay. Red lights mounted along the top of the metal walls flashed rapidly, turning the hangar into a bizarre dance-floor-like scene. Nick mashed his body against the metal column in preparation.

Suddenly, the force field holding the atmosphere in place dissolved, and an explosion of air blasted out into space. It was as though they were inside a champagne bottle and someone pulled the cork. The air left so fast that it was over in a couple of seconds, hurling an array of small objects out of the huge doorway. The debris spun away from the ship, weightless in the void of space. Some of the dead Mok'tu slid a few feet across the floor while Karg tumbled down the bay, coming to a stop some distance away. He stood up and gave a wave to let them know he was alright.

Nick looked down at the lifeless Mok'tu lying around on the deck. "Well, at least you have some of these bastards to study now." As he spoke, a light on the chest of one Mok'tu caught his attention. The little red light was flashing faster with each passing second. "Look!"

Arya turned to see what Nick was pointing at. "Sket! This way. *Hurry!*" Motioning for Karg to follow, she led them to a transport ship docked in the bay. Arya punched some buttons on an external keypad mounted to the outside of the ship. With a hiss of air, the transport door

opened, hinging down to create an entrance ramp. The team hurried inside, and Arya quickly closed the door behind them.

Nick followed Arya as she made her way to the cockpit of the ship. Numerous explosions suddenly erupted outside in the bay, rocking the transport as they stepped into the cockpit. Nick instinctively ducked as a metal hand was thrown straight at him by an explosion and slammed into the cockpit window directly in front of his face. Small metal parts landed all around the hangar bay, bouncing on the floor in the eerie silence of the vacuum before finally coming to rest. The Tac Squad had self-destructed. It was the Mok'tu's final desperate attempt at killing them.

Arya peered out of the window at the mess. "Now we know why no one has ever brought back a Tac soldier for study." She dropped her head back in the seat and sighed. "I was really hoping to find out more about their shields."

"Now what?" Nick asked as he stared out the cockpit window.

"We'll fly over to Bay One until we can repair this mess. Unless you would rather climb around outside looking for the air lock," she said, removing her helmet.

"No, thanks. Bay One will do fine." With the atmospheric pressure returning in the transport ship, Nick unlatched his helmet and pulled it off with a twist.

Arya looked over her shoulder at Nick. "We make a pretty good team."

"Yeah, a good...team," Nick replied, surprised she included him in their group. With everything going on he hadn't even been able to think about getting home, just surviving. "Is it always like this?"

"No.... This was one of our better days." Arya stared out the cockpit window as she maneuvered the craft out of the bay, never looking back at Nick. The tone in her voice was dead serious.

Nick was dead serious about his question. So far, it had been the roughest day of his life. If this was a good day, he wasn't sure he would make it through a bad one.

Arya turned toward Nick. Her serious look gave way to a grin.

One corner of Nick's mouth turned up as he fought to contain what was building in his gut. A laugh forced its way out from between his lips as he tried to hold it inside. He fell to the floor in an uncontrollable fit of laughter. Relieved for it to be over, relieved to be alive, and relieved Arya was joking, after all. His relief washed away the tension of the day and the only thing he could do was laugh.

Arya was also glad to have the episode with the Mok'tu behind them, for now at least. She couldn't help but let out a giggle at the sight of the strange alien life form rolling around on the floor of the transport, all red-faced and laughing hysterically.

Even Karg began to laugh as they cruised along, his deep rumble of mirth echoing through the empty transport ship as they made their way around to the other hangar bay.

## CHAPTER THREE



Arya walked down the corridor leading to the mess hall. As she rounded the bend, she heard Karg and Nick talking to one another over their morning meal.

"Your calendar is made up of twelve munse, your clock is divided by twelve, but your math and currency is based on ten? That's the most backward thing I have ever heard," Karg announced in his deep voice.

Nick scratched an itch on the back of his neck. "To start with, it's months, not munse. And what else would math be based on? Math is math."

"Yes, one plus one equals two, but basing it on ten is inefficient. We base it on twelve."

Nick was still perplexed.

Karg looked at him across the table. "Look, ten can only be divided by one, two, five and itself. Twelve is divisible by one, two, three, four, six and itself."

"Yeah, but—"

Karg cut him off. "What's three quarters of ten? Seven and a half. A fraction. What's three quarters of twelve? Nine."

"Yes, but—"

"How much is that currency you carry?"

"It's a quarter." Nick pulled the coin out of his pocket and flipped it over in his hand. "This is an old one, from back when they still had some silver in them. It equals twenty-five cents," Nick replied.

"Is that a lot?" Karg queried.

Nick laughed. "No, it's not much. A penny is the smallest currency on my planet. This only equals twenty-five pennies. Why?"

"What is half of that? Twelve and a half. A fraction! See, your system is very inefficient," Karg boasted.

Nick glanced up to see Arya standing there grinning. She had been watching their discussion from the side of the room. Arya raised her eyebrows and cocked her head as if to say *well, he's right you know*. Nick just shook his head, trying to grasp the strange alien concepts.

"So, instead of a dollar being one hundred pennies, it should be ninety-six? And a quarter would be twenty-four?" Nick said, narrowing his eyes in thought.

Karg laughed and banged the table hard with his hand, causing Nick to jerk so abruptly that he almost fell out of his chair. "Now you're getting it," Karg said. "There's hope for you, after all." Karg gulped down the purple gorbini juice from his cup and stood up to go get some more, letting out a deep burp as he went.

"Well, Karg seems to be warming up to you," Arya remarked, as she approached the table. "I came to tell you that Captain Argos wants you to answer some questions later."

Nick nodded as he stared off into space. He'd known it would only be a matter of time before Argos would want answers.

Arya glanced down at Nick's plate of uneaten food. "You okay there? Don't like the karesh meat?"

Nick's gaze panned over to Arya. "Oh, yeah, I'm fine, just didn't sleep much." He looked down at the not *quite* identifiable food in front of him. "The food is pretty good actually. What is Karesh anyway? No, wait...maybe it's better you don't tell me."

Arya sipped some juice from her cup. "Have you tried the gorbini juice? That will make you feel better. You should get some before it's gone. It's not often that we have it."

"Thanks, I will." Nick poked around on his plate with the two-prong fork that came with his tray of food. "Can you tell me where I am?"

"You're in a star system called Garanta Orionis. Some still call it by its ancient Arisian name, Back Of The Giant," Arya answered. "Which, by the looks of it, is very far from your home."

Nick stared at her for a long moment. "That doesn't really help me a bit." He sighed and scrubbed a hand across the back of his aching neck. "It sucks being lost and not knowing where the hell I am. I mean, I didn't plan on being here. I'm really not supposed to be here at all. Wherever *here* is. Don't get me wrong. If your ship hadn't picked me up, I'd be dead. So, I am very grateful you brought me aboard. And you have been very kind to me, but my coming here was just an accident. I don't even know *how* I got here."

Arya set her cup down on the table. "I can see you are missing your home.... I too miss mine. It has been such a long time since I have been to my home-world." Arya looked almost wistful as she thought about her planet. "I really miss the Sarlansis trees. There are huge forests of them. At least there used to be, before the war." Arya lifted her gaze back to Nick. "Your home must be awfully far away for us not to have *some* record of your species in our databanks. You really don't have any idea how to get home?"

Nick shook his head no as he toyed with his food.

"Well, Captain Argos will have the final say, but maybe we can help you find your home planet."

Nick stared down at his plate.

Arya leaned down to get his attention. "You should eat. You'll need your strength. I'll get you some juice. It'll help your energy." Arya left the table to round up a cup of juice, leaving Nick still staring at his plate, lost in his thoughts.

Moments later, she returned and plopped a cup down on the table. "Here you go. Taste it."

Nick agreeably lifted the cup to take a sip. "Wow. That *is* really good. Kind of like fruit punch, only better. Thanks."

Arya sat down and shoved some karesh into her mouth.

Nick glanced around at the almost empty room. In one corner, a couple of aliens were gathering some food containers. The two creatures were completely covered with what appeared to be spacesuits. He only caught a hint of their creepy faces through their masks as they turned to leave. They appeared to be four-legged with two arms and a bizarrely shaped head. The aliens were definitely odd, and it was even odder that they were wearing spacesuits *inside* the ship. It made him realize that overall he hadn't actually seen many crewmembers. Only a handful since being brought on board.



"I've noticed that there seems to be a very small crew for a ship this size," he said, still watching the two spacesuit-clad aliens exiting the room.

"Meths."

"What?" Nick turned to Arya with a befuddled look.

"We call them Meths. The two Coranii you were looking at over there. They're methane breathers. Whatever you do, steer clear of areas marked with red and yellow 'METH' signs."

"Oh, um, right. I'll do that." Nick's brain was still stuck on the whole methane breather thing as Arya continued.

"The Resistance is spread pretty thin. We only have enough crew to run the ship. That way we reduce our losses if one ship falls to the enemy," Arya explained through her mouthful of food.

"Resistance?"

"The Resistance is formed out of all the indigenous races in this sector. We have banded together against our common enemies. We are the ones that were lucky enough to escape the war between the Mok'tu and the Dragoran Empire. We were just in the right place at the right time to be spared. But we are few. The Resistance tries to rescue any survivors that it can. We stay in the shadows, attempting to fight the enemy any way possible. I feared our fight was a hopeless cause. But then you showed up with that ship of yours. You destroyed a Planet-Killer and a Dreadnought in one swoop. I knew then that the Divine One had answered our pleas. You are our salvation."

"Your salvation? I can't even get home. How could I be your salvation?" Nick asked, bewildered.

Arya's eyes glazed over as she spoke. "Our prophecies tell of a Great War spreading over this sector, and a brutal fight against soulless beings of metal and scales. It was written that when all appears to be lost, a noble warrior from a distant world would split the sky and swallow our violent oppressors, freeing our people. I never believed much in prophecy, and I never understood what it meant by *split the sky*, but now here *you* are. It's all so clear to me now."

Nick looked at Arya's hopeful eyes. He hated to crush her faith. "Look, I...I'm not who you think. I am just a man from Earth. A very *lost* man from Earth."

Arya grinned. "The prophecy said you would be humble."

Nick dropped his head and sighed. "I liked it better when I was being shot at. At least I know how to handle that," he grumbled under his breath.

END OF SAMPLE

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