



STARGAZER

Stargazer by Brandon Cole Phillips

Dedicated to...

My Family, *my support*.

My friends,

Brandon Cochran, Chris Schoen, Jared Martin,

Erin Hickox, Chris Freund,

Andrew Lupi, & Kevin Nickolson

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Preface

This book's genesis took place in my last few weeks of high school. A friend and I engaged our English class to help us generate a short film script. Cochran and I loved to make short films as children. That love continued well into high school as we made promotional videos for school dances, funny short films to show for our marching band on long bus trips, and much more.

The script came into being as a nice twenty-page draft called "The Night Before". Sadly, as we all went our separate ways after graduating, the film was never made.

Just one semester into college I was afflicted with a terrible disease that placed me in the hospital several times, as well as on various medical treatments. I was bedridden for nearly four months. Luckily, I had received an iBook for graduation, and as my interest in the story grew, so did the details surrounding it. Before long I had a full outline plotted with characters and situations that sprung forth from the small plot I had at the beginning.

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I typed from my bed as much as I could when I was well. And then I got better. I was back in school full time and working part time. It was hard for me to find time to write, but when I did, it flowed.

Nearly five years passed. School had come and gone. I still typed in my free time on my book, never expecting to actually finish it.

The story is full of tidbits from old short films that my friends and I had made as kids, as well as things from my own life and the lives of friends and family. I love this story, I love my characters, and I cannot wait to pen the next installment.

Thank you for reading, and I hope that you enjoy this work as much as I have!

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Brandon", with a stylized, cursive script.

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Prologue

July 6th, 1947

A tropical storm brewed over the Gulf of Mexico. Thunder boomed and rain danced atop the stirring waters. A bolt of lightning streaked across the dark sky, spitting a blast of molten light out across the ocean. The glowing orange disc skipped along the surface of the water and dove down into the deep.

A small trail of steamy bubbles crested at the ocean's surface as the heat of the ship dissipated into the cool, churning water. The ship was surrounded in a warm pocket of nitrogen gas. This pocket increased its ability to move fluidly and reduced friction on the craft from the busy waters. The craft moved quickly in sudden bursts and occasionally broke into rapid directional changes. The disc rode the continental shelf. It passed beside oil rigs and under fishing boats as it increased in speed.

Cooled down from its super-heated state, the saucer-shaped ship burst forth from the water in all its platinum-plated glory. It was just over thirty-six feet in diameter and

ten feet in height. It was seamless, and almost featureless. The only visible adornments were a tiny porthole on the top and a defined ridge where the center of the ship met the flat outer disc.

It traveled upward into the clear skies over Mississippi. Forests of trees and swamps passed underneath as the craft dipped forward and thrust into its top sub-atmospheric speed. The ship followed along a small channel of the Mississippi river. It slowed, dipped to the right, and grazed the edge of the outer disc across the water's surface. A lone deer took casual notice of the craft but continued to graze, unfazed by the intruder.

The saucer climbed high into the atmosphere. The sky became dark for a moment, but quickly grew blue again as the craft fired downward and leveled out over an expansive field of corn. The sun scorched the Kansas plains. A pair of farm boys shrieked with delight as the craft shot low over their heads.

Within minutes, the ship was hovering high over the snow-capped peaks of the Rocky Mountains. It hung still

in the sky as its pilots reconfigured their coordinates inside.

A long grey finger slid across the control display. The backlight of the screen turned from a golden yellow to bright blue. The craft shot south toward the dry desert air of the New Mexico summer. A dusty gust of wind sprayed the ship with sand. The sandy haze melted into glass pellets and fell like sleeting rain to the ground below.

The ship wavered and slowed. The control display flashed red and orange. Something had interfered with the navigation system. The craft took on a life of its own, blasting straight upward into the evening sky. It slowed as it climbed and stopped at nearly sixty-thousand feet, as the control displays went dark. Two of the pilots worked quickly to route secondary power to the navigation system, as the third manually engaged the rear magneto-repulsor array. It was a last-ditch attempt to keep the disc parallel with the Earth.

The altitude dropped rapidly as the back-up power supply was finally engaged. The ship thrust forward with a

hard jolt. The pilots were thrown to the floor of the craft as it maintained its level but continued in a slightly forward descent.

A rocky out-cropping pierced the belly of the craft as it crashed hard into the ground. One of the small pilots was tossed from the ship and landed nearby. The saucer impacted slowly, but with enough explosive force to scatter debris for nearly a mile. The bulk of the ship remained intact, with two of the small beings trapped inside to suffocate in the unforgiving pollution of Earth's atmosphere.

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"What the hell is this thing, Corman?" Riddell asked his recovery team leader.

"General Riddell, Sir!" Corman responded excitedly, "It's just like the one we were given by the Mexican army in March. But this one! This one! Its propulsion system is fully intact! We've got the torch team disassembling it now!"

"Good. Very, very good. We'll send it to Fort Worth and they can forward it on to Wright-Patterson if needed," Riddell replied, "And what of the passengers?"

"Three pilots sir, two dead. One still alive inside the craft. We've got it on oxygen, but it doesn't seem to be helping much," Corman responded.

"Mix it with 80% nitrogen and pump it right into the lung cavity like last time," Riddell ordered, "We need to keep it alive until we can get a telepath up to Groom Lake. This time we cannot afford to miss contact with whoever sent it. Find out everything you can from it about the ship and the propulsion system before it dies. Ask about its home turf. And have Rogers clean up this shit in the papers about a saucer."

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Chapter One

Starving Student

Rain pelted the windows yet again. It was the third day that week that undesirable weather had plagued southeastern Oklahoma. Storms were not an uncommon occurrence in the peak of the summer. The small community of Ravenwood had experienced its share of rain that year, and this storm was no different than the others. Uninvitingly cold, depressingly dreary, and eerily dark, it was a day better suited for a nap than for picnics in the park.

Faith sat at her newly acquired kitchen table, a souvenir purchase from a local thrift store. It was an old whitewashed piece – built of cheap pecan, with knotholes all down the legs. It was kitschy, though – and that made Faith content. She prided herself on her eclectic tastes, and was always on the lookout for something unique and inspiring to add an individual flair to her dank low-income apartment. From the satin curtains to the antique Tiffany lamps to the shag rugs – Faith maintained a style all her own.

As she sat staring blankly at a swirling cloud of cream in her mug of decaf Arabica coffee, she reminisced about better days. She thought back to times when she was not faced with great responsibility. She thought of times when she was not carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders. She enjoyed keeping the few pleasant memories she had, as her spirit had never fully recovered after her good friend's passing. The limited time they had together had been a lone shining point in her progressively dreary life. His lively spirit and the gifts he had left with her had changed Faith forever.

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Faith climbed into her two-tone Ford Tempo, another luxury of being an unmarried independent student. She was dreading another day at the hospital. For the last few years she had been working in the pediatric ward as a registered nurse, while trying to complete her doctorate at the university. It had been a difficult decision to decide to go back to school after she had established herself at the hospital, but the pay simply was not enough for her to live

comfortably by herself. She was certain that she would be living alone for some time to come.

Dating never came naturally to Faith. She was not into the bar scene, and the guys she met at the local coffee shop were not exactly the type to bring home to the folks. Their blackish-blue hair and eyeliner were not qualities Faith's father would appreciate. Faith also knew that he would not approve of the jersey-wearing frat-boys either, but at least he would be able engage them in conversation. Night after night, Faith sat alone at her kitchen table.

Faith let out a groan before inserting the key into the ignition, knowing full well that there was little chance that the Tempo would roar to life.

She was justified in her pessimism, as the starter would not make a sound. Faith continued to turn the key, hoping that eventually something would come of it.

"Jeez," she mumbled to herself, "Yet another perfect morning."

A loud thunk on the passenger side window sent a chill up her spine.

"Needing a little help again this morning Ms. Forester?"

"Oh, Dale, dear God, it's just you!" Faith said grasping at her heart as if it was going to leap out through her scrubs. It seemed as if she needed Dale's help every other morning in getting the Tempo to start.

"Sorry to startle you, Ms. Forester, you'd think I'd have learned by now," Dale said with a wink as he rounded the front of the car to pop open the hood.

Dale was a generous old country man, who, due to an eminent domain purchase, was displaced into the city nearly five years before. He was rarely seen outside the house not sporting a Dickies work shirt mostly hidden by a pair of coveralls. His beard hung nearly to the middle of his chest, untrimmed for a number of years. It was knotted and gnarled in a hopeless mess. His wife Margaret was equally as generous and endearing. She would often invite Faith over for some down-home country cooking. The meal always ended with a freshly baked cobbler for desert.

"Couple spark plugs are shot again, Ms. Forester. You know, eventually, I'm gonna run out of spares to stick in here and you're gonna hafta buy a few," Dale said, winking again.

"I know," Faith smiled, "And you'll have to come with me to show me what to get."

"Naturally, young lady. I'd be honored assist you!" Dale said with a paternal smirk, lumbering his gargantuan frame over to his work truck to gather the necessary tools and parts.

Faith pulled herself through the car window and sat in the window frame, hunched over the top of the car. She did so every time Dale had to work under the hood. He was like a second father to Faith. Margaret was like a mother. When Faith's mother mysteriously left the family, Faith was merely a toddler. She and her father had rarely discussed the circumstances surrounding her disappearance.

From Faith's vague recollection, June Forester had never left any notice that she was at all displeased with her

life and family in Ravenwood. All Faith could recall about the incident was a series of unidentified phone calls that increased until the point that her mother vanished. When June Forester had gone, the phone calls had ceased. Her departure had long been a mystery to her loved ones, yet no mention of it was ever made. It was painful to recall.

Faith still had no favor for answering strange calls so many years later. The incident had traumatized her with a terrible paranoia.

When Faith moved into her apartment at 14 North Yorkshire and first met Margaret, the two fell into a light conversation that lasted for hours. Over the past few years they had developed quite a close friendship. Margaret became something Faith had longed to have had in her life – a mother figure. She was a woman of strong character and great wisdom. Margaret guided Faith through many difficult times where she may have otherwise faltered.

“How’s the missus, Dale?” Faith grinned, knowing that she was about to receive an invitation.

"She's doing pretty well these days," Dale said, peering over the top of the hood, "I'm sure she'd love to see ya, if you're available for eats tonight."

Faith's grin grew bigger, "You know I'd never miss Maggie's cooking!"

"Well, then I'll make certain she knows you'll be there," Dale said with a nod and wink as he slammed the hood down.

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Yet again, Faith would miss her morning donut run. She sighed with a grimace as she watched the little pastry shop lose itself amongst the other restaurants in her rearview mirror. She would have to wait until one o'clock to fill the void in her stomach, but she was accustomed to the torture of an empty gut. Hunger had become increasingly common as her car continued to fail before work and as more money poured from her bank account into the college. Making matters just a bit more unbearable, it was her job to serve breakfast and lunch to the children before she was able to sit down for a meal.

She often fantasized about sneaking a cup of pudding off of the cart and darting into an employee break room to snack, but she would never entertain the thought past a daydream.

"Faith, honey, so glad you're here," said Pam, the admissions clerk, "We've got a new patient in room four twenty-four. I need you to get an IV started."

"Sure thing," Faith replied with a yawn, as she warmed up the water to wash her hands. Starting intravenous fluids was the one thing about Faith's job that she could not stand doing. She did not like veins, she did not like blood, and she did not like making little children cry. However, she suffered through it. She hoped that when she would become a pediatrician, she would not have to do the dirty work any longer.

Faith knocked on the door and opened it slowly. A young boy, blonde hair and freckles, was sitting on the bed playing with the controls. The boy and his mother had not noticed Faith entering the room. Faith watched the boy make the bed go up and down several times before it

stopped at the highest point. The boy's eyes darted toward Faith, then to his mother, then back again.

"Sorry ma'am," he said apologetically.

"Ah, don't worry about that. You aren't the first kid that's tried to blast out of here on these magic beds," Faith scrunched up her nose and smiled.

The boy grinned from ear to ear and looked to his mother, who nodded and returned the smile.

"So, what are you in here for?" Faith inquired.

The boy pointed to his stomach.

"He's been experiencing some severe stomach pains the last couple of days," the boy's mother explained.

Faith had heard of this many times before, and all the possibilities were running through her head. Appendicitis, ulcers, lymphoma – it could be any number of things. Thankfully, she thought, it was not her job to decide. That was one responsibility she could definitely wait for.

"Well, I'm going to start you on what's called 'intravenous fluids', which means I'm going to take this little tiny needle, and slide it into a vein in your arm," Faith

explained, "Then, you'll hear a little click, and the needle will slip out and just leave an itty bitty little plastic tube in your arm. Then, I'll plug that tube into a bag of saline, which is basically just water, and it'll keep you from drying out on me."

The boy looked to his mother, uncertain.

"Don't worry," his mother said in a comforting tone, "You're a big boy."

Faith pulled on a pair of latex gloves and scrubbed the boy's arm with a dab of alcohol.

"What's your name?" she asked the boy.

"Nate," he replied sheepishly.

"Okay, Nate, here comes a big stick."

Faith pushed the needle into Nate's arm as he fought back tears with groans. His mother turned her head, unable to watch her baby in pain. Just as soon as the moans had started, the room fell into silence – Nate sniffing heavily to keep his nose from dripping the bravely retained tears into his lap.

"Wow, no tears," Faith remarked, "You're quite a trooper. I wonder if your mom would let you have a bit of candy before the doctors come in to see you?"

Nate's mother nodded in approval.

"What would you like, Nate?" Faith asked, hanging the saline drip, "Maybe a sucker?"

Nate nodded and licked his lips with exaggerated expression.

"Well then, I'll be right back."

Faith walked down the hallway toward the employee break room to raid the candy dish, when she stopped to inspect a girl with familiar features.

"Angie?" she asked, "Angie McDowell! Is that you?!"

"Faith Forester! Oh my God, how in the heck are you?" Angie exclaimed, embracing her old high school friend.

"I'm great," Faith said enthusiastically, "Could be better, but I have no complaints. Where've you been the last... What is it now? Six years?"

Angie laughed, "It's been seven. I can't believe you're a nurse! That's so cool!"

"Heh, it's a living I guess. I'm studying to be a doctor."

"Really?" Angie was astounded, "I always thought you wanted to be an archeologist. Like a modern day Indiana Jones!"

"Well," Faith said looking Angie over, "People change over time. Speaking of which, you sure have sprouted."

"Yeah," Angie began, laughing, "I grew about six inches in the year following graduation, now I can look into your eyes when I'm talking to you!"

Pam shot Faith a look signaling that she should quickly get back to business.

"Hey look, I've gotta get back to work," Faith complained, "Do you wanna meet some time and catch up?"

"Sure! I'd love to, when?"

"Is Thursday okay? It's the only day I'm remotely free," Faith offered.

"Excellent," Angie said excitedly, "Harbor Cafe, noon, like old times?"

“Of course!” Faith said, backing herself through the break room door.

Angie had been a close friend of Faith’s for her four years of high school. They met in band when they were freshman and were soon after inseparable. After graduation, Angie went off to college in Kentucky, and Faith stayed home with her father to help out with the bills and to take care of her older brother, Ronnie, who was both mentally and physically disabled. Faith lost all contact with every one of her friends, with the inclusion of Angie, shortly following graduation. With that, she moved on into adulthood with little transition period between.

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The journey home was always the same – drudgingly slow. However, Faith was a patient girl and made sure to take every opportunity she could to sing along with her car stereo. Occasionally a car full of high school-aged jocks would pull up beside her and catch her belting out a tune, in which case she would shyly slide her finger onto the window controls and cage herself in.

Faith was a pretty girl, but in a homely sort of way. She had auburn dyed hair, light freckles, and bright green eyes that shone like emeralds in a hint of sunlight. She was no beauty queen, but she had been known to turn a few heads. What was most attractive was the air of maturity she carried about herself. When looking her over, one would quickly gather that she was no little girl. Faith was a woman and presented herself as such. One could tell by the expression of care on her face that she was wise beyond her years. It was an attribute she certainly gained from the trials of her youth.

Faith finally pulled into the space in front of her apartment. Dale's truck was absent from the parking lot, indicating that he had found more odd jobs to supplement his usual work. This meant that dinner would be delayed an hour or so, giving Faith plenty of time to shower the day's wear from herself. Sweat, grime, misery – they would all be washed down the drain.

Faith walked through her small living room, pausing briefly to sprinkle a bit of food into her fish's bowl. She

undressed as she walked, dropping her scrubs to the floor of the hallway, to be picked up later that evening – or the next day.

As she reached in and turned the faucet, the loud ring of the telephone in the next room startled her. She adjusted the faucet to her precisely tuned temperature – an exact three quarters turn – and darted into the next room to grab the handset. Faith was never one to pick up a call without first checking the caller ID, and she was puzzled to see that the screen was blank. There was no number or name. Thinking this just a bit suspect, and probably someone checking her satisfaction with her long distance rates, she decided against answering the call. After all those years since her mother's disappearance, she still could not help but shudder at anonymous phone calls.

As she showered, the telephone continued to ring. Faith stepped out of the shower and proceeded to dry her hair and clothe herself. All the while the telephone did not miss a ring. She briefly considered investing in an answering machine.

"Who the hell could this be?" Faith mumbled out loud, reaching for the cordless phone.

"Hello?" she answered in a somewhat sarcastic tone.

"Good afternoon Ms. Forester, we've been trying to reach you for a while now," said a voice on the other end.

"I noticed," said Faith, dumbfounded, "Who might this be?"

"Let's just say we've been watching you for quite a while," the voice said, with an almost hollow tone.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Faith asked, now miffed, "Is this some kind of prank?"

"No young lady, this is no prank. Actually, we are in need of your assistance in a crucial matter," the voice took a deep breath, "May we schedule a meeting with you?"

"Step off," Faith said dryly, hanging up the phone.

Not a second later, the phone began to ring again. It rang and rang, and was ringing as Faith left her apartment to go eat dinner with the Joneses.

Margaret opened the door before Faith could even knock. She always seemed to know when Faith was coming.

"Come in, Dear, have yourself a seat," Margaret invited her in.

Like Faith, Margaret had quite an eclectic taste in furniture. In all the years that she had been married to Dale, she had never thrown out a single piece. There was a sofa against the wall adjacent to the kitchen that must have been from the early fifties. It was sun-bleached across the back, fading down into an orange leaf pattern tipped off at the bottom with golden trim. Next to the couch sat a stained-glass end table playing host to a lamp shaped like a woman's leg – just like the one in *A Christmas Story*. Yet another piece of interesting furniture that always seemed to catch Faith's eye was a dusty pink chair with brass buttons lining the back, sitting atop a set of sturdy cherry legs. It did not match anything else in the room and stuck out like a sore thumb. It was Margaret's favorite piece, and

she sat in it for the majority of the day watching her soaps and talk shows, as she knitted at her leisure.

Faith found a place on the sofa next to a pile of clean clothes, still warm from the dryer.

"Let me take those, Faith, I can't believe myself leaving such a mess around here all the time."

"Oh, Maggie, don't make a fuss over me, for heaven's sakes," Faith said laughing, "We're like family!"

"I know, goofball," Margaret conceded, as she tossed the clothes into the laundry room, "I just like keeping up appearances for ya."

She threw Faith a wink and pranced into the kitchen to check her roast.

The front door swung open, and Dale swept in with lunch box in tow. He had a grim look on his tired old face, but he forced a smile at young Faith across the room. Faith could tell that something troubled him, but she refused to ask out of respect for her friends' privacy. He continued to smile as he walked past and into the kitchen. As he turned,

Faith could see the façade of glee turn down into a look of concern.

"Alan ain't gonna be hiring me for any more jobs," Faith overheard Dale whispering to Margaret, "He's taking on some Mexicans that just pulled in from El Paso. Says they work cheaper... The god--... The bastard."

Dale was a religious man and never took his lord's name in vain. Although Dale always seemed to be capable of finding work that would pay the bills, Faith could discern that this did not bode well for the weary countryman and his wife.

Margaret kissed the aged arthritic hands Dale offered to her, "We'll make it just fine. We always have. Don't curse God, he'll come through."

Faith never considered herself a religious person. She described her beliefs more as being "spiritual". She had long been debating with herself as to whether or not she believed in a higher power, a creator, a unity, or anything greater than the natural world as it presented itself. She had never personally seen anything to indicate the reality

of a greater existence, but she was open to the possibilities. She would not rebuke the notion of an omnipotent being presiding over all creations without hard evidence to sway her. However, perhaps ironic to her name, she would also not follow blindly with faith as her guide. She was conflicted, and thus opted to remain neutral on the subject.

“Faith, dear,” Margaret called, “Come get some grub!”

Faith jumped to her feet and danced into the kitchen in an attempt to raise a bit of cheer in the mood. The small low-income apartments did not have a dining room separate from the kitchen, so families crammed in around small tables that often just allowed for a small walk space in-between their chairs and the countertops. Faith squeezed into the seat nearest the north window, where she always sat during dinner with the Joneses.

“So how have you been, Faith?” Margaret inquired, slapping a pile of mashed potatoes onto a plate.

“Just fine,” Faith replied, “Keeping busy with school studies and the pediatric ward.”

Margaret handed the plate to Faith. "No moo for you?" Margaret asked, picking up a very well done slice of roast and placing it on Faith's plate.

"That's right, I don't like mine mooing and bucking the whole way down," Faith said, shooting Dale a mischievous smirk and an elbow jab. He replied with a simple wink while trying to chew up a gooey cut of rare meat.

"You been seeing anyone lately, Honey?" Margaret asked with a curious grin.

Margaret always seemed especially interested in Faith's dating life, a definite side effect of the motherly role she had taken on in Faith's life. She would always question Faith about the boys in her life, few as they were, trying to get as much dirt out of her as possible. Margaret was like most other typical small-town countrywomen, a sucker for gossip details.

"Still not seeing anyone, Maggie," Faith said, almost as if the reply was prerecorded.

"Ah, I figured not, Dear, which is why you should meet up with my nephew when he comes to town next week."

This was not the first time Margaret had tried setting Faith up with one of her lackluster relatives. Faith had usually declined in the past, but feeling somewhat guilty, she accepted the offer.

“Sure, that’d be great!”

Margaret smiled, “Wonderful! Ben will be here come Friday afternoon.”

Throughout dinner and while helping Margaret clear the table, Faith could not keep from letting her mind drift back to the incessant ringing of her home telephone and the creepy voice on the other end.

Faith was not feeling well and declined Margaret’s invitation to watch some television after they had cleaned the dishes. After hugs and goodbyes Faith left for home, but not before Margaret could hand her a plastic container filled to the brim with chocolate-pecan brownies and a slice of blackberry cobbler.

As Faith jingled her key chain around trying to find the house key, a chill rose up her spine. She turned to her left and then to her right, feeling a cold breeze blow straight

horizontal across her back. A bit of paranoia escaped her, as she finally found the key and slammed it into the keyhole. Faith thrust herself through the door, threw it closed behind her, and fell to the floor in front of her sofa. The phone was ringing.

Faith felt her way along the baseboards and up the wall to the phone cord. She slid the cord between her thumb and forefinger until it stopped at the receiver. The caller ID was again blank. It was the mysterious caller again. Her hand shook, fingers trembling, as she fought with herself over whether or not to pick it up. She slowly lifted the mouthpiece up, the earpiece still holding down the button. As she raised the receiver off of the base, the ringing ceased. She placed the earpiece to her ear. Her breath halted just before it could escape her throat. She licked her lips and tried to force out a word. She was frozen in place.

"Hello?" the voice said in the same gruff tone as before, "Faith?"

Just as she thought that she could not move a muscle, her paralysis broke and she slammed the receiver back down onto its base. Faith sat there in the deafening silence, waiting. As she began to rise to her feet, the telephone began to ring again.

She scrambled on hands and knees across the pitch-black living room and into the kitchen area, hiding behind the cabinetry. She heard a noise, quiet as a whisper, in her bedroom. She dug her hands into the flatware drawer and clasped a pair of bone shears. Both hands on the long scissors, shaking nervously, she made her way down the hallway toward her bedroom. Faith could no longer hear the noise, but she continued on steadily to her room to investigate. The telephone continued to ring.

As she reached the door, she placed her right hand on the inside wall, right below the light switch, gripping the shears in her left hand. She grasped the switch in her fingers and flicked it on, surveying the room back and forth, her eyes stopped on a kitten sleeping peacefully in the center of her bed. She scanned over to see that she had

left the lower windows open. The cat must have slipped in under the torn screen.

"I guess you can stay here," Faith said, as she tossed the shears onto her dresser.

Faith had never been fond of cats, stemming back to an incident in which a wandering stray sent her flying off of her bicycle onto the pavement. The tomcat had run out in front of her as she was racing with a neighborhood friend as a child. When she slammed the pedals backwards to brake, she was unable to keep her balance and took a dive over the handlebars. She had awakened an hour later in the emergency room, lucky enough to miss out on the sewing of the stitches that were knotted into her scalp.

The phone still rang. Faith returned to the living room and unplugged it. As she made her way back down the hallway, she stopped in at the bathroom to unplug the cordless phone. She did not even glance at the name of the caller. The mysterious creep would have to wait another day.

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Faith rolled over the next morning to find the small white kitten curled up on her pillow. Apparently the thing had already made itself at home.

Faith laid her feet on the cold wooden floor, which gave her a slight shiver. She walked into the kitchen, tossed a coffee pod into the brewer, twisted open a bottle of water, and poured it in. The water in the apartments was suitable for showering and washing clothes, but not necessarily for consumption. Faith learned this lesson the hard way when she spent a couple of days in solitary confinement in the restroom after she had first moved in.

Faith walked back to her bedroom, only to find that the kitten had disappeared. She looked in the bathroom, under the sofa, and even in the kitchen cabinets. She called out for it, but it had seemingly vanished.

Faith returned to the restroom to wash her face, then moved into the living room to get dressed. As she pulled a new shirt over her head, she noticed the white phone cord as it lay unplugged. She stepped into her pants – a scraggly pair of lavender scrubs – and tied a bow in the

front. All the while she stared at the snaking wire that lay there, taunting her.

Faith walked back to the restroom to pull a brush through her hair. It was remarkably knot-free. She pulled it back into a loose ponytail with ease. She slid some barrettes into the hair on top of her head, one on each side. She then walked to her room and grabbed the shirt top of her scrubs and slid it on over her t-shirt.

Faith returned to the kitchen and poured herself the usual mug of Arabica decaf with one spoon of cream and a pinch of sugar. As she sat at her table, the phone cord lay there, almost as if watching her. It was as if it was begging her to plug it in. She sat and sat, downing mug after mug, tapping her fingernails on the tabletop. She stood and paced at the place where the carpet and wood met. The turmoil became too much. She pounced on the white cord and pushed the plug into the wall. Silence.

Faith picked up her book bag. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays she had nighttime prep classes. This was yet another wonderful Wednesday. She did not

mind going to class – the work was not exceptionally difficult and the courses did not bore her. However, since they were not credit classes, it was simply a chore that had begun to nag on her nerves.

Faith slid her shoes onto her feet and grabbed her key off of the hook. As she took hold of the doorknob, she heard the sound that she had been waiting for – the familiar ring of her telephone. She shot the receiver an irritated glare, walked out, and threw the door closed behind her. She stood there on the doorstep, and asked herself what she was afraid of. She asked herself why she did not want to answer. There was nothing to fear. A phone call could not hurt her.

Faith turned, opened the front door, and stepped inside. She sat on the sofa and took a deep breath before she lifted the receiver to her ear.

“Hello?” Faith said with anticipation.

“Hello, is this a Ms. Faith Forester?” asked the voice on the other end.

“Yes,” Faith said, “With whom am I speaking?”

"This is Denise Thurgood from Ravenwood First Medical."

Faith, herself an employee of Ravenwood First, knew who Denise was and where she worked. She knew that what was about to be said would not be good news.

"Faith, Honey. Our department has been trying to get in touch with you all night. We almost sent a unit over to see if you were even home. At about eight o'clock last night your father, Eugene, was involved in a car accident. His car was sideswiped by a semi truck and flipped in the middle of old Highway 220. The emergency responders worked on him for nearly an hour, but," Denise paused, "Your father was pronounced dead at 9:17 PM. You've been given the rest of the week off. With pay. If you need anyth—"

"Thank you," Faith whispered, "Thank you."

Faith dropped the receiver and broke down on the floor, weeping. Her father was the most important family member in her life. She had let a childish fear keep her from being there for him during his passing. Her silly

paranoia had kept her from comforting someone she loved in his final hour, and she knew that she would regret that for the rest of her life. She felt as though it was pathetic and shameful that she had let emotions overcome her and drive her actions. It was her feelings of fear – her inexcusable fear – that had deprived her of sharing with her father those last few moments of his life. She had let herself exaggerate the circumstances and had let fear keep her from doing something so simple as picking up a telephone.

Margaret had always encouraged Faith to live life without regret – to ‘keep on keeping on’ and not to dwell on any shortcomings. This was something Faith found difficult to do, as she was a girl of compassion. She would always feel as if she could have done a little bit more.

Faith spent the majority of the day on the telephone with relatives. They discussed what to do with her brother – her grandparents had picked him up that morning. They made funeral arrangements and exchanged condolences.

There was not much to be said about her father. He was not a widely respected man. He was not too bright and not a very hard worker. He did successfully raise Faith, though – and that was commendable. Faith loved her father and saw past his many glaring faults – with the inclusion of his occasional neglect for Ronnie. She saw him as the man, who at one time, was good enough for her mother to start a family with. If he was good enough for her, then he was good enough for Faith. No matter how much he had changed over the years.

Faith and her father's parents decided to admit Ronnie to a home for the disabled. It would be paid for by the insurance money Faith would receive from her father's passing. Her grandparents offered to take care of all of the arrangements for her, now officially Ronnie's legal guardians. Faith was very glad that her father had set up that agreement with his parents, as she neither had the time nor the energy to expend on taking care of Ronnie. Faith's aunts and uncle pooled together to plan her father's funeral and burial, another relief that Faith welcomed.

Faith mourned the remainder of the evening in the company of Dale and Margaret. They had never had the opportunity to meet Eugene, but both had heard plenty about him. They knew of his pitfalls, though they also knew of how Faith's respect for him persevered. They honored his memory as if he was worthy of such.

Faith was glad to have people so geographically close that she could confide in. Many of her relatives lived out of state, with exception of her father's parents who lived in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Faith would be seeing her paternal grandparents at the funeral, which was scheduled for that upcoming Friday. She welcomed the opportunity, albeit a grim one, to try to socialize with her family.

As Faith returned home, her phone was again ringing. She had been talking to relatives all day and had grown tired of listening to their sympathetic ramblings. She would entertain at least one more condoling soul before heading off to bed to be at peace after the hectic day.

"Hello," she said rather lackadaisically, adjusting the phone to rest between her ear and shoulder.

"Hello Ms. Forester, our condolences on the passing of your father."

"Thank you," Faith said, curious, "Who is this?"

"Someone in grave need of your assistance," said the voice, in a solemn tone.

"Was it you who called here yesterday?" Faith asked, agitated.

"Yes ma'am. I am sorry if my forwardness startled you. I am call—"

"Sorry, but I don't really care why you're calling," Faith interrupted, "Whatever it is you want, I'm not interested, so please leave me alone."

Faith hung up the phone.

She walked to her bedroom and turned on the lights. There in her bed sat the little white kitten that had visited her the previous night.

"Decided to stay?" Faith asked, as if she expected a sarcastic answer in return.

After she fed the cat a bit of canned tuna fish, she laid next to the purring ball of fur and fell fast asleep.

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As Faith sat at her table sipping her morning coffee, her thoughts drifted to the mysterious caller she had dismissed so rudely. Again, she had let emotion get the best of her. She released herself from any feeling of guilt – she was already distressed enough over her father’s sudden passing.

Faith was reminded of the words of her father, the armchair philosopher that he was, “Excuses are like assholes: everybody has one, and they all stink.”

Although his words were not incredibly scholastic or proverbial, nor were they sophisticated, they did ring all too true.

Faith happened to glance at her calendar and realized that it was Thursday. It was the day she was to have lunch with Angie at the cafe. It was half past ten already, so she hurriedly showered and threw on her clothes. She did not have time to fix her hair, which was not uncommon. She twisted it into a bun on the top of her head and stuck a pair of chopsticks through it. *Not a bad look*, she thought. She

was a quarter Japanese, so she sported naturally tan skin and beautifully almond-shaped eyes.

Faith sat in her car, staring down into her lap.

"Please work," she whispered, almost as a prayer.

Faith turned the key in the ignition. As if by magic, the car rumbled to life. Faith eyed Dale, leaning against his truck holding his toolbox. He turned with a slight smile and placed the box back into the bed of the truck. Faith was so very grateful to still have a father figure in her life, though she sometimes felt as if she did not have one to begin with.

Faith pulled into the south parking lot of the Harbor Cafe. Faith, Angie, and the rest of their friends used to hang out at the cafe when they were in high school, on every lunch period. Lunches were allowed off campus for sophomores and higher, so every day at noon the girls would travel five miles down the road from the school to eat at the little mom-and-pop restaurant.

It was a strange theme for a restaurant in the middle of a farming community. The restaurant's sign was a gigantic

wooden anchor with HARBOR CAFE painted on it in big, bold, red letters. The windows were framed in the steering wheels of pirate ships and the terrace was shaded by an awning fashioned out of a flag bearing a skull and crossbones. Faith and her friends liked the little place because it was different, and because none of the other students ever ate there. It was *their* hangout.

Faith saw Angie sitting at what used to be their usual table, the closest one to the door under the lower right corner of the awning. Angie grinned ear to ear as she noticed Faith walking her way.

"Hey!" Angie called, standing up from her seat.

"Hiya! I was wondering if you'd beat me here," Faith said, reaching the table and pulling out her chair.

"I went ahead and ordered your weirdo kiwi-strawberry soda, for ya. Ya freak," Angie said with a wink.

The girls were sitting in the same seats they always sat in back in high school, without even really thinking much about it. The waiter took their orders, as the girls began reminiscing of old times. They discussed the drama of high

school, the trips they took across the country in band, and then Angie turned the subject to boys.

"So, how's the dating life?" she asked, "You always were my greatest competitor for the good prom dates."

"Dating life is slow," Faith sighed, "Haven't been out in quite a while. You know, I've got my job at the hospital, and all these damned classes."

"Oh, I know how it is, Faith," Angie jumped in, "It's like if a guy *does* ask me out, I need a secretary to schedule him in!"

The girls laughed.

"My last date was at that cheap Oliandro's place down by the bus depot in Camden," Angie said, grinning.

"The one with the huge mechanical bull right out in the middle of the dance floor?" asked Faith.

"Oh my God, yes!" Angie screamed.

The girls giggled at the thought.

"Yeah," Faith spoke up after a pause, "I just really haven't had an opportunity to pursue anything."

"You're kidding!" Angie said laughingly, "You must have had a boyfriend or something in the last *seven* years."

"Yeah, I had what you could call a boyfriend," Faith said, somber.

"Well, tell me about him!" Angie smiled.

"Well, it's just," Faith paused, "It did not end... well?"

"Ha! I've had my share of messy breakups in the last few years, no worries there!" Angie said, attempting to comfort her friend with humor.

"It... It was not exactly like that," Faith began.

Chapter Two

The Night Before

One year and three months previous, in the town of Ravenwood, Oklahoma.

Faith had been shopping all day long, an activity she could never grow tired of. There were outlet stores all over town, and Faith made sure to visit as many as she could. Her new internship at the regional hospital was bringing in a reasonable and steady income, so she treated herself once a month to a little clothing splurge. Fashion was an unembarrassed passion for her, and she hoped one day to be able to afford whichever clothes she fancied. For this, among other reasons, she was pursuing a career in medicine. In addition to the schooling she had already finished, she planned to start another round of classes in the fall semester to begin work on her doctorate. Faith never much had an interest in medicine, but she certainly had an interest in making a good living.

The stores were closing, and Faith was making her way out of her last stop, arms full of bags filled to the top with every article of clothing imaginable. She had been fighting

all afternoon at that particular outlet mall to not make a trip to her car to free her arms, and she reaped the benefits of that plan as she was struggling to get through the store's door. As she finally pushed her right arm free to the outside, she spied a young man that was headed her way.

Faith, not being one to want to look inferior, tried desperately to keep the door open with her leg as she attempted to maneuver her left arm through the passageway.

"Here, let me get that for you," the young man offered, reaching for the door.

"No, I'm good, thanks," said a smiling Faith, as she forced herself against the uncooperative glass door. The door slammed on her arm, trapping her momentarily in place.

He reached over and pushed the door, releasing her arm to allow her through.

"Hi, I'm Nick," he said, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

"Hi Nick, I'm Faith, have a wonderful evening," Faith said, almost annoyed, as she pressed onward to her car.

"Do... Do you need any help carrying all that?" Nick offered.

Faith stopped, turned around, and smiled a polite smile, "Do you really wanna help that bad?"

"Well, I was just—"

"Well," Faith interrupted, "You can *just* carry these."

And with that, she dropped her bags and continued to her car.

Nick picked up Faith's belongings as best he could, cradling her newly purchased purse on his arm like a football. He wondered to himself how a girl so beautiful could be so difficult. It did not make any sense to him why she was treating him that way. Was she playing hard to get? He only offered to assist her out of common courtesy. He was just trying to do his part to make a girl happy.

As Faith came upon her car, she tried to figure out what this Nick guy was up to. It was no longer common for guys to openly flirt with her, or even talk to her for that matter. She guessed that he was probably just looking for some chick pull a one-nighter with. Faith certainly was not an

easy girl, and she most definitely was not out looking for love. As far as she was concerned, he could just shove off – after carrying her bags, of course.

He *was* kind of cute, though.

“Put the big ones in the trunk, the smaller ones in the back seat,” she said, sneaking a quick glance at his backside.

Nick could feel her watching him, judging him, and, hopefully, checking him out. Faith was a gorgeous girl, definitely prettier than any girl he had spoken to in the last year or so. He wanted badly to ask her out. Just a date. Just one date to show her what a wonderful guy he was. However, he could not bring himself to do it. He was a coward. He feared rejection more than he feared loneliness.

“Well, there ya go,” Nick said rubbing his lower back, “You’re lucky I’m so generous with this aching back.”

“If you’re looking for a massage,” Faith said with a raised eyebrow, “You’re looking in the wrong place.”

Nick shivered. It was unseasonably chilly outside for a midsummer night. His back was killing him, almost to the point that it was excruciating to walk. He had been hurting a lot the last couple of days. He was a tough young man and would not go to the hospital unless it was simply unbearable. He figured that he had probably thrown it out playing with his younger cousin while baby-sitting her that previous weekend.

"You aren't looking so well there, Nicky," Faith said almost as if concerned, "You want a ride or something?"

"Nah," Nick said with a forced smile, "I just live in those town houses over there."

Faith looked in the direction that he was pointing.

"If you're sure..." she again offered.

"I'm sure, thanks a million though," Nick said as he turned painfully toward his home.

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As Nick reached for the doorknob, the door thrust open, his mother stood just inside tapping her foot. Nick knew what she was miffed about and knew that apologizing

for not cleaning his room would not change her mood. Nick never understood why his mother was such a stickler for cleanliness. Early on he had diagnosed her as obsessive compulsive, but that was based on a single college psychology course that he had not even bothered to finish. Whatever the case, she did not like it one bit when he left a mess anywhere – and while he was still fortunate enough to live under *her* roof.

“I’ll clean my room tomorrow mom, I promise. My back is killing me tonight,” Nick whined.

“I was watching you through the dining room window – who was the girl?” asked Nick’s mother, with a slight purse of her lips.

She was anxious for the day that her son would finally get married and make something of himself. Nick was not big into the dating scene, but he did have several female friends that called often. She would excuse his pigsty room if it meant him interacting with a potential future Mrs. Nick Rutherford.

"Joy or Hope or something," Nick said, as he lay down on the couch.

"When do I get to meet this Joy or Hope or something?" Ms. Rutherford asked.

"I don't know, I just met her and helped her carry her stuff to her car."

"You look ill, Babe, are you feeling okay?" Ms. Rutherford asked, feeling her son's forehead for signs of a fever.

"I feel like complete crap, mom," Nick moaned, "I just need to sleep it off."

With that, Ms. Rutherford sighed and shut off the overhead lights, saying a silent prayer for the wellbeing of her baby before she turned in for the evening.

Nick plugged in a soldering iron and set it on the glass coffee table in the center of the living room. He had always been delighted by electronics and had been taking things apart since he was a child. That night's project was finishing up the circuitry for pair of battery-powered wireless ear buds to use with his MP3 player. An older

gentleman he had once worked with had argued that the idea was impossible because of current battery technology, however Nick had found a way. He replaced the energy compounds in a pair of alkaline button cell batteries with a rechargeable nickel-metal hydride compound and wired a small solar cell into each bud. This way, the buds fed off of both solar power and the body heat generated in the ear canal. With this method, the battery life was significantly extended. It was a complicated system, but he was finally working on his finished set.

Nick was always delighted when his creations would spring to life. He loved to solder, to draw up diagrams, and to find unconventional uses for common items. He loved technology.

Delighted with his finished product, he popped an ear bud into each ear and played a few Beatles tracks. It worked well, but there was a slight hiss – probably a weak solder joint. He decided to worry about it in the morning and reclined on the couch to close his eyes.

Hours passed, as Nick wrestled back and forth with his blanket, unable to find comfort. The pain in his back had traveled around his right love handle and deep into his groin. In his mind, he likened it to the classic cartoons, in which the protagonist would leave a trail of gunpowder leading out from a wagon filled with explosives. The fire slowly made its way down the trail and then exploded when it reached its destination.

Nick began to cough violently, his chest feeling as if it was about to rupture. He sat up and bent over, his head between his knees, and felt his gag reflex fire off rapidly with nothing on his stomach to heave up. He tasted a salty, metallic breath exhale from his throat and out his gaping mouth. A drop of blood danced along the inside of his mouth and paused to rest behind his lower lip before it fell down into the carpet.

"Mom!" Nick screamed in horror, before abruptly passing out in a heap next to the coffee table. Nick did not favor the sight of blood – especially his own.

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Nick awoke, his eyelids lined with a thin glue of mucus. As he rubbed the gunk away from his view, he sensed a sterile smell. He was somewhere very clean – definitely not his bedroom. He saw a flowered curtain to his left, a television set affixed to the wall in the front, and a restroom, wheelchair, and IV pump to his right. He touched his face and found an oxygen tube that hung by his ears and ran under his nose. The door was slightly ajar and he could just make out the profile of a cute young nurse standing over a cart of food.

“Finally awake, are you?” called a voice from behind the curtain, “You’ve been sleeping for hours, probably the morphine they gave you. It’s three in the afternoon. I’ve just been watching some TV.”

“Um, who— who are you exactly?” Nick asked, very confused.

Nick watched as a polished wooden cane took hold of the curtain and slid it quickly back, revealing a pale skeleton of a boy, around the same age as himself. The sickly looking young man was hairless from head to toe as

far as Nick could tell. The boy was wearing nothing but a pair of white briefs.

"I'm Mike, your new roommate."

"Where the hell is my mother?" Nick asked, monotone.

"She had to go to work, they wouldn't let her 'the hell' off," answered Mike, somewhat sarcastic.

"They wouldn't let her off work when I'm in the friggin' hospital?!" Nick exclaimed.

"That's what she told me, and she also said to keep an eye on you."

Mike grinned and lay back down on his bed, picking up the television remote.

"Do you always just sit around like that?" Nick asked, with a concerned eye.

"What, in my briefs? My whitey tighties? Nah, I just do it when Faith is around, it gets on her nerves."

Nick looked down at the IV stuck into a vein in his hand. He had never cared for needles, and he certainly did not care for hospitals. The thought of being stuck in one for a more than a few days was quite unpleasant.

Nick's back was still aching, though certainly not as bad as the previous night. He wished for the possibility of a morphine drip to dull himself completely.

"So," said Nick, "Any word on my diagnosis?"

"Well, I'm no doctor," Mike admitted, "But I'd say by the blood coughing thing and the back and groin pain, that you're in stage four of some form of cancer – probably the lymphatic system swelling up that's causing that pain. But like I said, I'm no doctor, just speaking from experience."

Mike was a sort of cocky kid. He spoke like a young professor trying to prove his intelligence. He seemed unaware of the social awkwardness it caused.

"That stage four thing, what's that all about?" inquired a still confused Nick.

Mike sat back up on the edge of his bed.

"Well, I was a stage four case," he said, "Testicular cancer, coughing up blood and all that. Basically it means... Terminal. But I didn't die, obviously. After a couple surgeries, Dr. Andrews gave me a reasonably good prognosis. As I was taking the chemotherapy treatments,

my condition started to worsen again. I was literally hanging by a thread, and Andrews asked my mom and I if we'd consider putting me on a new experimental drug made out of a chemical agent in the blood of some fish that lives in a cave in Mexico. And, I'm still here, thank the good Jesus."

Mike was a religious boy, born and raised in a Pentecostal church with crew cut hair and sporting a bow tie every Sunday and to school. If there was ever anyone who was set in the ways of Christianity, it was Mike. Everyone around him, religious, atheistic, agnostic, or otherwise could tell it in a heartbeat. Nick, on the other hand, had no use for religion or anything that could be labeled as "spiritual". He considered himself down-to-earth and skeptical of anything that was without proof.

"So, you're good then. You're getting better," Nick said questioningly.

"For the most part," said Mike, "My body is building up a sort of resistance to the drug. The doctors are trying to

work out the dosage and all that so as to keep the drug in the body without the body fighting back.”

Nick heard muffled singing echoing in the hallway. It grew louder and louder until it reached his door. A young man clad in a burgundy bathrobe burst through in an impressive display, singing a serenade in a ridiculous falsetto. The boy, not seeing Nick sitting in the foremost bed, continued to sing.

“Oh baby, let's make love tonight.

Hold me in your arms baby. Oh so tight.

Hold me like you want me in that special way.

Oh yes baby. I would hate to wait all day!”

Mike motioned for the kid to stop singing, but he simply continued, oblivious.

“We can do it right, baby, yes we can.

Oh my baby, you are my only man!”

Mike held his hand up in front of the kid's face and pointed to Nick, “Sam, this is Nick. Nick, Sam.”

The two young men nodded to each other, awkwardly.

"If I knew I was going to have an audience I would've brought a tip jar," Sam joked.

"Sam here comes in for chemo only," Mike paused,

"Well that, and to wear a bathrobe in public."

"It makes me feel pretty," said Sam, sarcastically rubbing his face on the robe.

"He isn't a resident patient like me," Mike explained.

Just then, the door swung open. In walked a large brawny nurse staring at a chart.

"Nick Rutherford?" she asked.

"Yeah, that's me," said Nick.

"Okay, good, right room then," said the nurse casually,

"We need you to come down to the lab wing for a CT scan, some blood work, and all that jazz."

"I kinda need to go to the restroom," Nick confessed.

"Save it," said the nurse, "We'll be needing some of that too."

The nurse took Nick down to a lab room, his IV pump in tow, and seated him in the waiting area. He watched as

a man with skin as yellow as an ear of corn walked in and sat across from him. Minutes later another man rolled in, probably in his mid-thirties, unconscious and breathing quite heavily. Nick eyed the man's catheter tube with a steady yellow stream pouring through it. A pair of bald women came in together, sat next to the yellow-skinned man, and promptly struck up a conversation.

Nick eavesdropped on the discussion, as if he had a choice – the three elderly patients obviously were all hearing impaired and spoke loudly. He heard them talk of their chemotherapy and surgeries, and he wagered that all three were cancer patients. Those side effects certainly did not look pleasant, and Nick was not ecstatic to achieve his own yellow tan and bald noggin.

Nick felt a cold hand grip his shoulder, right in the spot where his pink flowered gown was partially open. He looked up to catch the eyes of a beautiful girl who looked remarkably familiar.

"Hey there, Nicky boy," said Faith.

"Oh my God! Um... uh-uh..." Nick stuttered, trying to think of her name.

"I'm Faith, you jerk!" she said, smiling and giving him a slight shove.

"My bad, my bad," Nick said, obviously blushing, "I knew it was something like that. So you're the Faith that Mike was talking about. Wow, I feel dumb!"

"Well," Faith said, "I'll let you off for now, seeing as how you had kind of a rough night."

Faith handed Nick a large cylinder of white liquid. It had no noticeable odor that he could detect as he took a sip and choked the horrible substance down.

"It's a barium drink, for the CT scan. It's supposed to taste like bananas," Faith explained.

"Right," said Nick with a tinge of sarcasm, "Just like bananas. Just like a big frikkin' bunch of fresh Chikitas."

"Hey, I'm not responsible for the flavor, I'm just the delivery girl," Faith said cutely.

"So, this is where you work, eh?" Nick asked with a curious tone.

"I'm interning for a while, until I can maybe secure a job near the university I plan on attending for my doctorate degree," said Faith, checking her buzzing beeper.

"Oh, a doctor, impressive!" Nick praised.

"Shut up!" Faith snapped back, shooting him a playful glare, "Hey now, I've gotta go poke little kids with needles and make them cry. Will you be okay by yourself, or should I get another nurse to come baby-sit you?"

Nick would not let himself pass up that opportunity.

"Well, if she's as cute as you, then please, go right ahead."

"Har har," Faith scoffed at his cheesy pickup line, "I hope you can at least pull up something from this decade for your next attempt."

"Oh, burn!" Nick laughed, "You got me, you got me. Show mercy."

Nick threw his hands up.

"I really have to go now, Nick, I'll catch you around later."

With a wink and a grin, Faith walked out the door.

She felt fabulous! She wondered why it had never been that easy before. All these times she had tried to create a relationship for herself, when instead, all she had to do was to let the right guy just fall into her lap. It was almost as if they had been friends for years. Faith felt happily warm inside, and a butterfly or two found the way to her stomach. She had never been so overjoyed about a guy before – especially one she had known for so short a time. But she did not care about statistics. She could not keep her mouth from smiling.

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Two days had passed since Nick's testing began – and in those two days he had not seen Faith once. He waited with his mother in Dr. Andrews's office. Andrews was Nick's oncologist, with whom he had not yet had the pleasure of meeting. It boggled his mind how a doctor could be working on the case of a patient without first meeting him or her in some formal way. The day before, Mike had explained in more detail of how Andrews had

helped aid in his case. That revelation had comforted Nick a bit, but he still had some lingering insecurities.

Nick and his mother were seated in two high backed, reddish-hued leather chairs that were positioned at forty-five degrees inward towards a large desk at the end of the office. The curtains were drawn, making for poor illumination in the room. The only light came from some bulbs in a trophy case that played host to several articles of baseball memorabilia. There were gloves, balls, bats, helmets, and more. Many were adorned with signatures and photographs from when they were attained. Andrews was obviously a Red Sox fan, with items dating all the way back to the days of the Babe Ruth trade curse. The architecture of the cases and room was quite fancy. There had definitely been a reasonable expense invested in the woodwork. All in all, it made for a somewhat dramatic place for what seemed like an eternal wait.

The door at the opposite end of the room creaked open. Nick and his mother turned to watch as a tall, slender man in a sharp charcoal suit and tie entered the office and

slowly sauntered up to the desk. Ms. Rutherford rose to greet him, and his gargantuan size became clearly apparent.

"Dr. Andrews," she said, extending her hand and accepting a masculine, sturdy handshake.

"Ms. Rutherford," said the doctor, examining the resemblance between her and her son, "I've been looking forward to meeting you and Nicholas. Please, take your seat."

With that, Ms. Rutherford smiled politely and sat back down, crossing her legs.

"How are you feeling, Nicholas?" Andrews asked.

"I've been feeling okay. Still have some back pain, and this IV is bugging the crap out of me," Nick said.

"Yeah, I'm sorry about that," Andrews smiled genuinely, "But we do have to keep you hydrated."

There was a short pause, while Andrews rifled through some papers in his briefcase. The leather-bound case looked like it had seen better days and was gearing up for retirement. It was the same hue as the chairs, though it

was quite a bit more beat up. It was filled with seemingly unsorted documents, but it appeared as though Andrews knew his way around in the mess.

“Ah, here we are,” the doctor began, pointing at a small number at the bottom of a sheet of test results, “These are your tumor markers – levels of certain things in your blood that we can measure to determine the intensity of cancerous matter in the body. This one, here, is elevated by about one hundred twenty-five percent. This one, here, is up about thirty percent. Now, from your other test results, our best determination is that you are suffering from a late stage three, or possibly early stage four case of testicular cancer. I’ve already scheduled an ultrasound to be done on your groin area, so that we can determine where the tumor growth is located, and you’ll also be meeting with another oncologist who is currently the acting urologist at this hospital. He’ll be examining the growths and performing the surgery.”

That goofy little bastard Mike was right, Nick thought.

"Surgery?" Nick asked as he gulped down a lump in his throat.

"Yes, Nicholas. Once we determine where the tumors are, we will remove the testicle to make way for treatment on your obviously affected lymphatic system. Very rarely should we need to remove both testicles, though. Everything should function normally when all is said and done," Andrews held up a black and white image film and placed it on a light board on his desk, "These are the images from a PET scan you had yesterday, composited next to a set of file images from a healthy twenty-one year old male."

The image was of Nick's head all the way down to his shins. From the middle of his chest cavity, all the way to his groin, was a large black cloud that extended side to side across his stomach. In the adjacent file image, there was no blackness. In fact, the whole torso was bright white with very little gray, even.

Andrews slid over another film, "Nick, this is an image from your lower CT scan. See this in here, where it looks

like a bunch of grapes? Those are your lymph nodes, and we really should not even be able to make them out against all of your internal organs. That swelling is caused by the cancer spreading up your lymphatic system along your main aorta. That's what we're going to need to treat with chemotherapy."

"So," Ms. Rutherford spoke up, "This is curable, no problem, right?"

"Certainly," said Andrews, "Most all cases of testicular cancer are treatable. There is one thing, however, that I am concerned about."

Nick knew that those words would never end with something pleasant. If a doctor used words like "concerned", then there was a problem. He looked to his mother, worried.

"I was taking a look at your brain scan from two days ago," Andrews explained, "And there is what appears to be a small cloud of some sort in your frontal cortex. Before I say any more, I want to assure you, not only is it rare for cancer to skip a lymph node on the way up to the head, and

even more rare for it to skip two, I would say it is nearly impossible for it to have spread with an undetectable trail. If this cloud were in your abdomen, I would be inclined to say it was bile or fecal matter or some sort of other mass found naturally in the body. Being as it is in your brain, I am just a bit more concerned, and it is something we will keep watch on. If I were you, I would not be worrying about it now. I'd be concentrating on preparing myself for the upcoming surgery. After all, it could be absolutely nothing."

No matter how Andrews tried to sugarcoat it, that news was still disconcerting. If it was not cancer, Nick was more worried about what it could be. At least the effects of cancer can be remotely predicted – a mystery disease would be an unwelcomed addition to his growing list of depressing problems. Nick knew he was probably just getting himself all worked up over a whole lot of nothing, and he tried to keep his mind from straying from the matter at hand.

“So, we’re going to have you examined by our radiology technician via an ultrasound tomorrow, and due to your blood results, we’re going to admit you as a resident patient until further notice. Your insurance is paying it all, so don’t worry there,” Andrews said, snapping his briefcase closed.

“Well, okay then,” Ms. Rutherford said with a sigh, “Whatever it takes.”

She forced a smile at her son, who then forced one back before taking her hand.

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Nick sat alone in the commons area staring at the row of vending machines that stretched across the north wall. His mother had left for work. He wondered how something like cancer could attack a person like himself. He wondered what he had done in life to deserve a death sentence.

Faith walked in and failed to look in Nick’s direction. He watched her, beautiful as an angel, as she gracefully floated over to a soda machine and punched up a diet cola.

She was the most beautiful girl he had ever laid eyes upon, both physically and in her charming personality. Faith was like the unobtainable to him, and all he wanted to do was to reach out and brush her flowing auburn hair. Was this just his juvenile hormones and stress that caused this? Or was this something different? Perhaps a deep, profound, inexplicable connection that superseded the bounds of human logic?

Or had Nick simply been to one too many romantic comedies with his cousins?

Whatever the case, Nick knew that he had to do something about all of his pent-up aggression. He rose to his feet in as brash a manner as possible, took a deep breath... And he sheepishly sat back down.

He did not know how to ask a girl out. He had only been on one actual date before. It was set up by one of his high school buddies who needed a way to get his girlfriend's best friend away from her for a few hours so he could try to make his move.

As he sat there, wallowing in his own pathetic cowardice, Faith turned his direction and lit up like a Santa Claus yard ornament on Christmas Eve.

“Oh my god, Nick! I’ve been thinking about you!” she proclaimed, covering her mouth after realizing her volume.

Nick stood up, once again, “Hi Faith. Thirsty or something?”

“Huh?” she asked before remembering that she held a cold soda can in her hand, “Oh, ha! I was getting this for a younger patient’s mother so she didn’t have to leave her kid’s room. I prefer coffee – with one spoon of cream and a pinch of sugar.”

“I’ll remember that! You know, I was wondering why a girl as cute as you would be wasting time with that low-carb, low-cal junk,” Nick said, hoping she caught the joke.

Faith looked at Nick, analyzing his body language. For a guy who had just been delivered some rather heartbreaking news, he knew how to hide his fear. She admired his courage – or at least his façade of courage. It held a kind of allure, in a goofy sort of way.

"Har har," Faith said sarcastically, "I try to keep up my figure."

Faith playfully patted herself on her behind.

The two laughed awkwardly, knowing that the tension was mounting.

"Look, when they finally let me outta here, do you wanna..." Nick paused, "Wanna maybe go get something to eat or whatever?"

"I'd love to, Nick," Faith said, plucking him on the nose, "But right now, I've got to get back to work *or whatever*."

Faith turned cutely and exited the commons area, leaving Nick alone once again.

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It was nearing midnight, as Nick and Mike sat in their room, under the light of a sole lamp between their beds. Nick's mother had left to get some food at the twenty-four hour cafeteria, leaving the boys alone to ponder the day's events and those of the immediate future. Nick had real fear about what was taking place – the thought that he was so near death loomed over him like the shadow of a giant.

The surgery, the treatment, the wait – it was all so big for someone so young. However, his roommate Mike had been there and done it all, and he was in a generally good spirit.

“What’s it like, Mike?” Nick asked, “The whole experience, I mean.”

“Well,” said Mike, “Let me tell you my story. I was in Ohio when I first came down sick. We went up to watch my cousin who plays basketball for his university. The second day of the trip, I was so ill that I could not even walk. I laid in bed all day long until my parents finally took me to an emergency room. The doctors there ran blood tests, did CT scans, took x-rays, and all that stuff. The test results came back inconclusive – so of course we had to travel all the way back here to Oklahoma where I was admitted to a hospital in Tulsa. After about a week, they finally gave me my diagnosis, testicular cancer. A few days later, I had my surgery. It’s called an orchiectomy. Basically, they opened up a slit under my belt line and sucked my left testicle out through the incision. So after

that, they did a biopsy on it to determine the cancer type, and then they started me on a chemotherapy regiment. That was the worst part. Sick and depressed all the time, wishing you could just go to sleep and not ever have to wake up. It sucked pretty bad. When that did not seem to be helping, and my health was in serious decline, Andrews consulted with Dr. Truman and they asked me to start this experimental drug called BT109. At first the thing made me sicker than a dog, but now I take it just fine with the right dosage. If you can keep your head up and keep telling yourself that you're going to survive it, then you won't have anything to keep ya down. When I get in a funk, I pray and read my Bible, it raises my mood like nothing else."

"So the chemotherapy," said Nick, "It hurts?"

"Nah, the chemo is fine, it's after the chemo that sucks. Even though they give you all kinds of anti-nausea drugs, you still get totally sick," Mike replied.

There was a long silence as Nick contemplated the severity of the circumstances. There was nothing to look forward to about getting sicker before getting healthier.

His thoughts drifted to Faith. He felt something when he was around her. He felt something for her. He wanted earnestly to get to know her – to have a relationship with her. He wanted to spend time with her. He wanted her to want the same.

“What do you think about Faith?” asked Nick, somewhat reluctantly.

“I think that faith makes a man,” began Mike, “In the Bible it talks about faith as being—”

“No,” Nick interrupted, “Faith the nurse.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Mike, laughing, “She’s hot I guess. Not particularly my type, too thin. I like ‘em chunky.”

Mike made grabbing motions with both hands, as if inspecting a fresh hog at the farmer’s market.

“Okay... Well, I asked her out for a date, dude,” Nick admitted.

“Ha! Moving kinda fast aren’t we?” Mike asked, humored.

"I don't believe in wasting time," Nick said with a wink, "And besides, I won't be able to leave here for a while, until the doctors tell me it's okay."

"Trying to mark your territory or something then?" asked Mike, like an excited baseball fan after watching a double play.

"You might call it that," a smiling Nick said, rolling over to face the opposite wall.

Mike shook his head, amused, and switched off the lamp.

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Nick tossed and turned for hours, plagued by a nagging insomnia that attacked quick and hard like a thief in the night, robbing him of precious sleep. He thought of his hardworking mother, rarely able to come be with him in the difficult time. He thought of Faith, how his affinity for her had grown, and of how she smelled when she first arrived in the mornings. He thought of the bald and pale-skinned Mike, putting his trust in a god whose unproven existence was overshadowed by the assumed magnificence

of his works. He thought of himself, ridden with adversity and disease, experiencing an absolute drain of emotion. Yet, still, he was not hanging by a thread over a pit of despair – his affinity for Faith provided daily hope and comfort.

Nick fell into a dream world, bright white and sterile without a wall to be seen. The floor was solid marble and glimmered like an ever-extending sheet of pearl – absolutely free of any imperfections. He walked for a bit, trying to see as far as he could, but the brightness of the extensive room was too overpowering for his eyes to see anything in the distance. Frustrated, he sat down to try to figure out his next move. Suddenly, as if growing right out of the floor, a drinking glass sprang up before him. The glass filled itself with what appeared to be the purest of water, as if offering itself up to him. He reached for the glass, when to his surprise, another glass rose up from the floor and filled itself to the brim. He reached for the new glass, and another glass sprang up. More and more drinking glasses grew up from the floor and were filled

with the crystal clear water. Nick was surrounded by hundreds of thousands of water glasses. He rose to his feet, but he was unable to move – one step in any direction would spill, or even worse *break*, one of the glasses. Agitated and enraged in the dream, Nick began to thrash back and forth in his bed, subconsciously angered by his lack of direction.

Mike rolled over on his side, awoken by Nick's wild nightmare-induced convulsions. He reached out and placed his finger on the emergency call button, waiting for a good reason to press it. Nick's body flailed wildly, the sheets thrown off onto the floor. A glass of water on the tray-table between the boys' beds slid over a few inches, untouched. Mike watched as it shook and rattled, and some of the water splashed onto the floor. Just as it appeared the glass was going to fall off of the table, Nick's hand shot up from the bed pointing directly at it. The glass exploded, sending water and shards of broken glass all about the room. Mike felt the sting of the glass, embedded

in the soft tissue of his face, and smashed his hand into the emergency button.

“Can I help you?” rang the dry the voice of the graveyard shift attendant.

“Get in here now!” screamed Mike in complete terror, noises all around him.

After what seemed to Mike like hours, in reality only a few seconds, paramedics and nurses swept into the room. They jumped on Nick to restrain him in his seizing. An older, seemingly more experienced nurse, grabbed a syringe from her coat pocket and removed the cap with her teeth. She picked up Nick’s IV tube, slid the needle into the stopper, and injected the sedative agent into his bloodstream – just as the room became suddenly dim.

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Dark became light, and light gave way to shape, as Nick awoke that next morning. His mother sat, obviously shaken, being comforted by Faith. Mike sat in the middle of his bed, a sheet wrapped tightly around him, his face patched up with several tiny pieces of gauze. Dr. Andrews

rose from a chair near the door and walked over to Nick's side. The doctor looked down upon the boy – into his eyes and at his complexion.

"You gave us all quite a scare last night," Andrews said, "What were you dreaming about?"

"I don't remember," Nick admitted, "Why? What the hell is going on?"

"You had a series of inexplicable seizures last night, Nick. Very violent, very unexplained. Your little friend Mike here called in the emergency crew and may very well have saved you," said Andrews.

"What's the problem?" Nick asked, slightly confused, "Don't you deal with seizures all the time, for lots of stuff?"

"Not like yours, Nick," confessed the doctor.

"What... What do you mean?" Nick's voice trailed off, as he sat up and inspected the room.

Light bulbs were broken, the television was a wreck, lamps were shattered, and broken glass covered the floor. It appeared as if a hurricane had hit the room. Nothing but the beds remained intact.

"We're going to get a crew in here to replace the window and clean things up, but we wanted you to see this. Nick, we need to figure out what caused this."

"Wait," said Nick skeptically, "Are you trying to say that I did this? In my sleep?"

"I saw the whole thing, Nick," Mike spoke up, "It freaked me way the heck out, dude."

As Mike went on to explain the night's events to him, Nick was unable to allow himself to believe it. It all sounded like something out of a comic book or a science fiction B-movie from the sixties, but as Nick looked around the room, he could tell this was no hoax. Something strange was going on.

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Dr. Andrews sat across his desk from his colleague and friend, Dr. Morgan E. Truman. Truman was also an oncologist, but he dabbled more in experimental procedures than established medicine. Truman had assisted Andrews in the decision to test BT109 on young Mike, and Andrews was hoping for similar good advice on

Nick's case. Neither doctor had dealt with a patient with a condition such as Nick's. The phenomena of the previous night were inexplicable.

"There is no earthly explanation, Ron," said Truman bluntly.

"I know, Morgan, I know. But there must be *an* explanation. Inanimate objects don't just explode without reason."

"I'll just say it, Ron, because I know it's what we're both tip-toeing around, it simply has to be extrasensory... Something to do with the probable tumor in the brain, most likely," said Truman.

"Morgan," Andrews sighed, "If that was an accepted... I don't know what you'd call it... diagnosis? I would be fine with that answer. If it was treatable, I would say 'Move on, let's conquer this thing!' But it's not, Morgan. It just isn't. The medical community, hell even the local community, would balk at us for even mentioning it."

"It was isolated enough," Truman said, "We can have nondisclosure agreements signed by the staff and

investigate this on a private need-to-know basis. Let's move forward with this. No one has to know but those most closely involved."

"This can't go public," Andrews cautioned.

"Let me pursue this, my old friend. Let me run brain-mapping, wave activity tests, electrical sensors, the works," Truman almost pleaded, "Continue the chemotherapy, but let me just try."

"I'll grant you access to the patient for any noninvasive studies, providing he and his mother consent," Andrews conceded, "But this must be kept under wraps."

"Assuredly," Truman nodded as he lifted himself from his chair and jogged out of the room.

Truman had a history of latching onto wild theories, and Andrews had grown accustomed to letting him investigate his hypotheses with the patients' permissions. This time was an anomaly, though – never had Truman come up with something so bizarre.

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Mike, Nick, and Faith sat in the hospital room that was quickly beginning to feel like home to its newest inhabitant. Truman had paid Nick a visit that morning, to introduce himself and inform Nick of his hypothesis. Nick really did not know what to think about what Truman had told him, but he certainly wanted to know what was going on. As long as the testing was not going to hurt in any way, Nick was more than ready to give it a go. Could he have some sort of extrasensory ability? *That would be awesome*, he thought. It sure would be a nice trick to help pick up the ladies...

"I can't believe that Dr. Truman thinks that you have ESP!" Mike said, breaking a short silence, "That's crazy talk!"

"Heh, he's planning on running brain wave tests this afternoon," Nick explained to his friends, "They're gonna glue some electrodes onto my scalp and monitor the activity with computers."

"That's weird, Nick," said Faith, a bit taken aback.

"They're gonna shave my head first, too – will you still think I'm as gorgeous without hair?" Nick winked at her.

"I guess we'll see," Faith giggled, "You know, they made me sign non-disclosure papers this morning saying that I would not talk about any of this with anyone not involved... Does that strike you two as odd?"

There was a short pause.

"I had to sign them too," Mike whispered.

"They told me that y'all would have to sign them... Anyone who knows anything about what happened last night had to. They said it's about maintaining patient confidentiality," Nick explained.

"You're a landmark case, Nick," Faith remarked, "They probably just don't want any of this to get out before they've figured out exactly what it is. Can't blame them. With Truman thinking that this is ESP-related, he'd be risking his career letting that slip out without proof. Crazy talk indeed."

There was a knock at the door as it opened. An older nurse walked in and motioned to Nick. She was a fat

woman with very poorly painted make-up. She wore dark tinted glasses, was gruff and clumsy, and breathed hard as she walked. Her eyes were dark. She said nothing as she guided Nick out the door.

"Never seen *her* before," Faith quietly commented.

"Must be new," laughed Mike.

The fat nurse led Nick to a lab where she punched in a key code on the lock. Nick could see Dr. Truman sitting at a table absorbed in paperwork at the back of the slightly darkened room. Truman rose to his feet upon seeing Nick and scooped the paperwork back into its folder. Nick could see some computers and equipment sitting at the end of the table opposite the doctor and a washbasin like that used in hair salons against a wall. There was new plumbing rigged to the washbasin as if it had all been installed that morning.

"You didn't set all this up special for me did you?" Nick asked Truman, as he watched the fat nurse leave the room as a younger but no prettier nurse walked in.

“Of course we did, Nick. But don’t worry – neither you nor your insurance will be responsible for it. I’m covering any and all expenses. Shall we get your head shaved?” Truman smiled.

“Yeah, may as well, it’ll be falling out in a few weeks anyways.”

Nick was fitted with a smock before he sat down in the chair. The nurse reclined his chair and fumbled with an electric razor until she got it working. Nick closed his eyes as he felt the chill of the room on his increasingly bald head. The razor clanged and clambered as it trimmed the hair to a half an inch all over Nick’s head.

Nick thought about Faith. He thought about death. He thought about all the changes in his life that had brought him to that point. He thought about that night in the parking lot. The razor stopped and the nurse fumbled with it again, removing the blade guard. She turned on the razor once again and began shaving the hair right off down to the scalp. Nick felt his life being stripped away along with it. He was a cancer patient, he was bald, he was

slowly dying, and there was something wrong with him that the doctors could not explain. The nurse shut off the razor and turned on the water. As she soaped up his head and rinsed it off, the gravity of it all hit him, and he began to lightly sob.

"It's alright, Nick, you've had a rough week," Truman comforted him, "Take a moment for yourself."

A few minutes passed and Nick regained composure. He climbed into the wheelchair that the nurse had brought for him. Truman supervised as the nurse glued electric sensors onto Nick's scalp with spirit gum. By the time she was done, she had covered nearly his entire scalp with over two hundred sensors. Each had a tiny clip affixed to it that branched out from a larger wire, which was plugged into a machine. The machine, covered with switches and dials of all sorts, was plugged into one of the computers.

Truman asked Nick a series of questions, all targeted at relaxing his nerves. For an adequate study of his brain wave activity he could not be in an excitable state. After Nick was relaxed enough, Dr. Truman motioned at the

nurse. She brought over a pitcher of water and a glass. Nick suddenly got chills. The nurse poured the glass full of water and sat it down on the table a couple of feet in front of Nick. Truman watched the needles and monitors spike briefly and then settle back.

"Something familiar?" he asked Nick.

"Kinda, yeah," Nick said, "Just got a weird feeling there for a second."

"According to your roommate, the first thing to shatter in your room was, indeed, a glass of water. It's what injured his face," Truman explained.

"Yeah... Yeah there was a dream. There were glasses of water everywhere," Nick recalled, "I kept trying to pick them up, but more would grow out of the ground. Everything was white..."

"Do you remember anything else?" asked Truman, curious.

"Yes," Nick said, thinking hard, "I remember a blue glow around my palms and right as the dream ended, I

threw my hands out to my sides. All the glasses exploded outward like a shockwave. Then, everything was dark."

Stargazer by Brandon Cole Phillips

Chapter Three

Discovering A Gift

It seemed like the stairs were endless. Faith clung to Nick's hand as she pulled him up more and more flights. Nick had counted at least six flights, and after his busy day he was in no mood for exercise.

"Almost there!" Faith yelled excitedly, "I promise I'm not crazy! You just can't take an elevator through these floors!"

The pair arrived at a large metal door painted a grayish shade of blue. The door had no lock, only a brass doorknob and a warning sign that patients were not allowed past that point. Faith promptly swung the door open and pulled Nick through. The roof of the small Ravenwood hospital was a large expanse, dotted with the occasional air conditioning unit or venting pipe. In the middle of the roof, away from the perimeter lights, Nick saw two hospital cots.

"What is this?" Nick asked with a shy laugh.

"A little vacation," Faith explained in brief.

They made their way to the cots over the nasty gravel-covered terrain. Faith allowed Nick his choice of seat and the couple laid down. They had a perfect view of the summer sky.

"What's your sign?" Faith asked, trying to hide her joke.

"You brought me all the way up here to talk astrology?" Nick laughed.

"It's beautiful up here. For the most part you're above the city lights for a full view of nature's finest," Faith said.

She loved to gaze at the stars, trying to spot constellations and meteors. She might be an astronaut in another life, she thought.

"I really don't like cancer so far, I'm gonna be honest," Nick confessed, as lightly as possible.

Faith tried to joke, "Not only do you have cancer, but you have it in your..."

"Nothing like insult on top of injury, huh?" Nick remarked with a grin.

Faith's eyes shone, even in the dark. They held each other's gaze for as long as possible without making themselves uncomfortable. Nick broke the silence by slumping back down on the cot with a creak. It sounded like the metal frame would buckle at any moment.

"So you're into space stuff, huh?" Nick asked, changing the subject.

Faith slid off of her elbow and onto her back, "Yeah, it's just beautiful."

"Some people would say that it's God's masterpiece," Nick offered.

"Yeah," Faith said, not wanting to move the conversation in that particular direction.

Nick rolled over to look at her. Her profile was striking.

"Thanks for bringing me up here, Faith. You're an awesome distraction."

The pair sat up on the edges of their cots. A cool breeze bit them as it passed through. Faith shivered a bit. She repositioned next to Nick on the edge of his cot. She

wanted to kiss him. He wanted her, too. The metal frame of the cot creaked underneath them as they moved closer to each other. Their eyes locked. The metal frame bowed beneath them and gave way, sending them to a perilous four-inch plummet onto the tar-covered gravel. They giggled nervously, but they never broke the gaze. If there was ever a better moment for a first kiss, neither of them had experienced it. It was short, but perfect.

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Truman shuffled the papers on his desk – printouts of test results from the previous day mixed with other documents. Attempts to record any significant data had failed – all of Nick’s tests came back just as normal as any young male cancer patient’s would. All things considered, a patient who could destroy things with his mind should have some sort of differential in brain function, but nothing conclusive came through. Nick walked through the open office door.

“Nick! So good to see you!” Truman called.

"Hey Dr. Truman! I heard you wanted to speak to me," Nick said.

"Yes, are you ready for the orchiectomy surgery tomorrow?" Truman asked, politely.

"As ready as I can be, I guess," Nick replied, his mind already drifting to the previous night's events.

"Good, good," Truman said smiling, "I wanted to discuss yesterday's results with you."

"Am I the world's next superhero Doc?" Nick joked.

"Well, not as I can tell. It's not like we have very many scientific tests dedicated to things like this, but from what I can tell there's nothing unusual about any of your vitals, rates, or brain activities. You're medically normal for a testicular cancer patient," Truman said with a chuckle.

"Great," Nick said, frustrated at the lack of answers.

"I would like to try something if you're game for some hocus pocus," Truman offered.

"Sure, why the hell not?" Nick replied.

"Have a seat. I've got some flash cards here. The backs are black, and the fronts each have a color from the basic

spectrum. Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple. I look at a card, you guess the color," Truman explained.

"Easy enough," Nick replied.

"Keep your mind clear," Truman said, raising the first card to eye level.

Nick thought hard. Nothing came to him. He tried desperately to clear his little date with Faith from his mind long enough to focus. Eventually, upon closing his eyes, a bright color flashed in the forefront of his mind.

"Blue," came Nick's first guess.

"Correct," said Truman, holding up another card.

"Red," Nick guessed.

"Correct again, very good," Truman said as he raised another card.

"Green," Nick said, quicker than before.

"Correct."

Nick paused, thinking. Truman held a new card at eye level, looking right at it. Nick thought hard, but he hesitated to offer up a guess.

"Something wrong, Nick?" Truman asked.



"I dunno, Doc. I don't have a guess. All I can see is... nothing. Just... White," Nick replied, frustrated.

Truman moved his eyes from the card to Nick, and back to the card. He smiled, laying the card face-up in front of Nick. It was a blank.

"Remarkable," Truman said, pointing to a camera mounted on the ceiling, "And we've got it on tape!"

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"I swear to God," Nick said, twirling a plastic spoon in his fingers before sinking it into a cup of pudding.

Faith and Mike sat, mouths agape, trying to decide whether or not to believe Nick.

"Really? You're not kidding around here man?" Mike asked.

Nick grinned, "Why on Earth would I do something like that?"

"Maybe you're not from Earth, you weirdo!" Faith said, tossing a pillow at Nick.

"Hah! You're hysterical," Nick said sarcastically, giving Faith a not-so-subtle wink.

"Look, I gotta go, you goofballs," Faith sighed, "You two take care of yourselves, and Nick – good luck with the surgery tomorrow!"

Faith left quickly, as she did not want to linger. She often fought off worry by trying to keep her mind busy. Nick went back to twirling his spoon.

"You nervous about tomorrow? Mike asked, coughing a bit.

"I'll be alright, it's routine, ya know? Nothing too big to worry about," Nick tried to be confident.

The spoon twirled in and out between his fingers, spinning around knuckles and over nails. He had honed the skill during the hour-long lunches in high school. He picked up more and more speed until the spoon finally flew from his hand and fell to the floor.

"Haha! You suck!" Mike joked, "Now ya gotta climb out of your cozy nest and pick it up before that creepy night nurse yells at you!"

Nick leaned over the edge of the bed and tried to prove Mike wrong by grabbing the spoon without leaving his

warm seat. It was about half an arm length out of reach, though.

“Just get up, you bum!” Mike said, egging Nick on.

Nick reached hard, fingers wriggling from the tension in his muscles. He only gained about an inch. He stretched with all his might, determined not to climb off of the bed. The spoon leapt up from the cold tile and into his grip.

Mike gasped.

“Okay, not that I wasn’t a believer before, but... I’m a believer.”

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Morning came early the next day, as Nick’s surgery was scheduled for seven o’clock. With no breakfast and nothing to drink, Nick’s stomach was making all sorts of noises. He was ready for the surgery, though. Anything to take his mind off of the incredible pain that he was experiencing in his back and groin. At that point, he could not decide whether the pain was real or imagined, but all he knew was that he wanted the surgery to come as soon as

possible. He did not get an opportunity to speak to Mike before being wheeled down to the operating room – his friend was still fast asleep as the door slipped shut behind.

The walls became more sterile in appearance as the nurse pushed Nick further toward the operating room. After a trip in an over-sized elevator, they made their way through lavender painted walls and a set of large white doors. The walls that followed were covered in deep, dark blue tile. They continued through a set of large stainless steel doors, and finally traveled down a crooked hall lined with bright flawless white tiles. At the end of the hallway were two rooms. The nurse pushed Nick through the door to the first room, a small operating theater. It was solid grey cement, with all of the surgical tools on tables in the middle of the room over a large drain grate.

Nick was placed on a stretcher with warm blankets all over his body. His IV was exchanged for a new one in his other hand and a mask of some sort was placed over his mouth. Truman's face appeared in view.

"How you doing, Champ?" Truman asked, smiling caringly.

Nick nodded.

"We're going to move you to the operating table now, and then we'll lead you in a count back from one hundred, okay?" Truman said.

Nick nodded again. The operating team lifted Nick to the operating table and a nurse grabbed his hand in hers and began counting down. The room became hazy at ninety-nine, bright white at ninety-eight, and faded to black at ninety-seven.

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Nick awoke in very little pain in a recovery room. Painkillers had already been applied to numb the wounds of the surgery. When he became more conscious of his surroundings, a nurse began to feed him ice chips. The world slowly came back to him. He closed his eyes. When he opened them he was back in his hospital room.

"You've been asleep quite a while, Honey," Nick's mother said from his bedside, "Why don't you wake on up and have some more ice chips?"

Nick struggled to get a finger on his bedside controls and elevate himself.

"Wh... Where's... Mike?" Nick asked, barely able to get a look at the empty bed next to his.

"Mike," Ms. Rutherford began, "He passed away last night. He had a bad reaction to a medicine he was taking. Everybody has his or her time, son. Last night was Mike's. He went in his sleep. He went in peace."

Nick looked up to see Sam standing next to the doorway. He was in a hospital gown and bathrobe, one hand clinging to an IV stand.

"I guess you'll be seeing a lot more of me in my robe, eh buddy? Won't have Mikey keeping me all to himself," Sam said, tears welling up in his eyes.

Mike had befriended Sam months before, and the pair had been through a lot together in their short friendship. For young Sam, it was like losing family.

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Weeks passed, and as Nick's body grew weaker, his ability grew stronger. He practiced rudimentary control over objects sometimes more than ten feet away. Also growing stronger was his love for Faith. The couple spent long hours in his hospital bed discussing the dates they would go on after his release, possible Halloween costumes, and favorite Christmas carols. For the first time in her life, Faith felt a future with someone. She loved him – and wanted to love him for the rest of her life.

Nick sat in a chair opposite Truman in Andrews's office. Andrews was holding some films up to his desk light and examining them closely. Nick finally got a good look and saw that they were the recent scans of his head. Andrews shuffled around in his desk, as he looked for the right implement. He settled on a black ballpoint pen.

"See this here?" Andrews said, pointing with the pen towards a large, very dark cloud in the middle of Nick's brain, "This is potentially very bad. While it's what's probably causing the increase in your gift, it should

probably also come out. It's definitely a tumor, and it's starting to put too much pressure on the more sensitive areas of your brain. I recommend we remove it."

"And this is the reason that I am here," Truman piped up, "I disagree with Dr. Andrews and feel that we should wait it out as long as possible, and continue our research into your... abilities."

"So we leave it in and I die, or we take it out and I can't grab the remote from across the room?" Nick asked, "I'll take the surgery, thanks. Being alive is a lot more awesome than silly party tricks."

"We'll get you scheduled, then," Andrews said, pleased with Nick's choice.

Nick left to return to his hospital room, anxious to text message Faith and let her know what was about to transpire.

"You can't do this, Ron," Truman said sternly.

"It's the kid's choice, he chose the surgery. You can't blame him," Andrews said with an almost condescending tone.

"I need to know what this is, Ron," Truman said, even more sternly.

"Well, I guess you'll have to find another patient to play Sherlock Holmes with, Morgan," Andrews replied.

Truman leaned in close, his hot stinking breath fogging up Andrews's reading glasses.

"I have to know what this is!" Truman yelled as the glass display case behind Andrews's desk erupted into a rain of glass shards.

A single baseball fell from the display case and rolled to a stop at Andrews's foot.

"What... Are you?" Andrews asked, his voice just a whisper.

"I'm trying desperately to find out," Truman muttered as he fell back into the cold leather chair, his face in his hands.

"My God..." was all that Andrews could spit out of his mouth, stunned by the spectacle.

Truman stood, put on his jacket, and walked slowly out of the office.

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"No one has heard from Dr. Truman in two days," Faith said, pouring a cup of orange juice for her favorite patient.

"I hope it was not because of my decision," Nick replied.

"You can't blame his disappearance on your decision to live, Nick. That's not right," Faith scolded him.

"I know, but he did so much to help me... To guide me... And... And I wouldn't help him," Nick said, frustrated with himself.

"He left. It's not your fault. You've got to think about yourself right now, and not worry about him or anyone else," Faith said, caringly.

"I think about *you*," Nick said, grinning ear to ear.

"Now, that's the cheesy Nick I love," Faith remarked, kissing him on the cheek before prancing out the door to finish her breakfast service.

Nick sat quietly, in turmoil over the impending surgery. He was scheduled to have *brain* surgery. Doctors were going to open up his *brain* to try to remove a tumor. It was

a heavy thought. He remembered a late-night operation being broadcast one evening on one of the local college television stations. Doctors had drilled a small hole into the back of the patient's head, with the patient still awake to respond to stimuli. They had to keep the patient awake, they explained, to make sure that they did not make any mistakes. That was reassuring. The plan was not to simply drill a hole in Nick's head, though – it was to remove part of his skullcap. It was a dangerous surgery with a very large mass to be investigated and removed. He wondered if he would come out of it the same.

Dr. Andrew's arm reached in and knocked on the door.

"Come in," Nick said, relieved to have a distraction.

"Hello, Nick! How are we feeling today?" Andrews asked, aware of Nick's turmoil.

"As good as I can be," Nick replied.

"We'll perform the surgery on Monday morning. That's six days from now, so it will give you a couple of days to bounce back from this first round of chemotherapy,"

Andrews explained, trying to be as compassionate as possible.

"That's good," Nick agreed, wishing he had more to say.

"It's a risky procedure, yes, but there is a very high success rate in fellows your age. I wouldn't worry too much about it if I were in your shoes," Andrews said, again trying to comfort the young boy.

"Right now," Nick began, "They are very uncomfortable shoes."

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That night, Faith was off work and she had no studying to worry about. She was well aware of what lay ahead for Nick, as she had seen several boys go through similar predicaments before. Nick was the most advanced and bizarre case that she was aware of, but that did not put a damper on her attraction to him. She saw how caring and kind he was. The boy was selfless – somewhat of an opposite of her father.

Faith stopped at the gift shop to buy Nick a small present. She had yet to buy him something and decided

that it was a better time than ever to start. She browsed the plush animals, magazines, flowers, cards, and figurines. She wanted to get him something special, not that typical gift anyone would pick up in a rush to grab something and get out. She walked to the bookshelves and thumbed through the titles, then stopped abruptly at the perfect book.

"Stargazer: A Visual Tour Of Our Galaxy," Faith mumbled to herself, "Perfecto!"

Waiting in line to pay, she scribbled a little note on the inside cover of the book. It was a perfectly black page, so a silver paint pen was in order. She thought back to that first night they shared alone together – two young kids trying to figure out life on a pair of hospital cots on the roof. She remembered how Nick looked at her. He did not look at her legs, or her chest, but right into her eyes. Deep into her eyes. Fixated, as if trying to determine her sincerity. It was sweet, and cute, and a moment that she would not soon forget. It was the first time Faith felt romantic love, and it could not have been more perfect in the moment.

Faith entered Nick's room without knocking, something she had become comfortable doing in the recent weeks. He sat on his bed with a tray table on his lap. He had a chess set on the table, with several pieces already moved to the side. He repositioned the black rook by simply pointing at it. It moved effortlessly to its new square.

"Chess with yourself? That's a new low," Faith said, winking.

"Oh hush! Maybe I should show you a good butt-kicking in chess so you would appreciate a gentlemen's game," Nick said, as he tried his best to sound like a British butler.

"Well Jeeves, I suck at chess, so you're probably right," Faith laughed, "I got you something."

Faith handed Nick the package, wrapped in pink wrapping paper. It was all she could find that did not have 'Get well!' or 'It's a boy!' on it. Nick tore the paper off with as little care as possible, making sure to strategically rip it

into as many pieces as he could. He spied the play frustration on Faith's face as he made his mess.

"Stargazer: A Visual Tour Of Our Galaxy," Nick read aloud, "Ah, I get it – very clever!"

"Why, thank you, sir," Faith said, delighted that her gift was appreciated.

She climbed into the hospital bed with Nick and snuggled up next to him.

"Stargazer," Nick repeated, "You know that'd be a good nickname for you, Faith."

"You're funny," Faith said with a mock stern tone.

"My little Stargazer," Nick proclaimed loudly, tickling Faith's ribs.

The couple laughed, before relaxing into an embrace.

"So how do you do it?" Faith asked, "What goes on in your head when you, you know, want to move something?"

"I don't know – it's weird. It's almost like a silent conversation with the air around it. Truman really helped me understand how to control it, more by conditioning

than anything," Nick explained, "You could probably do it if you tried hard enough."

Faith laughed and rolled over to look at Nick.

"Show me a trick," she said.

"For one, it's not a trick!" Nick said proudly, "And for two, give me a quarter."

They sat up as Faith dug a few coins out of her pocket.

"All I've got is a nickel and some pennies. Don't be picky," she said, reaching her arm out with the change.

Nick plucked the nickel from her hand.

"Okay, drop the change and hold out your hands," Nick instructed, as he placed the nickel on her open palm, "Now think about all the air around that nickel. You're going to imagine little wisps of air moving the coin around in your hand. The wind gets strong and stronger, blowing right toward your other palm. The coin gets lighter and lighter until it's like a feather, but under full control of your winds."

Faith looked hard at the coin on her palm, but it was motionless.

"Think harder," Nick said, placing his palms underneath hers, "Tell the air that you need the coin in your other hand. Tell it!"

The coin flipped from one open palm to the other, as if by magic.

"You did that, didn't you?" Faith asked, sticking her tongue out.

"Perhaps a magician never reveals his secrets?" Nick said coyly.

"You're full of it!" Faith remarked, again falling into the bed for a last cuddle before she left for home.

"Listen," Nick said, "I made something for you."

"Really, what?" Faith asked, hunching up again onto her elbow.

Nick pulled a small disc from one pocket and a little wire figure from the other. The figure was made out of copper electrical hook-up wire with a pink enamel coating. It was shaped like Saturn, with three thick rings. The disc was cylindrical, partly made from a small motor. Nick affixed the figure to the disc and offered it to Faith.

"What am I supposed to do with it?" Faith asked politely.

"Press the button!" Nick answered, laughing.

Faith found a button on the side of the contraption. It sprang to life as the planet spun around atop the cylinder. A song, like a tune on a music box played from within the round base. It was *Across the Universe*, the classic Beatles anthem.

"You like space, I figured you might like this song," Nick said blushing.

"It's beautiful," Faith said grinning, "I love it."

"I love you," Nick said, surprised at his inhibitions fading away.

"I love you," Faith replied, melting into Nick's embrace.

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The days passed, and it felt as though Nick and Faith had spent every waking hour together leading up to the surgery. Nick's mother took off from work the last few days before the operation to be with her son. She worried about the ramifications, but she stood strong in attempt to

comfort her boy. Their family seemed plagued by cancer, its foul vines weaving their way up and down their family tree. She wondered why God allowed disease to infest such good people. Was it a test? Was it a sign of his divine resistance to intervene? She hated to question her faith in tough times, but the circumstances made it difficult hold steadfast.

Faith, Ms. Rutherford, and Sam all sat in Nick's room waiting for the nurse to come pick him up for surgery prep. It was just around six o'clock in the morning, and nerves were finally beginning to get the best of Nick. His palms sweated as he tried to keep them still. He had a habit of drumming Queen songs on any available surface when his nerves were piqued. That morning it was *Bohemian Rhapsody* that he could not get out of his head.

Is this the real life?

Is this just fantasy?

For the first time, the lyrics actually rang true in his mind. He wished it were all just a dream. Why did he have

to find love and friendship under such grave circumstances? It was so unfair.

The heavysset nurse came in and silently motioned for him to move to a wheelchair that she had brought. Nick kissed his mother on the cheek, took a hug from Faith, and shook the hand of Sam before taking his seat.

He rolled to that familiar elevator and down that same hallway as before. The tiled walls looked different this time. *More like a prison than a hospital*, he thought. He was wheeled into the second operating room, and there were twice as many people present. They were cleaning tools, counting supplies, and washing their hands so vigorously that one might think they would wash their skin right off. The room was bright with white light, and a few intern students sat in the theater seating to observe. Rather than on an operating table, Nick was seated in a chair similar to that which one would find in a barbershop. His head was bald from the chemotherapy, so the wrap they placed around the incision area felt slightly cold on his scalp.

A nurse started a new IV in his other hand, as another placed warm blankets on his already-shivering body.

"It's cold in here," Nick said, obviously nervous.

"That's just your nerves, Honey," a nurse offered, "You'll be calm enough soon."

Dr. Andrews supervised the surgery as another doctor performed the work. Andrews talked about sports and girls with Nick as the incision was made. All the activity took place behind Nick's head. For that he was grateful. Tempting as it was, he really did not want to get a look at his own brain.

After what seemed like hours, Nick heard the surgeon ask for stitching materials. He was much more calm now, satisfied that he did not feel any pain throughout the procedure. It was over, and he could still think.

"You're all done now, Nick. We're going to go ahead and put you to sleep so that you can rest. Your body has taken quite a hit today. I'll be there when you wake up," Andrews said, smiling. He would never tell Nick, but he had just as many worries about the surgery as his patient.

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Nick lay fast asleep as Dr. Andrews left his hospital room. Andrews had checked up on him every thirty minutes for three hours following the surgery. Faith and Ms. Rutherford sat in rolling office chairs that Faith had snuck from a supply storage room.

"He sure has been sleeping for a while," Ms. Rutherford said, trying to make small talk with her son's new girlfriend.

"After an operation like that, they can sometimes rest up to four or five hours before waking up," Faith offered, "And they're usually clamoring for us to bring them Jell-O afterwards!"

The ladies laughed. Ms. Rutherford liked Faith. She felt a genuine compassion from her. She felt a friendship budding in their shared heartache. Nick had never brought home a girl that Ms. Rutherford had thought that she could live with, but Faith felt like a perfect fit for Nick. The two youths were so alike, it was no wonder they found love in each other.

A loud buzzer broke the silence in the room.

“Oh my God,” Faith shuddered.

Almost instantly the room was flooded with people. Technicians, nurses, and doctors rained in. The fat nurse pulled Faith and Ms. Rutherford to the door, instructing them in a gruff voice to wait outside the room. A tall, unfamiliar doctor ran in and began organizing the group loudly. The two women could do nothing but stand outside the room and wait for an explanation. They watched as a tall pump machine was wheeled into the room, followed by a man with a large cooling unit.

“What’s going on, Faith?” Ms. Rutherford pleaded.

“I don’t know, I haven’t seen anything like this yet!” Faith said, beginning to tear up, “The buzzer, it sounds when vitals fall rapidly, that’s all I know. Doctors always take over from there.”

The room was loud for what felt like hours, but what in reality were only a few minutes. The tall doctor emerged from the room with a somber expression. His grim appearance signaled unsavory news. He sat the women

down in the hallway to give his condolences for the loss of their loved one.

A blood clot no larger than the size of a grain of rice had suffocated Nick's brain of much-needed oxygen, ending his life with an unjust abruptness.

Stargazer by Brandon Cole Phillips

Chapter Four

The Visitor

Present day – Ravenwood, Oklahoma.

"His mother passed away with breast cancer not even six months later," Faith said, taking a sip of her kiwi-strawberry soda.

"Wow," Angie replied, astonished, "That's quite a tale. Not so sure I'm feeling some of that though. You know the... hocus pocus type stuff..."

"That's why I don't tell it very often," Faith sighed, "But I've got to go, I really have to finish this anatomy book before the real classes start back up."

"It was so nice meeting with you, Faith!" Angie exclaimed, as she ran around the table to hug her friend.

Faith began her walk home, as she wondered why she confided the story to her old friend. She knew many of the details were unbelievable, and she too would not have believed it had she not lived through it. Nick's memory haunted her every single day. He was a person in her life that she cherished so much more than anyone before, and

his loss was still a nagging heartache that she had yet to overcome.

Faith crossed the road on her way to her car, stopping briefly at a big puddle. She looked left and right, to check for witnesses, before she extended her right hand outward toward the water. As if cut by a large gust of wind, the puddle separated. Dry ground lay out in a path to the edge of the sidewalk. Faith grinned the rest of the way home. It was not the fatal brain tumor that had given Nick his abilities, but something unexplained and almost magical. It was something he had shared with Faith.

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Faith waved to Dale as she unlocked the door to her apartment. It was dark now, and her living room light had been burnt out for a week. It had gone without replacement because she hated to impose on Dale to help her with housework, but she could not reach it without a stepladder. If she asked Dale to borrow a stepladder, she would end up borrowing Dale too. He hated to let a woman do something he could so easily help her with.

Faith made her way to the kitchen, her eyes still not adjusted to the light. The smell of fresh coffee wafted through the air, though it had been hours since she had been home. Something seemed unsavory as she fumbled for the kitchen light switch. A cold tingle ran up her spine and gave goose bumps to the back of her neck.

"Please remain calm, Ms. Forester," a voice called out from the dark.

Faith froze as she saw a figure sitting at her dining room table.

"My name is Chon Tom. We've been trying to contact you for days now. You don't pick up your phone," the figure said.

Faith's eyes were soaking in as much light as possible, and she tried desperately to make out features of the visitor. He was overweight – obese even. He had dark skin and was wearing a suit. His eyes were sunken in and recessed. He had large hands and, unbelievably, four legs! Faith flicked on the light, sending her strained eyeballs into another panic. She saw clearly before her that this was no

man – it was a creature. A scaly, slimy, toad-like beast dressed in a charcoal tweed suit. Faith was still frozen.

“Have a seat, and we’ll chat,” Chon said, motioning to an empty chair.

He pulled a cigar from his front coat pocket and rolled it, unlit, between his lips.

Feeling like she was in some sort of bizarre dream, Faith pulled the chair over and sat down to face the creature. He was enormous, possibly more than five hundred pounds. He had brewed a pot of coffee and fixed himself a cup. He pointed to a mug that sat next to Faith’s coffee pot. Steam slowly rose from its top. On one side of the mug were seven dots, arranged in the shape of the Little Dipper.

“Go ahead and take it, I know what you can do,” Chon said, taking a gulp from his cup, “One spoon of cream and a pinch of sugar, just how you like it.”

Faith reached her hand out and the cup lifted from its place on the counter. It floated effortlessly down to rest in front of her on the table. She sipped the coffee, still silent,



too nervous to speak. The creature smelled like Old Spice. The nails on the ends of his nubby fingers were dark green, a slight contrast to the lighter yellow-green of his skin. His eyes were like little black marbles, recessed down into the baseball-sized pits of his eye sockets.

He had a throat not unlike that of a bullfrog, which filled and deflated with each breath. His second set of legs sat awkwardly off of the sides of his chair, the feet dangled just above the floor.

"I'm surprised you haven't run yet. That's good. What I am about to tell you is to be kept between us, do you understand?"

Faith nodded.

"You have abilities that you still don't even know about. Abilities my team and I can help you unlock and control. And we need your help. If I could bring you with me to my facilities, I could explain further," Chon offered.

"You need my help with what?" Faith asked in a struggle to get the question out of her mouth.

"We need you to save the world," Chon muttered, almost annoyed at her fear of his appearance, "Take this, when you're more prepared to hear what I have to say, press this button."

Chon stood up, walked to the middle of the kitchen, reached into his coat pocket, and faded away.

"What the hell?" Faith exclaimed, collapsing back in her chair.

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The kitten was back lying in the bed fast asleep. Faith noticed a collar around the kitten's neck. It had not been there before. Lifting the tag on the collar, Faith read the name, *Ursa Minor*.

"Little Bear," Faith said to the cat, "Cute name."

Faith dropped her clothes to the floor and pulled a ratty oversized t-shirt over her head. She climbed into bed, nestling the kitten between her arm and ribs. She dreaded her father's funeral. It was a day away. With her father's passing, all of her close relatives were gone. Her brother would go on to live in a home, and her grandparents were

mostly strangers. Dale and Margaret were the most family she had.

Faith could see a light from the small button that the visitor had brought her glowing through her jeans on the floor. She reached out toward it. It slid from the pocket and popped up into her hand. It was nothing more than an aluminum-looking square with a barely raised square button on it. There was a small circle on the back that glowed with a faint white light. She stared with disbelief at the object, and was unsure what to make of the visit. She kept telling herself that it was a dream, but she held the evidence right there in her palm. She sat the button on her nightstand and closed her eyes.

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Eugene Forester's funeral was a quick one. No one had much to say about the man, so with a few songs and a reading of the Lord's Prayer, the service was over. Faith leaned against a large grave marker and watched from a distance as workers lowered her father's casket into the ground. Family members were scattered about in groups,

conversations moving from thoughts of Eugene to suggestions of where to head for lunch. Faith spied her father's parents standing next to the gravesite, watching the crew work. For a moment she considered going to speak to them, but she decided that it was less painful to simply leave.

Her father was buried three towns over in a small family plot. The drive home was grueling and long. Margaret called Faith's cell phone to let Faith know that she had already broken the date with her nephew and to tell her that she and Dale would be there if she needed anything.

As Faith drove, she thought back to the previous night. Had it been a dream? A hallucination? Did a giant toad man actually offer answers to all the nagging questions she had about her abilities? If there was a small metal button on her nightstand when she got home, she would press it and find out. She was tired of questioning it.

Faith pulled into her apartment, jogged to the door, and dropped her purse just inside. She took off the dark,

depressing dress she wore to the funeral and slipped into a pair of Capri pants and a green hoodie. She wanted to look at the nightstand but was worried of what she might find there. She walked to the kitchen to start a pot of coffee, when she felt a tickle on her ankle. It was the kitten, walking in circles around her leg and then off into the bedroom. She followed the cat, and upon entering the bedroom, found it sitting on the nightstand next to a small square disk. A light pulsed behind it. Faith picked up the cat in her left hand and the button in her right. She walked slowly back to the kitchen.

"This is insane," Faith said, shaking her head, as she pressed the small square between her thumb and forefinger.

While from the outside an observer would see nothing but a quick disappearing act, Faith experienced much more. There were blinding bright beams of light swirling around her. Her body was not visible to her, nor could she feel its presence. She felt as if she was invisible and traveling at a high rate of speed. She maintained

awareness of herself but not of her surroundings. She was definitely not in her apartment anymore, nor was she anywhere discernable.

"Incoming!" yelled a yellow-skinned portly little alien worker, sitting at a terminal in the entry hangar of the *Ruengale*.

A light pulsed over the transport deck indicating a new arrival, as Chon Tom entered the room and straightened his tie.

"That was sooner than expected, after how long it takes to get that girl to answer the phone!" Chon laughed, walking toward the transport deck.

Faith flickered into presence in the middle of the deck with little luster. It was certainly not like any effect she had seen in a movie. There was barely any fanfare at all. Moments later, Little Bear snapped into view a few feet away.

"Dangerous move bringing that thing with you! You coulda ended up with a sweet set of whiskers, ma'am!"

Chon joked, "Ah, just kidding. The transport is more or less perfectly safe. Welcome to the *Ruengale!*"

Faith eventually looked up, satisfied that all of her fingers and toes had completed the trip with her. She was in a gigantic hangar – bright white metal everywhere. There were windows in the ceiling with stars clearly visible, and ships of all sizes and kinds docked neatly in uniform rows on the floor. She guessed there might have been fifty or more of them. Working on the ships were cleaning and maintenance crews of both aliens and robots. A row of a half dozen pudgy little yellow guys sat at a long control panel in front of her, pressing on-screen buttons on their monitors. They were Chernulans, a hardworking species from a vegetation-covered planet. There were no physical buttons to be seen on their control panels.

Chon reached out for Faith's hand to help her down the stairs of the transport deck, and she nervously accepted.

"She's a beautiful ship isn't she?" Chon asked, as if awaiting a compliment on his baby.

"It's very nice, very large," Faith muttered, still taking in the sights.

"This is where I like to spend a lot of my time," Chon beamed, "But we really must head down to the main base to talk."

Chon guided Faith to a large green ship, about the size of a speedboat. A staircase extended down from its side, as if from nowhere, as they approached. Faith climbed in first and took the passenger seat. Chon struggled up the small staircase behind her. Although she was fairly certain that seatbelt laws did not apply wherever they were, Faith snapped herself in tight anyway. The vehicle's hatch shut with a hiss, and they lifted off the ground with not so much as a rumble.

"It's all about free energy up here, Faith," Chon explained, "Your governments know about it, but they're still pretty attached to fossil fuels. We gave them the info they needed oh, about fifty Earth years ago. It's tapping into the energy that surrounds us. Photons, radiation, all that crap. Just like you probably don't know how a power

plant works, I don't really know how free energy works, exactly, but it doesn't cost anything beyond manufacturing the equipment! And I like that!"

Faith kept quiet, still in amazement of the view around her. The ship moved down a long strip between two rows of similar vessels and down into a small holding corridor. The door closed behind them.

"We have to wait for depressurization before we can head out. It just takes a few seconds," Chon explained.

Soon a door slid down into the floor in front of them and the ship moved out into space. Before Faith knew what was happening, the Moon swung into full view in the front window. It was gigantic, and they were headed for the dark side. The ship moved very quickly down to the surface and skimmed just over the tops of the craters. Faith was dumbfounded. She caught a glimpse of the *Ruengale* above them. It looked small, especially in comparison to the Moon. They were shrouded in darkness, and in the distance, Faith spotted a pulsating white light just on the horizon. Before long, they were right up on it.

"Here we are!" announced Chon, "And down we go!"

The transport ship sank into a seemingly invisible hole in the Moon's surface. The walls were lined with small lights and tiled with large metal panels that overlapped each other like the scales of a snake. At the end of the long vertical tunnel, the ship dropped down into yet another large hangar, again filled with ships of various sizes and configurations. Chon parked the ship in a spot near a set of doors and opened the hatch. The pair climbed down one by one, and Faith followed Chon through the doors, down a long barren hallway, and into a small room set up somewhat like a movie theater. There was small stadium seating and a projection screen. They seated themselves, and Chon picked up a small remote device.

"I'm going to go through this very quickly, so please try and keep up," Chon began, as pictures started to display on the screen, "July sixth, 1947, a Zetan ship crashes near the American town of Roswell, New Mexico. The next day, the Roswell Army Air Field claims the wreckage. On board that ship was a new kind of test-unit power supply that

promised to double the efficiency of other supplies used on planetary transports – which it eventually did, as an aside. So the United States Air Force, rather than utilizing the captured technology to improve human transport, instead devised a way to weaponize the device. Tensions with the Soviets were mounting and it made a good device for mutually assured destruction. We pretty much knew that it would never be used. Firing the unit could result in a black hole large enough to engulf Earth, and eventually the rest of the solar system. However, we at the United Inter-Planetary Assembly took the opportunity to engage the human race directly and try to work with them to sort the situation out. The UIPA has been working, mostly indirectly, with humans for millennia. Your species is very promising, very ingenuitive, and was on track to becoming an asset member of the UIPA. However, your armed forces and government demanded information about unlocking the powers of the mind, and reluctantly, we helped them by providing DNA sequences and splicing technology to show them how to unlock new abilities buried deep in the human

genetic code. For decades the Air Force and other, publicly unidentified entities, worked on producing hybrid embryos in what they called 'Treehouse Projects' with quicker and quicker progression. This occurred until the late 1980s when the programs were finally called off after some groups kidnapped women off the streets, faked alien abductions, and even infiltrated IVF clinics to implant their hybrids. Some of the hybrid babies made it into the wild. You are one of them. As far as we can tell, there are only three others left alive. Many didn't live past their first year. It was a terrible, shameful disregard for human life. Your mother was taken and silenced by the private operation that created you, when she began to catch on that you were not like other children. She was going to have you tested for genetic abnormalities, to make sure you were a healthy child. The whackos that fused your and your brother's DNA with the foreign genetic material couldn't have her figuring out what had happened."

Faith sat silent and stunned.

“So, you may be thinking – ‘Why am I here?’ Right?” Chon said, switching the on-screen image to a photo of a man in a fancy armored suit, “This is a man calling himself *Fusion*. He’s quite theatrical, as you can see. He was an Air Force medic during the time of the Roswell incident. The problem is, we don’t know who he is or really anything about him. We have a plant on the inside of Fusion’s operation, but he is not high enough ranked to be privy to that sort of information. Fusion was experimented on with the DNA sequences and may have some of the same abilities as you. We don’t know for sure. Here’s the deal, Faith. He’s got the weapon. Captured it five months ago when it was being transported between facilities. Now he’s quietly threatening the United States government to disclose information about the Treehouse Projects. If they don’t comply, he might use the thing. It’s time for us to get it back before the more militant members of the UIPA find out that he’s got it. Fusion is still unaware of our diplomatic base here, according to our intelligence. We need a human, so as to hide our presence here from

Fusion, but we need someone that will be able to match skill and ability with him if necessary. You're a human, and you have the same or possibly more abilities than him. We need *your* help."

"So you want me to go fight the guy and take this galaxy-swallowing weapon away from him and his henchman?" Faith laughed.

"Solar-system swallowing. And yes, please," said Chon, with a grimace, "If you don't, we might be in an intergalactic war within two months."

"So I have time then?" Faith asked, "Time to think about this?"

"Not much," a familiar voice rang from the door at the back of the room.

Faith shifted to look up the stairs, squinting at the bright light beaming into the dark room. She did not believe what she saw – and she began feeling dizzy.

"Is this some sort of trick?" Faith leered at Chon, who humbly shook his head side to side.

She leapt from her seat and ran up the stairs. It was him – living, breathing, and with a thick head of hair. It was Nick.

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“It’s so breathtaking to finally see you again, Faith,” Nick said, inspecting all her features like an art lover admiring a fine sculpture.

The two sat in fancy white metallic chairs, with big round cushions. A small robot rolled up with drinks. Lights beneath the drinks glowed both blue and red.

“The ones on the blue lights are safe for humans,” Nick explained, “It knows what species we are, isn’t that awesome?”

Faith took a drink from the robot’s tray. The bot looked like a turtle with its shell cut in half horizontally and fashioned into a tray. It was solid white with no other visible features.

“So, Nick,” Faith began, now prepared for her explanation, “Would you like to tell me where you’ve been for the last year?”

"I've been here," Nick said bluntly, "I can't really leave."

Faith raised an eyebrow at him.

"Chon saved my life. When the UIPA found out I was dying, they waited until the last moment and came in and took my body. They have this technique called 'cognitive transfer'. Basically they can replicate the full contents of your mind into a computer and then copy it into a duplicate body. They'd been tracking me around, just like you. Because, we were experiments in the wild," Nick chuckled.

"So you're one of the other 'surviving' experiments?"

Faith asked, almost amused.

"Yeah. There's three more that the UIPA knows of. There's a black guy in Manhattan. He hasn't been contacted yet. And Ronnie, who, well you know, the DNA didn't fuse right... And of course this Fusion guy, but he's not a Treehouse kid, just a military experiment," Nick explained, somber.

"Why didn't you come back?" Faith asked, looking into her beverage.

"It's just... How do you explain something like this without going to the loony bin? How do you abandon people who cared so much and worked so hard to save your life in hopes that you can help them?" Nick tried hard to explain.

"What about your mother?! She had *cancer*!" Faith was stern.

"You think I didn't care about that? She was more than taken care of, Chon and the UIPA made sure of that," Nick explained, "Remember the mysteriously paid-for food service? The house-cleaning service?"

Faith had stayed with Ms. Rutherford several times through her breast cancer ordeal and had witnessed dozens of near-miraculous outpourings of charity. She always attributed it to the kindness of neighbors not wanting to embarrass Nick's mother by their helping out.

"So let me get this straight, just for the sake of understanding," Faith began, changing the subject, "A spaceship crashed in the forties and the military turned it into a weapon that could potentially destroy everything in

the solar system. A crazy bad guy got a hold of it because of the incompetence of our national defense. They want us to use our alien-DNA powered abilities to sneak in and get it back?"

"For the most part," Nick said, "Except for the 'us' part. I don't have my abilities anymore, not after my revival. Apparently the alien part in my DNA didn't replicate over properly into the new body. They need you to do it, alone."

"Alone," Faith repeated.

"Yes, alone," Nick explained, "I'm afraid I won't be of much help. And you can't take a non-human with you, Fusion doesn't know about the UIPA's presence here, and it needs to stay that way until the UN approves full disclosure. Politics."

"I'll do it, but you're coming with me," Faith said, in a stubborn tone.

"But, I can't..." Nick paused, "Fine, but that's just going to complicate things!"

"Could things get anymore complicated, Nick?" Faith asked, waiting a moment before giving Nick a sly grin.

"I'm so glad to have you back, Faith. I missed you," Nick said blushing, "I guess we should go take care of getting you moved out?"

"Yeah," Faith sighed, "And I have some rough goodbyes ahead of me."

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Faith and Nick walked back through the large hangar. There were creatures and aliens of all types wandering about. A blue humanoid in a silver jumpsuit was chipping something off of a small one-pilot craft. A pair of the little yellow beings was going ship to ship scanning the bellies of the crafts with little hand-held computers. Some sort of apparently non-sentient creature, long and furry, like a house cat-sized caterpillar was sitting in a puddle of mucus next to the walkway. Faith spotted a robot in an apparent argument with an alien important enough to be wearing a business suit like Chon's.

"Here we are," Nick said, stopping next to a slender green craft not too unlike the ship Faith had arrived on. It

was sleeker, though, and more fancy. It appeared brand new. Faith noticed a mark on the rear of the hull.

"*Stargazer*," she read aloud, "You named it after the book!"

"No," Nick said with a chuckle, "It's named after you. That's what they call you here."

Nick was grinning ear-to-ear.

"You have them calling me by *your* pet name for me?!" Faith blushed, "I don't know whether to be honored or pissed!"

"I'll hope for honored," Nick said, still grinning, "She's yours, too. Unfortunately I'll have to drive her until you get trained, but she's your welcome present."

"More like welcome *bribe*, but I'll take it!" Faith said, climbing aboard.

The interior was beautiful. There was black faux-leather seating, with two pilot chairs and a semi-circle bench seat in the back. The floor was a glossy black – like a sheet of flawless onyx. The control board had just a few barely raised buttons, the entire console encased in a

brushed aluminum seamless housing. There was a single, long touch screen display embedded in the panel just above the buttons. As the pair took their seats, a force field-like bubble encased the open top of the craft over their heads.

“Riddle me this,” Faith said, turning to Nick, “If you can press a button and get zapped from one place to another, why do they have so many ships?”

“It’s safer,” Nick said, throwing Faith a deliberate wink.

Chapter Five

Dishonorable Discharge

Fusion was not a large man, a trait that likely contributed to his insistence upon wearing a custom suit of armor that looked as if it was inspired by a video game. It had dark black auto-painted metal plating with a burgundy trim around the edges. The boots lifted him nearly an additional four inches in height, making his form much more intimidating. He had developed the suit with hush money funneled to him by members of the United Nations in attempt to delay his uprising. It was worn both for protection and to satisfy his eccentricities. Once he and his team had secured the doomsday device, known in the upper military echelons as simply the *BlackHole*, the protection money from various entities flowed in almost regularly.

Frustrated with the lack of disclosure of UFO information and military experimentation with alien technology, it was Fusion's personal mission to bring the truth to the world. The scars of his military service ran deep – the effects of the testing performed on him

unshakeable. Out of twelve men selected for testing, he was the only one to survive until that particular program was ended. He received no care after his expulsion. No money, no medical treatment. He was thrown out onto the streets and told that if he spoke about the trials, he would be dead before he could close his mouth.

He took that as a dare.

Fusion inspected his new baby, a six-section space station to be launched later in the week. He knew that to be successful in his persuasion, he needed to prove his seriousness. So he would soon hold the world hostage from afar and force those who ruined his and so many other lives to talk. Those who profited from lack of progress, who subjected people to violent and torturous experiments, and above all those who held captive information and technologies that would change the human race forever – they would all be forced to explain themselves on the world's stage.

Fusion had spent many decades quietly developing his plans and two decades implementing them. The main

facility was situated on a small island in the Aleutian island chain. He chose the location because of its remoteness, but he could not help but love the comic book-inspired flair of having a base inside a volcano – even if it was far from active. For nearly a year he had been building his space station and rockets, utilizing technologies acquired under shell companies that were competing for private sector success in space tourism.

By trying to ignore a problem, the United Nations, the United States Air Force and investigative agencies, and many foreign governments had inadvertently set up their own dominos. Fusion was almost ready to prove that he could knock them down. He was fed up with trying to figure things out on his own and was ready to go all the way with his plan to get a public explanation. It was not enough for him to simply know what he knew. It was not enough for him to try to spread the word by mouth. It would not be enough for him until the President of the United States went on record with full disclosure of the

Treehouse Projects and all related information. Fusion saw no evil in his plan. In his mind, he was a hero.

There was an air of urgency about the base. In order to have the rockets launched and the space station complete while undetected by the U.S. Armed Forces, the team would have to move quickly.

"How is progress, Jim?" Fusion asked his assistant and the general overseer of the space station project.

Jim Denaro grew up in a wealthy mafia-affiliated family, but he chose to make a career man out of himself at an early age. He moved up quickly in the space travel research community, working for several aerospace conglomerates before helming a twenty-two year stint at NASA. When budget cuts took his job and his livelihood, a family member put him in touch with the man he would come to know as Fusion. Although he failed to agree with his boss's methods, Jim doubted Fusion's ability to actually press the button when the time came. Additionally, he was helping advance aeronautics in such a monumental way that he knew that even as accessory to a high profile crime,



his name would go down in history as a pioneer of manned spaceflight and extra-planetary colonization. He and Fusion also got along quite well – even if Jim did think that his friend’s self-dubbed moniker was a bit hokey. *It’s what I am, and it’s what the world needs to know I am*, Fusion once said.

“Everything’s still on schedule, Boss,” Jim rattled off, working quickly on a tablet computer with a stylus.

Fusion flipped open a small flap on his left wrist, revealing an OLED screen with a countdown timer and other statistics rapidly updating.

“So we have roughly five days and fourteen hours to go before launch,” Fusion stated, happily.

“That’s correct, sir, we’re right on time,” Jim confirmed.

Fusion closed the display on his wrist and walked over to inspect the compartment pods of his space station. They were gigantic, each approximately the size of a doublewide mobile home. The units were designed to be collapsible, each launching in its own rocket. Once docked in the

proper configuration, a compressed air unit the size of a tanker truck would dock underneath, inflating all the units over a twelve-hour time span. The topmost pod was designed as a sort of military control center, armed with simple defense weaponry and a full array of LCD screens connected to a video surveillance system. It was all very elaborate, like something out of a spy movie. Self-preservation was important to completing the mission. The more exposure that could be generated, the more successful the mission would be for Fusion.

An extended hand slid down the side of the residence pod, almost petting the creation with an odd affection. Crewmembers scurried about tightening bolts and checking restraints. For the launch to be a success, there was absolutely no room for failure. The pods were being secured to the transport platforms that would then be loaded into their respective rockets. Upon clearing Earth's atmosphere and establishing orbit, the transport platforms would be ejected from the rockets and only discarded once the pods were laser-guided by an intricate system of

networked computers into their places. The transport platforms would discharge and connect themselves together into what might resemble an accordion configuration. The last bit of fuel in each platform would be used to position the parts into a lower orbit, where they could be recovered at a later date if necessary during a repair or reconfiguration. There were a lot of points of failure, but Jim was confident in he and his friend's creation.

On the opposite side of the hangar bay was a jet-black transport vessel. Underneath its hull was a scramjet engine, which would propel the vessel to nearly mach twenty-four. It was the key to carrying the vehicle into orbit. The scramjet offered the benefit of supersonic speeds with barely any moving parts. It was a very new technology that was mostly developed in secret by both military and private sector entities, but Fusion had acquired many of the technologies needed to produce his own. With the assistance of his engineers, he had nearly perfected the design he sought.

Many technologies were purchased for the creation of the vehicle, and an immense amount of work and testing went into its construction. It was not the first iteration of the craft, but its designers were confident that it was now a finished product. Fusion imagined the day when people all over the planet would have access to such vehicles, but that they would be as easy to drive as a car and require less or no fuel to power.

"Everything is in order," Fusion said to himself.

He climbed into a monorail pod and punched a few buttons on the keypad. Within minutes he was stepping foot into a second large hangar. It was his "Plan B". Four hundred warheads, each packed with enough fuel to travel around the planet. They were armored enough to survive a trip out of the atmosphere and back. The payload in each was small. Fusion was not a terrorist, after all. However, it was large enough to make a point. If necessary, each pre-plotted warhead could be launched to their designated location by remote. Fusion had invested all of his time, money, and energy for nearly twenty years developing this

plan. During the last year it had been realized much quicker and more successful than he had ever imagined.

"Those political fat-cats have no idea who they're messing with," he said aloud, always pleased with his theatrics.

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Nick and Faith landed in a clearing surrounded by trees in the woods behind Faith's apartment complex. The small craft was well hidden in the thicket, but Nick activated the visual cloaking system just in case. The pair opted to walk to the complex rather than request a transport, as neither of them trusted the system enough to abuse it. It was only about a half-mile.

Faith's mind struggled with how to lie to Margaret and Dale, but she knew it was necessary. She certainly could not tell them the truth. She would explain Nick as a family member she was going to live with for a few weeks while she mourned her father. She knew her beloved neighbors would be more than understanding, but it pained her still to add yet another worry to their long list of troubles. She

told herself it was necessary and hoped at one point to be able to tell them of all the incredible things she was experiencing.

It began to rain as they trudged their way up and over a small hill and out onto the drive that extended up to the apartments. The cold precipitation soaked slowly through their clothes, but to Nick it felt comforting. It felt like home.

He had only been allowed back to Earth twice since his revival. The first trip back was to watch his mother's funeral from afar. He had done everything in his power to work with the UIPA to make accommodations for his mother from the Moon outpost, but he still fought to be present at her memorial. He was forced to stand far away, next to a crypt, listening to the service via a directional amplifier that beamed the words into an earpiece. A Chernulan he had befriended, Milo, stood with him – both to keep watch for witnesses and to keep Nick from getting too close.

His second trip was a simple flying lesson, taking him past several notable sites. Desiring to learn how to pilot one of the UIPA crafts, he took advantage of the trip to get a look at the Eiffel Tower, Golden Gate Bridge, Stone Henge, the Great Pyramids, and more. It was a surreal experience taking in the feats of humankind while basking in the accomplishments of non-Earth beings.

They reached Faith's apartment, drenched in rainwater. She realized that she did not have her keys. They were still in her purse inside the apartment. She jumped a couple times, pawing at the top of the doorframe until she knocked her spare key down. Surprisingly, Nick caught it before it hit the ground. The pair slipped into the apartment unnoticed, shutting the door quietly behind them.

Nick switched on the lamps. His eyes immediately struggled to adjust to the dim yellow glow. Faith rummaged through her storage closet and pulled a large suitcase from underneath the mess of coats and old antique dolls. She walked briskly to her room and began piling

clothes and valuables into her suitcase. When the case was full she pulled a backpack from the corner of her bedroom and began filling it with toiletries, makeup, and box after box of coffee pods.

Nick browsed the apartment, slowly taking in all the sights. Faith's apartment was filled with some of the ugliest furniture he had ever seen. There was a bookshelf with old editions of various classics, from *War And Peace* to *The Catcher In The Rye*. None of them looked like they had been touched in years – much less *read*. There was an end table decorated with framed photographs. He knelt down to get a better look. One was Faith as a young girl, with a handicapped boy and a tall muscular man. Nick could tell that it was her family, though he had never met them. Another was Faith with a few other girls, dining at a small restaurant outdoors. The last was a photo of him, bald and pale, with Faith and his mother. They were all perched on the edge of a hospital bed. He remembered Sam taking the photo. Next to the frame was a small cylindrical disc with a wire mesh planet on top.

"I kept that, do you remember?" Faith asked, leaning down.

"Yes, I made this in the hospital!" Nick recalled, "It plays *Across The Universe!*"

"That's right!" Faith said, smiling.

"Your apartment is crazy," Nick said jokingly, "It looks like five garage sales convened in one room."

Faith playfully slugged Nick's arm. A buzzer went off in his ear.

"Nick, this is Chon. Skree has reported in that Fusion's space station launch is still on schedule for five days from now. We need to hurry things along down there."

Faith was standing in the doorway between the living room and her bedroom, a backpack on her back and suitcase in her hand.

"Let me take that," Nick said, grabbing the suitcase from her, "Are you ready for your goodbyes?"

Faith tried to swallow the lump in her throat, but it would not budge. She was dreading the reaction from Margaret most, however she did not want to see either of

them cry. As they closed the apartment door behind them and walked to her neighbor's door, the lump grew larger. Faith could feel the tears welling up in the corners of her eyes. She wiped them away with the sleeve of her hoodie and sucked in a deep breath. Nick rang the doorbell for her.

"Hello girl!" Margaret exclaimed, opening the door, "Come on in Dear, and get out of that cold!"

"I can't Maggie, we're headed out tonight," Faith began, nodding to Nick, "This is my cousin Christopher, I'm going to live with him and my aunt for a few weeks. You know where my spare key is, can you feed my fish for me?"

Margaret called for Dale. Her eyes showed both concern and understanding. Dale appeared quickly by her side.

"Hello there, Faith!" he said as he greeted her with a hug.

"Dale, this is Faith's cousin, she's going to be living with him and her aunt for a few weeks," Margaret explained.

“Well, girl, you just take care of yourself and deal with everything in ample time, you hear? We’ll be here for ya when ya get home,” Dale said kindly.

Dale loved Faith like a daughter and wanted only the best for his girl.

“We’re leaving tonight for Texas,” Faith explained, biting the inside of her cheek while she lied, “Hopefully I’ll be back by the end of the month. I’ll definitely be back before the fall semester begins. Watch my crappy car for me!”

“Take all the time you need, Dear,” Margaret said, hugging Faith, “We love you.”

Dale and Margaret watched from their doorstep as Faith and Nick walked down the drive. Dale closed the door, knowing that Margaret would want to watch until the kids disappeared into the night.

“She’ll be fine,” Dale comforted his wife, “She’s been through a lot over the last couple of years, and she’ll be fine.”

The rain poured over the invisible ship, its outline defined fairly well by the glimmer of light dancing on the wash as it poured down the sides and off of the wing tips. Nick flicked his finger across the face of his watch to uncloak the craft, and he and Faith climbed aboard. The thin residual membrane of the energy shield roof had kept the interior of the craft bone dry, and had also helped to suck off some of the moisture in their hair and clothes. Nick reactivated the shield and the roof solidified into what looked like a glass dome.

"That's so cool," Faith said, looking above her.

Nick lifted the craft off the ground. It was silent as they traveled straight up with great speed. After just a few moments they were above the clouds. Moments later and they had crossed through the atmosphere into space. A satellite whizzed by, probably beaming down television, radio, or internet to homes all over America.

"I think that went well," Nick offered.

"Yeah," Faith said after a pause, "They're such good people. Like family."

Faith rested her hand atop Nick's as they began their two-hour trip to the Moon base. She nestled her head back on the headrest and closed her eyes as the chair automatically adjusted to a more comfortable position. Nick set the craft for automatic navigation and he too settled in for a nap. He watched Faith lovingly for close to a half an hour before his exhaustion finally consumed him.

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A beacon signaled on the display as the ship entered Moon base airspace. Nick awoke quickly and took over the controls. The ship lowered gracefully down through the airlocks and down the vertical tunnel into the hangar. Nick parked the ship in its reserved space. Faith's eyes slowly opened and she became aware yet again that this was no dream. Nick was already handing her bags down to Chon when she stood up.

"Here so soon?" Faith asked.

"Yep," Nick laughed, "Quite a bit better than NASA's preferred transport, huh?"

Faith giggled, as she climbed down the stairs to the ground floor. The hangar was buzzing with even more activity now – it was clear that the threat level was higher than before. A group of the small yellow Chernulans walked by whispering and pointing at Faith. It was clear they knew who she was and were excited to see her. The group stopped and one of them walked over and took the backpack from Chon.

Nick whispered to Faith, "I forgot to tell you one other thing. You're kind of like a celebrity here. They know you're here to get the *BlackHole* back, so sorry in advance if they seem a bit star-struck."

The yellow Chernulan stopped in front of Nick. He stood about two feet high and looked like a yellow Pillsbury doughboy, but fatter. He wore no shirt – only brown burlap pants.

"Milo, what's up buddy?" Nick said, greeting the small alien.

"And you must be the Stargazer?" Milo asked Faith, his accent similar to that of a Bronx native.

"Yeah," Faith agreed politely, giving Nick a playfully disciplinarian glare.

"So you're the person that's here to save Earth?" Milo asked with more intensity, his eyes widening.

"That's what they tell me," Faith said, beginning to doubt her role in the scheme.

"That's..." Milo looked to Nick as if to get agreement on the correct word, "Wicked!"

"Very good, Milo!" Nick congratulated him, laughing, "I've been teaching them some slang. Milo's still getting the hang of it!"

Nick led the group down several long hallways toward the residence area. They passed a window that opened to a large room. There were mailbox-sized hatches under the window. Faith stopped to peer through. Inside the large room were rounded rocket-shaped canisters, each on a square platform just barely larger in width than the canisters themselves. A few sat wide open with steam puffing out the tops.

"What's this?" Faith asked, stopping the rest of the group.

"Waste disposal," Chon piped up, "Dump the garbage in the chute, it takes an acid bath to dissolve it and is pumped into the canisters. The canisters double as rockets. The acid doubles as fuel to launch the canisters toward your Sun."

"That acid will dissolve anything in seconds," Milo said excitedly, "We once put a whole service bot in there and it was gone in a puff of smoke."

"That's awesome!" Nick laughed, impressed by the childish antics of his friend.

"Yeah," Milo agreed, "It was badass."

The group continued walking down the corridor, passing another window. Faith looked out upon the surface of the Moon, a desolate powdery white desert, shrouded in darkness. There were rolling hills barely visible in the distance and craters as far as the eye could see. No trees, no parks, and no people – it was far from home.

"I brought us through here on purpose Faith," Nick explained, putting his arm around her shoulder, "This is the only window to the outside, in a little hill that rises up out of the surface. It's kind of refreshing to come up here and just look out sometimes. Perspective."

"Your room's right up here, Faith," Chon said, still walking. His four legs moved somewhat like a crab's, weaving back and forth alongside each other.

"Mine is next door to yours, I made sure they had one cleared for you. The residents weren't too unwilling to give it up seeing as how Stargazer was gonna live there," Nick explained, "You might find that you're a bit of an inspiration to the residents here."

"You give us hope," Milo said, humbly.

"I hope I don't let you down," Faith said uneasily. Her room door opened automatically as she touched it.

"The door knows who you are and will only open for you, either by command or by touch," said Chon, proud of the technology he oversaw, "We'll leave you two alone now, c'mon ya little yellow goofball."

The door closed and Faith inspected her sickeningly white room. The bed was white, the chairs, the ceiling, and the floor – all solid white. The room had a small restroom and sink area, and even a kitchen area with a cook top and refrigerator. The bed was in the middle of what would be considered the living room, but in a corner there were what looked like beanbag chairs and a wall panel television. All white.

“Okay, you’ve seen my apartment now, can you guess what I think is wrong with this room?” Faith joked.

“Yeah, they aren’t exactly interior decorators here. It’s more about function than flair,” Nick said, grinning.

“Well, that’s gonna have to change if I’m gonna save the world,” Faith said, pretending to be absolutely serious.

“I’ll see if I can get you some paint,” Nick laughed.

The buzzer in Nick’s earpiece went off, “Nick, it’s Chon. Hate to break up the festivities, but Commander Vic is here to meet Faith. We need her at the com-deck pronto.”

“Faith you have a visitor. Just got a message from Chon to take you to the com-deck,” Nick said.

"What now?" Faith asked as Nick pulled on her arm.

"Just come on," Nick urged, "I'll explain on the way."

He stopped, waiting for the door. When the door failed to open, he turned around to Faith, who stood grinning ear-to-ear with a delightfully smug smirk.

"The door won't open unless I tell it to," Faith reminded him.

"C'mon Faith, this is important," Nick pleaded, Faith moving closer toward him.

Their eye contact was firm, and for a brief moment, the entire galaxy seemed to fall silent. Faith's head slowly tilted to one side. Nick's back was against the door as he placed a hand on each of her hips. He had waited a year to see Faith again. He had longed for her. Just as their lips met, Faith slammed her hands against the door, sending Nick out and flat on his behind!

"That's for rushing me, dork!" she laughed, as he climbed to his feet.

"You'll get yours when you least expect it, Stargazer!" Nick joked, winking and grabbing Faith's hand, "Now let's get up there!"

"So who are we going to see?" Faith inquired, trying to keep up with Nick's brisk walk.

"His name is Vic, which is short for something I don't think we could even pronounce," Nick explained, "He's the leader of the Zetans, as well as the chairman of the UIPA. He's the guy in charge of this operation, and he rarely ever comes here. It's an honor that he came specifically to meet with you."

"Well great," Faith said, fixing her hair as she jogged, "This day couldn't get any weirder."

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Fusion sat quietly in a large black office chair. He had carved out his office on the side of the volcano, so that he could have a balcony overlooking the sea. His back to the open water, he sat staring at the beautiful doomsday device before him. It was so simple – a sphere wrapped in a spiral that came out one side and into another. Almost like a

ringed planet whose rings had cut through its core. The *BlackHole* was no larger than a bowling ball and surprisingly light in weight. Its exterior was plated in a brushed metal, with no exterior features visible aside from a single circular light panel.

The panel was comprised of thirty-two concentric fiber optic strands. A key latched onto the device and communicated an encrypted hash via the fiber optic lines. If the hash was correct, the device was armed and would detonate in an hour. Fusion kept the key tucked safely in his armor. He was delighted by the simple beauty of the device and would be saddened if he were ever forced to use it. *It would be like smashing a Duchamp*, he thought. Nevertheless, Fusion was committed to his cause — disclosure and acknowledgement.

It was almost time to put the plan in motion, all the obstacles were out of the way or already apparent. All Fusion had to worry about was self-preservation.

Chapter Six

Fine Dining

Chon met Nick and Faith outside the communications deck. He was wearing a different suit now, cleaner and newer. It was a dark blue, with a matching tie and white shirt. His stubby green fingernails had been trimmed and polished. Two fancily wrapped cigars adorned his suit pocket like prized badges of honor. His regard for Vic was obvious in his dress, as well as his enthusiasm to impress.

"You kids didn't dress up?" he asked, annoyed.

"You said to hurry!" Nick barked back, in a whisper.

"I said I needed her up here 'pronto', Nick. I assumed it was obvious you should dress for the occasion," Chon said rolling his eyes as best an alien could.

"Let's just go in," Nick offered.

Reluctantly, Chon agreed and followed.

In the center of the room was a large oval table with seating all around. The room was filled with displays showing camera feeds, statistical data, and what appeared to be alien news broadcasts of some sort. There were more of the small yellow Chernulans walking around, tending to

consoles and speaking quietly. Along one of the long sides of the large table sat five small-statured grey aliens. Three of the grey beings wore flesh tone jumpsuits, one a green frock, and the one in the center a dark violet frock with a white collar. The creatures were no more than four feet tall, their chairs raised higher than the others to compensate.

“One more thing,” Nick whispered to Faith, “They don’t speak out loud. It’s kind of... in your head.”

Suddenly, a voice entered Faith’s brain in a stunning, almost crippling way. It was high pitched and throaty. It sounded synthesized and non-organic. It was creepy.

“Please, be seated,” Vic said, transmitting his words to the dinner guests.

Nick pulled out a chair for Faith, and the group all sat down opposite the Zetans. Their heads and hands seemed too big for their bodies. The heads were bulbous like an upside down pear. Their eyes were a deep piercing black – their mouths and nostrils just slits in their skin. They were the embodiment of the classic pop-culture alien, although

much less cuddly. The one in the center was Commander Vic – it was obvious by the way the others physically cowered in his presence. He was an intimidating figure, especially for such a small being.

“So you are the Stargazer?” Vic asked, “You are the girl who claims ability to preserve your system and restore respect to our work?”

Faith nervously floated her salad fork in the palm of her hand.

“Yes, that is me,” she spoke aloud.

“I look forward to dining with you,” Vic said, the shrill raspy voice penetrating the minds of the dinner guests.

The awkward dinner was made more uncomfortable when a service bot rolled in with the main course. It was a large plant that looked as though it had been boiled for days. It sat, steaming, on a large platter. Atop the plant was a yellow flower in full bloom. The service bot cut up and served large slices of the plant along with some very human-friendly chicken Caesar salads.

“On the planets of the Zeta Reticuli system,” Vic explained, “We do not eat other thinking life forms. Only what fruits that come forth from the soil. Only what The Unity gifts us. This plant is very rare on our planets – only growing in the darkest, deepest caves. More rare than a white truffle on Earth. We dine on this rare delicacy to honor those rare gems that shine even in the dark. We thank you, Stargazer, for your service in this difficult time.”

“You’re very welcome, I will do my best not to let your organization down,” Faith said, taking a bite of the mysterious plant.

Despite the putrid scent, it melted in the mouth and tasted like zucchini cooked with ginger that one might find at an Asian restaurant.

“Allow me to introduce my aide,” Vic said, extending an arm before the Zetan in the green frock, “You may call him ‘Tin’ in your English tongue.”

“Do you feel that you will be... Triumphant?” Tin’s lower pitched voice rang in Faith’s head.

"I will try my hardest not to let your organization down," Faith replied aloud.

The remainder of the meal went with little further discussion. After the salads and main course were eaten, Vic rose from his seat and dismissed the service bot. Levitating slightly off the ground, he plucked the yellow flower from the plant. From his frock he produced a water-filled sphere. He passed the flower through the membrane of the sphere and handed the memento to Faith, who stood to accept it. The other Zetans also rose to their feet and the group marched out of the room single file. It was an abrupt – but not unwelcomed – end to the meeting.

"That thing's resilient," Chon muttered, still stuffing his gullet, "You crack that open and pop it on some soil, you'll have a whole 'nother plant in about fifty years time."

Nick and Faith could not help but just fall back into their chairs and laugh.

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The next day Faith and Nick sat awaiting their briefing. Aliens of all kinds sat around in the stadium seating of the

small presentation room. Each one carried him or herself in a quite dignified way. Nick gave Faith a whispered run-down of all their names, species, positions, and representative planets to the best of his knowledge. Each dignitary brought a translator – some biological, some robotic. They were all important, and all had a lot invested in Nick and Faith's success.

"Nervous yet?" Nick whispered.

"Not as much as you," Faith whispered back, patting him on the knee.

Chon entered, wearing his old charcoal grey tweed suit. He was visibly shaken, the gravity of the situation taking a toll on his nerves. A lectern arose from the floor, the display screen with Chon's notes illuminating him in the darkness.

"Thank you for joining me. This briefing will highlight the major details of the Stargazer mission to Fusion's base," Chon began, as maps and images fired away on the large screen behind him, "Intelligence gathered by Skree indicates that Fusion's space station will launch in

approximately four days. Following the launch, Fusion will oversee the station's construction and furnishing for a minimum of two days before returning to the base briefly to gather supplies. During the first of those two days, after visual confirmation of Fusion's departure, Stargazer will infiltrate the base, accompanied by Agent Nicholas Rutherford, and retrieve the weapon following directions provided by Skree. The team will enter through the volcano's mouth while cloaked in their ship and will move undetected through a series of service hallways. There is a zero gravity room set up for part testing that should be powered down and perfect for a quick shortcut to the main office, where the weapon is stored as a sort of trophy. The weapon will then be delivered safely back to the *Ruengale* and appropriately disassembled by a team of Zetan technicians."

The crowd seemed less than approving, and some vocalized disagreement.

"These two children, they are your hope for an accomplished mission?" a tall, slender, blue humanoid asked politely.

"Yes," Chon said firmly, "You all know and trust Nick. And Stargazer, she is of similar respects. She also has retained abilities gifted to her during the Treehouse Projects, which will aid her in a successful venture. I am confident in their ability to succeed, as you all should be."

The dignitaries mumbled and muttered in their various languages as they got up and left the room.

"Meetings end very abruptly here," Faith whispered to Nick.

"They don't really have a lot of time to sit around and shoot the breeze, Goofball. These are like, you know, presidents and kings on Earth. Except they rule entire planets and systems," Nick whispered back.

Faith was glad she was not aware of that sooner.

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Nick and Faith stood in a large white room, about a third the size of the hangar. The floor was gun metal grey,

with markings similar to those found on sports fields. Large squares, meter markers, and concentric circles littered the floor in a seemingly unorganized way. There was a rack of long sticks in the middle of the room, with bulbs on each end. They looked like pool cues lined up in a row. Nick walked to the rack and picked one up.

"The others will be here soon, but I figured I'd give you a basic lesson on what you're going to be training with today," Nick began, "This is called a swizlakuli. The name sucks so I call it a 'swizzle stick'. It's pretty much the most kickass weapon we've got here, as it's good for far away shooting, as well as hand-to-hand combat."

Nick spun the weapon around with great ease and settled into a ready position.

"There's a physical button here," he said, pointing to the shaft of the device, "That allows you to fire. In time, you'll be able to control that without having to use your hands. You're lucky for that. The shot will come out of whichever end is pointed forward and away from you. So be careful."

Nick fired a particle blast from the stick. It shot as quickly as a beam of light from the bulb and was absorbed by the far wall. It was a green flash, and then it was gone.

"If you apply more pressure to the stick, it generates a shield," Nick explained, clutching the weapon hard as a thin membrane of particles formed an elongated flattened football shape from end to end, "It absorbs bullets, particle beams, crap like that."

Faith picked up a swizlakuli from the rack and examined it up and down. The shaft of the weapon was not made of solid metal – it was an odd semi-transparent alloy of what looked like metal and glass. She had never seen anything like it in her life. There were sensors and electronics running the length of the shaft and spiraled curls of metal in each bulb. She aimed the stick at the closest wall and fired a shot. It fired rapidly, with no recoil. A firm grip surrounded her hand with what looked like glowing, lightly blue-tinted ice. The shield ran the full length of the device, wide enough to protect her full body from a frontal assault. She lightened her grip and tried to

spin the stick around in her hand. It fell to the floor with a clang.

"It gets easier with practice. You'll have the advantage of being able to keep it in your hand without gripping it!" Nick laughed.

"I'm afraid I'm a bit out of practice with all of that," Faith said, frustrated.

"Well, hopefully you won't need to use *all of that*," Nick said, smiling.

A group of various beings began funneling into the room. Some began stretching while others went right to dueling with swizlakulis. Most were seasoned fighters, obvious by their skilled footwork. It was like a dangerous, carefully choreographed ballet. A Zetan entered the room, bearing her own specially adapted swizlakuli. It was smaller in size, making it more proportionate to her body.

"She's your instructor," Nick explained in a whisper, "She'll be able to teach you to use a swizzle stick with not just your body, but your mind as well. She can also help

you control your different abilities, including the ones you don't even know you have."

"I don't know about all this, Nick," Faith lamented, doubtful, "I mean, it's only a few days away. How am I going to be ready in time?"

"You'll be ready," Nick promised, "I have *faith* in you."

He gave her a wink and a hug, and then jogged out of the training room.

"You must be the Stargazer," the Zetan said, the voice penetrating Faith's mind with the clarity of a high-end set of in-ear headphones.

"Yes ma'am," Faith replied, annoyed more by the nickname every time she heard it.

"I have never trained a human, I find it despicable what your kind have done to you. Ironical that a bastard Zetan is to be our savior," the instructor said with a sharp hiss.

Faith winced from the snap of the voice. It had a disgusting sizzle to it, and she was still not accustomed to having words invade her head. What she used to consider a private space was now infiltrated by a hideous grey figure

that seemed to have nothing but disdain for the situation. The black bulbous eyes watched her intently, with an occasional blink of a filmy membranous set of eyelids. Faith wondered if she disgusted the Zetan as much as the Zetan disgusted her.

"I see that you have chosen a weapon," the Zetan began, "You are not ready for that yet."

Faith placed the weapon back on the rack. She had met her first critic, and knew that she was in for a very long day.

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Nick sat in his room, watching his small television set. A strange alien news broadcast was on in a language he did not understand, but his mind could not pay attention even if he tried to force it. Life had been quite a rollercoaster the last few years, and he was headed up yet another steep incline. Would he and Faith survive the trip? What would happen if they did? Would they ever lead normal lives? Nick flipped the television off and reclined into his bed.

"Open up!" Faith yelled, banging on Nick's room door.

"Door open," Nick said calmly.

The door immediately slid upward.

"What a crazy day!" Faith said, walking through the door as it shut fast behind her, "That instructor does not like me!"

Nick laughed, "I think they're still bitter about the whole predicament. It really made them look inept – they were the last species to build radar-resistant navigation systems. Man, when the Air Force first implemented radar, UIPA ships almost had to completely stop their activity. Too many were splashing down in the ocean or smashing into the desert!"

"No reason she had to be such a bitch to me," Faith groaned, falling onto her back in Nick's bed.

"Did you learn anything new?" Nick asked, changing the subject.

"Yeah, but nothing with the swizzle stick thing. She said I wasn't ready for that. I can kinda keep my feet off the ground now, though!" Faith said, enthused.

"Well c'mon," Nick begged, "You have to show me that one!"

"Aww, I'm not very good at it yet," Faith moaned, Nick already up on his feet and tugging on her arm.

"Fine," Faith said shyly, rising to her feet.

Faith walked to an open space in the room, which was difficult to find amongst the piles of clothing and electronic parts that littered the floor. Nick had obviously been having fun playing with the alien technology.

She kicked off her shoes and held her hands slightly out to her sides. She stood still for a few moments, concentrating. Her hair began to wave, as if disturbed by a very light breeze. Her muscles tensed. Her heels lifted off the floor, rolling slowly forward until her toes finally left the ground. She hovered, not more than an inch above the floor, for just a few seconds before settling back down gracefully onto her bare feet. Nick clapped loudly.

"Good show! That was fantastic!" Nick exclaimed, "I never got that far, that's so awesome!"

Faith bowed politely.

"There's no way I'm going to be ready in time," she admitted, "But hopefully some of this stuff will help."

"Look at it this way, at least *you* have an advantage," Nick said, nuzzling Faith's head into his shoulder.

The couple stood silent for a moment. Nick suddenly broke the embrace, turning Faith to face him.

"Hey, you love space stuff..."

"Yeah," Faith said, curious.

"Come with me!" Nick exclaimed, grinning wildly.

Nick led Faith down the long corridor and up an inclined hallway. They stopped at a large room, about the size of a basketball court. The ceiling was very low, leaving only a couple of feet of space above their heads. Several small oblong-disc shaped vehicles sat in a line along the far wall. Upon approaching the crafts, Faith could see that each contained two seats, one behind the other.

"What is this?"

"Here, put this on," Nick said as he handed her a thick jumpsuit and bulbous helmet from a compartment in the wall.

"What are we doing?" Faith asked, as she began to catch on.

"I just want to show you something, hurry up!"

Suited up and helmets air-locked, Nick looked into each vehicle for one that was unlocked. Every control panel was a dim red. He unlocked his glove and pulled a small device from within the sleeve. Upon pressing the device's two buttons, each crafts' screen glowed to life. Nick replaced his glove and chose the craft on the far end. He waved an invitation for Faith to have a seat in the rear chair.

"And here we go!" Nick exclaimed, as he air-locked the dome over their heads, "They're gonna know we left now, so we might get a little griping when we get back!"

Nick piloted the transport vessel up a long dark corridor. The screen flashed bright white and a door opened in front of them. As soon as the craft had cleared the door it closed. The screen flashed again and an exterior door opened. The small hovering vehicle flew out over the surface of the Moon at break-neck speed. They headed

toward the light side of the Moon, across the southern hemisphere.

"This is beautiful!" Faith said, giggling with delight.

The craft burst into the sunlight. It dipped into craters, dodged boulders, and jumped a broken stone pillar. Nick laughed loudly as he piloted the little cruiser. He had loved to spend time zipping around the lunar surface when he had first begun his time at the base. It was exhilarating to traverse a place where so few humans had been before.

"Here!" Nick exclaimed, "This is it!"

He slowed the craft on the edge of a small crater. A still flag was visible just a few hundred yards away. It was bent at its base, and was leaned over touching the ground. Its dusty stars and stripes were visible even from afar.

"Are you kidding me?" Faith said as her jaw dropped.

"Systems check alpha," Nick called to the ship.

"Systems function normal and optimal," the ship called back.

"Excellent!" Nick said excitedly, "Would you like to go for a walk?"

"Are you kidding me?" Faith repeated, still in a state of astonishment.

"We only have about fifteen minutes of air in the suits once we activate the pumps. Make the most of it!" Nick said, looking at Faith over his shoulder, "Activate personal respiration supply, open cabin airlock."

With a hiss the suits came to life, circulating breathable air inside. The dome over the craft lifted back, which sent a slight chill over the occupants. Nick hopped out and settled down on the ground. He helped Faith climb out and get her footing. She sank slightly into the thick top layer of ash-like dust.

"This is where the Apollo 11 mission landed, their flag didn't quite survive their exit," Nick explained, "Watch your step, 'cause there are some historic footprints still scattered around."

"This is amazing," Faith said as she skipped down toward the landing site.

"It's really funny, the UIPA doesn't even really care about these sites. They actually considered the U.S. astronauts to be invading their air space."

"At least someone up here respects these places. This is human history just as much as anything on Earth," Faith replied.

They came upon the flag, untouched since it had been placed there nearly four decades before. Faith was almost sad that humans had not made an effort to return to the Moon in her lifetime.

"I almost want to set it upright, ya know?" she remarked.

"But this might be an interstellar historical landmark someday," Nick said with a smirk.

"Yeah, I better leave it alone," Faith sighed, "It's beautiful in a way."

"Have a look up."

Faith looked up into the dark sky. No stars were visible to her naked eye. The sky was a blank dark black.

"How's that for stargazing?" Nick laughed, "It's so weird that you can be in space and barely see a star!"

"Wild," Faith said with a chuckle, "That would be one thing I would miss about Earth!"

"We better get back to the cruiser," Nick sighed, "Last thing we want is to have an emergency beacon sent back to the base."

"Well, I definitely want you to bring me back out sometime," Faith said as she tugged on Nick's arm, "Thank you so much."

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"Two days until launch!" Fusion reminded his staff.

The entire space station team was seated in metal folding chairs in the enormous zero gravity room. When developing the space station's automated assembly, the room was used to simulate conditions that may be faced in orbit. It aided greatly in improving the artificial intelligence used by the pods to maneuver themselves into place. The room's ceiling, walls, and floor were lined with gigantic arrays of electromagnets – the energy to power

them derived from the hot magma channels running underneath the volcano floor. The directional magnets polarized the air, causing anything magnetic to float weightlessly, as if in space. When the room doubled as a meeting hall, the activation controls were thoughtfully kept disabled under lock and key.

Skree, the UIPA spy, sat in the front row next to Jim. He was a Claman of about thirty-five Earth years in age. Clamans were the race most human in appearance yet discovered, although to those with an eye for such things, his white-less eyes were a dead giveaway to his un-Earthly origin. Skree worked his way up in Fusion's organization over the last two years, before the volcano base was even established, under the name Dave Tramble. Because of his personal knowledge of extra-terrestrial technology, he found it easy to find a place amongst the research and development team for the space station. *What a gig, he had first thought, I'm helping humans develop technologies my species mastered over a millennium ago.*

“In two days, we will make history with the first successful launch of a private sector space station!” Fusion exclaimed to thunderous applause, “Your hard work and due diligence has paid off to an extraordinary degree. Your patience, your persistence, and your pathological resistance to give up – all are highly valued in the realization of our goals. Disclosure is imminent. The lies, the secrets, the horrible façades that have ruined our planet, our species, and our families. The stifling of innovation, the refusal to overcome our dependence on obsolete fuel sources because of financial gain, the abstinence in acknowledging the truth about our shared existence to a world of those hungry for the change that it would bring – it all ends next week!”

The crowd roared with delight, the indoctrination into Fusion’s cult-like following visible on every cheerful face. These were not typical scientists and engineers, these were all people who had sought out Fusion’s cause because of their experiences either in the Air Force, NASA, a governmental agency, or private venture with unexplained

phenomena. Suppression and disinformation had shamed them from their jobs and families, no one believing what they saw or experienced. These were people who had witnessed UFO crashes, alien autopsies, satellite imagery of suspected Moon bases, and more. These were people silenced by their government and cast out of society, thought to be loons. They were vengeful, a quality at the top of Fusion's list of desires in potential employees.

"Tonight, my friends, when you turn in for the evening, I want you to tip back a nightcap in honor of your hard work! I hold you all as dear as I would family, your undying determination and willful resolve all a true testament to your dedication to enlighten and evolve the human race. May our mission be a success! May your hard work advance our species! May we unite as one race, one planet, and one universe!"

The crowd once again roared, as Fusion stepped down off of the makeshift stage, briefly shaking hands with a few audience members on the front row and triumphantly exiting to retire to his office. He was a charismatic and

convincing speaker, like many revolutionist leaders of the past. He enjoyed playing to the passions and prejudices of his audience, wooing them into submission to his radical ideals.

"Beautiful speech!" Jim praised, clapping loudly as he entered the large office.

Fusion was standing on the balcony, staring with sharp determination out over the sea.

"What's our percentage?" Fusion asked, motionless.

"We're at sixty, by my calculations," Jim answered in full honesty, "It's guaranteed we get all vessels off the ground, almost definite the pods will release successfully, my worry is in the coupling and inflation."

"Very well," Fusion mumbled, "We shall hope for the best, my friend. We have to hurry this along before the United States military catches on. We need to be armed and ready before they see us up there."

"I have the utmost optimism, sir," Jim said confidently.

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“The most important element to keep in mind,” the Zetan instructor hissed, “Is that all activity involving the swizlakuli must be kept to the front or the sides. Never the rear, for risk of removing your own head. Cognitive transfers are ineffective on significantly damaged brains.”

She showed off by spinning the weapon around her hand, never once gripping it with her fingers. The shield activated and deactivated at will, based on pressure applied or released by mind control only. She lifted off the ground, hovering briefly for a moment before shooting off like a rocket up and around the room in a wide, sweeping arc. The stick was held tightly to her side in a closed fist, her body stiff and limbs flush with the contour of her body. The bulb of the swizlakuli protruded just a hair further than the tip of her head, firing as she swooped, targeting each circle in the concentric designs on the floor as she passed. When all targets were marked by small wisps of grey smoke, she landed exactly where she began.

“Your turn,” she said, nodding toward the rack of weapons.

Faith sighed as she chose her weapon. This time she snatched one from the end. It had a green hue to it, Faith's favorite color. She figured a little good luck could not hurt. Faith had trained literally all morning without a break, but she was still not confident in her ability to both control her altitude and a weapon with any level of synchronicity.

She closed her eyes, lifting off the ground with more immediacy than the day before. When her eyes opened, she was nearly twenty feet in the air. Holding the stick to her side as best she could, she positioned herself horizontally. Her body waivered a bit, her equilibrium thrown off by the change in orientation. She moved forward slowly and clumsily. As she made the bend of the arc, she dipped a bit and hit the firing mechanism with her thumb. The shots hit some of the targets, though not with near the precision of her instructor. She maintained speed and swooped toward the second set. She scored more hits than the last set, though not all intentional. The third set gave her similar success, and she landed as gracefully as possible near her starting position.

“Very good,” the instructor hissed, “You were dead two minutes ago.”

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Dinner that evening was welcomed, and less awkward than the previous. Chon even refrained from mentioning Nick and Faith’s tourist trip to the surface.

Nick had reserved a special dinner room, inviting Faith, Chon, and Milo. Milo brought his girlfriend Nila, who had been dying to finally meet her idol.

The room noticeably stood out from the others, with deep cherry red carpet and brushed metal walls adorned with intricate laser-etched geometric patterns. The ceiling was painted to match the carpet with circular lighting in a Fibonacci spiral formation. There were no light fixtures, simply flush glowing circles lighting the room with a moody, almost romantic, glow. The table was a dark onyx-black, as were the chairs and doors. A service bot brought fresh tuna sashimi as an appetizer.

“Nothing normal for meals here, huh?” Faith joked.

"It's very difficult for us to get food up here," Chon said matter-of-factly, "We get as much fish and vegetation as we can, but you won't find a hamburger floating around up here."

"A lot of species in the UIPA look down on killing stuff for food. It's kind of seen as barbaric. It's a sorta unwritten rule that we don't cart whole deer and cattle up here," Milo said, stuffing a wad of wasabi-covered sashimi in his mouth.

"Faith," Nila spoke up, her shyness slowly fading, "What's Earth like?"

"Well," Faith thought for a moment, "It's a very nice place to live. Most of the people there are very kind and helpful. There are different races of people, in different colors and shapes, a lot like the different people here. There are beautiful hills, and lakes, and sunsets. There's so much to see and experience you could spend a lifetime trying to do it all."

"It sounds wonderful," Nila said, daydreaming, "Maybe some day I can visit it."

"Not a chance," Chon barked, "With the whole Zetan controversy, we probably won't see human cooperation with the UIPA in our lifetimes. The people *really* in control down there – they don't give a flying flip about a commune with us. Once we get the *BlackHole* back, Earth's probably gonna be on our black-*list*!"

"Hopefully, as ambassadors of peace from our planet, Faith and I will be in a position to begin a unity process of some sort," Nick argued.

"Fat chance," Chon laughed, "The people of Earth will be lucky to even hear from the UIPA in the next century. Sad too, 'cuz it was so close back in the forties."

"You don't think Nick and I will help Earth's reputation by doing this?" Faith asked quietly, picking at the raw meat.

"I just don't think that a couple hours work can forgive sixty years of stifled negotiations," explained Chon, "Had the humans in charge down there reacted differently, rather than weaponizing every technology they got their hands on, we wouldn't be where we are politically right

now. The UIPA cooperated to the degree we did because the humans offer great value to our assembly. But after all these years, the value is waning on many of the members. We knew that no one in charge down there would be dumb enough to activate that thing, but we worried somebody less intelligent would get 'hold of it and blow away thousands of years of research and development. Now somebody dumb *has* gotten 'hold of it."

"Research and development?" Faith questioned.

"What?" Chon asked, laughing, "You think the humans built the pyramids on their own? Don't get me wrong, the species was always on the right track, it just needed some nudging every now and then to speed things up."

"You're hilarious sometimes, Chon," Nick laughed, "You act like you were around back then."

"I wish I was," Chon joked, "Then I wouldn't have to put up with your sorry ass!" The group broke into laughter.

The main course was brought out. It was crab bisque served in bread bowls.

“Finally, something I can eat!” Faith exclaimed, almost crying with glee.

Chapter Seven

All Clear For Launch

The mission control room was abuzz with chatter. Technicians ran around comparing data on tablet computers, robotics specialists donned motion-tracked gloves in the event that the automatic guidance systems failed, and engineers chewed their nails anticipating the embodiment of their work lifting off into orbit. Fusion paced wildly on the command deck, listening to mission updates in an earpiece. Jim was seated in the command chair behind three crisp thirty-inch LCD displays, following all of the activity with rapid finesse. Everything was on track, and Jim wanted to be the first to know if any issues arose.

"Two minutes to launch!" Fusion yelled loudly, checking his wrist display, "As a great man once said, 'Hold on to your butts'!"

The staff laughed wildly, enjoying the brief break in tension.

Jim called for a status check, prompting dozens of echoes of *Affirmed!* from the staff. All was in order as the

image on the large video display began to jitter. All seven rockets were visible from a ceiling-mounted camera in the interior launch deck. The first rocket moved into place on its mobile launch pad. The others slowly edged forward behind it. The image on the display was briefly distorted before shaking wildly by the quake of the igniter firing.

“All clear!” Jim yelled, as the room fell silent – all eyes fixated on the display.

The first rocket cleared the volcano’s crater with ease. A second, smaller display flickered on underneath the main screen. It was a camera shot mounted on the side of the rocket. The volcano was seen shrinking smaller and smaller as the image grew wider and wider. The small bits of sky visible between all the rumblings of the rocket grew darker as it climbed.

An hour later, the second rocket fired up and shot through the opening in the volcano’s peak. Another small screen flickered on with imagery from the rocket. Over the next several hours it was followed by another and another, until there were six displays alight with echoed action

underneath the larger main display. It was like a well choreographed dance showcasing human innovation at its finest. Slowly, each small screen became black with the darkness of space's majestic backdrop. The main screen flickered a bright blue pixilated distortion, followed by a clear image of the six rockets lined up nearly side-by-side in orbit. The crew roared a relieved applause before focusing back on their terminals.

"Looks like that little satellite actually made it!" Jim yelled to Fusion, who was still pacing rapidly on the deck.

"All it provides us is a view into the unknown!" Fusion yelled back, annoyed, "The easy part is over!"

The rockets jettisoned their cones, as the explosive bolts blasted off like firecrackers. When the cones had safely floated out of view, the collapsed pods began their slow trip out of their encasements. The crew watched in agony for nearly two hours as the fragile pods moved out of the rockets into space, positioned themselves in configuration, and jettisoned their transport decks.

"Alrighty!" Jim exclaimed, "The pods are preparing for lock. If you're religious, pray. If not... Become religious and learn how to pray!"

Some crewmembers laughed quietly, while others rolled their eyes at the joke. The pods inched closer and closer. The view on the display was too unclear to see the couplings on the pods, so Fusion relied on periodic updates by technicians monitoring each pod's sensors. The wait was grueling.

"Pod five coupled with pod one," called a technician, giving a thumbs-up to Jim.

"Pod four coupled with pod one," called another.

"Good work, team," Jim yelled, "Keep 'em coming!"

"Pod six coupled with pod one!" another technician yelled, collapsing in his chair to watch the large screen.

"Pod three misaligned!" yelled a technician, signaling a robotics engineer in a motion-tracking suit to prepare for assisted guidance.

"Pod two coupled to pod four!" came another update.

"Status on pod three!" Jim demanded.

"Reconfiguring sir!" yelled the monitoring technician, "Pod three coupled to pod one!"

The room erupted. Fusion ushered Jim from the command chair to enjoy a brief reprieve.

"All clear for decompression tank launch!" Jim ordered.

The final rocket blasted off without delay, headed to join the others and complete the magnificent array.

"Let's bring the satellite cam in to inspect the couplings before we dock the tank!" Jim ordered, pulling up a chair next to his tired boss.

"I'd up our percentage to eighty," Jim offered, beaming like a new father admiring his first child.

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"Well, I've got to give him credit," Chon chuckled, "He got the thing up and together!"

Chon, Nick, Faith, and a host of UIPA dignitaries watched a hijacked feed of imagery from Fusion's satellite-mounted camera. The small camera weaved in and out of the pods, zooming in on couplings and inspecting seams. A

large container was occasionally visible hovering in wait in the background. The assembled crowd marveled vocally about the construction of the vessel.

"You kids better get down for a last round of prep, you're about eighteen hours from go time," Chon suggested, firmly.

Nick and Faith jogged down the hallway toward the training room. The hallways were clearer than ever now, all the staff focused on their respective jobs in preparation of the upcoming mission. Faith stopped for a moment at the exterior window to admire the view. It was still cold and desolate, but there was an uncanny beauty about it that struck her with awe.

"Come on, *Stargazer*!" Nick joked as he pulled her away from the window.

Upon their arrival at the training room, they walked to the center to choose their dueling weapons. Nick reached for the one with the green tint, but it leapt from its place and into Faith's hand.

"I call the green one," Faith said with a sly smirk.

Nick grabbed a grey swizlakuli and crouched into a ready position.

"Let's see if you've learned anything," he said, biting his lip.

At once they each attacked, spinning the weapons wildly before clashing. They broke the hold and spun out, igniting the shields. Faith ran toward Nick, who was crouched with his arms out. Faith swung the stick around and down toward him, but it was parried away in a spin. As he spun back in an arc, Nick swung for Faith's shins. She jumped over his swing and struck back with an overhead blow that was quickly blocked. Faith rocketed toward the ceiling and swooped down, the shields crackling under the friction as Nick guarded himself from her attack. Faith landed in a defensive stance on the other side of the room.

Nick ran fast, his swizlakuli tucked under his right arm like a football. Faith aimed her weapon towards him and fired off a round of blasts. Nick decided in an instant to forego the shield and show off. He quickly fired off a round

and slid to duck Faith's shots. One of Nick's plasma bolts connected with one of Faith's, resulting in an explosive sizzle and lump of molten material on the floor. Faith guarded herself with the shield, absorbing Nick's blasts. Almost before she could recover, Nick was in her face, swinging the swizlakuli with a finely tuned grace.

They fought mercilessly, matching every move. The shields crackled with every contact. Faith grew tired, her muscle mass less than that of Nick's. As he wore her down, she grew more and more aware of a cold feeling in her stomach. With every blow the feeling grew stronger. When she thought she could not bear to duel another moment, the feeling erupted from within her, a blast of energy so severe it thrust Nick halfway across the room. He landed with a thud, flat on his rear.

"I give up!" he laughed, rolling over to rub his swelling buttocks.

"That," Faith said, out of breath, "Was *awesome!*"

"I didn't know you had that in ya!" Nick yelled across the room.

They had been so focused on their duel that they had failed to notice the small crowd that had formed. They were all clapping and discussing their favorite parts like sports fans after watching a big game-day rivalry. Faith helped Nick up and suggested that they take a rest.

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"I think you'll like what I've done with the place," Faith said, tapping the door to her room.

Nick's eyes widened as he took his first glance at her re-decorating. The walls were crudely painted with a faux-wallpaper, border, and chair rail. The bed was painted with a wood grain finish. The floor was painted a dark green, speckled with black dots to simulate carpet. Nearly every inch of the room was painted, resembling an oddly Monet-esque portrait of her apartment back home. Three service bots were sitting in the corner, spraying paint canisters at a white chair.

"For one, I'm surprised that you found this much paint up here. For two, I can't wait to see what Chon says about

this. For three, this looks amazing!" Nick exclaimed in disbelief.

"You'd be surprised what kind of help you can get when you're the savior of the galaxy," Faith laughed, collapsing in a chair.

"So you ready for this trip?" Nick asked, inspecting the smudgy painted-on wallpaper.

"No!" said Faith, with a look of disbelief, "It's kind of funny you'd even ask that. I've had less than a week of training at this crap and I'm going into a possibly very deadly situation."

"Are there degrees of deadly?" Nick asked, crinkling his nose, "You'll be fine, no worries, there probably won't be anyone there anyways."

"God, I hope not," Faith sighed.

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Fusion sat in his office awaiting a status update. It had been hours since Jim had confirmed fifty percent inflation of the pods. His decades-old baby was finally coming out to see the world, and what a view she had!

He caught his reflection in a glass-framed painting. He was getting old. He wondered, briefly, how much longer he could keep so active. He hoped this would be his last needed effort to force the truth out of those who abused him so thoughtlessly.

"Full capacity reached," Jim's voice rang over the intercom, "Ready for phase two."

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There was a quiet knock at Faith's door. Nick was passed out asleep on the bed. Faith called for the door to open, amused by the look on Chon's face as he entered.

"Well, glad to see you've made yourself at home," Chon said shaking his head, "We've just received confirmation that Fusion's ship has docked with the space station. It's now or never."

Nick rubbed his eyes, "I never get any sleep around here."

The trip down to the hangar was short, the anticipation mounting. The once long trek now seemed like a jaunt down the block to Faith. There was a large group gathered

in the hangar, applauding as the two-person team burst through the entrance. The crowd was assembled like a tunnel of football cheerleaders waiting to welcome the team onto the field for the coin toss. The lines stretched all the way to Faith's ship.

As they walked, they heard wishes of good luck in languages unknown to them. Milo and a group of fellow Chernulans danced and sang, like members of a Greek wedding party. Some adolescent aliens extended their hands in hopes of an Earthly high-five as their heroes passed. Faith walked briskly and nervously, while Nick pandered to the crowd.

The Zetan instructor stood by the ship holding their swizlakulis. She handed the pair their weapons, refraining from offering any private words. Faith was thankful, as she was already overwhelmed by the noisy onlookers. They climbed into the ship and buckled themselves in. Nick lifted the ship from its space and triggered the automatic guidance system to carry them out of the base. The crowd pooled beneath the ship as it rose up through the tunnel in

the ceiling. The vessel breached the lunar surface and rocketed forward on its trajectory toward Earth.

"Welp," Nick exclaimed, stretching, "I'm out for another nap."

He produced a blanket and pair of pillows from a hatch in the floorboards. Faith shrugged as she crawled onto the floor and covered up. Nick placed an arm around her. They shared a bit of warmth, snuggled together in the coldness of space.

"Wake timer, ninety minutes," Nick called to the ship.

"Affirmative," a voice stated. The display in the console dimmed.

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Mahler's Second Symphony rang with a crescendo through a set of speakers in the console, awakening Nick and Faith from their brief slumber. Earth was now large and in full view. Nick took hold of the controls, preferring to guide the ship to its destination manually. The vessel quickly descended through the atmosphere. Alaska was

visible in the distance. Nick punched up the *Ruengale's* communications deck on the display.

"What's the forecast for landing?" Nick inquired.

"Good to hear from ya, boy!" Chon greeted him, his lumpy face appearing on the screen, "Should be all clear. The hangar bay was all but abandoned after the launch. Skree reported in about an hour ago that the engineers and techs were all hulled up in the command center keeping tabs on the progress at the station."

"We'll contact you once we lift back off," Nick said, switching himself into duty mode.

"Copy that. Be safe down there," said Chon, fading to black on the display.

Nick switched the ship into cloaking mode, making it only slightly visible by the condensation that formed as ice crystals melted on its warm surface. Fusion's volcano was on the southern edge of a cluster of other mountains. Faith could just make out the railing of a balcony extending from the steep side of the snow sprinkled cliffs. The place

looked lifeless, fitting well amongst the barren terrain. Faith wondered if she would ever see a tree or grass again.

The ship descended silently down towards the jagged open peak of the volcano, with forklifts and other vehicles visible below. Nick guided her to rest in a dark corner of the double hangar and launch pad. The place was empty. There were cranes and excavators scattered about, all covered in centimeters of white dusty debris. Nick handed Faith her weapon and a carrying strap. They hugged for good luck and slipped down out of a hatch in the belly of the vessel. Nick activated a heads-up display in a contact lens by blinking rapidly five times. A blue map appeared with their route plotted in red.

The dusty mess on the floor was damp. It shifted under their feet, rather than clouding as they had expected. They made their way undetected along the wall of the large room. There was not a soul in sight. Nick stopped for a moment to marvel at the backup pods stored along the wall. It amazed him that they were built by a human on

personally gathered funds. The pods were incredible in both size and structural magnificence.

There was no door to the service hallway that was to give them cover as they moved on toward the zero gravity testing room. Nick slipped through first, checked for trouble, and then pulled Faith through. The hallways were cold, dark, and crudely carved. It was apparent that little money was spent for the safety of the workers. Each passage seemed more cramped than the next. One section of the wall had carvings from workers wishing good fortune to their mission and leader.

The tiny passageway opened up to a larger hallway that was encased in a blocky stainless steel wall covering. The floor was stone, but it had been polished to a fine finish. They could see an open lobby before them. Nick slipped ahead, motioning to Faith after he had confirmed that it was empty.

"Here's the zero-G room," he whispered.

The large door slid open, sensing their footsteps. After a quick survey behind them, they entered the large cubical

room. There were metal folding chairs arranged in rows. A meeting had taken place there recently. Possibly a speech, as a small wooden stage decorated in sound equipment was present on the far side of the room. The large door slid closed behind them, sending an echo throughout the room. Their footsteps clicked against the metal floor as they made their way up the aisle between the columns of chairs. As they reached the end of the sea of chairs, the adjoining office door flashed open. A dark figure filled out the frame.

"Nick! Faith! So good to see you," Fusion bellowed, entering the room armored from head to toe in his sleek black mechanical suit.

"Oh crap," Faith mumbled.

The two quickly drew their weapons and positioned themselves back-to-back.

"I am surprised that your organization sent you here with the assumption that you would just swoop in and take my device," Fusion laughed, "You should not have come

here. You're involved in something much greater than you might ever know. Come on now, I don't want to kill you."

The youths stood firm, eyeing a group of guards entering from the hallway as Fusion walked toward them. Fusion flipped a panel open on his wrist, dragging a finger across the screen. The room rumbled to life, the metal chairs, speakers, and Fusion rising off the ground. A pair of rockets on the sides of each of Fusion's shin guards flipped out, giving him the ability to navigate in the gravity-deprived environment.

Nick and Faith stood on the ground, no magnetic components present in their attire or weapons. The guards remained grounded as well, their guns made of carbon fiber and synthetic spider silk compounds that Fusion had been developing for other projects.

"Alrighty," Faith said, igniting her shield, "Game on."

She shot off the ground with an explosive energy, smashing her swizlakuli into Fusion's chest. He grabbed her with a firm mechanized grip around the neck, forcing her to retreat from the pain. Fusion tapped the side of his

helmet, triggering a directional arc generator on his right forearm. With a clenched fist, a blast of lightning fired from his wrist, connecting with Faith's ungrounded weapon. It surged through her body, paralyzing her briefly. She fell, crashing into the hovering chairs before falling flat on the ground.

Faith jumped up and shook off the paralysis. Again she shot into the air toward the opposite side of the room. Fusion rocketed forward, leaping across the metal chairs like a frog across a pond full of lily pads. Faith dipped forward and ignited her shield. Fusion again extended his arm and fired a blast of electricity toward Faith. She broke the blast with her shield, though it pushed her slightly backward.

Nick swung his swizlakuli around in a fearsome display, knocking two guards unconscious onto the floor. Another pair of guards began firing on him, but his shield was in place in time to absorb the bullets. In a brief moment of luck one of the guards' guns clicked empty, and

Nick took the opportunity to fire a particle blast square into his neck. The guard fell dead instantly.

Faith shot forward, her weapon aimed squarely at Fusion's helmet. As she approached for a full force clash in the middle of the room, Fusion jetted upward and pushed off the ceiling, positioning himself behind her. Again Faith was struck with a bolt of electricity. She recovered quickly, spinning around and firing off a round of blasts from the tip of the weapon.

Nick fought hand to hand with the last remaining guard. The guard smashed his rock solid gun into Nick's swizlakuli repeatedly. Nick parried the blows as best he could. The guard towered over Nick by several feet, his brawn outweighing Nick by at least a couple hundred pounds. As Nick fought bravely, jabbing and dodging, he noticed a speaker from the sound system hovering behind the guard. Nick jumped up and kicked the guard right in the chest plate, knocking him back. His head crushed against the speaker before he tumbled into a lump on the floor.

“Well, that was intense,” Nick joked to himself before he noticed a group of more than ten guards enter the room from the hallway.

Fusion’s armor absorbed Faith’s blasts as if they were nothing. He kicked his legs behind him and thrust forward, his weaponized arm extended. The electricity spewed forward, connecting with the particle blasts Faith was firing from her swizlakuli. A rain of molten debris poured down on the room. Faith shielded herself from the attack and sped off, circling the perimeter.

Nick fired on the guards, knocking several to their knees. The remainder drew their weapons and fired back. The barrage of bullets pelted Nick’s shield like a spray of buckshot. He was unable to move, only capable of holding his defense under the immense pressure of the gunfire.

Fusion raised his other arm toward Faith and a compartment opened up from beneath it. A small heat-seeking rocket locked onto its target and fired toward Faith. She flew as fast as she could around the room, evading the projectile as best she could. It gained on her

feet and began blinking wildly at its tip. In an instant she swerved downward in a hairpin dip. The rocket exploded against the floor. Exhausted, Faith hovered still. In a sudden flash, like a bolt of lightning, Faith was electrocuted by a final attack from Fusion. She crashed through the hovering chairs, smacked her head on a microphone stand, and plummeted to the floor.

Nick was cornered, absorbing bullets in his shield, as more guards joined the fray. He knew resisting was pointless. Fusion hovered down to halt the firing squad. A pair of guards shackled Faith.

"Enough, enough," Fusion boomed through his jet-black mask, "Take them to detainment."

Nick dropped his weapon, exhausted and embarrassed.

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Faith was sore, but none the worse for wear. She lay on a cot across from Nick. The cell was a natural interior cave walled off with a set of fresh iron bars. It looked like something straight out of a 1940s western film. There was no exterior window in sight. A makeshift ceramic latrine

and sink sat at the rear of the roughly ten-foot diameter cell. Fusion came into view, clanging his armored hand on the bars of the cell.

"When we heard of your plans to visit, we had not yet accommodated for a guest room," Fusion said, his breath hissing in the mask, "So allow me to apologize for the rough facilities that we can provide. I wish you had even the slightest concept of what harm your little scavenger hunt may have caused you."

He held up his hand to display the earpieces that his guards had removed from each prisoner's ear.

"We'll be monitoring your channels to be positive that no other uninvited guests arrive," Fusion hissed, turning to leave.

"What do you have planned for us?" Nick demanded.

Fusion stopped, turning back to see his captives. Faith and Nick huddled together on the singular cot. A trickle of blood danced down Nick's forehead from a cut he had incurred while being dragged to the cell.

"You will be well taken care of, I do not wish to harm you," Fusion said, sincerely, "But I cannot allow interference with my success."

Fusion paused, as he reached into the armor of his chest plate. He produced black card with rounded corners and tossed it through the bars. Nick slid the card off the ground to reveal nothing but a blank white face.

"You were such an inspiration Nick," Fusion said, removing his air-locked helmet with a faint hiss.

"Dr. Truman?!" Faith gasped.

"Holy crap," Nick exclaimed, stunned.

Fusion turned on a small monitor on the wall by remote. An overhead video of Nick at the Ravenwood hospital flickered onto the screen. He was seated at the former Dr. Truman's desk, guessing colored cards.

"When I found your gift at the Ravenwood hospital, Nick, I knew that it was time to finally put my plan into motion," Fusion explained, "When I knew that I wasn't the only one effected by what had been done, that there were others out there, I knew what I had to do. I had been

preparing for years, but I needed to know that it was right. You showed me that, Nick."

"By destroying the planet?" Nick exclaimed loudly.

"I have never planned to use the thing, Nick. It's more symbolic, than anything. But a threat is a threat, and those involved with the travesty that created us will have to react," Fusion said with a sigh, "But there is a greater threat now, and there isn't time to catch up. Goodbye."

Fusion replaced his helmet and signaled a guard to stand watch before hastily leaving the detention area.

"Well," Nick began, taking a deep breath, "This field trip just got a bit more complicated."

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Fusion reclined in the pilot's seat of *Truth 2*, a duplicate of the first ship sent to dock with the space station. When he had discovered that Nick and Faith were training to recover the *BlackHole* in his absence, he quickly amended his plans and had the first ship sent up with supplies. He was now ready to make the voyage to inspect

his new creation. Jim sat in the copilot chair, chasing anxiety pills with an energy drink.

The ship lifted off from its short runway on the north side of the island volcano with ease. The scramjet would not be engaged until the craft reached mach six. Fusion and Jim rode confidently into the sky.

"Are you prepared for this, Jim?" Fusion yelled, as the noise of the rushing wind outside the thin hull boomed in his ears.

"The scramjet ignition?" Jim asked, also in a loud holler.

"No, to risk your life for what's right!" Fusion yelled back.

"I wouldn't be strapped to the top of the world's most untested propulsion system with nothing but a sheet of aluminum foil between me and a grim suffocating death if I weren't committed!" Jim said with a laugh.

Fusion flipped a switch on the dashboard and the scramjet burst to life.

Within minutes they had docked with the space station. It was a thing of beauty, more unbelievably perfect than Fusion had imagined. The walls were tight and perfectly inflated. The two men floated into the central chamber, where the four surrounding chambers were all visible. Pod one was the main pod and connecting point between all other rooms in the station. Pods four and two were a combined living area and bedroom, connected to each other to create a larger space. Pod five was a bathing and restroom area, three a viewing room with a large reinforced window, and six a command deck. There were two engineers floating in pod three enjoying an amazing view of Earth.

Fusion moved to the command deck and activated the electromagnets in a chair so he could be seated at the controls. He called up a display and accessed his network at the command center. The volcano's hidden missiles were all active and online, ready to be called up if necessary. He swiped his hand across the display, rotating the desktop like a cube. It was a telescopic view of the

Moon, a small pinprick of light hovering to one side, slightly larger than the backdrop of faint stars. It was the *Ruengale*. The distance was too far for him to make out any details, but he knew it was there.

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It had been half a day already as Faith sat and hovered a stone in her hand. It was porous volcanic rock, one of many scattered about the floor of the cave prison cell. She considered sending a load of the stones hurtling toward the guard, but even then they would still be locked in. She walked to the sink to wash her face and clear her mind. Nothing came out when the knob was turned. In fact, there were no pipes running to it. The cell really had been freshly furnished.

It was dark and cold in the caves. There was no system in place for heating the giant facility, as it was always intended to be temporary. Fusion had always maintained that once the mission was successful the crew would be held in high regard by the thankful thralls of enlightened humanity. He told them that they would never have to

worry about being outcasts again. They hoped he was correct.

A guard came to relieve his tired predecessor. He brought with him a couple of blankets to help comfort the weary prisoners. He was an African American man, with striking features and broad shoulders. He appeared too smart and well rounded to be in such a place.

"So you two were also part of the Treehouse Projects? Like Fusion?" he asked, handing the blankets through the bars.

"Yes," Nick said, graciously accepting the offer of warmth.

"Why don't you believe in what we're doing here?" he asked them politely.

"It's not that we don't," Nick corrected him, "But there are certainly better methods."

"What do you do when all else fails?" the guard asked, "What do you do when you've tried everything and have been rejected at every turn? Sometimes radicalism is the only alternative."

Stargazer by Brandon Cole Phillips

The guard took his seat, aimed his gun toward the captive audience and began chewing his nails.

Chapter Eight

Prisoner #1000

It had been more than a day since Nick and Faith were first cast into the dank cave cell. They had yet to have a meal, though they had been promised one several hours before. More than anything they were thirsty, and Nick finally gathered the nerve to demand a jug of water. When the relief soldier came he brought with him a gallon of ice-cold green tea. It tasted slightly metallic, but it was better than the taste of a dry mouth.

"Sorry," he apologized, taking his seat, "But tea is better than the water around here."

As Faith finished a refreshing gulp of the cold tea, she noticed a clanking noise grow louder and louder down the hall. A canister bounced into view and rolled across the guard's feet.

"What the hell?" he mumbled.

The canister began spraying a green gas that quickly filled the hallways. The guard passed out and slumped onto the floor. The youths coughed as they tried to cover their mouths with their blankets. The gas stung as it hit

their nostrils and throats. Each inhaled breath tingled and numbed the soft flesh in their mouths. A small silhouette appeared in the fog, ignited a torch, and cut the lock off the bars.

"Thought you two would never ask for a drink," he said in a unique Bronx accent.

"Milo!" Nick yelled, "How in the hell –"

"No time, dumbass!" he interrupted, "Follow me!"

"Antidote in the tea, huh?" Faith guessed.

"If you got thirsty sooner you wouldn't have been in there so long!" Milo yelled back.

A group of another four Chernulans met them at the end of the long hallway. One tossed another canister far down the corridor, clearing any potential threats. The toxin was only temporary, putting the victims to sleep for an hour or more. If Fusion's organization was aware of the UIPA, keeping their presence a secret from he and his minions was no longer a concern. They knew for sure that Fusion was onboard the space station now, and they were not taking chances on failing again. The hope was that he

would be in captivity before their presence at the volcano base was detected. It was sloppier than running a quiet in-and-out reconnaissance ploy, however the location was remote enough that the UIPA might be able to pull it off and keep it under wraps from the general public.

"Office is up here!" Milo yelled, tossing another canister forward.

"The door's locked!" reported one of the Chernulans, "We can't blast it, the whole cave could fall in on us."

"Faith!" Milo called, "This one's on you."

She stepped up to the door. She was weak. Her hands stretched toward the large metal barriers, touching them lightly on their cold surface. Her hair tussled a bit against the back of her neck. Dust and small stones rolled toward the barrier as if down an incline, piling up against the doors. Nick and the aliens watched Faith put pressure on the thick metal blockade. Her hair was blowing hard. A bit of static pulled the hair taut to the doors' surfaces. There was a creaking rumble, like a suspension bridge swaying with a gust of wind. Faith concentrated harder, her small

audience observing in hushed amazement. The doors buckled inward with a bang.

Faith dropped her hands to her sides and kicked back her head, visibly drained. Nick and the Chernulans ran past her and into the office. The *BlackHole* was sitting on a pedestal in the center of the room like a museum piece. Milo scanned it with a small device attached to his finger.

"No security, but it's got a key on it with an auto-detonator," he said.

"How hard is that going to be to remove?" Nick asked, frustrated.

"Pretty easy," Milo answered, yanking it off, "Let's jet!"

"Wait!" Faith yelled from the corner, "Check it out!"

She tossed Nick his grey swizlakuli, wrapping her carrying strap over her shoulder at the same time. She hooked her favorite green weapon onto the strap and joined the group.

Inside the main hangar were dozens of sleeping guards, engineers, and technicians. Some were armed – others appeared to have been working on cleaning up around the

spare pods. There were ten or so canisters lying around, some still sputtering green liquid. Milo uncloaked his ship as he ran towards it with his group. Nick and Faith found their ship by the dust that had collected on it. Nick felt around the nose of the ship, finally resting a palm on a small circular plate. The ship uncloaked and came to life.

"Thank heavens they built that feature in," Nick said, nodding to the tiny saucer packed full of Chernulans, "Or we'd have never gotten out of here!"

"Shut up, funny man, I want to go home," Faith said with a forced smile.

Nick gently laid the *BlackHole* in the floor of the ship, then lifted the craft up and off into space.

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"Incoming transmission, Sir!" Jim called from the command deck of the space station, "It's Skree from home base."

Fusion was in pod three gazing down at the large blue and green sphere he was once imprisoned on. It was so large in the window – barely any blackness of space could

creep into view. The United States and Alaska were mostly covered in clouds. A tropical storm crept toward the gulf coast.

He pushed off from the wall and soared across to pod six.

"What is it, Skree?" he demanded.

"They took it, Chief," Skree said, his throat still raspy from the sleeping gas, "The ignorant goofs came in, gassed the place, and took it."

"Those ridiculous fools!" Fusion yelled, pounding a fist into the console, "Initiate *Operation Sigma* immediately!"

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The two small vessels landed in the hangar bay of the *Ruengale*. As Nick followed Faith down the ship's stairs, he noticed a group of Zetans, including Vic, heading toward them. Chon followed closely behind, seemingly in a daze. Milo and the Chernulans stood alongside Nick and Faith, delighted to be a part of UIPA history. Faith held the *BlackHole* – the device that had caused so much trouble – ready to hand it over and move on with her life.

"Here it is," she said, "It's all yours."

"And here's the key," said Milo, presenting it like a bar of gold to Vic.

A jarring tonal squeal penetrated the very core of every member of the recovery group – and Chon as well. They fell paralyzed to the floor as a scratchy, hissing voice spoke – as if to their very souls.

"You human scum," Vic began, pointing a gnarled grey finger at Faith, "Your violent, miserable, self-serving race has plagued our universe long enough. We studied you for millennia, we spurned your creative processes hundreds of times – shaping you, forming you, molding you to be ready for all the magnificent innovations that my people have created. But in a moment of ignorant greed, your people changed the destiny of a high potential species. Your people weaponized a technological breakthrough so significant that it would end war and suffering throughout the entire planet. This reconnaissance effort was not about the salvation of a species from itself. It was about the long-deserved extermination of the species by itself. In your

year of 1947, neither my planet's government nor the UIPA would approve the extermination of the human race. To preserve the integrity and reputation of my people I had to take matters into my own accord. There was one weapon I knew I could get my hands on – and now I have it."

Nick mustered up enough power under the piercing, deafening tones to spit on Vic's feet.

"Take them to the Moon base and activate the device from the lunar surface. The hour will give us enough time to escape the projected trajectory of the gravitational hot zones," Vic instructed, handing the *BlackHole* to an aide.

The group was dragged to a large, cigar-shaped transport vessel. It was like a bus, but with no wheels or wheel wells. Three Zetans levitated Chon to the vessel, as he was much too large to be physically moved. Their muscles still twitching and their joints still unable to function from the paralyzing tonal array, the captives could only watch as the Zetans prepared the shuttle.

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The take-off and landing were just a blur, as was the march at gunpoint to the makeshift prison in the training room. It was filled with nearly three hundred base employees, some still reeling from the mind attacks by the Zetans. Every warm body in the lunar base had been rounded up in the last twelve hours, given a prison uniform, and placed in the training room. Chon was the last member taken captive, and he had been conditioned into submission to keep appearances until the weapon had changed hands.

The group was given green prisoner jumpsuits. It was more a psychological punishment than an organizational tactic. The Zetan race was a passionate one, which led to passionate revenge methods by Vic and his crew. They wanted to strip the humanity not only from the humans, but from the beings that helped them as well.

Faith sat huddled next to Nick, her mind finally settled. Her clothes provided some warmth underneath the relatively restrictive jumpsuit. She browsed the crowd, which was mostly looking back at her. She had been used,

and as a result, let the entire UIPA base down. After all that had happened, they were still looking to the Stargazer for hope. Sadly, it began to sink in for many of them that this may literally be their final hour.

"What is this?" Faith asked, pointing to an embroidered symbol on the front of her jumpsuit.

It was four dots arranged in a sort of 'S' shape.

"It's the Zetan number one thousand, similar to Roman numerals," Nick explained, "At least you got a good one, mine is four hundred eight."

"What are we gonna do, Stargazer?" Milo piped up, "What's the plan?"

"We've got to get out of here, I guess," Faith replied, rising to her feet and walking to the single, solitary door.

All the heads in the room turned to follow her as she moved. Faith felt for varying pressure. The door had been fused shut around all of the seams. They were sealed in. The base quaked around them.

"It sounds like they're trying to blast through the airlocks or something," Nick said, shaking his head.

Faith closed her eyes and applied pressure to the door. Her hair blew with a fierce, quickly conjured wind. The door buckled a bit around her hands, but it stood firm. The sides of the door stretched several feet in all directions but down, adding an additional level of reinforcement. Faith pushed hard on the door, focusing her entire mental strength on rupturing it through. Still, it stood firm.

"It's not possible," Faith sighed.

She was out of breath.

Suddenly, an inexplicable white flame burst through the door. The room gasped a collective breath of shock. The flame continued slowly along the side edge, around the top, and down the opposite side. It sputtered out with a puff of bluish-black smoke.

"Can we get a little help from you folks in there?" a voice yelled from outside the door.

Chon rose to his feet, the largest of all the beings in the room. He removed the suit jacket he wore over his prison garb. He handed it to Milo, who was buried under the pile of tweed. Chon stood at the door, placing two feet and two

hands on it, steadied by his hind legs. He struggled a bit at first, but he eventually bent the door at the bottom seam and settled it flush with the floor of the outside hallway. Standing there, armed to the teeth, were Skree and Jim. The hallway was littered with the bodies of charred Zetan guards.

"We have about ten minutes to get the *BlackHole*, disarm it, and get out," Skree said to Chon.

"You knew," Chon said, stunned, "You knew what the Zetans had planned this whole time and you didn't tell me."

"Some things are more important than politics," Skree said bluntly, as he signaled through the door for the prisoners to follow him, "It was safer kept in Fusion's hands than falling into the possession of those crazy Zetans. Plus the guy had a point!"

"Fusion was holding the planet hostage!" Chon yelled, enraged.

"Is that not what you were doing, Chon? You and the UIPA for centuries? Don't be such a blind fool, old boy!" Skree argued.

"You conspired with the enemy! You're a double-agent!" Chon accused with a growl.

"He's not the enemy, Chon!" Skree yelled, "He's about to save your asses!"

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Fusion manned the displays in pod six like he had been running the console for years. He called up a second display that slid out from the array. The *Ruengale* was a white blob in a live video window at the bottom of the main display. The secondary battery of missiles was well on its way toward the Moon, having been launched hours before. His warning shots sent to the *Ruengale* and the amassed fleet of Zetan saucers had already struck. Although he had not planned to actually use the *BlackHole*, he was well aware that the Zetans had every intention to do so. He hoped that his first line of missiles would be a well enough distraction to buy some time.

His monitors rang with alarm – two Zetan saucers were headed his way. The trajectory for intercept was less than fifteen minutes. They were at full speed and could only move faster by activating their light speed warp tunnels. Luckily, Earth's gravity and magnetic field would prevent the ships from safely doing so. He knew that Jim and Skree had limited time to recover the *BlackHole* and safely rescue his old friends, and Fusion hoped that the window of time was wide enough.

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The lunar base crew ran to the ships docked in the hangar, jumping over burnt Zetan corpses as they went. The workers knew that in order to save time they would need to fill as few ships as possible as quickly as possible and expedite their escape. They were all transport crafts, none capable of the power surge required to generate a wormhole through which to navigate to their home systems. Skree instructed them to wait on the far side of the Moon, as far from the *Ruengale* and the Zetan fleet as possible, until further instruction.

Faith followed as Jim led. Nick and Chon brought up the rear. Jim fired powerful electrical bursts out of a prototype sleeve worn on his right forearm. It was one of the first developed when Fusion's armored suit was engineered. The few Zetans still left in the station were mere charred lumps by the time the group would meet them.

"This one was a bit too powerful," Jim yelled back, "We had to tone it down for the final suit!"

They ran past a room of acid disposal units, down a narrow hallway and up to the communications deck. Jim flipped open a display on the mechanical sleeve.

"It's up here, the beacon is bright as hell now!" Jim said, running into the command deck, "We have about three minutes to disable the damned thing!"

The *BlackHole* sat in the middle of the room. It was unguarded, most of the Zetans already off the lunar surface. Jim quickly slid onto the ground and carefully placed the unit on his lap. The key was bolted onto the device. Jim pulled a tiny torch from his jacket and began

cutting through the first bolt. It was a harder metal than he had seen before – the torch cut it about as well as a butter knife through stone.

“It’s not cutting fast enough!” Faith yelled at him.

“Shut up!” he yelled back, “I have to take it back to Fusion! It’s the only way!”

“No it’s not!” Faith yelled, grabbing a ring on the device.

“Let go you little bitch!” he said, slapping her with his free hand.

A burst of energy flowed through Faith. It was powerful, cold, and uninhibited. She reached her hand out toward Jim’s head, the bright blue blast exploding from her palm. Jim fell back, unconscious.

“No time to rest,” Faith sighed, grabbing the *BlackHole*, bursting into flight, and soaring out of the room.

There were less than thirty seconds to detonation as she cruised down the hall toward the acid baths. Faith landed in a slide, smashing her shoulder into the wall. The

BlackHole was too large to fit through the disposal door. Faith extended a hand and the large reinforced-glass viewing pane exploded, sending large glass shards cutting through the disposal room. Faith flew toward the first open canister she saw and thrust the doomsday weapon into the molten acidic chemical. It sizzled and crackled as it safely disintegrated before her.

Nick and Chon stood at the viewing window clapping. They had dragged Jim along with them, although Chon was hesitant to do so.

"Yeah, yeah, Stargazer and all that – now let's get the hell out of here!" Faith exclaimed.

They rounded the corner to the hangar, no life to be seen. All the base workers had made their exit.

"I was going to keep this a surprise," Chon said, running toward a tarp-covered green ship.

Nick and Faith untied the tarp to reveal an upgraded version of Faith's vessel.

"It was going to be your reward when you two got back," Chon said smiling.

Nick and Faith climbed in to inspect the interior as Chon stuffed the still unconscious Jim into a rear seat. Along with the black faux-leather was a shimmering platinum trim that outlined every visible detail. Mounted in the center of the console was the glass-like orb that housed her yellow flower from the Zetan dinner party. It was a beautiful accent to the glorious ship.

"Aww, thanks Chon!" Faith said, hugging the large alien.

The second round of missiles slammed into the *Ruengale*. There was twice the number of missiles in the second attack, tearing the *Ruengale* to pieces. Shattered Zetan saucers were falling toward the Moon and smashing into each other. They had been taken by complete surprise by the first round and had failed to organize and disband by the time the second had hit. Nick flew the ship from the long tunnel. Just as the crew reached the lunar surface, a fallen saucer clipped the wing of the craft.

"Crap!" Nick yelled, "Not now!"

Chon watched as the *Ruengale* exploded in a fiery nuclear blast. It was his sanctuary for so many years, but now it was nothing but a memory. Nick piloted the ship across the barren crater-covered desert toward the waiting evacuees.

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The two saucers were in full view, as Fusion called up his emergency console. He knew they were there to destroy him. It was a vengeance mission by a defeated, sulking foe. Fusion was a sitting duck. With nowhere to go, he could only watch, as the saucers grew larger on his screen. A beacon glowed in the right top corner of the display – ‘Connection Established’ read the message.

“Dr. Truman,” a synthesized voice hissed over the intercom, “I came to see to it personally that you were disposed of. You interrupted our operation at the most inopportune time.”

“Tin, is that you, you sorry bastard? Where’s your commander?” Fusion barked back

"With any luck," said Tin, "Commander Vic is well out of harm's way. You should have known that we never intended for you to keep the *BlackHole*. You were only a mule to hold onto it until we were ready. We should have known that Skree would not be capable of handling the job he was assigned within the proper protocol."

"Skree is a fighter for the truth and for what's right. If the rest of *your* kind are as maniacal and arrogant as you and Vic, perhaps I should reconsider my plans to share a galaxy with them," Fusion laughed.

"You pathetic little man," Tin's synthesizer argued back, "It is your stupid, lazy, uncalculated, slowly evolving species that has brought us to this course of action."

The saucers were less than a kilometer away, as particle canons began firing from beneath their hulls.

"I may be stupid. I may be lazy. I may be one step up from a baboon. But I'm certainly not uncalculated!" Fusion roared, resting his forefinger on a glowing square in the middle of the emergency console.

A pair of secretly stored warheads erupted from underneath the space station, striking the saucers before the pilots could evade the attack. The flaming wreckage smashed into the space station in a fiery explosion. No one survived the incinerating blast. The magnificent engineering marvel was reduced to a shredded hunk of polymer, epoxy, and busted metal.

Stargazer by Brandon Cole Phillips

Chapter Nine

New Beginnings

"Ideological differences aside," Skree's voice rang through the console speaker, "What do we do now?"

"*BlackHole* is gone, as well as the *Ruengale*," Chon answered, "We have no choice but to trek to Earth. Hope for the best."

"We don't have much time," Nick reminded, "We have severe structural failure on the starboard wing."

"Let's roll out," Skree called back.

Dozens of ships, from saucers to mass transports to smaller single transport vehicles mapped their trajectories toward Earth. The group resembled a flock of gulls as they lurched forward toward full stride, slowly escaping the Moon's very weak gravity.

"There's no place remote enough for us to land undetected," Faith worried, "Nowhere with the specialized resources to support such a wide variety of —"

"No worries, Faith," Chon interrupted, "It's our time. We've kept the secret far too long from your people. They

deserve to know. I only hope they can be understanding of our motives."

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The ships broke their thrust as they approached Earth. Shield arrays were activated to protect the ships on entry of Earth's hostile atmosphere. 'Shields Not Active' read the display in front of Nick. The damage to the wing had affected the shielding generator. The shield would not engage. Entry was possible without the device, although amplitudes more risky.

"Put on some safety helmets," Nick instructed.

Chon had already grabbed three from the floorboard storage compartment. Chon's human-sized helmet did not quite fit over his large cranium, and it sat atop his dome like a baseball cap.

"This is going to be very rough," Nick lamented, angling the ship's nose downward as he accelerated.

Skree had plotted an open landing plain due east of Topeka, Kansas. It was relatively central to the United States and sat a comfortable distance from excessive

military establishments – as well as Faith's home. There was an Air Force base nearby, but without ample warning it would be unable to scramble an effective air presence to interfere with the landing.

The damaged ship made it successfully through the atmosphere's squelching heat, only taking minor additional wing damage. It rocketed down through the sky, as the North Pacific Ocean skimmed by below. The mass of over two-dozen ships trailed closely behind. They maintained a tight formation to reduce the chances of colliding with a passenger jet or civilian aircraft. California appeared on the horizon. The mid-day caravan was clearly visible from the ground as the ships blew past overhead.

"Well, they've seen us now!" Chon said laughing nervously.

"I have a feeling we're going to be no secret once we land!" Nick exclaimed.

Nevada passed by, then Utah, Colorado, and finally Kansas below. The convoy began slowing as their descent increased. The capital city was visible in the window as

Faith surveyed the area for their landing spot. They followed a highway, US-24, until connecting with the Kansas River. They continued on along the river until finally spotting the location.

"There it is!" Faith yelled through the helmet.

"Alright, hold on tight!" Nick said, attempting to activate the landing sequence.

"It's not engaging!" Chon warned.

"Let's try and set her down gently!" Nick laughed, switching the thrusters off and lowering the craft into a skid across the ground.

"Hold! Hold!" Nick ordered.

After what seemed like more than a mile, the ship finally lurched to a stop.

"This baby is *solid*!" Nick joked, "Nice job Chon, when do I get one?"

The fleet of refugees landed around them, some running to help the disheveled crew out of their busted heap. Milo was still holding Chon's jacket. The aliens and

their human friends celebrated in their prison garb, happy to be safe on solid ground.

"Faith," Nick called across the screams and hollers of the crowd, "Are you a very good public speaker?"

Faith looked in the direction of his nod toward an onslaught of news vans, military vehicles, and civilian enthusiasts.

Faith climbed onto the half-buried nose of her wrecked ship and placed her crash helmet back atop her head. She was not ready for her face to be associated with the media frenzy that would follow their arrival. She longed to go back to her simple life.

The legions of homeless aliens massed around her in a tight bunch. Chon stood alongside Skree and Nick in the forefront. Nick also donned his helmet. The vehicles reached the clustered group. Reporters, camera crews, Air Force representatives, and teens with camera phones all rushed out. The news reporters began yelling questions while the military men and women began forming a barrier in front of the extra-terrestrial visitors.

Faith held out a hand. The crowd fell nervously silent.

“Before you are the people of over a dozen worlds. These are people from races who have truly come far since their inception. They join us today on our humble planet out of tragic circumstance. They are stranded here begging our kind graces until such time as there are methods in place for them to return to their homes, families, and lives. As a nurse offers aid to a patient in need, so should we offer every ounce of assistance we can provide to these, our guests. They offer knowledge and understanding far beyond the current human establishment, as well as loyalty, friendship, and community. They were led here on their faith that humanity will stand up and offer them refuge. Today as you look upon their foreign faces and hear for the first time languages and words not of this world, I ask that you look and listen with open minds and caring hearts.”

“Who are you?” a reporter yelled from the back of the crowd.

“I...” Faith paused, “I am Stargazer.”

As Faith hopped from her perch atop the ship, she only stopped to grab the flower orb from the vehicle's dashboard. Milo rushed her and Nick to the small transport vehicle he had come in on.

"You two go home. We'll wrap things up here. We'll see you soon!" he said.

"Thank you so much, Milo!" Faith said as she hugged the small Chernulan, "Thank you so much for everything!"

"Thank *you*, Stargazer!" he said, grinning ear-to-ear.

The remainder of the impromptu press conference was helmed by Chon, none too eager to be on camera in front of the entire planet of Earth. It would take some serious convincing to keep his job once the main UIPA headquarters caught wind of the unapproved disclosure and events at the Moon base. Chon answered questions about their planets of origin, their operations, and what the governments of the world knew of extra-terrestrial life. He answered openly and honestly, the way it should be. Fusion's persistence and dedication had inspired a new outlook for Chon, and whatever the outcome, he knew in

his *hearts* that Earth would be a better, more open place because of it.

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It was growing dark as Faith and Nick walked up the driveway toward the small apartment complex. Faith wondered if the world would ever know of the *BlackHole* and her role in saving the planet from total obliteration. In a way she did not care, as she was so relieved for the ordeal to come to an end. However, she knew somehow that she was not destined to remain grounded for long. Her new alter ego was something greater than she could contain now, she only hoped that she could keep it separate from her private life.

The couple slipped into Faith's apartment for a clothing change. They immediately noticed that Margaret had been by to clean up, as everything was dust free and adjusted for perfection. The only male clothes Faith could find were old outfits of Ronnie's from his summer visits, but the clean pearl snap shirt and distressed jeans actually fit Nick quite well. Faith did not hesitate to poke fun at Nick's plaid

boxer shorts. Once dressed, Faith took a deep breath and prepared herself to surprise her neighbors.

"They're going to be very excited to see you!" Nick offered, grinning.

Faith held the flower orb. She knew Margaret would love the impromptu gift.

"I'm ready! I can't wait!" Faith said, smiling back.

Faith knocked on the door of her neighbors' apartment, excited to be back in the good company of her surrogate family. The door creaked open and at once Margaret and Dale pounced Faith with hugs and kisses. Even Nick received a hug from each. Their love for Faith was unabashed.

"Faith, Dear, we've been wondering about you! You're just in time for dinner!" Margaret said excitedly, "And you've brought your cousin!"

"I should have told you sooner, I have a confession, Maggie," Faith said, biting her lip, "He's not my cousin, he's my fiancée!"

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Dinner was normal that night – a delicious pot roast and mashed potatoes. They talked about the news, the weather, and a curious event that occurred earlier in the day. Faith and Nick listened intently as Margaret recalled the coverage she had watched when *the big green guy* was talking to the cameras and *the little yellow guy* showed a reporter his *space car*. Faith thought her descriptions were cute, but apt.

The young couple ended their evening laying on the hood of Faith's car, looking up into the night sky. Nick finally confessed that the kitten, Little Bear, had been his idea. Faith laughed and shook her head before snuggling up against her reclaimed love.

Life rarely deals in happy endings, but for once, happiness was the only available emotion.



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