

Devon Blake

and the Starship Crash

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Chapter 1

“Devon Blake, seat call for Devon Blake,” the speaker on Devon’s WristVid said cheerfully. He looked around, startled that it was already time to depart the shuttle and board the starship.

Devon pressed the button on his WristVid, letting the steward know that he was on his way. Devon’s luggage trundled after him automatically as he walked toward the large, round hatch that led from the shuttle to the space station. Despite the dozens of small, robotic legs frantically stepping underneath the bottom of the trunk, he had to wait for a moment before it caught up.

“Hurry up, Sammy,” he uttered. “If you weren’t lucky I’d have replaced you long ago. What’s the use of automatic luggage if it slows you down?” The people passing by glanced at Devon, wondering why he was talking to his luggage. Devon swallowed a smile as he saw their reaction. Not many people could afford automatic luggage that responded to voice commands. Most people just had the kind that followed you around.

Devon stared out the large, PlexiSteel window as he approached the hatch. A silvery tube stretched out into space, attached to the starship he was about to board. The *Boadicea* was a class V interplanetary cruiser equipped with the latest ion pulse engines. Devon could see the blue glow surrounding the rear of the ship off in the distance.

The hatch whispered open as he approached. A tall, pretty flight attendant was waiting for him with a smile. “Right this way, Mister Blake.” She gestured for him to enter the boarding tube to the starship. “We are so pleased to have you aboard. All of the arrangements have been made for your trip to Forrestal.”

“Are there many other kids onboard this trip?” Devon politely asked.

The attendant paused for a moment, “well...yes, I suppose.” She smiled at Devon, waiting for him to make his way down the walkway in the tube. Devon shrugged and entered, trying to imagine that this was the start of something great. Unfortunately he could not help but remember how boring all of those other trips had been that he had taken on ships just like this.

The attendant recovered from her momentary confusion, falling back into her rehearsed welcome speech. “You will have access to all of your exclusive gold-level amenities during your voyage. PulsarLines prides itself on providing our top clients with the highest level of luxury and privacy.”

“Are there any other kids traveling in the gold-level?” Devon asked hopefully.

The attendant looked puzzled, “You are the only gold-level passenger this trip, sir.”

Devon sighed, obviously dejected. He hated traveling alone and being the only gold-level passenger would just make it lonelier. Devon was used to being alone, but that did not mean he liked it. Before leaving, he had hoped that this time would be different. Sometimes he thought he must be the loneliest boy in the galaxy. He very rarely saw his parents, because of their busy schedules. They always made sure he had everything he wanted or needed, as long as it was not their attention. They were very busy running the family business, Blake Industries.

Blake Industries made the best hovercars anywhere. Devon’s great-grandfather had started the company with a little money and a lot of determination. His first hovercar was a true breakthrough. Until Hugh Blake had invented the HippoGriff many people on the frontier had not been able to travel long distances without using gyrocopters or ultralights. Devon was proud of the company and knew that millions of people had easier lives because of it. His parents had important work to do, but that did not make being alone any easier.

Devon was lost in his thoughts as he followed the attendant toward the starship. Before he knew it, he was at the entrance of the *Boadicea*. The attendant smiled sweetly at Devon and ushered him through the hatch. A steward with an equally pleasant smile was waiting for Devon.

“Hello, Mr. Blake. We have your suite nearly ready for you; we just need to know how you want the holographic simulation today. What environment are you in the mood for?”

“A Yukloth mud-pit sounds nice,” Devon quipped.

“A mud-pit, sir?” The steward sounded unsure.

“Yup, with extra squid-worms, if you please.”

The steward hesitated for a moment, obviously wondering what to do next. The equipment used to simulate any environment in the expensive suites was easily capable of producing such a place, but why would anyone want it to?

Devon let her suffer for a moment and then added, “Wait, I changed my mind. Set it for Camelot instead. That should be fun.”

Relief washed over the steward’s face at the change to a much more conventional choice. She made a few entries on her WristVid and then looked up at Devon, completely recovered from her momentary panic.

“Mr. Blake, if you would follow me I can show you to your rooms.” She stepped on to a quickly moving pedway, making sure that Devon followed. It took only a few minutes for the efficient people-mover to get them to the most exclusive gold-deck and drop them at his room. The attendant wordlessly passed the key over the lock and waited for the door to swish open. With a few muttered pleasantries, the steward handed Devon his key and excused herself. She glanced back with a relieved look as she was whisked away by the pedway, obviously glad to be done with greeting Devon.

Devon's face turned a bit red, embarrassed that he had teased the woman. He supposed making sure someone with his means was satisfied was normally not very easy, but had not made her job any easier by being difficult on purpose. He sighed and walked through the door into his suite. The holographic equipment built into the suite had transformed the normally plain walls into the inside of an opulent castle. Torches guttered in sconces along the back wall and the sound of a harp could be heard coming from the next room. Swords, shields, and axes hung on the walls, lending the place a rustic, medieval feeling. One wall was taken up by the mounted head of a ferocious looking dragon. Devon smiled when he saw that. He often day dreamed about rescuing fair maids and slaying dragons.

With another sigh, Devon flopped down into one of the overstuffed chairs in the living area. He looked over as his luggage struggled over a particularly thick rug, its motor whirring loudly.

"Well, Sammy, I guess this is going to be just you and me." Devon addressed the trunk, not expecting a response.

"Not necessarily," someone said in a strange voice. Devon nearly flew from his chair at the sound. He whirled around, facing the door to the sleeping area and beheld one of the strangest sights he had ever laid eyes on. A boy stood in the doorway, but not quite a boy. He had a larger than normal head, which was covered in thick, white hair. There was also something strange about his eyes, but Devon could not quite put his finger on what it was. The strangest thing, however, was the boy's skin. It was bright orange, almost so bright it nearly glowed.

Devon realized that he had been holding his breath. He let it out slowly and took another moment to study this intruder. He was wearing tight, grey overalls and some sort of black

slippers that fit closely on his feet, almost like socks. The boy was not making any threatening moves, but that did not change the fact that he should not be here.

“Who the heck are you?” Devon asked cautiously.

“Flimitpoytrotilmas....Flim for short.” He answered.

“So, what are you doing in my room?”

Flim looked embarrassed for a moment, “Sneakin’,” he answered, “it’s kind of my specialty.”

Devon thought for a moment. He could have this boy tossed off the ship in a matter of minutes for being in his room. But that would leave him alone again.

“Sneaking, huh? Well, that sounds like fun. My name is Devon, and it’s gonna be a long trip. I could always use somebody to hang-out with. Did you find anything fun when you were doing it?”

A huge grin split Flim’s face, “Lots of fun stuff.”

“Well, what are we waiting for? Let’s get to the fun.”

Flim laughed and Devon joined in as they ran down the corridor, ready to explore every cranny of the huge ship.

Chapter 2

Jacinda Vasquez hesitated when she saw the young man whiz by on the pedway with another strange looking boy. She recognized the young man immediately as Devon Blake. She had known that he would be on this voyage, but it still came as a shock to her. With her parents’ meager income, they never could have afforded to send her on this trip, not without the money that had been given to them by the Blake Foundation. She could not figure out why the foundation had decided to help fund her trip. She was not an especially good student, or an

outstanding athlete. The e-message had mentioned something about an above-average score on something called the Ackerman Test, whatever that was. She did not even remember taking any test like that, but if it had gotten her this chance for an adventure, she was fine with it.

Jacinda had mixed feelings about the boy. He looked nice enough, but how could anyone as rich as him be nice. When you had that kind of money, it just was not necessary. You could simply buy what you wanted without having to be nice about it. She also felt a bit of embarrassment about needing the money to go on this trip. Around her friends, who were mostly in the same situation as her, she did not mind being poor. But being around these people, she felt like she had a sign on her back that said “charity case.”

She shook off those depressing thoughts and smiled widely. Nothing like a big smile to make friends.

Just then, a group of four boys brushed by her in the passageway.

“Watch your step, pipsqueak,” one snapped as he bumped into her.

Jacinda spun around to face the boy, ready to toss a comeback at him, but stopped in her tracks. The boys had also turned around and they all looked like they were just waiting for her to say something so they would have a reason to make more trouble. She stifled a reply and looked down at the ground.

“What’s wrong, Rags, nothing to say. You workers should be more careful around the guests.”

“I am a guest too,” Jacinda snapped before her caution could stop her.

“A Guest? You can’t be serious. You are dressed like a beggar,” the boy growled.

“There is no way you could afford to be on this ship, unless you are a stowaway.” The boy

crossed his arms in satisfaction when tears began to well up in Jacinda's eyes. "What did I say, boys? She must be a stowaway."

"Yeah, Terry, a dirty stowaway," one of the other boys agreed.

Terry Jameson and the Gustav brothers were old hands at picking on other children. They had worked out their routine and knew just what to do to upset their victims, with as little effort as possible. Terry took special pride in his ability to pick out the most vulnerable person in any group. As the situation unfolded, they took a moment to watch the fruit of their labors.

By this time Jacinda was wiping her face furiously, trying to stop the tears. Seeing her distress, the boys began to laugh even harder.

By this time, the altercation has attracted the attention of a small group of children. The growing crowd seemed to feed Terry's satisfaction at her humiliation. Suddenly the hurt that Jacinda felt turned into anger. She had had enough of this abuse. She reached into a pouch fastened to her belt and felt around for something to throw at the boys. Her hand settled on a small can of fizzup.

The can looked small, but actually contained about a liter of sweet, fizzy soda. When it was poured out of the can it was supposed to change into its liquid form, but Jacinda did not plan on pouring it out. With a furious flick of the wrist, she shook up the can and pointed it at the group of boys. They had only a moment to look surprised before Jacinda pressed the release on the can and all of the soda spewed out on the boys, covering them with sticky, sweet smelling liquid.

All of the other children gathered around the disturbance began laughing, pointing at Terry and the three others. Jacinda flashed a satisfied smile at the boys. "Oops, how dreadfully clumsy of me."

Terry nearly choked with rage. This was not supposed to be how it worked. The girl was supposed to run away in tears, not douse them with fizzup. Two of the Gustav brothers, Link and Junior, were not so much mad as shocked. Their younger brother, Merrell, on the other hand, was neither shocked nor angry. In fact, he found it rather funny. The idea of this slim girl shaming her tormentors with a can of fizzup made him laugh out loud. Merrell immediately liked her. Seeing that the others did not seem to find it funny, he swallowed his grin, stifling another laugh. Link and Junior turned on Merrell, giving him a double look of annoyance.

Finally recovering from the surprise, Terry glared at Jacinda, rage twisting his mouth.

“You’ll regret that. I’ll have the captain put you in the brig until you learn how to treat your betters.” Terry spun on his heels and strode down the hallway away from the laughing children. Link and Junior looked at each other and then hurried after Terry. Merrell looked confused for a moment. With an embarrassed shrug to Jacinda, he turned and followed his brothers.

With the retreat of the bullies, several children in the crowd began to clap and cheer. Soon the whole group joined in the applause. One girl clapped Jacinda on the shoulder.

“Good show. Terry and his goons go to the same PrimeSchool as I do, and nobody ever stands up to them. By the way, I’m Maddie.” The girl offered her hand to Jacinda. “What is your name, or do you want to be called ‘Rags’,” she asked with a smile.

“Jacinda, my name is Jacinda,” she replied, unsure what to say next. Normally she did not lose her temper like that. But this time it seemed to have worked out well for her.

Maddie clapped Jacinda on the shoulder again “Well, I had better get my luggage to my room. Maybe we will see each other tomorrow at the briefing. Bye.”

Jacinda waved goodbye and turned to go back to her room. She picked up her threadbare luggage on her way to her compartment. She knew she needed to hurry. She had a reception to attend as part of her trip. All of the children from important families had been invited to the reception. She had been included because her trip had been sponsored by the Blake Foundation. She just hoped that Terry had not been invited as well.

Chapter 3

Plates and glasses clinked as the ship's staff completed the preparations for the reception. Devon had invited Flim to come, just so he knew he would have someone to talk to. Most of the other children were intimidated by Devon or by his family's wealth actually. Even the families of the wealthy children who were scheduled to attend the reception did not have as much money as Blake Industries. In fact, Devon's family probably had more money than everyone else on board, combined.

Devon dug in his pocket for the plasfilm sheet containing the guest list. One name had been highlighted, *Jacinda Vasquez*. According to the e-message Devon had received, Jacinda was very bright, but very poor. His parents' foundation had paid for her passage on this trip. If she did well, there were plans to help her parents pay for tuition at a top off-world school, but her parents did not know that yet.

Devon pressed the girl's name on the plasfilm sheet and a beam of soft light projected an image of her face above the sheet. Devon studied it for a moment. She was actually quite cute, he thought. The thing that impressed him the most, however, was the determined look in her eyes. She had the look of someone who you could always count on.

"Hi, Devon," a high voice, seemingly coming from nowhere, startled him out of his thoughts.

Devon immediately recognized the voice. It belonged to Flim, the alien boy he met the previous day. He scanned the area, trying to discover where his new friend might be hiding. About to give up in frustration, Devon noticed something strange about one of the tablecloths nearby. As a waiter passed by, it did not ripple like the others. Squinting, Devon looked closer. Suddenly the part of the tablecloth hanging down began to ripple. He looked closer and started to make out the outline of a small person. The effect was totally disrupted as Flim could not hold his giggles in any longer. As he broke out into a fit of loud laughter, Flim became visible kneeling next to the table.

“Ha, ha,” he laughed, “I had you going.” Flim held his sides, trying to hold in the laughter.

“How on Earth did you do that,” Devon asked, totally shocked.

“I told you that sneaking was my specialty,” Flim answered. “Everyone from y’Lang can do it. It has something to do with us having two suns, but I’m not really sure how it works.”

“That was amazing,” Devon still seemed in shock, “that is one of the coolest things I have ever seen.”

Flim looked embarrassed, “it’s really nothing. I have to really concentrate to make it work.”

“Still, that was amazing,” Devon responded. “I’m sure we can find a way to put it to good use this trip.”

Both boys laughed with more than a little mischievousness.

The room began to fill up with children, most looking bored and snobby. Devon cringed. He knew this kind of crowd. He often had to endure events like this reception. His parents

considered it part of his family duty to represent them as an educated young gentleman. Devon gave a silent moment of thanks that he had Flim here to break up the monotony.

He pulled the plasfilm sheet out of his pocket again to check the picture and then search the crowd. He did not see Jacinda yet, but she still had nearly a quarter hour before the reception officially started. As he peered at the image he was disturbed by Flim poking him in the ribs. Devon looked up to see that a surprised looking girl was watching him from the doorway. He immediately recognized Jacinda from her holo. He approached her, putting the plasfilm back in his pocket.

“Ms. Vasquez,” he greeted her, his hand extended. She took it meekly and shook it.

“That was me in the holo, wasn’t it,” She asked.

“Yes,” Devon stuttered, “I’m supposed to welcome you to the reception. My parents...I mean, the Blake Foundation sent me to make sure you had everything you needed and to make you feel at home.”

Jacinda chuckled. “It may be impossible to make me feel at home, unless you book me a smaller room. My cabin is as large as the apartment my family shares back home.”

Jacinda’s friendly manner helped put Devon at ease, “Well, I’ll see what I can do. Until then just enjoy our hospitality. I understand this is your first trip away from home.”

“Yes it is,” she agreed, “and it is terribly exciting. I can’t imagine how it would feel to be able to travel like this all the time.”

It was Devon’s turn to chuckle, “believe me, it gets boring. All these ships start to seem the same after a couple of trips.” Devon’s thought was interrupted by another poke in the ribs from Flim. The alien boy was smirking at Devon when he turned toward him.

Flim hopped forward and extended his hand toward Jacinda, “Flimitpoytrotilmas Sa’ Atar, at your service....Flim for short.” Jacinda grabbed a hold of Flim’s hand with gusto.

“Wow, a real y’Langian. I’ve never met an alien before, but I’ve read all about them.” Flim exchanged glances with Devon as Jacinda continued to shake his hand. “Can you really blend in with your surroundings? I read about your chromatophores. How does it feel to change color? Does it hurt? How quiet can you do it?”

Jacinda would have continued but Devon rescued Flim with a flourish. “Excuse me, miss, but I’m sure that Flim will be happy to tell you all about it, but we need to find our seats now. Dinner is about to begin.” Jacinda blushed when she realized how silly the boys must think she was. Her chagrin quickly faded at the boys’ ready smiles. She did not feel that they were making fun of her; they just found her enthusiasm cute.

Devon led his two new friends to an elegantly set table. Each place setting was set with the ship’s finest china. The ethereal face of a beautiful woman surrounded with a flowing pattern of Celtic knotwork adorned each plate. She represented the namesake of the ship, a beautiful Celtic queen of ancient England.

Devon remembered the manners that had been hammered into him at boarding school and pulled out the chair for Jacinda. She blushed at the unexpected courtesy, but took the seat. Flim flopped into the chair next to Jacinda and began fiddling with the silverware. As soon as Devon seated himself several adults joined them at the table. Devon rolled his eyes at their eagerness. He had seen it before. As the richest person onboard, there were always people nearby trying and be his friend, but he did not need that kind of friend. Despite their attempts to make small talk, Devon pointedly ignored them. Instead, he turned his attention to Flim and Jacinda.

“So, are you two looking forward to the drop to Forrestal as much as I am?” Flim and Jacinda nodded.

“I read that there are rumors of strange creatures there,” Jacinda said.

“They wouldn’t send us if they thought that there was some boogiemán down there,” Flim answered.

“I heard that too,” Devon added, “but I don’t believe it. They check out these places before they let these expeditions go down to the surface.”

Jacinda’s face lit up, “just imagine discovering a new creature, especially a smart one.”

Their conversation was interrupted by a nasty laugh. Jacinda immediately recognized the laugh. It belonged to Terry.

“So, rags, I see you made some friends. I guess a freak and a thief were the best you could do.” This comment caused Flim and Devon to turn toward Terry giving him angry looks.

“I’m no thief,” Flim shot back. Terry looked confused for a moment and then frowned. “I called you a freak, he is the thief,” Terry said, pointing at Devon.

Devon was taken aback, “What do you mean a thief? I’m not a thief.” He stared at Terry in confusion.

“Don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about, Blake. Everybody knows about your family,” Terry sneered as he berated Devon. “Just stay out of my way, thief!”

Terry turned and stalked away from the table. He was filled with anger. That had not gone as he had planned. He could not believe that the little ragamuffin had made friends with Devon Bake of all people. He silently vowed to get even with Devon for what the Blakes had done to his family.

Devon, Jacinda and Flim stared at each other in confusion. Jacinda broke the silence, “that boy has issues.”

The rest of the reception went very well. Several tasty dishes were served, each made with ingredients from Forrestal, the planet they were due to land on in a few days. Devon especially liked the chilled Taga fruit. According to the waiter it could only be prepared safely by chilling it. If it was not chilled to the right temperature it could make you very sick. The best dish, however, was the last. As dessert was about to be served, the lights dimmed. The gathered guests hushed as they waited for the surprise dessert to be revealed. Silently waiters pushed floatcarts to each table. An ethereal melody began to play over the loudspeakers. The lights then began to shift from white, to blue to green, giving the room a fairy mound atmosphere. The lights dimmed to near darkness and then with a flourish each of the waiters lifted the covers from the floatcarts. Each floatcart was topped by a mound of what looked like rich loam. The mounds were crowned by gently glowing mushrooms. The mushrooms were every color of the rainbow, filling the room with a soft rainbow glow.

Jacinda became very excited when she saw what was for dessert, “I have heard of these. They are called fairy mushrooms. The only place they grow is one of the moons of Jupiter.” The waiters served each person a mushroom then replaced the covers on the floatcarts. The more adventurous eaters, Jacinda among them, began eating the mushrooms immediately. Soon, almost everyone had sampled them.

Jacinda savored the rich sweet taste. The only thing she could compare the taste to was a cinnamon muffin, but the texture was totally different. It melted in her mouth, leaving behind a nutty, almond taste.

Seeing Jacinda's look of pleasure, Flim and Devon dug into their own mushrooms. They both smiled as the taste hit their tongues.

"Wow, I never knew mushrooms could taste so good," Jacinda said. "I'd love for my father to taste one of these. He loves mushrooms." She turned to the waiter, "Sir, where do you get these, are they expensive?"

The waiter looked down his nose at her, "they are very expensive, miss. Your dessert cost more than your ticket," he answered.

Jacinda froze. She could not believe that someone would pay that much for something to eat. It seemed so wasteful to her. Now she felt guilty for enjoying it so much.

Devon noticed her discomfort and realized how much the waiter's comment had stung her. "Don't worry, Jacinda. The foundation paid for everything. They also made a donation to a worthy cause for the same amount that the dinner cost. We always do that. It helps us live with ourselves."

Jacinda felt a little better, but just barely. "I guess that is ok, but it makes me feel guilty to be eating something that cost more than my dad makes in a year."

"If it makes you feel better, I can arrange another donation. How about a fund that will help other kids from your colony to make trips like this?"

Jacinda nearly burst into tears, "thank you, Devon." That was all she could get out. She could not imagine having so much money that she could change peoples' lives on a whim. She thanked the stars that Devon seemed to be the kind of person who did not take it lightly and tried to do good things with it.

"Hey, cheer up," Flim broke the tension. "We get to start getting ready for the expedition tomorrow morning. That is when the fun really starts."

Chapter 4

Devon and the others gathered at 8 am, ship's time. A hushed excitement could be felt running through the crowd of children. This would be the first chance they got to meet the guide who would lead them when they reached the planet's surface. The vid-blog about the trip had contained a short bio of their guide for this trip, Deke Jacobs.

Deke had become a hero ten years ago when he single-handedly rescued a group of marooned VIPs on one of the moons of Zenos Prime. The public vids only showed faint images of him as he was hustled into custody for debriefing after he returned the Ambassador's party to a backwoods outpost far from the civilized side of the moon. The glimpses the vids had captured were shadowy, but seemed to show a wiry, dark man with amber eyes. His face was sharp, just like his eyes. The look he had given the camera was fierce, causing many of the children, in the group gathered to meet him, no end of worry. Devon strained to see over the milling children, watching the door near the back of the room for any sign that Deke was coming.

Suddenly, a thump sounded at the door. The children immediately hushed. Slowly, almost frighteningly slow, the knob turned. Devon held his breath, waiting for the door to open. Slowly, ever so slowly, the door began to open. The room on the other side of the door was dark, so dark that no one could see if Deke was in the room watching them.

"What are you folks staring at," a gravelly voice said behind the students. They all nearly jumped as one, whirling around to see who was speaking. They laid eyes on a small, friendly looking man who was not much taller than most of the children.

"Well, he said, is there a show starting, or something?" He asked.

"Oh, get lost, mister, we are waiting for someone, someone important," Terry Jameson replied with a sneer. Terry's cronies laughed, pointing at the man.

“My guess would be,” the man said with a grin, “that I’d be the one you’re waiting for....but that’s just a guess.”

At those words all of the children turned to gawk at the stranger, wondering aloud if this could be the famous Deke Jacobs.

Terry sputtered in surprise as he wondered if he had made a mistake. “What, who? You can’t be Jacobs. My aunt looks tougher than you.”

The man laughed again, “tough is on the inside. It doesn’t always show, and anyway I bet your aunt is plenty tough to put up with you.”

All of the children, with the notable exception of Terry and his cronies, laughed heartily. Devon could not help but grin, but still feeling bad that Terry had been embarrassed. As mean as Terry seemed, Devon never enjoyed seeing people embarrassed. Devon looked over at Jacinda, who smiled guiltily when she saw that Devon did not approve.

Deke motioned for everyone to be quiet, “That’s enough, I’m sure the lad did not mean any offense.” The laughing dies, for the most part, but Terry still fumed. He eyed the Gustav brothers, but they simply shrugged as a group, unsure of what to do.

“Now, it’s time to get down to business. Each of your datapads has been updated with the latest information on Forrestal. It is primitive, but harmless for the most part.” Each of the students pulled out their datapads and began to follow along as Deke spoke.

“It’s a bit hotter than sol standard during the day, but it can get cold at night. Each of you will be issued a standard survival pack with a modular shelter and sleep roll. I will issue the insta-meals when we reach the landing zone.” Deke began to pace back and forth in front of the students, glancing at each to make sure they were paying attention.

“Now, this trip is serious business. While Forrestal has been completely surveyed, there are some ruins that have not been completely explored. We are not sure of their origin, but they are extensive...and fascinating. Our job during this trip is to study the ruins for 21 days and report what we find. In addition to our work at the ruins I will be teaching you some basic frontier skills.” Deke pressed a button on his WristVid. A pop-up appeared on the screen of each student’s datapads. The pop-up showed a map of the camp the group would be using.

“Our compound has already been dropped by an advance team. It is fully stocked and ready for us. We will be dropped about a day’s hike from the camp and we will use the hike to get acquainted. Before we make the drop to Forrestal each of you must choose a safety partner. If you can’t work that out yourselves by 3 pm, I’ll assign them. Everyone understand?”

A murmur of assent passed through the crowd of children. “Well then, then I will leave you alone until 4 pm. We will be having our first meal together in the forward mess at 6 pm. That is the cafeteria, for all you planet-huggers. Be there and I will finalize the assignments.”

Without another word, Deke motioned for the children to move out of his way. He strode through the crowd and exited through the door that had opened before he had appeared.

Chapter 5

Devon and Flim had logged their partnership right after the meeting that morning. Jacinda resigned herself to simply accepting whoever was assigned to her. After that the three friends set out to explore the ship. They started with the botanical decks, where the ship’s fresh air was produced. The decks were full of heavily forested tracks, fed by artificial light and a constant mist from the cavernous roof.

“I wonder if Forrestal is anything like this,” Devon asked. Flim shrugged.

“I think it is hotter than this,” Jacinda answered confidently. “Be sure that you have some tropical clothes when we get to the surface, or you will regret it.”

“Oh I packed plenty. We will need it,” Devon agreed.

Flim shrugged again. “I’ll be okay just wearing this.”

Jacinda and Devon were confused by his lack of concern. “Are you sure,” Devon asked.

“Trust me,” Flim answered, wearing a strange grin. Devon and Jacinda laughed at Flim, content to let him have his little secret.

The three friends played in the forest for a while longer, slaying imaginary dragons and discovering make-believe lost civilizations. After a while they began to get hungry. Flim was the first to mention it.

“It’s almost 1 o’clock. What should we do about lunch?”

“I can whistle something up,” Devon suggested. “I don’t feel like going all the way back to the dining deck.”

Jacinda clapped in excitement. “We could have a real picnic.” She had never had a chance to have one before, growing up in the mining colony. Even the botanical deck seemed huge to her.

“That sounds good. I’ll take care of it.” Devon tapped a code into his WristVid. “Lunchtime, Sammy,” he said into it. “Traditional twentieth century American picnic for three. Track this signal for delivery.” The WristVid beeped in assent. “It shouldn’t be too long now. How about a dip in that pond over there while we wait?”

“Zonk! What a great idea!” Flim exclaimed.

Jacinda shook her head. “Not me,” she hesitated. “I don’t have anything to change into. But you go ahead. I’ll just wait here.”

Devon felt bad that he had not thought of that. His own outfit could easily convert into a swim suit. Obviously, Jacinda could not afford anything that fancy.

“Oh, never mind. It was a dumb idea.” Devon waved the thought away. “Anyway, lunch will be here before we know it.”

“No, you go swimming,” Jacinda said. “I’ll be fine. I don’t like swimming anyway.” She hoped that the boys did not figure out that not having a swim suit was not the real reason she did not want to go. She did not know how to swim and it embarrassed her. She just had never had a chance to learn.

Devon hesitated, reluctant to leave Jacinda out of the fun. He peered over at Flim, who had somehow already changed into a snug swim suit. He looked back at Jacinda, who nodded and waved, letting him know that she did not mind.

“Last one in is a Jovian Puffball,” Flim shouted as he raced toward the pond. Casting one last glance at Jacinda, Devon followed with a whoop.

The boys ran full speed toward the pond. Devon, being a very strong runner, made up the distance between he and Flim. They reached the edge of the pond at the same time and leapt forward toward the water. They both landed with surprised grunts as they discovered that the pond was only a foot deep. Deep enough to keep them from hurting themselves, but not deep enough to hide their embarrassment.

Jacinda laughed out loud, her voice carrying all the way to the boys. “I give it a ten out of ten,” she called to Devon and Flim. All three began to laugh. Devon flopped on his back and pretended to do the backstroke. He merely succeeded in splashing water all over Flim. This only caused them all to laugh even harder.

Devon and Flim played in the shallow pool, chasing each other around and pushing each other over when they were caught. They were startled when they were suddenly splashed from behind. Jacinda had taken off her jumpsuit and wore only a short-sleeved unitard. She was splashing them furiously, emitting a high-pitched giggle.

“Take that, boys,” she shouted as she splashed them. Flim took cover but Devon strode imperiously toward the girl, causing her to scream in delight. “No, stop!”

“It’s a bit late for that,” Devon barked in mock anger. “You mess with us and you get wet too. Get ready for the big bath, Missy.”

Jacinda tried to dodge away from Devon but he leapt at her, catching her by the ankle. With a laugh she splashed down into the water, sending all three friends into another fit of laughter.

A shrill chirp interrupted their play. When they looked up, Sammy, Devon’s automatic luggage, was standing next to the pond. Devon jumped to his feet.

“Okay, Sammy, we’ll eat over there by that tree,” Devon instructed, pointing out a large, majestic Oak.

Jacinda stared, “That is Sammy? I thought you were calling your steward or something, not a walking suitcase.”

“I’ve had Sammy as long as I can remember. My parents had him specially made for me. The techs put in voice recognition and added some limited service routines to his programming.” Devon scratched his head self consciously, suddenly uncomfortable. “He is more like a robot than luggage. Sometimes he is the only one I have to talk to...so I probably talk to him too much.” Devon rubbed his hands together, embarrassed by his attachment to Sammy.

“It’s okay,” Jacinda answered, seeing how much it bothered Devon to admit his loneliness. “I just wish I had something so cool.”

The three friends watched Sammy trundle over to the tree and begin setting up the picnic. A compartment opened in his side and a red blanket popped out at the end of a slender mechanical arm. The arm unrolled the blanket and smoothed it out under the tree. Sammy then trundled a few feet from the blanket and set himself down. Once settled, Sammy opened, converting into a short table. The table was set with an assortment of delicious food. The smell of fried chicken filled the air. The table also held slices of sweet looking watermelon. Next to the melon were a plate of sandwiches and a bowl of macaroni salad.

The food seemed strange to Jacinda. On the small asteroid that her mining colony occupied, fresh food was nearly impossible to obtain. It was quite expensive and usually reserved for special occasions. Needless to say, Jacinda and her family usually settled for prepackaged foods brought to the colony on the various ships that delivered supplies and then picked up the ore processed by the colony. She had expected fancy food at the reception last night but was surprised that it was so readily available. She guessed that people as wealthy as Devon simply took this kind of luxury for granted. She did not fault Devon. It was simply what he was used to having.

Devon and Flim piled food on to plastic plates that had popped out of Sammy and then fell upon their lunch like hungry dogs. Jacinda hesitated for a moment longer then filled a plate as well. At that moment she made a promise to herself to simply enjoy the trip rather than worry about what it would be like to return to the mining colony where luxuries would be almost impossible to come by.

The food was delicious. They all sat eating, silent except for the occasional murmur of delight at the food. Flim seemed to like the chicken the most. He ate four pieces before Jacinda gave him one of those looks that girls give boys when they are acting badly. Flim took the hint and raided the sandwich plate next.

They finished the meal by each taking a slice of watermelon over to the pond and spitting the seeds as far into the water as they could. Jacinda found that she had a knack for it. She beat the boys handily and giggled as they tried to beat her longest spit.

“What’s wrong, boys? Are going to let a girl beat you?” Jacinda was enjoying the good natured ribbing. Flim and Devon redoubled their efforts. Unfortunately, the harder they tried, the more futile it became. Finally, they ran out of ammunition when they finished the last of the watermelon.

“Wow, that was fun,” Flim said, wiping juice from his chin.

“Thanks for lunch, Devon,” Jacinda said.

Devon nodded, “It was my pleasure.” He was happy to see that for the first time Jacinda did not seem self conscious about accepting his hospitality. He could not imagine how he would feel if their positions were reversed. Devon had always had everything he wanted, except for time with his parents. Jacinda, on the other hand, had little more than her family. He could not help feel that in many ways, she was much luckier than he was.

The meal acted like a sedative on the children. They lay back on the blanket near Sammy, who was no longer a table. There was no sign of the dishes or food anywhere. During the spitting contest, Sammy had cleared away everything and hidden it away somewhere, probably nestled somewhere inside.

The blanket felt so soft under their backs. All three friends fell into a gentle slumber, shaded from the artificial sunlight by the huge Oak. Sammy dutifully stood watch over the three as they napped. It was silly to think that Sammy could be protective of Devon. After all, he was only a piece of luggage, but anyone watching would have sworn that he was guarding the boy.

Chapter 6

“Beep, beep, beep,” Devon’s datapad chirped. It immediately woke Devon, Flim and Jacinda. Devon wiped his eyes, yawning.

“What time is it?” He asked no one in particular. The datapad chirped again.

“Check your pad. Did you set the alarm?” Flim said

Devon picked up the pad and scanned the readout.

“It’s 3 o’clock. The preliminary partner list has been posted.” Devon accessed the list. “It’s official Flim, we are partners.”

“Have they assigned me a partner yet?” Jacinda asked expectantly. Devon fiddled with the datapad. He frowned in concern.

“Yes, they did.”

“Well, who is it?” Jacinda asked, her voice filled with concern.

“You’re not going to like it.” Devon shook his head. Flim jumped to his feet and peered over Devon’s shoulder. He immediately began to snicker.

“Who is it?” Jacinda insisted, anger creeping into her voice.

Devon looked straight at Jacinda. “It could be worse.”

Jacinda finally had enough. She reached out and snatched the datapad out of Devon’s hand. Right there in black and white it sealed her fate.

Merrell Gustav, the datapad showed. She had been paired with one of Terry Jameson's toadies. He was the youngest, and the biggest.

"I guess it could be worse," Jacinda said in a resigned voice. It could have been worse. Merrell had been the only one of the brothers that had not been angry at being sprayed with fizzup. Also, at least she had not been paired with Terry. That would have been the worst outcome of all.

"Maybe you can ask Deke to switch you," Flim suggested. He had stopped snickering when he realized how much the news had upset Jacinda. Although he had not been there when it happened, Flim had heard about Jacinda's run-in with Terry and the Gustav Brothers. It had sounded really funny at the time, but he was not so sure anymore.

"I won't do that," Jacinda replied. "If I complain it will just give them something else to tease me about." Putting on a determined face, she nodded, as if making a silent agreement with herself and checked her unitard. It had dried during their nap so she began to put her coveralls back on.

"You are nicer than I am," Flim commented. "I would be screaming, if I were you." Devon and Jacinda both glanced over at the alien boy when he spoke. They did a double-take when they saw that he had already dressed. They wondered how he could have gotten dressed so quickly without them seeing him do it.

"What?" he asked when he saw their confusion.

Devon started to speak, "How in the world did....? Oh, never mind. We had better start getting ready for dinner tonight. We all need to review the information Mr. Jacobs uploaded to our datapads."

Flim immediately retrieved his datapad from the bag he usually wore over his shoulder and sat under the tree, reading the information on Forrestal. After dressing, Devon and Jacinda joined him under the tree. They wore serious faces as they studied, intent on learning everything they could about the alien planet they would soon be exploring.

Chapter 7

The ship's bell chimed six times with a metallic "BONG." All of the students waited at the entrance to the forward mess. During the coming meal, Deke Jacobs would finalize the planet-side partner assignments. Anyone who cared to check already knew their assignment, but a few held their breath, enjoying the anticipation of a surprise. As the ship's bell finished chiming the doors slid open. They were all greeted with the smell of grilling meat. The mess hall had been transformed into a wilderness fort. The ceiling panels had been programmed to look like a cloudy night sky. The staff was dressed as mountain men or Native Americans from Earth. What looked like a side of beef was roasting on a spit in the middle of the hall. Fiddle and fife music accompanied the sounds of the excited children. Deke stood in front of the fire, greeting everyone. He was dressed in buckskins and looked every inch the frontiersman.

"This is awesome," Flim shouted as they entered. Devon and Jacinda hurried to keep up with him. The staff was handing out large, wooden platters to all of the children. Everyone began piling food onto their plates. Hunks of meat were sliced right off the roasting beef and served to everyone who wanted some. Corn muffins, smoked turkey, roasted potatoes, and other delectables accompanied the beef. In addition various pies and pastries were provided for dessert and apple cider to wash it down.

The three friends found an empty table that looked like rough hewn wood and sat down to enjoy their meal.

“Wow, these people sure go all out,” Jacinda said.

“This is definitely one of the best cruises I have been on,” Devon commented.

“Good food,” Flim mumbled emphatically around bites of food.

“Can I join you?” asked a voice from behind them. They turned as one to see who belonged to the voice. Jacinda nearly choked when she realized who it was. Merrell Gustav stood there, looking at the three sheepishly.

Flim was the first to recover his composure. “Sure, I’m sure that Jacinda won’t mind. You two need to get to know each other better anyway.”

Merrell set down his plate and cup and sat down in an empty chair.

“Yes, now that we are partners.” Merrell looked straight at Jacinda. He blushed and then continued. “I hope it was okay that I signed us up as partners.”

“You did that?” Jacinda asked in surprise. “Why?”

“Well, I felt really bad about how we...I mean, how *I* acted. It was so mean.” Merrell nervously played with his food. “I wanted to make it up to you. I figured that if we were partners, I could keep anyone else from bothering you.”

Jacinda was flabbergasted, “I did not...but you...won’t you?” She could not get out a whole sentence because of her surprise. The boys sat there, watching her, especially Merrell. He looked as if his mortal fate depended on what she was going to say. She stopped trying to speak and took a moment to compose herself.

“Thank you, Merrell. It would be really cool to be your partner,” she finally answered.

“It was very sweet to do this for me. Maybe I was wrong about you.”

“You weren’t wrong, at least not then.” Merrell sighed with regret. “Terry and my brothers always give people a hard time. But, something about you made me think about what I

was doing. You are one of the first people that every stood up to us.” He looked up into Jacinda’s eyes, smiling when their eyes met. “It made Terry and the others plain mad, but it just showed me how ridiculous we were acting.”

Jacinda reached out, putting her hand on top of Merrell’s. ”It’s okay, you are sure making up for it now.” She paused for a moment, searching the room to see if she could see Terry. “Won’t your brothers be angry about this?”

“So what? They’ll get over it.”

Flim laughed. “I have seven brothers and eight sisters and none of them would ever forgive me for doing something like that.” Flim stood up and gave Merrell a mock salute. “I salute you.” Everyone at the table laughed at the exaggerated gesture.

Devon picked up his mug, lifting it toward his friends. “To a great expedition.” Jacinda, Flim, and even Merrell joined in the impromptu toast.

“And to lots of fun and mischief,” Flim added. This made everyone laugh again.

Their revelry was disturbed by the loud call of a horn. Everyone in the mess hall turned toward the sound.

Deke Jacobs stood in the doorway, holding a stubby bugle.

“That’s good people. That is exactly what you should do if you hear the bugle. Stop, look, and listen. Now that I have your attention, I’d like to make some announcements. First, we are on schedule to arrive in orbit above Forrestal at 0300 hours, the day after tomorrow. That is 3 am for all you planet huggers. We will be boarding the drop ship tomorrow night so that we can drop into the atmosphere as soon as we arrive. That gives you all day tomorrow to get any foolishness out of your system. As of 2100 hours tomorrow night, it is all serious business.”

A few murmurs of complaint ran through the crowd of children. Boarding the drop ship tomorrow night meant that they would have to sleep there until they departed.

“Second,” Deke’s loud voice cut the complaints short, “I know none of us is looking forward to sleeping on the drop ship, but that is probably the toughest thing you will have to endure on this trip, so I don’t want to hear any gripes.”

“Third,” he continued, “I was happy to see that almost everyone found a partner and made my job easier. Unfortunately, we had one member of our expedition drop out at the last minute, so we have an uneven number of explorers this trip. That means that one of you gets to be my partner.”

The murmurs began again, wondering who ended up having to partner with Deke. Deke silenced everyone with a whistle. .

“Congratulations, Mr. Jameson, you are my partner this trip down.”

On the opposite side of the mess hall Terry leapt to his feet, “I’m not your partner! I already have a partner!” He scanned the crowd, looking for someone. “There he is.” Terry pointed at Merrell.

Deke smiled widely. “I’m afraid you are incorrect. Mr. Gustav signed up to be Ms. Vasquez’s partner.”

Terry sputtered in surprise. “That’s impossible.” He turned toward Merrell. “Tell him, you idiot, it was a mistake.”

Merrell blushed as he suddenly became the center of attention.

“Sorry, Terry. I just figured that you would partner up with Link or Junior. I did sign up with Jacinda.”

“You are an idiot. Why would you sign up with Rags?”

“Stop calling her that,” Merrell barked at Terry with surprising anger.

“Whatever, just set it right.” Terry stared daggers at Merrell.

Deke stepped forward, interrupting Merrell before he could respond.

“I’m afraid the assignments are final, Mr. Jameson. You are my partner and that is the way it is going to stay.” Deke turned away from Terry, stopping any further argument.

“Enjoy tomorrow, people, but take the time to review the expedition rules in your datapads. I don’t want to have to remind anyone about how to behave once we are in the bush.” Just as he did in their previous meeting, Deke motioned for the crowd of children to part and left the room.

The children all watched the door for a moment, making sure that he was not coming back. Once it was certain he had left for good the room broke out into a party. Children ran everywhere, celebrating their last bit of freedom before they set out for their great adventure on Forrestal. The only one who did not seem to be celebrating was Terry Jameson. He sat near the edge of the mess hall, arms crossed and a scowl on his face.

After a few minutes, the room settled down. Small groups of children gathered together excitedly discussing tomorrow evening’s drop onto Forrestal. Terry watched Devon and his friends from his solitary perch in the corner. He stared at them in anger, as if trying to burn them with nothing more than his gaze. After almost an hour of being ignored, he shook his head in frustration and stalked out of the room. Nobody paid any attention as he left.

Chapter 8

Devon whistled for Sammy. The trunk ambled out of the cabin behind its master, with what almost seemed like excitement. Flim was waiting for him in the hallway with a big grin on his face.

“Let’s go, Devon. You and your dog are holding us up.” Flim had a small backpack over one shoulder.

“I’m coming, Flim.” Devon eyed Flim’s backpack with skepticism. “Is that all you are taking?”

“It’s all I need,” he replied with a wink.

They stepped onto the nearest pedway. Other groups of children streamed toward the docking level of the ship. Each had luggage of some sort. Most had large backpacks, but some, like Devon had automatic luggage.

“Are Merrell and Jacinda meeting us at the drop ship?” Devon asked.

“That is what she said yesterday.” Flim winked and grinned from ear to ear. “They spent the afternoon together getting to know each other.”

Devon had been busy almost all day with Blake Foundation business. There were lots of people who had wanted to talk to him before he departed for his trip down to Forrestal. He hated formalities, but considered them a necessary duty to his family and their business interests. He had been eager to spend more time with his friends, but could not until now.

“So, what did you do while I was busy? Devon asked.

“Oh, I entertained myself.”

“That didn’t include spying on Jacinda and Merrell, did it?”

“Just for a bit, but they are boring...” Flim suddenly realized he had probably said too much and blushed.

“It’s okay,” Devon reassured him, “I’m sure you were just making sure that Merrell wasn’t playing a joke on her by signing up as her partner.”

“He is actually a lot smarter than he looks. And he was being very nice to Jacinda. I think he likes her.” Flim grinned again at his last comment.

Devon and Flim shared a short laugh. The other children glanced at them, wondering what joke the two had shared.

“So, did you do anything else? That doesn’t sound like it took very long.”

Flim tried to suppress a smile, but failed. “Ah, let’s just say I helped somebody pack for the trip.”

“Flim, what did you do?” Devon shook his head, having a vision of Flim exchanging someone’s tropical underwear with wool long-johns.

“Nothing bad, just a bit of creative cuisine,” Flim said, acting hurt that he could be accused of misbehavior.

Devon stifled a look of disapproval. He hoped that Flim had not done anything mean. He thought he knew who had been the target of his friend’s shenanigans, but it was too late to worry about it now.

The pedway dropped them near a very large doorway. Jacinda and Merrell waited there. Merrell excitedly waved as soon as he saw them.

“Hi, guys. Are you ready for the drop to Forrestal?”

“Hi, Merrell,” Devon waved back. “I’m ready. How about you?” Devon looked from Merrell to Jacinda. She gave him a funny look, and then waved too.

“Oh, I’m all set,” Merrell said excitedly. “Jacinda and I spent all afternoon deciding what we should take. We have it all planned out. What to wear, what to eat, we thought of everything.”

Jacinda interrupted him. "I'm sure that Devon isn't that interested in our packing." She hurriedly changed the subject, seeming embarrassed. "So, Flim, is that all you are taking?"

"Like I told Devon, It's all I need." He winked at Jacinda who smiled meekly.

A high-pitched note rang out, rescuing them from an awkward silence.

"Everyone aboard," Deke's voice rang through the crowd of children gather near the door. "I assume that everyone followed the equipment list in your datapad. If you didn't, then it might be a long trip."

The children moved in a group through the door, which led into the hanger bay. The bay was dominated by a sleek looking craft that had a rounded bottom and stubby looking wings. A picture of an anvil held up by a tiny parachute over the words "*Going Down?*" covered the nose of the craft. Stewards were directing the children toward a hatch that had opened in the bottom of the drop ship. Each person's luggage was taken and stowed in another hatch as they boarded.

"Get ready to be stowed," Devon told Sammy. Several people looked at him as if he were being silly. They did not realize that his luggage followed his verbal commands. This made Flim smile.

"Can he roll over too?"

"Sure, but he doesn't fetch very well." All four of the friends laughed. They waited their turn to board. Once on board, the crew seated them, everyone in a seat next to their partner.

One female crewmember, to which all the others were deferring, motioned for Devon and Flim to come to the front of the drop ship. She motioned for them to take the very front row. Jacinda and Merrell were then seated directly across the aisle from them.

"I hope these are satisfactory, Mr. Blake," she asked.

He nodded, looking uncomfortable with the extra attention. Devon scanned his surroundings. He had never been on a drop ship before, but had read enough to recognize most of the important differences between this ship and a regular spaceship. The seats were comfortably padded and large enough for adults, offering plenty of room for the children. A large, rigid safety harness was positioned above each seat. Before the actual drop, these harnesses would be lowered over each passenger and locked into place. These were designed to keep each passenger safe during the rough, atmospheric entry for which the ship was designed. Everything else on board seemed to have been designed to be solid. Devon knew that this was necessary because of the stress that dropping into an atmosphere put on the ship. Drops could be very rough, depending on the speed of the descent and the conditions in the atmosphere.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Blake. She is a good ship,” the crew chief assured him, as if she could read his mind. “We have done hundreds of these and nothing has gone wrong. You’ll be asleep anyway.”

“What do you mean, asleep? Devon asked.

“We are equipped with sleep-wave generators. All of you will be sleeping like babies during the descent. The flight crew will be asleep as well. The pilots will be the only ones awake during the drop. It makes it easier if they don’t have to worry about the passengers.”

“I thought that we would get to see the entry.” Devon’s face showed disappointment. “It sounded like it was going to be like the biggest roller-coaster ride ever.”

“It’s a lot rougher than any roller-coaster. I don’t even like drops, but it is part of the job.”

“Still, I wish I could be awake.”

“I’m sorry Mr. Blake. Those are the rules.” The crew chief patted Devon on the shoulder. The firm hand helped reassure him.

After a few more minutes all of the children were seated and their gear stowed in the cargo hold beneath them. The soon-to-be explorers chatted quietly with their partners, wondering what Forrestal would be like. Their conversations were interrupted by a voice over the intercom.

“Okay, people, we are scheduled to drop into Forrestal’s atmosphere in approximately five and a half hours.” Everyone immediately recognized Deke’s voice.

“This is a routine drop, so no need to worry. Just to make it easier on everyone, you will all be asleep for the drop.” A few protests could be heard throughout the passenger compartment.

“That is the way it is, people. So, no need to complain. The crew will engage the sleep-wave generators at 2200 hours, so take care of any *final* business quickly, if you know what I mean.” A wave of giggles ran through the seated children. Everyone knew what he meant. A handful of students got up from their seats and moved toward the bathrooms in the rear of the craft.

“So, buddy, you ready for the big fall?” Flim asked Devon.

“You bet. I just wish we could be awake.”

“Not me,” Flim answered. “I don’t need that kind of excitement in my life.” Flim leaned across the aisle and tapped Jacinda on the shoulder. “What about you guys?”

“Sure, I love this stuff.” Jacinda nodded as she spoke. “We had a zero gravity elevator in our colony that is a lot like this. Every once in a while they would let all of us kids ride it, but only on special occasions.”

Merrell looked less sure, his face filled with worry. “I really don’t like heights very much. I’m glad I will be asleep.”

Their conversation was interrupted by a loud voice. “It figures that you’re scared. Is that why you signed up to have a girl as a partner? So you could look tough by comparison?” Terry Jameson stood in the aisle behind their row. There was no way to tell how long he had been listening.

“Go away, Terry! Go bother somebody else.” Merrell was red-faced with anger.

“Shut up Merrell. Nobody cares what you think, least of all me.”

Jacinda put her hand on Merrell’s shoulder, keeping him from standing up and confronting Terry.

“Mr. Jameson, why are you out of your seat?” Deke’s voice boomed loudly in the enclosed cabin.

Terry whirled to find Deke Jacobs standing right behind him.

“I was chatting with some friends,” he answered.

“That’s enough jawin’. If you’ve taken care of your business, get back to your seat. The sleep-wave generators turn on in fifteen minutes.” Deke’s look left no room for argument. Terry turned back for a moment and glared at the four friends then headed back toward his seat. Deke moved to the side, letting him pass, but there was no sign of backing down by either party.

Deke waited for another fifteen minutes and then motioned for silence. Satisfied that everyone had taken their seats, Deke addressed the children.

“We are going to lower your harnesses and engage the sleep-wave generators momentarily. When you wake up we should be in the atmosphere over our landing zone. From there it should be smooth sailing. Any questions?”

He waited for a few moments before continuing. “Okay, then let’s get this show on the road.” Deke walked back to his seat next to Terry and sat down with a sigh.

The crew made a quick pass through the cabin making sure that all personal items had been stowed. The crew chief signaled the pilots that everything was ready. With a soft whir, the safety harnesses slowly descended from the ceiling. As they neared the seats a red scanning laser ran over each child, measuring each for a perfect fit of the harness. The safety harnesses locked into place with a thunk, molding themselves to their occupant. There was hushed silence for a moment and then the cabin was filled with a low frequency hum. The sleep generators located in each harnesses began to hum deeply. The low rumble could be felt deep inside, causing everyone’s stomachs to flutter for a moment. Then, everyone strapped in their seats was enfolded in deep sleep.

Sure that everyone was asleep; the crew busied themselves with a few last-minute tasks and then strapped themselves into their own harnesses. They soon joined the students in deep sleep. The pilots stayed awake, monitoring the progress of the *Boadicea*, ready to get underway as soon as they reached orbit above Forrestal.

Chapter 9

A piercing whistle jarred Devon from a deep sleep. Wind rushed by his face, making it difficult to gain his bearings. The ship shook violently, making it even more difficult to focus. After a few moments, he realized that the whistling was coming from wind whipping through the cabin of the drop ship. He immediately knew something bad had happened.

Devon forced his head to the side to check on his friends. Flim looked at him in terror, his eyes pleading. From where he sat, he could not tell if Jacinda and Merrell were awake.

Devon could not imagine anyone sleeping through the chaos and noise, but if their sleep-wave generators were still operating then they could still be asleep.

The ship bucked again, clacking Devon's teeth together. From his place in the front row, he could not see how the rest of the expedition was faring, but if everyone else was being thrown around like him, he felt sorry for them. With effort Devon turned his head the other way, trying to glimpse something out of the small window. Blue sky and clouds raced by at an amazing rate.

The shaking increased and the whistling of the wind was accompanied by a new sound. The sound of roaring engines rumbled under the shrill wind, but it did not sound right. The engines stuttered, not the constant, reassuring howl Devon expected. A claxon rang out through the ship, even louder than the engines and the wind. From the corner of his eye, he caught the flash of green through the window.

Before what that meant could register, the ship slammed to a stop. For a moment there was utter silence, then came the sound of moans and frightened voices. The cabin lights flickered for a moment and then went out. Devon could see Jacinda and Merrell immediately stirring. He struggled with the safety harness for a moment.

"What are you doing," Flim asked his voice on the edge of tears.

"I have to check to see if anyone is hurt," Devon responded, his voice more confident than he felt.

"Won't the crew do that?"

Devon hesitated for a moment. If they were okay, the crew would already be hard at work helping everyone. Suddenly the harnesses relaxed in unison and rose up, freeing the passengers.

“I’m just going to go check to see if I can help out.” He winced in pain as he slipped around Flim and into the aisle. His shoulder was sore, but he could live with it. With the cabin lights off, the only light came from the small windows next to each row of seats. To make things even more difficult, dirt swirled through the air of the cabin from several broken windows. Devon checked the door to the crew cabin but it did not budge. It must be locked from the other side. He banged on it but there was no answer. He thought for a moment and then decided that he needed some help and started toward the rear of the ship.

He checked everyone as he made his way back. Everyone was confused and upset, but nobody seemed seriously hurt. Near the rear of the ship he finally found Deke. Deke was sitting in the window seat, still seemingly asleep. He had a large, purple welt on his forehead and the window next to him was cracked. Devon realized that Deke’s head must have hit the window during the crash. Terry was seated next to Deke, but just sat there staring at nothing. Leaning close to Deke, over Terry, Devon could tell that the unconscious man was still breathing. Suddenly Devon felt someone tugging at his jumpsuit. He realized that Terry had grabbed him.

“Please help me! I can’t die young. I’m too important. My parents couldn’t handle it. I’m an only child.”

Devon took Terry by the shoulders reassuring him.

“It’s okay Terry, don’t panic. I’m sure everything will be fine.” Devon hoped he sounded more confident than he felt. He was still very concerned that no one had emerged from the crew cabin at the front of the ship.

“No, it’s not gonna be okay!” Terry shouted. “We’re all dead!”

The children around Terry listened as he began to lose it. As he continued, the others looked on the verge of panic as well.

Devon freed himself from Terry's grip and tightened his grip on Terry's shoulders. He looked angrily into his eyes and spoke, a threat in his voice.

"Terry, you need to stop this. You are scaring the others. If you don't stop, I'll pop you one. I swear it."

Devon's anger snapped Terry out of his panic. He pushed Devon away, an angry look on his face. "Get your hands off me," he growled at Devon.

"Now, that's the nasty attitude I have come to expect."

"Oh, shut up and get away from me."

Devon gave Terry another angry look. "I need to check on Mr. Jacobs. I can't get anyone in the crew cabin to respond and I can't get the door open. Mr. Jacobs is the only other adult on board."

"What? The crew is gone?" Panic crept back into Terry's voice.

Devon showed Terry his fist. "Remember what I said about scaring the others. Now, go sit in my seat and I will see if I can wake up Mr. Jacobs."

Terry rolled his eyes, but got up from his seat. He pushed past Devon and headed toward the front of the ship. Devon slipped into Terry's now vacant seat and began to check Deke's vital signs. Part of his training for this trip had included basic first aid, but he could not find any injuries on Deke, other than the bump on his head. Devon reached over and gently prodded Deke. The unconscious man stirred, moaning in pain.

Devon prodded him again.

"Mr. Jacobs, we need your help," he said, trying to wake Deke.

Deke's eyes fluttered open. He turned to Devon, looking at him in confusion.

"What happened?"

“I think we crashed”

Deke reached up to feel his head. He winced in pain when he felt the bump. “I must have hit my head. Where is the crew?”

“I’m not sure if they made it,” he whispered. “I tried to get into the crew cabin, but the door won’t open.”

Deke rubbed his head again, trying to gather his wits.

“I had better check it out. Is anyone else hurt?” Deke asked, wearing a worried expression.

“I don’t know. You were the first one I really checked on.”

Deke unbuckled his seat belt and nearly swooned as he tried to stand up.

“Whoa, Mr. Jacobs. I don’t know if you should try to get up yet.

“Maybe you’re right, but we need to check on the crew. We need to find out if they were able to send a distress call.”

Deke sat silently for a moment, gingerly probing the bump on his head.

“Devon, I need you to do some things for me. First, I need you to check the emergency exit and see if it is blocked. We may need to get out that way if there is a problem.”

He paused for a moment, blinking slowly.

“Second, I need you to keep an eye on the other kids. You are the only one who managed to keep their head. If I get worse, I need you to keep everyone calm. I’m betting that the *Boadicea* is already mounting a rescue operation. It is just a matter of time before they come for us. We need to sit tight and not panic.”

Devon nodded, “I can handle that. How long do you think it will be before they come?”

“I can’t be sure. It shouldn’t be more than a day or two. We will need water and food in the meantime. There should be plenty in the galley at the front of the ship. If we can’t get that door open we may have to look elsewhere. That means we have to get to the baggage compartment in the belly of the ship.”

“So, what should I do now?”

Deke looked thoughtful for a moment.

“See if you can find the hatch that leads below deck.” He closed his eyes and moaned. His chin fell to his chest, unconscious.

Devon gently prodded Deke. “Mr. Jacobs, what do I do after that? Mr. Jacobs?”

Devon turned with a sigh. The only thing he knew was that he had to check the emergency exit and then find the hatch that led to the cargo compartment. Before the drop the crew had pointed out the emergency exits. One of them was just down the aisle. He walked over to the row with the emergency exit as casually as he could.

“Excuse me,” Devon said as he leaned over the students sitting in that row. “How are you feeling? Any injuries to report? Mr. Jacobs asked me to check around.” He tried to keep the attention of the children as he checked out the emergency exit. Everything appeared in order and the door did not appear to be blocked from the outside.

Satisfied that they could use that exit if necessary, Devon excused himself. He then began moving back toward the front of the ship, eyes focused downward, searching for anything that might be a hatch. He noticed a seam in the carpeting. Devon kneeled down, trying to peel back the carpet. It took him a moment, but he found a recessed release switch at the edge of the aisle. The children sitting in the nearby seats watched him intently. Devon gave them friendly nod.

“Just running an errand for Mr. Jacobs, nothing to worry about.”

The children relaxed visibly, reassured by his casual attitude. Pulling the switch, Devon stood back as a section of the floor slid back. He could see a flashing yellow light below, illuminating a metal ladder leading below. Devon peered into the opening, trying to see if this was the cargo compartment. All he could see was a narrow, passage ending with what looked like an airtight door.

Devon knew that he had to check to see where this led. He assumed that it was the cargo compartment, but it could just be a service hatch. He looked up at the watching children and smiled again.

“I’ll be right back.” He swung down on to the ladder and climbed to the bottom. The yellow light was harsh and its slow flashing made it difficult to make out many details but he could see enough to move around. It only took a few steps to reach the door. He examined it carefully, but could not find any indication of where it might lead. Still determined to find the cargo compartment, Devon took a deep breath and levered open the latch on the door. There was a short hiss as the pressure equalized and then the door swung inward.

Dust wafted in from the compartment beyond, making it hard to see inside. Devon waited for a moment for the dust to settle and then peered inside. Success! He had found the cargo compartment. Racks of baggage filled the compartment in rows. Several had broken free from the deck in the crash and spilled some of the children’s bags into a large pile, blocking part of the floor.

He climbed over the mound of spilled luggage to see where the dust could be coming from. He was able to wriggle through to the row of racks against the far right-hand wall of the compartment. The source of all the dust became apparent as he neared the far wall. There was a

large tear in the side of the ship. The jagged edge of a large boulder protruded into the cargo compartment; the obvious cause of the large gash in the side of the ship. The gash was very large, large enough, for a person to crawl through with no trouble at all. Dirt and debris had spilled in through the gash, but there did not appear to be any other damage. Unfortunately, that gash meant that this ship would probably never be space-worthy again.

After a quick look around he did not find anything that looked like it might have supplies in it. He wondered if they would be marked in some way to make it easier to find them. Devon thought he had better go check with Mr. Jacobs. As the leader of the expedition, he obviously would have a better idea of what kind of supplies might be down here.

After scrambling back over the mound of luggage, Devon began climbing back up the ladder into the main cabin. Several faces peered down at him. He recognized them as Flim, Jacinda, and Merrell.

“What are you doing?” Merrell asked.

“Just checking on something for Mr. Jacobs.”

Flim snorted a laugh through his nose as Devon climbed up through the hatch. “Deke asked for *your* help?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, he did. He hit his head and isn’t feeling well. I think he passed out.”

“Oh, no,” Jacinda’s breath caught in her throat. “We had better help him. Everyone at the colony is taught to be a medic, just in case there is an accident. That’s because we practically live inside the mine. I’ll go check him out.” She immediately jumped up and hurried toward Deke’s seat. Merrell followed her a moment later, like a lumbering shadow.

“You guys shouldn’t be out of your seats,” Devon brushed the dirt off his coveralls as he gave Flim a stern look.

“With Terry sitting in your seat? Not likely. It didn’t take him two minutes to start bad-mouthing Deke and the crew. He said that he would have them all fired.”

Devon gave Flim a pained look. “He may not get the chance.”

Flim stared in confusion at Devon for a moment and then blanched. “Oh, dear. You think it’s that bad.”

Devon pulled Flim close. “It could be, but we can’t let anyone else know. We have to keep the others calm. If everyone panics surviving this gets ten times harder.”

“So, what do we do if people start asking questions?”

“We just gotta hope Mr. Jacobs wakes up before then.” Devon shook his head, a worried expression on his face.

Devon’s moment of reflection was disturbed by someone’s approach.

“What did you find, Devon?”

Devon smiled in relief when he saw that it was Deke who was speaking. The man swayed a bit unsteadily, but seemed otherwise okay.

“The emergency exit I checked out looked fine; no blockage. I also found the cargo compartment. Some of the luggage has broken loose and there is a big gash in the side of the compartment, but that looks like about it.”

“Good, good.” Deke nodded his head vigorously and then had to catch himself on the nearest seat. His eyes spun, as if he were dizzy. “I guess I am not as well as I thought.”

Jacinda came up behind Deke and took his hand. “You had better sit down, Mr. Jacobs. We’ll take you up to our seats.” She pulled on Deke’s hand, leading him up the aisle like a

protective mother hen. As they passed, children asked Deke if everything would be alright. He reassured them with a slow nod and a confident smile.

Devon sealed the hatch in the floor and followed the others a moment later.

It only took a few moments for them to reach the front row, but Deke looked very much worse for wear. Sweat had broken out on Deke's forehead and he was breathing heavily. Jacinda and Merrell helped him sit down carefully, but he still winced.

"Easy, kids, I'm a bit fragile at the moment." He managed a weak smile, but even that soon faded.

Terry looked over from across the aisle, a sneer on his face. "I thought this guy was supposed to be tough. He doesn't seem it to me." He sniffed, grinning.

Jacinda turned on him and snapped, "Okay, Terry, how about I smack you in the head and see how tough you are."

"Yeah, right," he said with a laugh.

Jacinda drew in a deep breath, ready to give Terry a fierce tongue-lashing. Fortunately for Terry, Merrell stepped between the two. He loomed over Terry, a burly giant in the cramped aisle. "How about *I* smack you in the head, Terry?"

Terry's face turned pale. "You wouldn't dare."

"I've wanted to do it for four years, ever since I met you. Want to test me?"

Terry's face fell, filled with fear. After a moment the fear disappeared, replaced with a look of Bravado. "Okay, I have been friends with you and your brothers for a long time, so I'll let this go this time. But just this time."

Terry slipped past Merrell and rushed down the aisle toward his old seat.

Merrell watched Terry hurry away and smiled. “Thanks for understanding, Terry.” He turned to the others, a huge grin on his face. “Wow, did that feel good.”

The others smiled back. Flim slapped him on the back. “Well, I guess you aren’t the slack-jawed buffoon I thought you were. Good show.”

Jacinda glared at Flim, but the alien boy just grinned. She just did not understand boys. She did not realize that any sign of weakness was simply an opportunity to tease your friend about it.

“Thanks Pal.” Merrell returned Flim’s slap on the back, perhaps a little hard, as Flim nearly fell over but they exchanged friendly grins and then turned back to Deke.

Their guide was barely conscious. He seemed to be drifting in and out; barely able to function when he came out of his fog. His eyes fluttered open for a moment and he looked at Devon and his friends.

“Pretty soon the others will realize how long it has been since they ate or drank anything. I need you people to see if you can gather all of the food and drinks up here so we can hand them out a little at a time. I’m not sure how long we will be down here, but I wouldn’t be good if we went through our supplies too quickly.” He paused for a moment, trying to clear his head.

“The Galley is right in front of us, so I want you, Merrell, to try and get that door open. If you can’t, that is no problem. There should be supplies stashed down in the cargo compartment. If you can’t get into the galley then I want two of you to go down below and gather as much as you can. You can tell which cases have the supplies because...” Deke swooned, his eyes closing and his head dropping to his chest.

Devon and the others looked at each other. Jacinda nodded her head, looking like she knew exactly what to do.

“You heard him, Merrell. See if you can get that door open.” Merrell responded immediately to the authority in her voice. He motioned for Devon to stand aside from the door leading to the crew compartment and then grabbed the handle. His face twisted with effort as he tried to turn the handle. It did not budge at first. Gritting his teeth, Merrell redoubled his efforts. His face turning red, he pulled on the handle. It slowly began to shift. He could feel the bolt holding it closed begin to slide. With one final grunt, he forced the handle to turn the rest of the way. They all heard the bolt click open but the door still refused to open. Something else must be blocking it. Merrell set his shoulder again and tried one final time to push the door open, but it still would not move.

“I guess we need to go down below and see if we can find any supplies.” Merrell sighed as he spoke.

“Well, what are we waiting for?” Jacinda added, smiling at Merrell.

As a group, the four friends made their way back toward the hatch that led below. Devon opened it much more easily this time. He climbed down the ladder, followed by Flim, Jacinda, and Merrell. The cargo compartment was exactly as he left it.

Devon wondered where they should look first. Each of the students had been given a small amount of emergency rations to include in their gear, but he knew that it would be better if they could find a larger amount of food and water all together. That way they would not have to go through everyone’s personal items.

Jacinda looked at the pile of spilled luggage and nodded. “Okay, I suggest we try to find any extra supplies that were included for the expedition. From what Mr. Jacobs said, the boxes with the supplies are marked somehow. Try to find cases with the same markings. I’ll bet those are the supplies. Each of us needs to take one part of the cargo to check. Let everyone else

know if you find anything.” Her suggestions echoed Devon’s own thoughts and he nodded in agreement.

Each of them moved toward a different corner of the cargo compartment. Flim and Devon had to scramble over the pile of luggage to get to their corners. Devon watched Flim gawk as he passed the gash in the side of the ship.

Nearly ten minutes of fruitless searching passed before Flim cried out.

“I think I found something.” The others started toward his voice. Devon was the first to reach Flim. The alien boy was grinning widely and pointing to a large stack of stout looking travel cases. Each case had the shipping line’s logo stenciled on the side along with the words *Emergency Supplies*.

Flim smiled, “I could be wrong, but I think these may be it.”

Devon laughed at Flim’s joke just as Merrell and Jacinda reached the pair.

Jacinda examined the cases carefully, a serious look on her face. “Excellent work, Flim.” She immediately turned to Merrell. “How heavy do you think these are?”

“I don’t know,” he replied. “Let’s open one up and see what is in it before we start moving them all up the ladder.”

“Good thinking”

Flim and Devon were suddenly feeling out of place. Jacinda had taken charge so naturally that they had not even realized it. It seemed that she and Merrell worked very well as a team. Devon and Flim could not help but feel a little left out.

Sensing their discomfort, Merrell turned to Devon and Flim. “What do you think, guys?”

The two nodded in agreement and then began to wrestle one of the cases out of the rack onto the floor. It hit the floor with a thump, but did not seem too heavy. Devon flipped open the

old-style latches on the case and raised the lid. All sorts of supplies were packed inside. He could see food concentrates, a large first aid kit, and two containers of water. The others crowded around behind him, examining their prize.

Jacinda reached out and closed the lid of the case. “Okay, no time to waste. Let’s start getting these up to the top deck. They look light enough for each pair of us to handle one.”

They all nodded as Devon fastened the latches on the case they had examined. He scooted it toward Merrell and Jacinda who lifted it up and turned back toward the ladder. Devon and Flim retrieved another case and followed the others. It took quite a bit of effort to drag the cases over the pile of luggage, but they managed. By the time Devon and Flim got their case to the ladder leading up Merrell and Jacinda were still pondering the best way to get the case up the ladder.

Finally, Jacinda climbed the ladder and then Merrell picked up the case over his head with one end toward the open hatch. Jacinda reached down and grabbed the handle of the case and was able to lift it slightly. Merrell immediately began climbing the ladder while pushing the hanging end of the case with his shoulder. After a few moments the two were able to lever the case through the hatch and into the passenger compartment.

Devon looked over at Flim. “I don’t think either of us are big enough the pull that off.”

“Yup,” Flim nodded in agreement.

Just then Jacinda’s head appeared through the hatch. She was smiling widely.

“Let’s go, you two.”

“Ah, I think we need some help.”

Her smile grew even wider. “As long as you admit you need help. That is the important thing.” There was no trace of meanness in her voice, only good natured teasing.

Merrell clambered back down the ladder. Once at the bottom he motioned for Devon to climb up.

“After you.”

Devon scurried up the ladder and through the hatch. He reached down, just as Jacinda had and helped Merrell bring this case up as well. Merrell followed the case through the hatch. Flim was right behind him. The four friends carried the cases to the front of the ship and set them on their empty seats.

Jacinda paused. “Let me check on Mr. Jacobs before we go back down for more supplies.”

She bent over Deke, who was still unconscious, and began to check him over.

“He doesn’t seem to be too badly injured, but I can’t be sure.” She shook him lightly one last time. He moaned as his eyes fluttered open. All four friends let out a sigh of relief.

Deke gave them a weak smile. “I’m back now. How long was I out this time?”

Devon began to speak, but Jacinda spoke up before he could begin.

“You were out for about thirty minutes. We found the supplies in the cargo hold.”

Deke nodded, obviously pleased. “Good work. Are they easy to get to?”

“They are a little tough. We have to drag them over a pile of luggage, but other than that, it is a snap. We even brought up two cases already.”

“Excellent work Jacinda.”

Flim groaned loudly. Jacinda looked sheepish for a moment.

“It wasn’t just me Mr. Jacobs. We all helped, especially Merrell. I guess I just took charge.”

“You can say that again.” Flim laughed.

Jacinda blushed, suddenly aware that her earlier assertiveness may have been a little overpowering for the others.

“I didn’t mean anything by it.”

Devon put his hand on her shoulder reassuringly. “It’s no big deal, Jacinda. We’ll let you know when you officially get *bossy*.”

Everyone, including Jacinda, laughed at that.

“You have all done good work,” Deke added. “I need you to do something else for me. You mentioned that there was a hole in the side of the ship. Is it big enough for you to go through easily?”

They all nodded.

“Good, then I need the four of you to go and check out the ship from the outside. We need to make sure that it is not in any more danger. Also, we need to see if we can access the cockpit from the outside. The crew may be trapped in there and might need help. While you are out there I also want you to check out the nearby area. Make sure you don’t go too far, but I’d like to get a general lay of the land. You four are going to have to be my eyes and ears until I feel up to going outside. Any questions?”

Flim raised his hand. “Deke, what about the wildlife? What if there are any of those bowzers out there? They mentioned them in the briefing on our datapads.” Flim’s mention of the bowzers made everyone think about the picture that had accompanied their description in the briefing materials. Bowzers were big, four-legged predators covered in bristly black fur. They looked very similar to Earth wolves, but were quite a bit bigger. They also had jaws more akin to a crocodile than a wolf. All in all, they were about 250 pounds of pure mean.

“Very good, Flim. I’m glad you did your homework. However, the briefing also mentioned that the bowzers are strictly nocturnal. As long as it is light outside, you should be fine.”

The four friends nodded in relief.

“What I want you to do is see if there is any other damage to the ship. Also, check to see if there is any high ground nearby. We might be able to set up the emergency transponder there. While you are out there I want you all to stick together. Never be out of touch with your partner. Make sure you all have your WristVids as well. We should have short-range communication using those. Don’t wander too far from the ship, though. I want each of you to take a pack with food and water, just in case.”

There was silence for a moment and then Devon stepped forward. “I think I speak for all of us when I say that leaving the ship is a bit scary. I know the bowzers don’t come out during the day, but it still makes me nervous.”

“I can understand that, Devon, but I need you to do this. I can’t explain it right now, but this is really important. All I can do is to ask each of you to trust me.”

The four friends slowly nodded.

“Thank you, now please hurry. You have to get back before night fall. Remember the bowzers.”

Chapter 10

Captain Leiber stood on the Bridge of the *Boadicea* and studied the report the watch officer had just handed him. He shook his head in dismay. Rubbing his chin, he scanned all of the available flight data received from the drop ship just before they lost contact. Everything had

been going as planned until the drop ship entered the ionosphere of the planet. The flight data became erratic and then ended completely.

Something had caused the ionosphere to go haywire and the drop ship had been in the unfortunate position of traveling through it just at the wrong moment. Despite their best efforts, the crew of the *Boadicea* still could not get their sensors to penetrate the suddenly opaque ionosphere. It was as if all of the electromagnetic interference in the atmosphere had suddenly turned solid, cutting off all contact with anything inside.

The captain mentioned for Ensign Kepler. The fresh-faced young man practically leaped to his feet and hurried over from his duty station.

"Mr. Kepler, have you found in any previous reports of an incident such as this in any of our databases?"

Kepler shook his head. "No, sir. I have checked and cross-referenced all Space Safety Board reports and have not found anything that resembles this atmospheric condition...Sir."

The final word was added with a little too much emphasis. Kepler frowned nervously as soon as he realized his mistake. He wanted so much to make a good impression on his new commander.

"Good, Mr. Kepler. Have you checked the science databases as well?"

"I have the computer running a high granularity search right now. An answer to the search query should be available within thirty minutes."

Anger flashed in the captain's eyes for a moment. "Mr. Kepler I need those results sooner. Those children may not be able to afford thirty minutes."

"Aye, Aye, Captain. I'll see if I can adjust the parameters of the search. It would help if I could task more of the computer core to the search."

The captain nodded. "I'll send orders to Chief Baker to retask the core." He keyed his WristVid. The sharp face of Chief Baker appeared.

"Aye, Cap, what'cha need?"

The captain would not have tolerated such familiarity from any other crew member, but the Chief's years of service to the commercial fleet had earned him leeway.

"I need you to retask as much of the computer core for Ensign Kepler as you can."

"Aye, I can do that. I'll just..." The captain politely interrupted Chief Baker.

"I don't need the details. Just take care of it."

"Aye Cap." Chief Baker's face disappeared from the captain's WristVid.

Ensign Kepler activated the new bandwidth with a few keystrokes. After only a moment he nodded.

"Captain, using the new core resources the estimated completion time for the search is six minutes."

"Very good, Ensign."

Even this delay concerned the captain. Every minute that passed could mean danger for the children aboard the drop ship. Until the crew could figure out what had happened to the atmosphere, their hands were tied. The drop ship had been equipped with plenty of supplies, so if they landed normally than they would be fine until this could all be sorted out. On the other hand, if the change in the ionosphere had damaged the drop ship, any rescue ship would probably be damaged as well. The key was figuring out what had caused this and how to fix it.

The captain said a silent prayer that the children would be safe until his crew could discover the answer. He had never been good at waiting, so he decided to do what he could until they could send a rescue party.

“Commander Saberhagen!” The captain bellowed for his second in command. A whippet thin man wearing an earnest expression hurried forward.

“Yes, sir”

“Mr. Saberhagen, I want you to personally oversee the preparation of a rescue mission for the missing drop ship. I would suggest you use the time until we know more to prepare a ship for any eventuality.”

Saberhagen executed a crisp salute. “Aye, aye, Captain. Right away.” Without another word he turned on his heels and walked briskly out of the room.

The captain trusted his second in command with the task. He knew that Commander Saberhagen had four children of his own, and knew that right now he was imagining how he would feel if it were his children in danger.

He wished he trusted the crew of the drop ship as much. As a part of the commercial fleet, the *Boadicea* was under command of the merchant arm of the Galactic Navy. This included the command crew and all of the key engineering and security positions on the ship. The rest of the crew was not part of the navy. The drop ship was not part of the commercial fleet, but the rescue ship would be. Often a delicate balance had to be maintained between the naval and civilian parts of the crew. However, in emergency situations, naval authority was unquestioned.

The captain had no children of his own, but he often saw his passengers as his children, for as long as they were on his ship. The thought of losing 35 of his *children* chilled him to the bone. It was not going to happen on his watch, if he had anything to say about it.

Chapter 11

The sun shown brightly, a burning jewel set in the blue silk of the midday sky. No clouds obscured the unbroken blue. The deep green of the surrounding forest was a great contrast to the vivid blue set above it.

Devon and Flim scrambled up the hill followed closely by Jacinda and Merrell. From this vantage point they could see the whole drop ship.

“Look at that,” Devon said as he gawked at the sight before him. All four friends stared in amazement at the ship. It had plowed a furrow through the forest for as far as they could see. The drop ship had come to rest against the side of a tall hill. They could not even see the front end of the ship. It was either deeply buried in the hill or completely gone. Either way, it did not look promising for the crew who had been there during the crash.

Devon pressed the talk button on his WristVid. “Mr. Jacobs, we made it outside okay. We climbed up a hill next to the ship.”

Deke’s familiar voice came from the speaker. “How does the ship look from out there?” There was concern in Deke’s voice.

“It looks like the entire cockpit is a wreck. The front of the ship is stuck in a hill and I can’t even tell if the cockpit is still there.”

There was silence for a moment. “Bad news. The transponder was up there. Now I want you to circle the ship. Make sure that everything else looks okay. Call me back as soon as you are done, or in fifteen minutes. Whichever comes first. We have to stay in contact.”

Devon clicked off his WristVid. “You heard him. Let’s circle the ship and check it out from all sides.”

Merrell and Jacinda responded with nods while Flim rolled his eyes and huffed. “First we crash, and now we have to walk...this wasn’t in the brochure.”

Jacinda wiped sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand. All of them were sweating quite a bit in the heat of the morning.

From this vantage point it was obvious that the ship had settled into a basin-shaped dell surrounded on three sides by a high hill. From here they got a much better look at the ship.

They followed the ridge of the hill around to the front of the ship. Jacinda and Devon shared a knowing look when they saw the crumpled mess that had been the cockpit.

Suddenly, Devon began to feel a strange vibration through his feet. The ground beneath him seemed to be shaking, making him feel unsteady. He looked over to the others to see if they felt it too. They all exchanged quizzical looks, wondering what could be causing the shaking. Bits of dirt and rock began to tumble down the hillside as the shaking increased.

Devon began to worry as larger pieces of the hillside began to slide down toward the ship. He sat down quickly, unsure if he could keep his feet if the shaking grew any worse. Without warning, the section of ridge Devon was sitting on broke away and began to slide down the hill. Jacinda squeaked in alarm as he began moving.

Devon scrambled backward on his rear, trying to keep his place on the ridge, but it was futile. It was as if he were sledding down the hill on his bottom. He gained speed as he went, barely able to keep upright on top of the shifting dirt. Devon hit the bottom with a grunt, rolling over once and landing in a heap. He felt stunned, but could hear his friends arguing at the top of the hill.

Merrell’s gentle hand on Jacinda’s arm kept her from following Devon down the hill to help.

“Hold on. It is too dangerous right now. We have to wait until the ground quake has stopped, or you’ll just end up falling too.”

Jacinda tried to pull away, but Merrell’s grip remained firm. “We have to help him,” she protested.

“By getting injured too...No? Believe me, we have ground quakes on New California all the time. We have to survive before we can help anyone.”

As if on cue, the shaking stopped. Devon stumbled to his feet, scattering loose dirt everywhere.

“Devon, are you okay?” Jacinda shouted and waved to Devon from the top of the hill.

He gave her a thumbs up, smiling widely. “Just a few bumps. It’s good for me to get dirty once in a while.” They all laughed.

“Hold on, I’m coming back up there.” Devon began to climb back up the slope, but soon slid right back down. He could not gain any traction on the loose dirt of the slope left behind by the ground quake. He tried again, but once again slid back down.

“Anyone want to give me a boost?” They all laughed again.

Their moment of humor was interrupted as the ground began to shake once more. Merrell grabbed Jacinda and Flim, snatching them back from the edge of the hill. They looked on in horror as the side of the hill that they had originally scaled began to collapse. It seemed as if the entire hillside was collapsing. Suddenly everything was pelted with flying dirt as something broke through the hillside. A huge snakelike creature loomed over Devon. The creature was so huge that most of it was still concealed in the hillside.

“Help!” Devon cried, his voice filled with panic. The creature swayed back and forth, as if searching for something. At that moment Devon realized that the creature had no eyes. It

must be using its ears to hunt, he thought. That made sense because something that tunneled under the ground would not need very good eyesight.

Devon froze, holding his breath, hoping that not moving or making a sound would make him invisible to the creature. It seemed to work for a few moments as the creature swayed back and forth, seemingly confused by the disappearance of its prey.

The creature stopped swaying and seemed to take in a deep breath. After a moment it lowered its head. Devon clapped his hand over his ears as the creature roared. The sound made the nearby ground to shake, knocking Devon off his feet again. As soon as he fell, the creature reared up once again, aware of where its missing prey had gone. Devon covered his face with his hands and prepared himself for the coming blow.

Instead of feeling the jaws of the creature crushing him, he felt a deep thrumming coming from the ground. Peeking through his fingers, Devon watched the creature. It seemed confused by the sound, not sure where it was coming from. It was frantically swinging its massive head back and forth, searching for the source of the sound.

“Devon, behind you,” he heard Jacinda shout. Springing to his feet, Devon glanced quickly behind where he had been laying. His jaw dropped open when he saw the source of the sound. Sammy, his automatic luggage, was standing in the gash in the side of the ship. A strange looking probe extended from its side, touching the ground. Each time Devon felt the earth thrum, the dirt around the probed jumped. Somehow Sammy must be causing the sound.

Devon leaped to his feet and tried to scramble back up the slope to safety. As soon as he moved the creature swung its head toward him and began to slither forward, intent on making him a meal.

The creature gave out a bellow of pain and swung away from Devon, back toward Sammy. Over his shoulder, Devon could see another arm extended from Sammy, firing some sort of emerald beam at the creature. Where ever the beam touched the creature's rough hide, black blood flowed. Somehow Sammy was attacking the creature, protecting Devon from being eaten.

Devon was frozen in place as he watched Sammy nimbly avoid the clumsy lunges of the creature. He had never seen Sammy move like this before, and it shocked him. With a final flourish, Sammy's beam severed the creature's neck. Its sightless head fell to the ground with a thump. This sent the body of the creature into a spasm of panic. Its thick coils thrashed wildly, knocking large pieces of hillside into the ravine.

With the grace of a deer, Sammy leaped over the madly convulsing coils and skittered toward Devon. Without stopping, another arm extended for its side and grasped Devon by the collar. Spindly legs digging into the loose dirt of the hillside, Sammy dragged his master up the hill and away from the edge.

Jacinda, Flim, and Merrell followed quickly, convinced by the increased amount of dirt tumbling down toward the ship that the hilltop was no longer a safe place to be. They got away from the edge mere moments before a huge slab of the hillside separated and tumbled down onto the thrashing creature.

The creature stopped moving, buried in a grave of its own making. Devon and the others sat silently, afraid to move too soon, just in case the monster was able to dig itself out. After a few moments Devon felt another vibration...and it felt like it was right next to him. He rolled away from the others and leapt to his feet, scanning the ground in a near panic. With a start he realized he was the source of the vibration. With a relieved sigh Devon realized that the

vibration was coming from his WristVid. He flipped open the lid and pressed the button to activate the speaker.

“...there, Devon? Are you okay?” Devon recognized Deke’s raspy voice.

“I’m here, Mr. Jacobs.”

“Were you hurt? That slither came out of nowhere.”

Devon chuckled, “A slither? Is that what tried to eat me?”

“There were unsubstantiated reports of such creatures, but nothing confirmed.” Deke sounded embarrassed. “The survey team figured that they were just figments of a few prospectors’ imaginations. I guess you proved them wrong.”

“Lucky me.” He laughed out loud, brushing dirt from his coveralls.

Jacinda stared at Devon, shaking her head. “I can’t believe you think this is funny! You were almost killed.”

“But I wasn’t...and if I don’t laugh, I’d probably cry.”

Deke’s voice came over the speaker again. “Never mind that. What happened to the creature? We couldn’t quite see from here. The view from the passenger windows isn’t very good.”

“I thought I was a goner until Sammy distracted the thing.”

“Sammy? Who is he?” Deke sounded confused.

“Sammy isn’t a *he*; Sammy is a ‘what’.”

“Excuse me?” Deke sounded even more confused.

“Sammy is what I call my automatic luggage.”

“And how, exactly, did your suitcase distract the slither?”

“Well, I’m not really sure. But he did, and then he saved me. I always knew that Sammy was specially made, but I never saw him do anything like he did back there.”

Devon glanced over at the trunk, now seemingly dormant.

“I could swear I caught a glimpse of a plasma beam down there.”

Devon cleared his throat, sounding embarrassed. “I think you did. That was Sammy too. He dragged me up the hill too. I’ve never seen him move that fast before. His legs never got that long before.”

“I saw it do that. Where did you get that thing?” Concern was creeping into Deke’s voice.

“My parents had it made for me. I guess they added a few things that they didn’t tell me about.”

“Sammy sounds more like a Class One SecBot than automatic luggage. Well, that doesn’t matter right now. You people need to get back in here right now. There may be more of those things out there.”

Flim was peering over the edge of the ridge, down into the ravine.

“I think we have a problem, folks.”

All eyes turned to Flim. His normal smirk was missing.

“When that thing buried itself, it buried our way back into the ship.”

Devon, Jacinda, and Merrell scrambled over to see if Flim was right. Just as he had said, there was a huge mound of freshly turned dirt piled against the side of the ship, completely blocking the gash they had used to leave the ship.

Chapter 12

Ensign Hal Kepler hunched over his data terminal working feverishly. He wiped his tired eyes and yawned.

“One more time,” he muttered to himself as he scanned the search results. He knew he had to make sure that he did not miss anything. One slip-up and the captain might never give him another chance.

Ever since Hal had been assigned to the *Boadicea*, he had tried to make a positive impression on Captain Leiber. However, it seemed that impressing ‘Old Stoneface’ was impossible. He usually treated Hal with indifference, which was much preferred to the stern glare he had seen the captain bestow on crewmembers who disappointed him.

According to the search results, what happened to Forrestal’s atmosphere could not happen. The only similar incidents of a planet’s ionosphere becoming opaque involved highly contaminated industrial planets. Forrestal was a nearly pristine wilderness planet. The two pieces of information just did not seem to fit.

The rescue mission could not begin until he solved this riddle. Kepler knew that this was his chance to shine. He tried to think of any natural occurrences that could mimic severe pollution.

The answer hit him like a lightning bolt. He sat up straight and exclaimed, “A volcano!”

Everyone on the bridge turned toward him, startled by his outburst.

The captain raised an eyebrow, “New information, Mr. Kepler?”

“Sir, the atmospheric changes could be the result of volcanic activity.”

“A volcano? This sounds a little extreme for a volcano to cause.”

Ensign Kepler paused for a moment, thinking carefully. “I agree, sir.”

Frowning, the captain rose and walked over the Kepler's work station. "Please explain."

"Well, Sir, I agree that a single volcano, no matter how big, probably couldn't cause such a widespread problem...but a series of them might be enough."

The captain turned to face Kepler, giving him his full attention. "How sure are you of this?"

"It's just a theory, but it's the only one that makes any sense. The combined gas output from multiple volcanoes is the only thing that could replicate the atmospheric contamination that causes this type of problem...unless the survey team missed a highly industrialized civilization down there."

"I doubt that, Ensign Kepler." The captain gave him a dark look. "It just doesn't make sense that they would miss an imminent disaster either."

Kepler shrugged apologetically.

The captain paused for a moment. "As this is the only theory we have, we will go with it. However, I need more information...quickly."

"Yes sir, I'll try to confirm it." Kepler hunched over his terminal once again, desperately trying to think of a way to confirm volcanic eruptions through the haze of Forrestal's ionosphere.

Chapter 13

Terry and the other children pressed themselves up against the glass of their windows, hoping to catch a glimpse of Devon and the others that were trapped outside.

Terry snickered, "Serves them right, getting stuck out there. They were just trying to show off, and it bit them in the backside. Let the bowzers eat them."

Link and Junior stopped peering out of their windows in unison.

“But, Terry, our brother is out there,” Junior remarked. Both boys wore a look of concerned confusion.

“Who cares, he made his choice,” Terry said with a sneer in his voice.

Link’s eyebrows furrowed. “But, Terry, Merrell, might get hurt. Are you saying you want him to get hurt?” Both Link and Junior turned toward Terry, beginning to show signs of anger.

Sensing that he had gone too far, Terry gulped. “Merrell...hurt? Of course I don’t want that.” He smiled nervously. “He is my friend, why would I want him to get hurt...it’s just that I don’t like the others. Like I said before Blake is a thief, Flim is a freak, and the urchin girl doesn’t even belong with us. She is as poor as a spaceport mouse.”

Link and Junior relaxed, soothed by Terry’s fast-talk. Junior scratched his head and paused for a moment.

“...Terry, I’ve been meaning to ask you something. You called Devon a thief. What did he steal?”

Terry shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “Well, *he* didn’t really steal anything, but his whole family is a bunch of thieves.”

Junior shrugged. “I still don’t get it. Why?”

Terry leaned forward, putting his face close to Junior’s. “His grandfather nearly wrecked mine. My grandpapa owned United Gyros back then. We owned it for generations before that. When Devon’s grandfather invented his stupid hovercar nobody wanted gyrocopters anymore. My grandpapa lost the company, and nearly everything else. Luckily, he still owned another, smaller manufacturing company. He and my dad worked for a long time to make it successful,

and it is now.” Terry paused to make sure that Link and Junior understood. “So, you see, he and his family stole almost everything we had. It just wasn’t fair.”

Link shrugged, “I guess your right, but you still got that other company. So you are still rich.”

Terry crossed his arms angrily, “Rich, yes, but not as rich as we are supposed to be...thanks to them.”

Junior nodded, seeming satisfied. “Okay, I guess you’re right. His family done you wrong, so no need to be nice to Devon.” He paused for a moment, then continued. “By the way, what does that other company your family owns make?”

Terry sat silently for a moment, jaws clenched, then growled. “Garbage Dumpsters.”

Chapter 14

Devon's eyes scanned the nearby trees carefully. The hair on the back of his neck stood up, sending a shiver down his back.

"Does anyone else feel like they are being watched?" Devon whispered, trading glances with Flim, Jacinda, and Merrell.

They all nodded in agreement.

Devon tapped the transmit button on his WristVid. "Mr. Jacobs? Are you there?" He waited for a response for several moments. "Hello, Mr. Jacobs?" There was still no response.

Devon's mind began to race, filled with images of Deke lying unconscious in the aisle of the drop ship, the children all around him screaming in panic.

Devon nearly jumped when Deke’s voice came out of his WristVid. “I’m here Devon. You sound upset, is everything okay?”

Devon paused for a moment, trying to keep the fear out of his voice. “We are okay, but I am getting a bad feeling...like we are being watched.”

“Don’t worry, I’m sure it is just your imagination. What we need to worry about right now is getting you back inside. We have plenty of time before nightfall, but I want you in here a lot sooner than that.”

“So what do we do?”

“I think we can open one of the emergency doors and lower a rope or something down to you. We just have to find something like a rope. It should not take more than a few minutes.”

Devon sighed in relief and turned to the others. “I think that’ll make us all feel better. Right guys?”

Jacinda and Merrell nodded in agreement, but there was no sign of Flim. Devon gave the others a confused look.

“Where in the world did Flim go?”

Jacinda looked around, her eyes wide. “I’m not sure. He was just here.”

Merrell and Devon began looking as well, scanning the area for any sign of their friend. Unfortunately, there was no sign.

“Flim! Where are you?” Jacinda called loudly, her voice on the edge of panic. Looking pleadingly at Devon, she seemed about to cry. In a flash her worry turned to anger as she realized that Devon was trying to suppress a grin. Her eyes narrowed and her mouth shrank down to an angry scowl.

“What...is going on?” Jacinda’s hands moved to her hips, her whole posture teetering on the edge of exasperation. “This had better not be some kind of dumb joke.”

Devon finally mastered his mirth and managed to respond. “No, it’s not a joke...exactly. But...you know Flim. He likes to play tricks on people, and I’m sure this is one of his tricks.”

“But where did he go?” Jacinda asked. Merrell was looming over her shoulder, a look of expectation on his face as well.

“Hmm, that is a little hard to explain.” Devon paused, not really wanting to reveal Flim’s special talent. Devon began to wither under her relentless glare. “Let’s just say he is really good at hiding.”

Jacinda signed, shaking her head, uttering a single word. “Boys.”

Merrell stifled a snicker as well, earning him a sharp look from Jacinda as well.

The sound of rustling leaves broke the building tension, drawing all of their attention toward the deep forest surrounding the hilltop. All three friends peered into the undergrowth, expecting to see Flim emerge with a smile of triumph on his face.

When no one appeared they all looked at each other, confused.

Jacinda was the first to speak. “Okay, so where is he? I honestly didn’t think he had this kind of patience.”

“I have no...” The words caught in Devon’s throat as a figure emerged from the undergrowth behind Jacinda and Merrell.

Jacinda recognized the look of surprise on Devon’s face and began to turn. “It’s about time you...” She froze as well when she saw the figure. It surely was not Flim.

The creature, if that word could be used, stood upright. It was about the same height as Jacinda, but the similarities ended there. What looked like soft green feathers covered its entire body. Bright amber eyes peered out of the green, fuzzy face, almost like those of a friendly puppy. The creature shifted, turning slightly toward Merrell, whose back was still turned.

Jacinda's eyes grew wide as the creature reached out to touch Merrell. He flinched when the creature made contact with his arm, but then seemed to relax, a look of contentment on his face.

Devon leaped forward toward Merrell. His friend seemed to be under some sort of spell, but if he could jar him, perhaps it would be broken. Devon bowled over the larger boy. The two went down in a heap, tangled together and struggling.

The creature hopped back, just barely avoiding ending up on the ground with Devon and Merrell. With a fluttering that sounded like leaves in a stiff wind, it scampered back into the undergrowth, quickly disappearing, its green ruff blending perfectly with the surrounding leaves.

With a grunt, Merrell pushed Devon off of him. He sat up, scowling. "Why did you do that."

Devon stared at him, eyes wide. "Are you kidding? That thing was doing something to you. I thought I was saving you."

"Saving me? I don't know about that." The blush of embarrassment began to fill Merrell's face. "I mean...it seemed friendly enough."

Jacinda shook her head. "Not to Devon and me. It looked like it was taking control of you."

Merrell shook his head. "Why would you think that? I'm strong and can take care of myself. Just because I'm big doesn't mean I have a weak mind." He scowled at Devon, perhaps more angry than he should be.

"That's not what I meant...not at all," Devon said. "I was just afraid that I might be losing a new friend. I didn't want anything to happen to you."

Merrell's face softened, the anger draining away. "Oh, well I guess I owe you an apology then, Devon." Merrell scrambled to his feet and offered Devon a hand up.

Devon took his hand and got to his feet. "No worries, Merrell, I was just watching out for you."

Merrell still seemed unsure. "Are you sure...I mean, it didn't hurt me."

"But it grabbed you." Jacinda interrupted.

Merrell shook his head slowly. "You are probably right, but it just didn't *feel* dangerous. It *felt* friendly."

Jacinda stared at him in confusion. "I still don't understand."

Merrell hesitated, his eyes full of thought. "Well, I don't know if I can really explain it. I mean, I *was* startled when it touched me, but just as quickly I calmed down. I got this image in my head of my home, back in New California. It was like I was looking at a postcard of one of those fun, summer days when I had nothing to worry about. It was almost like I was back there."

Merrell looked back at the trees where the creature had disappeared. He wore a look of longing. "It just felt so wonderful."

Jacinda walked up to Merrell and put her hand on his shoulder. He looked back at her, still almost overcome with emotion.

"Are you gonna be okay?" She asked, concern showing in her voice.

Merrell sighed. "Sure...I'll be fine...it's just been a long time since I felt that way. My brothers and I have been away at school for so long I guess I just miss home. We haven't been back for three years."

Jacinda and Devon were obviously shocked by this news. Devon began to ask Merrell about it, but bit off his question when Jacinda gave him a warning look.

“It’s okay, Merrell,” Jacinda gave his shoulder another squeeze, “You’ll get to go home...and I bet it will be soon, with everything that has happened to us.”

Merrell smiled. “You are probably right...but that still doesn’t explain why I thought about it. It was almost as if I had no choice.” He thought for a moment, “I think that the creature did it.”

“Why would it do that?” Devon asked, suddenly very interested.

“If I had to guess, I’d say it was trying to tell me something. I think it was trying to communicate.”

Jacinda’s eyes furrowed skeptically. “Communicate? Why did it sneak up on us if it was trying to communicate.”

“Maybe it was afraid of us.” Devon commented.

“Beep, beep.” Devon’s WristVid chirped, interrupting their discussion.

Devon thumbed a button, answering in an excited voice. “Mr. Jacobs, you will never believe what just happened.”

“No time for that now, Devon,” Deke interrupted him. “We need to get you inside, as soon as we can.”

“Okay, but we have to find Flim first.”

“What?” Anger showed in Deke’s voice. “Where did he run off to?”

Jacinda stepped to Devon’s side so she could be heard. “Mr. Jacobs, that is not all. We just encountered a very interesting creature.”

“Jacinda, I appreciate your curiosity, but I couldn’t give two hoots about that. I want you to find Flim and get back to the ship. We have rigged up a makeshift rope and we will be pulling you up through one of the emergency exits.”

“But Mr. Jacobs.” Jacinda pleaded.

“No argument Ms. Vasquez. Do as I instructed.” Deke’s use of Jacinda’s last name signaled that he would not be moved.

Devon shrugged his shoulders, giving Jacinda resigned look. After a moment he spoke into his WristVid, “We will find Flim and come back to the ship. I’ll let you know as soon as we find him.”

“Good, just don’t go too far into the forest. I don’t want you getting out of range of your WristVid. Make sure you contact me every fifteen minutes.”

“Yes sir.” Devon deactivated his WristVid.

Jacinda huffed in frustration. “Okay, we have to find Flim as soon as we can.”

Merrell nodded. “Then we can go back to the ship.”

“No, I don’t think so. At least not yet.” Jacinda said, shaking her head.

Devon and Merrell both turned to look at Jacinda, mouths open in disbelief.

Jacinda began to make her way into the forest as she spoke. “Wait, before you say anything. We will do what Mr. Jacobs said. We will look for Flim, but why can’t we look for that creature too? We will contact Mr. Jacobs every fifteen minutes, just like we said we would. We just have to take our time finding Flim.”

“I don’t know about this, Jacinda.” Devon looked skeptical.

“Trust me, Devon. Maybe these creatures can help us.”

Devon and Merrell followed Jacinda into the forest. They all called Flim’s name and scanned the surrounding underbrush for any sign of their friend.

Tall, wide trees cast the land into deep shade. Thin, fern-like plants huddled around the trucks of the trees. Soft, grey grass covered the ground everywhere else. Walking on the grass

felt like walking in thick foam. It gave under their feet and sprang back up behind them, leaving little trace of their passage. As they moved deeper into the forest, the light grew dimmer, blocked by the ever thicker canopy above.

They continued to call out to Flim, but got no response. Devon soon realized that if they went much further into the forest, they may not be able to find their way back.

“Jacinda, Merrell, I think we need to turn back. I doubt that Flim would have gone this far, and we better not get lost.”

“But Devon, we can’t just leave him out here,” Jacinda said, determination showing in her voice.

“I wouldn’t suggest it if I thought we had any choice. But...”

A soft, melodious hoot interrupted their conversation. The hoot had come from a particularly dense clump of underbrush directly in front of them.

Devon, Jacinda and Merrell all froze in their tracks.

“What was that?” A note of fear showed in Jacinda’s voice.

Merrell stepped protectively between Jacinda and the undergrowth. “Whatever it was, it didn’t sound dangerous, but I suggest we get out of here.”

“I agree,” Devon added hastily.

“But, Flim...” Jacinda was still hesitant to leave their friend to fend for himself.

Merrell turned and took Jacinda by the hand. “We have to worry about ourselves right now. We can’t help him if something happens to us.” He started back the way they had come, pulling Jacinda along with him by her hand. They heard the hoot again. This was enough to convince Devon that it was wise to leave.

They had gone only a few yards when they heard another hoot, but this one came from the forest to their right. It was immediately answered by another hoot on their left. The friends picked up their pace but were brought up short by the sound of rustling leaves coming from the undergrowth directly in front of them.

“Flim?” Devon asked, his voice nervous. He was answered by several more hoots from the direction they faced.

The brush moved, like a breeze was moving through it, and parted. Two of the green creatures seemed to materialize right out of the bushes. They were undistinguishable from the one they had seen earlier. These did, however, seem upset. Their deep brown eyes looked almost angry.

The larger of the two creatures carried a sharpened stick and motioned for the friends to stop. Devon thought about running for a moment, but a quick look over his shoulder revealed that several more of the creatures had materialized right behind them.

The creature with the stick seemed to be in charge. It motioned at the others, who quickly surrounded the children. The leader slowly approached Merrell, perhaps assuming he was their leader because of his larger size. The creature studied Merrell, its brown eyes intent and intelligent. After a few moments it motioned with its stick and the circle of creature opened. The leader scampered past the children and motioned for them to follow.

When Devon and the others didn't follow, it motioned again and hooted for emphasis. It seemed like they didn't have any choice but to follow. They made their way deeper into the forest, following the leader, surrounded by at least a dozen of the green creatures.

Chapter 15

Fifteen minutes had passed and Deke had not heard from Devon and his friends. Concern etched his face. He decided to give them a couple more minutes before really growing concerned. Perhaps they simply forgot to check in...he hoped.

Deke waited for two more minutes and then Keyed open the microphone on his WristVid.

“Devon, please respond. You are late for your check-in.”

He waited for a moment, listening for a response. His WristVid remained silent. He keyed the button again.

“Devon, I repeat, please respond. Are you there?”

Deke shook his head. He hoped that they had simply gotten out of range and it was not something worse. He tried to convince himself that they had gone out of range looking for Flim and would be calling at any moment. Unfortunately, he didn't manage to quite convince himself.

Deke felt that it was his responsibility to keep all of the children safe. If he went out looking for Devon and the others there would not be anyone to watch the children here on the drop ship. He was also still did not know the full extent of his injuries. He had not passed out again, but he still got light headed at times. He just could not take that risk. His only choice was to pray and hope for the best.

When they did come back Deke planned on having a bit more than harsh words for Flim for running off. He knew Flim had a wild streak. Deke had been accused of that more than once as a child. But he would never have believed that Flim would run off like this, but he obviously had.

Deke cursed himself for letting Devon and the others go outside. He should have done it himself. What had he been thinking? Those kids were in danger, and it was all his fault. If they did not make it back before nightfall, they would be in great danger from the bowzers.

Chapter 16

The creatures surrounding Devon and the others watched them with interest. They grew especially interested when Jacinda began speaking to Devon.

“Where do you think they are taking us?” She asked.

“I’m can’t be sure, but I guess wherever they are taking us must be safe from the bowzers. They must have learned how to deal with them...or they wouldn’t be there.” Jacinda began to say something else, but stopped when the creature leading them stopped and cocked his head, as if listening for something. He sniffed the air, turned and motioned at two of the creatures that were accompanying them.

Those two disappeared into the trees, all but invisible among the foliage.

“It’s no wonder we didn’t see them creeping around earlier. Those feathers blend in to the leaves perfectly. They must have been watching us the whole time.”

“I don’t think those are feathers.” Merrell spoke up for the first time since they had been taken. “When the creature touched me it didn’t feel like feathers.”

Jacinda turned to him, a question in her eyes. “What did it feel like?”

Merrell’s brow furrowed in thought for a moment. “This is gonna sound weird...but it felt like it feels when you are rolling around in the grass.”

“Huh? What do you mean?” Devon asked.

“Well, have you ever rolled around in grass? You know how it is kinda soft, but scratchy at the same time? And, it didn’t feel warm, like our hands.”

“I guess...but how could that be?” Devon glanced at Jacinda, looking for any help she could offer.

Jacinda simply shrugged. “Don’t ask me, on the mining colony we didn’t have grass, so I’ve never rolled in it.”

Merrell grinned sheepishly at Devon and Jacinda. “I know this sounds crazy, but I don’t think they are...like us. I think they’re, plants, maybe.” Even he did not seem convinced by his own argument.

“Maybe that is why they don’t talk,” Devon added. That would make sense.

Their conversation was interrupted by a hoot from the forest just ahead. Two of the creatures emerged from forest, approaching the one who had led Devon and his friends here. One of the approaching creatures was much larger than the others. As it neared the group it held out its hand. The creature who had led the children reached out and grasped the offered hand. They each closed their eyes and a low thrumming resonated through the clearing. The two creatures stood unmoving in the late afternoon sunlight.

Jacinda started to say something but a pointed look from the other newcomer silenced her. A few more minutes passed as Devon, Jacinda and Merrell traded shrugs and confused expressions. The creatures had made it obvious that this meeting, or whatever it was, should not be disturbed.

What did they expect from the children? Why had they taken them? Would they be safe? Where was Flim? All of these questions weighed on Devon’s mind. Right now it did not seem like these creatures were ready to give them any answers.

Five minutes turned into fifteen minutes and then into a half an hour. Devon felt the urge to ask how long this would take, but remembering the look that Jacinda had gotten from one of the creatures convinced him to hold his tongue for now.

Abruptly the communing of the two creatures ended. The larger one hooted so loudly that it almost sounded like an elephant trumpeting. At this all of the creatures, except for the two newcomers, disappeared into the nearby forest.

Jacinda shook her head. "I'm sure they are not gone. I'll bet they are all still creeping around close by. Dumb creepers." She crossed her arms and harrumphed in irritation.

The large creature stepped forward and eyed the children. He towered over them, bigger than most adult humans. Devon watched the creature as it looked them over. He thought that despite its fearsome appearance, it had kind eyes.

The creature stepped closer to Devon and put out its hand, just as it had earlier. He glanced over his shoulder at Jacinda and Merrell, who shrugged, as unsure of what he should do as he was. This close to the creature his nose detected the rich, earthy aroma of moss, like a damp forest. The smell was somehow comforting.

Swallowing his fears, Devon grasped the creature's hand. It felt just as Merrell had described, soft yet scratchy, like deep, dry grass. The creature's hand closed gently around Devon's. This time Devon both heard and felt the thrumming. It filled his chest with a giggly feeling, like the feeling you get when you swing a little too high and your heart flutters in your chest.

Suddenly images tumbled into Devon's head. He saw a huge forest that made this one look like a garden. He saw oceans at sunset with the waves sparkling like fields of jewels. He saw clear, cool nights filled with meteor showers like fireworks. Devon even saw things that he

could not understand, but made his heart sing anyway. The strongest image he received was of a vast range of mountains covered in smoke. Several large peaks glowed with the red of lava and belched smoke and ash into a dreary, gray sky.

Devon's head was filled with so many images that he had trouble sorting them out. It was as if he were living a lifetime in only minutes. Just when he felt like he could not take anymore, the creature released his hand.

Devon looked up, staring into the creature's eyes. A connection, like a spark passed between the two. He suddenly realized that the creature had shown him parts of its own life. Somehow it had shared its experiences with him. Devon realized that this must be how the creatures communicated. The first creature that had touched Merrell had only been trying to communicate. Devon had probably frightened the creatures by trying to stop it.

Devon's head was filled with so many thoughts and images that he stood dumbfounded for a moment. He took a deep breath and tried to sort them out. One of the strongest was a feeling of peace, just like Merrell had described. Perhaps the creatures were trying to reassure Devon and the others that they meant them no harm. But that didn't explain why they took them away from the ship. The creatures must want something from them, Devon thought.

He also had another image in his head. It was an image of just a few moments ago when Jacinda had called the creatures creepers. He sensed acceptance, as if they had taken the name as their own. They liked the name and felt it suited them. He also remembered an image that he thought might be the creature's name. He could only translate it as DeepRoot.

"Well, Jacinda, they like the name you gave them." Devon chuckled.

"What?" Jacinda looked confused. "How do you know?"

“They told me, sort of. I think they communicate with their minds, but not with words. When I touched the big one’s hand I saw all kinds of things in my head. It was showing me its life. I think that is how they communicate. With images.”

Merrell clapped his hands. “That is what I saw. I knew there was something to it.”

“How can you be sure?” Jacinda shook her head, unconvinced.

Merrell and Devon looked at her, both wearing irritated looks.

Devon stepped toward her. “Just wait, Jacinda. You will be just as sure when it happens to you.” Merrell nodded in agreement when Jacinda looked his way.

The young girl glared back at Devon and Merrell. “Why can’t I do it too?”

The boys shrugged. Devon stepped toward her, trying to lay a calming hand on her shoulder. “I’m not sure why DeepRoot hasn’t talked to you yet.”

“DeepRoot? So you are on a first name basis now?”

“I think that is his name. It just popped into my head.”

Jacinda cocked her head in thought seeming to ponder a decision. Finally she nodded and strode toward DeepRoot. She stuck out her hand, waiting for the creeper to take hold of it. Instead it shied away from her, perhaps uncertain of her intentions. Jacinda grunted angrily and stepped forward, her hand held out. DeepRoot skipped away from the offered hand and hooted loudly.

The smaller creeper who had been standing nearby suddenly stepped forward, placing itself between Jacinda and the large creeper. Jacinda took several steps back, but quickly regained her courage. Once again, she held out her hand to the creeper, this time to the smaller one.

It looked back at DeepRoot, who gestured at it. The smaller creeper gently took Jacinda's hand, filling the girl's head with racing images. She knew instantly that this creeper's name was ClearSky. She saw images of groups of smaller creepers gathered together in a field, arms raised to the sky, as if they were soaking up the streaming rays of sunlight. Other, larger creepers moved among them, seeing to their needs. She also saw images of vast forests and serene oceans. Suddenly the images grew more intense. She saw the same field of small creepers, but this time a spaceship was raining fire among the field of creepers. The larger creepers ran among the smaller, trying to save as many as they could from the flames. With a flash of pain Jacinda realized that the smaller creepers were rooted in place and had to be pulled up before they could escape. She could feel the anguish of the keepers as the fire forced them to flee the field, leaving behind many of their charges.

Jacinda began to sob when the creeper broke contact. She fell to her knees, unable to control her crying. Devon and Merrell rushed to her side, desperate to see if she was okay.

"Oh, Merrell," she sobbed, "someone attacked their young. So many died." Merrell knelt down and cradled her in his big arms.

Devon felt like an intruder in their moment of grief. He stood up and approached DeepRoot.

"DeepRoot, what is going on? Who did this?" DeepRoot did not respond, merely cocked his head at Devon. Perhaps he could not understand the question. Did the creepers want their help? Could that be what they were trying to tell them? Devon tried several more times to make himself understood, but failed each time. Finally he decided to take a break. He slipped off his backpack, looking for a place to rest for a moment. He found a soft spot in the grass and sat

down, rummaging through his pack for a waterpouch. It was too bad that all he had was water. He could use a nice bit of juice. That would be nice. Sammy always had plenty on hand.

Devon jumped up in shock. He realized that Sammy was not here. He had not seen him since they started looking for Flim. He had completely forgotten about Sammy.

“Sammy,” he blurted before regaining his self control.

Devon only had a moment to think about his missing luggage before the sky lit up with a flash like nothing Devon had ever seen. For a moment he was distracted by a flash of something pink hidden among the bushes just outside of the clearing, but his attention was soon drawn back to the sky by more flashes, each a different color. The whole sky glowed, like they were inside of some sort of giant globe and some unknown giant was shining different color glowsticks at it. The display continued for quite a while, mesmerizing the children and the creepers. Its hauntingly beautiful hues danced across the sky from horizon to horizon. The patterns changed constantly, whirling in complicated swirls and eddies of light.

Chapter 17

Flim pressed himself to the trunk of a tree, trying with everything he had to not move. He had somehow felt the presence of the creatures before they had revealed themselves near the crashed ship. Perhaps it was because he was an excellent sneaker, so he knew what to listen for. Their presence was overwhelming and he thought there must be over a dozen of the things in the forest surrounding his friends.

Flim felt ashamed that he had not warned them, but by the time he had realized the creatures were there he only had time to blend in with a nearby tree. His skin had turned a mottled green, with streaks of brown. When he stopped moving it was impossible for anyone to

tell *him* from the *tree*. He hoped that these creatures did not share his ability to detect other hidden folk.

These creatures blended into the foliage nearly as well as Flim, but it was more because of their natural color. It did not seem like they could change color like Flim could. Their soft, feather-like skin helped them blend in too.

Flim heard Devon talking into his WristVid, but could not quite make out what he said. Flim wanted so much to warn Devon, but staying hidden might be his only chance to help if it came down to the worst. Flim watched his friends leave the clearing, shouting his name. He listened, holding his breath, until he could no longer hear their call. The presence of the creatures faded too. He knew that he was alone again...or so he thought.

Flim nearly jumped out of his skin when he heard rustling coming from a nearby bush. He froze, not daring to move a muscle as the bush shook. Relief flooded into him as he saw Sammy, Devon's luggage, emerging from the underbrush. Sammy hesitated for a moment at the edge of the clearing. A slender stalk emerged from some hidden part of Sammy and scanned the clearing. It swung back and forth several times before stopping, pointed directly at Flim. The stalk disappeared once again, back into its hidden compartment. Sammy trundled toward Flim, as if he had called the chest. Sammy stopped, as if waiting for Flim to meet him halfway.

Flim let go of the tree and approached Sammy slowly. He nearly fainted when Sammy turned on his stubby legs and trundled off in the direction Devon and the others had gone.

“Wait, where are you going?” Flim called after the scuttling luggage. Sammy did not even slow down. Flim rushed to catch up. Luckily, Sammy's stubby legs could only carry him so fast through the soft dirt of the forest floor. Flim was able to catch up without much problem.

As they made their way through the forest Flim caught brief snatches of the far off voices of his friends calling for him. Each time he heard them it sent a pang of guilt through him. Flim had never considered himself a *hero*, but he had never seen himself as a *coward* either. But there was part of him that felt like he was a coward for not helping Devon and the others. He could not think of what he could have done, but not even trying made him feel like a chicken. His only hope was to follow his friends and try to rescue them. He hoped that he could, or he might not ever be able to forgive himself.

Flim and Sammy followed Devon and the others for nearly an hour, careful not to be seen by the creatures. Sammy trundled along by Flim's side, his legs beating a soft rhythm on the forest floor. Flim found the steady sound relaxing. Some of his tension drained away, leaving behind a feeling of hope that he could do something to free his friends. Sammy stopped abruptly, disturbing Flim's thoughts.

Flim stopped as well, peering into the underbrush making sure he had not been seen. He concentrated for a moment and his skin darkened, turning a deep green to match the nearby bushes. He crept forward, carefully avoiding anything that might make noise as he passed. He inched slowly, ever so slowly, forward. As quietly as a mouse he crept through the bushes. He was rewarded by the sight of several of the creatures standing in a clearing up ahead.

Flim moved even closer, just close enough to catch sight of his friends as well. Flim froze as two more of the creatures strode into the clearing. One of the creatures, a huge one, strode toward the creature who had been leading Devon and his friends away. The two clasped hands. The feeling that something was going to happen filled the air. It was almost like electricity. They stood, their hands together, for what seemed like forever. Flim considered

trying to move closer several times, but each time he tried he was filled with a strange feeling of hesitation. Something inside of him was telling him to wait.

Finally, the two creatures dropped their hands. The large creature trumpeted, starting Flim in his hiding spot. Flim watched in disbelief as all of the creatures except for two left the clearing. What happened next shocked Flim even more. First Devon and then Jacinda touched the creatures. Flim stared in horror as Jacinda collapsed, sobbing. Had the creature hurt her? He held his anger in check. It looked like Merrell and Devon were doing all they could to help her, and Flim could not very well rescue his friends if he was captured too.

Flim decided that it was time he started planning his rescue. There was no telling when he would get a better chance. With only two of the creatures nearby, he and his friends had them outnumbered, but that was sure to change soon enough.

Taking a deep breath, Flim began working his way around the clearing ahead. If he could get close enough for Devon or one of the others to hear him, perhaps they could be ready when it was time to escape. He crept closed, looking for a way to approach his friends without being seen, but it just was not possible.

Flim watched as Devon jumped to his feet and blurted out the name “Sammy”. After that things happened so quickly Flim lost control of his color changing and began a shade of bright pink. Fortunately, everyone else was as surprised by the ensuing aerial display that nobody noticed.

Chapter 18

A squat, bug-like work module sat near a large pool of bubbling lava. Several blackened metal pipes led from the work module to the pool. A much larger pipe led from the module to a

large lava field. Globbs of half liquid lava burped from this tube, leaving a mound of cooling leftovers from whatever processing was happening inside the module.

The air inside the portable mining rig was hot and oily. The smell of raw hydrocarbons burned the eyes and filled the nose and mouth with a bitter tang. The man hunched over a workstation did not seem to notice. In fact, his grimy clothes and blotchy skin made him almost seem like one more piece of neglected equipment.

“Cappy, we got a definite problem here.” The voice came from the dirty looking fellow hunched over a battered display console. The console was patchwork of scavenged parts and homemade doohickeys and it was a wonder that it worked at all. Everything about the room was worn and poorly maintained. It could only lead to one conclusion: that whoever did take care of this place did not take much pride in its appearance.

A burly, fearsome-looking man kicked open the door to the room, sending bits of trash and equipment flying. “What did you say Burgess? You know I don’t like bad news.”

“Sorry, Cappy, I just call em like I see em.” Burgess eyed Cappy, looking concerned, but not overly so.

“Well...what’s the problem. You got me out of the bathroom for this. It had better be good.”

Burgess let Cappy stew for a few more moments and then continued. “We got a problem with the ionization.”

“What problem, we knew it was gonna happen sooner or later. We got our ships shielded for when we gotta get out.” Cappy was irritated that he had been bothered with something that they knew was going to happen.

Burgess gave him a sly smile. “Oh, it ain’t the ions that’s got me concerned. It’s whoever is scanning em.”

“Scanning? What do you mean. Get to the point or I’ll dump you in one of the smelters.” Cappy was feeling particularly crusty today and didn’t have time for Burgess’ games.

“Scanning, sir. I mean to say that someone on the outside is scanning the atmosphere.” Burgess’s manners always improved with the mention of bodily harm. “We have guests out in the black, and they want to know why they can’t get in.”

Cappy cursed. Things just never did go right for him. Cappy Weiss was a survivor, but just barely. The universe always conspired to throw a wrench into his plans, no matter how careful he was. Of course that could have something to do with his tendency to cut corners and his irrational belief that he was the smartest person in the known universe.

Cappy harrumphed loudly, scratched his greasy head and nodded. There was nothing to be done but wrap up the operation and high-tail it off this rock before he got caught.

“Alright, Burgess, keep an eye on the scan and buzz me if they figure a way through. Meanwhile, tell the boys to be ready ta drop and burn if’n they do get through.” Cappy sighed sullenly and went back to the bathroom.

Chapter 19

Everyone on the bridge turned in surprise when Kepler whooped. The captain gave him a sharp look, but did not say anything.

“My apologies, Captain.” Kepler said, blushing in embarrassment.

“I assume this means you have news?” The captain asked. He eyed Ensign Kepler with just a touch of humor in his expression.

“Yes, sir, I think I do. I may have figured out how to break through the interference in the ionosphere. It should, at least, let us scan the surface.” Kepler bit his lip, trying to hide his excitement. He loved a puzzle, and this one had been a tough one. The lives of the kids on the drop ship might also ride on the answer, which had only made Kepler want to solve the puzzle of the ionosphere even more.

“Very good, Ensign, you may proceed.”

“Thank you sir. The key to the whole thing is to determine the frequency of the existing interference. We should be able to do this by pulsing phased radio...”

The captain interrupted Kepler with a raised hand. “Ensign, I meant that you can proceed with your plan. I don’t need to know how it works. Just make it work.”

“Yes sir. It will only take a few moments to ” Kepler nodded excitedly and turned back to his console. He typed in a short program telling the computer what to do and sent the command to the computer core. Kepler imagined that he could hear the humming of the pulsing radio waves streaming down on the planet from the ship’s communications array.

The captain watched the planet on the main viewscreen with interest. He smiled when the pearly white atmosphere began to change color. The white gently bled into a cool green, and then to a soft blue. He looked over his shoulder, pleased that Ensign Kepler’s scheme seemed to be having some effect on the interference keeping them from rescuing the kids from the drop ship.

“Any idea how long this may take, Ensign?” The captain said, turning to address the pleased-looking, young officer.

“It depends on the modulation. If the interference in the ionosphere changes too rapidly, it may not work at all, but if it stays the same then it should not take more than ninety minutes.”

“Excellent work, Ensign,” the captain said. “Inform me as soon as we have an answer.”

Kepler watched his console intently as the ship beamed different radio frequencies at the planet, watching the shifting colors. If the computer could generate the right combination of radio waves the ships sensors would be able to penetrate the interference. Given enough time, the interference could be eliminated completely.

Kepler felt good. For the first time since the accident with the drop ship, there was a chance to save the children.

Chapter 20

The changing colors of the sky had set the creepers off, causing them to hoot wildly and scamper among the underbrush in seeming panic. DeepRoot and ClearSky simply stared up the changing sky for a moment and then began to herd Devon and the others out of the clearing, deeper into the woods.

Jacinda gave Devon a questioning look and then gestured at the sky.

Devon Shrugged. “I have no idea. Maybe that is why we crashed.”

The three friends followed DeepRoot and ClearSky out of the clearing. The creepers moved very quickly through the dense bushes and trees. The foliage almost seemed to part for them, opening a path wide enough for the children to follow with ease.

Devon could felt a sense of urgency in DeepRoot and ClearSky. Something about the way they were moving made him think that wherever they were going was important. He only hoped that he could figure out what the creepers wanted from them.

They climbed up hills and down ravines, scurried across meadows and slogged through a gloomy swamp. All the while they watched the shifting colors of the sky.

Devon was not sure how much time had passed since they had gone with the creepers, but it seemed like hours. He was getting very tired and was not sure how much farther he could go. With just a look, he could tell that Jacinda and Merrell were feeling the same way.

DeepRoot suddenly stopped. ClearSky turned, motioning for Devon and his friends to stop as well. Devon had a chance for the first time in a while to survey their surroundings. They stood in a dense stand of trees that resembled bamboo, but a thick as his waist. There was a brisk breeze blowing through the trees, making them sway. They gave off a soft creaking sound as they moved with the breeze.

Devon began to hear another sound above the sound of the trees swaying. Just at the limit of his hearing he heard what sounded like some sort of grunting. DeepRoot and ClearSky also heard the sound. DeepRoot held up a cautioning hand, cocking his head as if to hear better.

The grunting grew louder, coming closer. It almost sounded like pigs, but with shrill yaps between the grunts. The sounds were making Devon nervous. Whatever was making them sounded big, and in a jungle like this bigger usually meant trouble.

The breath caught in Devon's throat as four huge beasts ambled into view. They looked like huge, bristled-haired wolves with long tusks jutting out from their lower jaws. They tested the air with their fleshy noses every few feet. As they came closer Devon realized that these things, whatever they were, were more pig than wolf. But that did not make them any less dangerous. He knew in his heart what these must be.

Devon looked back at Jacinda and Merrell. Merrell looked worried, but Jacinda looked on the edge of panic. Her eyes went from the creatures to Devon and back again. Her mouth moved as if she was trying to speak, but nothing came out. Merrell sensed Jacinda's panic and

drew him into his arms. It seemed to help. She shut her eyes tightly, shutting out the sight of the creatures.

Coming from a mining colony on an asteroid, the biggest animal Jacinda had ever seen for real was a large cat one of the workers smuggled in. Of course she had seen vids of the creatures of old earth, like elephants and horses, but seeing a picture of one and being confronted with creatures this size were two different experiences.

“Bowzers,” Jacinda muttered under her breath.

At the sound of her voice, the head of the largest bowzer snapped toward their hiding place. It squinted at them with its small, piggy eyes, sniffing the air greedily for any scent. It moved closer, led by its furiously working snout. It stopped for a moment as if analyzing a new smell.

The rest of the beasts noticed that their companion was on the trail of something. Interested in sharing in any hidden morsels, they turned as a group and began to follow him. All of the bowzers sniffed the air in excitement. They soon caught the scent of the children as well. They squealed in excitement and rushed toward the group of hidden creepers and children.

DeepRoot stepped out from his hiding place, putting himself protectively between the bowzers and the children. He let out a deep, rumbling hoot and the bowzers stopped in their tracks, but still pranced nervously. DeepRoot hooted again. ClearSky joined in and began to hoot in a sad harmony. Their hoots mingled together, almost sounding like a song. This seemed to calm the bowzers, who began to mill about, sampling nearby foliage. Soon the bowzers lost interest in the children and simply wandered away from the clearing.

Devon realized that he had been holding his breath. He let it out with a rush, then sucked in a deep breath. He looked over at Merrell and Jacinda to make sure they were alright as well.

Merrell had released Jacinda, but still stood very close to her. Jacinda was back to normal. Gone was the look of terror and the familiar look of determination had returned.

DeepRoot and ClearSky turned to each other and clasped hands. Devon wondered what they could be talking about, if that was they were doing could be called. They must be communicating. They stood that way only for a few moments but a decision had obviously been made.

ClearSky motioned for Devon and the others to follow her. DeepRoot turned and strode out of the clearing. Devon could see DeepRoot disappearing into the trees, a purpose in his stride.

ClearSky motioned again for Devon and the others to follow her. With a sigh, he turned and followed her into the darkening forest. The sun was going down, but he no longer feared the bowzers. The little demonstration made it obvious the creepers knew how to handle them. Devon felt much more hope for their survival.

Their spirits buoyed by their successful encounter with the bowzers, Devon and the others walked with new enthusiasm. Most of their tiredness had fallen away and their steps were lighter. ClearSky sensed this and picked up the pace.

The trail began to slope gently upward. The change was small, but Devon's legs began to tire. Jacinda and Merrell also showed signs of tiring. Devon gave a sigh of relief when he realized that they were at the top of the slope. The sigh caught in his throat as he crested the ridge and saw what was on the other side. He heard Jacinda gasp as she saw as well.

The forest ended abruptly at the peak of the ridge. The far side of the hill had been torn away. With no canopy above, smoke filled the sky over the valley beyond, if it could be called

that. The valley looked more like some mythological leviathan with an unquenchable hunger for dirt and rock had fed for days. The valley was now a great wound in the earth with small pools of molten lava dotting the floor like the oozing blood of the planet.

Devon, Jacinda, and Merrell stared down at the destruction in utter disbelief.

“This isn’t natural,” Jacinda said.

“What? How do you know?” Devon asked.

“Believe me, I have lived in and around mines all my life. I know what natural rock looks like. Someone did this on purpose.” There were tears in Jacinda’s eyes.

Merrell shook his head. “Who would do something like this?”

“Probably the same people who attacked the creepers,” Devon answered.

As if on cue a small ship passed overhead with a roar. Jacinda gasped.

“I recognize that ship from the vision ClearSky gave me. It *is* the same kind of ship that attacked the creepers.”

They watched the ship descend into the valley and skim the lava below. It slowed and then began to hover in the shadow of a steep cliff. It swayed in the roiling updrafts from the surrounding lava, slowly descending. With a start Devon realized that the ship was about to land on some sort of structure sitting near a large pool of lava.

“Do you see that down there?” Devon asked the others.

“I sure do,” answered Jacinda. “That looks like some sort of mining platform.”

Devon looked confused. “Mining? What would they be mining, lava?”

“Exactly. I have read a lot about it. The miners pump lava in and filter out all of the heavy elements from it. They pump the rest out as slag.”

“That sounds dangerous,” Devon said.

“It is,” Jacinda nodded. “If you make any mistakes it can be deadly. That is why they only do it on dead worlds. It is just too dangerous to do on inhabited worlds. The mining can cause lots of problems with the air.”

“Like pollution?” Merrell asked.

“Yes, pollution, and worse. I don’t understand how it all works but I think that to get the most valuable stuff, which is heavy, they have to stir up the lava. I have heard that they use big bombs or other really destructive stuff. That’s what makes it so dangerous. On a dead world there is nobody affected by the earthquakes or new volcanoes that pop up.”

“How could they do it here? They are killing the creepers.” Devon’s voice filled with anger.

“My guess is that these are outlaw miners. Not much better than pirates.” Anger also showed in Jacinda’s voice. “I bet they figured that Forrestal was a backwater that nobody would care about. The creepers were an unexpected problem so they just decided to blast them. People like this give all miners a bad name. Jacinda and her family were happy to be miners, but they knew that a lot of people looked down on miners. Many people saw them as uneducated and simple, unable to make a living at anything other than digging holes. Jacinda’s father always joked that the family all had dirt in their blood and that they were part badger and that was why they liked being miners. He had instilled in his children a deep pride in the hard work of being a miner. This pride drove Jacinda to make herself a silent promise that she would stop the outlaw miners, no matter the cost.

Merrell stepped forward, his fists clenched. “So, what do we do? We have to stop them somehow.”

Jacinda nodded, wearing a determined look. “We owe it to ClearSky and DeepRoot. Humans are messing up their planet and humans should put a stop to it.”

“So do we all agree; we have to try and shut down the mining operation?” Devon asked.

The three friends clasped hands, sealing their decision with the squeeze of their hands.

Devon was the first to let go. He watched curiously as Merrell and Jacinda seemed to share something a bit deeper for a moment. Merrell sighed and put his other hand on Jacinda’s shoulder, giving it a squeeze.

Devon shifted uncomfortably, not sure what to do. He felt awkward interrupting his friends’ moment, but time might prove to be very short. He cleared his throat and spoke.

“They probably don’t have any idea we are here, so that gives us an advantage.”

His words startled Jacinda out of her reverie. She dropped Merrell’s hand and gulped.

“Oh...of course...an advantage. We need that...” Jacinda backed away a step, making Merrell’s hand fall from her shoulder.

“You bet we do,” Devon responded, trying to fill the uncomfortable silence. “These pirate miners sound like very bad people who wouldn’t think twice about hurting a few kids if they got in their way. We need more than a little luck to pull this off.”

Chapter 21

Flim watched the incredible show in the sky for a few moments before realizing that the surprise had made him lose control of his color shifting abilities. He was a bright pink, with purple hair.

With a silent curse he shut his eyes tightly and tried to concentrate. His pink color immediately began to darken, from red, then brown, and finally a deep green.

“That was close,” he whispered to Sammy, not expecting any response. Talking to Sammy just made him feel a bit less alone.

Flim looked over toward the clearing where Devon and the others stood, transfixed by the sky. The creepers were hooting and capering around. He knew that this was probably his best chance of getting close without being seen. He began to sneak closed to the clearing, careful to avoid any dry twigs or leaves that might alert the creepers to his presence.

Flim heard the snapping of a twig to his left, coming from the deep vegetation lying in that direction. He froze like a statue, hoping that he had not been seen by the creepers. Slowly he turned to look in that direction to see what had made the noise.

Flim’s blood turned cold as he saw the outline of a powerful creature pushing its way through the brush. The movement of the creature assured Flim that it was a predator of some sort, hungry for its next meal.

His terror grew as he saw that the creature was not alone. Several other shapes moved in the thick foliage behind the first. He stifled a gasp as the lead creature pushed its way into the open. Flim had never seen such a fearsome beast. It looked mean and hungry and was sniffing the air, looking for something to sate its hunger.

Flim hoped he was not the thing’s next meal. Luckily for the young alien boy, y’Langians were very different from humans and most other aliens. As part of their adaptation for hiding, y’Langians had lost their scent. That is to say, they did not smell like anything in particular. In fact, if they stayed in a particular environment they eventually began to exude the common scents of that environment.

After a few moments, four of the beasts had broken through the surrounding brush and were searching the area with their noses. Each, in turn, passed by Flim, not seeing or smelling

him. After they moved away Flim said a silent prayer to Y'la the creator, thankful for his race's peculiar talents.

Flim watched in horror as the beasts caught the scent of his friends and their captors. The beasts rushed toward the clearing, baying and grunting in equal amounts. Relief washed over him when the largest creeper rose and put himself between the beasts and Devon, Jacinda and Merrell.

Flim's relief turned to amazement when the creeper hooted at the beasts and they simply wandered off, as if they were puppies rebuked by a stern master.

Soon Devon and the others started off again. Flim waited a few minutes and set off after them.

Chapter 22

Deke sat silently in his seat. He stared at the back of the seat in front of him, concentrating. He struggled to think of what to do next. Devon and the others had been missing for the last four hours, and Deke felt helpless.

He silently cursed whatever fate had put him in this position. His first instinct was to rush out and track the missing children, rescuing them from whatever situation that kept them from making a report. The realization that he could not leave the rest of these children alone warred with his desire to rescue Devon's group. His responsibility to all the rest tied his hands. Until they could be rescued by the crew of the Boadicea, he had to stay here, making sure the majority of the children remained safe. It went against all of his maverick instincts.

"So...what exactly are you doing to get us out of this?" Terry Jameson's shrill voice snapped Deke out of his funk.

"Excuse me?" Deke said.

“Well, you are here to take care of us, and I don’t mind pointing out what a sad botch of it you have made.” Terry eyed Deke with smug confidence.

“I’d be surprised if anyone ever hired you again. I mean, four missing kids...who *you* sent out there. What a disaster.”

Deke rose from his seat, angry for the first time this trip. “You had better take your seat, son.”

“I’m not your son. My father could buy and sell you if I asked, so you had better watch your manners.”

Deke took a deep breath, corralling his anger. “Mr. Jameson, as leader of this expedition I must warn you that if you do not take your seat I will have to put you in your seat and lock down the safety harness. I cannot allow you to distress the rest of the group.”

“You had better not touch me,” Terry said fearfully, most of his confidence having fled. “I’ll tell my father, and you’d be finished. He have you in front of a laser firing squad before you knew what hit you.”

The anger drained out of Deke’s face at Terry’s words. “Mr. Jameson, congratulations. I think you may have come up with a solution to one of our problems.”

Deke rose to his feet, pushing past Terry and heading toward the rear of the ship.

“Where are you going?” Terry asked.

“To get my laser rifle, of course.” Deke said over his shoulder.

Terry gulped and hurried back to his seat.

Chapter 23

Devon, Jacinda, and Merrell stood atop the cliff overlooking the pirate mining module. The sun had set nearly an hour ago, leaving the area illuminated by the eerie light cast by the

lava in the valley. The children felt, more than saw, the creepers standing around them in the dense vegetation covering the edge of the cliff.

Devon and the others had decided that the only way to stop the miners was to climb down the cliff, sneak into the module and deactivate or destroy the controls. They all realized that it was not much of a plan, but it was better than nothing.

Preparation for the 'assault' had taken the rest of the afternoon. After nearly a half an hour of speaking slowly and gesturing, Devon had been able to make ClearSky understand what they would need for their plan. With a few hoots, the creepers had sprung into action, gathering strong vines and weaving them together to create ropes that would let the creepers lower Devon and his friends down the cliff near the mining module. The ground around the module looked fairly stable and free of splashing lava.

Whoever these miners were, they were likely to put their module on the most stable ground in the area, so Devon was not too concerned about the hardened lava collapsing under them, but one could never be too careful. The greater danger was from the odd splash of lava or the occasional release of toxic fumes from the crater.

Devon tied a vine rope around his waist and then walked over to the edge of the crater, peering down. It seemed much higher now that he prepared to go over the edge.

He took a deep breath, steeled his nerves and nodded to the gathered creepers. Several of the larger creepers took hold of the rope and began to lower Devon down the cliff.

The trip down the cliff was not as frightening as he had expected. The worst part was standing on the edge of nothing the moment before going over the edge. Once he got past that point he saw little but the cliff face right in front of him. Following what must be one of the oldest pieces of advice in the universe, he did not look down.

Devon said a silent prayer when he reached the bottom. The rock felt solid, but shuddered slightly from the activity beneath the crater. He looked up, watching Jacinda and Merrell descend. Jacinda looked down once or twice on the way down, but didn't seem to be bothered. Merrell's eyes were shut tight when he reached the ground and his completion was a bit on the green side.

"Not much for heights, huh?" Devon asked playfully.

One of Merrell's eyes popped open and he eyed Devon with more than a little irritation. "No, I have never liked heights. Well, not the height so much, but the thought of the splat at the bottom has been more of a concern."

"Oh, just be quiet you two." Jacinda said. "We are down now, so let's just get on the move, before somebody in there sees us." She pointed at the nearby module.

The three were so intent on their task none of them noticed one of the vines swaying back and forth as if someone were climbing down behind them. But, of course, no one was to be seen. That was the whole point.

Devon, Jacinda, and Merrell hurried toward the module, being careful on the uneven surface of cooled volcanic rock. They could see a hatch on the side they were approaching. It looked corroded and burnt, but the whole module looked that way.

Merrell crept forward and tried to turn the wheel that would open the hatch. It did not budge. Devon stepped up, adding his strength. The two tried again, but it still did not open.

"Shoot, it must be locked or something," Jacinda said.

"Then how do we get in and surprise them?" Devon asked.

"Simple," Devon said, "We get them to open the door."

"You are joking, right?" Jacinda was skeptical.

“No, I’m not. Here is my plan.” Devon outlined his plan for Jacinda and Merrell. They all agreed that it was the only way to get in.

Devon and Merrell picked their way carefully around to the side of the module, making sure that they could not be seen if there were any windows or portholes. Jacinda worked her way to the back of the module where the lava intake was.

She took a few minutes to familiarize herself with the equipment. It was not much different than a lot of the heavy equipment that could be found on the mining colony where Jacinda lived. It was all pumps, power couplers and hydraulic actuators.

Slipping a compact toolkit from a storage pocket in her coveralls, she selected a spanner and began working on her part of the plan. She pried the cover off a control port and examined the inside, shaking her head. The wires were old and had obviously been patched several times, each time more sloppy than the last.

Jacinda gingerly prodded the mess of wires, trying to figure out what was connected to what.

“What a mess,” she muttered. “Haven’t these people ever heard of proper maintenance?”

After a few more moments of examining, she smiled widely. She pulled on a pair of thick gloves from one of the many pockets on her coveralls and selected a multitool from her kit.

After one final check of the wiring Jacinda clipped two of the wires. She closed and sealed the control port with a flourish.

“That should fix them.”

She hurried around the side of the module to where Devon and Merrell waited. The three huddled in the shadow of a huge conduit, waiting for their plan to unfold. A few moments passed with nothing happening. Merrell and Devon turned to her questioningly.

“Just another minute and you’ll see.” Jacinda said.

That seemed to satisfy the boys who went back to patiently waiting. A few more moments passed before a low rumbling began. The rumbling morphed into a loud grinding. The grinding grew slower and slower until it sounded like a giant burping. The burp ended abruptly followed by a high pitched pop that sounded like a bottle of fizzup opening. Then...silence.

The silence was a surprise because the mechanical sound of the module had been so overpowering. For the first time they could hear the sound of the bubbling lava nearby.

Merrell smiled and gave Jacinda a thumbs-up. She returned the smile beaming at his approval. Devon watched the exchange and smiled as well, but that had more to do with Merrell and Jacinda’s growing friendship than anything else.

They all heard a mechanical whir as the nearby hatch slid open. A grubby looking fellow emerged, a look of irritation on his face.

“Infernal piece of garbage! I done patched ya four times already.” He said no one in particular.

The man continued to berate the unseen target of his wrath. “If I have to fix you again I’ll recycle you into a toilet control valve.”

Devon had to stifle a laugh as the ragged man ambled and cursed his way to the control port Jacinda had sabotaged. He turned the corner, going out of sight of Devon and the others. This is when they planned on sneaking into the module.

Finally reaching the control port, the man fished in one of the pockets of his baggy jumpsuit. Not finding what he was looking for, he moved on to another pocket. He failed to locate the goal of his quest in that pocket as well.

“Where is that darn zeta-driver?” He growled. “I had it right here...somewhere.”

The man began to empty his pockets, tossing various tools, widget and gizmos onto the ground around him. "Hold on, let me think. I was working on the enviro-evaporator. Then I fixed the core resonator. I didn't need it to adjust the toaster...so I must have left it by the resonator."

While the man searched, Devon and his friends snuck into the module, slipping in the open hatch and hiding behind a stack of battered equipment cases. Devon rummaged around for a moment and found a stained, canvas tarp. He draped the tarp over the stack and then attached it onto a hook on the wall, giving them a bit more cover. With the mess in the room, he did not think that something out of place, like the tarp, would be noticed.

All three froze when they heard a clatter from the other side of the room. Devon peeked out from underneath the tarp, checking to see if the man had returned. He noticed that a box had fallen from a table spilling a handful of electronic parts across the floor, but he did not see any sign of the man.

Just as Devon began to relax, he was startled by the mumbling curses of the man returning from repairing the sabotaged control port.

"Durn, stinkin', broken-down, piece of garbage. Can't hold together for more than a week without fritzin out." He mumbled as he entered the room, thumbing the switch to close the hatch. "If Cappy wants me to keep this place going he is gonna have to pony up a bigger share."

The man turned and stormed out of the room, kicking aside the spilled electronic parts as he did. He stomped through the hatch leading out of the room and slammed it behind him.

Jacinda pulled the tarp aside and ran to the hatch the man had just slammed shut. She punched several buttons on a control panel next to the hatch and then sighed.

"That should lock them out so we can do our work." Jacinda said.

“We risked all that just to lock ourselves in this room?” Merrell asked, looking confused.

“Yup, because these modules are used in very dangerous places, every room, even the hallways, can be sealed and has an auxiliary control console. I may need to hack their control codes, but once I do that we can run the entire module from here. We only needed to get inside so we could access their systems.”

“Good job, Jacinda.” Devon said, obviously impressed. “How long do you think this will take?”

“I can’t be sure until I try to access the system...but if their security is as sloppy as the rest of their operation, it shouldn’t take too long. The first thing we have to do is find the control console.”

Devon, Jacinda, and Merrell began searching the walls, moving cases and generally rummaging around, trying to find anything that might be a control console. Several times Devon though he heard the scrabble of something unseen moving around in the debris around the room, but not seeing anything, he guessed it was probably just a mouse.

The search dragged on for quite a while before it was interrupted by a curse from Jacinda.

“Oh, great. These pirates really don’t care about safety at all.” She said.

“Why, what did you find?” Devon asked.

“Well, I found out where the console is *supposed* to be. Unfortunately, these bozos have removed it, probably to use it as a replacement for one of the primary control consoles. Doing that is just dangerous. If someone was trapped in here during an emergency than they would be helpless.”

“So what do we do now?” Merrell asked.

“Well...I think I may be able to patch my datapad into the system using the interface wires that they *did* leave. But I will be limited in what I can do. But, it may be enough.”

Jacinda once again retrieved the toolkit from her pocket and set to work hooking up her datapad to the control wires. She worked intently, a bit of pick tongue peeking out from the side of her mouth showing her concentration.

She mumbled in frustration a few times before looking up at Devon and Merrell, her face beaming.

“I think I got it. Now I just have to hack their system.” She typed furiously with her thumbs on the tiny keyboard. “It looks like they haven’t even done any security upgrades for quite a while. So...yup, I got it. We are in.”

Devon eyed Jacinda suspiciously. “How do you know how to hack into a system? I knew you could work on hardware and stuff, but the hacking thing is unexpected.”

“What, I just know a little. You know, like enough to watch vids I’m not supposed to...or getting an extra helping of dessert from the food machines. I don’t make a habit of it.” Jacinda responded, a blush growing in her cheeks.

Merrell stifled a laugh. “Don’t worry Jacinda, Devon and I won’t turn you in. In fact, I like your dark side.”

“I don’t have a dark side.” Jacinda said. “Just because I am poor doesn’t mean that I’m a criminal.” Tears welled in her eyes.

Merrell was shocked by Jacinda’s heated response. “Jacinda, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it that way. I...I...I’m just so sorry.”

Jacinda wiped away the tears, her anger disappearing. “No, Merrell, you didn’t mean it bad. I can be sensitive about it. I shouldn’t take it out on you.”

Merrell shifted uncomfortably. “Still, I’m really sorry.”

Jacinda wiped away the last of the tears and cleared her throat.

“Well, that is enough of that. Now let’s get down to business. What should we do first?”

Jacinda asked.

Devon thought for a moment. “Jacinda, you know better than us how to throw a wrench into their works. What do you think we should do?”

Her brows furrowed in thought for a moment. She smiled suddenly, the light of mischief in her eyes. “How about we start by reversing their sewer pumps and work our way up from there.

Chapter 24

Burgess slammed the hatch behind him, scattering various bits of junk. He huffed, and puffed, and grumbled his way back to his control console.

“Cappy had better get me better equipment soon or I’ll jet.” Burgess muttered. “I’m sick and tired of keeping this place together with spit and bailing wire.” As he spoke, he rummaged through a small box filled with electronic do-dads, like rainbow plastic popcorn. He plucked items out one at a time, examining them for a moment then plopped them back into the box. A few he simply tossed them over his shoulder to clatter on the floor, adding to the already considerable piles of junk scattered around.

Burgess’ muttering lessened as his temper cooled, as did the frantic sorting of his bits and pieces. He finally put down the box and turned his attention back to his control console. An amber light on the console drew his attention to the waste control readouts. His confusion turned to shock and then to dismay. He had only a moment to wonder what was going on before a

storm of yelling and the sound of rushing liquid drew his attention away from the console and toward the bathroom hatch.

The hatch slid open, releasing a wave of foul-looking, brown liquid into the room. Cappy rolled into the room, caught up in the vile wave. His arms flailed as he was tossed head-first out of the bathroom, flinging gobs of waste all over the room.

Burgess ducked to avoid a particularly large gob and then nearly gagged as the smell of the onrushing wave hit him. In the small room the stink made him dizzy and burned his eyes. He leapt into his chair, the thought of being caught up in the stinking wave suddenly very terrifying.

Cappy's ride came to an end at the feet of Burgess' chair. Cappy lay there unmoving, the dregs of the wave washing past him. Burgess was afraid. If Cappy was gone then he was stuck here all alone until one of the pilots returned to pick up the smelted ore. On the other hand, if Cappy survived he would surely blame him for this. There was no telling what Cappy might do in anger. Burgess pondered which fate he preferred for Cappy.

Fate answered the question for Burgess as Cappy rolled over with a groan. The groan became a deep cough. Burgess did not want to imagine what Cappy might be coughing up out of his lungs. The thought made him shudder.

Finally, Cappy sat up and eyed Burgess.

"What in tarnation is going on? Even *you* can't be this incompetent." Cappy said.

"I swear I don't know what is happening." Burgess replied. "It's like somebody reversed the sewer pumps on purpose. I watched the readout change, but it was too late to do anything about it, before...well, you know, before your accident."

"It doesn't sound like an accident to me." Cappy snapped.

“Okay, Cappy, let me run the systems through a full check. I’ll find out what happened.”

“Fine, I’ll be in my quarters cleaning up.” Cappy said.

He stood up, his clothes squishing and dripping as he did. He walked over to the hatch leading to the crew quarters.

“Burgess, open the hatch. My hands are dirty.”

Burgess nodded a smile. “Aye, Cappy.” He punched the release button on his console. The console squawked rudely, and the door did not open. He pressed the button again and got the same response.

“Can you hurry it up?” Cappy asked.

“Uh, Cappy, it’s not working. It acts like I am locked out.”

“Whatever it is, fix it...this stuff is starting to dry and I’m getting crackly.”

Burgess had to stifle a laugh. “Aye...Cappy.”

He flipped switches, turned knobs and tried to access any of the other controls, but the console seemed frozen. That could only mean one thing.

“Cappy, I got really bad news.” Burgess said. “Someone else has taken over the controls. That means that they are inside somewhere.”

What?” Cappy said. “Good thing I got this.” He smiled a shark’s smile and drew a chunky pistol from his jumpsuit.

Burgess pales. He might be a bad man, but he had never been a violent one. The thought of fighting intruders made him go pale. Cappy walked over and grabbed the front of Burgess’ jumpsuit.

“Don’t get soft now, Burgess. We have to finish this, and I can’t get out of here unless you can get one of these hatches open.” Cappy snarled. The smell, the gun and Cappy’s snarl conspired to break him out of his shock.

“Sure boss, but I don’t think I can get one of the hatches open...” Burgess said, but was interrupted by Cappy, who waved the gun in his direction. “But I was gonna say that the hatches ain’t the only way out of here.”

Cappy grinned evilly.

Chapter 25

Devon and Merrell stood behind Jacinda as she feverishly tapped out commands on her datapad.

“Okay, everyone is locked in wherever they are. That should give us some time.” Jacinda said, in between keystrokes.

“Any chance they can get out and stop us?” Devon asked.

“Nope, not unless they know some way to override that I don’t know about.” Jacinda answered. “Give me a minute. I need some time to concentrate. I think I figured out a way to shut this whole operation down.”

Devon and Merrell nodded silently. She worked away, mumbling and sighing several times.

“I think I have it.” Jacinda broke the silence and smiled.

“So, what are you going to do?” Devon asked.

“Well, I found out that these bandit miners injected lots of smart probes into a couple of volcanoes. The probes were supposed to give off signals that would make the volcanoes even more active. Well, the plan seems to have worked a bit too well, or maybe they just used too

many probes. Not only did the volcanoes erupt, new ones popped up. That stirred up the really heavy metals and that is what they have been mining.”

“You said you figured out how to stop it.” Devon said, seeming impatient.

“I’m getting to that.” Jacinda rolled her eyes. “I found the control sub-routines for the probes. I can control them now. I could just turn them off, but I have a better idea.” Jacinda smiled, mischief in her eyes.

“What are you up to, Jacinda?” Devon asked.

“Well, according to their records, the miners have a dozen more of these mining modules, all of them unmanned. I reprogrammed the probes to return to the closest unmanned module and wait for another signal. In an hour they will all be in place. Once they are we can tell them to self destruct and they will blow up, along with the unmanned modules.”

Merrell smiled. “Wow, Jacinda, you have a mean streak. I like it.”

All three laughed and sat back to wait the hour until it was time to activate the probes’ self-destruct protocol.

Chapter 26

Deke lifted the heavy case up through the hatch into the passenger compartment of the shuttle. The children craned their necks from the seats, hoping to catch a glimpse of Deke’s burden. After Deke had gone down into the cargo compartment, word had spread about the goal of his trip. Most of the children had never seen a laser rifle, except for on vids or in plasbooks. Hushed speculation abounded about the reason Deke needed the rifle.

Deke followed the case through the hatch. With quick, deft movements he snatched it up and strode toward the front of the ship. All heads turned to watch him as he passed, as if he was a magnet and the children’s eyes were iron.

He reached the front and lay the case down across several seats. He placed his thumb on the biometric lock and it clicked open. Deke opened the case, revealing the disassembled laser rifle. The sight of it brought forth gasps from the children who had turned in their seats and were peering over them. Deke gave them a hard look and they sat back down in their seats.

He retrieved the focus module from the case and laid it on an empty seat. The emitter module was the key piece required to maximize the power of the laser. The more tightly focused the laser, the more power it had. Deke opened his tool kit and began the task of adjusting the focus module so that it did not work as well as it could. He finished the adjustment he began attaching the other parts of the laser.

Deke carefully finished assembling the rifle, rechecking each piece to make sure it was connected properly. Once complete, he inserted the power cell and peered through the scope to check the power level. Fully charged.

The children had regained their courage and were once again peering over the backs of their seats watching Deke. He flipped a switch, powering up the laser rifle. The children's eyes widened at the humming sound that came from the fierce looking weapon.

Deke rose from his seat, hefting the laser rifle on his shoulder. The children gasped in wonderment. To them he looked like some hero out of the vids. He cocked his eyebrow and smiled.

"Time to send a message," Deke said.

Chapter 27

Kepler sat at his console wearing a sad expression.

"Any news, Ensign Kepler?" Captain Leiber asked.

Kepler sighed. "No, sir. The program has not found the right modulation yet."

“How much longer?” The captain asked with a look of concern on his face.

“That is hard to say, sir. My original estimate should have been correct. I am sure that it could be any minute now.”

“Ensign Kepler, I understand that estimates can be wrong, but that does not help us rescue those stranded children. I need results.”

“Sir...” Kepler started to respond but was interrupted by a sharp chirp from his console. He checked it quickly, looking down in surprise.

“Any news now, Ensign?” The captain asked.

“Uh, not exactly, sir. But it looks like somebody down there is trying to talk to us.”

“How so?”

“Someone down there is using some sort of laser signal to illuminate a cloudbank. They are using what the computers say is an old, Terran code.”

“What are they saying, Ensign?”

“I’ll punch up the feed on your console, sir.”

Kepler flicked a few keys and a read-out appeared on the screen in front of the captain.

-Ship down

-No known casualties

-Four children out of contact

-Search for datapad locations if able

-ID 211-4211-7176786

-ID 211-6580-0192874

-ID 211-6421-9751357

-ID 700-0000-0000018

-Situation here not emergency

-Missing children priority

Captain Leiber frowned as he read the data.

“Four children missing, what the devil is Jacobs doing down there? Ensign Kepler, find out who those datapads belong to.”

Kepler hit a few more keys and the readout changed.

-ID 211-4211-7176786 – Blake, Devon

-ID 211-6580-0192874 – Vasquez, Jacinda

-ID 211-6421-9751357 – Gustav, Merrell

-ID 700-0000-0000018 - Sa'Atar, Flimitpoytrolilmas

The captain scanned the names and let out a groan. Everyone on the bridge of the *Boadicea* turned to look at the captain. To most it was the first time they had ever heard their commander show any emotion other than irritation.

The captain rubbed his eyes for a moment and let out sigh. He knew that Devon Blake being one of the missing children complicated matters. Blake's family had great influence and if anything were to happen to him, there could be terrible consequences for the crew as well as the UCF.

“Anything else, Ensign?” The captain asked.

“No, sir. That is all there is, but I guess it is something. At least we know that the ship made it down okay.” Kepler answered.

“Thank goodness for small favors.” The captain replied.

Chapter 28

Cappy leaned close to the grate covering the ventilation port. He could hear voices, but they sounded funny. He thought it must be a trick of the sound traveling through the air vent. The voices almost sounded like they belonged to children, but he knew that could not be right.

He crawled closer to the grate, starting to get a view of the room on the other side through the fine, metal mesh covering the vent opening. He could see motion, but could not make out any details. The voices, however, were clearer. They definitely sounded like they belonged to kids.

“What do you see, Cappy?” Burgess’ voice echoed in the vent.

Burgess grunted as Cappy responded with a kick at Burgess’ face.

“Sorry, Cappy, won’t happen again.” Burgess said, this time in a whisper.

“Keep your trap shut for a minute, you simp.” Cappy snarled. “Whoever is messing with our place is right outside the vent. Trouble is, they are right there. I can’t get in there without them seeing me.”

Cappy was silent for a few moments and then kicked out at Burgess again.

“What? I didn’t say anything.” Burgess protested.

“I know, I wanted a suggestion. Is there any other way in there?” Cappy hissed.

“I can only think of one, and it won’t be comfortable.”

“Fine, I can do uncomfortable. Let’s get out of this vent and you can show me the other way.”

Cappy began backing out of the ventilation tube the way they had come. Burgess had to scramble to keep Cappy’s boots out of his face.

Burgess tumbled out of the vent back in the control room. He splashed in the standing wastewater on his rump, splattering even more of the foul liquid on the walls. Cappy followed, more carefully. He jumped down, trying to land on one of the chairs to stay out of the waste water. The chair tipped over under Cappy's weight, sending him face first into the gunk. Burgess had to fight hard to stifle a laugh.

"By thunder, I'll kill them kids!" Cappy bellowed as he picked himself up out of the gunk, dripping with filth. "I don't care who they are, they'll pay for this." He turned toward Burgess with murder in his eyes.

Burgess' blood turned to ice water. He had seen Cappy mad before. In fact, it was Cappy's normal mood, but he had never seen this kind of rage.

Cappy fixed Burgess with a steely glare. "You better find a way into that room, or I'll use your head for a battering ram. You got that straight?" Cappy growled, his voice strangled with anger.

"You betcha, Cappy. I got an idea, but like I said, it ain't comfortable."

Cappy nodded, still angry, but seeming satisfied with his answer. Relief flooded into Burgess.

With a quick nod Burgess went back to his workstation and picked up his toolkit. He fished out an autospinner and walked toward a pile of crates stacked in the corner of the room. With a sigh he slipped the autospinner into his belt and began to drag crates away from the wall. He finally succeeded in clearing all of the crates away, revealing a removable panel. He sighed, shaking his head. Cappy would not like this idea, but it was the only way Burgess could think of to get into the other chamber.

Burgess removed the panel using the autospanner. As the panel came off, he was hit by a wave of heat. Burgess knocked the autospanner against a large pipe inside the panel, making it resound with a hollow ring. The sound caught Cappy's attention.

His eyes grew wide when he finally understood Burgess' plan.

"No way, Burgess. I'm not crawling through the slag pipe. It'll burn me alive."

Cappy shook his head. "Nope, not right now. Those kids turned it off and the automatic system emptied it out so the slag wouldn't cool inside the tube."

"But it is still hotter than blazes in there." Cappy said.

"Sure it's hot, but if you put on one of our toaster suits you'll be fine." Burgess responded.

"When you said *uncomfortable* I didn't know you meant *this*." Cappy said as he shook his head.

"Well, I think it is your only choice." Burgess said as he opened one of the nearby cases and retrieved a jumpsuit made of silver, quilted material. He held out the toaster suit to Cappy, who took it reluctantly. He reached into the case again, retrieving a matching set of gloves and boots. He held them out as Cappy struggled into the jumpsuit, the presslock fastenings barely able to close over his large belly.

With a look of irritation Cappy took the rest, pulling on the books and then stuffing his chubby hands into the gloves. Burgess had to stifle a laugh. Cappy looked like an overstuffed silver teddy bear in the quilted suit. With an oddly appropriate growl, Cappy pulled on the hood attached to the back of the suit and sealed it tightly. The suit plumped even more as the built in circulation system began pumping cool air through the suit to keep Cappy safe inside the still hot slag tube.

Cappy shoved Burgess out of the way and unsealed the access hatch on the side of the slag tube. Burgess involuntarily stepped back up several feet as a new, more intense wave of heat hit him. Cappy clumsily got to his knees and crawled through the hatch.

The hatch automatically closed behind Cappy, leaving Burgess alone in the control center. He thanked goodness that the heat was gone, but something was still bothering him. He could not quite decide what it was. He was not hungry, or uncomfortable, or sleepy or even bored. Slowly he began to listen to that little voice in his head. It screamed at him that what Cappy was going to do was wrong. Burgess argued with the voice, telling it that there was nothing he could do. With great effort Burgess battered drowned out the little voice, pushing it out of his mind.

Chapter 29

Devon and the others crowded around Jacinda's datapad watching the progress of their plan on the tiny screen. It showed a schematic of the liquid core of the planet dotted with bright pin-pricks of light showing where the miners' probes were located. Most were near the surface hovering in the molten rock, right below the unmanned mining modules. A few were still inching their across the map toward their destination.

"They look nearly there," Devon said.

"Yup," Jacinda agreed. "It should be less than fifteen more minutes and then we can activate them. That will put a stop to the mining."

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Merrell asked.

"It's the best one I could think of," Jacinda said.

"But what if the miners catch us after we blow up their mining thingies?" Merrell asked, concern in his voice.

Jacinda shrugged. “I don’t think it will be a problem. Once we activate the probes we can slip out of here and go back up the cliff. DeepRoot and ClearSky will protect us.”

“Anyway, by the time the miners get back on their feet I’m sure that we will have been rescued.” Devon said. He wore a look of cool confidence. “The *Boadicea* has one of the best crews in the fleet. I bet they have already picked up Deke and the others.”

“I sure hope so,” Merrell said. He seemed to be satisfied with her assurances.

They waited in silence for a few more minutes, fidgeting as they all stared at the screen.

The heat surrounded Cappy like a physical force. It pushed at him constantly as he inched his way through the tube toward the next room where the kids were. Sweat poured down his face behind the mask, making the fabric damp and uncomfortable on his cheeks. He thought to himself for a moment that he knew how a baked potato must feel right before it was finished cooking. He also knew he had better find the exit hatch before he was ready for butter and sour cream. Finally he found the latch to the exit hatch. It was big so that even someone in a toaster suit could turn it easily in the thick gloves of the suit.

The hatch fell open and Cappy could feel the rush of cooler air even through the thick suit. He stepped through the hatch into the room. The red glow from the hot tube cast a harsh red light into the room giving it an ominous feeling.

Cappy scanned the room, intent on finding the kids and ending their little game. The visor on the suit limited his vision but it took him only moments to spy the kids sitting together on the floor. They were frozen, wearing looks of terror.

‘Good,’ Cappy thought to himself. ‘They had a reason to be afraid. They had caused him a lot of trouble and he intended to give it back, and worse.’

Devon watched the screen intently. The probes were nearly in place. In minutes they would be able to trigger them and put an end to the mining operation. Jacinda and Merrell watched the screen as well and Devon was sure that they were feeling the same strange sense of excitement that he was.

He could not figure out exactly what this peculiar feeling of excitement was coming from. He knew that he was excited to be helping DeepRoot and ClearSky, but that did not quite fit. Neither did the excitement of giving the bandit miners a taste of justice explain it. There was something else there. Adventure? Maybe that was it. Devon had read all the old stories of swashbucklers and such who craved adventure, but he never thought to taste it himself. Well, maybe he had...and he liked the taste. It had to be the taste of adventure, with a side order of danger to spice it up. Devon knew his parents would never approve, but it was too late now.

Devon's thoughts were interrupted by a loud clanging from behind them. All three children spun around on their rear ends to see what had caused the sound. Horror filled them as they saw a silver, man-shaped creature step out of a burning hatch in the far wall. A wave of heat rolled into the room, hitting the kids like a slap.

The creature craned its neck, scanning the room, and then it saw them. With a growl it advanced, silver arms stretched toward them. Devon cringed, fear filling him, the taste of adventure suddenly not so sweet.

As the creature approached it brought a new wave of heat with it. Merrell tried to get to his feet to fend off the creature. It swatted him with its silver arm, sending him hurtling into the wall. Merrell collapsed with a grunt. Jacinda scrambled on her hands and knees to his side, crying and shouting his name.

Devon remained frozen in terror, unable to move. His mouth moved in a silent cry while the creature towered over him. The thing raised its arm, ready to strike him. Devon covered his eyes, partly from the heat given off by the monster and partly in fear of the impending blow. There was a thump, followed by an even louder thump and a deep moan.

When the blow did not land, Devon lowered his arms. He was greeted with the one of the sweetest sights he could imagine. Flim stood with his foot on the creature, clutching a steel pipe in his hand.

Flim reached down and grabbed the top of the creature's head, giving it a quick tug. To Devon's amazement, the head came off; or rather the hood came off revealing a man's ugly face.

"It's a man?" Devon exclaimed. He then realized that Flim was no longer missing. He stared at his alien friend in disbelief.

"Yup," Flim answered. "Luckily he didn't see me, so while he was giving you the toaster yeti treatment I got the drop on him."

"But, how did you get here?" Devon asked, still confused.

"Me, I've been with you since you got picked up by those green creatures. I just decided to stay hidden, until we knew more. You never know when a little surprise can come in handy." Flim was grinning from ear to ear.

"Flim!" Jacinda interrupted their conversation. "You creep, you have been following us that long?" she asked. Merrell stood behind her, rubbing his sore head, but looking otherwise unhurt.

Flim looked embarrassed for a moment. "Uh...yes. It was all part of my plan. I wanted to be able to rescue you, just in case. Just like this," he stammered.

Jacinda's glare melted. "Okay, I suppose you made the right decision, but you had us worried sick...and you enjoyed it way too much." She ended with a wide smile.

Flim helped Devon to his feet. All of them looked down at the man, wondering what to do next. Jacinda put her hands on her hips and eyed the others seriously.

"Okay, I have a plan," she said.

"I didn't see that coming," Flim replied, laughing.

Jacinda glared at him for a moment and then smiled again.

"Well, as long as everyone agrees that I'm bossy, I don't have a problem. Now listen up. Merrell, you find something to tie up this guy with, whoever it is. Devon, you watch that hatch, just in case somebody else comes through. That is not the guy we saw outside, so there is at least one more bad guy around here somewhere. Flim, you do what you do best. Get lost. We may need the surprise again. I'm gonna finish up with the probes and then we can get out of here."

They all nodded, happy to feel near the end of this particular adventure. Merrell located a length of plastic cord and tied up the man, not worrying too much about being gentle. Devon picked up the steel pipe Flim had used to dispatch their last attacker and positioned himself near the open hatch, ready to defend his friends. He looked up to give Flim a wink, but the alien boy had already disappeared.

Jacinda picked up the datapad and examined the screen.

"All of the probes are in position. I'm going to go ahead and activate them." She gave each of her friends a quick look to make sure none of them had any objections. Seeing none, she pressed the final button to make the probes blow up.

For a moment they all stood looking at each other, wondering what would happen. Suddenly, a deep boom rang out through the ground. They could feel it through the soles of their feet. The boom died away leaving them all in silence.

“That’s it?” Flim said from somewhere, but still not visible. They all began to laugh.

They were interrupted by a deep rumbling that shook the module, shaking all of the cargo cases around them. They looked in horror at each other as the entire module bucked and shook.

“We had better get out of here,” Merrell shouted over the clatter of falling cargo cases.

Jacinda pointed at the fallen and bound man. “What do we do with him? We can’t just leave him.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Devon answered. “Let’s see if we can drag him out of here with us. Getting him up the cliff will be the problem.”

Merrell and Devon each took hold of the silvery fabric of the man’s suit and pulled together. Unfortunately, the man did not budge. Jacinda bent over and tried to lend a hand, but they still had no luck.

“Sure, we had to knock out the biggest bad guy around,” Jacinda said. “Let’s try one more time.”

The three pulled at the man’s clothes but his bulky mass still refused to move.

“What do we do now?” Merrell asked.

Devon shrugged and looked at Jacinda.

“We just can’t leave him. It is the miners’ code,” Jacinda said, her eyes filling with tears.

The three friends stood silently for a few moments, pondering just how to proceed. Their thoughts were disturbed by a loud pounding on the inner hatch they had locked. Devon rushed to the hatch and listened. The pounding came again and Devon could make out a faint voice.

“Help, I’m trapped in here,” the voice called. “You can’t just leave me here.”

“There is somebody in there,” Devon said. “I think we have to let them out.

Jacinda nodded grimly and retrieved her datapad, still hooked into the mining module’s control system.

Merrell found a stout piece of metal, testing its usefulness as a weapon by swinging it experimentally a few times. Devon still gripped the metal pipe that Flim had used to knock out the man earlier.

Jacinda keyed in a few more commands and then looked up at her friends.

“Are you ready?” she asked.

Devon and Merrell both nodded.

Jacinda pressed the last button the hatch slid open. The grubby looking man they had seen earlier tumbled out of the hatch with a grunt.

Devon hovered over the man, his makeshift club at the ready.

“Oh lord, what did you do?” The man wailed on the verge of panic.

Jacinda stepped forward. “We destroyed your probes, to stop the eruptions.”

The man looked horrified. “You destroyed the probes? Are you crazy?”

“No, I’m not crazy,” Jacinda snapped. “We had to do something to shut you folks down. You were destroying the Creepers’ world.”

“Well, if we don’t get out of here, we are fried,” the man said.

“Well, we kinda figured that out,” Merrell stepped toward the man, his makeshift club raised. “You’re just lucky we decided to let you out.”

“Okay, sonny, just settle down,” the man’s demeanor suddenly changed. “No need to be so hostile. We are all in this together now. My name is Burgess, by the way.”

“Now that that is settled, grab your friend and let’s get out of here,” Jacinda said. The commanding tone in her voice stopped any argument before it could begin.

Burgess nodded, stood up and walked over to the other man.

“Looks like somebody gave him a good whack on the noggin,” Burgess said as he checked out the man. “I can’t say that Cappy didn’t have it coming.”

Burgess grabbed the collar of Cappy’s silver suit and began dragging him toward the hatch leading outside. His face reddened as he struggled with Cappy’s unconscious bulk.

“Little help?” Burgess muttered.

Merrell sighed but helped Burgess pull Cappy outside. Pulling Cappy across the rough stone toward the cliff proved even more difficult and Devon had to join the effort.

By the time they made it to the bottom of the cliff Devon, Merrell and Burgess were red-faced and breathing heavily.

“If he was this hard to get this far how are we ever going to get him up the cliff?” Devon asked.

“We need some way to let the creepers know we need them to lower the vines so we can get back up,” Jacinda said.

“If Sammy were only close enough I could send a message to him through my datapad, but he is still back near the ship,” Devon said, sounding disappointed.

“No he isn’t,” Flim said, his voice seeming to come from thin air.

“Flim, please don’t do that. It makes me nervous,” Jacinda said irritably.

Flim slowly materialized standing next to cliff.

“My apologies. Sometimes I forget that I am still invisible.”

“What did you say about Sammy?” Devon asked, suddenly very interested in the conversation.

“I said he isn’t back at the ship,” Flim responded with a bit of a smile. “He is right at the top of the cliff.”

“But how did he get there? Did you bring him with you?” Devon asked.

“No, I actually followed him. He is better than a SeekerBot. He never lost your trail.”

Devon could not believe his ears. He never thought that Sammy’s programming was that complex. Devon made a mental note to ask his parents about the programming the next time he saw them. There seemed to be more to Sammy than he ever imagined.

“Let me see what I can do with Sammy,” Devon said. He pulled out his datapad and keyed in the command to open a communication channel to Sammy.

“Sammy, if you are within range please signal” Devon said into his datapad. Almost immediately they all heard a shrill horn sounding from somewhere above.

“We are in luck,” Devon said with a smile.

He set to work having Sammy fasten a winch line to a tree on top of the cliff. They decided to take turns riding up using Sammy’s built in winch.

Jacinda was the first up. She was puzzled when she did not see any of the creepers around. Either they had hidden like they had earlier or they had simply left, sure that their people were no longer in danger. Still, she would have felt better if she could have said goodbye.

Devon was next up, followed by Burgess and then Flim.

Sammy’s electric motor strained to raise Cappy to the top, but finally got him up.

Devon reached down to check on Cappy as Sammy brought up Merrell, the last of them left to make the trip up.

Just as Devon touched Cappy's neck, the man lashed out, sending Devon tumbling back into the underbrush. Cappy struggled to his feet and took a couple of awkward steps toward freedom. He stopped short, backing toward the clearing at the edge of the cliff.

They were all puzzled by this, but understood when DeepRoot stepped out of the forest, looming over Cappy.

"Don't hurt me," Cappy cried, putting his tied hands over his head.

DeepRoot reached out, placing his hand on Cappy's arm. The big man seemed to crumble before them, falling to his knees and weeping.

Devon had experienced DeepRoot's touch and knew what Cappy must be seeing with his mind's eye. He could not imagine how much more powerful the experience must be for Cappy, being the one responsible for the creepers' pain.

Burgess watched in horror as his boss wept like a child.

"Is that thing gonna do that to me too?" He asked.

Devon shrugged. "I don't know. I think it all depends on how sorry you are for what you did. The creepers seem to be able to sense stuff like that."

"Oh, I'm sorry...sorry I ever came here. Sorry I ever let Cappy bully me into doing any of this. Sorry for how everything turned out. And most of all, I'm sorry for what we did to them. It wasn't my idea...but I didn't stop it either. I guess I deserve whatever they do to me." Burgess sat down on the ground holding his head in his hands, weeping.

ClearSky emerged from the forest, walking over to Burgess. She looked down at him for a few moments, her huge eyes reflecting the afternoon light. She gently reached down, putting

her hand on the grubby man's shoulder. Burgess froze for a moment and then looked up in wonder.

"They forgive me," he cried. "How can they be so understanding?"

Devon and the others looked at each other, all smiling. Perhaps the creepers were not the only ones who had been saved that day.

Devon thought he might have seen Jacinda wipe away a few tears as well, but he decided not to mention it.

Chapter 30

Ensign Kepler checked the control displays on the drop shuttle. The atmospheric interference had cleared up several hours ago and the crew of the *Boadicea* had immediately launched the drop shuttle. The captain had given the honor of commanding the ship to Ensign Kepler. The captain had barked something about earning the privilege and Commander Saberhagen had agreed. Kepler took it as a compliment and any praise from the captain was hard won and meant a lot to him.

Kepler peered over his shoulder. Through the open cabin door he could see the children they had just rescued. Their guide, Deke Jacobs, sat in the front row, a bandage around his head and cradling the laser rifle he had used to signal the ship through the interference. The sound of happy chatter from the children gave Kepler a proud feeling, the feeling that he had done a good job. His only task now was to pick up the children who had been separated from the others and trekked out into the jungle. The crew had heard some vague story about strange aliens and bandit miners. The story seemed to Kepler very unlikely, but the captain had told him to expect a couple of prisoners...so the story just might be true.

Peering at his sensor screen, Kepler homed in on the clearing where the children waited. Through his cockpit window he could see four children, along with two dejected looking adults, both men. He could have sworn that some of the trees on the edge of the clearing were moving, but he dismissed it as a trick of the light.

Kepler set the ship down as lightly as a leaf dropped by a breeze and a cheer rose from the kids in the cabin behind him, making him smile. It had been a couple of long days since the kids had shut down the machines causing the atmospheric interference. The captain had ordered the kids in the jungle to return to the crashed ship, but one very determined young lady had set him straight. She insisted that they were fine where they were and expected rescue soon.

Kepler pressed the button to lower the rear ramp of the ship. It opened with a hiss of pressurized air and a electric whirring. Hushed whispers of aliens and pirate miners passed through the newly-rescued students. They craned their neck toward the back of the ship hoping to catch a glimpse of anything exotic. Instead they were greeted with a gentle surge of warm, moist air and the sounds of the jungle outside.

Two marines leapt from the ship, rifles ready, the moment that the ramp clanged completely open. Kepler rose from his seat and began walking toward the back of the ship. He scolded several children for standing in the aisle and gawking. Kepler emerged just in time to see the marines escort the two men toward the back of the ship. One, dressed in a silver, insulated suit glared at him. The other man gave him a weak smile as the marines hustled them past and into the ship.

Kepler approached the four waiting children. They looked dirty and tired, but otherwise unharmed.

“Hello there,” he greeted them. “I am Ensign Kepler. Are any of you injured?” he asked.

They all shook their heads wearily.

“Well, that is good. Now which one of you is Mr. Blake?” Kepler asked.

Devon perked up. “That’s me, sir.”

“Ah, very good. If you would come with me, we have a small cabin reserved for you for the trip back up to the ship.” He turned to the others. “We have seats for the rest of you as well,” he said with a smile.

Jacinda began to say something, but Devon put his hand on her arm. He stood up and approached Kepler, looking irritated.

“Excuse me, Mr. Kepler. I’m sure you are only following orders, but there is no way that you are going to separate me from my friends. I don’t need any special treatment.” Devon’s voice was strong and confident, but showed no trace of anger.

“Uh...I’m sorry sir, but the arrangements have already been made,” Kepler stuttered.

“Well, Mr. Kepler, this is your chance to collect a favor from someone who’s family owns a lot of stock in the company who runs your ship,” Devon said with a grin.

Kepler relaxed when Devon smiled. “Of, course, sir, I am sure we can accommodate you. Perhaps we could let Mr. Jacobs recuperate in the private cabin for the trip up. He was injured” Kepler said.

“That sounds like a great plan,” Devon said as he patted Ensign Kepler on the arm.

Kepler turned on his heel and walked back up the ramp into the ship. Devon whistled and Sammy rose on his spindly legs. He motioned for the others to join them and followed Kepler up the ramp.

Devon and the others turned once they had boarded and watched the ramp slowly close, sealing out the bright sunlight and early smell of Forrestal. They were filled with great joy that everything had turned out well, but felt a bit of loss at the same time.

Their adventure had not begun or ended as they expected, but none of them would ever regret it. They had discovered more than just bandit miners and mysterious aliens. They had discovered friendship, and they knew deep down that this was something that would last.