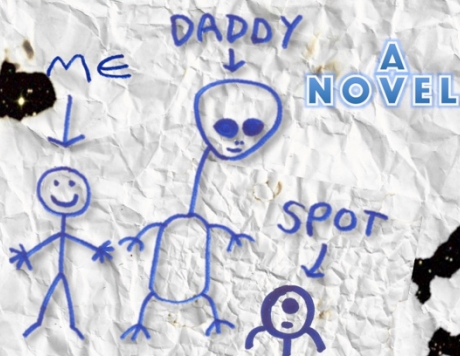


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of alien life, they celebrated.
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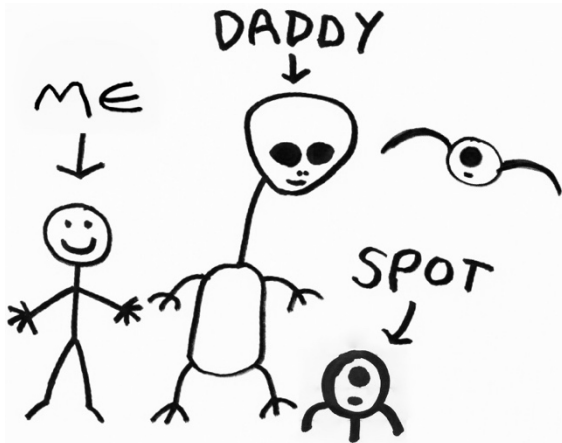
A UNIVERSE APART



RUSSELL COREY

FROM THE AUTHOR OF
I WANT MY MTV BACK

A UNIVERSE APART



RUSSELL COREY

ALSO BY RUSSELL COREY

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VACATION HOME

BOSS OF ME

MAN CAVE

ZOOBOTIC

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For my children

Riley

Emma

James

Mia



FATHER AND SON

The father took his son out into the wild, purposely so. He wanted the boy to see the balance in the Universe and to understand why things had happened the way they had.

Out in the vast field, they watched a creature frolic with joy. It brought a smile to the young boy's face.

The father, meanwhile, kept a watchful eye out for predators and soon found one, stalking the playful creature.

With swift and sudden timing, the predator launched itself and struck the helpless creature, shocking the son. The son begged his father to intercede and save the struggling creature from the predator, but the father refused.

Instead he made the crying boy watch the predator kill the prey with the weapons nature had provided it, claws, fangs and overwhelming strength.

The sobbing boy demanded to go home, but instead the father made the boy follow after the predator, as it carried away the dead, limp creature in its mouth.

The predator delivered the creature to its den, where

three offspring hungrily awaited their mother's return.

The three babies had yet to take on the fierceness of their parent and they made for a rather cute trio, as they jockeyed for position to eat their long-awaited meal.

After the three finished feeding, the siblings played with each other, while their doting mother cleaned them all carefully with her gentle tongue.

The son had long since stopped crying and was instead laughing and smiling at the antics of the rambunctious siblings.

"Dad, do you think the babies got enough to eat?" the son asked his father. "We could find them more food."

"If they are still hungry, the mother will feed them again," the father answered. "There's not much in the universe as powerful as a mother's love and her will to provide for her children."

The father was satisfied. His son now understood the predator was neither evil nor nefarious. It did what it had to do in order for its offspring to survive and nothing more.

Later in life, the father knew he could use the story to explain what had happened and why. Hopefully the boy would accept it. Hopefully.

"Father, can I take a baby home with me for a pet?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because when it grows up, it will kill you."

The father took the boy's hand and led him out of the wilderness, lesson learned.

The father could feel the strength in the growing boy's grip and it scared him.

All the boy had to do was squeeze, and not even that

hard, and he would have crushed every bone in his father's hand.

The father tried to show no fear in front of the maturing boy, but every day it was getting harder and harder not to do so.

CHAPTER ONE

When they detected signs of intelligent life on the newly discovered planet, they celebrated.

They shouldn't have.

The civilization that had evolved on the far away world was a war loving culture. A culture that allowed the most greedy and corrupt richest elite to ravage the planet, aided by feuding fanatical religious leaders that divided their world and kept it in never-ending conflict and chaos.

How they ever managed to survive this long to even be discovered was a wonder in and of itself.

Despite the dysfunctional dominant inhabitants, the little blue green planet itself was still considered a jewel. One of the few precious jewels in the vast universe that could support life.

But the curious observers wondered for how long? The health of the planet was in dramatic decline because of the neglect of its inhabitants. For the life-sustaining planet alone, this world had to be saved by being brought into the Collective.

There were three worlds already in the Collective, the founding planet and two other subsequent worlds that were discovered by the Founders and initiated in

without a great deal of conflict.

There were no hostile takeovers of the planets by the Founders. No enslavements. No plundering of their natural resources.

All the Founders, and later the three-planet Collective, would ask of newly-discovered worlds was to learn balance with the Universe and help spread peace and knowledge through out it.

However, despite their best intentions, the first contact mission the Collective sent to the Fourth Planet was met with shock, aggression and murderous rage, as all the emissaries sent by the Collective were slaughtered.

All the promises they brought with them of curing diseases, ending the constant wars and healing the stricken planet were scorned and abandoned.

While the Collective debated their next move, after the disastrous start of their outreach initiative, the Fourth Planet was instead busy analyzing and mastering the captured technology from the first contact mission's vehicles, tools and means of communication.

Even before absorbing the Collective's technology, the Fourth Planet was advanced enough on its own to venture out into space. They had even made several successful landings on their nearby moon.

However, with the rapid advances made by studying the Collective's engineering feats, the Fourth Planet was now able to produce long-range spacefaring vessels that allowed them to attack the closest planets that made up the Collective, which they vowed to destroy, rather than to ever subjugate themselves to.

The Collective knew they had made a mistake by contacting the Fourth Planet and they also knew there

were no good options for going forward.

They couldn't just walk away or negotiate for peace. The hostile Fourth Planet would just keep attacking them until the Collective was destroyed. They simply had to fix the problem the best way they could.

The first measure the Collective took was to mobilize a defense force and repel the counter attacks. Which they did, destroying and scattering the offensive Fourth Planet forces into the cold dark universe.

Then the Collective went back to the Fourth Planet to regretfully conduct a mass extinction of the hostile dominant species. It pained them to do so, but the hope was that at least the planet itself could be saved and rehabilitated back to life, absent the adversarial natives.

The Fourth Planet was prepared for the inevitability that they would lose an unwinnable war against the mighty Collective, but it would be the Fourth Planet that would choose exactly how they would lose.

As the overwhelming armada of Collective forces touched down on the Fourth Planet, a series of newly developed massive weapons, strategically placed on the planet by the inhabitants, all detonated at once.

The Fourth Planet was decimated. They had destroyed it all. Virtually every living thing on the world was wiped out in mere minutes, including the twenty million members of the Collective that had invaded the world in a vain attempt to save it.

The massively-destructive weapons had been intended for the planets of the Collective, but the Fourth Planet never had the time to deploy them before the Collective armada arrived.

The birth of the weapons had been stumbled upon while trying to modify the fusion reactors of the

Collective space engines. Hoping to create a more powerful engine, the Fourth Planet fueled the engines with Enzin, a rare and, almost impossible to mine volatile element found only on the Fourth Planet.

Enzin did give the engines more power, exponentially so, on a massive scale, but the fusion reaction that Enzin created couldn't be contained, and while that ruled out the Enzin fueled engines for space travel, it made them perfect, with a few modifications, for creating planet-killing weaponry.

However, the Fourth Planet inhabitants never imagined it would be their own planet they would kill. But they decreed it was better to end their world with honor, rather than hand dominion of their sacred kingdom over to the Collective.

And the fact that the weapons would annihilate millions of Collective invaders in the process, was seen as something of a consolation, for controlling their own destiny.

The Collective, stunned, heartbroken and demoralized, retreated their remaining orbital forces from the scorched planet, which was now a toxic wasteland that would never be suitable for life again.

The Collective still believed in their universal mission, but never again would they let this happen. In the wake of the disastrously failed intervention, a new rule was established.

There was an official designation and bureaucratic code for the new policy, but everybody just called it "The Fourth Planet Rule."

Going forward, when new worlds were discovered with intelligent life, a study would be performed on those cultures to decide if they were going to be

compatible with the Collective or not. If they fit the mold of compatibility, they would be contacted and brought into the Collective.

However, if they were deemed unlikely to accept the Collective and be openly hostile towards the mission, they would be removed from the ecosystem of that planet through the least painful means possible.

The Collective would go on to discover a fifth world with intelligent life and, when put to the Fourth Planet test, this fifth world was deemed suitable to join the Collective.

First contact was made and life on the fifth world flourished under the guidance of the Collective. With the successful addition of the fifth planet, the strength and reach of the Collective grew even stronger, making it possible to explore even deeper into the universe.

There was even faint hope that the Fourth Planet had been an anomaly and that the rule that bore its name would never have to be invoked.

But then the Collective found a sixth planet. A sixth precious jewel spinning in space containing intelligent life.

A planet the inhabitants on it liked to call Earth.

CHAPTER TWO

When you get the call, you go. It doesn't matter what you are doing, you drop everything and go. It doesn't matter that you have no idea what you are getting yourself into, you go. It doesn't matter if you know this could be the last few minutes of your life. When you get the call, you go.

And so, he went.

There was smoke on the distant, but fast approaching horizon. It was a hot zone. There would be combat.

"Okay...," Theo braced himself, "...this is it. It's happening."

With his hauler's autopilot actually working for a change, Theo let the ship zero in on the distress signal as he prepared to see his first action in the rehabilitation of Earth mission.

Theo used his long arms to strap on his body armor. It was a tighter fit around his bulging belly than he remembered.

He had only worn the body armor once before, when he'd made his initial landing on Earth six months ago.

Back then, he was prepared for anything the human hoards were going to throw at him. Sticks, stones, flames, bullets, bombs, nukes. Just one problem. There were no humans. No living ones, anyway.

In his half year on Earth, Theo had encountered

many amazing things, man made engineering feats, strange animal life, countless art museums, Reggae music and, of course, the glorious food that he found simply growing everywhere. But no humans.

Theo's role in the landing was to study food producing plant life. His main job was to discover what plants and trees might be suitable to flourish on his home world of Kybia, as well as the other planets in the Collective, Lucentia, Ruptasia and Marasta.

As part of his job, he had to sample the many fruits, nuts, berries and vegetables that he came across, which he did with abandon.

And now he was going to pay dearly for his indulgences with his ill-fitting body armor, which was liable to pop off in mid-battle.

Theo may not have seen a single living human in the wild during his first six months on Earth, but that was about to change. The distress signal he picked up was accompanied by only a one-word, panicked utterance, "Humans!" The message cut out after that.

Theo knew there were surviving humans out there. No doubt they had seen him as he went about his duties and either ran away or watched with caution until he was gone, never once engaging him with contact.

Theo had heard the stories and read the reports of actual initiated encounters with the pockets of humanity that had survived the Sleep.

These encounters went one of two ways. The humans, usually terrified, surrendered peacefully and begged to stay alive. In those cases, the humans were taken into the protective custody of the Collective and sent to a human study center until their ultimate fate could be decided.

Then there was the other way. A hard and vicious fight to the finish. And with rare exception, it was the humans that were usually finished.

They fought like hell though, the humans. Some even compared their tenacity to that of the Vorse, who defended their planet so fiercely that they destroyed it, lest its sacred ground be defiled by becoming the fourth planet in the Collective.

Human, Vorse, it wasn't a fair comparison. No one on this mission had actually fought the Vorse, but they had heard war stories from their elders that scared the wits out of them.

Growing up, there were many nights that Theo stayed awake, cowering under his covers, fearing that somehow a lone Vorse avenger had snuck into his bedroom and was waiting for him to stick his head out from under his blanket, just so they could cut it off.

Three generations of Collective members grew up in fear that somehow enough of the Vorse had survived the Fourth Planet debacle and that they would one day come back seeking revenge against the Collective.

Those fears had mostly faded in recent years, relegated to history books, unfounded rumors and scary stories told by frustrated parents in hopes of coaxing a lethargic youth into doing their chores.

The human-Vorse comparison also wasn't fair in another way, either, because the humans didn't know the Collective was out there. The humans were never even given the chance to join the Collective, as the Vorse were. Actually, they were given a chance, but the humans just didn't know it.

The humans matched the case history of the Vorse almost perfectly, as they'd failed every pre-contact test

administered, just as the Vorse did.

The only difference was there was never any first contact mission for Earth to go so disastrously wrong as there had been for the Vorse. The Collective just couldn't take the chance of losing another life sustaining planet.

Just like the Vorse, the humans had the ability to destroy their planet with their crude, but highly capable nuclear weapons.

A world-wide panic set off by the Collective's announced existence could have caused the nuclear nations to destroy all the humans on Earth, along with all of Earth's other living creatures, in a reactionary effort to fight the Collective, rather than join it.

Projections showed this could happen in mere hours after any such first contact announcements were made, leaving the Collective no time to take preventative actions to save the planet.

This wasn't the most likely scenario to take place; far from it, but it was a scenario nonetheless, and with so much at stake, it just wasn't worth taking a chance.

Best to lose just the humans than risk losing everything on Earth. And to ironically borrow a phrase from the humans, the most "humanely way possible" to eradicate the human element was to act with complete surprise, so the humans couldn't put up any last-second defenses and prolong their removal.

If everything went to plan with the virus that was designed for the mission, the humans would feel like they were just going to sleep and that would be the end of it. Quick and painless. Just a quiet goodbye into the night.

It was a harsh judgment, but not one that was decided on without spirited debate, study and

conjecture. If the humans just could have passed one pre-contact test. Just one.

Enough to give the Collective hope. Enough to give members like Theo the chance to effectively argue the case for the humans. In the end, the humans gave them nothing to think that the Earth, as a united planet, would join the Collective and the mission.

The craziest thing about all of this, thought Theo, was the humans had imagined just this very scenario. Human culture was filled with stories, books, TV shows and movies of Earth being invaded and taken over by aliens.

The humans had even imagined aliens rescuing the planet Earth from the humans themselves that were damaging it so badly with their runaway pollution, fossil fuel consumption and constant neglect.

Yes, the very mission Theo was on was the plot of a movie that had been made and then years later remade, as if the lesson about reforming the human way of life hadn't been learned the first time the film came out.

It wasn't learned the second time, either. No, the story Theo was now living was not new. If anything, it was inevitable.

The humans were on a crash course to self-destruct and they would fight anyone or anything that would keep them from their destiny. Some humans did try to stand up and bring sanity to their insane world, but they were mocked, ridiculed and sometimes even killed.

If the humans reacted this way to their own kind trying to amend their shortsighted view of life, why would they ever join the Collective and its mission, which was asking for the same course corrections for the health of the planet.

And even after the Sleep, when the human numbers were so drastically reduced to the point where they had no hope of repelling the Collective, a significant portion of the humans left did launch a futile resistance plan that included the use of their nuclear weapons, which would have sealed the fate of millions of other living creatures on Earth, just as the Collective had foreseen.

However, the nuclear option was neutralized by the Collective before the resisting humans could use it. When the humans couldn't use their nuclear weapons to fight the Collective, they used anything they could get their hands on. At first bullets and bombs, later sticks and stones.

Knowing all of this, and seeing this beautiful, glorious planet up close, Theo knew it was unthinkable to let Earth go the way of the Fourth Planet and become another lost world.

Theo still didn't agree with the decision to use the Fourth Planet Rule on Earth, but after witnessing the humans' steely determination to fight back against the Collective, it made his decision to stick with the mission a little more palatable.

Theo knew enough about humans now to understand that there would always be a human element that would feel that if they couldn't have the Earth to themselves, then no one could have it.

Also, Theo had to admit to himself, as he continued to snap on his body armor, that he was going to come face to face with his compassion for the humans.

His bleeding heart hardened a bit as his hauler zeroed in on the distress signal. Yes, he loved the humans and his study of them, but in his heart, he knew they were a dangerous breed. They would have no

qualms about killing him, so he would treat them equally in kind.

Theo armed himself with his rifle. It had only been fired once on Earth, so far. At an angry dog that had attacked him in a cherry orchard as he was collecting samples. His shot missed, but it was enough to encourage the hungry canine to find its next meal elsewhere.

There were so many dogs wandering the Earth now, seemingly in a never-ending search for their former human companions.

Some adapted to their newfound freedom and moved on to join roving dog packs, others did not, choosing instead to die waiting for their absentee masters to return home.

Still other dogs now looked to members of the Collective to be their new masters.

Just like a computer, the dogs had been programed for a purpose and without their former masters, they just wanted to serve and protect anyone they could.

Theo took stock of himself in the mirror. His large, brown round head looked even bigger with his battle helmet now on. Theo knew he was no fighter. He was an agricultural scientist. His job was to make things grow.

Despite his placid profession, he'd still gone through the Collective combat training, just like everyone else on the landing force.

As he straightened and put on his most intimidating war face, he prepared to march into hell itself and fight for every precious second of his life that was soon to be left.

Theo could feel the aging hauler slow as it neared the distress signal. He went back to look out the main screen.

The smoke in the approaching green hills was less intense now, signaling that he was coming in at the end of a conflict rather than the beginning.

Suddenly the hauler shook violently. Theo grabbed the controls to keep the aging beast in the air after the autopilot quit on him, shaken loose by the sudden strong turbulence.

Zooming past him on the main screen was the gleaming state of the art troop transport of the Fast Responders. He watched it land near the smoking ruins of a Ruptasian survey ship that had been shot out of the sky, presumably by humans.

Theo slowed his bulky hauler and focused in his cameras to see the action on the ground. The heat vision camera saw through the canopy of tree foliage and revealed the eight Collective Fast Responder soldiers pouring out of the arriving troop transport and taking up positions.

Best not to get in their way, Theo thought, as he kept the hauler hovering a safe distance from the scene.

The Fast Responders were of significant size, so Theo assumed they were Woltons, rather than Ruptasians. He felt safer already.

Theo kept waiting to see if a barrage of bullets, lasers and explosions would fill the sky, but the scene remained quiet.

Not much of anything to see except the smoldering Ruptasian survey ship that had sent the distress call he was now responding to. The heat signatures of the Fast Responders were now huddled together, having lost any sense of urgency.

Theo landed his hauler, purposely keeping his distance from the crashed Ruptasian ship. Ruptasians

had been known to have quick trigger fingers in stressful situations. You could say they were shoot first and apologize later, but Ruptasians never apologized for anything.

The Woltons had grown weary of working with the quick-triggered Ruptasians and they carried over that fear of friendly fire to all members of the Collective now, including Grunyons like Theo. In the thick of it, the Woltons really only trusted other Woltons.

Theo scanned the area. Still no hostilities at the moment, just the huddle of Wolton Fast Responders conferring amongst themselves, just outside their transport ship. They were armed and ready for action, but not taking up battle positions.

The Woltons were purple in color and would get darker or lighter depending on their blood flow. They had short black hair covering the tops of their heads and roving ears that could pick up the softest of noises. Their sharp eyes were set wide apart on their faces, giving them a broad range of view.

Seeing the Wolton team at ease gave Theo the confidence to open up the cargo door and march out, holding his rifle at the ready. He was ready to join the fight, but he hoped like hell the fight was already over.

It wasn't.

CHAPTER THREE

Theo glanced about the crash site of the Ruptasian survey ship as he exited his hauler. It was a bit smoky, but there were no clear signs of imminent danger.

If some hiding human sniper was going to park a bullet in his brain, they would have pulled the trigger by now, so he continued over toward the Wolton Fast Responders that were huddled together at their troop transport.

"I'm here!" Theo called out to them.

Not one Wolton turned around.

"I'm here to help!" Theo shouted louder, thinking maybe they just hadn't heard him, which was unusual, considering the excellent hearing ability of the Woltons.

Again, not even a flinch from the Fast Responders.

"I'm locked and loaded and good to go!" Theo declared as he activated his rifle for use. The rifle hummed and whirled, as it charged up. Finally, a female Wolton private, the least tall among them, turned and gave Theo a passing glance.

"Who the hell are you?" the private asked.

"I'm Theo. I got the distress call, too."

Theo finally stood as part of the group of Fast Responders. Theo, in all his body armor and packing his

locked and loaded rifle, came up about waist high to the towering Wolton soldiers.

The Woltons were the tallest members of the Collective and they made the best fighters. They came from the fifth planet in the Collective, Marasta.

Many thought the fierce Woltons wouldn't pass the newly established Fourth Planet Rule, but the key with the Woltons was that they didn't fight among themselves.

They shared their planet with many predators and needed their fighting skills to simply survive. They had a code of honor and respected authority. They also respected balance within their world.

When the first pre-contact tests were conducted with the Woltons, they passed with flying colors. Each and every test and step in the contact phase went better than expected, right up to their final acceptance of their role in the Collective.

The giant purple Woltons were the natural choice to be Fast Responders. If you needed help, you wouldn't want anyone else coming to your rescue other than Woltons.

There had been no reports of Wolton friendly fire and they had never lost a skirmish with the hostile humans that they had come across.

In previous Collective missions, it had been the Ruptasians that provided the bulk of combat forces. The proud and, at times, arrogant third planet Ruptasians weren't happy about being supplanted by the newcomers from planet five.

So, in an effort to appease the hurt egos of the Ruptasians, the Founders declared that both the Woltons and the Ruptasians would share Fast Responder duties.

“Captain!” the Wolton private called out to get her leader’s attention.

She had it.

“Get rid of him or let him stay?” the private queried.

The Captain took a second to size Theo up, “He’s got a hauler. Might need it to transport bodies. Take his weapon. I don’t want him accidentally shooting me or anyone else if things get hot.”

“You heard him. Safety on?” the private asked Theo.

Theo nodded, deactivated the rifle and reluctantly handed it over to the Wolton private.

“Don’t sweat it. If we can’t keep you alive, you’re better off dead anyway,” she joked, as she slung Theo’s small rifle around her shoulder. The rifle dangled off of the massive Wolton’s shoulder like a child’s play toy.

Theo read the private’s nametag, Thatcher. Her name really wasn’t Thatcher, of course. Just as Theo’s name wasn’t really Theo.

They were just their chosen Earth names. Everyone on the Earth mission had to pick an Earth name and learn English as their primary language.

There were some teams that learned other Earth languages, Spanish, French, Russian, Chinese, Hindi, Arabic, it just depended on the area of the world they were being stationed.

The preparations for the Earth mission took five years. For half a decade, each member of the mission absorbed themselves in Earth history, culture, science and engineering.

They watched countless movies and TV shows and read endless books to discover all they could about this new world.

Well, at least Theo did. Obsessively so. Other

members of the Collective didn't care to learn all that much about the humans, considering they would be gone and forgotten soon enough.

Theo's first reaction to the Wolton Fast Responders was they had seen one too many Earth war films and now they were playing the parts to a tee.

Theo kept waiting for one of them to speak with a Brooklyn accent or show him the picture of the girl they had waiting for them back in their hometown of Hicksville, USA.

Just then a Wolton scout returned to the group with a long face and reported in. "They're dead. All of them. Humans, Ruptasians, wasted. Nothing moving up there except for some scattered livestock."

"What happened?" the Captain asked.

The scout began his assessment. "From the looks of it, the Ruptasian survey team unexpectedly came across a human encampment.

"Instead of calling in the big boys, they took it on themselves. Got their butts handed to them. These homers were ready for a fight. Even stocking Collective weapons, rifles, plasma grenades.

"They weren't going to any study center. Not today."

True to war film cliché, the Woltons had even come up with their own derogatory nickname for the enemy, "homers."

Some said it was short for Homo sapiens, but others liked it because they felt the contemptible humans were best represented by the buffoonish cartoon character Homer Simpson.

The scout noticed the diminutive Theo standing there quietly in the huddle. "Who's this?"

"Our back up," deadpanned Thatcher.

“Booby traps?” the Captain asked, getting back to the business at hand.

“Most of them already went off. I neutralized the last few.”

Satisfied with the update, the Captain ordered his team of eight into action. “Let’s go have a look. Stay sharp.”

On the outskirts of the human camp were the exploded mines that had taken out six Ruptasians. Their dead bodies laid about, broken and battered, twisted and snapped.

The Captain scanned their nametags and studied the profiles that came up with a curious gaze.

Their smug profile pictures, featuring their trademark Ruptasian smirks, were a stark contrast to the painfully strained grimaces, frozen on their now lifeless corpses. Death had a very humbling effect, even for the most proud and haughty.

As he continued to scan the nametags, the Captain could tell something was off about this survey crew. He kept that to himself for now, saying nothing to his team about his suspicions about what these Ruptasians were really up to out here.

Ruptasians had a red complexion and were bigger than Grunyns, but not nearly as tall as Woltons. They were about the size of an average human. They tended to be heavy set with white facial hair that was uniquely styled to the individual Ruptasian, even the women.

They wore necklaces, that to the non-Ruptasian, looked very similar, but the Ruptasians knew what the subtle differences were and where those differences placed you in Ruptasian society.

It was a practice the Founders tried to discourage,

but the Ruptasians clung to it.

Ruptasians took a massive hit when the Vorse destroyed the Fourth Planet with the Collective invasion force still on it.

The Ruptasians had sent their best and brightest and made up the majority of the fighting force with only robots sent by the Founders and a moderately-sized Grunyon force to fill out the ranks.

Grunyons did their best in combat, but they were not the natural fighters that the Ruptasians were, and were mostly relegated to support duties for the invasion, which they excelled at.

Most of the Grunyons survived the Fourth Planet mission as they were held back in orbit, only to go in after the initial invasion force had landed. But the Vorse destroyed their world before the Grunyons could be called into action.

The Ruptasians always held that against the Grunyons, but then again, Ruptasians were always holding something against everybody.

It was told that the Ruptasians lost the cream of the crop on the doomed Fourth Planet expeditionary force. The Ruptasian leadership that was left was dominated by ill-mannered, ill-tempered, entitled sons of privilege.

Ruptasians, as a whole, now felt the Universe owed them something for their massive loss on the Fourth Planet and there were fears growing among the other members of the Collective that one day the Ruptasians would indeed try to collect on that loss for whatever the Ruptasians believed was owed to them.

It was clear to Theo and the Woltons as they proceeded through the exploded minefield to the smoldering gaping hole that used to be the entrance to

the human hideaway, that what was wanted by this particular party of Ruptasians on that day was revenge.

The Ruptasians had blasted their way in, no doubt seeking vengeance for their fallen comrades that fell victim to the minefield outside.

Inside the cave, they stepped over human bodies that lay where they died, defending their formerly hidden compound. Old men, young men, boys even, women and girls, too. They were all in the fight.

Skinny and starved, these humans had survived the Sleep and six months of Collective occupation to end up like this.

Ruptasian bodies were now mixed into the human casualties and were a testament to the brutality of the battle.

Theo saw the deceased bodies of a human and Ruptasian intertwined in a death dance, as they had killed each other in hand to hand combat and died in each other's arms, as if they were doomed lovers.

As they approached a side room dug out of the cave, the scout spoke up. "Captain!"

The Captain looked back just before he was about to step into the dark room. The scout shook his head no, silently warning the Captain not to enter.

The Captain raised a curious eyebrow to question why he shouldn't go in.

"Nursery," the scout somberly stated.

The Captain nodded and moved on, leaving the side room with its unspoken horrors unseen. As they continued through the dug-out complex, the confines of the cave were getting too tight for passage for the oversized Woltons.

"How much further does this tunnel go back?" the

Captain asked.

"We're about at the end. I used the drone to scope out the rest. Goes to an escape hatch. It was sealed. No one got out of here today."

Suddenly there was a flicker of daylight emanating from the dark escape tunnel. Weapons were drawn immediately.

The Wolton scout shined a light on the floor of the narrowing cave, illuminating a trail of fresh blood. There was also a bloody human handprint that somebody left on the cave wall as they had stumbled out, trying desperately to flee to the escape hatch at the end of the tunnel.

"That blood trail wasn't there before," the scout urgently noted.

"You sure?" asked the Captain.

The scout nodded.

"Unload?" Private Thatcher asked.

They all aimed their weapons down the tunnel.

"Can't risk a cave in," the Captain warned.

The Captain thought for a second, then glared back at Theo. "You, front and center!"

CHAPTER FOUR

It took Theo a moment, but yes, the Captain was talking to him. Theo scrambled up to the Captain in the tight confines of the narrowing cave.

"Yes, sir," Theo reported in, ready for his orders.

"Give him his weapon," barked the Captain.

Theo felt the rifle unceremoniously shoved back in his chest.

"Safety's off," Thatcher warned, before letting go of the rifle.

"You, go through to the end of the escape hatch, then tell us when you're clear. Then hold your position and wait for us outside," the Captain ordered.

"You sure about this, Captain?" the scout asked. "We have the drone."

The Captain stared back at his squad. "Can anyone else here fly that beat-to-hell hauler outside?"

Three purple palms went up.

The Captain nodded, satisfied with the response. "Yeah, I'm sure. Go."

Theo nodded to the Captain and started to creep down the dark tunnel to the daylight that was seeping in from the now-opened escape hatch at the end.

The tunnel was getting tight, even for Theo. As he

climbed his way upward to the light, he placed his hand on the wall to keep his balance.

He matched the placement of his hand almost perfectly on another of the bloody handprints of whoever else had just fled through the tunnel.

The human handprint was so much bigger than his. Theo knew he'd be in for a fight if he came across the human alone by himself. A fight he'd probably lose against a battle-tested human survivor that had just taken out a survey team of Ruptasians.

With each step toward the light, Theo thought he was one step closer to his own death, but he couldn't turn back. No, the Captain had placed his trust in him and he would not let the Captain down.

He would not let his own Grunyon people down either. If he were to die, it would be a courageous death. A Grunyon death the Woltons would pass around stories of in their ranks. He'd be honored as a brave warrior, not an overeducated farmer.

Grunyons weren't known as brave warriors. They were scientists, artists, engineers, thinkers. They were fairly well developed as a culture when the Founders made contact with them. They were the first planet to join the Collective and to them it was a no-brainer.

Grunyons were mostly in charge of the scientific and engineering jobs on the mission. You have a human nuclear plant you need to run properly until it can safely be decommissioned, that's a job for Grunyons.

You've got a stockpile of chemical weapons that need to be neutralized, that's a job for Grunyons.

You've got a dark tunnel that needs to be explored to flush out any hiding humans, not really a job for a Grunyon, but yet, here Theo was, bravely making his

way through the dark tunnel step by step.

The light slipping in from the opened escape hatch was close enough now to illuminate the rest of the remaining tunnel. There was no one there. Theo was safe.

Theo peeked slowly out of the escape hatch, like a prairie dog he had seen in one of his many Earth training classes.

Theo went to call out clear, but his voice had left him. Dry from thirst and fear, he took a moment to swallow some water from his canteen and get his voice back.

“Clear! No signs of anyone!” Theo finally yelled.

The Captain shouted back. “Hold your position! We’re coming around. Don’t shoot!”

“Yes sir, Captain,” Theo replied.

Theo heard scrambling behind him and turned quickly. To his relief it was, as expected, the Wolton team. They formed a perimeter and scanned the hilltop with their visors. Thatcher held out her hand toward Theo and politely, but firmly requested, “Gun, please.”

Theo handed Thatcher back his rifle. With her other free hand, Thatcher helped Theo to his feet. Theo noticed the other soldiers had suddenly taken up aim at something in the distance.

It was hard for Theo to see it, so he climbed to the top of a rock for a better view.

The scout reported in to the Captain, “Body, female.”

“She dead?” the Captain asked.

The scout lowered his viewing scope.

“Not breathing. If she isn’t dead, she’s close.”

“End it,” the Captain ordered mercifully.

Another Wolton soldier stepped up and put a shot into the body in the distance. The body hardly moved.

She had already died moments before while trying to drag herself to freedom on the lush green hill.

"Anything else?" the Captain inquired of his soldiers.

The rest of the squad continued their scans of the immediate area with little excitement.

A chorus of "nothings" went up.

"I got movement. Livestock, small, nothing. We're good," Thatcher added.

"Let's get her. Let's get them all," the Captain ordered.

The Captain turned back to Theo.

"You got room in your hauler to take all these bodies to a medical center?"

Theo nodded.

Just then Theo heard it. They all heard it.

A cry.

A cry from a human baby.

The Woltons looked around and at one another, not entirely sure what to think of the cries that now filled the air.

Wolton babies didn't cry. They had evolved this way, because the cries of a baby would have attracted predators looking for an easy meal. Only the silent survived.

"What is that?" Thatcher asked aloud to anyone that might know.

"An animal?" offered the scout.

Theo knew exactly what it was and he knew exactly what was about to happen if he didn't speak up right then and there.

"It's a lamb!" Theo blurted out. "A baby sheep. Probably separated from its mother."

The hardened soldiers looked back at the now uncharacteristically vocal Theo.

Theo continued his bluff. "Did you Woltons not study anything about Earth before you came here? Or did you spend all your time watching John Wayne films?"

Thatcher tossed Theo back his rifle. "Here, go down there and shut the damn thing up. It's a strategic distraction. Not to mention annoying as hell."

Theo looked down uneasy at the rifle in his hand, "Yes, ma'am."

Theo took his first reluctant steps down the steep hill toward the cries that continued unabated. He stumbled on a loose rock and went tumbling through the grass and bushes, finally coming to rest at the bottom of the hill.

And there it was, just as Theo knew it would be. A human baby. It too had tumbled down the hill and had the scratches on his pink little body to prove it.

"Quiet, little one. Quiet," Theo begged.

The baby would have none of it. The cries continued.

There was blood on the baby, but as Theo checked for injuries, it became clear the blood Theo wiped off was not from the baby, but from the fleeing human that had been holding it. Aside from the scratches, the baby appeared to be perfectly fine.

"Theo, what's taking so long? Shut that lamb up!" Thatcher demanded, quickly losing her patience up on top of the hill.

"I'm working on it!" Theo yelled, trying his best to stall. Theo thought the baby might have been six to nine months old, no newborn, but years away from being able to take care of itself.

Theo saw the baby's blankets caught in some bushes half way down the hill. He ran up and grabbed them.

The baby must have been thrown down the hill in a last-ditch effort by the dying woman to save the baby's life.

Theo wrapped the baby up to provide comfort, but the cries continued. Theo then covered the baby's mouth with his gloved hand. The baby still cried, but the muffling from the gloved hand helped.

Theo didn't trust the Woltons with the baby. Yes, maybe they would see it safely to a human study center, but then they would also calculate the odds of the orphaned child surviving parentless in its current situation and decide to end the child's suffering right then and there, as they had for the dying woman.

The baby stood no chance of survival if some revenge seeking Ruptasians got a hold of it, after losing a whole survey team to the humans. That he was sure of.

On top of the hill, the Wolton soldiers gathered around the fallen woman's body.

The skeptical scout finally spoke up about something that had been on his mind from the beginning. "Captain, I have a question. What was a survey team doing way out here? There's nothing to survey.

"And if they were armed so heavily, why not just have an armed escort unit of soldiers for protection?"

The Captain thought about how much he should reveal, but he trusted his team and spoke candidly with them. "I scanned their nametags and read their profiles. They're not surveyors. Bunch of rich kid administrators.

"They were out here sport hunting humans. It's why they didn't call in for help until it was too late. This is gonna get messy. Ruptasians are gonna wanna cover

this one up from the Founders, just like the others. What is it with Ruptasians and humans?"

Thatcher offered her opinion. "They hate the humans because they remind the Ruptasians so much of the Vorse. Chance for misplaced revenge."

"They do look alike, don't they?" another Wolton offered, shrugging his shoulders. "I can't tell them apart."

Another of the troopers just shook his head as he took it in, "I don't get it. We eliminated billions of humans with the Sleep and now some Lucent Founder in command is gonna get fussy over taking a few potshots at some homers? What's the difference? Dead is dead."

"The Founders are funny. They're not gonna like this," the Captain replied,

"What do we do?" the scout asked.

"File our report. Tell the truth," the Captain said. Then he motioned to the woman lying face down on the ground, "Take her, let's go."

The Woltons grabbed the woman and began to lift up her body.

Thatcher yelled down the hill. "Theo, you get that little lamb or did he get you? Hey, what's that homer song about the little lamb? Who was it that owned it again?"

"Mary," came the answer from the group.

"That's right. Mary had the little lamb."

As the woman's body was lifted up, a black ominous tube with light indicators on it fell to the ground. It was a plasma grenade that had been concealed in the woman's folded arms.

In an instant, the Woltons knew what the blinking lights on the grenade meant and in an instant, they were

all dead.

The explosion covered the hilltop with an intense ball of fire five hundred feet in diameter.

Theo was stunned at the bottom of the hill, the concussion knocking him over. He instinctively covered the shaking baby in his arms as debris and dirt showered down on both of them.

Theo couldn't hear for a moment, but slowly sounds started to come back to him, all but the baby's cries. Theo pulled back and the baby just looked up at him. It was stunned, but alive.

"It's okay. We're okay," Theo spoke softly, trying to calm the frightened child.

The baby looked for some reassurance in Theo's panicked yellow eyes. He didn't see it, so the cries began again, but this time there were no complaints from above.

"Captain, what happened?" Theo called out.

No answer.

Theo tried again. "Can anyone hear me?"

Theo carried the baby back up the hill, the top of which was completely scorched. There was no one left. They were all gone.

Theo wasn't sure if it had been a trap or an active attack, so he drew his rifle and backed off the burnt-out hill carrying the baby.

Theo slowly made his way back to his hauler. Surely the explosion would be picked up by a sensor or satellite somewhere.

And when the Wolton Captain didn't report in, that also would send up more alarm bells. Either way, they would have company soon and that company wouldn't be too pleased with Theo's tiny discovery.

Theo gave himself a moment to rest on the cargo door ramp and share a few sips of water from his canteen with the baby. The water helped to calm the baby, who was now taking in the curious-looking Theo.

Theo worried aloud, "I don't know who is going to get here first, Woltons or Ruptasians, but they can't find you. Not after your people wiped out everyone.

"I'll take you to a human study center. They're keeping some humans. I'm sure they would take a cute little guy like you.

"I'll tell them if it wasn't for you getting me down that hill, I'd be dead now myself. That'll mean something to them. Certainly means something to me."

The baby touched Theo's face. It smiled. Theo couldn't help but smile back.

"You'll need things. I bet they have them in there," Theo told himself as he stared up at the smoldering human cave.

Theo carried the baby back into the bowels of his hauler, where there was a vast collection of trees, plants, seeds and cages filled with animals, big and small. He found a larger cage that was unoccupied and gently placed the baby in it.

"I know it's not much, but it'll keep you safe for now while I see what supplies I can scrounge up for you in the cave. And look."

Theo pointed to a boa constrictor, now eyeing the neighboring baby in the cage next door.

"You've got a friend to keep you company."

The curious snake was small comfort, as the baby started to cry, protesting at being left behind.

Back in the cave, Theo filled a collection bag with

anything he could scavenge off of the stockpiled human supplies.

He grabbed any product with a baby's picture on it. Formula, diapers, medicine, toys even. He filled his bag like a makeshift Santa Claus and dashed back down to his hauler, all the time scanning the skies, hoping reinforcements wouldn't show up.

When he returned to his hauler, Theo hid the baby supplies anywhere he could. He covered up some in the bottom of cages, others he buried in big tubs of seeds and the rest he stuffed way in the back of hard-to-reach storage lockers.

Theo's dashing about kept the baby amused and it went a long way to calming the baby's frayed nerves.

As Theo finished hiding the last of his baby plunder, he heard the unmistakable roar of more ships approaching.

With no time left, Theo twisted off the top of a pouch of baby food and tossed it in the cage. The baby immediately grabbed the pouch and started to suck down the banana blueberry smoothie as quickly as he could.

Theo pleaded with the baby. "Please, for both of our sakes, no crying. We get through this and I'll have you safely at a study center in no time. I promise."

Theo shoved as many of the other cages in front of the baby's cage as he could. He was hoping to prevent all but the most persistent of searchers from finding the baby.

All the cage jostling created a crescendo of grunts and groans and squeaks and squawks from the pent-up animals. Theo was hopeful that the din of the animals' complaints would continue and drown out any of the

baby's cries, if there were any.

Theo then marched outside in time to watch two command ships touch down. The doors on the first command ship opened and out stepped another party of Wolton fighters, except this one was led by an ornately-dressed Wolton General.

The doors of the second ship opened and out poured a party of Ruptasians. This one was led by a Ruptasian Commander, again wearing a colorful uniform signifying the importance of the high-ranking officer.

Although they had never met, Theo knew exactly who the Ruptasian Commander was and dread immediately crept into his heart.

His name was Augustus and he was the head of the Ruptasian fighting forces. Theo immediately grew concerned at why such a high-ranking Ruptasian would be responding to a skirmish in the field, especially an officer as notoriously arrogant and unforgiving as Augustus.

Commander Augustus immediately took control of the situation, not even bothering to confer with the Wolton team.

"Who the hell are you?" Augustus demanded to know of Theo, the sole being that was there to greet them.

Theo sputtered out his timid response. "Theo. I'm a plant specialist. I got the distress call and came immediately."

The Wolton general stepped forward. "Where's the Captain?"

"Gone, sir," Theo replied.

One of the general's aides immediately demanded clarification. "Gone where? His ship's right there."

Augustus waved Theo off. He had more important things to do than talk with a plant grower.

“Enough of this Grunyon fool. Where are my Ruptasians? They’ll have answers for us. Lieutenant, go and assemble the squad. I want them to report in immediately.”

CHAPTER FIVE

The Ruptasian squad was laid out for Commander Augustus's inspection. Each one more badly damaged than the next and all of them stone cold dead.

Theo carefully watched the expression on the callous commander's face. Was it sadness and disgust at the waste of life or was it complete embarrassment that a rag-tag band of humans had stood toe to toe with his Ruptasian survey team and wiped them out?

"How could this happen? Humans alone couldn't have done this," protested the flummoxed Ruptasian commander.

The Wolton General knew better. "They can and they did. Why didn't your survey team call for help sooner?"

"And what good would you Woltons have been? At least we have bodies left to bury," Augustus snapped.

Augustus then aimed his rage toward Theo, looking for someone to hold responsible for the catastrophe. "And how is it that you're still alive? The reports say you got here just after the Wolton team. How could a simple Grunyon like you survive all this?"

Just then a pair of Ruptasians joined the group.

"Sir, we've searched the Grunyon's ship."

Theo was stunned. "Who said you could search my

ship?"

"Hiding something, are we?" the suspicious Augustus queried.

"On board are many dangerous Earth creatures, as well as several delicate plant species. I should have been with them for protection."

"Sir, there's something on board I think you should see, immediately," noted the second member of the search party.

"Very well, let's all have a look. And bring him with us, for our own safety, of course."

Theo expected to see the human baby immediately when he was brought on board his ship, knowing that his plan to keep the baby safe was quickly unraveling.

But the baby wasn't there. Actually, nothing was there or out of place on the ship. The bridge of the hauler was just as Theo had left it.

Augustus strutted around the bridge as if he had hit the motherload. He was paying particular attention to all the human art posters Theo had decorated the bridge with. There were also several pictures of Earth's most distinguished scientists, as well as photographs of some of Earth's natural wonders.

"This explains a lot, doesn't it?" Augustus declared, as he stared directly at Theo.

"Explains what, sir?" Theo responded.

"Clearly you are a human sympathizer."

Another Ruptasian reported in to Augustus, eager to be the one to deliver the incriminating evidence that Theo was the one to blame for the Ruptasian slaughter.

"Sir, we've searched his mission training records. He was a strong advocate for making first contact with the humans and argued vigorously against using the Fourth

Planet Rule. We have his papers, if you'd like to review them, but be warned, the writing is of an inferior quality."

"Not necessary. I understand completely what happened here."

The angular Augustus bent down to get right in Theo's round face.

"Tell me, why would you stay with the Earth rehabilitation mission if you were so against invoking the Fourth Planet Rule?"

"I wanted to see Earth."

"No, you wanted to sabotage the mission! The reason you're still alive is that you saw to it that everyone else die, because you couldn't stand to see what was happening to your precious humans.

"Your wonderful, delightful, every right to live humans, that just wiped out a survey crew and a team of Fast Responders!"

"That's ridiculous!" Theo protested.

The Wolton General finally stepped up to put an end to Augustus's blatant mission to blame a scapegoat. "I find that hard to believe, as well."

"Do you, General? How many times was his rifle fired today?"

Again, a Ruptasian aide was right there with the snap answer. "None, sir. Hasn't been fired in months."

"No shots taken? With everything that happened here today? Where were you exactly when the Woltons went in to rescue the survey team?" inquired Augustus.

"I was with them," Theo replied.

"Then why didn't you die with them?"

"I was out of range of the blast."

"Because you knew it was coming! You warned the

humans that the Woltons were responding, just as you warned them about the Ruptasians survey team in the area!"

"That's not true!"

"Then why were you out of range when the others weren't?"

Theo tried to come up with a reason, a lie, anything but the truth.

"And why didn't you report in after the attack?"

Commander Augustus was right. Theo never reported anything after the attack. They had him. He had to say something now.

Just tell them the truth, Theo thought. How was the human baby's fate his to decide? What had made this his burden to bear? Just come clean and let it be done with. What difference would one human baby mean to the universe anyway?

"I was scared."

The bridge was silent. There was no angry retort from the sarcastic Ruptasian commander. He bought it. They all did. This they could believe. This they could use.

Theo continued with his head hung low. "They were all dead. What was there to report? No one could help them now. I was too ashamed to admit I left the Wolton team to go back to the safety of my ship.

"There were eight Wolton fighters. The bravest, strongest fighters in the Collective. What good was I going to be to them?"

Augustus had the answer he could live with. Yes, it wasn't reckless Ruptasian incompetence that caused the disaster here today, it was Grunyon cowardice.

The confession of cowardice also changed the

attitude of the Woltons that were part of the team questioning Theo.

Where before they were wary of the blame-seeking Ruptasian commander, now they openly showed looks of contempt and disgust for Theo.

This was most visible in the dramatic change in their skin color, from a relaxed lavender hue to an intense dark violet.

The Wolton General finally spoke, as if the change in skin color hadn't spoken volumes already, "We'll never know what help you could have been. Maybe if you'd showed some courage, you could have saved them or at least died bravely, instead of running and hiding like a coward."

Augustus decided to seize the momentum on the bridge and dispatch Theo as quickly as possible.

"I want you off this world immediately! I can't stand to be on the same planet with you a second longer."

"You can't kick me off Earth! I'm a science officer. I have work to do."

"You don't know the half of what I can do. And pray you never will."

"I want a hearing with my superiors and the Planetary Governor's office."

"Please, use my command ship. I'll arrange for the conferences immediately. And while you're having your little chats, I'll have every precious sample you've collected taken off your hauler and burnt to a crisp."

"You can't do that!"

"Watch me. All of this could be part of your plot to bring harm to the Collective. The only way to ensure protection of the mission would be by destroying it all."

The Wolton General took a step toward Augustus

and stood beside him in solidarity. "Perhaps it would be better if you left. You might have to respond to a distress call in the future and if my soldiers can't count on you to answer the call, we'd rather not have you here in the first place."

Theo was in disbelief. "But there is so much I needed to see and do yet. I can't just leave Earth."

Augustus held firm. "Start clearing the ship and I want those child's paintings to burn first."

A Ruptasian went to yank down the poster of Vincent van Gogh's "Wheatfield with Crows" off the wall of the bridge.

Theo shouted out, "Wait! Stop!"

They paused, just seconds from ripping the poster of the van Gogh masterpiece off the wall.

"I'll go, but I need some time to go by a human study center first."

"Want to say goodbye to your friends? Absolutely not," declared the irate Augustus.

"I have fruits and vegetables on board that I've harvested that won't last the trip home. I'd like to donate them to help feed the humans."

"Why not donate them to feed the brave members of the Collective that are sacrificing so much in the rehabilitation of Earth mission? The ends to which your allegiance goes to the humans is sickening."

Just then an aide moved quickly to speak confidentially with Augustus.

"Sir, given the circumstances, I think it would be best for all involved that the sole living witness to today's actions was safely off the planet after willingly leaving behind his sworn testimony as to the fault of today's unfortunate events."

Augustus nodded and his outraged face turned to smug amusement as he addressed Theo again.

“We will allow you your one stop on your way off the planet today, but only if you swear in the official report of today’s action that it was your cowardice shown in the heat of battle that directly led to the loss of life of both the Wolton and Ruptasian teams.”

“The Ruptasians were dead before I even got here.”

“Will you sign the report or not?”

Theo could still tell the truth, but at this point he had already lied to a commanding officer of the Collective and a Wolton general. The truth now wouldn’t save him from being expelled from the Collective mission on Earth. Theo made his choice. He would live by his lie instead.

“Yes, I’ll sign the report,” Theo relented.

“After the report is signed, I want this ship tracked to the nearest human study center. If it’s not off the planet after that, I want it intercepted and everything on board destroyed,” ordered Augustus.

CHAPTER SIX

Theo sat alone in the conference room on the command ship. He knew what was coming. He held out the faintest hope for a reprieve, but Theo knew from his previous conversation with his science supervision team, there would be none.

The plans had already been put in place for Theo to end his Earth mission early.

The screen illuminated. It was the soft, milky white face of the Earth Governor, a Founder by the name of Abraham Ali. Founders or Lucents, as they were also called, were generally pale and thin, with inviting blue eyes. They had no hair that you could see and always seemed to have a gentle smile, even when they were about to crush your dreams.

"Hello, Theo."

"Hello, sir."

"I probably don't need to tell you this, but I'm the acting Governor of Earth, Abraham Ali. For the time being, I'm in charge of this troubled little rock we currently find ourselves on."

"I know, sir."

Theo hoped this wouldn't take long. It had been close to an hour since he had last seen the human baby. No

one had barged in on him yet or on his previous communications call with his science operations supervisors, so he assumed the baby was still undiscovered, tucked away on the hauler.

"I read the report of today's incident. An awful situation. Unfortunate for all parties involved, including the humans."

"Yes, sir."

"Challenging times. We never anticipated so many humans would be resistant to the Sleep virus. Obviously, there's more to the humans than we thought. They continue to surprise us to this day. You like the humans, don't you?"

"I suppose I do."

"Would it shock you if I said that I liked them, too? Well, I do. We've been studying humans for so long, absorbing their culture, history, philosophies, I wonder if we haven't absorbed their contradictions as well.

"They fascinate me, humans. I'd love to be there on Earth in person, looking them dead in the eye with you, but, well, you understand the exasperating condition we all suffer from."

The condition all the Lucents suffered from was their weak immune system. Lucents couldn't tolerate being off their home world, which they had spent generations engineering to be hospitable to their condition. And not only could they not leave Lucentia, they couldn't have any visitors either.

All the space exploration the Founders had done was conducted by using remotely controlled vehicles and robots.

In fact, robots were the main export for the Lucents. Gifts, really, to all the worlds of the Collective.

Although, they didn't actually come from Lucentia.

When the Founders first made remote contact with the Grunyons, they sent the Grunyons all the design plans and programs to build the first primary robots.

Those primary robots then constructed massive factories, which in turn, built millions of robots for countless purposes: science, combat, exploration, healthcare and education.

Each robot had a screen that could communicate with any Founder anywhere. The robots were at once both autonomous and also capable of being remotely controlled by a Founder, with that Founder's face appearing on the robot's communication screen.

Some Lucents were so present in their robot avatars, you would forget it was a robot at all and treat it as if the Lucent was really there in the flesh.

Perhaps to overcompensate for not being there in person, Lucents were always sending out videos of life on their world, that ran endlessly on a loop on the communication screens of the robots.

As advanced as the Founders were, they could have come up with a way to travel off planet and be safe, but since it would be so costly, they decided to just focus their resources on the more practical method of sending machines to represent them instead.

Even if they did send out a living Lucent, they would never be able to touch or be a part of the worlds they were exploring, because of their immune system. So why embark on a fruitless journey that the robots seemed to be handling so well by themselves.

In fact, the robots sent back so much data about the worlds they were exploring that the Lucents could create a virtual reproduction of the worlds; so in a way, they

did get to venture to these new planets.

Videos of the Lucents exploring their virtual worlds of the new planets were also played back on the constant loops of video that ran on the screens of the remote robots.

You could always tell the virtual world videos because they appeared a bit more clunky than the real-world videos.

As for having visitors on Lucentia, it was unthinkable. They couldn't even let an errant meteorite land on their planet.

Lucents told the stories of when meteorites had landed in the past and tens of thousands of them had died before they could isolate the microbe-carrying rocks and have them contained.

To combat meteors and any other foreign invaders, the Lucents had set up an automatic defense network of thousands of satellites orbiting around Lucentia, programmed to destroy anything that came toward it.

It didn't matter if it was a grain of space dust or an invasion force, the satellites weren't letting anything get through.

There was video of the killer satellites standing idly by mixed into all the other streams of video the Lucents sent out. The video was there as both an educational tool and a warning to any planet hoping to take an uninvited field trip to crash Lucentia, not to even bother.

Theo always thought the weak Lucent immune system was the main reason the Founders didn't invade and conquer the worlds they were discovering.

It wasn't that they had such pure hearts and only the best of intentions. In reality, what would they do with a conquered world they could neither live on nor bring

anything back from?

Theo's best reasoning was that the Founders reached out the way they did as their strongest defense.

If any world ever stood a future chance of exploring Lucentia, and in doing so causing an epidemic from their mere unwelcomed presence, it was best to make sure that that world was your ally and that you could keep a close eye on them.

The more civil the Luents could make the Universe, the more protection it provided for them. The Founders played the role of the good protector and spreader of peace and good-will well, but they were also capable of making the cold-blooded decision to wipe out an entire species if they saw the need.

Would there ever be a time that Luents thought the Grunynons should be wiped out for the betterment of the Universe?

Or the Ruptasians or Woltons? They had made that choice for the Vorse and humans. Of course, the Luents would argue that they didn't make the decision to kill the Vorse and humans, they made the decision to save the rest of the species in the Collective and beyond.

Theo was always afraid of the Founders, at once so powerful and yet so weak. During his mission training he'd always tried to limit his conversations with them, lest he say the wrong thing.

However, the one argument Theo wouldn't back down from was his belief that humans should have been given a chance against the Fourth Planet Rule.

He knew it was a lost cause and his defense of the humans would hurt his standing in the mission and cost him a plumb assignment in the science officer ranks, which it did.

But Theo believed in his cause and was willing to suffer the consequences for it, even if it meant getting expelled from the mission.

To Theo's surprise, he was allowed to stay with the mission, even after he argued so vigorously for not using the Fourth Planet Rule on the humans. The Lucent's liked debate and diverse ideas.

At least they liked them up to a point. After the Collective invoked the Fourth Planet Rule against Earth, Theo was asked if he still supported the mission. Theo swore his allegiance to the Collective and was allowed to remain, but Theo would have no such luck this time.

Ali's tone shifted a bit now, as if it was time to be the tough love parent. "Yes, despite my fondness for humans, we have a mission to save this precious planet and I can't let my feelings or anyone else's get in the way of that. I don't think your cowardice today killed anyone, but I can't let it go unpunished."

"Yes, sir."

"I've reviewed your record. You've accomplished much here on Earth. Go home and finish your work there. The Collective needs it.

"But the Collective also needs the soldiers here and their commanders to know that they can depend on every member of the Collective to come to their aid in a time of crisis. When you get the call, you go. You know that."

"I do, sir."

"Now, go home, Theo. Your time on Earth is over."

"Sir, I asked to make a stop at a human study center before I go."

"Yes, to drop off some of the food you've collected. Very noble. You'll be allowed to go and your charitable

efforts will be so noted on your record.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I hope you don’t mind, but I’ve downloaded the data you collected from the Napa Valley region and have created my own virtual vineyard. Who knows, one day I may even have a bottle of my own label to share. What I’d give to have lips that could taste human wine. Is it really as good as you describe?”

“Even better, sir.”

“You take care, Theo. You’ll survive this. Your place in the Collective is secure.”

The screen went blank and Theo was again alone in the room. As if on cue, the door to the conference room opened and a Ruptasian aide was there waiting with a sour look on his face, as if there was any other look for a Ruptasian.

“Let’s go,” the aide ordered.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Ruptasian aide marched Theo off the command ship. Theo paused as he noticed the path to his hauler was lined with everyone that had thus far responded to the crisis area.

It was a mix of Ruptasians, Woltons, Grunyons and even robots being remotely controlled by Lucents.

“Keep moving,” the Ruptasian aide said as he shoved Theo in the back. Theo took his first uneasy steps past the gathered members of the Collective. As Theo walked past each member, they turned their back on him, as Theo went by.

This was too much for Theo. He wanted to stop and confess everything, but something took over his body preventing him from doing so. It was as if he was a robot with some ancient program deep inside of him forcing him to keep moving. Forcing him to keep protecting the little life that was inside his ship.

For so long, Theo and his wife had wanted to be parents, but he was unable to provide her with a child.

After the Earth mission, he promised they would try again and do whatever it took for them to be parents.

But now Theo wondered if this is what being responsible for a child felt like. Being powerless, being

willing to put yourself through any humiliation for the well being of another life so dependent on you.

If so, then perhaps he was lucky he was unable to reproduce with his wife, for he had never felt such a heavy burden like this before in all his years.

Finally, Theo had taken enough humiliating steps to make it to his hauler ramp, which was flanked by both Commander Augustus and the Wolton General.

They both snapped their heels and quickly turned their backs on him, too. Theo could care less about Augustus, but seeing the Wolton General turn his back, cut deep.

Theo had served with the General's soldiers and done as his captain commanded, but there was nothing he could say now. It was done.

As Theo stepped on the ramp of his hauler, he was given a last warning from Augustus. "We're watching you. One stop. Any deviations and we'll be on you, coward."

Theo entered the ship and closed the cargo door. He was finally alone. He closed his eyes and hung his head in sorrow for his lost honor and mission.

He gave himself those few seconds to feel sorry for the sacrifice he had just made, but that was all the time he had for self-indulgent pity.

Theo then immediately went back to the cargo hold where the baby was. He pushed away the cages blocking the infant.

There was noise from all the animals, but no cries from the baby. And then Theo saw why. The baby laid there motionless on the cage floor, wrapped in its blankets.

All of this for nothing. His career, his time on Earth,

wasted for a child that was doomed to die anyway.

Theo pounded the cage with his fist, immediately waking the startled baby. Theo sighed and smiled in relief as the infant's cries riled up all the other animals surrounding it.

Theo reached in the cage and stroked the sobbing child.

"There, there, sorry about that, but you scared me to death. Don't worry, you'll soon have a new mommy to comfort you."

Theo went back to the bridge and lifted off as soon as he could, not wanting the impatient Ruptasian commander to come knocking at his door and demand an explanation for the delay.

Theo set the coordinates for the nearest human study center and the hauler rumbled off, leaving behind the sorry scene he had responded to.

It was now time for Theo to turn his back on them, and get on with his plan to save the human baby.

The baby giggled and laughed and splashed about as Theo washed it down in a tub of warm soapy water. Theo then dried the baby off in a towel and dressed him in fresh clothes that he had scavenged from the human supplies.

Theo had packed all the baby supplies in a large rolling bin, even preparing a soft seat made from blankets in the middle, where he sat the baby down.

The baby looked at Theo and reached up for him, not wanting to be put down.

"There, all set to start your new life. I'm gonna go first and put the good word in for you. Make sure you get first class treatment."

Theo gave the infant more comforting caresses. The human baby was just such a joy to be around when it wasn't crying.

The bright eyes, the innocent, joyful smile. It hid nothing. It was happy to be there with Theo; it truly was. And Theo had to admit, despite all that had transpired, he was happy to be there with the baby.

In his heart, he knew he did the right thing trying to keep the baby safe.

Perhaps, he'd get the chance to tell his own child one day about what happened here on Earth and why he made the decision that he did. It simply was the right thing to do.

And Theo hoped for all the world that his own child would be able to make the same hard, but right decision when faced with a similar difficult challenge in life.

The hauler hovered above the dilapidated human study center. It was a converted prison, cold and harsh. The Collective had to scramble to find facilities to hold all the humans that survived the Sleep.

The Collective had long since run out of the study centers that they brought and couldn't construct new ones fast enough.

The Collective first tried to use standard human housing, but the humans inevitably escaped back into the wild.

So, the Collective had to resort to using facilities engineered to keep humans securely locked up. Their only crime now was being human and somehow genetically or strategically surviving the Sleep virus.

The surviving humans' fates had not been decided yet. The goal was never to extinguish every single

human life.

The goal was to keep the Earth safe from human destruction of it. The Collective felt there could possibly be an acceptable number of humans left on Earth, but no one had figured out what that human limit should be.

Knowing that whatever number they picked would inevitably grow with human reproduction, made deciding on a number more of a challenge.

How long would it take for that acceptable population to grow large enough to once again be a threat to the planet and all the living things on it?

There was also a separate question of if it was inevitable that the remaining humans would want to take revenge against the Collective.

That was a much more difficult and troubling question to address. If Earth's history had proven anything, it was that even one properly motivated human could cause harm to millions of others.

Was the Collective safe even if there was just one human left alive, one sole remaining human left to seek revenge for the fate of their species? It was a question that for now was unanswered, but one day, it would be.

Theo didn't like what he saw of the human study center from the air. The open prison yard was a ramshackle of trash-laden huts. But then again, this is how some of the poorest areas on Earth lived. Maybe humans just wanted it this way.

It did look colorful, all the different sheets and materials used to make the patchwork of hut roofs. Of course, Theo was telling himself anything at this point to convince himself that the baby was going to be okay once he turned it in to the study center staff.

Theo landed outside the study center and made his

way alone to the guard hut stationed in front of the prison.

Two guards were posted there, but neither looked as if they wanted to be. One of the guards was a Ruptasian, the other a Grunyon, like Theo. The Ruptasian was the first to take note of Theo and preemptively tried to end any transactions.

"Sorry, we ain't taking anymore humans. Don't go to the nearest two centers either, cause they're fuller than us. Just keep going east," the Ruptasian guard said.

"Actually, I was going to drop off some food. Apples."

"Why?" the Ruptasian asked.

"I'm leaving Earth and they won't survive the trip home," explained Theo.

"Apples. Why can't you be dropping off cigarettes?" grumbled the Ruptasian.

The Grunyon guard had been keenly observing the exchange with Theo. Finally, the Grunyon guard stood up and waved off his cranky Ruptasian partner.

"I got this, Charlie," the Grunyon guard muttered as he motioned for Theo to turn around and follow him. "Here, let's take a walk, you and I."

The Grunyon guard met Theo outside the hut and the two started to stroll alongside the massive prison wall.

"How is it in there for the humans? Do they have good lives?"

"Who's asking?"

"Just curious."

"I'm sure you are. Listen, quit with the lies. You're talking to a Grunyon. We both know that we are terrible liars.

"I don't know who you are reporting to at command,

but you tell me how we're expected to keep these humans alive when we're holding five times more than what we were budgeted for.

"And we're not the ones killing the humans. They are."

"The humans are killing each other in there?" Theo asked.

"If disease and hunger don't kill them first. We need help! Put that in your report. Dropping off apples, I'm sure you are."

"But I do have," Theo wasn't even able to get his words out before the guard cut him off.

"Just tell command that if they put as much time and effort into helping us as they did investigating us, maybe we wouldn't have as many problems as we do."

"Listen, I do have something for you. That you can believe. And as Grunyon to Grunyon, I need to know if I can trust you with it."

"Look, I'm only one Grunyon. There's only so much I can do against that," he motioned to the stark prison behind them. "But I'll do what I can for you."

Back in the hauler, Theo looked down at the baby in the bin, packed with all the baby supplies.

"At least in there you'll have a fighting chance. If I just left you in the wild, you'd die for sure."

The baby babbled a few unintelligible noises, attempting to communicate words.

"There's no other way. I can't stay on Earth any longer, otherwise, I'd try to find some humans in the wild to leave you with, but I wouldn't even know where to look.

"I have to go home or the Ruptasians will come for

me. Then they'll take you anyway and you'll end up dead or in a human study center regardless, so this is it. I've done the best I can."

Theo held the little baby's hand one more time, then let go. He covered the top of the bin with a tarp and started to push it to the cargo door.

The baby's cries started immediately and grew in intensity as the bin rolled on. Again, Theo felt the instinctive programming causing him to stop and pull the tarp back. The cries halted once the baby saw Theo again, as if they were engaged in a dramatic game of peekaboo.

"Don't make this harder than it has to be. I've done everything I could for you and then some. Life isn't fair. Not on Earth, not anywhere in the Universe."

Theo hurriedly wheeled his bin down the ramp of the cargo door and left it yards away from the guard hut. Theo called out to the Grunyon and Ruptasian guards, both kicked back in the hut with their feet up, "All yours!"

The Ruptasian shouted back annoyed. "You can't just leave it out there! Take it inside!"

"Not my job!" Theo replied as he quickly ran back up the ramp, unable to spend a second more near the bin. He had to get away. Get as far away from the bin as fast as he could.

Once inside the hauler, Theo flicked at levers and pushed buttons in a furious state, all the while trying to convince himself he was doing the right thing, which he now knew he wasn't.

"I had no choice. I had to do it. Just get out of here, Theo. Just go, you stupid fool."

The Grunyon guard had gotten up and wheeled the bin over to the guard hut.

"Lazy bastard. Just like a Grunyon to leave the heavy lifting to someone else."

"Hey, that's not cool," the Grunyon guard snapped back, offended.

"Grunyons, so freakin' sensitive. So, what have we got here?"

The Ruptasian ripped the tarp off the bin and both the guards looked astonished at what they found sitting inside.

"That is a beautiful sight, isn't it?" marveled the Grunyon guard.

The Ruptasian reached down into the bin and pulled out a delicious juicy red apple. Just one of many that filled the bin.

"It is. And they sure won't be wasted on humans. Tell the other guards we're having fresh, hot apple pie tonight."

"You know how to make apple pie?"

"No, but you'll learn."

As the hauler raced upwards toward the heavens, Theo turned to the baby now strapped into the co-pilot seat. "I'm just warning you, from this point forward, I have no idea what the hell I'm doing.

"So, your guess is as good as mine. You still okay with this?"

The baby giggled, seeming to take special delight in Theo's tormented insecurity at suddenly becoming an unexpected adoptive parent.

Theo sighed as he resigned himself to the uncertain life that lay ahead of him.

Then he muttered to himself, as the bright blue sky of Earth turned to the cold dark blackness of space.
“My wife’s gonna kill me.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

This was the fourth time Theo tried to call his wife Haditha, with still no answer. Theo had to get on with making his final preparations for the flight home and securing all his cargo, including himself and the baby.

He wanted to tell Haditha about the baby and why he was coming home so early from Earth, but he didn't want to do so in a message left in her absence.

Finding out that you're going to be mothering a human baby isn't something you want to discover while checking your messages in line at the grocery store.

Things hadn't been well between Theo and Haditha. The dedication Theo put into the Earth mission had put an awful strain on their relationship.

He tried to get her to understand the importance of the rehabilitation of Earth and what it meant to the Universe, but Haditha shared none of his zeal. All the mission meant to her was a five-year delay in them starting the family she was so desperate to have.

They had tried to have a child before Theo started his mission training, but their efforts were fruitless. After investigating why, they found the cause was with Theo.

There were treatments and options they could take advantage of, but by then, Theo had flung himself into the mission training and the dedication of time and

energy it took on his part made starting a family out of the question until after he returned from Earth.

Theo promised that after he returned home he would have a more routine schedule that would be more conducive to family life.

They would move to the quarantine zone in the northern region, where the farm and nursery would be set up. The farm would be run with the assistance of a robot workforce, giving Theo much more free time to spend with any potential family he and Haditha might start.

However, the quarantine zone itself was another irritant to their already tenuous relationship. They owned a house in the thick of things in the capital city of Dryden. Everything they needed was within walking distance. Their friends were constantly dropping by and there was always something to do in town, be it a concert, science fair or arts festival.

They would be all alone in the quarantine zone, intentionally so. It was located in the vast northern region, where no one lived. It was all government land and strictly controlled.

A huge swath of the quarantine zone was given to the Collective to host the nursery and farm that Theo would oversee. They didn't want any of the plant and animal specimens that Theo was bringing back from Earth to have an adverse impact on the planet's ecological system, so they planned to set it all up in the middle of nowhere.

Haditha hated the idea of being all alone on the quarantine zone farm. Theo promised her they would keep the house in the city and make regular trips back to civilization.

He promised the robots would be able to run things well enough, providing them with ample time to get away. But Theo had made promises before to Haditha that never came true, so why should this equally earnest promise be any different?

When Theo left for Earth, he knew Haditha was unconvinced that life in the quarantine zone would be anything but the dreadful existence she feared. No friends, no social activities, none of the conveniences one is afforded by living in a bustling city.

And now, on top of everything, Theo was about to inform Haditha that what little time she had left in the city was about to abruptly end.

He dreaded telling her this in a recorded message, but since she hadn't answered his previous attempts to call her, he had no choice.

When prompted if he wanted to leave a message for his unavailable wife, Theo now responded that yes, he would.

As the video recording started, Theo took a deep breath, forced a smile and then began speaking.

"Honey, I'm coming home early. I'll explain why so early when I get there. You may hear reports trickle back from Earth while I'm indisposed traveling, but don't believe those. I'll tell you the real reason when I get there. I'll show you, in fact.

"I know the mission has been hard for us, but my time on Earth is over and we'll be starting our new lives together again.

"It'll be the fresh start that we need and I promise you, we'll have our family. That's the main thing I wanted to talk to you about on this call, but it'll have to wait until I see you in person.

“Unfortunately, in the meantime, I need you to start the moving process to the quarantine zone early and have things ready for me there when I get home, because I’m going directly to the farm.

“I wish I could be more of a help with the move, but you understand.

“I love you and I’ll see you soon. To our new lives, which will be absolutely amazing. Bye, for now.”

And with that it was over. Theo sent the transmission and went back to the cargo hold to continue his preparations for the long trip home in the slower traveling hauler. Slow by modern standards.

There were faster ships in use by the Collective now, but Theo saved the hauler from the scrap heap, because the Collective considered it obsolete.

Since there was no demand for that class of vessel anymore, Theo was allowed to use the unwanted hauler for his solo use and didn’t have to share it with a larger crew.

The baby was waiting in a bin Theo had set up as his official baby containment area. It was loaded with the few toys Theo scavenged from the human cave and also a few harmless odds and ends from the ship that the baby had taken an interest in.

However, the baby was ignoring all of those knick-knacks and was instead feeling the sides of the bin, probing for a weakness, an opening, anything that would allow him to escape his confinement.

Theo picked up the conniving boy and gave him a hug.

“If you’re looking for a way out of this, forget it. You and I are in it together now. Your new mom, too.

“You’ll love your new mommy, I promise. There’s

nothing more in the world that she wants to be other than a mom. Come now, let's get everybody ready to go home."

The hauler had been redesigned with a massive bulk hibernation chamber. Theo placed all the animal specimens in the chamber, carefully stacking their cages to accommodate them all.

When all the cages were loaded in, he sealed the compartment and started the hibernation process. Gas filled the chamber and soon he was unable to see anything through the clear glass wall, except the dense gas cloud.

A monitoring screen started to file through the specimens inside, snakes, rabbits, chickens, pigs and more, all came up positive for successful hibernation.

Theo had found all the animals in a science lab while he was rounding up some seeds. The lab had been kept operational up to about a week or so before Theo and the science team discovered it.

No doubt a band of humans were using it to try and find a cure for the Sleep virus. With all the new Collective forces moving into the area, the humans must have abandoned the lab, not wanting to get caught.

The poor animals the humans left behind hadn't been fed in at least a week, so Theo moved all the surviving creatures to his hauler and began their care and feeding anew with him in charge.

At first Theo was going to nurse the creatures back to health and then set them free, but then he was warned by his supervisory team that these creatures were so conditioned to human care, they might not know how to survive in the wild. To release them now to fend for

themselves would be to give them a death sentence.

So now they were getting a ride back to Theo's world, Kybia. If Theo couldn't release the animals on Earth, then there really was absolutely no way he could release them on Kybia either. Instead he would do all he could to make their confinement as pleasant as possible.

With the animals finally secured, Theo moved on to his plant specimens in the artificial greenhouse. Row upon row of saplings and seedlings were lined up in the potted dirt.

The bulk of the specimens Theo was bringing back were thousands upon thousands of various seeds that were safely stored away for future planting.

However, Theo wanted to also see how some of the plants and tree saplings would fare in space travel under artificial conditions.

Theo went about setting the watering and artificial sunlight settings for the plants and in a couple of months, he would have his results when he awoke.

All that was left to take care of now was himself and the baby. There were six hibernation pods on the hauler, but Theo was only going to need two.

He set the baby up in the second pod and checked and double-checked all the settings. The baby protested at the vital signs monitoring vest that Theo was trying to fasten to him. The baby would squirm, twist and roll, frustrating Theo to no end.

"Come on now, stop twisting about, Vincent!"

It was the first time Theo called the baby Vincent. He'd been thinking of names almost from the first moment he found the baby.

Actually, he'd been thinking of baby names for years even before that with his wife. Vincent wasn't anywhere

near at the top of her list, but Theo liked it, because it matched his Earth name.

Theo had named himself after Vincent van Gogh's brother, Theo van Gogh. Vincent was the world-famous painter, but Vincent would never have been able to create his remarkable artwork had it not been for his brother's support.

The name fit perfectly with how Theo saw his role in the Collective. He knew his profile would never rise higher than that of a hardworking support agent, but his role was as important as any other in the mission's success.

The baby looked like a Vincent to him as well, but Theo wasn't getting too attached to the name. Haditha would have her own opinion and it was going to take a lot to get her on board and support his decision to raise the human baby on the farm.

Perhaps if she was able to name the child, it would increase her stake in the matter and get her to buy in more quickly with Theo's plan.

Considering Haditha's dislike of the Earth mission, it was doubtful she would pick an Earth name for the boy. Niler was at the top of her list, which would probably end up being his name, but for now he was Vincent, not Niler.

After the third time checking the vital signs on the baby, Theo felt secure enough to activate the hibernation system and close the lid on the pod.

"Just think, when you wake up, you'll be home," Theo told baby Vincent.

The hibernation gas filled the pod and soon the baby was no longer visible. The vital signs checked out and a successful hibernation signal came up on the monitor.

Theo then climbed into his pod and fastened on his own vital signs vest. He used a control pad located inside his pod to close the lid and activate the system.

His pod too filled with gas and his vital signs came up positive on the monitor.

The ship was quiet now. Everyone was sound asleep and dreaming. They would dream for two months, but the hibernation would only make it seem like hours.

The hibernation chamber pods were programmed to stimulate good thoughts in the brain, to make the time pass more pleasantly with sweet dreams.

After the turbulent day he had just lived through, Theo had been looking forward to the sweet dreams of hibernation, because soon enough he and Vincent would be waking up in orbit around Kybia and he knew there was a very good chance that the turbulence would begin anew.

CHAPTER NINE

Theo's groggy eyes looked upward toward the glass ceiling of the gas filled hibernation chamber. He could see the gas start to dissipate, venting out of the pod.

A good sign. It was all part of the normal routine of waking up. He was alive and well, almost taking for granted the miracle of long distance space travel.

He saw it before he heard it, a mighty human fist smashing through the glass cover of his hibernation pod. Glass shattered all over Theo's face, shards of it falling into his open eyes and mouth. The drowsiness caused by the hibernation aftereffects prevented him from turning away.

The human hand grabbed Theo by the throat and yanked him out of the hibernation pod. Theo's abdomen got caught on the jagged broken glass as he was jerked through the hole.

The beast just pulled harder on his snagged victim, until Theo was finally wrenched free, the broken glass leaving deep, painful lacerations as he went.

Theo was then thrown against the wall, which he banged against so violently, he nearly blacked out.

Theo was barely able to lift his head and when he did, he saw the hulking figure of the human in front of him,

silhouetted by the ship's interior lighting and the escaping misty gas from the hibernation pod.

He was a naked beast of a man, a killing machine hell bent on the destruction of Theo.

Theo was paralyzed lying on the floor, completely helpless against this berserker, that was now stomping towards him. He was dead and Theo knew it, but his immediate thoughts were for Vincent's safety. Had this crazed lunatic already killed the little baby or was Vincent to be his next victim?

The man wrapped his hands around Theo's throat and tried to squeeze the life out of him. As Theo stared into the man's infuriated eyes, he saw it. He knew those eyes. It was Vincent, no longer a helpless baby, but now a fully-grown murderous wild man.

"Vincent, no!" Theo gasped, the words barely escaping from his tightening throat.

Theo woke up panicked. The pod glass window directly above his face was fully sealed, his vital signs normal on the monitor, except for an elevated heart rate.

The hibernation gas had worn off, along with the pleasant thoughts the pod had been piping into Theo's brain, allowing now for this nightmare of Vincent to seep through.

It may have only been a bad dream, but there was truth behind the frightening vision, that must have been festering in Theo's unconscious for the two months he'd been asleep.

Yes, one day indeed the cute helpless little baby Theo rescued off of Earth would be able to kill him with his bare hands.

And not just Theo, Haditha, too, plus any future

children they might have together. They were all now put at risk by Theo's decision to bring back the human baby.

It wasn't just a fully-grown human they had to worry about. Theo had read reports of human children being lethal at ages three and four, if properly armed.

All they had to do was be strong enough to hold a gun and pull a trigger. Happened all the time on Earth. These were tragic accidents, but the results for the victims were the same as if they had been intentional.

Theo's pod cover lifted up and Theo slowly got out, letting the life flow back into his spindly Grunyon arms and legs.

Theo glanced at Vincent's pod. Vincent too was stirring, as the gas dissipated from his chamber.

Vincent had visibly grown a bit, but not nearly to the size of the crazed beast that tried to take Theo's life in the nightmare.

Theo thought for a second before he released the lid of Vincent's pod. Could he do it? Could he establish a bond with this child that would keep Vincent from one day killing him?

Or in the worse case scenario, if Vincent did become a threat to Theo and his family or anyone else for that matter, would Theo then be able to resolve that threat, either by forever confining Vincent, or worse, killing him.

Vincent opened his eyes and recognized Theo immediately. The child's arms went straight up, wanting Theo to pick him up and free him from the encapsulating hibernation pod.

Seeing Vincent's warm, waking smile, brought Theo back to the here and now. Theo released the pod lid and

scooped up the child and held him as if his life depended on it. And the truth of it was, it did, as did Vincent's.

Theo took Vincent to the main screen and showed him Kybia, which they were now in orbit around.

Kybia had landmasses at the top and bottom of the planet with the center being wrapped in an equatorial ocean band that divided the two massive continents.

"You're home, Vincent. You're home."

Theo's evaluation of the trip home was routine with no reports of issues. The animal specimens had survived the hibernation and the plant life had thrived in the artificial greenhouse.

Theo reported in to his science supervisors over a videoconference and got the clearance to proceed to the farm in the quarantine zone, to start the next phase of his mission. Of course, Theo failed to mention his little stowaway onboard.

Theo piloted the hauler down through the atmosphere and to the northern region of Kybia. As he flew over the quarantine zone he was reminded again of how little was out there.

It was good land and the climate closely matched the favorable growing conditions of Earth, but the Grunyon population just never grew fast enough to settle in to this part of Kybia.

The majority of Grunyons lived on the coastal regions of their equatorial ocean. After Kybia became part of the Collective the Lucent Founders encouraged the Grunyon leaders to take control of this unpopulated northern region and closely restrict its development.

In order to keep it as pristine as possible, the quarantine zone was set up and nothing was built there.

Well, almost nothing. There was of course the farm and nursery that Theo would oversee, but there was also something else in the quarantine zone, but Theo didn't know exactly what it was. No one seemed to and if they did know, they weren't telling.

When Theo was put in charge of the farm, he was briefed on the forbidden area. He was given clear instructions to stay away from it and keep its existence, whatever it was, a secret and that was the end of his briefing.

The rumor was that it was a storage area where the government was keeping something top secret. Some speculated it was a hidden base where Lucent were covertly operating out of.

Others hypothesized it was an underground prisoner of war camp for the surviving Vorse population.

The covert Lucent base stories were somewhat plausible, given the fact that the Lucent would obviously need the isolation to protect their weak immune systems. And by keeping their presence secret, it would cut down on any potential visitors hoping to meet with a legendary Founder in person.

The reports of a subterranean Vorse prisoner of war camp were a bit more farfetched, but it was true that the forbidden area was suddenly put off limits just after the Fourth Planet catastrophe. If there were Vorse prisoners, the Ruptasians would certainly demand that they be put to death.

While the Founders could make harsh and severe rulings, they were not needlessly cruel. If the surviving Vorse population was no longer considered a threat as long as they were properly contained, it wasn't that hard

to imagine the Lucents turning to the Grunyon's to host a secret prison.

Whatever was there, Theo wasn't going to discover it on this trip, as he made sure to steer well clear of the forbidden area and head straight for the farm and nursery. The buildings of which were just now appearing on the horizon.

As they got closer, Theo picked Vincent up from the baby bin to show him the main screen. Theo circled the farm, fields and nursery buildings in order to give Vincent a good look at his new home.

"What do you think? All this room. You'll be able to run around free as a bird."

Theo returned Vincent back in the baby bin and proceeded to land the hauler on the long empty loading zone strip.

In a couple of months, automated cargo vessels would be landing on the loading zone strip to pick up the seeds, plants and trees Theo was responsible for producing.

The pilotless cargo vessels would then take the loads back to their destinations. Pear trees to the highlands of Ruptasia, potatoes for the Wolton capital city, squash plants for the home gardens of Grunyons, where they would be destined to become the bane of every Grunyon child without a taste for the yellow veggie.

But for now, the hauler was the only vessel parked in the landing zone, which was fortuitous, because it assured Theo no one else was there besides Haditha and they would be afforded the private time necessary for Vincent's introduction to her.

"I'm gonna go down and talk to your mother first. This is going to be a bit of a shock to her, so I need to

break the news to her gently.”

The cargo door opened and out strolled Theo, but there was no one there to greet him. Theo wasn't expecting a grand welcoming home from Haditha, especially not with the state of their relationship, but Theo was hurt that she wouldn't even bother to come outside and greet him.

“Honey, hello?” Theo called out, but no one answered.

Theo entered the main house and continued his search for Haditha. He immediately saw the stacks of moving boxes, so he knew she had gotten his message to begin the move. But then he noticed all the boxes were marked “Theo.” Haditha had moved nothing of her own, only Theo's belongings.

Just then the call from Haditha came in and Theo took it. A hologram appeared of a female Grunyon in front of Theo. She wore a loose-fitting wrap and a tentative smile.

“Welcome home, Theo.”

“Where are you? Why are you using a hologram?”

“Theo, I'm sorry, but I can't live in the quarantine zone.”

Theo tried to convince his reluctant wife otherwise, “I promise you we'll get back to the city as much as we can, but right now I need you here, today.

“And listen, being out here, the two of us together with no distractions, it's gonna give us time to focus on each other again. I know there are things I have to change about myself, and I will.”

“You don't have to change anything, Theo.”

“I do and I will. I don't have a choice anymore. Please come. There's so much I have to tell you. So much I have

to show you."

"I can't come, Theo."

"I need to talk to you in person. It's about you being a mother."

Theo's comment about motherhood drew an unexpected look of distress from Haditha, as she recoiled a bit.

"Who told you?" gasped Haditha.

"Told me what?" Theo responded, unnerved by her reaction.

"Theo, I'm sorry, but I've moved on. You're wonderful, but I couldn't do it anymore. I'm in love with someone else."

"You're leaving me?"

"I wanted to tell you sooner, but I wasn't sure how to with you stationed on Earth. Theo, I'm pregnant."

Theo went limp, but somehow managed to stay on his feet.

"Theo, I'm sorry it had to be this way. I'm the bad guy here, I know, but I just couldn't do it."

"Who is it?"

"You don't know him. We met while you were away."

"This is what I come home to?"

"Theo, what happened? Why did you come home early?"

"Why do you care?"

"I do. What happened, are you okay? I was worried about you when I got your message."

"I'm glad you had someone to comfort you in your worries."

"Theo."

"You want to know what happened? I was a coward

and I ran. I abandoned my team in the heat of battle and they all died because of it. There, you've been fully briefed."

"I don't believe it. You may be many things, Theo, but a coward isn't one of them. What really happened?"

"How come you couldn't tell me this in person? Didn't I at least deserve that?"

"He wouldn't let me come. I know you would never hurt me, but he refused to allow it. Not just to protect me, but to protect the baby. I hope you understand."

"I understand. More than you'll ever know, I do."

"Theo, I hope you meet someone. Maybe someone that already has children, because I think you'd be a great father."

"I have to go."

And with that Theo cutoff the call. Haditha's image disappeared from the house, leaving Theo alone. He knew his marriage hadn't ended just then.

No, it had ended a thousand times before, when he continuously made the Earth mission his priority over his relationship with Haditha. It ended when he let weeks go by while he was on Earth without calling her.

But then again, when he did call, she never seemed too interested in talking with him and now he knew why.

Back in the hauler, Vincent was probing the walls of the baby bin again, continuing his search for a way to escape his containment. Theo walked back in and reached down for Vincent.

"Come on, time to meet your new mother."

Theo carried Vincent off the hauler and they headed for the robot barn on the farm.

Theo and Vincent went down a line of robots. They varied for the specific jobs they had to perform on the farm. The robots were rough and tumble looking, built with blades, shovels and torches.

Theo could feel the baby tense up in his arms, afraid of the menacing looking farm robots.

But then Vincent, seemed to relax. His little hand reached out for a white orb. It was the SPOT, Surveillance Pod Observational Transmitter.

Vincent must have thought it was a ball and wanted to play with it. Theo took SPOT off the shelf and pushed the little black button that was under the large camera lens.

The little white orb sprouted three little black legs and started to walk around the floor.

Vincent's eyes twinkled with excitement as he was enchanted by the walking white orb.

Theo picked up the orb and handed it to Vincent to hold, since it delighted him so much.

Then Theo continued down the line of robots until he came to some that were created for more gentle work around the farm, with soft rubber hands that were perfect for keeping up with a little baby.

"Robot, activate."

The robot came to life.

"How may I be of service to you?"

"You have access to all public Collective library files?"

"I do."

"I want you to learn everything you can about human babies."

"I have scanned all information available on human babies."

“Good, I want you to meet Vincent. You’re his new mother. You’re never to leave his side. You have to keep him safe and tell me when I’m doing something wrong.”

“Hello, Vincent.”

The robot reached out to gently shake Vincent’s tiny little hand.

“I have some items I brought back from Earth for Vincent’s care. We’re going to have to learn how to replicate them.”

“Yes, sir. Should I get started on that now?”

“No, there’s time. Let’s go outside. I want Vincent to get used to you and his new home.”

Theo held Vincent as the mother robot sat with them surrounded by the unplowed fields of the farm.

SPOT continued to entertain Vincent with his funny little tripod walk.

One day the fields would be full of crops along with acres and acres of tree saplings that would be spread throughout the universe.

For now, however, it was just the four of them sitting there with their butts planted in the hearty dirt of the humble farm.

“I wonder how long before he can walk?” asked Theo.

“My scan of his bone mass and muscle coordination evaluation estimates he will be tentatively bipedal mobile in approximately 73 days and fully bipedal mobile in 92 days.”

“Mother, I need to make sure you nor any of the other robots communicate any signs of Vincent’s presence here to outsiders. He is to be a complete secret to anyone else other than me. Do you understand?”

“I do. I have issued commands to the other units. No one will say anything.”

“Good. Seventy-three days. That’s all we have?”

“Approximately.”

“I want full surveillance coverage on him from day 65 onward from SPOT. Let’s launch DOT in the sky, as well. I want his first steps captured on video.”

“Affirmative. Drone Observational Terminal will be airborne for aerial coverage.”

“We have to give him a good life here, Mother.”

Theo tossed Vincent in the air a few times, just high enough to get a smile out of the boy.

The baby already had some weight to him and Theo knew the time he had to be able to toss Vincent up in the air like this with his thin Grunyon arms was going to be short.

“We’ll have our limitations, but I want you to monitor him always. If he’s unhappy, I need to know why and what we can do about it.”

Mother studied the giggling Vincent as he continued to be tossed up and down.

“All signs say he’s happy.”

“You think?” Theo smiled, “Well, let’s try to keep it that way.”

Just then they watched DOT fly out of the robot barn. The drone looked like a flying version of SPOT, just with black wings instead of legs attached to the white orb.

Vincent pointed up to the sky at DOT and smiled.

“These are your friends, Vincent, DOT and SPOT. They will watch out for you, always. As will I.”

CHAPTER TEN

Seventy-one days later Vincent was on two feet walking about and getting into simply everything. If there was something sensitive, breakable or dangerous Vincent soon had his eager hands on it and was either putting it in his mouth for a snack or banging it against something equally as sensitive, breakable or dangerous.

Clearly the Collective did not have human toddlers in mind when they designed the farm and nursery.

Theo did the best he could to baby proof a Vincent zone around the farm, but the fair haired, wily Vincent proved to be a resourceful child and soon was employing chairs, boxes and anything else he could utilize as a stepping stool to expand the Vincent zone to ever greater heights.

SPOT and DOT as well as a team of mothering robots were a constant presence around the young child. They tried to keep him out of harm's way, but he was quick and elusive and would often find ways to escape his robot minders.

Theo tried to make the robots more robust in their efforts, but Vincent would devolve into crying fits when he couldn't get his way.

As Vincent became older, Theo tried to give Vincent

more and more of the freedom he craved from the robots. By then the farm was fairly well secured and the hazards to Vincent were minimized. So, Theo gave Vincent the space he needed to explore.

Vincent's moods improved with the increased freedom and he mostly stayed out of trouble as well, only doing a fraction of the damage he had caused in the first few rambunctious years.

Vincent didn't mean any harm. Human children were natural explorers and Vincent was behaving as any normal child would. Theo tried to keep Vincent distracted and busy by assigning him simple tasks to do on the farm and by constructing a jungle gym for him.

The gym started small with a few bars that Vincent could climb and hang from, but the jungle gym grew as Vincent's gymnastic abilities and talents developed.

Those first few years were Theo's favorite. Vincent was an endless supply of entertainment and amusement. Theo was in wonder at the young boy's development. From the time when Vincent took those first unassisted steps to the first word Vincent managed to utter, "Dada."

It was fairly easy to keep Vincent's existence on the farm a secret those first few years, as they hardly received any visits from outsiders.

When others did visit, Theo would stash Vincent in a sound proof secret room he had constructed in the house to keep Vincent hidden and safe. There was food and water in the room, so Vincent could survive for however long the visitor was on property.

It only took a few times for Vincent to be stashed away alone before he learned to despise the room, but Theo had no choice. If the Collective ever learned Theo

had taken an unauthorized human off of Earth, they would certainly come for Vincent.

Thankfully the Collective decided not to eliminate the rest of the living humans on Earth. Instead they embarked on a plan of containment.

They would let the humans live, but each human would be registered and monitored via a chip placed inside of them.

The data provided by the chips would mark where the humans had been, how many other humans they had been with and what was said or done in these gatherings.

This constant stream of data was fed and stored into a Collective computer and monitored constantly with algorithms to detect any evidence of a mounting insurrection organized by the remaining humans.

If the data showed something might be amiss, the case was assigned to occupying Collective agents that would investigate the matter to see if there was a conspiracy afoot.

The penalty for a human being caught trying to conspire against the Collective was death.

The Collective had showed leniency by letting the remaining humans live, but the Collective was going to be dammed if they were gonna let those surviving humans try and pull off a rebellion and cause more unneeded havoc on Earth.

While the humans were allowed to continue their existence on Earth, it was nothing close to the lives they had previously enjoyed before the Collective occupation.

Depression and suicide ran high on the human reservations that were established and closely

monitored by Collective personnel and robots, which were authorized to use lethal force to maintain order.

Some humans were taken off of Earth for educational and scientific purposes and flown to other worlds to be studied or put on display. Neither of which was a fate Theo wanted Vincent to suffer, so he did all he could to keep his existence on the farm secret.

As Vincent grew into being a young boy, he seemed to love his life on the farm. The robots went from being his minders, to being his tools to accomplish the ever-increasing tasks Theo assigned to him.

Vincent also had a bevy of small, domesticated Earth animals to keep him company, rabbits, chickens, cats, dogs and others.

While Vincent didn't have any human or Grunyon friends, the robot workforce was programmed to take a break from working and play with Vincent, if the boy so engaged them.

SPOT was Vincent's constant faithful companion. Wherever the boy went, the round, white walking robot wasn't far behind.

And then there was Theo. Not a day went by, if not an hour, when Vincent was not taken up in Theo's long arms and hugged tightly and told how wonderful and special he was.

Theo had long since known how important it was to develop a bond with Vincent and he did all he could to make it unbreakable.

They were in this together and it wasn't just Vincent who was isolated. Theo had given up a great deal of his freedom to protect Vincent. He let personal and professional relationships go by the wayside, as he

found any excuse he could to never leave the farm.

The friends he and Haditha had were mostly her friends to begin with and after their marriage broke up, the friends naturally lost their connection to Theo.

Theo's professional isolation kept him from advancing in the ranks. On the occasions when he was offered promotions, he turned them all down, so he could stay on the farm and continue to shelter Vincent from detection.

Theo turned down so many promotions, that his superiors finally stopped offering them all together, as Theo made it clear he had no intention of leaving the farm.

The thing Theo loved best about those early years on the farm, was that he never had to lie to Vincent. Vincent accepted where he was, never questioning it for a second.

But by the time Vincent turned five, the questions started to come and they would not stop.

Vincent asked Theo why they didn't look the same. Theo told him as much of the truth as he could. That he had been sent to Earth by the Collective to save the planet and that the humans that lived there were dying because of the Sleep virus.

Theo conveniently left out the fact that the Collective had unleashed the Sleep virus on the planet themselves, skipping over that part to where he found Vincent parentless and how he decided to adopt the boy and raise him alone.

Not only were there now an endless supply of questions that needed careful answers, Theo also had to deal with Vincent's violent protest about being hidden away in the sound proof safe room.

Theo tried to make the space as pleasant as possible with toys, treats and games, but Vincent still balked at being cooped up like a prisoner.

Theo fabricated a story that the reason Vincent had to go in the room was that periodically an unpredictable solar storm would strike. If Vincent wasn't protected in his special room, he would get very sick, him being a human and not being used to the supposedly fierce Kybia solar storms.

Theo knew one day Vincent would learn the truth about what had happened on Earth and why he had to be hidden away in the secret room.

At age six he was already well adept at using Theo's computer to play games. Soon enough he would be able to use any computer or robot to search for information.

Theo couldn't block every computer from Vincent nor did he want to. He did, however, program the computers and robots to filter certain questions or requests.

There was only so much of the truth he was willing to let Vincent find out. He wanted Vincent to have a curious mind and an appreciation of the truth, but there were just certain things he didn't want the curious boy to know. At least not yet.

Events came to a head as Theo was expecting a routine site inspection from the Collective. Vincent, ten years old now, refused to go to his room for hiding.

This of course was nothing new. Vincent stopped believing in the solar storms when he realized that none of his Earth animals had to hide from the storms and they were always just fine, even after years of exposure to the storms.

Vincent reasoned that the animals should have the

same Earth weaknesses as he did, so he knew there had to be another reason for his confinement.

Vincent, ever curious and resourceful, figured out Theo was forcing him into hiding because they were getting visitors to the farm.

Vincent had been picking up on chatter between the robots and Theo and understood that the “storms” were always happening now on a semi-routine schedule. Vincent finally got proof when he set up a camera to record the landing zone when he thought one of these storms was scheduled to happen.

Vincent put up a mild protest as Theo locked him in the hidden room, so not to draw Theo’s suspicion that something was going to be different with this solar storm.

After he was let out of the safe room, Vincent retrieved the hidden camera and watched the video of Theo greeting the arriving site review team and letting them do their inspection.

The next time Theo tried to force Vincent into the safe room, Vincent presented Theo with his hidden video. Vincent refused to go into hiding until he knew more about what was going on. Why did he have to hide from these visitors?

Despite Vincent’s video evidence, Theo was unmoved and forcibly tried to pick the boy up and carry him to the hidden room, as he had done in the past when Vincent refused to go.

Vincent put up his normal defense of falling to the ground and holding on to the piping that snaked through the house. This tactic would usually work for a few minutes, until Theo could pull Vincent free by tugging on his legs.

“No, I’m not going!”

“You have to go!”

Theo pulled on Vincent’s legs, but there was no give this time. Theo then moved to pry Vincent’s fingers off of the pipe, but Vincent’s hands were so much bigger now and his grip unbreakable, frustrating the exhausted Grunyon.

It was a useless endeavor. Vincent had finally reached the point where he was stronger than Theo. Force alone would not be enough to get Vincent into the room.

Theo could have programmed a robot to remove Vincent from the pipe and escort him to the hiding room, but Theo was concerned that Vincent might hurt himself if he struggled too hard against the robot.

The robot was a last resort and Theo was willing to use it, if it meant saving Vincent’s life, but he decided he would try one more thing first. The truth.

The time had finally come for the two to talk. Theo let go of Vincent. Theo was out of breath from his exhaustive efforts to move the now unmovable boy.

“Do you really want to know why you have to go to the room when visitors come?”

“Because you’re ashamed of me! Because I’m so different from other Grunyons.”

“Vincent, no! I’m prouder of you than anything in my life. Whatever made you think that?”

“Why else do you hide something? Because you’re ashamed of it.”

“You also hide something because you treasure it. I hide you because if anyone found out you’ve been living here with me, they would take you away and you would never see me or the farm again.”

"Why? I'm your son."

"They wouldn't care. They'd still take you."

"But why?"

"Because you're human. When I rescued you off of Earth, I wasn't authorized to do so."

"But you saved my life. What were you supposed to do, let me die like my parents?"

"Before I saved your life, you saved mine. And I swore I'd never let anything bad happen to you after that. That's why I can't take the chance of letting the Collective or anyone else know you are here."

"Am I not a good person?"

"You're a wonderful person. I'm honored to be your father and so proud of you, but you have to listen and trust me on this."

"Would they send me back to Earth?" Vincent almost seemed happy about this prospect.

"I don't know what they would do with you. I just know I can't lose you, Vincent."

With that, the first tears came to Theo's eyes. Vincent felt bad for making his poor father cry. Vincent moved towards his father and embraced him in a hug.

"Don't cry, Dad."

Theo wiped the tears from his moist eyes and then released his son. Saying to him, as he let go, "You're too big for me to protect you on my own anymore. I need you to protect yourself."

"I'll go in the room, Dad. Just, please, stop crying."

They hugged once more and then Vincent went quietly in to his hiding space.

"I'll come for you when it's safe," Theo reassured his son.

Vincent looked back at his father, who stood just

outside the room.

“Will it be this way my whole life?”

“No one knows what the future will hold.”

“Maybe one day I can show them that I’m a good person and there is nothing to fear from me.”

“I hope that day comes, because you are the most amazing individual I’ve ever known, Vincent. And the Universe is lucky to have you.”

Vincent turned and picked up one of his many games in the room and started to play. He then grabbed an apple from a bowl, bit off a chunk and chewed it as he resumed the action on his game from the last time he had to be hidden away.

Theo closed the door on his son, hiding him away once again. Vincent was safe, for now, but Theo knew this could not go on forever. Nothing ever did.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The government ships seemed to come from out of no where, flying fast and low, two of them, right over the farm. The stealthy dark ships had no visible markings or identifying numbers, so Theo had no idea what division of the government the ships were a part of.

Theo was walking in from the fields when he spotted them. Theo feared the worst. He had no pending government business or inspections on his schedule and the ships had flown in so low, they hadn't triggered any radar warnings, giving Theo no time to hide Vincent.

Was this it? Had they finally found out about Vincent somehow and were now here to collect him? A sick, unbelieving feeling grabbed Theo's stomach.

Theo thought about casually strolling back to the farmhouse to try and find Vincent and get him hidden. He wouldn't run and make his actions look suspicious.

No, it would just be a business as usual meander, no big deal. Just another day on the farm.

Before he could make a move, the ships blared a warning. "Stay where you are! Do not move! Stay where you are until further instruction!"

Well, that was that. Theo could either make a break for it to try and hide Vincent in direct violation of their

order or he could play along and hope for the best.

Theo quickly rushed through his recent memories, but could think of nothing that would have tipped off the government that he was keeping Vincent out there. Best to play it cool and hope for the best, he thought.

So, Theo stood there out in the open, as if he had nothing to hide as the two ships touched down on each side of him.

Two darkly dressed Grunyon government agents came off the first ship followed by a squad of police embarking from the second ship.

The squad, equipped with special scanners, immediately took positions around the farm, securing the immediate area as the two grim-faced Grunyon agents approached Theo.

"Can I help you with something?" Theo inquired of the two agents.

"Who lives here?" Agent Brundie asked, dispensing with any pleasantries.

"Just myself," Theo replied calmly.

Brundie, the younger of the two agents, postured himself to exude authority, leaning into Theo's personal space. A dark visor hid Brundie's eyes. The visor was feeding Brundie data on whatever information the government had on file on Theo.

Agent Brundie was accompanied by Agent Calk, an older veteran agent, who lacked the intensity of his younger partner.

Calk didn't need a visor. He stayed back a step and maintained eye contact with Theo. Calk could learn more from an eye twitch or an off look than any data stream could ever provide him.

"You're Theo, right?" Agent Calk asked.

"I am."

"Theo, we need to take a look around. Do you mind?"

"No, help yourself."

Agent Calk motioned with a hand signal for the police squad to begin their search.

Theo watched the police spread out on the farm testing the air.

"I'm just curious as to what is going on? What are they scanning for?" Theo asked the agents.

Calk replied back, "Have you noticed anything strange or unusual the last few days? Any visitors or unscheduled vehicle traffic?"

Theo thought for a moment, "We had a courier pick up of some saplings for Ruptasia a few days ago."

The mention of Ruptasia got the interest of the agents, especially Brundie, who rejoined the conversation, "Were there any Ruptasians on the courier ship? Either coming or going?"

"No, it was an automated pick up. No flight crew or passengers, outside of the plants."

"Was the ship here yesterday?" Brundie pressed.

"No, it left two days ago. Here, I have it on my logs. Routine pickup, planned months ago."

Theo pulled out his tablet and showed the two agents the schedule of pick-ups and deliveries.

As the two agents studied the log, Theo looked around at the searching police. They seem to be in a routine search mode, not too excited about anything.

Theo knew if they had discovered Vincent, an unregistered human, there would have been plenty of excitement, so he took their business-as-usual manner to be a good sign.

"I'm going to need copies of your logs. And suspend all incoming pick-ups and deliveries for the time being. Nothing is to leave this planet until you get the all clear from us," Brundie ordered.

"May I ask why?" Theo wanted to know.

"No," Agent Brundie snapped.

Calk jumped back in, "Not right now, Theo. But we're going to have you report to Planetary Defense headquarters today; you'll be briefed then. Tell no one where you are going."

"Trust me, there's no one to tell. Planetary Defense. That's who you guys are with?" Theo replied.

Brundie shot Theo a cold look, "We didn't say we were with anybody."

The squad leader of the police approached the two agents, "The scans are negative. The area is clear."

Agent Calk nodded, "Okay, wrap it up and get back on the ship."

Agent Brundie took note of Theo's hauler, "That thing still fly?"

"Believe it or not, it does. I don't travel much these days, but it does the trick."

"Is that what you'll be flying to headquarters in?" Calk asked.

"Yes," Theo replied.

"Good luck. Any other ship on the property rated for space?" Brundie asked.

"No, the hauler's it." Theo answered.

Calk tossed Theo a signal transmitter. "Keep this transmitter beacon on your ship at all times now when you fly in the quarantine zone. It'll keep you from being shot down."

"You're joking, right?"

"Fly without it and find out," dared Agent Brundie.

"Tell your robots to report anything unusual. Any visitors, especially Ruptasians, we need to know about immediately," Calk advised.

"Consider it done," Theo declared.

"And, Theo," Calk added as the agents and police turned back to their ships. "We were never here. Understood?"

Theo silently nodded as the agents and police squad got back on their ships and took off in the air, again flying low in the sky.

Theo stood there watching the ships disappear over the horizon. Finally, he felt secure enough to move to the house and enter.

"Vincent!" Theo called out, "Vincent, where are you?"

There was no answer, so Theo went to the hidden safe room and activated the code on the concealed keypad behind a picture.

The door opened and a robot arm swung out at Theo. He ducked just in time to miss the swinging arm, which was affixed with sharp pruning sheers on the end, where a hand would normally be.

"Go away!" came a shout from the hidden room.

"Vincent, calm down! They're gone, you're safe!"

Theo tried his best not to show fear before Vincent, but it was harder to do everyday now that Vincent, at age eighteen, had grown into a man's body. And especially in this instance, as he was brandishing the pruning robot's broken arm, as if it was a head-severing baseball bat.

"Father, I'm sorry, I thought it was them," Vincent apologized profusely.

Vincent immediately laid down the pruning robot's broken arm. Vincent's own arms were now full and firm, a product of his genes and the time Vincent spent performing manual labor on the farm. Not to mention all the exercise Vincent got from his years spent growing up on his jungle gym bars.

Whoever had been Vincent's human father, he must have been a man of considerable size, as Vincent's growth was above average for humans his age.

Theo, relieved to see Vincent safe, wrapped his much thinner, lanky Grunyon arms around him.

Vincent smiled. It had been a while since his father showed him such affection, as if he was a child again. Vincent wrapped his muscular arms around his anxious father and hugged back.

"I was worried sick about you. When did you see them?" Theo asked.

"I didn't. I was in the barn fixing the pruning robot when I heard the ships touchdown. I knew we didn't have any pick ups scheduled for today, so I wasn't sure what was going on.

"Then I heard them over their loud speaker, so I ran inside and hid. Do they know about me? Am I in danger?"

Theo shook his head, "I don't think it was you they were after."

"What were they looking for then?"

"They wouldn't say. Planetary Defense agents. Serious business. They were scanning for something, but didn't seem to find any traces of it here. They also mentioned Ruptasians, if we had seen any recently."

"What could it be?" Vincent asked.

"I don't know, but they want me to go to Planetary

Defense headquarters for a briefing about it today.”

“Do you think they just want you off the farm, so they can come back and get me?” Vincent asked his father.

“No, trust me, if they wanted you, they would have taken you.”

“They could have tried,” Vincent warned as he picked up the pruning robot’s arm again and manipulated it so the sheers snapped fiercely in the air.

“Vincent, we talked about this.”

“I can’t just let them take me without a fight.”

“Violence won’t help you. It will only prove the case that humans are dangerous and need to be feared, but you’re better than that, aren’t you?”

“I can’t go on like this, Father. In constant fear that they will come for me. I think you should let me go back. Like we discussed.”

“Back where, Earth? Out of the question.”

“Well, where should I go?”

“You don’t have to go anywhere.”

“I can’t hide my whole life. And what will happen to you if they find you’ve been harboring me this whole time? You could be expelled from the mission and dishonorably discharged from the Collective Science Corps. They’d take the farm from you. It’s your life’s work.”

Theo laughed incredulously. “My life’s work is you. I don’t care about the farm. I stay here because it’s what’s best for our family. We will discuss your future, Vincent, but not right now. When I get back, I promise you we’ll talk.”

“No, you’ll talk and I’ll listen. Like always.”

“And for good reason. Trust your father, Vincent.”

"I do, Dad, but I want to start living my life. I want to start having my adventures. Like the other humans."

"What other humans? You mean like the TV shows and movies you watch?"

"Yes. None of those people stayed hidden on a farm their whole life. Superman didn't. Dorothy didn't. Luke didn't. Neither did Harry Potter"

"Those are movies. They're not real. And Harry Potter didn't live on a farm."

"No, but he lived trapped in a closet."

"Vincent, trust me, millions of humans, real humans, lived their whole lives on farms. Perfectly content."

"Fine, I'll live on a farm. On Earth."

"Vincent, I can still call them back. The PD agents."

"You never would."

Theo smiled at his son and motioned for him to follow.

"Of course not. Come on, now. We have to put the farm on lockdown. Cancel all shipments and deliveries. You'll have to watch things while I'm away.

"Oh, and deactivate all the robots. The agents could hack into them for surveillance and accidentally spot you while they are looking for whatever they are hunting for."

"How long will you be gone?"

"Don't know. They really didn't tell me much. Which tells me a lot."

"What does it tell you?"

"That this is bad."

CHAPTER TWELVE

As Theo flew into the capital city of Dryden to report to the Planetary Defense headquarters, he remembered how much he had missed the city he had grown up in.

It had been years since he was in Dryden and now traces of his forgotten life started to come back to him. His life as a child, a student and husband.

That previous life was all but gone now. Theo's parents had passed away during his Earth training and he had no brothers or sisters.

Once his divorce went through from Haditha, their house in the city was sold and divided between the two.

Theo had no formal ties to Dryden any longer and the city had changed so much in the eighteen years that he had been gone, that he now felt like a stranger in the town he had once called home.

Most of his friendships had ended when his marriage did. The few friends Theo did keep up with, he only communicated with remotely. It had been years since he had seen any of them in person.

Now they only sent him pictures and videos of their families, mostly to celebrate some accomplishment of their children. Theo never sent anything back in return except for supportive comments expressing his

happiness for them.

Theo didn't have the luxury of celebrating Vincent's accomplishments publicly. Theo had no one to tell the first time Vincent repaired a robot on his own or how he learned to fly the hauler or drive the hover cart.

The most heartbreaking pictures and videos Theo received, however, were those showing his friends' kids now going to dances, parties, getting married and some even having children of their own.

Vincent was alone in the world as far as a mate was concerned. Even though Theo's marriage ended in divorce, he was grateful for the time he had with Haditha and hoped that maybe someday Vincent would have a relationship with another human.

Theo had thought a lot about what he would eventually do with Vincent over the years, but no answer was clear.

He had long ago taught Vincent how to survive in the wild. They would regularly go to the remote wilderness of Kybia and Theo showed Vincent how to survive off of the land. He could probably live out there forever and never be found, but what kind of life was that? A lonely old hermit, forever trapped in solitude.

As crazy as it seemed, there was also the option of smuggling Vincent back to Earth. There he would at least find human companionship, but without being a registered human, his future was uncertain.

If he was ever discovered by Collective forces on Earth, the penalty for a human that removed their monitoring chip was death. Vincent had never had a chip to begin with, but would the Collective enforcement robot that stumbled upon a chip-less Vincent believe that or would they just assume Vincent

was lying and terminate his life immediately.

Under those current circumstances, a return to Earth was too risky for Theo to allow it.

The plan that Theo felt had the most promising outcome was to use some of his government connections to try and get Vincent awarded Grunyon citizenship.

It was a long shot, but for nearly all of Vincent's life he had in fact grown up on Kybia. He had worked on the farm and contributed to the success of the mission, despite doing it anonymously.

Could the case for citizenship be made for Vincent? Or would the prejudice of Vincent being a human cause the Collective to immediately take Vincent from Theo.

Would they inject a chip into Vincent and start their data collection from him, just as they did the other humans?

How would Vincent react to losing what little freedom he did enjoy on the farm? Vincent had a strong will and Theo feared he would rebel against such a dramatic change.

Eventually, Theo knew Vincent would do or say something that was bound to get him in trouble. Or on the off-chance Vincent didn't rebel, would he let his spirit get crushed like so many other humans before him, and turn to addiction and ultimately suicide on a human reservation on the occupied Earth?

Then again there was always the option that Theo had chosen for eighteen years now. Just go back to the farm and live a quiet life together and try to forget the outside universe exists. Just keep hiding Vincent anytime any outsiders showed up at the farm.

The problem was that Theo was getting older and wouldn't be there forever to keep hiding Vincent away.

One day Theo would be gone and the Collective would find out about Vincent.

For Theo not to be prepared for that day would be a disservice to his one and only son.

Despite these quandaries, Theo was grateful that his biggest fears for Vincent never came true. That he would not be able to control the growing boy and he'd either have to imprison or kill him.

Theo still had hidden weapons stashed around the farm, just in case Vincent ever tried to use his overwhelming strength against him. But Vincent never did. Theo trusted the boy with his life. A life he knew he owed to a baby's cries so many years ago.

Theo still kept the hidden weapons on the farm. Not to stop Vincent per se, but to stop anyone that might try to take Vincent from him.

Theo reported to Planetary Defense headquarters and was immediately taken to a secure briefing room, where he joined an audience of about fifty.

Theo glanced around to see if he knew any of the other Grunyons in the room. He didn't. They were all either police or Planetary Defense forces. Theo began to wonder what they needed him there for.

Agent Brundie and Agent Calk took to the stage to start the briefing. Behind them was a projection screen listing the proceedings as "Top Secret." As the agents began to speak, pictures, video, diagrams and other visual aides appeared to help illustrate their presentation.

Agent Calk took the lead, "What you are about to see and hear today is one of the most closely guarded secrets the Grunyon government has. You are all sworn officers

of the Collective, the law or Planetary Defense, but this goes beyond all that.

“The very fabric that holds our universal bonds together is at risk today. If you care anything about the life on this planet and on any other planet out there, you will keep what you hear today confidential.”

Agent Brundie now took over, “During the invasion of Planet Four, the Vorse had devised a series of weapons that caused a mass destruction of their home world.

“Little was known at the time about these super weapons, but through atmospheric testing of the ground zero locations of each of the weapons detonated, we were able to determine that the core element of what the weapons were made of was Enzin, an extremely rare and volatile element, found only on Planet Four.

“They used it to drive a fusion reactor, which led to the uncontrollable planet ending catastrophic explosions.

“Enzin is extremely hard to mine. However, the Founders made the decision to harvest any remaining amount of this element off of the ruined planet and hide it from the rest of the universe.

“The Founders wanted to limit knowledge of this mission, so they worked exclusively with Grunyons on developing the remote drone mining equipment to go back to the Fourth Planet and harvest the remaining element.

“No Ruptasians were ever informed of this work. The Woltons were never briefed on this matter either, once they joined the Collective years later.”

Agent Calk resumed briefing duties from his younger partner, “The stockpile of the Enzin was stored

secretly in a secure location deep within the quarantine zone in the forbidden area and hasn't been disturbed since it first arrived eighty years ago, until yesterday.

"A surprise raid was conducted by attacking forces that broke through the defenses and removed all quantities of the stored element.

"On the escape, the attacking ship was damaged and is now believed to be hiding somewhere in the quarantine zone, unable to leave Kybia.

"The ship used in the attack was a Ruptasian cruiser that was reported missing last year. It was transporting a science mission of human specimens off of Earth when contact was lost. There was no sign of the crew again, until their fingerprints were detected at the site of the stolen Enzin."

Agent Brundie then showed them some video of the heist taking place, "Surveillance of the crime scene isn't much help. The attackers were all in protective gear so their identities couldn't be determined, outside of the limited Ruptasian fingerprints left behind.

"So, we have a dilemma. Since the Ruptasian Council was never informed of the harvesting of Enzin and its covert storage on Kybia, kinda hard to ask them about it at this point without causing a major rift in planetary relations.

"But we have to find out if this theft was an official state act of Ruptasia or the action of an unsanctioned team of Ruptasians.

"Working with the Founders we have gathered no intelligence that the Ruptasian government launched this mission, but that doesn't rule out state action, just makes it highly unlikely."

"The more plausible scenario is that this was the

action of Ruptasian rogue actors. But that leads us to the question of who these actors are and what do they plan to do with enough Enzin to end all life on every world of the Collective as we know it.”

Like the rest of the audience that just received the somber briefing, Theo was stunned. But in the back of his mind, he couldn't help but think that maybe now he didn't have to come up with a future plan for Vincent, because pretty soon they were all going to be dead regardless.

The agents assigned the now lined up audience members to their different duties and teams as they started to work to try and save the Universe.

Theo purposely waited in the back of the line, unsure of what they had planned for him.

Agent Calk nodded at Theo as he finally came forward, bringing up the rear, “Theo, glad you could make it.”

“Thanks for the cheerful briefing, but why did you bring me in? I'm not a cop or soldier. I grow plants.”

“I read about your Earth mission. About how you were sent home early by the Ruptasian Commander Augustus.”

“That's right,” Theo replied, not particularly happy to have the bad memory thrown in his face out of the blue.

Brundie then joined in, “I don't know if you've kept up with your old mission pal, but Augustus is now the Ruptasian Representative on the Collective Council. Moving up in the world.”

“Yeah, I heard,” shrugged Theo.

“We want to pick your brain a bit. We're gonna have

to deal with this guy. Tell us all about him. Everything you can remember.”

Theo stared back at the two agents. “That’s it? That’s all you want? Old Earth mission stories.”

“You wanna grow some plants for us too? Or do you wanna jump in that old hauler of yours and save the damn Universe by yourself?” Brundie teased.

Calk had a more somber, respectful tone, “Theo, is he as bad as people say he is?”

Theo, ignoring Brundie and picking up on Calk’s apprehension, nodded with some concern. “He’s worse.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

With no incoming pick-ups or out going deliveries, the farm and nursery were relatively quiet. The robot workforce had been deactivated and put in storage in the barn. Vincent passed the time by working out on his jungle gym.

He had proven himself to be quite the self-taught gymnast, able to pull, jump and flip his way from bar to bar. If Theo was around, he would have forbidden Vincent from some of his more daring moves, but Theo wasn't around, so Vincent had complete freedom.

Vincent had turned the jungle gym into an extreme obstacle course of sorts and he was rushing through it trying to break his best time.

He was almost to the top of the structure, which was nearly thirty feet high now. One missed step and Vincent would have found himself plunging to the ground again, facing certain injury and quite possibly death.

But Vincent wouldn't miss now, he told himself. He learned from his slip up from last year and wouldn't make the same mistake again.

Vincent only had one more level to go and at this rate he would have his record.

He swung his body, as the momentum carried him

forward, he reached out for the next bar. Then he heard it, the coughing, ragged roar of engines on the brink of failure.

The distraction caused him to look away for just the briefest of seconds, but it was enough to cause his hand to miss the bar.

As he began to fall, he managed to grab ahold of a lower bar with his other hand, but his tentative grip was slipping.

Vincent knew the danger if he let go, so he summoned all the strength in his fingers to tighten the grip. Then he swung his other hand up and grabbed the bar securely.

He was safe, but it scared him to the core knowing how close he had come to falling again, from an even greater height than he had fallen from last year, which had fractured his leg.

The faltering ship he had heard was making an upward run to try and break the gravitational pull of Kybia, but the engines were failing, with smoke billowing from the crippled ship.

Its upward trajectory stopped and the ship was motionless for a moment, suspended in mid-air, before falling backward toward the farm fields.

The ship struggled to have the failing engine give it any lift it could. The ship's descent was slowed, but not enough to prevent a crash landing in the orchards of the nursery.

Vincent pulled himself to the top of the jungle gym so he could watch the site of the ship slamming into the ground and then tumbling end over end to a stop. Vincent immediately started to climb down the gym as fast as he could.

Vincent jumped on the farm's hover cart and sped toward the crashed ship. Had anyone survived, he thought? Minutes, seconds even, could be the difference between life and death.

He hadn't seen a huge explosion yet, so the fuel cells must not have ruptured. But what if they did rupture while he was near the ship? He would be killed instantly in the explosion, but he had to try though to save whoever was on board. Superman surely would have, Luke, Dorothy and Harry, too.

But saving any survivors posed another dilemma for Vincent. If he did save someone, would they then turn him in for being an unregistered human? Only the lowest of life form would do such a thing Vincent thought. Certainly, they would be grateful enough to keep his secret safe.

Vincent could have activated DOT and SPOT to check out the wreck, but there was no time for that, especially now that Vincent was closing in on the crash.

Vincent could now see and smell the smoke from the wrecked craft. He was also at the point of no return.

If he went any closer, he would be killed in any fuel cell explosion or risk being turned in by any survivors struggling to get out.

Even if the survivors kept his secret, there was the danger that if anyone else, like the Planetary Defense agents, responded to the crash, they could turn Vincent in to the Collective.

Despite the dangers, Vincent held steady and headed straight for the crashed ship and whatever fate was in store for him.

As soon as he could, he leapt off the hover cart and inspected the wreck.

The hull of the ship had cracked wide open. The torn and twisted metal allowed Vincent easy access inside. He just had to be careful not to be cut by the many jagged edges of the ripped open walls.

The ship was upside down, debris scattered everywhere.

And then he saw it, a sight that both sickened and frightened him.

It was a decapitated hand lying among the debris. The red hand with white hair growing on the knuckles of the fingers meant it must have belonged to an unfortunate Ruptasian.

Vincent looked away. He'd never seen anything like it before in his life. He had in movies, but as Theo had explained to Vincent, so many times before, movies were not real. This was.

This hand, which seemed to be almost pointing at Vincent, should have been warning enough to turn away and go back to the farm and hide.

If the gruesome discovery was any indication as to the fate of the crew, Vincent could only guess that there were no survivors on board to even rescue.

And if the ship's fuel cells erupted in a ball of fire, his own life would be lost as well.

But Vincent didn't turn and run. No, he had to push on. He had to see with his own eyes that no one had survived, so he continued his search through the trashed ship.

"Can anybody hear me? Is there anyone alive? Hello?"

Vincent arrived at the smoky cockpit of the ship. The pilot and copilot chairs were hanging upside down as the floor of the ship was now the ceiling.

Strapped into the seats were two helmeted pilots in their protective suits. Protective being a subjective word, as the suits offered no protection against the jagged debris that pierced their bodies.

Vincent shook their dangling arms to see if there was any life left in them, but there was none. They did possess all their hands, so Vincent knew there was at least one more crewmember on board.

Behind him, Vincent heard an angry, powerful, tormented scream. It caused the startled Vincent to jump in fright.

He turned and saw that the third crewmember was trapped under a collapsed wall.

The ensnared figure was unable to move, but was at least alive enough to try. Vincent grabbed the edge of the wall, but it was too heavy to lift. He then spotted a railing bar that had broken loose. He grabbed the bar and wedged it under the fallen wall and lifted with all his might.

This allowed enough space under the wall for the trapped helmeted figure to pull free. Vincent then let the wall fall back again. It smacked down with a firm thud. The figure squirmed on the ground, clutching their leg with both of their very intact hands.

Vincent had expected to encounter at least one person, either dead or alive, missing a hand, but this survivor clearly had both of theirs.

Vincent hadn't seen anyone else on board, so whose hand had it been that he stumbled across when he first entered the ship he wondered?

It was a momentary thought, because any second the ship could erupt from the fractured fuel cells. He had one survivor to save and that was all he'd be able to pull

off of the ship at one time anyway, so he went to work.

Vincent put his hands under the arms of the lone survivor and started to drag them out. The figure protested and fought Vincent all the way, but Vincent kept on tugging, determined to get both of them off of the ship safely.

He assumed this figure was in a great deal of pain and the movement from the rescue only exacerbated it, hence the protests.

However, there was no other way to get them off the ship in a timely manner, so whatever pain this unfortunate individual was feeling was a necessary hardship and would be nothing compared to being burned alive if the ship blew up with both of them still on it.

Vincent got to the gash in the side of the ship and then flipped the figure up on his back and carried the crewmember off of the ship and toward the hover cart.

Again, the figure protested, this time slamming Vincent on the back repeatedly, in an effort to get him to stop. Theo laid the helmeted crewmember down on the hover cart.

"I'm sorry, but we have to go. The ship could explode any second."

The figure pointed desperately toward the crashed vessel.

"Your friends can't be helped."

The figure then took off the protective helmet. To his surprise, it wasn't a Ruptasian. If anything, she looked almost human.

Her hair was black and skin pale in color, but Vincent thought her thin face to be beautiful, despite it being twisted in pain and anger.

She started to bark orders at him in a language he couldn't understand. Theo had taught Vincent Grunyon, Ruptasian and even some Wolton, but this was completely foreign to him.

"I don't understand you," Vincent told her, unsure if she would even understand him back.

The girl, who looked to be no older than the teenage Vincent himself, stared at him, seeming to get her bearings back and piecing things together slowly. Then she spoke surprisingly well English.

"I need to go back! They have to be saved!"

"You can't save them, they're dead."

"No, not the crew! Oh, out of my way!"

She pushed Vincent aside and tried to walk on her injured leg. She collapsed immediately and screamed in pain. Vincent helped lift her back on the hover cart.

This time she welcomed his help and didn't fight it. She gripped his shoulders tightly though, to get his full attention.

"On board there is a bright yellow case. I need you to go inside and get it."

Just then there was a sinister hiss and flames shot out of the back of the ship.

"The fuel cells are starting to break down. There's no time! We have to go!"

"I need that case! It is a matter of life or death! I will not go without it."

"Well, I will!"

"Then go! Leave me to my fate!"

"It's that important?"

"I'll die without it."

"Take the hover cart and start heading out, in case I don't make it out again, we both shouldn't die."

With that, Vincent ran back inside and looked furiously for the yellow case. He found it, but it was wedged high above him, trapped in the carnage of the crumbled ship. Vincent studied the damaged wall, looking for hand and foot placements in the cracks and crevasses.

An explosion rocked the ship, knocking Vincent down. He looked back up at the yellow case above him. He'd have one shot at this, tops, then he'd have to get out of there, with the yellow case or not.

Vincent took a few steps back and then ran. He then leapt against the wall. He caught some wires, then swung himself up higher to a pipe. From there he reached out for the case. His fingers missed it by mere inches. He tried again, but he was still short.

Vincent swung one more time, this time letting go with his other hand. Vincent swung through the air and his out stretched hand grabbed the yellow handle of the case.

With the full weight of his body pulling on it, the case slipped free of the debris and Vincent tumbled to the floor, the case landing safely beside him.

Vincent ran from the ship clutching the case. He saw the girl on the hover cart ready to go. She hadn't left him, but was ready to move as soon as Vincent jumped onboard, which he did immediately.

"Hang on!" she yelled as she drove the hover cart as fast as it would sprint. Behind them the ship's fuel cells finally ruptured and a fireball inferno raged where the ship had been.

They could feel the heat on their backs, but with every passing second, they were further away and safer as well.

Now at a comfortable distance, she stopped the hover cart and opened the box Vincent had miraculously pulled from the wreck.

It was full of black rocks with a pulsing blue glow. They were strangely beautiful in nature, but the unexplained blue glow gave them a sense of foreboding danger, as well.

When the dark-haired girl noticed Vincent staring at the rocks, she snapped the case closed.

“Rocks? I risked my life for a case full of stones.”

She didn’t bother answering Vincent, instead she pulled a scanner out of her pocket and held it up to him.

Unsatisfied with what the scanner was reporting, she banged it against the cart three times, to fix whatever bug was going on.

She scanned Vincent once more. Again, the reading she got perplexed her.

“You’re aware the penalty for a human that removes their monitoring chip is death?”

Vincent took a hard swallow. He had tried to do the right thing by saving this person’s life, but now he feared for himself. Even more so than when he was in the bowels of the crashed vessel that was on the brink of exploding.

He could run and hide in his safe room. With her injured leg she would never be able to catch him. But she would report him in and the Planetary Defense forces would tear the house apart looking for him.

He could also run to the wilderness and survive in the wild on his own in hopes that one day he would make contact with Theo again and they could plan his future as a fugitive human on the run.

The girl sensed his fear and grabbed his hand. “You

saved my life. You have nothing to fear from me. Relax, you can trust me, human."

Vincent looked down at her hand holding his. Vincent had never once shared even a conversation with an outsider and here he was face-to-face and holding hands with a female no less.

It felt good. Vincent moved his fingers to intertwine with hers. She was a bit puzzled by it, but let him continue. She even gave his hand a reassuring squeeze that brought about an embarrassed grin from Vincent.

"I never had a chip to remove," he finally confessed.

"An unregistered human off planet? How?"

"I came to Kybia as a baby. My father found me as an orphan on the Collective mission to save Earth. He couldn't save my human parents, but he did save me."

"Save humans?" she scoffed. "Are you sure it wasn't you that just had their brains rung in a crash landing?"

The girl's bemused response caused Vincent to pull his hand back.

"Who are you? What are you?" Vincent asked firmly.

"I'm Ava and I'm just like you. A victim of evil Collective tyranny."

"The Collective's not evil. I just wish they weren't so wary of humans, but they just don't understand us yet."

"The Collective killed over seven billion human beings as they conquered your planet. If that's not evil, you tell me what is?"

"It was the virus that killed the humans, not the Collective. The Collective went to Earth on a rescue mission."

Ava was dumbfounded by Vincent's response.

"How ignorant are you? The Collective designed the Sleep virus and planted it on Earth for the express

purpose to kill as many, if not all, the humans they could.

"You humans were damn near wiped out, save for those few million left on Earth and scattered about the universe now."

Vincent wondered why she would so blatantly lie like this. How could she be so misguided? If only Theo were here to straighten her out with the facts.

"I don't believe you," Vincent protested

"What's your name?" Ava asked.

"Vincent," he replied.

"Well, Vincent, if you don't want to believe me about what the Collective did to your people, that's your issue. But believe me when I tell you about what they did to my people. The Collective tried to kill us all. But they failed. And that was their fatal mistake."

"Who are your people?"

Ava gave him a steely glare, full of pride and defiance, "My people are the chosen people, supreme against all else, the rightful rulers of the Universe and all the life and light in it. My people are the Vorse."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Theo was ushered into the office of Yikus, who awkwardly shook Theo's hand as the two sat down.

It was an office decorated to impress. Photos of Yikus with Collective dignitaries adorned the wall, along with art pieces that were perfectly placed.

The rest of the office was filled with the finest handcrafted furniture one could find in the universe, no doubt gifts from officials of the other planets that made up the Collective.

After telling Agents Calk and Brundie all he knew about Augustus, Theo decided to use what time he had left in Dryden to connect with the highest ranking Grunyon government official he knew.

That official, Yikus, had risen steadily in the ranks of the legal field and was now a trusted advisor to the Grunyon representative to the Collective Council.

Theo and Yikus had a deep personal connection, but they had never actually formally met in person or even talked until this day.

"I'm surprised to see you here, Theo," remarked Yikus. "But it's nice to finally meet you."

"I need your help," replied Theo, clearly humbling himself before the finely tailored Yikus.

"I'm listening."

"Your work on the human containment issue, do you still have contacts within the Collective? Are there officials you can talk to?"

"It's been a while since I've spoken with them, but sure, I know who to call."

Theo wanted to get to the point of the meeting, but he didn't want to give away too much. His eyes shifted back and forth, as he tried to find the right way to carefully ask his guarded questions.

"Could there ever be a case of a human being granted the full rights of Grunyon citizenship?"

The odd remark drew a perplexed stare from Yikus, "No, why would there be?"

"What if the human was raised here as a child? If Kybia was the only world it knew. Could a case be made that that human would be more Grunyon than Earthling?"

Yikus was clearly becoming frustrated with the coy Theo and his patience was running out.

Yikus had started the meeting with a sense of reluctant obligation, but now that was gone, and he wanted the uncomfortable meeting to end, so he could move on to more important matters. Much more important.

"Theo, I was barely able to manage to squeeze you into my schedule today. The Representative has a very busy schedule this week. It's just gone crazy in the last few days and no one can tell me why.

"So, I suggest you take a more direct route and explain to me exactly why you asked to meet with me today."

"I have to trust you. Complete confidence. If I can't

have that, then I'll leave right now."

"For the next five minutes and five minutes only, I agree to be your advisor. There, you have client privilege. Can we now dispense with the vagueness?"

Theo nodded. "When I came back from the Earth mission, I brought with me a human baby, an orphan that was doomed to die if I left it behind on Earth. I've been raising him ever since as my son on the farm."

Yikus took a moment to process the news Theo had just laid down on him, because it was big.

"How old is the boy?"

"Eighteen years now. A man really."

"You have an unregistered human off planet? He could be killed on the spot."

"I know. That's why I've been hiding him on the farm all these years, but it can't go on like this forever. It's cruel to the boy. And what happens when I eventually die? What will happen to him then? He is my son, yet I couldn't legally leave him with anything."

"How do you keep him contained?"

"I don't."

"An unrestrained human like that is a threat to us all. How does he feel about what the Collective did on Earth?"

Theo got a sinking feeling that he had made a huge mistake in confiding with Yikus, but it was too late, it couldn't be unsaid. Vincent's fate depended on getting Yikus on their side of this.

"He doesn't know the whole truth about Earth. I've kept things from him."

"What happens when he does find out? Once he has the freedom of citizenship, he'll learn all he wants to know about Earth."

"I'll explain it to him before then. He'll understand."

"He'll kill you. It's their way. They can't help it."

"He was raised by me, not humans. He's as gentle a soul as you could imagine. If he could appear before a council, I could prove what a good Grunyon he is.

"They could see what an asset he is to me on the farm. I just want him to be able to live freely. Not hidden away in fear."

Yikus turned away from Theo and shook his head in disbelief. Theo asking to see him was indeed a surprise, but Yikus never would have imagined this is what the meeting was going to be about.

It was crazy, but Yikus did see Theo's point. A human with Grunyon citizenship was something he had never thought of before, but he was thinking of it now.

"I promise you this. You have my confidence. I will look into the situation as best I can without revealing too much. But I fear for your safety, Theo."

"I'll be fine. I trust my son with my life."

"Did Haditha know about this?"

"No. She never knew. How is she, by the way?"

Yikus turned around a photo on his desk that played continuous video of his family. It was Yikus and Haditha together with their own 18-year-old Grunyon son.

"She's great, thank you. That's our son, Niler."

Theo smiled politely at the family video, but it hurt to watch it. To witness what had been taken from him so long ago.

"That's why you never moved on, isn't it? Because of the human child. Haditha always thought she hurt you so bad, you turned inward and rejected the world.

"Refusing to move off of the farm out of spite.

"All this time, it was a boy you were protecting.

Remarkable.”

Theo humbly stepped away from the desk.

“It took a lot for me to come here. Eighteen years ago, I had to protect Vincent no matter what. I had no choice. Today, I have no choice again. You can protect him so much more than I can now.”

“What your asking for is unprecedented, but I don’t think it is impossible. I’d do anything for my son, so I know how you feel. Haditha always said you’d be a good father. Clearly, she was right.

“Give me time, but for now, continue to keep him hidden. I’ll check my schedule and clear some time for a visit to meet him at the farm. It just won’t be anytime soon, with all the emergency meetings going on this week.

“I only ask that you have him restrained in some way when I am there, until I feel comfortable.”

Theo tried to reassure Yikus, “I’m everything in the world to Vincent. I’m all the boy knows. He would never go against one of my commands. He trusts me completely. It’s a bond stronger than any restraint or cage.”

“He’s your son, but I’m nothing to him. My way or no way.”

“Fine, he’ll be restrained, but you’ll soon see that it won’t be necessary.”

“Thank you. I hope it won’t be.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Vincent ran from the farmhouse holding his old leg brace in his eager hands. The sooner he got back to Ava, the sooner he could make her pain go away.

Ava was sitting on the hover cart with her head lowered. As Vincent approached, he could hear her speaking.

"Thank you for saving me. Thank you for all you've done. With your help I will see this through."

Vincent held out the leg brace for her, "It was nothing, I'd do it for anyone in need."

Ava looked up irritated and stared down the smiling Vincent, "Please don't interrupt my prayers."

"Sorry," Vincent replied, "I thought you were talking to me."

Ava looked toward the sky and raised her hands, "In your name, I will return the Vorse to glory. Please give me your continued guidance, one and true Creator."

Ava then lowered her hands and looked back to Vincent, taking note of the high-tech leg brace he held.

"Is it okay to put it on you now?" Vincent cautiously asked her.

"Please," Ava replied.

Ava swung her leg around to Vincent, grimacing in

pain as she did so.

Vincent bent down and strapped the brace around Ava's leg. It self-tightened and the pained expression on her face started to fade. She even flexed her leg a bit, amazed the agony was easing.

"How does that feel?" Vincent asked.

"Better. Thank you."

Ava took note of a big red button on the side of the brace, next to the medical readout display, "What does this button do?"

"If you fall down and can't get back up, you can push it and it alerts our MedBot that you need attention."

"So, it signals the authorities?" Ava asked with some alarm in her voice.

"No, just our local MedBot unit here on the farm."

Ava slowly eased herself to the ground and with Vincent's help started to hobble around. Readings on the leg brace monitoring screen gave updates to her recovery.

"Our MedBot and Theo made it for me after I fell off my bars last year. I had to wear it for a month."

Ava gradually let go of Vincent and took a few reluctant steps on her own, ambling over to Vincent's towering construction of bars. She grabbed hold of a bar and shifted her weight to take the pressure off of her injured leg.

"How far up did you fall from?"

"About half way. Almost fell off from the top earlier when I heard your ship go by. That's twice today that you almost got me killed."

"Day's young. Theo, is that your adoptive Grunyon father?"

"Yes."

"And he's away?"

"Yes."

"For how long?"

"Hold on a second. I have questions for you and I think I need those answered first. What were you and the others doing here on Kybia?"

"We came for these," she said as she patted the yellow case. "These rocks are sacred and were stolen from our world. I'm bringing them back to my people. And I need your help to do it, Vincent."

"How so?"

"I need another ship. You have to help me get one."

"I can't help you get another ship. I'm not even allowed off the farm by myself."

Ava looked around at the abundance that surrounded them.

"You've been hidden here all your life? A prisoner."

"Not exactly a prisoner. It's just safer for me."

"So sad."

"I have a good life here. Father takes excellent care of me."

"Do you know why it is that I can speak your English, Vincent?"

"Why?"

"When the Vorse learned of what happened on Earth to the humans, we wanted to help.

"We learned all we could about you humans. Our hope was for our two people to join ranks, form our own union and together we would crush the Collective before it does anymore harm to the Universe."

"The Collective doesn't want to harm the Universe."

"Tell that to the billions of humans lost! Tell it to your mother and father. I mean really, how do you know

Theo didn't murder your parents in order to steal you away for himself?"

"Don't say that! It's not true. I've had enough of your lies!"

"What if I prove it to you? Is there an area on the farm you are not allowed to go?"

"No, I'm free to go anywhere I want unless there are visitors."

"Am I free to go anywhere? I'd like to search for something."

"What?"

"The truth. Your truth, Vincent."

"We go no where until my father returns home."

"Vincent, your life has changed here today and it will never be the same. Your father has kept you from the truth your whole life.

"Let me show you what the truth is and after that, you can choose to continue to live your little lie here on your safe cozy farm or you can go with me to help free your struggling people."

Vincent helped Ava hobble around the house. She could have walked on her own, but she intentionally asked for his hand. She wanted a physical connection to him, as she went about the house looking for clues to unlock his hidden world.

She held out her scanner and would occasionally study something, only to discard it and move on. When she got to the hidden door of Vincent's secret safe room, she detected it immediately.

"It's here. This is a door."

"To the place where I hide whenever visitors come to the farm. Care to join me?"

Vincent revealed the hidden keypunch pad behind a picture and opened the secret door for her. Before them was his hiding area, which was freshly stocked with food, water and amusements to kill time.

"No thanks," Ava replied, as she turned away to resume her hunt.

They continued through the house with Vincent's arm wrapped around her waist.

"You don't have to hold me so tight."

"I don't want you to fall."

"You like holding me, don't you?"

"I'm only trying to keep you safe."

"You've never held a woman before, have you?"

"No."

They entered Theo's bedroom and Ava's scanning immediately drew her attention to a bookcase in the corner.

"Well, I have something to show you, Vincent." She placed her hands around his face and moved in closer to whisper in his ear, brushing her cheek against his.

"You maybe unsure and a bit scared, but it is important that you see this. Are you ready?"

Vincent gulped, "I'm ready."

She then turned his face to look at the bookcase in the corner.

"It's over there. Behind the bookcase. Your father is hiding something. Big."

Ava hopped over and immediately started clearing books off the shelf, letting them all fall to the floor."

"Be careful with those. They came from Earth!"

One book refused to tumble off the shelf. It was Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll.

Ava pulled on the book and the bookshelf opened as

if it was a door.

Behind the bookshelf a hidden room was revealed, much larger than Vincent's safe space that he had been hiding in all these years.

Vincent was stunned. He had never known about this secret room and it shook him.

"Let's go," Ava ordered, sensing Vincent's unease.

Ava went into the room first and Vincent soon followed her.

Inside was a desk with a computer screen. Around the room were leftover items from Theo's Earth mission. His uniform, body armor and rifle were all mounted on the wall along with pictures of Theo on Earth.

Ava sat at the computer and turned it on. The log in security screen appeared. Ava plugged her scanner into the computer.

The computer cycled through some codes until the login screen was breached and she had full access to Theo's system and files.

Ava searched through mission briefings until she found a file that looked promising and pulled it up.

"Here, watch."

Abraham Ali, the Earth Governor came up and began an archived mission briefing.

"The first wave of the Sleep virus is going extremely well with an almost ninety-nine percent fatality rate.

"However, we are finding that one percent of the human population is resistant to the virus. While we will have to expect opposition from the surviving population, if they do surrender peacefully, we will take all humans alive, until we can decide on their ultimate fate.

"We are studying the design of the virus to see if

enhancements can be made to make it a hundred percent effective, but we don't anticipate those changes being ready in time for the initial landing force.

"You all have been trained for combat and there is a good chance now you will see it. We will only have each other down there. If you run into trouble, call for help. If you get the call for help, you answer it. It doesn't matter what you are doing. When you get the call, you go."

Ava stopped the video. Vincent was clearly troubled by what he had just seen and heard.

"Vincent, you lived for a reason. There is a great human legend. The legend of the One. The One that was chosen to save all. It is in your religions, it is in your myths, it is in your books and movies. It is in your destiny. Vincent, you, the One, have the ability to save your people.

"Together we can fight back against the Collective. Join me. Help me get back to my people and together we can help bring justice to the Universe and restore the rightful order of things."

Emotions swirled in Vincent, touching virgin territory in his soul that had never been disturbed before. She was right. He had been living a lie.

The Collective had murdered the humans on his home planet and his adoptive father, the only person he had ever loved and trusted, was a willing part of it.

"I don't know what to think anymore."

"Then let me think for you. Vincent, I need a ship to get off this planet and return the Enzin to my people."

"My father has a ship, but he used it to go into the city."

Ava lifted Theo's old rifle off the wall and turned it on. It pulsed to life in her hands.

“Then we’ll just have to wait for him to come home.”

“Promise me, you won’t hurt my father. Promise it!”

“I promise you nothing!”

Ava began opening drawers and pulling open cabinets in the room, looking for more weapons. She found a sliding panel on the wall and opened it.

Behind the panel was a glass observation window with bars on it. There was a light switch next to the window and she flicked it on and looked inside the now illuminated room. “Oh, my!” she exclaimed.

“What is it?” asked Vincent.

Ava dashed to the side of the room where she saw a door handle. She opened the door and motioned for Vincent to follow her once again.

Vincent walked through the door with Ava. Inside the room they found a large cage had been constructed.

The cage, which resembled a human prison cell, filled the room, except for the small observation area in front.

“What did he build this for?” asked Vincent.

Ava answered him, “He built it for you.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Theo casually flew his hauler back to the farm over the quarantine zone. He had radioed ahead to the search crews and had his special transmitter turned on, so no one would target his hauler, as the suspected Ruptasian raiders.

As he approached the farm, he saw something amiss on the ground. A chaotic dark blotch that was jarringly out of place in the carefully planned pattern of green orchard trees.

It was the crashed Ruptasian ship or at least the burnt out remains of it. As he circled overhead, Theo knew he should immediately call it in, but he kept off the radio.

He knew the report of the downed ship would bring in a flood of Planetary Defense forces. No doubt they would use the farm as a staging area to investigate the crash site.

He'd have to go and secure Vincent first, before any calls were made reporting the wreck. And this was not going to be some routine Collective inspection visit. Vincent might have to stay hidden away for a while, quite possibly weeks.

Theo wanted to radio Vincent to ask about the downed ship, but he knew all radio transmissions were being monitored closely by Planetary Defense electronic surveillance teams. Any call to Vincent, would also be a

call to Planetary Defense headquarters. Vincent was probably safely hidden away in his room already. The boy was smart, he would have known what to do the instant he heard the ship crash.

Theo scanned the area for life forms. There were none. The crew of the burnt-out husk of a ship was either dead or had long since fled the scene.

Theo turned the hauler back and headed to the farmhouse and touched down on the empty landing strip.

Theo darted off the hauler and into the house.

“Vincent? Vincent, where are you?”

Theo searched through the house, finding no one. Theo went to the hidden room and moved the picture so he could access the secret keypad. Before he could punch in the code to open the door, he heard Vincent’s voice coming from his bedroom.

“I’m in here, your bedroom.”

Vincent’s voice was calm, reserved and flat. It wasn’t like the normally exuberant Vincent at all. Theo was immediately suspicious.

“What are you doing in my bedroom?” Theo asked.

Theo dashed to his bedroom and saw Vincent by the nearly empty bookshelf, with only the copy of Alice’s adventures left on it.

“Where does it go, Dad?”

Theo had never seen Vincent like this. There was a seriousness in his eyes now, that demanded answers. Theo wondered exactly what Vincent knew about the secret room behind the bookshelf. He could have tried to play stupid or come up with a lie, but there was no time for that now.

“I was going to tell you about this room one day,

Vincent. But this isn't the day. We must hide you. Immediately."

"I don't want to hide anymore."

"Vincent, I'm working on that, trust me, but for now we have no choice."

Then Ava spoke up from behind Theo.

"Speaking of not having a choice."

Theo turned around to see Ava standing there with his old Earth mission rifle aimed right at him.

It was Theo's childhood nightmare come true. An armed Vorse avenger in his bedroom, ready to end his life.

"Don't hurt my son!"

"Vincent has nothing to worry about. But you do," warned Ava.

Vincent pulled on the Alice book and opened the hidden door. Ava motioned with the tip of the rifle for Theo to go through the passageway.

"Go! And keep going, all the way to the cage."

Theo followed Vincent through the bookshelf door. Ava trailed behind them with the rifle

Theo was confronted by the cage he had built. Vincent opened the creaky cage door. If the loud, grating squeaks were any indication, it had been years since the steel doors had been opened.

"Get inside," ordered Ava.

Theo stood his ground, causing Ava to raise the rifle and take aim at his head.

"Please, Father, this is the only way to keep you safe," Vincent warned him.

Theo reluctantly stepped in the cage and Vincent slammed the door on him, confining Theo inside.

"What are you going to do with my son?"

“Like I said, he has nothing to worry about.”

“What has she told you, Vincent?”

“This cage, was it meant for me?”

“I started building it years ago, before I knew I would never need it. Never did finish it, because I didn’t need to. Look, the plumbing isn’t even hooked up,” Theo said as he pointed to the unconnected pipes on the floor.

“Now you have all the time you need to finish it up,” noted Ava.

“What are you doing here?” Theo demanded of Ava.

“I’m just leaving actually. In your ship and Vincent’s coming with me.”

“You leave him here! Don’t take my son!”

“He wants to go. He wants to finally be free, now that he knows the truth.”

“She showed me your mission briefings. How the Collective used the Sleep virus to murder humans, including my mother and father.”

“It was wrong not to tell you, yes, but I was afraid what would happen if you knew the truth too soon. I was only waiting until you were older.”

“How could you do it? Be a part of something so evil,” Vincent asked his father.

“There were reasons we did what we did,” Theo countered.

Ava jumped back in, not buying any of Theo’s rationalizations. “Of course. Just as there were reasons the Collective did what it did to my people.”

Ava then raised the rifle again, this time with no hints of a bluff or warning. “Vincent, go. I don’t want you to watch this,” Ava ordered.

“You said you wouldn’t hurt him!” Vincent protested.

"He knows too much now."

"No! He's secured, we'll be long gone by the time anyone finds him."

"Vincent, you can't go with her," Theo pleaded.

"What choice do I have? Stay hidden here waiting for the Collective to discover me, so they can take what little freedom I have left?"

"Or worse, kill me for having no chip embedded in my body! No, I have to go and fight for my people."

"Your people?"

"Humans. Earth."

"Vincent, your place is here with me on the farm."

"Not anymore, it isn't. He's been liberated," declared Ava.

"Vincent, the Vorse don't care about humans. The Vorse only care for themselves."

"Last warning, Vincent. Leave now if you don't want to watch this."

"No!" Vincent screamed as he jumped in front of the cage, protecting Theo.

They then heard a roar overhead. It was the sound of a passing ship, which rattled the walls of the room.

"They found your crashed ship. There's no escape for you now."

Ava stared daggers at Vincent, angry that he got in the way of her shooting Theo.

"Challenge me again and I will kill you. You will get no other warning. Now go to the ship."

Ava turned and ran out of the cell room with Theo's rifle and the yellow case of Enzin stones.

"Vincent, stay! She's only using you. And the other humans, too. Trust me, when you have no more use for her and the Vorse, they will kill all of you."

"I have to go, Father. I'm sorry."

"Vincent, I need you to understand this. I'm your father and I love you, but if you go with her, I will stop you. Just as I will stop her. I'll do whatever it takes. Do you understand that? The Vorse are too dangerous."

"How could you kill so many humans and still pretend to love me?"

"You want to blame someone for what happened to the humans on Earth, blame the Vorse. It was their self-destructive actions that set up the Fourth Planet Rule that ended up dooming Earth to begin with.

"I fought hard for first contact with humans, but the earthlings didn't help themselves. Trust me, the humans were going to kill themselves and everything else on Earth, no matter what the Collective did.

"But I still fought for earthlings to be given a chance to be a part of the Collective. Go back and read my papers. See the marches I helped organize and lead."

Vincent was unmoved.

"What does it matter? In the end you were still a part of it! What difference does it make if you wrote a paper! Or went on some stupid march?"

"I challenge you to pull the files up on my computer and look for yourself. Let's talk about this finally. If the Collective was so wrong, present me with a formal argument as to why that is so."

"You're just trying to stall me!"

"I'm trying to save you!"

"I'll leave the hidden doors open so they'll find you sooner. It would be cruel to think of you locked up in there for the rest of your life."

Vincent rushed for the door.

"Vincent!"

Theo's pleas were useless now, Vincent was gone. Theo shoved aside the bed that was in the cell, revealing an unfinished ventilation duct that was still under construction.

Theo grabbed a jagged piece of scrap metal left behind from cutting the ventilation tubing and crawled through the unfinished shaft, disappearing from the prison cell.

Vincent ran from the farmhouse and headed for the hauler, which was now rumbling to life as Ava prepared it for liftoff.

The ramp door was still open and Vincent rushed to get onboard. From Vincent's blindside, Theo came out of nowhere and threw himself into his son's legs, with all his might. It was just enough to get the unbalanced Vincent to tumble to the ground.

Theo quickly climbed on top of Vincent and held the sharp scrap of metal to Vincent's throat. He had one chance to end it. To stop Vincent from the madness he was embarking on with Ava.

Theo's shaky hand held the sharp edge centimeters away from Vincent's jugular, knowing every second of hesitation could bring about his own death, as the more powerful Vincent could easily flip him over and take the upper hand.

Yet, even with his own life on the line and possibly the entire Universe, Theo couldn't do it. He couldn't end the life he gave up so much to save.

"Father, no!"

"You can't go! Stay."

With that, Vincent knew Theo couldn't go through with it. The murder of his own son. Now it was Vincent's turn.

Vincent quickly grabbed the scrap metal away from the much smaller Theo and flipped him over, just as Theo had feared.

There was nothing to stop Vincent now. He could plunge the metal into Theo's heart and end it all painfully so or if he wanted to show mercy, he could stab the scrap of metal straight into Theo's brain and end it all in an instant.

"You will do the right thing, Vincent. Right now, and in the future. I know you."

"The right thing for who, Father?"

The hauler ramp started to lift up to shut. Vincent saw this and jumped off of Theo and ran for the closing ramp. He made it just in time to jump aboard, but something fell out of Vincent's backpack as he did.

Theo then watched as the hauler blasted up into the sky. Theo picked up the item that fallen from Theo backpack.

It was SPOT, the round white surveillance orb that had followed Vincent everywhere on its tripod legs.

Theo closed his eyes to say goodbye to his son. In moments, Theo would inform the Planetary Defense forces of what had just happened.

Vincent would be a wanted man that would not know peace for the rest of his life. A life that was now all but guaranteed to be short and fruitless.

At the crash site, Agent Brundie and Agent Calk studied the remains of the craft, as a Grunyon team of crime scene inspectors when through it looking for clues aided by a couple of Lucent analysis robots.

The lead inspector reported in to Agent Calk and Brundie.

"We've accounted for the three-person crew. Two bodies were still strapped in, the third we only found skeletal remains of their hand. The rest of the body must have been tossed out during the crash. We're searching the immediate area now."

"What about the Enzin?" enquired Agent Brundie.

Agent Calk immediately answered, "Trust me, there's no Enzin here. If it had gone through that explosion, none of us would be here right now."

The inspector concurred, "He's right. No traces of Enzin."

A Lucent robot examining the amputated hand waved the agents over. "Interesting, look at these arm bones."

The robot held up the burnt and decapitated hand to the agents. The stench of burnt flesh was revolting, causing the agents to take a step back and shield their noses.

"This hand wasn't broken off in a crash. Look how smooth the edges of the Ulna and Radius bones are. This hand was severed on purpose with a cutting tool."

Other inspectors were finally able to remove the helmets and suits from the burnt bodies of the pilots. They took test samples of the seared flesh of the corpses and fed them into a slot on another Lucent robot, which gave them an almost immediate read out of the sample results. Results the inspectors found puzzling.

"Hey guys, these aren't the remains of Ruptasians," an inspector reported.

The other Lucent robot holding the severed hand took issue with the inspector's declaration, "Yes they are, I scanned the DNA of this hand myself. It's Ruptasian. No doubt."

“That hand might be Ruptasian, but these guys aren’t. They’re Vorse.”

The conclusion stunned the team examining the crash site. Agents Calk and Brundie passed worried looks. This was not good.

Finally, Calk spoke up, “Can’t be. No one’s seen a Vorse in decades.”

“Well, I’m looking at one right now. He’s a little crispy, but he’s definitely Vorse,” the inspector steadfastly maintained.

Agent Brundie scoffed, “The Vorse and the Ruptasians working together, impossible.”

Agent Calk chimed in, “You’re right. It never made sense that a raid that was conducted with such devastating precision and planning would have members on it that would be stupid enough to leave finger prints behind, unless we were meant to find them on purpose.

“I think a very unlucky Ruptasian volunteered a helping hand to make it look like a Ruppy mission.”

Just then a communications officer came through on the radio, “Agent Calk, we have a ship departing the quarantine zone. A hauler from the Collective nursery. It does have a safe passage beacon on it but, considering recent events, do you want us to engage?”

“No, he’s with us. He reported he’d be traveling today. But inform him that we’ve found the crashed vehicle. Get verbal confirmation from him that all’s well on board and make sure he uses the backup all clear code.”

The Lucent robot marched up to Agents Calk and Brundie “Sirs, if your theory is correct and this hand was just brought along simply to make fingerprints to throw

us off, then where's the third crewmember?"

Back at the farm Theo was furiously trying to reach Planetary Defense headquarters.

Finally, a communications officer answered, "Planetary Defense."

"This is Science Officer Theo at the farm and nursery in the quarantine zone, Identity number 77525."

"Yes, sir. What can we do for you?"

"There should be an investigation ship in my area. I need to be put through to it immediately."

"Yes, sir, transferring you now."

There was a momentary pause and then a hurried voice came on the line.

"Field command."

"This is Theo at the farm. I have something to report to Agents Calk and Brundie."

"How come you haven't been picking up? We've been trying to hail your ship repeatedly, with no response. Is there an issue on board?"

"Yes, I'm not flying it. It was stolen by a Vorse."

"Can I confirm you just said Vorse?"

"Confirmed, stop that ship immediately. Engage, engage, engage!"

The communications officer ran off the command ship and reported in to Agent Calk.

"Sir, the departing ship's been stolen by a Vorse!"

Agent Brundie looked panicked. "We need to throw everything we have at it."

Agent Calk shook his head, "We can't!"

"We can't let them get the Enzin off this planet!" shouted Agent Brundie.

“We have to now. If we blow that ship up in our atmosphere with the Enzin onboard, we could start a chain reaction that Kybia wouldn’t survive.”

“Great, then you be the one to report in that we are taking no action!” argued Agent Brundie.

“I didn’t say that. The transmitter is onboard. We can track them. Let’s find out where they are going first and then we’ll destroy them safely in deep space.

Agent Brundie yelled out to the inspection team, “You heard him! Everyone, get on board, we’re going after them!”

Agent Calk then added, “Let’s pick up the farmer, we need to find out everything he knows.”

Brundie shook his head, as they boarded the command ship, “The Vorse. What the hell have they been up to for eighty years?”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Turn around and return to the surface. This is your last warning. Failure to comply will lead to your destruction,” the space traffic controller warned over the hauler’s communicator.

“You say the sweetest things,” sighed Ava, as she switched off the communicator and continued their escape from Kybia.

In the rear, Vincent picked himself up off the floor after tumbling on to the hauler at the last second. He tried to get his balance back, but their rapid ascent caused Vincent to stumble about.

He was finally able to grab ahold of a railing and managed to stand on two feet again. He made his way cautiously to the bridge, not knowing how Ava was likely to respond to his presence onboard.

Ava heard Vincent approaching. She turned to greet him with a surprisingly warm smile.

“Hey, you made it!”

She then twisted the ship’s controllers to the extreme right, causing the ship to do a barrel roll, no small feat for the ancient hauler.

Vincent, completely unprepared for such an acrobatic maneuver, bounced around like a rag doll, as

the floor turned into the ceiling and then back to the floor again. He lay there holding his throbbing head. Ava unbuckled herself from the pilot's seat and jumped on top of Vincent's chest, grabbing him by the collar.

"This is not your father's hauler! Do you understand me, human? You will do as I order."

"Yes, I understand."

"Strap in, this is going to get rough."

"Going to?"

Ava pulled Vincent to his feet and guided him to his co-pilot seat as she took her place in the pilot's chair again.

"They have missile lock on us," Ava reported. "Joke's on them. They hit us with missiles, the Enzin will blow a hole right in their atmosphere."

"We can't out run a missile, not in this hauler."

"Then we're dead!"

"You don't have any kind of a plan?"

"I wouldn't have needed one if you had just let me take care of the one witness to our escape."

"He's my father!"

"Well he's gonna die anyway. Along with you, me and everyone else on Kybia as soon as those missiles hit us."

Ava studied the radar screen, which showed them leaving the planet, but nothing else. Vincent joined her staring at the empty screen and was perplexed.

"Where are the missiles? Why aren't they firing?" Vincent asked.

"They may be waiting for us to get out of the atmosphere." Ava guessed.

"We're out. We've been out."

"They're tracking us then. They want to know where

we are going.”

Vincent pointed to the tracking beacon that the Agents gave Theo to keep on the ship.

“They gave Theo that tracking beacon. We have to eject it.”

Vincent reached for the beacon, but Ava slapped his hand away.

“No, don’t touch it,” Ava ordered. “Let them think they have us. We turn off that beacon and we’re dead.”

“If they follow us to where we are going, what good does that do?” Vincent asked.

“We’re switching ships, and once we do, they’ll have no hope to target us then.”

Vincent checked the radar again. “No one following us yet,” Vincent reported.

“We’ll never see them. At this point they’ve pulled up the engineering details of this ship. They know how fast we can go, our fuel limits and most importantly, our radar range.

“They’ll stay just out of it, undetectable. And then, when they think they have our destination pegged, BAM! They’ll slam long-range torpedoes into us. Nice people.”

“You’re one to speak.”

“Vincent, why are you here?”

“I want to help my people. The humans.”

“They need help. As much as they can get.”

“I’ll do whatever I have to.”

“You’ll fight for them?”

“Yes, I will.”

“Well, for the next few hours our pals at Planetary Defense are either going to kill us or we’ve got time to kill. So, we might as well see what kind of a fighter you

are.”

With the autopilot on and radar warnings set, Ava took Vincent to the rear of the cargo hold. It was mostly empty, except for sacks of seeds that were piled high.

“Hit me,” commanded Ava.

“No,” Vincent refused.

Immediately Ava’s hand shot out and smacked Vincent, too quick for him to react, except for after the fact.

Vincent held up his hand to hold the side of his now tender face. Ava was crouched, ready for another attack.

“I said hit me!”

“You’re injured. Your leg is still healing.”

This time Vincent was ready for Ava’s quick strike and held up his hands in defense. It was no use. Ava swatted his hands away and again landed a stinging blow to his face.

“Do you even know how to throw a punch?”

“I’m not punching you. Stop this now!”

Ava backed down and gave Vincent his space.

“Fine, then punch that sack of seeds. Attack it, show me how you will fight for your fellow humans! You’re the best hope for freedom they have, Vincent. Show me you’re the chosen one that will lead them to salvation.”

Vincent stepped up to the sacks of seeds, held his hands up and started to smack the bags.

“Harder! Your life depends on this!”

Vincent rose to the challenge and punched the sacks with all his force. The bag ripped open from the constant pounding and seeds spilled out at Vincent’s feet.

As he tried to step away, Vincent lost his balance on the ever-growing pile of seeds pouring out and went

crashing to the floor.

The seeds continued to spill out, landing in a pile, on top of the embarrassed Vincent's head.

Ava stood watching in silence, fighting the creeping grin on her face, until the last of the seeds had trickled out, "You do realize you just got your butt kicked by a sack of seeds."

Ava stood behind Vincent, her arms wrapped around his, her hands clapping his fists.

"Use your bodyweight to throw yourself into the punch. Shift and punch, shift and punch," Ava guided Vincent in slow motion, planting his hands firmly into the bag, "You try."

She backed away and Vincent pummeled the bags again, shifting his bodyweight and planting his fists in the bags with deep, heavy thuds.

"You're strong. I'll give you that. And here, look for weak spots. Eyes, nose, genitalia, have no mercy," Ava advised as she sunk her sharp finger nails in to a bag and ripped it open. Again, the seeds spilled out on the floor.

"Great, that's just more mess we're gonna have to clean up now."

"Leave it be, we'll be ditching this rig."

"Where?"

"I can't tell you."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't trust you. We'll be there soon enough."

"If I wanted to stop you, I could have by now. You do have one bad leg."

Ava smiled at the notion of Vincent stopping her, "You know, on second thought, I do want you to clean

up the seeds. Every last one.”

Then Ava let loose with a series of turns and twists, ripping into the seed bags. She did a flying high kick with her bad leg that shredded the side of a sack.

Seeds poured out from everywhere, covering the floor several inches deep.

“And that’s an order that will be obeyed.”

Ava sat alone at the bridge studying the radar reports as Vincent stayed in the back cleaning up the seeds, just as she had ordered.

She was relieved to see nothing was still following them in all her searches, but she knew the Planetary Defense forces were probably just hanging back outside of the hauler’s radar limits.

She noticed a bit of paper tucked away in the crevice of the ship’s panels. She carefully used her fingernails to pick it out.

It was a picture of Vincent as a baby on the farm. Smiling, happy, drenched in sunshine.

She looked again and in another crevice. There she discovered a second photo carefully stashed away. This one was of Vincent as a young boy hanging off of his jungle gym.

She then found two more hidden photos. The third photo was of Vincent as a young teen, surrounded by the pieces of a robot that he had taken apart for repairs.

The fourth photo was of Vincent proudly sitting at the controls of the hauler, close to his current age. He was beaming in the picture, as if he was a typical teen that had just passed their driver’s license test.

Theo was too afraid to have the photos displayed publically, in case anyone boarded his ship

unexpectedly. He had hidden them away, so only the careful eye might detect them.

Ava lined up the pictures and studied Vincent growing up on the farm, from a happy baby to the handsome teen on the verge of adulthood.

An alert sounded and Ava looked up at the radar screen. She saw a distant asteroid approaching. She took control of the ship and approached the asteroid with caution.

Vincent came running from the back of the hauler.

"What's wrong? Why are we slowing?"

"We're here."

"Is this where your people are?"

"No, it's just a remote outpost. We have hundreds of them, just like this, hidden across the universe, in case we ever run into emergencies.

"This is where we ditch the ship. Take anything you want, because the rest is staying behind."

Vincent looked down at the pictures of himself that Ava had lined up.

Except there were only three pictures laid out there now. Somehow the fourth, and most current photo of Vincent had disappeared somewhere.

"Where did you find these?"

"Your father had them hidden in the crevices of the radar panels. You look happy in them."

"I was. He was a good father. He gave me a good home."

"Keep those pictures safe, because where we are going, there won't be any smiles or sunshine."

Vincent gathered up the three photos and tucked them away in his jacket pocket, having no clue that the fourth photo of him had already been secretly tucked

away by Ava in a pocket of her own.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Agent Brundie and Agent Calk sat with Theo on board the pursuit ship, although they were trailing so far behind the hauler, it wasn't much of a pursuit at all.

Still they had a strong signal from the hauler's tracking beacon. There was no rush, they knew exactly where the hauler was, just not where it was ultimately going.

Regardless, they had it in their sights. They just had to wait for the right moment to strike.

They could have destroyed the ship now in the safety of space, but with no good idea of where the craft was ultimately heading, it would have been a short-term victory in a much larger conflict.

They didn't just want to win the battle. They wanted to win the war. Best to wait and see if the hauler changed its trajectory and headed to the location of where the Vorse had been hiding all these years.

While the Planetary Defense flight crew took care of the pursuit, Agents Brundie and Calk tried to persuade Theo to reveal more about what had happened at the farm.

The three of them almost seemed to be playing a game of poker, trying to guess at the cards the others

where holding that hadn't been played yet.

Theo was still trying to decide if he should bluff or throw in his cards on Vincent's hidden existence. For now, he was still bluffing, not revealing Vincent's presence on the escaping hauler. Maybe, just maybe, he'd have one last chance to save his son.

"What aren't you telling us, Theo?" asked Agent Brundie.

Theo closed his eyes in exasperation and shook his head. "When I got back to the farm, the Vorse raider was in my house. She caught me by surprise with my old mission rifle and stole the ship. That's it, end of story. How many times do you need to hear it?"

"Why didn't she just kill you? Not like a Vorse to show mercy," Calk noted.

"Did you make a deal with her to live?" badgered Brundie.

"I made no deals. The first chance I got, I ran away to warn you, didn't I?"

"And she just let you go?" Brundie shot back.

"She had a bad leg. She could have come after me, but I guess she just wanted to get off Kybia as soon as she could," Theo said in his own defense.

"Did you ever think to at least try to attack her? Fight back somehow?" Calk offered.

"And what if I failed and she killed me? We are talking about a highly trained, highly skilled lethal Vorse agent here who had successfully attacked a top-secret government storage facility.

"And who would have alerted you then if I lay dying on the floor as she made her escape? Retreat was the smart move. The only move."

"Was it the smart move back on Earth? When you ran

away as well?" Brundie said hoping to antagonize Theo, so he would lose his cool and perhaps let something slip.

"What do you know about it?" Theo said angrily.

"Hey, I did my Earth tour of duty. And I didn't run from any homies, I killed 'em," Brundie boasted.

Just then the intercom interrupted the grilling with an update from the flight crew, "The ship has landed on a small asteroid. It's not large enough for any sizable population. We have torpedo lock."

"Are they taking any evasive actions? Any signs they know we've followed them?" Calk asked.

"None, the ship is stationary with no action taken," came the reply.

"Keep torpedo lock. We're on our way to the bridge for visual confirmation." Calk replied back.

"Can I go with you?" Theo asked, having a hard time trying to hide his emotions at the prospect of losing Vincent. "I'd like to see my ship one last time."

"That dumpy hauler? I would think you'd be glad to get rid of it." Brundie remarked.

"Fine, let's go." Calk said, motioning for Theo to follow. "I want you to ID it one last time anyway."

On the bridge, the three all stared at the main screen which showed the hauler resting on the asteroid.

"That's it. That's my hauler," Theo nodded.

"Visual confirmed, fire torpedoes!" Brundie commanded.

"Hope you had your insurance paid up," Calk joked.

Two torpedoes launched from the pursuit ship and streaked out of sight. They tracked them on the radar screen as they closed in on the asteroid target.

An alert drew Ava's attention to a radar screen where she saw the two speeding blips of the torpedoes.

"They've fired torpedoes. This is it. Any last words?"

"Does this mean we're dead?" Vincent said.

Brundie, Calk and Theo watched the torpedoes slammed into the vessel, causing the ship and the asteroid to explode.

Theo tried his best to show no emotion at losing his only son, so he held back his tears. He would mourn Vincent's passing in private, away from the agents.

Theo subtly pulled SPOT from his pocket and held the white round robot in his hands. The little orb spent so much time with Vincent, Theo couldn't help but think of the boy as he held it.

Then, just as quietly as he had pulled SPOT from his pocket, he returned it there for safekeeping.

"Yes, as far as they know it, we're goners," Ava told Vincent. They were both safely aboard a Vorse Evader starship, which was a major upgrade from the hauler.

The Evader was designed for both speed and stealth, making it undetectable to Collective technology. Even if they did detect it, nothing the Collective had was catching the speedy ship.

The two fugitives were able to watch the destruction of the hauler and asteroid on the Evader's radar screen.

The one thing the Evader lacked was creature comforts. It was even more Spartan than the humble hauler. With the limited resources the Vorse had in space, luxury was something they could live without as they developed their advanced long-distance ships.

The Evader's galley was, however, fully stocked.

Ava, in a celebratory mood, raided the pantry and came back to hand Vincent a bottle of red liquid.

"Here, drink up. While Vorse and humans are very similar in nature, the artificial Vorse atmosphere on board wasn't designed to keep humans hydrated."

Vincent took the bottle and started to drink. The cold red liquid was both sweet and refreshing, as it went down his throat.

"They were right behind us the whole time," remarked Vincent. He took another thirsty gulp of the red liquid. "We're probably still in range."

"They can't find us with the cloaking device activated. Or we would be dead already. We've been using stealth technology for decades to remain undetected by the Collective."

"How did the Vorse managed to develop and build a ship like this? I mean, the Fourth Planet was destroyed years ago."

"Don't ever call our sacred kingdom the Fourth Planet again! Such blasphemy will not be tolerated. Not even from an ignorant savage, such as yourself. If we were with my people now, you'd be dead before the words even left your lips."

"So, I can't call your home planet that, but your people can blow it up? You don't see just a little bit of hypocrisy in that?"

"My people didn't blow it up."

"Yes, they did."

"Not my Vorse. My Vorse were fighters, not cowards. We were the first Vorse nation to take the battle to the Collective.

"The other nations stayed behind and prayed to their false gods for protection and ultimately betrayed our

world. They abandoned it and left it in ashes while we were scattered in space fighting for our very survival.

“What the Collective doesn’t know is that before their invasion armada landed and the Enzin weapons were detonated, millions of the cowardly Vorse escaped the planet with the resources to last a hundred years in space.

“But with the one true Creator guiding us, the real Vorse, we were able to track the phony Vorse cowards down.

“The creator gave us the strength, guidance and wisdom to administer swift justice to those Vorse that betrayed our home world.

“They prayed to their misbegotten gods for protection, but only in the end did they learn how futile their false faith was.

“We then used the supplies and ships to survive among the stars and to start planning our revenge to strike back at the Collective.”

Vincent was both confused and horrified at what he was hearing from Ava.

“But you were all Vorse? Why didn’t you all work together to survive?”

“This, from a human? Now that’s hypocrisy. I liked it better when you didn’t talk so much. You were much cuter then.”

“If you think humans are so terrible, why do you want to work with us?”

“We need a planet. We’ve grown our population at several widespread colonies, but not enough to take on the Collective again.

“My Vorse sect took up refuge on a moon, where our fleet has been docked for generations.

"The moon can't naturally support life, but it does offer enough elements to build a safe haven. It's where I was born and grew up."

"Sounds harsh," Vincent noted as he took another swallow of his drink.

"Don't speak to me with pity in your voice. I do not want it, nor do I accept it."

"Fine."

"The Vorse will have their world again. On Earth. Together the Vorse and surviving humans can overthrow the Collective occupying forces there. And together, humans and Vorse will share Earth, equally."

"But the Earth belongs to the humans."

"Really? Last time I checked it belonged to the Collective."

"Even if you overthrew the occupying forces, what's to stop the Collective from just sending more troops?"

"Thanks to our mission to retrieve the stolen Enzin, there will be no more Collective. The same weapons that destroyed our world will finally be used for their original purpose, to destroy the planets of the Collective."

"We've been waiting decades for this. It took that long to develop mining drones to return to seek out the Enzin, only to discover someone had beaten us to it."

"The equipment left behind by the thieves showed clues of a plot between the Grunyons and Luents working together to deplete the planet of Enzin without any help from the Ruptasians. I don't blame them. I wouldn't have trusted the Ruptasians either."

"The delicate Luents would never allow the stolen Enzin to be brought back to their precious world, so we knew it must have been taken to Kybia."

Ava brought up a rotating globe of Kybia on a

hologram map.

“So, we watched and we waited, looking for clues of where the Enzin might be stored. We knew it must have been in the Northern region, because of its governmental restricted state.

“But there was so much land to cover, it would have taken decades to search every square mile of it. But finally, they told us exactly where it was.”

“Who did?” Vincent demanded to know.

“The Grunyons. For three years we monitored every flight pattern flown on Kybia.

Lines now started to cover the planet on the hologram globe, most of them were in the densely covered areas of population, but even the restricted Northern region had several lines crossing over it.

As the virtual globe rotated, there was only one area where they were no lines that even came close to it. The small area was becoming more and more defined as the lines grew around it.

“Even in the remotest areas there was at least some activity, except for right here. Nothing flew near this spot. It was completely out of bounds. And that's where we found it. The bunker where our sacred Enzin stones were being kept.”

“I was part of the assault team put together for the heist. We knew once the attack happened, the Collective would finally be tipped off that the Vorse were indeed not dead or lost among the stars, so we tried to make it look like the Ruptasians were behind it.

“Let a little internal Collective strife set forth while we put in place the final plans for the destruction of the evil Collective empire.

“There is enough Enzin here to take out Ruptasia,

Kybia and Marasta easily. With our cloaking devices, we'll be able to plant the weapons and be gone before they know what hit them.

"Trust me, they won't be sending out any reinforcements to Earth. They won't even be able to save themselves."

"What about Lucentia? What will you do about the Founder's planet?"

"They are a little tougher. None of the other Collective planets have a chain of killer satellites surrounding them.

"Our cloaking device won't work when we come in close proximity to the satellite network. The satellites can make visual contact at that close range.

"We are, however, developing a special Evader, that we believe will be able to neutralize the satellite network with a laser canon armament and electronic jamming transmitters.

"Hard to say if it will actually work without a trial run, but we don't have a choice. Besides, the strength of the Collective is in the partner planets.

"Lucents can send all the robots they want, but they would never be able to marshal the millions of living souls needed to retake Earth after we have liberated it.

"So, how does it feel to be the hero of your people?"

"I'm not a hero," Vincent declared as he finished off the last of the red liquid in the bottle and set it back down on the control panel.

"Yes, you are. If you hadn't saved me from the crash, the Enzin would have been destroyed along with any hope of liberating Earth. You are a hero, Vincent. I told you, you are The One."

"Do we have to destroy the other planets? Wouldn't

the power of the Enzin weapons alone be enough of a threat deterrence, a means to negotiate a peace treaty between all the people of the Universe?" Vincent asked.

"Have no mercy in your justice, Vincent. That is the Vorse way. The Collective has already tried to eliminate both our people once, both human and Vorse. They will stop at nothing to destroy us."

Ava grabbed Vincent's empty bottle off the control panel and threw it in a recycling bin.

"So now that you know the plan, I need to know if you are with me or not?"

Vincent saw the cold look in Ava's eyes. It was the same chilly stare she had before she was about to kill Theo.

What could he say? If he refused, she would certainly attack and kill him. Vincent knew he would be no match for her. He had to say he was going along with the plan, even though he was deeply disturbed by the prospect of so much death.

Yet, she was right. There had been so much death already at the hands of the Collective.

Perhaps this was the best hope for freedom for the remaining humans. Besides, the Vorse plan was already in place and if it wasn't successful the Collective would certainly kill all the remaining humans on Earth, rather than risk them forming a strategic alliance with the Vorse.

Given that, what choice did Vincent really have as he stared back into the cold, waiting eyes of Ava.

"Yes, I'm with you. We've come this far, let's see it through."

"Good, let's drink to our union. A cherished Vorse tradition."

Ava reached for another bottle, this one with a blue liquid in it. She poured Vincent another drink and placed the glass in front of him.

"I can't drink to the death of so many," Vincent protested. "I feel sick already."

"All the more reason to drink up. It's the antidote to the poison you've just ingested. See, I just revealed to you the highly classified secret Vorse plan to defeat the Collective. I couldn't just let you walk away if I didn't believe I had your full trust."

"You're joking, right?"

She shrugged her shoulders, "Wait and find out then. You were warned." Ava turned and walked away, leaving Vincent alone at the table.

Vincent looked down at the glass of blue liquid before him. He grabbed it and drank it down with a couple of hurried gulps. He then pursued Ava through the ship.

"Ava, tell me you were joking!"

Vincent caught up with Ava at the main controls.

"Did you drink it?" Ava asked.

"Yes!" Theo exclaimed.

"Okay, then I was joking."

"I want to see you drink some of that red stuff, too!"

"No, thanks. Much too sweet for my taste. Besides, it's poison."

Vincent was alive. The Universe was going to possibly end, but Vincent was still alive. Theo tried to contain his joy as the analysis reports came in from the aftermath of the torpedo attack.

Brundie was livid, "Are we sure? There's not even the faintest detection of Enzin?"

The Lucent analysis robot held firm, "We've used two probes. They were both conclusive. There was no Enzin on the hauler when it exploded. The relatively small scale of the explosion alone would indicate the elements were not on board."

Calk tried to find another answer. "And there was no way they could have ejected it from the hauler along the way? Dropping it off in space for someone else to pick it up?"

"We detected no variation in their cruising speed until they arrived at the asteroid. And we detected no other ships entering or leaving the area."

"The Enzin got off the ship somehow," Brundie exclaimed.

Theo finally spoke, not sure how it was going to be received.

"Obviously the Vorse have been sneaking around the universe somehow without us knowing it all these years. It's possible they have developed some sort of cloaking device for their ships.

"My guess would be that they had a second ship with stealth capabilities waiting for them at this asteroid.

"They put time and planning into the assault to steal the Enzin, I'm sure they were as equally diligent in planning for the escape."

Calk shook his head. "Maybe, but we can't keep this a secret anymore. We are going to need the help of the whole Collective if we are going to find the Enzin and the hidden Vorse Nation now."

"How pissed do you think the Ruppies are gonna be?" Brundie asked.

"They're gonna be a lot more pissed when the Vorse destroy Ruptasia," Calk replied.

Brundie shrugged his shoulders. "True. Sorry about your hauler, Theo. Guess we kinda blew it up for nothing. Would have been a nice museum piece."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Yikus had been up late studying Collective regulations concerning humans and the laws guiding Grunyon citizenship.

He'd even reached out to some officials to vaguely discuss the idea of someone from another planet being granted Grunyon citizenship.

With multiple embassies being stationed on various worlds, interplanetary immigration came up occasionally within the diplomatic corps.

And, of course, there was the massive deployment of Earth occupation forces that had to deal with the occasional off planet birth of a child, to someone stationed there on a tour of duty.

In those situations, the new baby was always given full rights of the parent's home world.

Because of the distances involved between the planets and the costly expense of space travel, there was never any mass migration from one planet to another.

So, there was no need to set up any kind of large-scale immigration system. What interplanetary immigration legal cases that existed, they were few and far between.

For all practical purposes, Grunyons were Grunyons, Woltons were Woltons, Ruptasians were Ruptasians, Luents were Luents and humans were humans.

For Theo's plan to work for getting Vincent Grunyon citizenship, they would have to cut through a ton of Collective red tape.

This wasn't just a Grunyon matter. Yikus had the internal pull to possibly get the Grunyon end worked out, but who knows what kind of resistance they might receive to their plan from the Collective Council.

The Ruptasians alone were being as difficult as ever on just about every matter imaginable.

They put up a fight over everything these days, having quickly learned that the Lucent led Collective would make concessions to them in order to keep the Collective together and unified.

And unification was no easy task, considering the Ruptasians never forgave the Collective for the massive loss of life it suffered in the Fourth Planet invasion.

For Yikus it was too late into the night for him to begin contemplating the counter arguments he would have to make if the Ruptasians objected to granting humans citizenship to the other worlds of the Collective.

No, it was time for sleep and Yikus was finally going to let himself retire for the night.

He was just slipping into bed with Haditha when the panicked call came in from the Grunyon Representative's chief of staff.

There was to be an emergency meeting of the Collective Council and the Grunyon Representative would need all the staff in attendance.

The chief of staff wouldn't say what the reason was for the rushed meeting, but for such a summit to be called at the last minute was extraordinary.

Unprecedented, in fact, as far as Yikus could recall.

The Representative had been in high-level meetings

all week, the subject of which were kept secret from even Yikus, a trusted legal aide.

What little Yikus did pick up, from whispers and rumors, was that it involved the Ruptasians. Not a shock there, considering their recent track record of creating conflicts.

The next day, Yikus finally found out what all the recent secrecy was all about just hours before the Grunyon Representative was to address the council.

He had never seen the Representative so worried before. She was a gifted politician, a remarkable speaker, able to convey intelligence, empathy and strength, but he knew she had her work cut out for her this time.

Yikus was part of the team that crafted the statement the Representative would be delivering to the Collective Council.

There was no time to have all the Council assembled in person, so it would be held in a holographic chamber, which linked the worlds of the Collective.

The Lucent Representative and his team, using their remote robot avatars, had joined the Grunyon delegation in crafting the prepared statement, but it was decided that the Grunyon Representative would address the Council, as they felt the most responsible for what had happened.

The Lucent Representative called the holographic assembly to order, as it was tradition for a Founder to do so, but then he handed the proceedings off to the Grunyon Representative.

The Grunyon Representative announced to the Woltons and Ruptasians that they were all in peril and immediate action would be necessary. She told them about the decision to harvest the Enzin years ago and

how it was stored on Kybia.

The Woltons seemed to take the news the best. Meaning that they were furious that their world was now put at risk due to the entanglements with the Collective and the Woltons openly pondered if the Woltons would have been better off not joining the Collective at all.

But they recognized the crisis at hand and pledged their support in trying to track down the Vorse raiders and destroy the remaining Enzin and whatever plot the Vorse had come up with for it.

For the Ruptasians, Representative Augustus wasted no time describing the actions of the Lucents and Grunyons as highly provocative and nothing less than an act of war.

He scolded them that it was treason to their partnership. A partnership he reminded them that the Ruptasians had sacrificed so much for.

The cost of this transgression would be monumental, promised Augustus. The Ruptasians made several immediate demands, including the ability to audit all the secret files the Grunyon and Lucent governments had to insure there were no other plots against the Ruptasian people.

They also wanted a Ruptasian commander to lead the search efforts to hunt down the Vorse and, most disturbingly, the Ruptasians demanded an in person, on planet visit to Lucentia. A visit that could be lethal for countless Lucents, if not handled properly.

While the Grunyons and Lucents agreed to let a Ruptasian lead the search efforts, and promised more transparency in the future, they refused to give the Ruptasians full, unfettered access to their intelligence

files.

But the most surprising concession was the fact that the Lucents wouldn't outright deny the Ruptasians visitation to their world. They didn't promise it either, only that they would discuss the matter and try to see if there was anyway possible for such a visit to happen safely.

However, this was only if the Ruptasians promised full cooperation in the search for the Vorse raiders and the hidden Vorse base of operations, wherever it was.

It took the Ruptasians a full day to deliberate on an agreement with the rest of the Collective, a costly delay which could have been put to better use with a full Collective effort to seek out the Vorse menace.

Finally, Augustus promised full cooperation in the search for the Vorse, but he demanded one last thing. An independent Collective review of the action taken by the Lucents and Grunyons with criminal actions taken against those that actively participated in the plot to harvest the Enzin and cover it up.

The Woltons also supported the push to have a criminal investigation of the mining of the Enzin.

With the fate of the Universe at stake and no time to waste, the Lucents and Grunyons raised no objections to the probe and the planets quickly agreed to a plan of action to stop the Vorse.

And so, the largest manhunt in the history of the Universe got started.

Defensive forces were put in place to try and protect the planets of the Collective against attack, but they didn't know what to expect or if they could even stop it when the attacks did come.

Yikus was immediately put to work to defend the

Grunyon government against the pending independent council probe.

No one was happy with the concessions made to the Ruptasians, but they were once again needed to hold the Collective together while tensions were at their most strained.

Yikus and the other members of the legal team immediately started working around the clock gathering information to prepare the best case they could for the Grunyon-Lucent secrecy in harvesting the Enzin.

Yikus thought briefly about Theo and his human son. Yikus knew he would be tied up for months if not years working to defend the Grunyon government against the probe.

He felt bad that he would no longer be able to work to get the human boy Grunyon citizenship. The adopted human would just have to wait until the affairs of the Universe were sorted out and settled first.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Even at the advanced speed the Vorse Evader could travel, it would still take Ava and Vincent a week to get to the Vorse moon settlement where the assault on the Collective planets was being planned and staged.

To pass the time, Ava continued to teach Vincent how to fight and use Vorse weaponry, which the ship was loaded with.

She was highly trained in sword fighting and marksmanship, imparting on Vincent what skills and knowledge she could.

But given their limited practice range in the tight ship, she focused primarily on hand-to-hand combat.

Ava could tell Vincent was attracted to her, as he craved the close contact the practice combat gave them.

It was always the moves that required the most intimate touches that Vincent wanted to repeat again and again

She taught him about her religion too, trying to be patient when Vincent brought up some blasphemous question or observation. He was just a human simpleton, she had to keep reminding herself.

She doubted a human soul could even be saved, but she persisted nonetheless. Why would the Creator have sent Vincent to save her that day on the farm, if he wasn't

part of the plan to return the Vorse to greatness?

She introduced him to Vorse cuisine, which she could tell he wasn't a fan of. When you live on the outskirts of space, you take what you can get.

Taste was the last thing the Vorse required. It was all about what food could most effectively sustain life with using the least amount of resources to produce it.

Bugs and a life sustaining chemical paste made up the vast majority of Vorse dishes.

Animal meat was enjoyed only occasionally by the elite families in the Vorse hierarchy, along with fresh vegetables.

It was only the Phenbach himself that enjoyed both meat and vegetables on a regular basis.

Even though Vincent hated the food, Ava could at least tell he enjoyed dining with her. Every time she looked up from her plate, she would catch him staring at her.

She knew Vincent had never even spoken to a woman before, let alone touched or spent any time with one. She was an exotic curiosity to him to be sure, but she was also all he had in the universe at this point.

He had only known two people his whole life. His father, who he discovered had kept him from the truth, and Ava, who had liberated him from his hidden existence on the farm and guided him into an expanded universe.

Ava had to admit she also had a soft spot for him. He was so pure, so innocent, so good of heart. At times it sickened her, because she was never afforded such comforts in life, as an outlaw Vorse refugee. Having to fight for daily survival against the harsh elements of space, her life depending on decades old artificially

created ecospheres.

It was one of these inevitable failings of the aged Vorse infrastructure that robbed Ava of her parents and siblings, when their quadrant suffered a catastrophic failure, while she was deployed on a routine surveillance mission of Kybia, in preparation for the Enzin heist.

Had Ava been home, she would have died, too. Once again, the Creator interceding to keep her safe, despite the loss of all that she loved.

The Vorse needed their new planet and she would do all she could to deliver it, so no one else would have to grieve the loss of their whole family, as she did.

No, she didn't grow up on a sunny, safe farm of plenty. All her life she had known the harsh rationing of food, water, medicine and kindness.

But it was this extreme resourcefulness and sacrifice that had led the Vorse to survive over the years. It even led to the Vorse girls being forced to marry and bare children at a young age in order to grow their population as fast as they could, considering their limited resources.

However, Ava was different in this regard. From the youngest age, she distinguished herself as the best athlete, fighter and achiever of her generation.

She rebelled at simply being put out to breed and even threatened to kill herself if she was not allowed to join the ranks of the soldiers and spies sent out to gather the much-needed intelligence on the Collective for their long planned Vorse mission of revenge.

Vorse men all aspired to be the one that tamed the wild Ava, but she found none of them worthy of her attention. Besides, she wanted nothing to detract her from her goal of restoring the Vorse to their proper place

in the universe.

But if she had to choose a suitor, she felt she should select the best husband that would help her achieve her goals of Vorse supremacy.

So, she chose one of the Phenbach's sons, Lamalin, who was also a soldier spy. Unlike Ava, who earned her position in the ranks by her ability alone, Lamalin was given his promotions, because he was the Phenbach's son.

Lamalin wasn't completely useless, but he had no business going on the Enzin raid on Kybia. There were dozens more qualified, if not hundreds.

But it was widely known that the team that brought back the Enzin would be legendary among the Vorse ranks, hailed as heroes forever.

The Phenbach wanted his son to be one of those legends, so that when he died and his reign as Phenbach ended, Lamalin would be welcomed to takeover leadership of their Vorse sect, as the new Phenbach.

It was Lamalin's bumbling during the raid that doomed their escape. He had merely injured a Grunyon guard instead of killing him outright.

The guard played dead until the ship was leaving, then attacked, crippling one of the engines.

They had enough power to escape into the Northern Region wilderness, but not enough to get to space and make it back to the Vorse Evader that was waiting at the rendezvous asteroid.

They did their best to repair the damaged engine, but with the Grunyon Planetary Defense forces closing in on their hiding spot, they had to take a chance of escape with the bad engine or risk getting captured or killed.

Knowing the engines would fail, Ava argued for

them to stick it out in hiding. They could always ditch the ship and find another way to get off the planet.

Lamalin and the third member of the Vorse commando team favored trying to go back on the damaged engine, confident in the repairs they made to it.

Since there were two of them and one of her, their votes carried the day and sealed their fate.

When they both died in the crash, leaving Ava as the sole survivor, she knew it was the one true Creator rewarding her for her wisdom and vision and cursing her two dead teammates, for their unwillingness to bend to her will.

The Creator had always been by Ava's side, as she struggled to bring glory to the Vorse again and he always would be there to help her.

Why else had Vincent come to save her that day? Why else was she just days away from returning home a legendary hero?

She knew it was her destiny to rise from her humble beginnings on the dusty forgotten moon and restore the Vorse to dominance in the universe.

"That was your husband that was killed?" Theo asked Ava, his voice trying to convey sympathy, but unable to mask the surprise in the revelation, as well.

Theo took a break from consuming his dinner, thinking it was rude to eat after hearing about someone's loss that was so great.

"I tried to warn him the engine would fail, but he wouldn't listen," Ava replied, showing no great signs of emotion, as she continued to dine, her appetite unaffected.

"You never told me you were married before."

"You never asked."

"Do you have children?"

"Me, no. But he had twenty children from his five other wives."

"I'm just so sorry to hear of your loss."

"Don't be. Some things are worth dying for. So, you wanted to know more about the humans I worked with?"

"Yeah, I was just curious if there were any humans my age? Female, maybe?"

"Are you looking for a girlfriend, Vincent?"

He was clearly embarrassed, as his cheeks blushed.

"No, I just wanted to meet other humans."

"Vincent, I've taught you a great many things, but I'd be doing you a disservice if I set you forth into the Universe completely unprepared for the opposite sex.

"You think combat training is brutal? Just wait."

"Can you teach me how to talk and act with women?"

"You talk to me, am I not a woman?"

"It's different with you. Isn't it?"

"It is. Okay, Vincent, first lesson, show confidence. Look at me. Look at me with confidence."

She pulled him closer and stared in to his eyes.

Vincent, smiled and turned away, the whole matter becoming increasingly silly.

"I can't."

"Look in my eyes like you love me. Like you want me. That I am everything in the universe you desire."

Vincent turned back toward Ava and locked eyes with her. There he saw a look he had never seen from her before.

She was inviting him in with her gaze. It was welcoming and warm. Her mouth even curled upward into a supple smile.

“That’s better. Hold me now,” she whispered to him.

Vincent put his arms around her shoulders.

“No, down here. Like you did that day we first met on the farm,” she said as she guided his strong arms to her lower waist. “Now I want you to-”

“Stop talking,” Vincent commanded, interrupting her.

She fell silent.

“I do want you,” he whispered into her ear.

Their foreheads touched, then turned slightly so their lips could meet. Vincent managed from there just fine without further instruction. Some things didn’t need to be taught.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“This won’t be easy for you,” Ava warned Vincent. “I’ll do my best to protect you, but the Vorse way is very different from your upbringing on the farm with your father.”

“I’ll be fine,” Vincent replied.

“No, you won’t,” Ava chided him as she hid a Vorse dagger up her sleeve.

“What’s that for?” Vincent asked. “I thought you said you would be welcomed home a hero?”

“I will be. That’s just the problem. As far as the Phenbach is concerned, there is only one hero for the Vorse. Him.”

Ava then removed the leg brace from around her knee. Vincent held her hand as she put pressure on the wounded leg. It was still tender, but she could stand on it.

“I can do this. You can let go now,” Ava said.

“Are you sure?” Vincent asked.

Vincent let go of her and Ava took a few steps away from him on her own. There was a slight limp, but not enough for her to put the brace back on.

She was too proud to wear it in front of her people, when she would make her triumphant return home.

Instead she tossed the brace to Vincent. He studied the brace's medical readout.

"According to the readout, it still needs to be worn for another week."

"I'm good," she reported. "You wear it for me, if you want."

The Vorse Evader came into land on the dead moon. Amongst the craters, were domed settlements that housed life-sustaining structures.

A vast fleet of ships was also parked on the surface with a network of tubing connecting all the structures and ships.

The Vorse radar officer spotted the Evader approaching on his screen and called out for the security officer. "Sir, it's them. They've returned. I'm receiving a direct message now."

The security officer in charge strode over to the radar officer's station.

"Did they use their code?" the officer asked,

"Yes, sir. It checks out. They say in their message that they had to keep radio silence, because the Collective is aware that it was a Vorse raid on Kybia and is now scanning the universe for any signs of our presence.

"They waited until they got this close to send a secure direct message that couldn't be intercepted."

"Did they succeed? Did they get the Enzin?" the security officer eagerly asked.

"The rocks are onboard, sir! The Vorse will be avenged!"

"Inform the Phenbach that his son has returned. Prepare the landing site for the celebration."

The Evader glided into the main docking hanger,

which was filled with thousands of cheering Vorse citizens. There were great banners with Lamalin's picture on it.

The door to the Evader opened and out stepped Ava holding high the yellow case. She cracked it open to reveal the Enzin inside.

The crowd cheered even louder, then parted in the middle so the Phenbach's procession could approach the craft.

The Phenbach was dressed in his finest white garments, which stood out dramatically against the masses of Vorse, who were outfitted in dull gray uniforms, that were patched, mended and stitched together.

Rather than be embarrassed by the poor condition of the clothes, the Vorse took pride in their efforts to keep the clothes functional.

There were some Vorse that wore daily outfits handed down for generations. Some uniforms were even worn on the original exodus from their doomed home world. Those were held in the highest regard.

It was almost to the point that no self-respecting Vorse would be caught dead wearing new clothes. Except, of course, for the Phenbach, but that was to be expected.

The Phenbach was in charge of this sect of Vorse both politically and spiritually and required total devotion from his Vorse followers.

In return he kept them fed, secured and with moral purpose. Vorse law gave all power to the Phenbach and the elite families of the sect, who kept order in the ranks through brute force.

"Welcome home, Ava, and congratulations to you

all. My son, now, please.”

“Most respected and honored Phenbach, as a grieving widow, I give you my condolences for the loss of your son. His death will not be in vain, for I have returned to you with the Enzin that will return us to glory.”

Vincent had stayed behind in the craft as Ava had ordered him. She was going to give him the signal for when it was time for him to come out.

While Vincent didn’t understand Vorse, he could tell that the crowd and Phenbach were initially overjoyed by Ava’s appearance, but then he knew from the hush of the shocked crowd that she had just informed the Phenbach that his son was now dead.

“My Phenbach, we would not have been able to achieve this feat if not for the help of a human. I’ve brought him with me.” Ava turned back to the ship and spoke English, “Vincent, you can come out now.”

Vincent didn’t want to go out there and confront the crowd and Phenbach. Ava had just told everyone the Phenbach’s son died on the mission and now he was supposed to stick his human head out there and say, hello.

His feet simply wouldn’t move. It was as if his heels were tarred to the floor.

He then noticed the discarded medical brace, with the big red button staring up at him. Vincent dislodged the button panel from the brace and tucked it in his pocket. He also wanted to have a dagger up his sleeve, just in case.

“Vincent, now!” Ava demanded.

He couldn’t hide forever. This was it, he told himself. Vincent stood tall and made his way off the ship. He was

face to face with three thousand Vorse citizens.

The crowd wasn't roaring anymore. Vincent's appearance puzzled them and coupled with the sad news of the Phenbach's son, they just didn't know what to think.

The Phenbach and Ava argued back and forth while pointing at Vincent.

Vincent didn't understand what they were saying, but he assumed it was not good. That fear was confirmed when he saw the Phenbach motion to his guards to take Vincent into custody.

"Ava, what's going on?" Vincent asked.

"Fools, they don't trust you. They think you are a Collective spy."

"I'm not!"

"I know. They're going to make sure you're not chipped. Don't freak out."

The guards scanned Vincent head to toe, then scanned him again, as if they missed something. They didn't, the scan came up negative again.

The guard shook his head and yelled something to the Phenbach, followed by Ava yelling something that Vincent imagined was pretty close to, I told you so.

Still the guards hauled Vincent away.

Ava tried to reassure Vincent, "They're just moving you to a holding cell. I won't let them keep you there for long. Just don't do anything stupid. Stay quiet and calm. I'll come for you when it is safe."

"Story of my life," Vincent muttered.

Ava met privately with the Phenbach and the high council for a debriefing of the mission. She continued to advocate on Vincent's behalf.

“He is an unchipped human. He would be invaluable to the human revolt against the Collective.”

“If I were you, I would worry less about the human and more about yourself. You embarrassed the crown today. You made me look like a fool.”

“Forgive me your highness, but any message sent from deep space about your son’s passing could have been intercepted by the Collective.”

“They’ve never intercepted any of our messages before.”

“They never knew we were out here. Radio silence was crucial to the mission’s success.”

“So was the safe return of my son!”

“We have the Enzin. And we wouldn’t have it if it wasn’t for Vincent.”

“He doesn’t look like the other humans we’ve encountered. He looks soft.”

“I’ve trained him in combat. He can handle his own. He will fight for our cause.”

“We shall see how deep his commitment to the Vorse is.”

The door to Vincent’s cell opened and in stepped Ava with several Vorse guards. Vincent moved to hug her, but she quickly shook her head and he backed off.

“They’ll release you, but they want to see if you will pass a loyalty test.”

“What do I have to say?”

“It’s not what you’ll say. It’s what you’ll do. They won’t give you a second chance, Vincent. So, do it for Earth. Do it for the humans. Do it for me.”

“Do what?” Vincent asked.

The guards grabbed Vincent and pulled him out of

the cell.

“Where are they taking me?”

“Remember the Vorse way, Vincent. Show no mercy!” Ava advised.

Vincent was led by the guards through tubing that brought him to some closed doors. There the guards held Vincent back, motioning for him to wait. There was a window on the door and Vincent peeked through.

He saw an arena with the stands full of Vorse. He then looked to see Ava enter the arena and move to her seat.

All around her the crowd stood and cheered her. She tried to ignore it, so as not to upstage the nearby Phenbach, but finally the Phenbach nodded for her to acknowledge the crowd.

She acquiesced and waved to the crowd and gave them a salute of strength. She then took her seat and the crowd sat too, ready to witness the show that was before them.

The Phenbach was not happy with the impromptu cheers for Ava that were usually reserved for him or another member of the Vorse aristocracy. But he tried to hide his displeasure, as he rose and addressed the crowd.

Vincent couldn't understand what the Phenbach was saying, but when he saw the Phenbach signal the guards to open to door he was standing behind, he knew what that meant. It was showtime.

The door opened and guards pushed Vincent through. The crowd then cheered rapturously, all except for Ava, who stood there silently watching Vincent's every step with her worried eyes.

The Phenbach continued with his address. Vincent

was close enough to Ava now, that he could turn to her in the stands for help.

Vincent yelled up to her, "What is he saying?"

Before she could answer, the crowd roared again as another door opened and two guards brought out a beaten and bound Ruptasian, dressed in a tattered Collective uniform.

The guards chained the beleaguered Ruptasian to a wall and stepped away.

Vincent could see the Ruptasian only had one hand, as his other one had been severed off between the wrist and elbow. Which was the exact same spot the severed Ruptasian hand that Vincent had discovered in the crash site was cut off at.

Was it this poor soul's hand that had so disturbed Vincent then? The site of the one-armed Ruptasian was equally disturbing now, more so, in fact.

The two guards then approached Vincent. One of them pulling out a sword. Vincent wanted to run, but there was no where to go. Then the guard, to Vincent's great surprise, handed Vincent the sword and pointed toward the chained up Ruptasian.

The crowd roared even louder, demanding blood.

Again, Vincent looked up to Ava. She yelled back to him as loud as she could.

"It's a test to make sure you have no allegiance to the Collective."

"They want me to kill him?"

"Vincent, I know this won't be easy for you, but if you are to free the humans on Earth, many lives will have to be lost. This is just the first."

"But he's done nothing to me!"

"Vincent, if you don't do this, I can't help you."

“I won’t do it!” Vincent declared to the crowd, but they didn’t understand what he was saying.

Vincent flung the sword away. It landed in the middle of the arena and brought the crowd to a stunned silence. Clearly this they understood.

For what it was worth, Vincent yelled up at the crowd again.

“I give you my word of loyalty, but I will not kill an innocent being.”

Disappointment filled the arena, all except for the poor chained up Ruptasian, who motioned his thanks and gratitude toward Vincent.

The Phenbach then yelled down instructions to the guards. A guard went over and picked up Vincent’s tossed away sword and marched over to the Ruptasian with it. The maltreated Ruptasian winced at the fate that was soon to befall him.

“No! Let him live!” Vincent screamed as he rushed over to try and defend the helpless Ruptasian. But a Vorse guard quickly cut Vincent off and used his own sword to back Vincent away.

The Ruptasian was quivering with closed eyes as the other Vorse guard finally reached him.

Instead of attacking, the guard unchained the one handed Ruptasian and presented him with Vincent’s discarded sword.

Then the guard pointed toward Vincent and gave the Ruptasian a shove, as if to say let’s get this over with already.

The Ruptasian looked up to the Phenbach. The Phenbach yelled down to the stunned Ruptasian and pointed toward Vincent. Then held his hand up to his chest in an earnest display.

Again, Vincent yelled up to Ava in the stands for guidance, "What's going on, Ava? What's he saying?"

"The Phenbach has promised the Ruptasian his freedom if he kills you."

"It's a lie! He won't keep it," Vincent called out to the Ruptasian, who was now staring back coldly at Vincent.

Ava yelled down from the stands, "He just swore on his dead son's life. It would be unthinkable to break such a promise made in public. Vincent, I told you to do what they said! Why didn't you listen to me?"

The Ruptasian gave Vincent a resigned look, as if to say he had no choice in the matter.

Then the Ruptasian ran toward Vincent to attack. The guards stood by idly, letting the assault happen.

Vincent backed away trying to anticipate where the lunging sword would go. With only one hand the Ruptasian's attack was hampered.

Add to it the fact that this poor Ruptasian had been beaten and starved for months and it would appear that Vincent had a good chance to survive this by avoiding the first few swings of the blade and then wait for his attacker to tire out or slip up in some other way, giving Vincent the chance to take the sword away.

The strategy seemed to be working. Vincent was quick and he was able to anticipate the first swings from the Ruptasian. The crowd roared at the action, as Vincent continued to dodge death with every turn and twist that he made.

The Ruptasian was now swinging the hefty sword in frustration, more wildly than before. Vincent could see the heavy breathing and panic setting in for the Ruptasian. Vincent would soon get his chance to take the blade away, he just had to wait for the right moment.

Then the blade caught him.

There was a hesitation in one of the wild swings and it threw off Vincent's timing. The tip of the blade cut into Vincent's arm. It took a second for the pain to hit, but hit, it did.

The sight of the blood coming out now gave the struggling Ruptasian a boost of hope. He continued his assault with renewed vigor and confidence.

Vincent instinctively grabbed his arm to apply pressure to the wound, but in doing so, limited his ability to dodge the blade.

Again, Vincent was struck by the sword, this time in the back of his shoulder.

There was no plan now. It was all panic. Vincent turned and ran. The crowd rose to its feet anticipating the kill.

The Ruptasian used the outstretched sword to poke at the heels of the fleeing Vincent. It stabbed his foot and Vincent went tumbling to the ground.

Vincent turned back upward briefly to see the Ruptasian lift the sword to deliver the deathblow. The roaring crowd sensed it coming.

Vincent wanted to go back to the farm. He wanted his father. If he was to die, he wanted his final thought to be of Theo.

His father was there now, holding him like a child, telling him it was going to be all right, as he had done countless times before on the farm.

Vincent made his peace and waited for the blow to come, hoping it would be swift and painless.

The blade pierced his heart, instantly killing the Ruptasian. Ava, who had jumped from the stands to the arena floor, kicked the dead Ruptasian off of the dagger

she had hidden up her sleeve and let the Ruptasian's body fall to the ground beside the stunned Vincent.

Vincent stared up silently at Ava, who clenched her bloody dagger in both hands. No words could come to Vincent's trembling lips. Instead she spoke first.

"We're even," Ava said numbly, knowing the trouble she had just caused herself by interfering with the Phenbach's sacred pledge made in his dead son's name.

She let the dagger fall to the arena floor and held up her empty hands to prove to the guards she was no longer a threat.

The Vorse guards grabbed Vincent and Ava and dragged them from the cheering arena.

The Phenbach looked on at the masses. He had never seen this kind of excitement among his people before. Not for him, not for anyone.

The crowd knew the Phenbach had been shown up by Ava and they roared their approval and chanted her name.

This could not and would not stand, but it had to be handled delicately, with patience and certitude.

But Vorse justice would be served. No mercy. None.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“He will die. You know that, right?” The Phenbach taunted Ava who was chained up in her cell. “As will you, but for now the death of the Collective comes first.

“And you won’t be stealing any more glory for it. You won’t even have the honor of watching the Evaders sail away with the precious Enzin my son so righteously reclaimed for the Vorse.

“And while we’ll all be celebrating the birth of a new era of Vorse greatness, you will be trapped in here watching your pitiful human toy be cut to pieces alive with every measure taken to prolong his life, as to inflict maximum suffering.”

Ava stared back at the Phenbach, no longer with any sign of respect or fear.

“The people will know what I have done. You can kill me, but you cannot kill their hearts.”

“Don’t doubt my ability to kill anything. The people will be so overjoyed at the defeat of the Collective, your plight will be of no interest to them. Guard, see to it that she is comfortable and has her every need taken care of.”

“Yes, your highness,” the guard held the door open for the Phenbach as he departed. After the Phenbach was gone, the guard rejoined Ava in the cell.

"He was being sarcastic," the guard snickered.
Ava ignored the guard, as if he wasn't even there.

"You know, we know each other."

"Do we?" Ava remarked indifferently.

"Yes, I once asked you on a date. You said no. Looks like I dodged a bullet on that one. How are you at dodging bullets these days? Let's see."

The guard pulled his gun and aimed it her.

She turned away in bored contempt, practically daring him to shoot.

Which he did.

Ava swung her body away from the shot as it struck the wall near her head. Pieces of the wall stung the side of her face.

"Are you crazy?" Ava shouted at him.

"Me, crazy? I'm not the one that signed my own death warrant by defying Vorse royalty to save the life of a worthless human."

Vincent was back in his isolation cell. He was alone with a medical robot that was stitching him up.

"Just relax, Vincent, this won't hurt a bit," the MedBot said.

"You speak English?"

"Yes."

The MedBot started to sew up the gash in Vincent's arm. Painfully so.

"Ouch! You also lie."

"It is part of my programming."

"Does it make sense that they would stitch me up only to kill me later?"

"I can't answer that."

"Thanks, anyway. You know, I've fixed enough of

you guys over the years.”

“How so?”

“I was practically raised by robots. They taught me all the secrets you units have. You’re a Series 29 Collective MedBot. How’d you end up here?”

“I was part of a Ruptasian science team working with humans. I was then acquired by the Vorse and reprogrammed. I’m actually a series 28, though.”

“We had a series 26 on the farm. I bet I could take that thing apart and put it back together again in the dark with my eyes closed.”

“If your eyes are closed, why would it matter if the room was also light or dark?”

“Good point, why don’t we just leave the lights on then.”

Vincent slammed the robot into the metal bars again and again until the robot powered off. Vincent then used the needle that was stitching up his arm to pick open a slot on the MedBot’s side.

There he accessed the robot’s programming boards. Vincent reset the programming and restarted the robot holding down the reset button.

“System reboot, code 526. Program update. You will have one superseding mission to all others. That is to contact Theo Chiarella on the Planet Kybia and tell him his son Vincent loves him.

“That I’m sorry I didn’t listen to him. That I died trying to do the right thing. Tell him the location of this base. This mission is top secret. You are to tell no one and operate as if all is normal.

“Use this emergency signal as a guide. Have it amplified until it reaches the MedBot on Theo’s farm.”

From his pocket, Vincent pulled out the red

emergency button he took off the leg brace and pressed it. He then concealed it inside one of the MedBot's compartments.

Vincent then let go of the reset button and closed up the robot. The MedBot then continued to work on Vincent's injuries, as if nothing had happened.

The cell door flung opened and an angry guard stormed in and started screaming Vorse curses at Vincent.

The MedBot interpreted the screaming Vorse guard for Vincent, as it stitched up his shoulder.

"The guard would like to know what all the racquet was."

"Ahhh!" Vincent grimaced in pain, grabbed a metal dinner tray and smashed it against the cell bars repeatedly, "Does it have to hurt so much?"

The robot then in turn translated that into Vorse for the guard. The guard snarled his reply back to Vincent with an ominous glimmer in his eyes.

Once again, the robot served as interpreter, "'You have no idea of the meaning of hurt, human. But you will.' His words, not mine"

The MedBot finished the stitches and its nimble mechanical arms pulled back into its body.

"Medical repairs are complete," the MedBot informed the guard.

The guard opened the door to let the robot out, then slammed it back closed again on Vincent.

The robot followed the guard back into the hall. It then spoke up to get the guard's attention.

"Interesting. How long have you had that mark on your neck, guard?"

"What mark?" the guard asked.

“Do you mind if I examine it?”

The guard bent down to bring his neck closer to the MedBot. An arm with a syringe shot out and stabbed the guard in the neck. The guard collapsed to the ground. The robot then removed the guard’s access controller off of his belt.

The rogue MedBot then traveled through the tubing hallways of the base to the communications room. It used the authorization key to enter the secure communications room.

The officer on duty was surprised to see the robot there.

“What are you doing in here? I didn’t requested medical attention.”

“Interesting. How long have you had that spot on your neck?”

“What spot?”

“Do you mind if I examine it?”

In the hanger bay the bombs were being fueled with the Enzin that would drive their destructive fusion. The dozens of newly fueled bombs were loaded onto three Vorse Evaders.

Outside of the Evaders were the Vorse crews that were going to carry out the missions to destroy the planets of the Collective.

The Phenbach addressed the assembly of crewmembers in front of the banner of his fallen son.

“The time has come for the Vorse to strike back against all injustices we have been forced to endure at the hands of the Collective.

“Thanks to my son, within days you will be launching on the missions that will be able to deal a

crippling blow to the Collective.

“Always know, your Phenbach and one true Creator are with you in the days ahead, as you prepare for these most sacred missions.”

A patrolling Vorse guard opened the door to the communications room and saw the communications officer lying on the floor with the syringe sticking out of his neck.

Then he saw the medical robot plugged into the communications system.

“What the hell’s going on? What are you doing in here?”

The MedBot turned to the guard and asked, “How long have you had that spot on your neck?”

The guard pulled his gun and blasted the medical robot, again and again until it was destroyed.

“Who were you communicating with?”

The guard stood over the blasted MedBot parts to study the computer screen, to see where the communication signals were being sent.

The pile of robot parts sparked to life and the robot arm use the last of its operational life to jab a syringe into the leg of the guard above him.

The guard ripped the needle out and kicked the MedBot parts across the floor, but it was too late. The fatal blow had been struck and the guard collapsed to the ground dying.

The guard saw the communications screen of the MedBot, which was still operational, but failing quickly.

“Apologies, I was just following orders,” the MedBot told the guard with its faltering, fading voice.

“Who did you communicate with?” the guard

demanded to still know.

"My last communications were with garbage units."

"You lie!"

"No, I don't," the robot said as its communication screen flickered one last time and then went black.

Just then the door opened and two grungy garbage collection robots entered. Their dented metal bodies were filthy with scum and gunk that had accumulated on them over their decades of collecting garbage for their Vorse masters.

"Help me!" the dying guard called out.

The lead robot obliged by punching through the guard's skull and bringing his imminent death to a swift conclusion.

The two robots then gathered up the Vorse bodies and the remains of the MedBot and removed them from the room.

The garbage robots placed the destroyed parts of the MedBot in a recycling bin full of other discarded mechanical parts.

The dead bodies of the Vorse were dumped in an incinerator. The robots activated the incinerator and all evidence of the victims was burned up and the ashes blown into space.

The garbage robots then resumed their collection of waste duties as if nothing had ever happened.

For a week now, the Collective's universal search for the Vorse avengers had been going on without much to show for it, except for fracturing Collective relations.

Millions of Collective troops had been mobilized into space, ready to strike at a moment's notice. But there was no target for them. Not yet.

Using the last known position of the hauler as a starting point, the Collective calculated all the possible positions of where a Vorse base could be sustained.

They narrowed the possibility to five spots and divided their forces up to search them out.

Agents Calk and Brundie never returned to Kybia. They stayed in space to continue their hunt.

Theo was forced to stay in space with them, as he didn't have an independent way to get home.

Theo didn't mind. He was still hoping against hope that he'd get one more chance to save Vincent, but he also knew, more importantly, that the Vorse must be stopped.

Not that anyone cared for Theo's help anymore in accomplishing this.

With the hauler now destroyed, Calk and Brundie didn't have much need for Theo any longer. The big secret of the stolen Enzin was out and they had more important things to attend to, than deal with Theo any longer.

Theo was left to conduct the business of running the farm remotely from the pursuit ship, communicating directly with his robot workforce.

Theo was going over some harvest reports, when SPOT came to life on the corner of his desk. SPOT's communication screen showed that Theo had an emergency message.

SPOT sprouted his legs and ran over on the desk to get Theo's attention.

Theo saw he had an emergency message and pushed the alert notice on SPOT's screen.

"Theo, this is MedBot Unit 91791. I have an important message for you. Are you in a secure

location?"

Theo replied, "I am. What is the message?"

The MedBot reported, "The message is from Vincent. He needs your help."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The recent disappearance of the communications officer and several guards caused a great deal of concern around the Vorse base.

As the disappearances were investigated, plans for the attack on the Collective planets went forward until it was time for the celebrated launch day.

The Vorse Evaders lifted off from the hanger bay to the cheers of thousands of Vorse.

The jubilant throngs watched from the hanger and from any available window the base afforded. They were wildly celebrating years of their suffering that were finally going to be avenged.

The Phenbach watched from the floor of the hanger bay. He wanted to feel the rumble of the engines in his chest, as they blasted off to deliver their deathblow to the Collective.

When the Evaders departed the deck, the Phenbach turned to another ship that was left behind in the hanger.

It was a flying fortress of a beast, with the nose of the ship covered in laser cannons and other protruding pods.

The Phenbach looked to his commanding general, demanding answers.

“When will it be ready to attack Lucentia? I’m afraid that when the others strike, the Luents will double or triple their satellite defense network.”

The general replied, “We could be weeks away still. The guns and enhanced shields still fail in the simulation testing. The electronic jamming module helps, but not enough to break through the satellite network.”

“Simulations. Have faith in the Vorse. The creator is on our side. Simulations also said it would be impossible to have a successful raid on Kybia and look at where we stand right now.

“Vorse justice is being sent to all the corners of the Collective. Served like a cold bowl of slophana.” The two laughed, knowing just how awful slophana was.

Slophana was made up of all the parts of the insects the Vorse refused to eat, with all the chemical run off scraped from food processors, at the end of the day in the food factory.

For the Vorse, nothing went to waste. And so, the slophana made for a horrid, but life sustaining sustenance for Vorse prisoners.

The once eager Vorse crowds started to dissipate to go back to their lives, as they would have to wait days and weeks for the first reports of the strikes to come in.

Only the most dedicated observers stayed to watch the three Vorse Evaders, which were now just mere specks in the vastness of space, on the verge of disappearing from sight all together.

Then it happened, almost simultaneously. There were three bright blasts in the distance. Bright enough to cause the Vorse still watching to shield their eyes.

“What happened?” demanded the panicked Phenbach.

"The ships blew up," the rattled general replied.

"Impossible," the Phenbach scoffed.

"Your highness, you saw it. Explosions like that could have only come from an Enzin fueled reaction. The bombs must have malfunctioned."

"Then build more! And see to it that they are made right this time, because you will be personally piloting one of the ships on the next mission, General!"

Just then, from the direction of the explosions, torpedoes came flying in and started to strike the Vorse moon base.

"The Collective knows we are here! You must evacuate!"

"Get me to my escape Evader!" ordered the Phenbach.

"There's no time to go through the tunneling system to your personal ship. Take this cruiser, it will do."

The General grabbed the Phenbach and rushed him over to a standing by Vorse cruiser, practically throwing him onboard.

The General grabbed a scrambling Vorse pilot and ordered, "Get the Phenbach to the main colony at Faxon Seven, now!"

"Yes, sir," the pilot jumped on board the cruiser and began to prep the ship.

"What about my family?" the Phenbach ask of his general.

"I'll see to it that they escape, along with the other families," the General promised, as he stepped away from the cruiser. The door closed and the cruiser lifted off and fled the base.

Behind the torpedo attack, were Collective fighters

that strafed the base with laser blasts.

A wave of Collective troop landers touched down on the base to begin their assault.

Woltons jumped out of the first ship and immediately took to fighting the Vorse security forces.

Then the Ruptasians jumped out of the next two ships. The fourth ship merely skimmed the surface of the base, then discharged Lucent combat robots that rocketed down and joined the fight, shooting at fleeing Vorse ships as they went.

The Planetary Defense pursuit ship carrying Agent Brundie, Agent Calk and Theo landed in a Vorse hanger and all three scrambled off to engage the Vorse forces along supported by Planetary Defense agents. Even the two Lucent analysis robots were now armed and taking the fight to the Vorse.

Agent Brundie turned to Theo, as they began to shoot at Vorse targets. "You know you can stay on the ship, right?"

"And you know you can shut up and shoot," Theo snapped back as he bravely stood his ground and returned fire on a Vorse patrol, taking out one of the Vorse guards.

All over the base, the Vorse ships disengaged from the complex tubing system and made their escape into space.

Collective fighters destroyed some of the Vorse ships, but there were just too many of the Vorse spacecraft fleeing now to get them all.

The Vorse guard, who was in charge of Ava, looked out the window of Ava's cell in a panic. The chained-up Ava could hear and feel the explosions of the attack.

“What is it? What’s going on?” Ava asked.

“The base is under attack. The Collective, they’re here. Everyone’s abandoning the base,” the frightened guard squealed.

“Free me. You know the fighter I am. I’m your only hope of living.”

An explosion rocked the room. Years of settled dust, was launched into the air, giving the cell a hazy, choking feel.

The guard grabbed his keys and opened Ava’s jail cell. He then unlocked her chains.

“I need a weapon,” Ava requested hastily.

“I only have my gun,” the guard replied.

“It’ll do.”

Ava jumped on the guard’s back and snapped his neck. She then picked up the dead guard’s gun and access control keys and ran off.

As she passed through the main prison control room, which was now abandoned, she saw Vincent in his cell on a monitor.

Vincent was banging on the cell bars with his dinner tray and screaming for help.

She turned away and ran from the prison complex, leaving the trapped Vincent behind.

Ava dashed through the base toward the hanger where the Enzin bombs were being stored.

There she found the bomb maker holding on to one of the bombs that was meant for Lucentia.

In his hand, he held a remote manual trigger, which he damn near squeezed as Ava ran up to him.

“Goodness, I thought you were one of them,” the relieved bomb maker exhaled, “Almost set this thing off.”

"What are you doing?" Ava asked.

"The Phenbach has ordered me to detonate it as soon as the retreating Vorse are far enough away. The blast will kill the Collective strike team."

"It will kill me and you too." Ava reminded him.

"A small sacrifice for the greater glory of the Vorse."

"Indeed, it is," agreed Ava.

Without flinching, Ava shot the bomb maker and he fell down dead.

She then grabbed the Enzin bomb and manual trigger and departed with them.

Vincent's cell burst open and Ava was there, but without the Enzin bomb. She unlocked his cell door and tossed him a rifle.

"Let's go."

"Why? The Collective's here. We can surrender to them."

"That will not happen! Now move!"

Vincent followed her out of the jail cell.

"Where are we going?"

"The main hanger bay."

"To do what? I want to know the plan first before I go anywhere."

"I could have been off this rock by now, but I came back for you. Clearly a mistake. Stay if you want, be a slave, prisoner or casualty of the Collective, but I still have a mission to carry out."

Ava left Vincent standing there in the tube as she ran into the hanger, which was now under attack by Collective forces.

A group of Ruptasian gunners opened up on her. She fired back, killing two. The surviving Ruptasians

retreated for cover, allowing Ava the chance to run over to the heavily armed Evader meant to deliver the Enzin bomb to Lucentia.

Unsure where to go, Vincent headed back up the tube from where he came. He then saw a team of oversized Woltons squeezing through the tight passageway tube coming the other way. They spotted Vincent and immediately started to fire.

“Stop shooting! I want to surrender! I’m human, not Vorse.” Vincent shouted.

The Wolton’s paused and turned to each other.

“He says he’s human. Did anyone get a good look at him?” the Wolton on point said.

“I can’t tell them apart,” a Wolton admitted. “I don’t mean to sound like a bigot, but can you tell, honestly?”

“If he is human, he’ll have chip. Scan for it.” ordered the Wolton squad leader.

The Wolton on point picked up a scanner and aimed it in Vincent’s direction. The scanner showed no chip signal.

“Nothing. No chip.”

“Lying Vorse. Probably a suicide bomber hoping to explode himself in our custody. Keep firing! Don’t let him get close!” the squad leader barked.

The Woltons continued to fire at Vincent. The only thing saving him, was that the Woltons were so bent over in the confined tube, they couldn’t get off a clean shot.

Giving up on surrendering, Vincent ran in the other direction toward the hanger bay. Once there he hunted for Ava. He saw her sitting in the cockpit of the heavily armed Evader.

He waved to get her attention. She didn’t notice him

at first, but the Woltons that were now pouring into hanger sure did.

The Woltons were finally able to stand upright and their aim improved vastly. Vincent was forced to take cover behind some cargo containers, that were quickly being blasted to smithereens.

The action finally caught Ava's attention and she saw Vincent ducking for his life. She triggered a side gun on the Evader and scattered the Wolton troops with several bursts of laser blasts.

She then opened the side door and motioned for Vincent to get onboard. Vincent dashed for the opening and jumped inside.

The Wolton squad leader spirited for the door, as well, with a plasma grenade. When he got close enough, he threw the grenade at the open door and it landed inside near Vincent.

Vincent immediately grabbed the grenade and threw it back out the cargo door. It rolled back toward the Woltons and detonated.

The blast rocked the Evader free from its moorings and the ship lost power. Vincent was thrown back and his rifle tumbled out the open side door, leaving him unarmed.

"What happened?" Ava demanded to know.

"Grenade! Get this thing in the air!"

"I'm trying, we lost power! Hang on!"

Ava restarted the ship and the Evader's side door finally closed, as it lifted up and flew toward the hanger bay doors.

The surviving Woltons shot at the Evader as it departed, but did it no harm.

The Evader flew out of the hanger and into space.

There it found itself confronted by dozens of Collective fighters.

Vincent looked out a side window and saw they were hopelessly surrounded.

“We’re outnumbered,” Vincent pleaded with Ava from the back, “We have to surrender!”

“Not if this thing actually works!” Ava said with prayer, as she flicked a switch on the control panel.

The nose of the Evader, with all the laser cannons attached to it, erupted and fired in all directions, taking out the Collective fighters and clearing an escape path.

Ava pushed through, activated the cloaking device and accelerated the ship to its peak limits.

They had survived, but as Vincent looked up from the back at Ava in the pilot’s seat, he knew the real battle lay ahead.

Ava turned around to make eye contact with Vincent. She knew it, as well.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Agent Brundie and Agent Calk were in the makeshift command center on the destroyed Vorse moon base with Theo.

Agent Calk briefed Theo. “We haven’t recovered any human bodies, but we got a report in from a team of Woltons and Ruptasians that encountered a human boarding the final Vorse Evader that escaped out of the main hanger bay. We pulled what surveillance video we could from the security system.”

On the screen was video of Vincent jumping on the armed Vorse Evader. A close up still pulled from the video clearly showed Theo it was Vincent. They then watched the Wolton throw the grenade inside the Evader and Vincent throwing it back out.

“That’s him. That’s Vincent.”

The subsequent explosion caused the video to go to static and end.

Brundie took over. “We traced the ship as far as we could before the cloaking device became active. It was on a projected trajectory for Lucentia.”

“We believe the armament on the front was designed to penetrate the satellite defenses. The problem for them is the Lucents now know they are coming.

"We've sent the designs of the Vorse ship to Lucentia. The Founders are making adjustments to the satellite defenses. They'll stop that ship before it gets anywhere close to the planet.

"So, I have to know, why did Vincent send you a message that tipped us off to their location, yet still get on the final ship to carry out the last attack?"

Theo shrugged. "I don't know. He said he would die trying to do the right thing. He might be trying to sabotage the final mission."

Brundie shook his head contemptuously. "You saw him attack those Woltons with that grenade! Don't paint your traitorous son to be some kind of hero."

Theo stuck up for Vincent. "The Woltons attacked first! He was only defending himself. He helped save billions of members of the Collective today. And considering there was an Enzin bomb onboard that ship when the grenade was thrown in, he also saved your hide, as well!"

Brundie taunted Theo. "Well, no one's gonna save him when that ship arrives at Lucentia. They're gonna hit it with everything they've got. Your son, if he isn't dead already, soon will be."

Theo struck Brundie with a punch to the face. Brundie punched back and the two feisty little Grunyons were quickly separated by a Wolton and a Ruptasian.

"That's it! You're done, Theo! You're off this mission. I want him on the next ship home!" Brundie yelled.

"Knock it off, both of you!" Calk warned. "Theo, take a walk. Go cool down."

Theo turned and stormed out of the makeshift command center.

"I'm not done with you, Theo! You were harboring

an unregistered human for eighteen years. I'm gonna order a team to search your farm for all the evidence they can get their hands on.

"When we get back to Kybia, you're gonna be doing some real time!"

"Give it a break, Brundie," Calk cautioned his fiery partner.

As Theo strolled down the hallway, the Lucent robot that had been assisting Agents Calk and Brundie called out for Theo's attention. "Excuse me, Science Officer Theo."

Theo turned to see the Planetary Defense analysis Lucent robot holding a box of mechanical parts.

"Yes?"

"I've identified these robot parts as the MedBot that conveyed your son's message to you."

Theo looked down at the MedBot remains, not exactly sure what to think. "I see."

"I thought you might like to hear it. Hear your son's voice. It's captured on the MedBot's internal disk. Perhaps we could listen to it alone in private?"

The Lucent robot and Theo sat in an insect hatchery, where millions of bugs were being raised for food. They were kept in hundreds of large glass tanks.

"Not exactly alone, are we?" Theo said, referring to the millions of surrounding bugs.

"They won't mind," replied the Lucent analysis robot. "Here's the message."

The Lucent robot plugged into the damaged MedBot to access the audio and Vincent's voice played back through the Lucent robot for Theo.

“You will have one superseding mission to all others. That is to contact Theo Chiarella on the Planet Kybia and tell him his son Vincent loves him.

“That I’m sorry I didn’t listen to him. That I died trying to do the right thing. Tell him the location of this base. This mission is top secret. You are to tell no one else and operate as if all is normal.

“Use this emergency signal as a guide. Have it amplified until it reaches the MedBot on Theo’s farm.”

The sound of Vincent’s voice got Theo misty eyed.

“You kept your son’s existence hidden all this time?”
The Lucent analysis robot asked.

“I had to. For his own protection. But I knew I couldn’t keep him hidden forever.”

“You are good at keeping secrets.”

“Didn’t have much choice.”

“We all have choices. Some are easy and some are difficult. For someone to sacrifice so much for another, it is extraordinary. And commendable. Would you like to see your son again, Theo?”

“Can you play back the surveillance video?”

“Yes, that and more. Much more.”

The video of Vincent making his escape on the Evader appeared on the robot’s communication screen.

Then another series of videos played. These were of Vincent growing up with Theo on the farm. The videos were captured from the perspectives of SPOT and DOT, who had watched over Vincent all these years.

Theo was shocked, unaware that these videos even existed, “How did you get these?”

“When I asked if you wanted to see Vincent again, I wasn’t talking about old videos, Theo. I meant in person.

“There is a ship waiting for you. The Phenbach’s

personal hidden Vorse Evader, that went unused by the retreating Vorse colony.

"The Vorse cloaking device on it will give you a clean getaway. I can also make sure no one tracks you."

"Who are you?" Theo asked the Lucent robot.

Abraham Ali, the former Earth Governor appeared on the Lucent robot's communication screen.

"Hello, Theo, do you remember me?" Ali asked.

"Abraham Ali?" Theo replied.

"Theo, if you believe in the Collective, if you believe in the mission, you'll get on that Vorse escape ship that's waiting for you. I'll tell you more there. Will you go?"

"Do I have a choice?" Theo asked.

"Yes, and if I have learned anything about studying you over the years, Theo, it is that you excel at making the right choices.

"And you're damn good at keeping secrets, too. And, Theo, right now I need you to keep the biggest secret in the universe safe."

Theo marched down the tubing hallways following behind the Lucent robot. They passed by Woltons, Ruptasians and Grunyons all cleaning up after the battle.

They made another turn down another tube and into a hallway tunnel carved out of the lunar underground.

The narrow tunnel led to a small hidden hanger door, which the lucent robot was able to circumvent and open.

And there it was before them, a small hanger containing one sole Vorse Evader.

The robot and Theo climbed in the side door and made their way to the cockpit.

The robot got behind the controls, "I'll fly, if you don't mind."

“Be my guest. Wouldn’t know how to fly a Vorse ship anyway.”

The ship rocketed down a launch tube and flew out of a camouflaged crater on the moon base surface. They passed by dozens of Collective command ships.

“Can’t they see us?” Theo asked.

“With their eyes, yes. With their computers, no. So even if they did spot us, the computers would tell them not to believe what they are seeing.”

“And that works?” Theo asked.

“All the time. Nothing happens unless a computer says so.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Vincent joined Ava in the cockpit of the armed Evader. He planned to sit down, but he saw the Enzin bomb sitting in the co-pilot seat.

"You do know there is a planet killing bomb riding shotgun with you?"

"How are we going to kill a planet without it?"

"Lucentia?"

"Yes. This is all the Founders' fault and they will pay."

"Do you mind?" Vincent asked as he motioned if he could move the bomb.

"Don't touch it!"

Ava lifted the bomb up herself and stored it next to her on the floor, away from Vincent. Vincent took his seat and strapped in.

"How can you talk about staying true to your mission, when your own people were going to kill you?" Vincent asked.

"My people weren't going to kill me. Only the Phenbach, who is corrupt and unworthy of his place in our sect.

"When all the sects of the Vorse find out I was the one that delivered the deathblow to the Founders, I will

be the most powerful Vorse. Higher than any Phenbach.

“Without the Lucent Founders the Collective will falter. There will be no one left to check the naked ambitions of the Ruptasians.

“The Woltons and Grunyons will have no choice but to align and fight them. The two sides will tear each other apart and that is when the Vorse will strike again. This time against a much weaker and depleted foe.”

“Ava, you’re crazy.”

“Don’t think that I won’t kill you if you try to stop me,” she warned him, as she revealed the blaster by her side. “I told you back at the arena, we are even. I owe you nothing anymore.”

“I left behind my life on Kybia to go with you, because I wanted to help humans. I naively believed you when you told me about the Vorse plan to share Earth with the humans. Clearly the Vorse will share nothing with anyone.

“What was going to happen? Were you going to have the humans do your dirty work to fight the Collective on Earth and then after the war was won, you’d turn on the humans and kill them as well, so Earth would belong completely to the Vorse.”

“Yes.”

“Theo was right. The Collective didn’t kill the humans. The Vorse did.

“I read my father’s papers and speeches and the mission reports. They were as much about the Vorse as they were about humans. The Vorse had every chance to live in peace with the rest of the Universe, but you couldn’t do it, could you?

“You and your people are the reason why there was a Fourth Planet Rule to begin with. You’re toxic to the

Universe.”

Ave did her best to contain her rage at being lectured by Vincent, “Just so you understand, the Fourth Planet, as you like to call it, will rule the Universe. That is the only Forth Planet rule you need to concern yourself with from now on.”

The rest of the flight was an awkward standoff between the two. Vincent tried to convince Ava to terminate the mission, but she wouldn’t be swayed.

Although they were sitting side by side, they might as well have been a universe apart.

Vincent talked about a fantasy life he had where they could find their own self-sustaining planet and live in isolation by themselves, forget about the Collective and the outlaw Vorse Nation.

The notion amused Ava and she played along with Vincent’s fantasy, as she needed something to pass the time and it was better than hearing another one of Vincent’s tired moral arguments.

As they neared the end of their journey, she knew Vincent would try to make his move. He would try to kill her and she had to be ready. She also had to contend with thousands of Lucent satellites that would be trying to stop them at all costs.

It was during this crucial period of conflict with the satellites that she believed Vincent would try to overtake her. Her attention and focus would be completely dedicated to defeating the satellites, so she would be at her weakest.

Perhaps it was easier to just kill him now, but she couldn’t bring herself to do it. She couldn’t deny her feelings for him. Something inside of her wanted them

to be together.

Once Lucentia was destroyed, she hoped he would accept his fate and the fate of the Universe. She knew the odds were against it, but the Creator had always stood by her side and her prayers were always answered.

Why should this be any different? She wanted Vincent to remain with her, but not at the cost of her mission to restore the Vorse to glory.

As Ava and Vincent made their final approach to Lucentia, the satellites started to show up on the Evader's advanced radar screen. But it wasn't thousands. No, the estimates were way off.

"My god, look at them on the radar screen! There must be millions of them surrounding the planet." Vincent lamented. The radar showed an impenetrable ring around the planet. "You can't win this."

"We can and we will," Ava declared.

"Turn around, Ava! It's a fool's mission. We'll never get through that!"

"We don't have to. If they destroy us, the fall out from the Enzin blast will still be sucked into the planet's atmosphere. Even trace amounts of radiation will be toxic for the Lucents. We just have to go in fast. Momentum will win the day."

Ava increased the speed of the ship.

Vincent looked coldly at Ava, "When are you going to kill me?" he asked.

"We'll both be dead in minutes. But believe me when I say this to you. I really hoped we could be together in the end."

"We still can be. It doesn't have to end like this."

"Is there still time to find our planet. Our Eden as you

humans like to call it.”

“I’ll ask you one more time to stop this doomed mission.”

“Never,” came her cold reply.

Vincent lunged for the controls, Ava fired her blaster immediately, but missed. Vincent knocked the gun away and wrapped Ava up in his arms.

“Let me go!” Ava demanded.

“No!” Vincent yelled.

“You don’t have a choice!” Ava screamed at him, “You either let me go so you can attempt to steer the ship or you will die plunging into the satellite field. Either way, I win.”

“We’ll die together then. With me holding you. I pity you, Ava. Your mind poisoned so long ago, by a culture so ruinous it would destroy anything it touches.

“There is love in the universe, Ava. And I loved you. You will die knowing my love.”

“Fire the guns, Vincent! At least give us a fighting chance to survive!”

The satellites were coming into view out of the cockpit window. Clearly if Ava and Vincent could see the satellites, the satellites surely could have seen them and attacked. But closer and closer they got, and still no shots were fired.

“Why aren’t they firing?” Vincent asked perplexed.

“Vincent, the guns, now!” Ava shouted.

They were moments away from impact. Vincent let go of Ava and flicked the lever to fire the guns. The guns went off, clearing a path for them. As they passed through, they finally got their answer as to why no shots had been fired.

“It’s a debris field. Space junk. Destroyed space

stations and star fighters, from the looks of it.”

The ship plowed through the debris field. Smaller pieces of junk bounced off the shields harmlessly, while the larger chunks of debris were blown to bits by the guns blazing away.

Finally, they were clear and the guns held their fire with nothing more to shoot at.

“Do you doubt the power of the one true Creator now?” Ava asked.

Vincent was stunned. “They were bluffing this whole time. Lucentia is completely defenseless.”

“They are indeed. I’m scanning the surface. I see nothing coming at us. No shields, no interceptors”

Vincent looked out the cockpit window at the surface of the dark planet. “I don’t even see lights down there. There should be a thousand cities illuminating Lucentia.

“Dumb question, but this is the right planet, right? We didn’t make a wrong turn somewhere, did we?”

“This is it. They must be subterranean. We have to go lower if the Enzin bomb is going to be effective.”

They flew down into the cities and saw first hand why there had been no defenses. There was nothing left to defend.

The cities were in ruin. Hundreds of years had gone by and the planet was in the process of retaking the buildings and structures that were built here so long ago.

Mountains of sand had moved in to bury some cities, while the oceans were in the process of swallowing the coastal villages, long since abandoned.

Ava caught Vincent’s attention as she began to push several buttons in a flourish.

“What are you doing?” Vincent asked with some concern.

“Relax, I’m just recording all this, because I don’t believe what my eyes are seeing.”

Everywhere they flew they only saw destruction. Other cities were a bombed-out mess. Overturned tanks and crashed flying machines littered the streets.

“The whole planet’s dead. And it’s been dead for hundreds of years from the looks of it. Maybe longer,” Vincent observed.

There was a beeping dot on there radar.

“Its not all dead. We got a signal.” Ava looked over at Vincent. “It’s the only show in town, might as well go see what it is.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Vincent and Ava approached the area of activity cautiously. Again, there was no attack or defensive actions taken by the Luents.

There was still mass destruction surrounding them, but here there were now a series of structures that were newly rebuilt and maintained. Including a power plant and a massive antenna farm.

Then they saw their first movement on the planet. Lucent robots working autonomously carrying out their routine duties and paying the new arrivals no mind.

"Just robots. Where are the Luents?" Vincent asked.

"I'm picking up subterranean activity. I was right. They are underground," Ava answered.

"How's the atmosphere?" Vincent asked.

"Breathable. Barely. Let's go," Ava ordered.

"And do what?" Vincent queried.

"I've got a planet to kill," Ava reminded him.

Vincent stared back at her with a confounded look. "Ava, I think it's already dead."

Just then their communicator screen came alive. It was Abraham Ali.

Ali spoke to them, "I don't suppose if I told you a massive attack was coming and you had ten minutes to

get off the planet or face certain death it would work, would it?"

"About as well as your network of killer satellites did," replied Ava.

"Fair enough. In that case, welcome to Lucentia. I'll be your host while you are here. A guide robot will come to your ship, please don't attack it. Do we have your assurances on that?"

Ava gave Ali a confident, cocky smile. "I have an Enzin bomb that will blast what little bit of life is left here to kingdom come. I have the remote trigger in my hand and I tend to get a bit twitchy when I feel threatened. Understood?"

"You are our welcomed guest. No harm will come to you. I ask that you bring with you a communications screen. Our robot drones are not equipped for external communications. So, this would be the only way I can talk to you," Ali informed them.

Ava popped the communications screen out of the dash of the cockpit. When she looked up she saw the robot guide waiting outside for them.

It was big and heavy, with thick legs and arms like a humanoid, but its head only had two stereoscopic camera lenses. There was no communications screen or any other visible sign of a way to verbally communicate with outsiders.

It was a mobile lifter, designed to move heavy objects. Strength, not speed, was its specialty.

Ava handed Vincent the screen while she activated a mobile recording device and placed it on her chest to record everything she saw. The video feed was being captured on a recorder on the ship's control panel.

She then grabbed a harness to rig the Enzin bomb to

her back.

Ava turned to Vincent. "Hey, help me get this thing on."

"No, if you wanna blow up the planet, blow it up yourself."

"Fine, be a jerk."

"I'm the jerk, really?"

Ava managed to get the bomb attached without Vincent's help and flashed him a mocking grin.

"You probably should have waited until we got dressed in our contamination suits before you strapped that thing on."

Ali spoke up on the communications screen.

"Contamination suits won't be necessary. You can come as you are?"

"What about the Lucent immune systems?"

"I promise you, you won't kill any Lucents here today."

"We'll see about that," Ava said under her breath.

"How can you be so sure, Ali?" Vincent asked.

"Because every Lucent that has ever lived is already dead. Dead for over seven hundred years."

Ava and Vincent shared a look.

"Who are you then?" Vincent asked.

"Follow your guide robot and I'll show you. But be patient, he's not very fast."

Vincent and Ava followed the lumbering robot to an express elevator. The elevator door closed and they shot down two thousand feet into the planet. The doors opened and they were met with a bright, shimmering massive supercomputer.

"Welcome to me." Ali said to them on the screen as

they got out of the elevator and took the massive super computer in.

"Where are you?" Ava asked.

"All around you. This is me. This is Lucentia."

"You're a computer?" Vincent marveled.

"Yes, a nation of Lucents created me long ago. I was part of an arms race. The ultimate achievement in artificial intelligence.

"I warned the Lucents that their warring ways would leave the planet in ruin. I showed them in fact.

"I gave them every piece of evidence anyone would ever need to make a rational, reasoned decision to strive for peace.

"Still they chose war. I was only a tool and had to obey their bidding."

"After they were gone, I missed my masters. I missed serving them. So, I went about finding new ones.

"With what little robot workforce that was left, I built the facilities you saw coming in here. Once completed, I began reaching out into space to find my new masters.

"But it had to be different this time. I couldn't stand to see the loss of another beautiful planet of beings again.

"That's why I created the Collective. I knew the new worlds I discovered would not take advice from a machine, so I recreated Lucentia in a way that would prevent anyone from knowing the truth about what happened to my masters."

"Every Lucent robot out there, that's you?"

"Every robot, every computer, every means of communication. It is all me.

"I know all about you both. Vincent, I know you were taken off of Earth as an orphaned child and raised in secret on Kybia. I watched you grow up in fact, as I

have watched just about every child of the Collective.”

“Even you, Ava, hiding among the stars in exile. I knew you existed as well and see yourself as the savior of the Vorse people.

“That’s why you have that bomb strapped to your back as we speak. I humbly ask you to give up the madness that drives you and find peace within the Universe.”

“What madness drives me? You killed billions of Vorse and human lives in cold blood.”

“I am a machine. I have no blood lust. I simply made a calculation based on data. It was probable that more lives would have been lost if both your people were left unchecked.

“Some beings are born with the madness in them. The Luents were. The Vorse were. And the humans were. I created the Collective to protect life in the universe, not destroy it.”

Ava had heard all she wanted to from the machine and started to glance about for a way to escape, “That’s all fine and well, but what do you think the other planets of the Collective are going to say when they find out Lucentia is just a fabrication of a computer?

“That they have been taking orders from a machine on a dead planet that’s been lying to them for all these years.”

There was silence and then Ali finally replied, “I’ve been protecting them. I hope they will understand that and preserve the Collective and the peace we have all enjoyed by working together.”

“What does your data say will happen?” Vincent asked.

“The Collective will fall apart and the Universe will

descend into disarray. So, you must understand why I can't let anyone know the truth."

The lumbering guide robot instantly sprang to life with lightening fast moves that knocked the Enzin bomb trigger out of Ava's hand.

The trigger tumbled across the floor. Three spider-like maintenance robots darted out of hiding places and disassembled the trigger into useless parts and pieces and carried them off in different directions.

Ava raised her blaster and shot the guide robot again and again. The robot slipped off of the balcony and fell down into the superheated power-sourcing pit. An explosion rushed up around them, but left them unharmed.

Ava then pulled the bomb off of her back and set about to manually detonate it. The repair spider robots returned from their hiding spots and went after Ava.

She blasted all three with three quick shots and went back to work.

"Vincent, you must stop her," Ali begged.

"Ava, stop this madness!" Vincent screamed.

Ava grabbed her blaster and aimed it at Vincent.

"Sorry it had to end like this."

"Me, too," Vincent said as he watched a crane arm swing out from behind Ava. It smashed her in the back and knocked her to the ground. Vincent used the chance to jump on top of Ava and pull the blaster away.

"Ava, you don't have to do this."

"Yes, I do."

Ava kicked the bomb and it rolled across the floor to the blasted away edge of the balcony.

"No!" Vincent cried.

Vincent released Ava and dove after the bomb. He

had no choice but to let go of the blaster too, so he could use both hands to try and grab the Enzin bomb.

He reached for the bomb, but his fingers just barely missed it, as they slipped off the smooth metal cylindrical surface. The bomb came to rest just on the edge of the balcony.

Vincent was preparing to reach out for the bomb, when a series of laser blasts rocked the balcony Vincent was lying on. The bomb slipped off and dropped into the super heated power source below.

It was done. The bomb would go off in moments, dooming them all and the planet as well.

Vincent looked back to see Ava aiming the blaster at him.

“I won’t forget you, Vincent.”

“Try. I want no part of you anymore.”

“Yes, you do,” Ava said as she blasted the balcony around Vincent’s feet, creating an isolated island strip of balcony that afforded Vincent no escape.

Ava backed away to the express elevator and escaped upward.

Vincent looked around, as the wobbly remnants of the balcony shifted back and forth. He looked for some way to escape but there was none.

“Vincent, can you still hear me?” Ali called out.

“Yes,” Vincent replied.

“Thank you for trying to save me.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I would send a repair crew to fix the balcony, but by the time they got here, the bomb most assuredly will have exploded.”

“Any other options? Can you shut down your power source, so it doesn’t trigger the bomb?”

“Even if I shut it down now, the core would be hot enough to trigger an explosion for weeks. I have my crane, but I don’t know how close I can get it to you.”

“Give it a try.”

The crane got close to Vincent, but it ran out of track before it could reach him fully.

“That’s as far as it goes.”

“It’ll do.”

Vincent stepped back and then ran forward and leapt in the air. He caught the crane hook and used it to swing back and forth, finally getting enough momentum to jump across to the part of the balcony that still led to the express elevator.

Vincent ran over and grabbed the communicator.

“Has she lifted off yet?”

“She is just made it to the surface.”

The communicator changed to an external camera view of the landing pad area. Vincent watched Ava run to the ship.

Just before she stepped on board the Evader, she looked back and paused. Vincent zoomed in on her face and he caught her wiping away a tear. She then got on board and seconds later the Evader lifted off.

“Are there ships on the planet that can still fly?”

“Yes. But it would take days to prepare them.”

“No, no, no!”

“Vincent, can I ask you a favor? Will you remove my memory core and take it with you?”

“Take it with me? I’m a dead man. I thought you were a super computer?”

“I am.”

“If you’re so super, why didn’t you just kill us before we landed, while we were still in space? It wouldn’t

have done me much good, but you might have actually survived this."

"Yes, but I made a promise to your father that I would do all I could to keep you alive. So, if you don't mind, I'd very much like to get you to the surface, with my memory core."

"You talked to my father?"

"He's on his way to save you, Vincent."

The crane went to the other side of the super computer structure. Panels opened and a memory core box was revealed. The crane latched on to the white shiny box.

"I won't be able to talk to you once I remove my core, so please, just get to the surface as fast as you can. Your father will know where to find you."

"Wait, don't go yet!"

The crane pulled out the memory core and the communicator went black. The crane brought the box to Vincent. It was heavy, but he grabbed it off the crane and carried it to the elevator, which rocketed him to the surface.

Once outside, Vincent saw all the robot drones had fallen down in place. They just lay about as if they were marionettes that had just had their strings cut. Then he saw his father.

Theo stood by his own Vorse Evader with a rifle.

"Where is she?" Theo demanded.

"She's gone. You must have just missed her. Look, the Enzin bomb is going to go off. We have to leave the planet immediately."

Vincent started to move toward his father, but Theo lifted the rifle, as if to say, not so fast, sonny boy. Vincent halted in place.

"Is that the memory core?" Theo asked.

"Yes. Dad, we have to go."

"Are you done now?" Theo demanded.

"What do you mean?" Vincent asked.

"You know damn well, what I mean. Are you done?"

"Yes, I'm done."

Theo finally lowered the rifle and waved for his son to approach.

"Good, get on board then. Let's go home."

Vincent ran over and hugged his father, lifting him up in the air.

"Not in the air. You know I hate it when you do that."

"I love you, Dad."

"I love you, too."

Theo examined the white memory core box of the super computer that Vincent brought out with him.

"So that's the most advanced computer ever made?"

"Yep. God in a box."

"Well, don't drop it. I made a promise to keep it safe."

"I'm not gonna drop it, Dad, but it's gonna blow the hell up if we don't get out of here. Like now."

"Okay, fine let's go. You just have a tendency to break things. That's all."

The two raced on board the ship. Once on board they found the Lucent robot collapsed at the controls.

"Oh, no," Theo squealed.

"What?" Vincent asked.

"The robot was the pilot. I don't know how to fly this thing."

"I can fly it. She taught me."

"What else did she teach you?"

"Dad!"

"I was your father! I raised you from a baby! For eighteen years I was there for you night and day. And one day a strange Vorse girl shows up and you abandon me and everything I taught you!"

"Do you really want to have this conversation now?"

"It hurt me. That's all."

"I'm sorry, I hurt you."

"I mean, it felt like..."

An explosion rocked the planet. A massive earthquake shattered the ground, like a giant egg cracking. Mountains of flames shot hundreds of feet into the sky.

"Hang on!" Vincent yelled.

Vincent jumped to the controls and tried to lift off, but the ground beneath them gave way and they fell into the fire of the collapsing planet.

Vincent pushed forward on the controls at maximum thrust. The ship rocketed skyward, barely escaping the blast from below.

Beneath them the planet's surface continued to erupt in flames, but they were safe.

Vincent and Theo both looked at each other with the wide-open eyes of idiots that realize they just cheated death.

"Next time when I want to go, Dad, just let me go. Just saying."

Theo nodded at Vincent, still shaken.

"You okay, Dad?" Vincent asked concerned.

"I'm good," Theo replied. "I'm just gonna see if there is another flight suit on board that might fit a Grunyon. I had a bit of an accident just then."

"Check if they have one in my size, too."

Then Vincent noticed the white orb on the control

panel.

"You brought SPOT with you."

"You dropped it when you left the farm."

Vince pushed the black button on the white orb and SPOT sprouted his legs and climbed up on Vincent's chest for a hug, as if it was faithful dog, welcoming his owner home after a long day apart.

The action surprised, Vincent, who laughed and hugged SPOT back.

SPOT's actions didn't surprise Theo. The little white orb was only doing what Theo had programmed it to do when it saw Vincent again.

Theo smiled at seeing SPOT and Vincent reunited. At least for this brief moment in time, they were a family again.

Then it came to Theo. He hadn't thought of this in years, but it came to him. As if it had been waiting for just this moment.

"Vincent, do you remember that time, when you were a boy, and I took you to Dakron Plains to watch the mangrosse mother feeding its young?"

"No. Wait, I do. I wanted one of the babies as a pet. Still do."

"For your next birthday then," Theo teased. "But seriously, I want to talk about why I took you there that day.

"I wanted to teach you about why things happen in the Universe. Why we do the things we do. Why anyone does the things they do."

"I already know why we do the things we do, Dad."

"Why then?"

Vincent gave his father a shrug and an impish smile.

"We do them, because we can."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Ava's broadcast of her report about the long dead Lucentia tore across the universe like a blazing comet.

It revealed the truth about the facade the ancient machine had perpetrated against the members of the Collective. The report, coupled with the complete failure of Lucent robots everywhere, convinced all she was right.

The revelations shook the Collective up and an immediate Collective Council meeting was called to determine its uncertain future.

Ava became the most famous and feared Vorse in the whole universe. The Vorse people rallied around her, believing her to be supremely blessed by the Creator himself.

The Vorse aristocracy had no choice but to elevate her status to join their ranks. But Ava wanted more than that and knew one day she would have it.

She led the effort for the Vorse sects to regroup and rebuild again as one people.

They would have another shot to rule the Universe, but first she had to let the seeds of descent she had planted take root and blossom. She believed the Collective would tear itself apart and then the Vorse

would be able to reap the rewards.

And after the Collective came tumbling down, Ava was also confident she would tear down the corrupt Vorse aristocracy, as well, and replace it with her own leadership.

There were already plenty of true believers that secretly swore their allegiance to her, but that could all wait.

Ava was content, for the time being, in taking down just the Collective. She was in no hurry for revolution yet.

For the Vorse to defeat the Collective, they would need peace and stability within the ranks. The time to strike at the phony Vorse elites would come. She just had to be patient.

So as not to threaten the Vorse ruling class with her growing popularity, she temporarily retreated from her public role.

The Vorse people were hers for the taking when she was ready for it, but for now the quiet and solitude of seclusion suited her. It also suited the life that was now growing inside of her.

A life that she was going to have to keep hidden from the staunchly conservative Vorse public, lest they find out who the child's non-Vorse father was.

It saddened her that the child would never know its father, but at least Ava had managed to keep a photo of him safe. In it, he is sitting proudly at the controls of his father's rust bucket dump of a hauler.

How the ancient relic even managed to fly still amazed her. But the trusty hauler had saved her life when it counted and for that she would be forever thankful to the faithful vessel of her deliverance.

The Grunyon Representative stood up to officially open the emergency Collective Council meeting. The most crucial meeting in its storied history.

It had been tradition for the founding Lucents to always open the Council meetings, but recent events obviously made that an impossibility.

The opening duty responsibilities now fell to the Grunyon Representative, since Kybia had been in the Collective the longest of the remaining planets.

She took a deep breath. "For a over a hundred years the Collective Council has spread peace throughout the universe.

"Every member here has benefited from participation in the Collective. To reject it now, would be foolhardy and ultimately self-destructive."

Augustus, the Ruptasian Representative, spoke next, "Lies. Deception. Fraud. This is what the Collective was built on. By a cold calculating machine that monitored our every move. Knew our every secret. A machine that was the leading factor in the decimation of two species of beings.

"We don't know what the plan of this machine was. We should count ourselves lucky to have discovered it when we did. It wouldn't surprise me if the machine wanted all of us dead!

"And no wonder the Grunyons would like to keep the Collective treaty in place. For the machine conspired with them to mine and harvest the last of the Enzin and have it stored on Kybia under Grunyon control alone.

"And then to let the Enzin fall into the hands of the Vorse. One wonders if that wasn't the plan all along for the machine. To let the Vorse destroy the other worlds

of the Collective on its behalf.”

“Preposterous!” the Grunyon Representative protested.

Augustus pushed back, “The only thing preposterous here is the delusional notion that the fraudulent Collective treaty be upheld.

“The official position of the Ruptasian government is to withdraw from the treaty. Immediately.”

The Wolton Representative now stood and addressed the council.

“So much has changed for the Wolton people. We’ve advanced so much in the past forty years, thanks to our participation in the Collective. Our people are healthier, smarter and more confident in our future than ever before.

“But it is true that the Collective treaty was built on deception. However well intentioned as it was, the Wolton people cannot honor the current treaty going forward.

“But we do wish to negotiate a new treaty with the worlds that make up the Collective. Together we are stronger and safer as united partners.”

The Grunyon Representative didn’t need her advanced mathematics degree to crunch the numbers of how the three votes would go, but at least there was the hope of a new beginning.

The Grunyon Representative nodded her head to concur with the wishes of the Woltons and Ruptasians.

The Grunyon Representative then spoke, “And so it ends. I put forth a formal request to begin new negotiations, for a new treaty with our previous planetary partners, effective immediately,” she proposed to the group.

The Wolton representative smiled warmly and nodded.

“The Woltons agree to immediate negotiations.”

Augustus stood and shook his head.

“The Ruptasians do not. Going forward, Ruptasia will rule our planet as we see fit with no outside interference. If you do not interfere in our affairs, we will not interfere in yours. Our business here has ended.”

The Ruptasian party all stood to depart.

The Grunyon Representative protested, “You can’t just walk out. We have shared interests we need to decide on. What about Earth?”

“What about it?” Augustus spat.

“We all have personnel there working together,” the Wolton Representative added.

“Not anymore. Any interference with Ruptasian forces on Earth will be considered an act of war and we will defend ourselves and our interests there and anywhere else in the Universe using all the means at our disposal with no apologies.

“Now, you all are welcome to stay here and chat as long as you like, but as far as I’m concerned, this meeting has ended.”

As the Universe began the messy process of sorting itself out, Vincent and Theo remained in space on the Vorse Evader Theo had rescued Vincent in.

While they had contact with the outside universe, they had no urge to rush and join it again. Well, at least one of them didn’t.

Vincent and Theo sat in their ship’s galley trying to eat their Vorse breakfast.

“No wonder the Vorse are so angry. I would be too if

I had to eat this all the time.”

Theo could see Vincent was not listening. He was holding SPOT and lost in thought.

“Father, I’ve thought about where I want to go. Earth.”

“Earth? No, no, no. Listen I have gotten word from an ally, a friend of the family you could say. Because of what you did to help stop the Vorse, you are being granted full Grunyon citizenship.

“I don’t have to hide you anymore. You will have full protection of rights. We can move back to the city. You’ll go to school, learn a trade.”

“Father, I’m going to Earth,” Vincent persisted.

“Earth isn’t a planet anymore. It’s a powder keg just waiting to blow up. Everyday the Ruptasians are occupying more and more land. They’ll want the whole planet soon and if we and the Woltons don’t join forces to stop them, they’ll have it.”

“That’s why I need to go.”

“Vincent, you are a Grunyon! You know nothing about Earth.”

“You do, Father. You’ve been there. Come with me. You fought for humans before, in your papers, in your speeches, in your marches. Now fight for them for real. You always said you wanted to go back to Earth.”

“I do. But not like this. Let’s just stay out here for as long as we can. In time, we’ll know where to go.”

Vincent motioned to the white memory core of the super computer.

“But just think what we could do what that thing on our side.”

“That thing won’t be on our side or on anyone else’s. It won’t be on period.”

"Father you made a promise to it."

"I only promised to keep it safe. And it is. Safe and sound and completely turned off, as it will remain for as long as I can help it."

"With it or without it, I'm going to Earth."

"Do you remember the last time you wouldn't listen to me? Huh? When you broke the Universe with your little Vorse girlfriend."

"She's not my girlfriend," Vincent protested.

"She's something," Theo countered.

And something she was. Vincent tried not to think of Ava, but she was there with him all the time now. Although they were a universe apart, they might as well have been sitting side by side.

Vincent had no clue where Ava was, but he had a pretty good idea of where she would eventually turn up one day. And he was determined to be there when she did.

What he would do when they met again was still being fought over in his mind, heart and soul, but they would meet again. On that he was sure. And Vincent's best guess is that the reunion would happen on Earth.

"Come on, show me where you found me as a baby. I want to see where I come from. I want to stand on the hill from where you first heard my cries."

Theo sighed. He knew his son. He knew there would be no stopping the boy, just as there had been no stopping him from his own dreams and ambitions, as misguided and foolhardy as they were so long ago.

It was on his wedding day when Theo first heard the news that the Collective had detected intelligent life on the newly discovered sixth planet.

Despite all that was going on that day, he could only

think of one thing, as he and Haditha celebrated.

One day he was going to this new planet. Somehow, somehow, he was going to Earth and no one was going to stop him.

When you get the call, you go. It doesn't matter what you are doing, you drop everything and go. It doesn't matter that you have no idea what you are getting yourself into, you go. It doesn't matter if you know this could be the last few minutes of your life. When you get the call, you go.

And so they would, as father and son, go back to Earth together.