

# THE HYPERSCAPE PROJECT

BOOK ONE

## *The Lost Chapter*

By

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## THE LOST CHAPTER

Arya lay on a rolling hill, gazing up at the night sky. Her right ear twitched incessantly, tickled by the long blades of grass that swayed back and forth in the warm, gentle breeze. The enjoyable, subtle, sweet fragrance of Vercosian Tulyps filled the air and delighted her delicate nose. Strange to find such a rare flower this far out in Demented Space. She took in a deep breath and just stared up in amazement. Swirls of colorful, glowing gas filled the heavens from horizon to horizon, creating a picturesque backdrop filled with numerous bright stars and two rocky moons. Nick was right, the Araknis Nebula was an extraordinary sight to behold. And this *was* the perfect spot to take in all of its magnificent beauty. She had never seen a more awe inspiring spectacle in all her days.

The feeling of solid ground beneath her back, the smell of tulyps, and the sight of stars overhead, all reminded her of when she was a child. Back when she would sneak out of the Palace and into the Courtyard at night to stare at the stars, often for hours at a time. She had forgotten what it felt like to be in wonder of what lay out there beyond the stars, in the deep reaches of space. Those were the days, dreaming of mysterious civilizations and lost treasures. She'd been so naive. It seemed like a lifetime ago. She couldn't even remember the last time she'd actually relaxed. She took in another deep breath of the delightful, fresh air and slowly released it. It was nice to get away from her constant duties as head of the Resistance and just enjoy this moment. Nick must have sensed that she needed the break.

Poor Nick. She'd been quite reluctant to come along at first. But the intrigue of learning what a *pick...nick* was all about, and Nick's persistent prodding, eventually coaxed her away from her work. She was still pretty sure that he had concocted the whole so-called tradition just to get her to come with him. Something about the name 'picknick' was suspicious. She glanced over at Nick lying on the ground next to her and smiled.

"So?"

"So...what?" Nick answered with his usual confused expression.

"So, you said you would tell me what happened to you while you were stuck on this planet for three weeks."

"Now?"

"You promised."

"Did I?" Nick tipped his head and gazed at Arya's big, hopeful, cat-like eyes. "Yeah, I guess I did, didn't I?"

He took a deep breath and stared up at the glowing nebula above them. "Alright, where to start?" He reached out to gesture, his hand silhouetted against the brilliantly colored gas cloud hanging in the space beyond the planet. "There I was diving into hyperspace when a Mok'tu launched himself off some nearby debris and clamped onto the right wing of the mod—  
"

Arya cut him off. "Yeah, yeah. You already told me about the Mok'tu. Skip to the part about that...killer orb thing you mentioned."

"Now, who's tellin' the story? You or me?"

Arya's ears folded back, reminding Nick of the calico cat his sister had had when they were younger. Whenever Fluffy's ears went back, trouble wasn't far behind. Nick took a double-take at Arya's face as her one fine brow dipped lower. Intent on avoiding Arya's ire, he quickly jumped forward in the story a bit.

"Yeah, right. The killer drone orb. Well, after old Metal Face decided to become *One* with a big chunk of debris, I set off in search of the probe. But not before making one last log entry...."

*One Month Earlier In Hyperspace....*

*Nick pulled his handy recorder from his pocket and flipped it on. "Personal Log, Nick Bannon. Well, I must be crazy, or just a damn fool, 'cause here I am floating in hyperspace again. At least my plan worked...sort of. At least there's one less Star-Killer and Dreadnaught out there to worry about. Hopefully the distraction has given the Ashok enough time to escape. I just pray that Arya was right about the Mok'tu keeping their entire hyperspace research program on that one vessel.*

*I figure I can triangulate my position using the trajectory of the probe as a reference. With any luck I will be able to locate the probe and then using its speed and distance I can plot a point to jump back into normal space. My goal is to emerge as close to the Ashok's destination as possible. That's my plan anyway. Bannon out."*

Nick tuned his radio to the probe's transmitter frequency. A faint series of pulses crackled through the speaker. There was no mistaking the sound. It was the probe's shortwave telemetry. He reached over and turned the dial to the probe's secondary audio frequency and increased the volume. Nick's recorded plea echoed from the radio. The haunting sound of his voice calling out from the vastness of hyperspace was more than he could deal with for long, so he quickly flipped back to the primary telemetry channel. The probe seemed to be working as planned, for now at least.

A sudden sigh from Arya wrenched Nick's mind out of his story telling and into the present.

Arya glared at Nick impatiently. "*I know* that you found the probe using the new directional antennae array. *And* that you had to calculate where to make a new jump point. I read the reports, remember. Get to the part where you find this planet. You apparently forgot to include that part in your report."

Arya's brow arched upward in a look that Nick knew well. It was that '*I'm not stupid, you know*' look. She must have known there was a reason he'd left it out of his report. He had made a couple of near fatal mistakes that day. If he'd put it in the report, Karg would've given him a good ribbing. Somehow, Karg and Sirok had still found out about it. That sneaky Sirok must have overheard him making a personal log. Nick laid his head back on the thick grass and began his tale again.

"Right, the planet. There I was stuck in that cramped cockpit. My first attempt at locating the planet didn't work out so well...."

*Nick's mind drifted back to that day in hyperspace....*

*Three...two...one....* "That's it." Nick brought the module to a quick stop. Judging by the speed and trajectory of the probe, it should have originally entered hyperspace at his current coordinates. Now he needed to calculate a safe place to jump back to normal space. He had no desire or intention to end up anywhere near the vicinity of the Grok. Captain D'rog must be pretty pissed right about now. And getting captured by a big angry lizard was definitely *not* on his to-do list.

Nick studied the gravitational readings carefully. He punched a formula into the craft's navigational computer and calculated the location of his next jump point. This was all new, untested science, but he gave it his best educated guess. If he missed the Ashok's destination, even by a little bit, he'd be in deep shit. The location would take a good three week's worth of flying in normal space to reach, but in hyperspace, it should only be days at most. If everything went as planned, he'd be there long before his friends arrived. But when did anything ever go as planned? He double checked his calculations, looking for any mistakes. Confident of his math, he throttled up and headed off to his rendezvous with the Ashok.

After a long and uneventful flight, the proximity warning finally signaled the nearing of his estimated jump-point location. He slowed to a stop and stared into the redness. The empty, undulating realm was wearing on him. The lack of scenery seemed to drain the energy right out of his body. He'd spent most of the three day flight dozing off from utter boredom. His legs had fallen asleep a dozen times already. No matter what he did he just couldn't get comfortable. It was time to get out of this damn wasteland. And out of the cramped module to stretch his achy legs.

"Here goes nothing." He flipped on the switch and the familiar backdrop of space appeared through the opening hyperspace window. He punched the throttle and sped toward the window as fast as he could, exhaling in relief as he cleared the hole between dimensions. But one glance upon his arrival on the other side made his heart fall. Nothing looked familiar.

"Crap." Judging by the star patterns, he had miscalculated. The lack of a nearby solar system made it painfully apparent that he had missed his destination. "Damn," he sighed. Not even a planet around to stretch his legs on. He recalibrated then carefully recalculated a short jump, crossed his fingers, and flew back into hyperspace. Twenty minutes later he tried again. He could only hope that he got it right this time.

Through the hyperspace window a beautiful blue and green planet came into view. It was a sight for sore eyes. But the only way he would ever know if it was the *right* planet was to go through the window.

He cautiously throttled up and pierced the boundary separating one dimension from the other. Once clear of the jump-point, he began surveying the surrounding space. This was the only planet nearby. It looked like the right place, and the navigational system seemed to confirm that. At least the readings showed the planet could sustain life. Surprisingly, there was no radio chatter at all. He had expected some kind of transmissions. Perhaps he had stumbled upon an uninhabited planet, or one that just wasn't very technologically advanced.

There was only so much of the cramped module he could take. He really needed to stretch his legs. Thirty-six hours of hyperspace and he'd had enough. Besides, he was going to need food and water soon. The breathable atmosphere below should sustain him while he

hunted for something to eat. He had two or three weeks before the Ashok would arrive, so his choices were few. Better to test the waters down below and take his chances on finding food and shelter. He blew out a long breath, rubbed the amulet that hung from his neck between his thumb and forefinger, and then set a course for the planet's surface.

Minutes later, Nick plunged through the atmosphere and leveled out over an area of green plains. Flying a few hundred feet above the ground, he skimmed along assessing the area. *Was that a road? There's another one. And cultivated fields full of food. Something edible, I hope.* He shuddered at the thought of the alien crap that one farming community tried to pass off as food. They wouldn't be picking up any supplies on that planet again, that's for sure. Whatever was down there couldn't be *that* bad. *Could it?*

Numerous buildings loomed above the tree line in front of him. Suddenly, he was nervous. He quickly checked his six. No one following him. That was a relief. Nick peered over the side of the cockpit at the city now rolling by beneath him. *Where's all the people?* All he saw were a few abandoned vehicles in the streets. He quickly circled around, looking for a safe place to land.

The module set down on a sandy patch of ground a short distance from the town. Nick opened the canopy, cautiously watching the surrounding landscape for any sign of movement. "I gotta get *me* one of those handy PDU, scanner thingies," he sighed. "Yup, first thing I'm gonna' do when I get back. It sure would come in handy right about now."

He prayed that he would be able to find some food and water in the nearby town that he'd spotted from the air. *If not...* Well, he'd cross that bridge when he came to it.

"Okay, time to get moving." He released the clasp of the safety harness and pushed himself up out of the seat. Gravity pulled down hard on his body. After a day-and-a-half in space he'd become accustomed to the feeling of weightlessness. The planet's higher than normal gravity was a rude awakening.

Nick slid down over the side of the module until his feet hit the ground. With a firm grip on the edge of the cockpit, he tested his land legs. One more wary glance around and he started out across the dunes toward the town. He trudged along through the sand and sparse vegetation until he approached the outer group of buildings. There didn't appear to be any tracks in the sand or any other signs of life at all. The only movement was a few leaves that tumbled haphazardly across his path, carried along by a warm gust of wind. The town looked deserted. The total lack of life was creepy, and concerning. Perhaps the inhabitants had simply ran and hidden themselves when they had seen his craft.

As he reached the opening between two of the buildings, he stopped dead in his tracks and hung his head. What he saw before him was nothing more than a ghost town. There were no signs that anyone had lived there in quite a while. Damn, he was in desperate need of food. The alien recycling system installed in the module had extended his water supply, but he probably only had another day or two before he would need more. He had finished off the last food bar a day ago, a fact his stomach was quick to remind him of.

A sudden movement out of the corner of Nick's eye drew his attention. He could swear something had scooted across the small square that sat neatly in the center of town. He froze, studying the area for some time. "Guess I'm just imagining things. Ghost towns always did give me the creeps," he mumbled under his breath. With another cautious glance across the empty

square, Nick headed off to explore the town. Maybe there was still something here he could use. Canned food, maybe?

*Whirr....*

Nick spun his head around. Nothing there. "Shit! What was that?" Nick looked down the dusty street, examining the buildings closely. No sign of life. No ghostly figures staring out from the windows. Only the sound of the wind blowing an occasional dead leaf or two over the cobblestone streets. "I must be going crazy. There's nothing here," he said, hoping to convince himself.

*Whirr....*

Nick whipped around again. The sound had definitely come from behind him that time. He quickly ducked behind the corner of a building to keep anything from sneaking up behind him.

"Crap," Nick mumbled, disgusted by his luck. He released a long sigh as he stared up at the sky. "Not another energy creature. Please, anything but one of those damn energy-vampire things." He peered apprehensively around the corner for any signs of life.

*Whirr....*

Nick closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. *Shit.* Whatever it was had come around the building and right up behind him. He yanked his pistol from its quick release holster and wrenched himself around, poised to fire.

A round metal orb floated about ten feet away. Nick hesitated. He had expected to see something more organic, not a mechanical hovering object. On the bright side, at least it wasn't an energy creature.

Nick stood with his pistol aimed at the orb. "Uh, hello?" There was no response. Only the faint whir of its antigravity drive as it hovered in the same spot. He slowly lowered his pistol. "I mean you no harm."

Suddenly, the bottom section of the orb popped open, exposing a gun port. Nick jerked his weapon back up and dove to the side as the hovering ball opened fire on him. Chunks of stone blew from a nearby wall as he narrowly escaped behind it. He peered over the wall, readying himself for a fight.

The orb paused, then closed its gun port and whirred around to reacquire its target.

"Why me?" Nick groaned. "Do I have a big, red target painted on my back or something?"

He fired several rounds as the alien device came around in front of him, striking the orb's metal body dead center. But it seemed to have little effect. The device locked onto Nick and gave chase around the square, grazing him in the shoulder with one of its rounds.

Nick slid behind the safety of another wall to examine his injury. "Oww." He winced as he touched his burnt skin. Just a flesh wound. He'd live. But damn it hurt. Still, when stranded without proper supplies, even a small wound could be deadly. He wasn't prepared for this.

*Whirr....*

"God dammit!" he hollered as he popped up and fired a stream of rounds at the device then ran in the opposite direction. The shots jarred the flying orb, but the machine quickly regained its bearings and continued pursuit.

"Damn thing is persistent," Nick huffed as he ran.

Nick hid around another corner and tried to catch his breath. He felt particularly vulnerable without Arya and Karg to back him up. He could make a run for the module, but then he would be out in the open. That thing would surely gun him down. *Crap*, he was going to have to make a stand. The orb seemed to attack in a pattern, taking a moment to recharge after firing. That could be his chance.

Nick ran from the corner, giving the drone orb time to lock on then dove behind the protection of the courtyard wall as it opened fire again. Chunks of rock rained down on his head, blown from the wall by the device's powerful plasma bursts. It seemed he was always hiding while some damn thing was shooting at him. He'd had enough. He was pissed now.

"I want some peace and quiet! Is that too much to ask?"

The orb ceased firing, and Nick jumped to his feet. He ran straight at the killer drone, firing as many rounds as possible in one long burst. The orb tilted on one side, sparks exploding from its seams. "Die you bastard!" he yelled, continuing to fire. It spun out of control until finally crashing into the ground and exploding in a fireball of debris.

Nick plopped down on the ground and leaned back against the shot-ridden wall. The drone must have been some kind of automated defense system left over from the inhabitants of the town.

"What's next? Giant worms?" He sat for a while, afraid to move. "Crap, why did I have to say that? I still have to trek across sand dunes to get back to the module. With my luck, there is such a thing as giant worms. And this would be the only planet in the galaxy that had them." He puffed hard, still trying to catch his breath. "Dammit...now I'm talking to myself."

Eventually Nick quelled his fear, picked himself up, and set out to explore the town for much needed supplies. He stared in trepidation at the ground as he walked. "There's no such thing as giant worms." Nick spun around to look at the ground behind him. "Nope, no such thing. I just hope there aren't any more of those drones." He paused and shook his head. "Great, I'm *still* talkin' to myself."

Nick paused from his story and glanced over at Arya lying next to him. "And the rest you know. I managed to survive for three weeks and even recharge the battery backup using the solar panel I scavenged. I spent many nights staring at this nebula, wishing you were here to see it. Then I heard the radio chatter from those lousy pirates and came to investigate. Good thing too 'cause I saved the day...*again* and—"

*Whir....*

The sudden noise in the darkness behind him caused Nick's heart to land in his throat. *Shit, another drone.* Before Arya realized what was happening, Nick pulled his ever-ready pistol from its holster and rolled on top of her. The silhouette of an orb floated several yards away. He didn't hesitate to open fire. Three rounds hit their mark and the round object blew apart, showering pieces down into the grassy meadow below. The remaining rounds raced into the night sky, finally dissipating some distance away. The lower half of the orb crashed to the ground, while the upper section dangled and jerked about, almost like it was.... *On a wire?*

Deep, rumbly giggles sprang from the darkness as a long, thin pole dropped to the ground and clanked against the piece of metal that had been suspended from it with a string. What Nick had thought was a drone turned out to be a pile of scrap metal, and he knew exactly who was behind the hoax.

“Sirok! Karg!” Nick’s bellowed into the darkness.  
Arya chuckled beneath him, her luminous cat eyes staring up at him in adoration.  
“Guys! You can leave now!” Nick yelled. “Payback is a bitch!”