

DAVID PAUL POWERS AND THE QUEST FOR THE CHILD CRYSTALS

EPISODE THE FIRST — THE ADVENTURE BEGINS

BY JASON SREBNICK

If the rumors are to be believed, this is a true story.

If the rumors are to be believed.

Once upon a time...

Actually, you know what? Let me stop right there. Let's try something else:

Hello my friend. My name is D'Votner Rite, and I am a traveler to the past and futures. I have a story to tell you. Now I could have written a novel I suppose but when I've tried to tell others this particular tale, they called me a liar; a teller of tall tales; that I have nothing but fictitious ambitions. But I assure you I am not a purveyor of fiction. And so, I invite you to come with me in my time traveling machine and observe this story in real time. Come, and witness and you will see I am no teller of tall tales. We will have to stay inside the machine for there is no changing the past, but it can be observed. And rest assured! At no time will I spoil the ending for you. Not matter the outcome. Good, bad, uplifting, or downright disastrous.

Let us go.

PROLOGUE: A WOMAN RUNS

All is not well.

On the faraway world of Lucasia a cascade of unthinkable events has happened.

The sacred Child Crystals have been taken by the evil Ninth Legion of Za.

With a unique ability to commune with the Crystal Mother, which resides at the planet core, these four mythical beacons, placed at equidistant energy vortices around the planet formed the Magnificent Field that balanced the natural order of all things on Lucasia.

ALT: Located on the planets surface these four beacons in commune with one another and with the Crystal Mother, residing at the planets core, formed the Magnificent Field. A matrix of invisible energy that enveloped Lucasia in light and brought balance to all things.

But that is no longer. Now, everlasting peace has been replaced by perpetual war, prosperity by poverty, abundance by scarcity, optimism by cynicism, and a culture of character by a cult of personality.

Worse yet, the Ninth Legion has purged the planet of its protectors: The legendary Crystal Warriors. For once the Child

Crystals were taken, and the Magnificent Field no more, their mystical powers were drastically reduced.

Once numbering in the thousands there is but one Crystal Warrior left.

And this is where our story begins.

As she, the last of the Crystal Warriors, runs.

But she does not run for her own life. She runs for the life of another...

It is the middle of the night on the northern pole of the planet Lucasia. Like Earth but not Earth, and over twenty-eight galaxies away, Lucasia is a vibrant and living planet.

Near its northern pole is the Great Galaidian Mountains, a vast, mountainous region far away from any city and inaccessible to even the most determined adventurer.

Imagine, dear reader, that from atop the tallest mountain, you look upon a star filled sky dotted with the four moons of Lucasia. Each one of varying size and color.

Now focus in on a ridge of this tallest of mountains. A large, flattened ridge carved out by the ancients long, long ago.

There, rests a giant dome with a single shaft of light coming out of its top, that eventually fades into the heavens. Called Convexum Prime by the chosen few aware of its existence, this sacred dome has stood for well over ten millennia.

All is quiet and serene.

Until...

Into this scene fly deadly attacking warcraft of the vile Ninth Legion. An evil cult with the sole aim of complete and utter dominance over the entire planet.

Large armored gunships, bombers, as well as smaller fighters and attackcraft that buzz about like angry hornets. They launch

missiles of varying type, drop bombs of all sizes and hurl many other deadly payload at the dome, but the mystical and ancient structure holds...for now.

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Adjacent and attached to the dome, and dwarfed by it, are a collection of temples and clerical structures. Inside the hallways of one of these buildings a young woman, twenty-seven years old, runs with panicked urgency. This is the last Crystal Warrior. She has a staff strapped to her back and in a sling across her other shoulder is a 4-month-old baby.

As she passes through various checkpoints in the corridors, she closes doors behind her and urgently hits a sequence of buttons to lock them. Mechanisms slide into place with a clang then the doors seal with authority.

Not far behind her Ninth Legion soldierDrones, ruthless killing machines gyroscopically balanced on their one wheel and remote controlled by Ninth Legion youth from faraway bases, pursue with a predator's zeal for the kill practically tripping over one another in their zombie like pursuit.

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At last, she bursts into the spacious and magnificent dome itself.

It is a glorious thing to behold, as high and wide as many football fields with a shiny, reflective floor throughout.

And it's nearly empty, the design minimalistic, but at it's very center there's a bottomless pool etched out of the floor. And from this pool emanates a purple shaft of light upward and through a circular glass window in the top of the ceiling. This is the same shaft of light seen from the outside of the dome. The woman and the baby are but a teeny tiny dot running across the vast open floor. Her goal is to get to the pool in the center. That's all she is focused on right now. But it's so...far...away.

In pursuit, in a triangular military formation, march the Ninth Legion Drone Army, they've crashed through the fortified doors and are closing in fast. Their numbers so large that they start to fill up the boundless dome floor like an insect infestation. Plasma blasts, too many to count, flood the space their explosions can be heard all around her and those that come a little too close for comfort make a deadly *spffftt, spffftt, spffftt* sound as they zip by.

A quick note on plasma blasts: They are fiery hot pellets, orange in color, that give the illusion of light streaks when fired. When they hit something that they cannot penetrate they burst apart and sprinkle smaller hot pellets all about like a lethal drop of water. When they hit something they can penetrate, like flesh, they cause immense pain and death.

She zigs and zags evading the blasts, a skilled warrior even with her diminished powers.

Then she turns to face her hunters and, taking the staff from her back, forms an invisible shield and the plasma blasts go bouncing off like water droplets.

Then she holds the staff from one end and swings it like a baseball bat. This disperses a tidal wave of invisible energy that knocks the soldierDrones over like bowling pins.

She's caused the slightest of delays. Increased her chances by a fraction of a fraction. But it's something. And now is not the time for grousing. She will take what she can.

She turns and runs again for the pool with even more urgency as the soldierDrones, the ones that are still functional and the reserves that come pouring in, unleash a hailstorm of plasma blasts at her.

She gets nicked on the shoulder and falls to the ground sliding along the polished floor, careful to fall in such a way that the baby is protected.

She gets up unwilling to give in, ignoring her injury, and continues to run.

The shower of plasma blasts keeps coming.

Next, there's a whistling noise and knowing this is not good, leaps higher than a mortal possibly could. She's just in time with her leap too, because a lethal projectile lands and a large

explosion goes off cracking and smearing the once pristine floor. In mid-air, she senses she is close enough to the pool that she hurls the baby towards it.

Miraculously he is not hit by any plasma blasts or explosions and instead splashes neatly into the bottomless pool.

Under the water, the baby's little breath holding and swim reflexes kick in. Heck, he even manages a smile, unaware of the catastrophic events going on around him.

The woman dives into the pool after him, scoops him up, and desperately swims for the edge. The pool is surrounded in different spots by large crystal monoliths that jut out and provide her some much-needed cover as the blizzard of plasma blasts keep coming, unrelenting and with more intensity. The predators are closing in on their prey and they can sense it. She swims to an edge that is just under the water and sits.

Scoops water with her hand that she laps over the baby's head. Trembling, she whispers, "Crystal Mother in your name I initiate this child under the First Rite. Watch after him and he shall watch after all."

More plasma blasts come streaking in. Dust and debris cover her and plasma droplets burn her flesh. Large chunks of the crystal monoliths crumble into the heretofore unblemished pool.

She looks down at the baby knowing she will never see him again.

"I love you my little Kee'lae. Please. Make my strength yours. And remember me. Always remember me."

She kisses him on the forehead then with a renewed resolve and an instinct to protect the baby gets up and runs for the far end of the dome.

You see, the pool was merely part one. Her next goal: get to the other side of the dome. We shall see why in a few moments.

She turns again to form an invisible shield around them with her staff while also zigging and zagging to avoid what she can. But there are so many shots spitting down on her.

She's getting desperate. She takes the staff and slams an end into the floor causing an even bigger wave of energy than before and the soldierDrones are scattered about once again.

One of the commanding soldierDrones, controlled by its "pilot" from far away, communicates with the forces outside.

"Target still not acquired. Recommence with exterior attack."

And with that the gunships, bombers and fighters outside begin to attack the dome once again as a torrential downpour of missiles, bombs, and bowling ball size plasma blasts rain an ungodly storm down on the dome.

Inside everything quakes, the floor cracks, the ceiling crumbles. Dust and debris shower down in this once sacred place. Even the soldierDrones are shaken off balance.

Yet all of this gives our heroine time. Precious time.

And at last, she and the baby arrive at the far side of the dome.

Where there is: nothing.

She smashes her fist into the wall shattering a section which reveals a hidden control panel. She pulls a lever and giant crystal shards come crashing up through floor and more of the dome wall crumbles away to unveiling more of the lit-up control panel but also: a round, all-glass hatch door embedded in the wall.

The giant crystal splinters that poke up out of the floor form a protective circle, similar to the now defunct monoliths that surrounded the pool. Much-needed cover once again.

She turns a circular handle on the hatch door and opens it to reveal: An egg-shaped escape cart on a tunneled-out quad-rail track system that disappears into darkness and off to who knows where.

As thousands of plasma blasts continue in a merciless fiery storm all around her, she places the baby into one of the four padded seats, buckles him in, and places a loving kiss upon his forehead. She pauses a moment, tempted to get in and ride away with him but knows his best chance is for her to stay behind and stave off the Ninth Legion attack and buy him precious time and so she pushes a button on the outside of the cart and an all-glass door slides into place and seals tight with a thssst.

More blasts rain down all about.

With urgency she closes the hatch on the wall, then turns the handle to lock it.

Her hands and face pressed against the glass taking a last look at her baby.

She wants to hold him in the worst way, but she knows this is his only chance for survival and with that she presses a red "launch" button and the crafts rocket engines start to whir and then it blasts off down the track, through the narrow tunnel that burrows into the mountain.

Just as this happens, the dome quakes and tremors and the great structure finally begins to wither under the attacks from the outside. Larger cracks form in the floor and chunks of ceiling crash down all about.

Still looking through the windowed door, one hand still pressed against the glass, as the craft zips away, the warrior presses a small button next to a speakerphone in the wall.

"Special delivery on its way. Protect him Serretus. Promise me you will protect him."

She keeps her hand against the glass door as long as she can, as if, through it, she can project all her love towards her baby as she can.

The cart races down the track at a magnificent speed as the fragile tunnel cracks and chunks of ceiling cave in.

From the baby's point of view: the woman's hand against the round glass door. That will be his last memory of this terrible event. Round glass door, mothers' hand against it. But the image gets smaller and smaller, fading as the distance grows between them, until she is no longer in sight (and soon will likely no longer be at all).

The little pod speeds away to wherever its destination is and the part of the tunnel through which it just sped crumbles in upon itself, just missing the precious cargo which continues on its way.

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Back inside the dome.

The woman, her hand still against the glass, basking for just the briefest of moments in this smallest of victories, gets thrown to the ground as plasma blasts rock just near her.

The jutting crystal spikes that were protecting her have been beat down to rubble.

She turns to the approaching army. The odds are impossible but the look on her face suggests her undeniable resolve. She will buy her baby as much time as she can. She fights them with all she has, taking out more than one could imagine (even with her reduced powers) but eventually she gets hit with a plasma blast in the lower back and her legs fail her.

She crawls like a dying animal to a broken off chunk of crystal rock for some semblance of cover.

She begins to cry, the pain so bad, then shakes it away and composes herself. *In the weakest moments strength is the only option. Be strong.* She tells herself.

She catches her breath during this short reprieve as impacting plasma blasts spew their spittle all about and the crystal boulder that is her cover quickly erodes with each hit.

Now that the baby is safely away, she will attempt her own escape and so she presses a button on a communicator near her shoulder.

"MAL, I need you."

The dying warrior reaches for her staff on the floor but before she can wrap her fingers around it a massive boot steps on her hand and there is the audible crunch of broken bone.

She screams.

A giant of a man (over seven feet tall), with a robotic blue eye, the broadest of shoulders and the gravest of intentions, takes up her entire field of vision. Lord Dogen. A rising star in the Ninth Legion whenever unspeakable deeds need deeding. Absent a soul and lacking a conscious he is a bad guy for sure. Accompanying him, as always, is his little protectorBot, a multi-eyed, multi-antennae robot who always has his back,

looking and listening for enemies, wheels up beside him, standing at a height that barely comes to Lord Dogen's knees. With his boot still clamped on her broken wrist, he takes her staff and with great effort even for the mighty Lord Dogen bends it as hard as he can, straining, straining until finally it snaps in two. A pop of energy released as if the staff's very soul has been relieved from its container and the mystical staff is no more.

"Traitor!" she spits out with vitriol at Dogen.

Dogen saying nothing icily pulls out an exotic twin-barreled plasma gun and points it at the helpless woman with the same emotion as if he were about to step on a worthless insect. It's a kill shot for sure.

His finger slowly begins to depress the trigger when...

There is an explosion from above as a large hole is punctured in the ceiling of the dome. Then the silhouette of a glorious winged aircraft floats down, cannons rapid-firing plasma blasts at the Ninth Legion battalions.

There's no pilot, the craft, call sign MAL-051748, flies itself. With this distraction Lord Dogen's plasma shot goes *slightly* awry but still puts a burning hole through the dying woman's abdomen, severing her spine and causing irreparable damage.

But, Lord Dogen, knowing the ferocious loyalty with which a MAL-class aircraft is programmed does not attempt another shot but

instead turns and flees in full retreat, his protectorBot, sensing his genuine fear, squeals in agreement and follows. "She won't survive. Move out and called in the Major Bomber," he says over a communications channel.

And now it is just the dying woman and the MAL aircraft in the dome.

She sees, through bruised eyes so swollen they are mere slits, the blurry vision of a slender auxiliaryBot exiting the aircraft from the rear loading ramp, wheeling towards her. Or perhaps it's just a hallucination for her vision is blurry and tunneling, with flecks of white spots popping about. And though her hearing has been lost she can feel her wheezing lungs struggling for precious air. Struggling. Struggling. Then she withers into unconsciousness. Or worse.

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Outside, the Ninth Legion forces have dispersed while a Major Bomber, a Ninth Legion bomber craft carrying a bulbous, almost cartoonish (but rest assured very deadly) bomb, flies through the upper atmosphere high above the dome. The targeting engineer lines the dome up in the various targeting readouts and cross-hairs and, after taking into account, wind and other environmental factors, and certain it will be a direct hit, releases the bomb. As it falls a high-pitched whistling follows

in its wake until finally detonating with deadly precision upon its target. And Convexum Prime is no more.

10 YEARS LATER (EARTH)

1 YEAR LATER (LUCASIA)

PART I

CHAPTER ONE

There are two dreams then the paralysis.

First dream: He's underwater and surrounded by a magnificent light that originates from far below. Unable to breath yet somehow not afraid because he knows she's there. She's there every time he has the dream. She scoops him up. He can't see her but he can feel her heartbeat and sense her presence and these bring comfort. There's chaos all around but he can't see it but somehow knows it's there the way you know something is happening in a dream without having to literally see it. Then they are apart separated by glass, and he sees her hand against the glass and her face with tears waterfalling down her cheeks. Everything around her goes dark and she gets smaller and smaller as she shrinks into the distance. The scene fades to black just like in a movie.

All black for a few moments when it fades in from black and he is on to the next dream.

Second dream: He's standing on a large rock in the middle of a river. It's flat and dry with plenty of room to maneuver and he's never gotten the feeling like he could slip off into the water. He feels safe, stable.

All surroundings beyond the river are a blur. He can tell that the sky is blue, that the sun is shining but he can never make

out any details beyond these generalities. As happens in a dream.

Upriver, a man stands atop a stack of five small rocks, slippery and wet. The man balances effortlessly and impossibly on this stack of rocks. It's his father. He knows it's his father. A younger version of his father than the older man he knows in real life (non-dream life that is). Mid-thirties, in his prime, strong and vibrant. Not a grey hair or wrinkle, he's wearing Chuck Taylor sneakers, worn jeans and a grey t-shirt that forms nicely to his wiry frame. The exact opposite of the man who lies literally comatose in a bed day after day in the non-dream world.

His father never says anything in the dream, mostly just smiles and waves. Jovial, content, not a care in the world. His feet hardly fit on the top rock in the stack yet he is as relaxed as if he were on solid ground.

Not much happens for some amount of time. It could be seconds, it could be hours for who knows in dream time. Anyways, eventually his father gestures that he's going to toss him something then produces a long stick, about five feet in length and 2 inches in diameter. A staff. His father tosses it into the water and it makes it way around this rock and that until arriving before his large rock. He kneels and scoops it from the water and looks it over. He looks back at his father who kindly

gestures that he should look closer at one end of the staff. He does and there is some sort of glyph-based writing on it, though he has no idea what it says. Not even close. Then a voice, a female voice, translates in a whisper. Although the translation is just as cryptic as the glyphs: "Nothing is something. Do not fear the emptiness. Embrace it. Go towards it. The emptiness is the key."

He looks upstream at his dad who smiles at him in a proud sort of way. Like mission accomplished sort of way. Message delivered sort of way. Yes, a proud sort of smile but also...cheeky. Then everything fades to black again movie-style and there is darkness.

Sleep Paralysis: When it fades from black he's lying on his back in his bed. It feels like he's awake, but he can't move, he's paralyzed, and he can hardly breath. As if breathing through a very thin straw. He tries to cry out but can't speak. No words come out. No sound at all. Breathing becomes harder and harder. He's sure he's going to die. Then the shadow figure appears like death itself waiting patiently for him. A silhouette made up of thousands of black smokey strands it looms off to the side but never comes closer.

Breathing is nearly impossible now and it seems the harder he tries to move the more impossible it is going to be. Death is all but assured.

Then he wakes up.

David Paul Powers jolts up in bed gasping for air. He's drenched in sweat and hyperventilating. His legs feel weak even though he's lying down. He feels nauseous. His throat is tight like an invisible hand is squeezing his Adams apple, his heart is rattling the bars of the cage that hold it.

"Oh no. Oh no. Oh no," whispers the ten-year-old. He can't catch his breath! He's sure he's going to die. He's sure he's going to die. He's sure. He's sure. He's sure. He's sure.

"Mom. Mom please don't let me die," he cries out in a whisper to his mother. "Mom please." The comfort that she is somewhere, call it heaven if you like, the afterlife, but *somewhere* watching over him brings some comfort to him. It doesn't stop this event, but it at least takes it from a 10 to an 8 in severity.

He reaches over for his sketch book and turns to a fresh page. The pen moves all about the page. He never lifts the pen from the page as he moves it about wildly. "Imagining a tiger, doesn't make it real. Imagining a tiger, doesn't make it real." He repeats this over and over as he moves the pen maddeningly across the paper. It looks like some sort of random scribble at first but slowly and surely it forms into the shape of the shadow. The shadow that he calls anxiety. And by the time he's done he's no longer sweating. Breathing is closer to normal and

the invisible anaconda that was squeezing around his chest and throat is no longer there. The strength in his legs is back. And the impending feeling like he's going to die has passed. It was just another panic attack. Or anxiety attack. Or vasovagal episode. Different people have called it different things over the years. He falls back into his bed frustrated yet grateful to be alive and that his mother is watching over him. He's ashamed that this happens to him. He feels weak. His one victory tonight was that he didn't cry out to his Auntie Pal who surely would have run in with the ice packs (ice packs under his arms and at the back of his legs and on his stomach seem to help) told him he was fine in her typical angry and frustrated tone and then stomped off upset for yet another night's sleep disturbed. These happen far too frequently in her opinion, and he needs to just "get over them". How many more does he have to have to realize they won't kill him. Everyone has bad dreams! But these are more than just bad dreams. But she doesn't want to hear any more of it.

He looks over at his clock. 3:30 am. He'll be up for another two hours before finally being able to fall back to sleep. And tomorrow, or later today more accurately, he'll feel like a pro wrestler body slammed him over and over and over again; there's always a sort of "hangover" from these episodes the next day. At least it's not a school night. Having to be up and ready for

school makes it even worse. On the weekends he gets to ease out of his slumber.

For now, knowing he won't be able to fall back to sleep right away, he slinks out of bed and walks down the hallway to another bedroom.

Lying in a bed is a man. His father. He's hooked up to an IV, eyes closed, peaceful.

His father to wake up.

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That's all David Paul's ever really wanted. Well he would do anything to bring his mom back to life but he knows that he can't do that. She died of a heart attack shortly after giving birth to him. But his dad. He's been in a coma, or something resembling a coma (David Paul's not quite sure what the exact medical term is) for all of David Paul's eleven years. Lies there in the bed and has never so much as made a move or spoken a word. But he's alive so there's hope. And he holds onto that hope like an exhausted drowning person holds onto a life preserver thrown to them just seconds before they go under for the last time.

His father can breathe on his own but requires the IV and a feeding tube for nourishment and twice a week a physical therapist visits to move his arms and legs to stave off atrophy. This room is the smallest of the three bedrooms in the modest

suburban ranch where David Paul lives with his father and his Auntie Pal. We'll get to Auntie Pal in a moment.

He tip toes to his usual spot, the worn over-size armchair by the bedside, **and sits as the morning sun warms his back**, David Paul stares at his father for a long time, not saying anything, willing him to wake up, then finally breaks the silence.

"Hi Dad."

No response, of course.

"I had that dream again. Seems to be every night now. Same one. Every time."

Again, no response. Just lies there.

"You don't talk in the dream either."

The dream.

David Paul has had it pretty much every night for as long as he can remember and it's the same every time.

Typically, which is to say always, David Paul startles awake drenched in sweat. Once he gets his bearings, he tiptoes into his dad's bedroom. He's not sure why but it has a calming effect that helps him settle, sitting next to his dad after the dream.

"I wonder. Will you ever wake up?"

No response.

He turns away and looks longingly out the window where, a few houses over, a father is having an early morning catch with his

son. He's envious and transfixed on this simple act of tossing a baseball back and forth.

Auntie Pal, David Paul's legal guardian, enters the bedroom startling him out of the trance.

"Good morning my friend! I thought I would find you in here. You, okay? Kiddo? Another dream?"

"Yea."

She can tell he's not.

"Some day I don't know when but someday, your dad is going to wake up. I just know it. Don't give up hope. Never give up hope. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Can you smile for me?"

He half smiles.

She gives him a tickle. Full smile.

"Better. Now come on I have breakfast ready. I have made for you sir the most delectable toast made from the finest bread from FoodMasters bread aisle and I have topped with no-frills butter," she says putting on a French accent. *Butt-aire*. "Then I thought we could jam on the piano. Nothing like a jam session with your old Auntie, eh?"

David Paul can't help but chuckle.

"You don't look so excited? You mean you *don't* want to spend your entire Saturday with your dear old Auntie?"

"Well..."

"Let me guess. Going to The Place with the gang?"

David Paul nods 'yes'.

"Then we shall play until they arrive."

David Paul runs to the kitchen to eat.

Auntie Pal, tidies up her brothers' blankets with care.

"Rest dear brother, rest. You will wake up one day," she whispers.

CHAPTER TWO

On the same morning, pretty close to the same time, on a typical suburban street in a typical suburban neighborhood (you know the one; you've seen it a hundred times; maybe you even live in one; safe; generous amounts of spaces between houses; and lawns ranging from well-kept to exquisite), two eleven-year-old boys ride their bikes. Cooper and Rudy. Two of David Paul's best friends. Rudy is short and round. Cooper tall and lanky. Both on the highly intelligent side.

Cooper shakes his head and rolls his eyes as Rudy, helmetless, pulls wheelies and other tricks with abandon. Cooper, ever the cautious one, wears a helmet, elbow pads and knee pads, and maintains two hands on the handlebars at all times.

Their back-and-forth banter never-ending as they ride on.

You should know this: Rudy is deaf and signs; even while riding his bike, holding onto his handlebars with both hands is a mere afterthought. Cooper took the time to teach himself sign language so he could more easily communicate with Rudy. Though he would never admit this.

"It's your fault we're late," Rudy signs.

"My fault? It's not my fault we're late. You couldn't decide what you wanted. Chocolate or Chips. Chocolate or Chips. I mean gosh-darn-it-to-heck just choose already."

"I did," Rudy signs.

"You did not. You got both that's not choosing."

"I chose both."

"You're impossible, you really are. And why did we go this way? There're too many hills this way. Why do I listen to you? I seriously don't know."

Rudy signs, smiling: "Because I'm smarter than you."

"Oh, don't you even get me started mister."

Rudy signs: "You're going too slow. Juliette is going to leave without us."

"I am not going too slow. And besides look there she is."

An eleven-year-old girl comes riding up. She's got a subtle combination of social smarts and book smarts and is that rare type of girl who can hang with boys and run with the girls.

"What took you guys so long?"

They point accusingly at one another.

Juliette rolls her eyes and says, "Come on."

Rudy signs: "See she's mad at you."

"She's not mad at me she's mad you."

"I'm not mad at either of you let's just go!"

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The three continue along when a twelve-year old boy rides up and joins them. Reid. He's actually in the same grade but his father insisted on holding him out of school for a year so as to give

him an advantage in sports once he reached high school which is why he's a year older. He's the tallest of the group, though Cooper is gaining on him but doesn't possess the wide shoulders and natural athletic V-shape that Reid does. Look up beanpole in the dictionary and you will find an illustration of Cooper. He's also easily the toughest of the group and we shall see why in a few moments.

"Hey! What the hell took you guys so long? I've been waiting forever."

"Relax spasm," says Juliette.

Reid (to Rudy and Cooper): "Who's fault?"

They point at one another again.

"Of course," Reid says.

CHAPTER THREE

A short while later the four friends pull up to David Paul's house where the sound of a piano playing can be heard from within.

Inside, David Paul is at the piano keying away at a cheerful number while his Auntie, eyes closed and smiling, rocks back and forth to the rhythm, gently coaching him where necessary.

"You are maestro, comrade!" she says in her best version of Russian-accented English. "Take your time though. Remember it's the silence between the notes that matter just as much."

David Paul stops playing.

"Did my father play piano?"

"Oh my goodness no. Never."

"Would he have known that thing you just said? The silence between the notes?"

She scrunches up her face thinking.

"I don't think so though you never know, he was very smart your father. But piano? No. Your father was into one thing and one thing only," she takes a deep inhale then bellows out in an exaggerated demonstrative movement: "Science!"

"I was the artist he was the scientist. He never so much as touched a piano and if he did it would have been to take it apart and put it back together again."

David Paul starts to play again.

"Better. Very nice. Dah, da, da, da, dah! And one and two and three and keep it going you are doing great!"

Just then a small stone comes through the open window, ratty-tat-tatting along the floor before stopping.

Auntie Pal pokes her head out.

"Hi kids!"

"Hi Auntie Pal", they all return in unison.

Rudy signs up to her.

"Why yes that is a wonderful idea, Rudolph. Go ahead and get it."

They go to the garage where there is a wooden ladder with every rung painted in cheery colors, every hue of the rainbow represented, and the sides, well the sides are wrapped delightedly in colorful yarn. Yarn bombed as they say.

They lean the ladder up against the house and David Paul, backpack on, is out the window and climbing down.

"Now David Paul you will remember to have fun, yes? Cherish these days they--"

"I know they are the best years of my life."

"And dream big. Remember, all of you,--"

"-pipe dreams aren't just for plumbers!" they yell back in unison.

"Are you trying to tell me I need to come up with some new material kids?"

"Don't change a thing!" Juliette shouts back as the five ride off into suburbia's maze of streets and houses.

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Not long into their journey they come upon a corner store which David Paul turns towards.

"I need to go in."

"Seriously dude? You can pee in the woods," Juliette protests.

"No. Snackage."

"Dude we're never going to get there."

"Is your name Jill? Cause I think you need a chill pill Jill.

Rudy, Cooper. You guys come with me. Reid and Juliette can go on ahead."

"But we've already been," Cooper protests.

Rudy turns to head towards the store without a second thought.

"Oh fine," says Cooper.

"We'll meet you there," Juliette calls back as she pumps her legs to catch up with Reid who doesn't wait for anyone. When she finally does catch him they continue on, disappearing further into the labyrinth of suburbia, finally turning onto a dead-end street the end of which is a small lot that butts up against conservation land. A forest.

Reid gets off his bike and walks it into the woods. Juliette hurries to catch up. Reid isn't one to wait. In case you hadn't noticed.

Back at the corner store, David Paul is inside retrieving said "snackage" while Rudy and Cooper wait outside. Rudy patiently, Cooper not so much.

As David Paul is paying the cashier and digging into candy bar number one, he notices a group of older boys approach Rudy and Cooper in the parking lot, and he knows all too well who they are. And his stomach feels like he just hit the steepest hill on the roller coaster and his legs jiggle to hold him up.

Eighth grade bullies. Three of them. There's a group like them at every school since school was invented it seems. This little trifecta is made up of two brothers, the John brothers, its leader Jake John (who by the way stayed back and should actually be in *ninth grade*), his younger brother by a year Jack John (confused? Blame their idiot parents), and their greasy friend Marcus with his rat-like face to match his personality.

Jake John (head bully), grabs onto Rudy's handlebars, gets right in his face and shouts:

"Can. You. Hear. Me?!"

The other two bullies, Jack and Marcus, laugh in ogre-like snorts; hyenas always eager to please the alpha.

David Paul darts out of the store, a protective instinct has boiled up inside of him, an irrational trance has taken hold, his friends are more important to him than anything. The bell of the door -- ba-ding-bing -- announces his arrival into the small parking lot with worn lines and cracked asphalt.

"Leave him alone Jake John!"

All three bullies look over in unison. Cooper takes the opportunity, gets on his bike and pedals as fast as his stick legs will take him away.

Jake John, amused by David Paul's bravado, saunters over, snatches the candy bar out of David Paul's hand and takes a nice big bite for himself. Lips smacking away like a cow eating cud, he's right in David Paul's face the smell of chocolate combined with his bad breath so close that David Paul nearly gags and has to turn away.

"And what are you gonna do about it? Huh tough guy?"

He spits the chunk of candy bar onto David Paul's shirt, *pa-toeey*, and it slowly dribbles down leaving a messy brown saliva stain.

David Paul is still as a statue, rethinking his approach to helping his friends.

"Your choice in candy bars suck by the way. So I'm still waiting tough guy. What're you gonna do about it? Hmmm? What's that? I can't hear ya," Jake John says hand cupped to his ear.

David Paul stands there frozen, unable to move or talk. Big Jake pushes him down. Rudy rushes over to help but is held back by the others, then thrown to the ground as well. And these aren't just playful shoves. They hit the unforgiving, unbiased pavement hard.

David Paul tries to get up but is pushed down again.

"Come on, get up tough guy. Let's go," says Jake John. He's not smiling but he's as happy as can be. Bullying is his happy place. This is exactly how he hoped things would go today. What luck. What a way to start a day.

"I-I'm not afraid of you," says David Paul not even able to make eye contact and in just about the most unconvincing tone one could muster.

He tries to get up but is pushed down yet again. Even harder this time. The hardest yet. So hard that his face hits the ground giving it a good red burn and his nose begins to bleed. Jake John bends down to address David Paul (still on the ground, no attempt to get up this time), blood dripping from his nose and tears in his eyes.

"Still gonna do something about it?"

David Paul, face down in the asphalt, defeated and trying to compose himself, doesn't say anything and he still doesn't make eye contact with the beast but he does look up enough to see that he has a clear shot at the bully's crotch. Acting on

impulse, and some might say outright stupidity, he makes a fist and...BAM!

Jake John, in some combination of an angry moan and a whistling squeal shrieks, "What the fu--"

Grasping his crotch, his face glows red, his eyes cross and he slumps to the ground.

David Paul runs for his bike and waves like a madman at Rudy to get his attention.

"Run Rudy! Run!" he shouts forgetting that Rudy can't hear him but Rudy gets the message loud and clear regardless and he and David Paul get on their bikes and pedal with the urgency of rabbits being chased by angry hounds.

Adrenaline fuels David Pauls legs as he tries to get out of the lot and onto to the road to his and Rudy's escape. *We're gonna make it! I can't believe it. We're gonna make it!*

It's then that a recovered Jake John grabs David Paul by the shoulder ripping him off his bike with such power that the bike continues on as if it had a rider until it crashes into a chain linked fence nearby.

Rudy made more progress, but Jack John lunges at him with a strong shove and he and his bike crash down, scraping along the merciless pavement.

Jake John drags David Paul across the small lot as

David Paul, wails: "Get away from me! Get off! Get off me."

Jake John hands David Paul to the other bullies.

"Hold him."

He goes to David Paul's bike, lifts it over his head and marches forward.

David Paul goes into a seizure trying to escape Marcus and Jack John's grasps but to no avail and as Jake John gets closer with bike overhead, his stomach downshifts into zero gravity mode as he is certain he's about to have the bike smashed right over his cranium. And he should be concerned because that is just the sort of thing that ole Jake John would do but luckily the bully just throws the bike against the wall of the store. He repeats this a few more times to get it good and scratched up and to ensure reflectors and other peripherals snap off then finishes things by carrying it to the side of the store where he drops it into a dumpster.

Then he goes back to David Paul, hits him HARD right in the gut knocking the breath out of him.

He slaps David Paul across the face with his bear paw of a hand.

WHAP!

The force and sting of the slap makes David Paul rethink his short stint of bravery and plead. "Okay. I'm sorry, alright? Leave me alone. Please," he barely gets out. His breath hasn't fully come back to him, he can't breathe and for the first time

in his life thinks he may die. Not being able to breathe will do that to a person.

"Sorry? It's too late for sorry." WHAP! Another paw across the face.

"Dude. Almost took his head off with that one. Ha, ha. Sweet," Jack John cackles.

Then. Hope.

"Hey! Let him go."

Reid.

Jake John stops.

"I ain't afraid of you Reid. There's three of us and one of you. Bring it."

Cooper, Juliette and Reid have arrived on scene. You see Cooper didn't bail on his friends he went to get help. Reid.

"Leave him alone you shit heels!" yells Juliette.

"Stay out of this. You're just a girl," Marcus chimes in.

"Go find a doll to play with girl," says Jack John.

"Yea we don't need no girl butting into this," says Jake John.

"Okay you two need to shut up because your last name is a synonym for a toilet bowl and you Marcus need to shut up because your name backwards is 'Suck ram'," she spits back and not one has a comeback but it angers and embarrasses them good judging by faces that look as red as if they'd been sunburned from a full day at the beach without sunscreen.

Reid marches towards Jake John with, let us just say, *intention*.

"I said. Let. Him. Go."

"I told you I ain't afraid--"

Reid feints a low kick at Jake John's privates. This distracts the Bully (especially given recent history) and Reid punches him once, twice and three times in the chin, mouth, and nose and Jake John falls to the ground in such a way that the only thing missing is a lumber jack yelling 'Timber!'. Generous amounts of blood gush from his lips and nose.

"Anyone else?!" Reid offers.

The other two scatter into a full retreat.

Jake John stumbles to his feet. Runs but trips and falls. Gets up again in a panicked hurry and runs away.

Reid addresses them all as they go.

"Come near my friends again and it will be worse next time."

And with that the bullies are gone. The incident over.

Rudy, even though he didn't take the brunt of the bullies rage but still feeling dejected that he couldn't do more to help, signs to Cooper: "Please tell Reid I said thank you."

"Rudy says 'thank you'," whispers Cooper to Reid.

"I know what he said."

Reid gives Rudy a thumbs up and a wink.

"Friends don't leave friends behind," he says Reid leads the group away.

...

Everything is back on track, the five friends on their bikes again riding down Sheppard Road which is just a few streets over from the entrance to the woods.

They break apart just a tad with Rudy and Cooper riding together, while Reid, Juliette, and David Paul have bunched up closer.

"You should be thanking me. I was the one that got him," Cooper says to Rudy.

Rudy smiling, signs: "You were just running away."

"Wha- Oh- Wh- Friends don't leave friends behind. You know that."

Rudy, still smiling, signs: "And yet you did. Leave us behind."

"To get help! My goodness, why do I bother with you?"

And he rides on, ensuring he stays *just* ahead of Rudy. Rudy shrugs and smiles. One of his joys in life is to aggravate Cooper just so.

Juliette addresses Reid.

"Does it always have to go to the extreme with you?"

"What're you talking about?"

"Violence?!"

"I was helping our friend. Friends don't leave friends--"

"I know! But that was a little excessive."

"Solved the problem didn't it?"

"For today."

Juliette shakes her head and rolls her eyes in disgust and rides on ahead and as she does a parting spat at Reid:

"You made it worse for them you know."

Now it's just Reid and David Paul riding together.

"I don't get it," says Reid.

"Probably mad because *she* wanted to kick their asses."

"This isn't the first time they picked on you? Been going on for a while?"

David Paul doesn't say anything.

"C'mon junior. Give up the goods."

"It comes and goes. You know how guys like that are."

"I want to know if they look at you the wrong way from now on."

"I don't mean to seem ungrateful but you're not always going to be there to bail us out."

"I'll always have your back daddio."

"But you think you could teach me that stuff some time?"

"I've told you before you're not a fighter."

David Paul nods. How can he argue after what just went down.

"That's not a knock. Don't take offense. You're better off,"

Reid says with the wisdom of one far older than his age.

"If I learned though, you think I could take them?"

Reid gives it some thought.

"I think you could. Cause you got heart. Maybe you wouldn't win every time but you'd make it ugly enough that they would rather find someone else. But like I said, I ain't teaching you. Cause like I also said, you're not a fighter, you're not that person." David Pauls shrugs as the group pedals on.

Soon enough they arrive at the lot that is the entrance to the woods. They dismount their bikes and take a path, walking their bikes in tow alongside.

They stop at a hefty and tall collection of bushes bookended on each side by two thin but unwavering middle-aged pine trees.

David Paul goes behind one of the trees, where there is a bundle of empty wine bottles each filled with sand and hanging from thick twine. While ensuring that no one is around to see, he pulls. The sand-filled bottles are part of a ropes and pulley lever system they've rigged (well it was Rudy and Coopers design but they all helped build it). The bushes are fake and fastened to a wooden plank that has pine needles and leaves glued to it so no one would ever know it was a wooden plank. When the sand-filled bottles are pulled, one end of the plank gets hoisted up revealing a hidden, "less beaten" path. They cross over and stow their bikes in a lean-to covered with tree branches and camo netting.

Then David Paul pulls on another collection of sand filled wine bottles that hang from thick twine and the whole process reverses and the wooden plank lowers down into the ground hiding the secret path and they begin the hike up the steep trail. This routine one they've done nearly every day since they built it. As the trail flattens out the five friends walk through the woods for about another hundred yards until they arrive at their destination:

A clearing amongst two ancient pines, with thick trunks filled with sap and wisdom, where no other trees or bushes grow, just the carpet of pine needles the giants have laid down.

Our friends call this area "The Place". It is their top-secret refuge. There's a fort, built from scrap wood they've claimed and collected over the years. It's a ragtag of a thing but overall, quite impressive and something they've dedicated a lot of time to building. It's got a real door (that locks!) and even a cupola, which they call the tower, from where their flag flies and from which they can always be on the lookout should someone discover or be on the brink of discovering their secret locale. But they don't call the fort, the Fort. They call it the Fortress. Around the Fortress they have chairs, a table and other comforts of home they've been able to muster together when the right person wasn't looking. The things people put out on the side of the road.

David Paul runs into the Fortress and climbs the ladder to the tower. There's a pair of binoculars permanently hanging from a rope and he looks through and can see the neighborhoods and the streets beyond the woods. Butterflies flutter inside his stomach at what he spies next. Jake John, Jack John and Marcus and they've brought reinforcements. He gulps and begins to hyperventilate but today is his lucky day as the Neanderthals assume the dead end street where the entrance to the woods is must be just that. A dead end and they turn and move on.

Relieved and thankful at their being born with I.Q.'s on the lower side David Paul heads back down to join his friends.

Juliette goes into the Fortress and brings out a ring of branches bundled together with twine, a slightly larger version of a laurel wreath.

"Come on," she commands.

"Seriously? We just got here," protests Reid.

"It's protocol."

"Come on Reid. Let's go," says David and Reid, rolling his eyes and shaking his head relents and walks over to where they all are.

Each one grasps the ring in one hand and they recite their sacred creed.

"On the darkest day,

In the brightest night.

No matter what others say,

No matter the enemies might.

Even in the worst circumstances in which we ourselves find,

Friends don't leave friends behind."

Rudy: "Friendship."

Reid: "Strength."

Juliette: "Compassion."

Cooper: "Character."

David: "Loyalty."

They break from this ceremony. Reid darting off muttering 'so stupid' under his breath, Juliette and Cooper getting out a first aid kit to help Rudy and David tend to their wounds.

A few other notes of importance about the area:

Not far from The Place, not even a stone's throw, the land slopes down and leads to a lazy river -- about 30 feet wide, slow moving, and dotted with beaver dams. Now before there is any conjecture on the matter let us settle it right now: this river is indeed just that. A deep and wide and slow moving river and is most certainly *not* the stream from David Paul's dream.

Continuing on:

On the other side of this river the bank slopes upward into more woods. And not too far into that side of the woods is an aged and dilapidated shack. And a man, ragged and homeless looking, limps towards it.

The five friends, now sitting in the hodgepodge of chairs they've collected over the years, spot him.

"Old Crazy Hoof," says Reid.

"Poor guy. His limp has gotten worse," says Juliette.

"His victims must be putting up more of a fight," says Reid.

"Stop," Juliette barks back.

"Crazy Hoof" as they have nicknamed him, 'crazy' because at some point they questioned his mental stability and 'hoof' because of his limp, continues to hobble towards the shack until, at last, he gets there, winded and worn from his efforts.

He is tall and lanky with a long face suggesting wisdom (or madness or both), piercing bright green eyes, pronounced cheek bones draped by sunken cheeks, dark unkempt hair and beard with dashes of grey, and a large and crooked, torpedo shaped nose. Pausing for a moment he leans on the door handle catching his breath, then opens the door, gives a quick and eerie glance over to our group, and goes in.

"Ever wonder what his backstory is?" David Paul asks, eyes still on Crazy Hoof's shack.

"Serial killer," offers Reid.

Juliette rolls her eyes.

Rudy sighs: I feel sorry for him. Wish there was something we could do to help.

"Rudy says he feels sorry for him and wishes there was something we could do to help. As to his backstory, my opinion is that there's likely a history of mental health issues," says Cooper.

"Guys come on. He's just down on his luck. He's never bothered us. Not once. And he was here before we were," says Juliette.

Rudy sighs: We could help him. Build a walking stick for him?

"No. No one wants to do that! Now shush."

"Wish we could help him somehow," says David Paul.

Rudy taps Cooper on the shoulder. Cooper shrugs it off.

A thought from Juliette, "I have an idea. What if we made him a cane or, like, a walking stick? You know, to help him get around."

Rudy throws up his hands in frustration.

"You nuts? Are you trying to get killed?" Reid snorts.

"He's harmless," she protests.

Reid makes to reply but then they hear Crazy Hoof yelling from within his shack. It's not clear what he's saying, it's muffled, but he's yelling for sure.

"Do you hear that? He's having an argument. But the thing is there's no one else is in there with him so it's an argument...with himself. He's having a yelling match with himself."

Juliette (mocking Reid): "How do you know it's not with one of his 'victims'."

David Paul offers his input.

"I think it's a good idea. The walking stick. Like a peace offering. To let him know we're friends. We've been coming here for forever, like J-Girl said, and we've never even waved at him."

Rudy signs. Please tell him I agree and that it's a good idea.

"Oh fine. Rudy says he agrees. Good idea. I, on the other hand, do not think it's a good idea. I err on the side of caution."

"The axe murderer theory?" Reid asks.

"Pretty much."

Rudy gets up and starts to search for stick. He finds one and holds it up.

David Paul looks it over.

"Bigger. Longer I mean. More like a staff."

Rudy mimes that he understands and continues his search.

Juliette and David Paul get up to search as well.

Reid: "You guys are as crazy as he is."

"Come on Cooper," Juliette calls.

Cooper gets up.

"I'll help look but I'm with Reid. I'm not going anywhere near him."

Reid gets up but not to help with the search. He goes to a punching bag hanging from a tree branch and starts to punch and kick it, quite the skilled martial artist. He had to beg his

parents to take up martial arts. His father insisted that he only play the mainstream sports but finally relented. Reid isn't sure if Sensei would have approved of his laying into Jake John today. Self-defense only and all that crap. Then again he was coming to the aid of a friend so who knows. After tenderizing the bag, he gets out a martial arts staff and starts twirling it with the proficiency of a callused warrior.

Now, as a quick aside, you may be wondering, with all of Reid's eye rolling, impatience for the groups rituals and what have you, why is he even friends with this crew? The answer is David. Reid didn't start off with the rest in kindergarten, he moved to town in 4th grade. He didn't fit in. Not with the smart kids. Not with the goof-offs, or the bullies, or the nerds, the list goes on. He was really good at sports but didn't mesh with the jocks either. Truth be told he didn't love to play sports, but he was damn good at them. Now his father, his father loved for him to play sports. And when a functioning alcoholic of a father wants you to play sports you end up playing sports. But David befriended Reid. And for no other reason than he didn't like to see another kid on the playground hangout all alone. And despite the protest from the others, he insisted Reid become part of the group to the point where he pledged to leave it and reveal the location of the Fortress. They knew he was serious then. And ever since, four have been five.

As the group continues their search for the perfect stick to whittle and Reid abuses the punching bag with his martial arts staff, the muffled yelling of Crazy Hoof can still be heard from within his shack.

In fact, let's go inside and have a listen...

"We've no other choice Ellie," says Crazy Hoof.

There's a pause, a silence, as "Ellie" replies (but there's no one else in the room).

"He just has to find them. That is all. Yes. Only needs to find them."

Another pause whilst Ellie, "replies".

"Well of course there is more that could be done!"

In the corner of the shack there's a wood post that's mocked up with paint and sticks to look like what most would assume, and correctly so, to be a robot. Its name, after the model type that it is, an L/E-model auxiliaryBot (auxBot), is Ellie. His trusty assistant and companion.

"I haven't been able to fix the vessel so this was the only other option and now we must see it through. You know as well as I do there's simply no turning back now."

Pause to let Ellie "reply".

"Well, of course I remembered to do that. My goodness, give me some credit Ellie!"

...

Later that day, around mid-afternoon, there are a dozen long, mostly straight, sticks laid out in a neat row in front of the Fortress as Juliette, Cooper and Rudy look them over. Overall, the selection is pathetic, and no one is happy with what they've worked so hard to put together thus far.

David Paul is by himself, far into the woods still searching. He hears a whisper. A voice. Distant. Echoey. Difficult to hear, both low in volume but also like there's a bad connection but he can hear it none the less when he focuses.

"You're getting close. Don't give up."

David Paul shakes his head and looks around for the source of the whisper but there's no one around. And where has he heard it before? Of course, his dream.

He wonders if he might be going crazy then figures *what do I have to lose* and decides to listen to the whispered voice.

He starts to move in a certain direction.

"Not that way."

He changes direction.

"Yes. This way."

Then he sees it, as if it's glowing, calling to him in an angelic hum even: The perfect stick to be made into a walking staff for Crazy Hoof. It needs work, whittling off of the bark, a good sanding, blunting the ends but it has potential. He picks

it up and looks it over. Yes, needs some work for sure, but with the right touch it will be perfect indeed. He smiles.

...

David Paul trots out of woods, the newfound stick in hand.

"Found it! It's perfect. Well almost. Needs some work. But it will be perfect."

A brooding Reid rolls his eyes. This whole exercise is stupid and a waste of time and he's glad to have not taken part in any of it.

David Paul tosses the stick to Reid and Reid reflexively catches it.

"You're the only one of us with a pocketknife."

Reid doesn't say or do anything.

"Reid."

Reid shoots him an unpleasant glance but still doesn't say or do anything.

"Reid. Please."

Reid gets up in huff, and walks off, stick in hand. He plops himself down onto a fallen tree trunk in a secluded clearing barely in view of The Place, opens his pocketknife and starts to whittle bark off with an angry sort of rhythm against the backdrop of Chipmunks scurrying about in their constant obsessive compulsive collection mode.

...

Several hours later when the sun is more orange than yellow, and the shadows are longer Rudy, Cooper, David Paul and Juliette are playing a board game and laughing away. Cooper multi-tasks and reads a book at the same time.

Reid, forehead glistening with the perspiration from a hard day's work, marches into the area with the now freshly carved stick, lifts it high over his head and slams it into the dirt.

"For Crazy Hoof. It was nice knowing you all," he spats and walks off.

"Thank you," David Paul calls to him.

David Paul attempts to pull it from the ground. He can't. He uses two hands, he squats low to 'put his legs into it', wriggles it back and forth, but it won't budge no matter what he tries and he's out of breath and dripping in sweat from the measly forty-five second effort.

Reid sees this and walks back over.

"Stop. You're gonna break it. Here," and he grasps the stick in one hand, pulls it from the ground in one quick effort and hands it to David Paul.

"Can't think about it," Reid says to David Paul tapping the side of his head, "you just gotta do it."

David Paul takes it to the table where the others are sitting.

Rudy signs to Reid. Very nice.

"Rudy says nice work," Cooper translates.

Reid gives Rudy a 'thank you' nod then walks away.

"I think we should carve something into it. A word like 'friendship'. And maybe a cool design or something," Juliette suggests.

Rudy signs with excitement.

Cooper: "Yes, yes. I was thinking the same. We could make up a glyph-based language and carve a message of peace."

"You guys always have to take things to the next level don't you?" she says.

"Well I--"

David Paul chimes in.

"How about everyone just takes a turn and carves in whatever they want, and we call it a day."

...

As the velvety dusk sky turns to a starry night and crickets sing outside, Juliette then Cooper then Rudy take turns carving their designs and/or messages into the stick with Reid's pocket knife (reluctantly loaned out by its owner), held like a pencil. Juliette chooses to carve in the word "FRIEND" with the peace symbol next to it then surrounds both with some wavy lines made of small circles. Rudy carves in "HELLO THERE" alongside a circular cartoon face with two dots for eyes, no nose or ears, but a great big smile. Cooper writes in the word "WE COME IN PEACE" but he writes it in a glyph-like language he made up on

the spot with each letter comprising some combination of triangles, lines and dots; depending on how many lines and dots and where they are in or around the triangle this corresponds to a letter of the alphabet.

Reid wants no part of any of this of course and sits in a corner with eyes closed and headphones on and volume cranked to maximum.

David Paul, last to go, at last puts the finishing touches on what he has carved in while doing his best to see in the flickering light of the oil lamps inside the Fortress. He remembers starting but not the time spent working on it and before he knows it he's done. Cooper glances over his shoulder. Like Cooper, he's carved in a sort of glyph-based language. Unlike Cooper he has no idea what it means.

"Ah. Very nice David Paul. What does it mean?" asks Cooper.

"I don't know actually. Just sort of made it up I guess. Not sure it really means anything."

"Fascinating. It must mean something though. It's clearly a language, it's not random. Look see here, some of the characters repeat. These are vowels perhaps? Interesting indeed, however you came up with it. Swell job, David Paul."

Rudy nods in agreement.

Unknown to David Paul, he has subconsciously carved into the walking stick the same message carved into the staff that has

been in his dreams all these years. The one his father tosses him each time.

In any case, the walking staff is complete, and they look it over with pride (except for Reid of course).

"The Staff of Peace. For Crazy Hoof," proclaims Juliette, "We did it. Alright. Tomorrow I'll go over and give it to him."

"What do you want your tombstone to say?" injects Reid.

"Funny," Juliette says, not amused.

Rudy stands up with enthusiasm and signs.

"Rudy says he will go with you."

"I got that, thanks," says Juliette.

"I'll go too," says David Paul.

"I think someone should stay with Reid," says Cooper.

"Okay then it's settled. Tomorrow morning we go," says Juliette.

CHAPTER FOUR

The next morning Reid sits in the Fortress, alone. He's been here all night. The staff, a new and nice shine to it, lay atop newspapers covering the table. Used rags are strewn about and a can of half empty wood oil, rivulets of its contents drying down the sides, is nearby.

The door opens and the other four friends enter and the smell of the wood oil hits them hard.

"Hello! Good morning! Wow that'll wake you up. Who needs coffee. Hey, we were wondering where you were," says Juliette.

"Your stupid staff needed wood oil or it's gonna rot."

Rudy signs. Thank you.

"Rudy says--"

"I know. You're welcome," Reid says as he simultaneously signs 'you're welcome' to Rudy.

"Yea thanks man," says David Paul.

"I started last night so it should be dry."

He gets up and walks out of the Fortress. "Nice knowing you all."

"Thanks?" Juliette replies.

...

Reid and Cooper sit in tattered webbed folding chairs from the safety (and sanity Reid would add) of The Place and watch as Juliette, Rudy, and David Paul make their way to a fallen tree

that bridges one side of the river with the other. Conical shaped beaver lodges spot this area of the river. This "tree-bridge" is slick but it's the only way over unless they were to walk for miles downriver.

They stare at the obstacle that awaits.

"We can use the staff for balance," says Juliette. "Who goes first?"

Just as she gets the words out, Rudy goes. No staff. No hesitation. Sneakers squeaking along the way, Juliette and David Paul not moving or breathing as if it helps Rudy not fall, but he moves fast, the speed aiding his balance, he doesn't waver once, and is soon over to the other side and waves enthusiastically for them to join him.

"One down," notes Cooper from his perch.

"Wow. That was pretty damn impressive. You want next?" says Juliette.

"You go. Here take the staff. You can use it for balance," replies David Paul.

"What will you use for balance?"

"Uh, luck?"

Juliette looks at the bridge with eight parts determination and two parts hesitation.

"Okay. Here goes."

She takes a moment. Closes her eyes. Slows her breathing. Opens her eyes and goes. She is more cautious and slower than Rudy, uses the staff for balance, and there is a moment where she starts to wobble (when she does Reid rises from his chair ready to take action...though he would never admit it) but she recovers her balance and makes it over, Rudy extending a hand to help her with the final few steps.

Rudy and Juliette celebrate her triumphant crossing of the tree-bridge and exchange high fives then wave for David Paul to come over.

"Come on! It's not that bad!. Here I can toss the staff over to you!" calls Juliette.

"No don't! I don't want to take the chance of it falling in," says David Paul while a "duh" moment hits him in the forehead like a good dope slap and he realizes they should have tied some rope to it so they could toss it back to one another without risking it being whisked away by the river.

Well, too late now.

He looks at the glossy tree-bridge, pausing for a few moments while the part of the brain that says "oh heck no" negotiates with the part that says "go for it".

He hears voice again. Barely a whisper, distant and choppy. It's not ghostlike though, it's more mechanical as if over a walkie-talkie with a bad connection and volume turned down real low.

"Move towards the fear. Embrace it," it whispers.

Convinced it's just his imagination he shakes his head to make it stop then mutters to himself, "Okay. Here goes."

He starts his way over. Cautious at first as he gets a feel for things but once halfway, his confidence fortifies and he begins to walk faster about as fast as you can walk without it turning into a run or jog, and, of course, this is the moment he loses his balance, flaps his arms and twists his body like a gymnast determined not to fall from the balance beam and recovers. Close call. He shakes off the misstep and refocuses. He takes a step then another and another. Slow. Then faster and faster still until he is at that speed-walk pace again. He can see Juliette and Rudy smiling and encouraging him over. Almost there. Once again, he loses his balance but this time the gymnast doesn't recover they fall to the mat or in this case into the river! Reid gets up and starts running towards the river.

"Oh my. Oh my. Oh my, oh my, oh my," Cooper cries out in a panic.

"David Paul!" Juliette and Rudy shout unison.

David Paul hits the soft leaf and pine needle carpeted river bottom and goes bouncing off. It's dark and cold and he somersaults uncontrollably, spinning round and round. Upside down one moment right side up the next. He's disorientated, unsure which way is up. And, though he's on the verge of panic,

his first thought is *there's something familiar about this*. Being submerged like this that is. But that thought is fleeting as the panic kicks in. Not being able to breathe and being underwater and unsure which way to the surface will do that to a person. Not to mention he's never been the strongest swimmer. He's flailing, sure he's going to drown.

Then the voice again: "Relax. All will be okay. Embrace the moment no matter the obstacle."

He stops flailing, trusting this voice. Still completely underwater, he lets the pull of the river take him for a moment comforted momentarily by literally going with the flow. And after this brief reprieve, still under water, he begins to swim. Sure he's never been the strongest swimmer *above* the water but underwater it's actually easier (aside from the whole not being able to breathe thing).

Above water the group looks desperately for a sign of their friend who has yet to surface. Everything is eerily calm and quiet.

"David Paul!" Reid shouts.

Rudy runs back and forth searching for a sign of him. Juliette looks toward the fallen tree.

"Could he be stuck under there? I don't see him!"

"David Paul!" shouts Reid again.

"David Paul!" Cooper joins in.

Reid jumps into the water and disappears for as long as he can hold his breath but reemerges with nothing.

"I don't see him. It's too dark!" he says, a genuine panic in his voice (unusual for Reid, indicative of the dire situation). Rudy dives in but comes up with nothing as well, and exits the water, defeated.

Then all is quiet. Nothing but the peaceful din of nature.

Did they just lose their friend? For real? That reality sinks in, a knee to the gut.

Still quiet.

Still nothing.

Then David Paul pops up out of the water. Upriver. He swam *upriver* away from the tree bridge to emerge on the other side (the Crazy Hoof side). He crawls out of the water and rolls onto his back chest heaving as he catches his breath.

Sighs of relief abound from his four friends.

Juliette and Rudy go running to him as Reid and Cooper look on from the other side.

"Are you okay? How'd you do that?!"

"W-water's cold."

Rudy emphatically mimes that they should leave and forget the whole thing, but David Paul isn't having it.

"No. We said we would do this now come on. And besides," he chuckles, "I didn't just do that for nothing."

Neither Juliette nor Rudy moves.

"Guys. We can do this," David Pauls says and takes the walking staff from Juliette and starts up the hill towards Crazy Hoof's shack. Juliette and Rudy, both still a bit in shock, follow him in a daze.

As they get closer, they approach the shack with extreme caution, David Paul dripping with water, teeth chattering away. There's a *maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all* look on all of their faces.

"Plan?" Juliette whispers.

"Let's put it down in front of the door. Then we'll knock and run," replies David Paul, also whispering.

"Won't that make him mad?"

"Well what other way is there?"

They approach the door. David Paul still with the staff in hand.

"I'll put it down. You knock on the door. Okay?"

"Got it. Knock on the door. Run."

When they arrive at the door David Paul turns to address Rudy.

"I'll put the staff down and she's going to knock. Then we run. Okay?" he whispers, adding exaggerated miming to ensure Rudy understands.

Rudy nods okay, simple enough, gives a thumbs up but then...

... three quick knocks BANG, BANG, BANG, and Juliette bolts past David Paul. Rudy, seeing her run, darts off as well leaving David Paul standing there, a dripping wet statue with a staff. The rusted metal door comes flying open, banging against the side of the shack and continuing to rattle with aftershocks. And there before him is the tall and wiry Crazy Hoof looking down on David Paul with wide, angry eyes.

David Paul looks up at the brooding and intimidating figure like he was looking at a grizzly bear on hind feet ready to charge.

"W-We-we made this for you."

Crazy Hoof says nothing, his expression unchanging and his eyes laser-focused on David Paul save for a millisecond glance to the staff.

"To help with your walking. Cause we saw you limping. And we thought it could help. With your walking. I mean with your limping."

Crazy Hoof still says nothing. Eying David Paul like a hungry big cat eyeing prey.

David Paul slowly places the stick near the doorway never taking his eyes off Crazy Hoof.

"I'll just leave it."

He backs away, alert and cautious not wanting to make any sudden moves, wide, alert eyes still locked on Crazy Hoof, who in turn

hasn't taken his unblinking eyes off David Paul, nor said a word or moved.

David Paul backs up for several more steps then turns and runs.

Once David Paul is away, the only thing the statuesque Crazy Hoof moves are his eyes as he looks down at the staff.

Intrigued.

CHAPTER FIVE

The seasons have changed. Winter. A snowy day. Nothing to brag about, a dusting, but Fall is officially on its annual break. In the schoolyard a large crowd of children have gathered, shouting and cheering. In the center of it all is Reid fighting everyone's favorite bullies. Jake John and Company. But this time the jackals are putting up a fight and using the numbers to their advantage.

Front row amongst the crowd is David Paul. Sullen, with a bloody nose and lip split open good, and a merry-go-round of a thought repeating in his head: *why can't I take on these jerks like Reid can?* The bullies had grabbed a young fifth grader after school and started to lay it on pretty good when David Paul, not thinking it through but unable to resist trying to help, attempted to come to the rescue once again. Then the bullies turned on him, tired of his little vigilante act, and decided to send a message and pounded away on him like a baker on fresh dough. Then Reid showed up to rescue him. Yet again.

"What the hell is this?" Juliette asks just arriving on scene. David Paul and Cooper start to answer when Juliette, sees David Paul, puts two and two together for herself, and walks right up to one of the bullies and punches him square in the mouth. She shakes her fist.

"Ow damn it. That hurt!" she shouts in anger. But it did the trick because that bully runs off, the crowd laughing and pointing.

Reid punches and kicks and dodges and parries. He's taking shots but he's giving out more than he's taking; holding his own. Not bad for three-on-one (well, now two-on-one after Juliette swatted one).

At last Mr. Duncan, the bearded and beer-bellied eighth grade English teacher, shows up and the crowd scatters like a school of fish dodging a diving gull.

He pulls Reid off one of Jake John.

"What is going on here? Get off of him. Right to the office. All of you. Now!"

"There was three of them and one of me, how am I in trouble?"

Reid protests.

"All of you. To the office."

As Reid is lead away, he lays down another warning to the bullies, "I told you. Stay away from my friends."

"Move. Now!" shouts Mr. Duncan, patience waning, upset that these damn kids interrupted the one time in his day when he gets to work on those unfinished novels that haunt him from his hard drive.

...

Later that day, after school and the "extracurricular festivities" that followed, our friends make their way to The Place per their normal everyday routine.

It's still snowing. Heavier now. The river has a thin sheet of ice on it and there's a generous layer of snow covering it and the ground.

"How do you plan on getting into college if you keep getting suspended?" Juliette asks Reid.

"Who said I'm going to college?"

"What else are you going to do?"

"Don't know, don't care."

"Well you should care."

"Maybe I'll join the Army then. Special forces."

"You're an idiot sometimes Reid."

"What because it's not what *you* think someone should do it's wrong?"

"No. It's just. You always have to win."

"What can I tell you. I don't like to lose."

"Well you're losing now. Losing a friend!" and she rushes ahead.

"Can't win with her," Reid says to David Paul.

David Paul brushes it off, wanting to address this afternoons events, "You know I had that. If it wasn't for the others, I mean. One-on-one I had that."

"Yea looked like it," Reid says.

"I don't mean to sound unappreciative it's just I have to learn to stand up for myself. When are you going to get that?"

Reid grabs David Paul by the shoulder of his jacket, stopping him.

"A. You're welcome. And two, I told you, kid. I'll always have your back."

"Yea, well, one of these days they're going to grab me when you're not around."

"Not after today."

"Look I get it. You'll always have my back when you're *there*. But one of these days you might not be *there*. And for that day, I need to know how to kung-fu my way out of it," says David Paul, miming some karate moves.

"I told you, baby baby baby, you're not a fighter. Bird can't be a lion and lions can't fly. Just the way it is. Now stop worrying. Trust me, they know not to hurt you."

As they arrive at The Place, tossing their backpacks aside, they collect branches and chuck them into a circle of rocks for Reid to make a fire. That's when Juliette spots something nearby. Something that was never there before.

"Guys. What's that?"

Off to the side, under a small lean of tree branches (the lean is new as well) are several boxes wrapped, with artistic purpose and reverence, in cloth material (in an almost origami style).

They all scamper over to see.

Juliette takes the largest box and carries it into the Fortress. The rest follow suit carrying the remaining items. Everything is placed on the rectangular table inside.

Juliette removes a note taped to one of the boxes. It is written in exquisite cursive handwriting. She reads: "'My new friends. Thank you for the walking staff. It is helping and I sincerely appreciate your kind gesture. Please accept these gifts as a small *thank you.*' It's from him!"

"Gifts? What could they be?" David Paul wonders.

"Only one way to find out. Come on everyone grab one and open it," she says not bothering to wonder and starts to unwrap the largest box.

"Might want to make sure it's not ticking first," pokes Reid. She shoots him a penetrating glance.

"What? You want my professional opinion? Your little unboxing exercise there is going to reveal that in each one of those packages are the heads of his many victims."

"I don't. Want. Your professional. Opinion!" and she continues to open the package.

As is fairly common in these situations, in case you hadn't noticed by now, Reid hangs back, uninterested (or at least pretending to be) whilst the others open the packages with great curiosity and enthusiasm.

Juliette pulls out the first item from one of the boxes. It's a toy. A winged sci-fi looking aircraft. A MAL-class fighter to be specific. Aerodynamic triangular wings, atop which sits its hull, while an all-glass cockpit sits below where pilot and passenger seats get lowered into from telescopic rods.

David Paul, Cooper, and Rudy all react with excitement.

Giddiness even.

"Neat."

"Dude."

"Cool."

"Sweet."

Excited, they burrow into the other packages to see what else there is (except for Reid of course).

They pull out alien toy action figures, toy creatures and toy beasts.

Toy land craft and aircraft. Some, it would appear, are for everyday travel purposes, others clearly, like the MAL-class fighter, are military in design and purpose.

All of it is otherworldly. Not one item is what one would consider to be "of Earth".

And not all the action figures look human. There are a variety of species. Different sizes, colors, number of limbs, number of eyes, number of ears and on and on.

Other boxes contain books and manuals, trading cards and posters all aligned thematically with the toys.

Soon enough they've opened and emptied all of the boxes and their table is completely covered.

Every single item is of a superb quality and made with a degree of care and craftsmanship from days long gone.

"Oh, excellent. Simply excellent," Cooper says.

Juliette looks at one of the manuals.

"Lucasia."

Rudy signs. Looks like science fiction.

"Yes, yes. Appears to be a made-up world that all of this is based on," says Cooper.

David Paul and Rudy sift through more items.

They retrieve a map, folded in an exotic and curious way that would impress even the Viking map makers of old, and carefully open it. Once completely unfolded (which was quite a process) it covers half the table forcing them to offload some of the items onto the floor. The map depicts this made-up world "Lucasia" with its four moons in artistic detail. Same for the many posters that picture the vehicles, aircraft and inhabitants of Lucasia. Each individual drawing has the name of what it is atop it and then a blurb next to it stating its purpose, history and other information. And it's all written, in English, in neat handwritten script.

Cooper goes through the books holding each up as reads off the title.

"Beings, Places and Creatures of Lucasia: An Introduction. Aircraft and Vehicles of Lucasia. A Brief History of Lucasian Cultures. Oh well this is just fascinating, isn't it? Golly." Reid rolls his eyes. *You've gotta be kidding me.*

Something dawns on David Paul, "It all makes sense now. His backstory. He was a toymaker, or something like that, before he, you know, hit a rough patch."

Juliette pulls out another book from the pile.

"The Crystal Mother, the Child Crystals and the Magnificent Field."

She pulls out another.

"The Crystal Warriors: A History of The Greatest Protectors the World Has Ever Known."

They continue to rummage through everything. David Paul and Cooper hang the map of Lucasia and the aforementioned posters on the walls of the Fortress.

Juliette and Rudy organize the toys in neat rows.

"Lucasia has four moons. Two are dead like Earths. One red. One grey. Another is a water moon but all life is microscopic. The fourth is a thriving and biodiverse world unto itself with all sorts of life. It is known as the Living Moon," announces Cooper.

Reid, finally giving in, swiping up and reading a book on Lucasian military history. Images from the book he reads depict weapons, tanks, aircraft, and other apparatuses of war. Right up his alley.

...

Across the way, Crazy Hoof is walking to his shack (and with the aid of his walking staff, he's doing much better). He glances over at The Place and sees that his packages are no longer under the tree-lean that he built, and he can hear the excitement, laughter and enthusiasm from within the Fortress. The precarious walks back and forth over the tree bridge to deliver them was worth it.

He smiles. And nods. Yes. Yes. Very good. Very good.

...

While all of this is happening on the ground, let us pause a moment for an important item of note:

Imagine, dear reader, that you were able to view the scene from way high up. As high as a bird can fly let us say.

Here is what you would see:

Crazy Hoof's shack, the river (iced and snowed over), The Place and the Fortress, trees all around, snow on the ground. That's all normal and expected now, isn't it?

But here's the interesting part and what is not so normal nor expected:

There's snow everywhere **except** for a perfect circle of **no snow** around Crazy Hoof's shack, then **no snow or ice** in a strip that runs from his shack, across the river and up to The Place. And just as with Crazy Hoof's shack there is a perfect circle of **no snow** around The Place as well. Given the size of these circles and the 'no snow' strip it is not something someone at ground level could easily discern or identify. Interesting indeed. Please take note.

CHAPTER SIX

A few days later, in the school library, David Paul, Cooper and Rudy are sitting at a table looking over some of the books and toys that Crazy Hoof gave them. The library is their sanctuary. Reid cannot always be there to protect them and bullies by nature tend not to frequent such venues. And yet, unbeknownst to them, someone is watching from several bookcases back peeking through the latticework formed by the uneven profile of the books upon their shelves.

“There are approximately twelve distinct yet each highly intelligent species on Lucasia. More or less depending on how one defines ‘intelligent’. For intelligence does not equal kindness, empathy, or good judgement.’,” David Paul reads. He continues, “And...‘many of these species have a number of subspecies’,” he notes.

Rudy signs, signaling to something in a book he is reading. Cooper snatches it out of his hands.

“Let me see that. Mmm. Okay, interesting. A militaristic cult called the Ninth Legion has disrupted a planetary peace that had existed on Lucasia since recorded time. Any being or beings that do not swear allegiance to their cause is considered an enemy of the state and is hunted down and dealt with accordingly.”

“‘Dealt with accordingly’. That can’t be a good,” says David Paul.

"Agree."

"What is their 'cause' anyways?"

"Let's see, let's see," says Cooper but is interrupted by an enthusiastic Rudy who shoves another book, different subject, in front of Cooper and taps the page, urging him to read a section aloud.

"Alright, alright. Okay, listen to this: the Crystal Warrior gains her power from an energy field created by--"

The bell rings and Cooper, obsessed with timeliness, hands the book back to Rudy who rolls his eyes and the three friends gather their things and leave for class.

As they become one with the larger organism that is a bustling middle school hallway David Paul shouts to them, "I'll see you guys later. I have after school lessons so I'll be a little late."

"Very well David Paul. Enjoy your lessons," says Cooper in his sophisticated way of speaking.

Rudy fist bumps David Paul.

"Later guys."

And, by the way, whoever was watching them back in the library has followed them into the hallway.

...

Later that day David Paul is finishing up his after school piano lessons.

"Very good lesson today David Paul. Your aunt will be most pleased," says Mrs. Wallace the music director.

"Silence between the notes, right?"

"Indeed," she says with a smile.

David Paul exits the music room and walks down the hallway to his locker. He hurries to it and opens the door as he's in a rush to get to The Place and spend time with his friends. He crams in the books and other items he will not need to take with him, gathers others that he will and goes to close the locker door when he sees it. A folded piece of paper left in his locker, slid into the ventilation louvers most likely. It just says "read me now" in marker. Despite the poor handwriting for a moment there is hope. Maybe it's from Crazy Hoof? Who knows? But hope fades in a snap as soon as he opens it and sees the neanderthal-like scrawl and instantly there's a twisted knot in his throat.

The note reads:

We going get you. Your friend not always going be there. To save you. Tell him about this. And you make it worst. You should be very afraid. VERY VERY VERY AFRAID.

David Paul lets out a sigh and his shoulders slump.

"Terrific."

He closes his locker and the metal clang echoes about the ominous and eerie, and very empty, after-school hallway.

Suddenly on high alert, he looks around. He has a feeling as though someone is watching him. He's sure of it. And that note only magnifies the feeling.

He walks fast.

Then trots.

Moves to a jog.

Then to a run.

He busts through the outside doors and runs to the bike rack, turns the combination disks to their proper numbers like his life depends on it, unlocks it, recovers his bike and rides off. Whoever has been watching David Paul watches him ride away and out of the school yard.

David Paul bikes as fast as he can through the various neighborhoods on his way to The Place.

When he arrives at the entrance to the woods, he gets off his bike and looks around. It still feels to him like someone is watching, but he looks everywhere and can't see anyone.

He runs for the secret gate, gets through, stores his bike and storms up the trail to The Place.

Inside the Fortress, the door flies open with a bang as David Paul comes storming in. The rest of the gang is in there hanging out.

"Whoa dude. What's with you?" wonders Juliette

"You okay there, junior?" asks Reid.

"What? Oh yea. I just, um, I'm out of breath."

"You sure?" asks Juliette.

"Yea. Why? Why wouldn't I be sure. Why?"

"Oookay. Then come in. It's cold out," she says.

David Paul joins them at the table.

...

As has become his habit as of late, Crazy Hoof, from his shack, looks out its lone window over at the Fortress. He saw the rest of the gang go inside earlier and David Paul just now, rushing in as if he was being chased by a hungry bear. He rubs his beard between his fingers wondering what that could have been about.

...

As the sunlight loses to the dark of an early winter evening our friends pour out of the Fortress, chatting about this and that (Who would win in a fight: Superman or Iron Man? How much more effective is Aquaman in the water than out? Etc. etc.)

They make their way down the path, retrieve their bikes, and start the journey home and as they come to the part of the ride where everyone goes their own way, Reid grasps David Paul by the arm.

"You sure you're okay, shorty?"

"Yea, I'm fine. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Want me to come with?"

"Dude come on I'm not a baby. I'll be fine. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Alright. I'll talk to you, 'migo."

Reid watches David Paul as he pedals away and fades into the darkness of the street. Somethings not right. He can't quite put a finger on it, but he has a bad feeling and wonders if he should follow David Paul home. But it's after dark, streetlights on and he's already in trouble. And if his old man has already started drinking (and that's almost a guarantee) that's double trouble so he shakes it off and heads home.

...

The street that leads David Paul home is an isolated one. It's in such disrepair that it's practically a hazard. There are potholes everywhere and where there aren't potholes there are small hills of hardened asphalt where the municipal workers filled potholes but didn't bother to smooth them out. It's dark. No streetlights. Brooding. Isolated. On one side there are the backs of houses, all with yards that are fenced in, further sequestering this road from the other bustling neighborhood streets in the area. On the other side a chain link fence runs the entire length (and then some) and on the other side of the fence are an expanse of shadowy woodlands.

He's taken this road countless times but tonight just as he turns onto it the hairs on the back of his neck rise. Maybe he

should have taken Reid up on the offer to come with him. And the note! What about the note from the bullies?

"No. Gotta be brave. Come on," he says to himself out loud, shaking off any hesitation and continues on.

"I can't always rely on Reid and besides what's the worst that could happen?" he again says aloud.

And soon after he says this the worst is about to happen.

At the halfway point he is questioning his decision and cursing his own impulsiveness and starts to pedal faster. His imagination isn't helping either as every shadow looks to be a sixth-grader-eating monster at the peak of feasting hour, every tree branch ready to snatch him up and tear him into a thousand pieces to be shared amongst all of the other trees.

But what is not part of his imagination but is unknown to him is this: someone *is* watching him making his way down the dark street.

David Paul pedals. Faster. Faster. Legs burning. Lungs afire. He can see the end in sight. A smile breaks on his face as he's about to make it to the end. *I made it!*

Then they jump out at him.

The bullies.

Jake John and company.

Jake John grabs David Paul right off his bike and the bike continues on its own for some time before wobbling over and

falling down (the bike almost seems to have a talent for that doesn't it?).

"Where you going, huh? Where's your friend now? Huh? Huh?! He's not around is he? You got no one to save your sorry ass now do ya?" snarls Jake John.

"Get away from me. Let me go."

Jake John punches David Paul hard in the gut and he crumples. The others join in and they really lay it on. They take it to the next level, damn them. And they finally break him good. Physically yes but worse his psyche, his spirit, his soul, takes a beating. They humiliate him.

"Please. Please," he whimpers, as he struggles to hold a hand up in an instinctive but pathetic attempt to defend himself.

He's nearly unconscious but they don't ease up. They lay it on some more.

Then

...someone jumps out of the darkness and takes on the bullies. From David Paul's point of view, lying on the ground, everything is a hazy blur. He can only make out fuzzy shadows and he can scarcely hear as the ringing in his ears from getting punched suppresses most sound.

But he knows who it is.

It's Reid. And he has his martial arts staff with him.

David Paul in barely a whisper (because that's all he can manage) says Reid's name. Or at least he thinks he does. He's not even sure if the sound actually comes out.

"R-Reeid."

The darkness of unconsciousness encroaches.

"Thank you Reid."

Then all goes dark.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The dream sequence again.

David Paul standing on a large flat rock in the middle of a river. Surroundings blurred.

His father, younger looking and as healthy as can be, balancing perfectly on five, smaller, wet and slippery rocks, improbably stacked atop one another. His father waves. And smiles. But does not say anything.

He tosses him the long stick. A staff. Same mysterious glyph writing as always.

A voice.

"The greatest musical pieces come from the silence between the notes, the greatest paintings from the empty spaces on the canvas. Do not fear the emptiness. Embrace it. Go towards it. The emptiness is the key."

It ends as it always does, and David Paul awakens though more groggy than usual and with a headache that could stop an elephant. It's darker than usual in his room. Just a shaft of moonlight from a single window.

His eyes strain to adjust to the darkness and anything he can see is hazy and out of focus. Overall, there's one big dizzying sense of disorientation.

His throat is scratchy and dry. He clears it. He needs water. Feels like he could easily and gladly down a gallon of it right now.

"Auntie? Auntie Pal?"

He's still lying flat as the ache in his head jackhammers against his skull. Pound-pound-pound-pound-pound. He tries for his aunt again.

"Auntie Pal!"

"Relax my friend. You've had a rough go of it."

David Paul, startled by this unfamiliar voice, sits up and retreats to a corner of the bed. Panicked. Afraid.

It's Crazy Hoof. And they're inside his shack. He's not in his bed he is on an old cot.

"Don't worry it'll be alright. But you must rest."

"Where's Reid? How did I get here?"

"I'm not sure who Reid is."

"He's my friend. What did you do to him?"

"I didn't do anything to him. Did I Ellie?"

There's silence as Ellie "replies".

"See? Ellie never lies."

David Paul only sees a decorated wooden post in the corner, no other person is in here, and he tries to ignore the fact that this man is talking to it.

"He helped me though. Reid."

Crazy Hoof chuckles.

"He helped you? With the ones who meant you harm you mean?"

"Yes."

"Reid did not help you," says Crazy Hoof chuckling some more.

"You?"

Crazy Hoof takes the walking staff and mimes a few martial art moves.

"You can learn a lot from some books and a few classes at the Y."

David Paul takes a moment to processes his situation.

"Did you- Did you kill them?"

"We're still speaking of the ones who meant you harm? No, no, no. No one is dead I assure you. I hardly touched them. A light tap here and light tap there, and they were sent on their way. Their kind tend to scatter quite easily you'll find. I just scared them."

David Paul looks around orienting himself with this environment, his eyes now in focus and adjusted to the darkness. Crazy Hoof simply sits there with a bemused smile upon his face. All is quiet save for the rhythmic symphony of background music provided by the crickets, toads, and the other creatures of the night.

"Thank you."

"You're quite welcome. I'm just glad you're okay."

His headache has gone from one that could stop an elephant to one that would merely cause it to have a bad day. His ribs hurt and his body aches everywhere as fresh bruises are still blooming but overall, he's still in one piece.

"What time is it? I-I need to get home. My aunt will be worried."

David Paul attempts to get up but gets hit with a combination of dizziness and pain that throws him off balance and Crazy Hoof rushes to assist.

"Easy now. Here sit back down. We'll get you home soon enough, won't we Ellie?"

Crazy Hoof helps him back into the cot.

"Better?"

David Paul nods yes.

Crazy Hoof goes to a small, round, wood burning stove where something is cooking in an cast iron pot. He ladles it into a bowl and hands it to David Paul.

"Here try this. I think it will make you feel better and then we can get you on your way."

David Paul looks at it unsure. He smells it and his face scrunches up but his hunger wins out and he takes a sip and nods 'not bad' and digs in.

Crazy Hoof sits back in his chair which is really just two milk crates stacked one atop the other with a burlap sack folded up for a sitting cushion. He has a similar sack folded up and tacked to the wall for a backing cushion.

They sit in silence for several moments. David Paul gulping down the stew; Crazy Hoof just looking out the window, where the light-blue moonlight angles into the small shack in bladed shafts.

David Paul breaks the silence.

"Can I ask you something?"

"You may ask me anything at all."

"What's your name?"

"My name? I was expecting a tougher first question. My name. How rude of me. My name is Serretus. *Doctor Serretus Gepps.*"

"You're a doctor?"

"I am a scientist. Like your father was."

"Like who?"

"Like your father."

"How did you know my father?"

"I knew both your parents, your father especially. We were colleagues for quite some time before you were born. You know your father and I were the lead engineer and designer on the original fleet of MAL-class fighters."

MAL-class fighters David Paul wonders? Oh, that's right, the toys from the collection Crazy Hoof gave him and his friends.

"But that was all before the accident. Colleagues indeed. Colleagues and friends, I should say. Good friends. Best friends."

"Why haven't you ever come around before? To see him."

"Do I look like the type of person that should be 'coming around'? I stopped over a few times when you were just a baby but...well."

"He just lays there in that bed all the time, every day. I wish he would wake up."

"I wish he would too. I wish he would too."

They sit in silence once again for several moments.

And once again it is David Paul that breaks it.

"Can you tell me about him?"

"Let's see. He was a great scientist and a marvelous colleague and..."

Serretus (Crazy Hoof) has to compose himself a bit and sits up in his chair.

"But more importantly: He was kind and caring, nearly to a fault. He knew nothing of ego, self-serving agendas or profit. Only what was the right thing to do. He was, is, a person of the highest character. And I'm so very proud to call him my friend."

David Paul starts to well up a bit, lip quivering, "Thank you."

"I didn't mean to upset you," Serretus says.

"I just...I just always thought that's what he was like even though I've never spoken to him. I've never met anyone who knew him besides my aunt and she never really tells me anything."

"Your aunt was very close to your parents and had a rough time dealing with the accident. As did I. But we all have our own way of grieving such a tragedy. I fell out of sorts as you might have guessed," he says gesturing around the shack.

"Is that when you started to make the toys?"

"The toys? Oh, yes. It is indeed. The toys. Yes. Which reminds me how are you and your friends enjoying the items that I sent your way?"

"They're great. Thank you by the way. We never said thank you."

"Thank you. Toys don't mean much if they're not played with, do they?"

"You invented all of it? The toys? The books? The games?"

"I did indeed. Ellie helped."

"The details are amazing. All of it is. I can't believe no one ever tried to buy it from you."

"Perhaps they did, and I refused. Money means little to me in case you can't tell."

He again gestures at his modest living quarters.

"Yes, when you've lost as much as I have money means very little indeed. You and your friends have the only copies."

"Wow. Are you sure you don't want them back?"

"No, no. Please keep them. It's important that you do."

Serretus pauses, hesitates for a moment then leans forward.

"I need you to familiarize yourself with all there is to know about Lucasia. I may need your help someday you know."

"How's that?"

"On Lucasia."

"Lucasia? You think it's a real place?"

"I know it's a real place."

David Paul plays along.

"So what, it's like your home planet or something?"

"More like my adopted one. I'm not from there originally. Muren-Five was my home planet."

"I see. What about Ellie? Where is Ellie from?" asks David Paul. The guy did save him after all.

"Oh Ellie? Ellie is from Lucasia originally. I built her myself. To keep me company."

David Paul stirs, a bit uncomfortable. *Maybe the "crazy" part of 'Crazy Hoof' wasn't so far off after all* he thinks to himself.

Then to his relief Serretus says: "Well enough 'crazy' talk for one night, mmm? You should be on your way. You're right, we don't want your Auntie Pal to worry."

"Guess I should. Thank you again...Serretus."

Serretus holds out his hand and they shake.

"You'll be okay going home then?"

"I should be fine. Thank you again. I really appreciate it."

"Your quite welcome. I'm glad you're okay. Your bike is just outside. And, please stop by any time at all. I would look forward to seeing you again."

/INTERLUDE

On Lucasia, all is still not well. In fact, worse.

Since the purge of the Crystal Warriors and the taking of the Child Crystals, the sacred balance is no more paving the way for the Ninth Legion to carry out unspeakable planet-wide atrocities.

A Coalition has formed to oppose this barbarity and as a result a WORLD WAR has been raging for years.

Battles are won by one side, then the other. It is a stalemate with no end in sight.

But the Ninth Legion is about to take a step, years in the making, that will tip the scales and win the war once and for all as they obliterate the Coalition, welcome conformists, exterminate dissenters, and pave the way for planetary domination for the next thousand millennia and beyond...

/CHAPTER EIGHT

The Ulloonian Desert with its signature dark-blue sparkling sands and reputation for shark-serpents and giant sand hippos both looming just beneath the sands surface each with a propensity to kill and eat most anything, is one of the more remote places on all of Lucasia.

Nestled amongst the Spice Dunes of the southern tip of the Ulloonian, a vast and highly secretive Ninth Legion missile launch site stands alone. Its official name is "the Ever Brilliant and Superb Leader Who Descended from the Divine Eternal Realm Doctor Froot Missile Control Center" and it is the size of a small city, taking up thousands of acres.

The sole purpose for the base's existence is *The Revolution*. A missile of such height and girth that it seems to perspire the very power it will soon inflict.

It stands upon a colossal mobile launchpad where Ninth Legion science staff urgently scurry about, while others carry out their tasks amongst the yellowed skeleton-like scaffolding that hug the missile.

There is an urgency in the air. A buzz. But mostly? An excitement.

Atop the launchpad, only footsteps away from *The Revolution*, the custodial flight crew for the doomsday missile are being blessed

by a Ninth Legion High Priest, the Vicar General. There are three of them each dressed in silver spaceflight suits and wearing over-sized spherical all-glass helmets.

The Vicar General places an open palm on the left shoulder of the crew lead, "For the Ninth Legion," then on the right shoulder, "For the Grand Plan," finally on the crew leads glass helmet, "For the Chosen One, Za."

He does the same to the other two crew members then addresses all three.

"Your sacrifice is acknowledged and will be celebrated for time eternal. Estates of endless prosperity await you and your kin in the Eternal Realm. Glory be to Za."

It should be noted that the term "custodial flight crew" is used loosely here. One would presume, rightfully so, that "flight" would suggest that the crew are pilots. One would further presume that pilots have control over their craft and in most cases one would be correct but that is not the case here at all. This crew will not have any control over The Revolution. They are mere symbolic caretakers. Exemplars of the sacrifice the devoted masses of the Ninth Legion are willing to make for the "Grand Plan".

At the other end of the base sits the Missile Launch Control Center (the MLCC), an all-glass edifice more wide than tall

where Ninth Legion staff are claustrophobically crammed into tiered bleachers each at computer terminals and control stations nervously attending to every last detail of the terror that will soon be unleashed. Their view through the windowed walls is of the spotlighted Revolution so far off in the distance it looks like but a one-eight scale model of the real thing.

A man leaning on an intricately decorated cane limps into the heart of the frenzy, then stops. Doctor Frood. Minister of Science and Propaganda for the Ninth Legion, its undisputed glorious leader, and scion of the Ninth Legions' mysterious "Chosen One", the mighty but mysterious Za. Frood is tall and lanky with a long face suggesting wisdom (or madness or some combination of each), pronounced cheek bones draped by sunken cheeks, piercing bright green eyes devoid of compassion, slicked back hair with greyed sides, a pale unnerving complexion, and a large and crooked, torpedo shaped nose.

His escort is the hulking warrior, the mighty Lord Dogen, who, you may recall, is the same Ninth Legion henchman from earlier in our story that rained down hell at the dome so many years ago. He stands at over seven feet tall with athletic build, obscenely wide shoulders, dashing black hair, face half covered by a face-plate riveted into his skin to house his mechanized blue-lit eye, and a fully robotic arm that begins on his right shoulder and is capable of crushing strength.

And as always his protectorBot, gifted to him by Doctor Frood, is by his side straining his head upward to look up at the two. The 'Bot wheels along just behind them, its multi-camera eyes, many microphones and a multitude of antennae taking everything in. Always watching. Always on the lookout.

The launch of The Revolution is Doctor Frood's pet project. Years in the making. His Magnum Opus as it were. Well, not quite, that will come later but this launch is close. This very base as you may have noted is named after him as are most Ninth Legion locales of significance. His reputation is such that any Ninth Legion military minion cowers and feels a chill down their spine(s) when he is in their presence.

Doctor Frood hastens over to the director of the launch control center, his cane clacking on the metal floor with each step.

The director, a short bucket of a man, stands frightened and at full attention as Doctor Frood addresses him.

"Is the missile ready Director?"

"Ready and able Doctor Frood."

"Very good."

"Permission to load the Crystals My Liege?"

"Permission granted. Load the Child Crystals."

"Proceed with loading of the Crystals with haste," the director speaks into a microphone.

"Payload Valor-Ion-Proton being loaded. Payload Valor-Ion-Proton being loaded. All personnel be at the ready. Standby," a crackling intercom bellows for all of the base to hear and is immediately followed by ringing alarms, whirring klaxons and flashing red and yellow lights that thunder and flash across the entire launch site.

From within a superbly guarded hangar four containers each the size of a small moving truck is rolled out by Ninth Legion payload specialists in hooded red hazmat suits with tri-treaded hazBots assisting. The rugged and fortified containers each levitate on a thin cushion formed by a magnetic field above a wheeled flatcar. Each of these transport containers is built and handled in such a way that it would be clear to any observer that they carry volatile cargo. But also, precious: the Child Crystals.

The containers are rolled out to the launchpad then into a bony metal freight elevator and ride up the scaffolding to the nose of the missile where they are cautiously placed into the payload system of the missile head. Once the Crystals are secured inside, the doors to the head are locked with a mechanized clank and then sealed airtight with a hiss and a thwap. Clunk-clank-Tsssss-thhhwaaap-pop.

The intercom bellows again with an update, "Payload Valor-Ion-Proton loaded and locked. Payload Valor-Ion-Proton loaded and locked. Ready for launch. Repeat: Ready for launch."

The three custodial flight crew members take private elevators to cockpits that stand out like pimples along the missiles surface. They board, buckle in and start pre-launch checks using the nauseatingly complex instrumentation panels at their disposal.

Inside the MLCC, a communications analyst in charge of the Space Teams nervously works at her terminal, "Space Teams. Please report in."

Orbiting Lucasia, Ninth Legion globular-shaped spaceships with large grasping claws at the front and storage bays in the rear, and operated by a crew of aeronautical pilots, stand at the ready. They will play an integral and vital role in this devious exercise as we shall soon see.

"Space Teams standing by and at the ready," the Space Team Commander replies as she floats and bobs in zero gravity.

On the launchpad, plumes of exhaust clouds bloom from the missile nozzles as it gets closer and closer to lift off. Any and all scaffolding, elevators and maintenance vehicles are pulled away.

"Launch missile!" yells Doctor Frood and with that a senior missile facilities technician gives the official command, "Time to launch is zero. Repeat TTL is zero. We are GO FOR LAUNCH. Repeat we are GFL."

The rockets fire white-hot, blinding flames and the launchpad and everything around it is lathered in bulbous gas emissions. The Revolution lifts off the pad and fires off into the night sky. A dot of white light trailed by a puffy white string that is its wake.

"Liftoff. The Revolution has lifted off. Velocity is go. Heading is go."

The custodial crew, ignoring the rattling and vibrations inside their cockpits aboard The Revolution, calmly make last second adjustments and settings to their monitoring feeds, turning this dial and that, trusting they will soon see the great and mighty Za in the Eternal Realm and that He will look upon them with pride and honor for their sacrifice on this most glorious of days. Their backdrop quickly goes from a deep blue night sky to the blackness of space as The Revolution breaks atmosphere and now four moons of Lucasia dot their panoramic view of space and soon enough The Revolution locks in on its target: Loxbor Prime. The only living moon of the four.

"Revolution is out of atmosphere. Target in sight. Custodial crew confirm."

"Roger that. Target in sight," the custodial crew lead confirms as the moon is center stage in his viewfinder in no time at all. A Ninth Legion control center technician counts down to impact from the safety of the MLCC, "Impact in five, four, three..." The missile is traveling at such speeds that the custodial crew onboard go from seeing Loxbor Prime as but the size of a coin to seeing the surface up close and personal, veins of leaves in trees distinguishable and in high resolution, in less time than it takes for a shallow breath from their air tanks and just like that the missile makes impact with the moon's surface (the custodial crew no more).

What was, just a nanosecond ago, a beautiful, blue, biodiverse celestial body is now an environmental catastrophe of the highest proportions as the moon is torn to pieces. The impact first creates a towering mushroom cloud and then a titanic wave of energy spreads faster than the speed of light tearing the moon apart in the time it takes between one heartbeat of the many confused and panicked wildlife that scramble and run in a futile attempt to find refuge.

And in the Ninth Legion MLCC the senior missile facilities a technician smiles, "Impact. Full and absolute impact."

...

Off a remote beach along one of Lucasia's larger oceans, two fishermen, well-tanned and tranquil, kick back in their small fishing boat not far from shore. The means by which they fish is thusly: Exotic pelican-looking sea birds (but these have bright teal-blue feathers) sit on perches made from carved tree branches tied to the side of the boat. The birds, with rope tied to a leg to keep them from escaping, plunge into the water and catch large, prized fish with relative ease. Rare is the try that they do not come up with one of these trophies. When they land back upon their post, the fishermen bribe them with a smaller fish, one that is a delicacy for the birds but is poisonous for the fishermen, and one that the birds gladly give up the larger fish for. A more than fair trade in their avian minds. Everyone wins.

Above the horizon, the younger of the two fishermen spots Loxbor Prime, or what was Loxbor Prime, in the blue sky above exploding into pieces. He shakes his head to clear it, thinking it an illusion but then gulps down the lump in his throat, when he realizes this is very real and points it out to the elder fisherman. The elder squinting towards the sky sees it now as well. Neither can believe their eyes. In their language whose words most would not understand but by the inflection in his voice and urgency with which he moves anyone would get the gist

of what he is saying, the elder shouts at the younger to get them to shore. The younger fisherman scrambles to the front of the boat where there is a bench that juts out over the bow. He sits, grabs the reins, and gives them a snap and a sea cow pulls the boat forward from under water; and at a pretty good clip, too.

They are making fine progress to shore, but an indiscriminate tsunami of impossible size is rising behind them and gaining quickly and before they can even consider whether they will escape from it or not, and as the large birds try to fly away but are jerked back by their tethers, the colossal wave slams down and wipes them completely out.

This, but one small example of thousands of environmental atrocities taking place all across the planet from the Ninth Legion's reckless act.

...

Inside every crevice of the Ninth Legion MLCC cheers and celebration abound. All screens and other indicators show the moon as it continues to come apart in space. Mission.

Accomplished.

"Silence!" shrieks Doctor Froot, his cry slicing the celebration in half and not a breath is heard.

"The Child Crystals. Have they been retrieved?!" asks Froot as he glares at the MLCC director.

progress every five kiloseconds. Over," says the shaken Ninth Legion control center technician.

A sinister smile forms, like growing spores, on the face of Doctor Frood as he watches a screen showing a spherical cloud of small space rocks and space dust that was the Loxbor Prime the "Living Moon" expanding in all directions.

"Congratulations Doctor Frood," says Lord Dogen.

"Only the beginning Lord Dogen. Only the beginning. The Grand Plan. Merely Phase Two. Phase Three is next and there is no Phase Four."

"Long live the Ninth Legion, Doctor."

"Indeed," Doctor Frood says and turns on his heels shuffling triumphantly out of the control center his cane tapping to an evil rhythm. Dogen and his trusty protectorBot follow.

/CHAPTER NINE

In a Ninth Legion theater-in-the-round(the "Amazing and Peerless Leader Divinely Selected by The Chosen One Doctor Frood Theater" to be exact) the dedicated masses gather. Thousands of adherents to the Ninth Legion all stand in the center of the darkened circular theater where every face is spot lit from a recorded broadcast being projected onto a floor-to-ceiling screen that wraps the walls for all 360-degrees.

The newscaster-like voice of the film's narrator reverberates every fiber of the theater, "Horrific news on the war front. The CULT OF THE CRYSTAL MOTHER has taken the unthinkable step of blowing up Loxbor Prime! I say again, The Cult of The Crystal Mother has blown up Lucasia's only living moon, Loxbor Prime. As is well known, Loxbor Prime was a peaceful destination for millions of Ninth Legion dedicatees who took sanctuary there every year for retreat. Even through these trying times, per the Trubius Conventions, the moon was to be a neutral, non-violent locale. And yet with this one gutless act every last one our innocent companions on the moon were needlessly murdered."

Over the narrator speaking appears on the screen:

A grassy landscape, where every blade of grass is so green it looks artificial, that goes on and on disappearing at the edges of the horizon in every direction until it meets the perfect

blue skies. Clusters of leafy trees dot the field as do hundreds of white tents belonging to a Ninth Legion spiritual retreat. It is a serene and peaceful scene.

Happy people in clean, white, loose-fitting clothes are going about their happy day attending to various happy activities. Tending to the happy soil, dancing merrily around in circles, happily meditating, happy children running happily all about, happy youngsters sitting in a happy circle, happily listening to a happy adult happily talking about something or other that is, well, happy.

Happy faces everywhere, until they all look up at a bright white dot of light that descends from the skies and lands beyond the horizon where a mushroom cloud erupts skyward then its unforgiving wave of energy spreads wide and fast with the speed of a sneeze. The bright green grass is brown in a flash, the trees evaporate. Everyone runs but it is futile. Many pick up children and run, other children fall and are trampled, but it doesn't matter because within seconds they are all vaporized by combination white-hot light and venomous dust cloud and are erased for good.

In the event, dear reader, that you are not picking up on it, *it should be noted that all of this is pure propaganda created by the Ninth Legion to bring their masses together in solidarity. This is not what happened at all. The moon was*

*destroyed but it was **their** doing. There are no Ninth Legion spiritual retreats. Not of the loving and well-meaning sort shown in the film anyways.*

The light from the projected film shines brightly upon the shocked and horrified faces of the crying and angry audience members watching the film as more ghastly images flash onto the screen, the next being a shot taken from space, a view of the moon as it shatters into billions of rock and dust particles that go flying off in all directions. Over this visual the narrator continues:

"To the millions we lost today, we appeal to the Chosen One, The Great and Powerful Za, that they pass into the Eternal Realm. Our fearless leader Doctor Frood addressed the masses in The Great and Glorious Sun of the Ninth Legion DOCTOR FROOD Square. His resolve never stronger."

The film then cuts to a vast square of obnoxious size made of concrete and ill-intent. Doctor Frood stands at a podium with a bouquet of microphones in front of him. He is outfitted in grandiose military dress with facial makeup piled on, as he speaks to the colossal crowd while a military parade showcasing the Ninth Legions mighty arsenal rhythmically rolls by. Floating in the sky in the background is the State Basilica, a massive tubular-shaped architectural achievement with the capacity to hold millions, suspended from gigantic floating hydrogen

cannisters. It's official name: the "Highest Incarnation of the Grand Plan DOCTOR FROOD State Basilica".

"We will not let the cultists win. We will not forget the lives lost. We will not stop until they are extinguished from every crevice of Lucasia. To this cause, we will dedicate our every resource. These evil savages have surfaced a monster the likes of which Lucasia has never seen and soon that monsters' fangs will sink into their very hearts. Let the tears from our sorrows be the waters that baptize our resolve!"

The crowd in attendance roars whilst likewise back inside the amphitheater the audience erupts into frenzied cheering. All Ninth Legion adherents galvanized around this latest cause.

/CHAPTER TEN

Mt. Nebbulus is a mountain of epic girth and the second tallest on Lucasia. Inside, a massive section has been hollowed out and an entire city built within. Known as the Hidden Fortress it is the top-secret headquarters of The Coalition. It is their primary military base and command center and recently, as the waters of an all-out world war continue to roll to a boil, and the ugly losses of that take its toll, a refugee sanctuary. Burrowed inside the Hidden Fortress there is a large municipal arena, the Crystal Warrior Memorial Auditorium, where today an emergency public meeting has been called concerning recent

events. Namely, the blowing up of Loxbor Prime by the Ninth Legion.

In the center of the arena is a large round stage and surrounding it entirely are seating risers that go up for many hundreds of rows. The walls of the arena angle inward providing better sight lines for those in the higher seats but a claustrophobic feel for those on stage.

The stands are filled to the brim with the panicked masses. Species and sub-species of every kind. Refugees from all over Lucasia. Wanted or displaced by the Ninth Legion. Each having read the words above any entrance upon entering the arena, the ghosted whispers of the vaunted warriors to which the auditorium is dedicated:

“Make our strength your own.

And remember us.

Always remember us.”

A conference table is spot lit in the middle of the stage around which representatives from all over Lucasia sit. Known as The Council of The Wise there are thirteen members in total and while not every intelligent species on Lucasia has a seat on the Council this is not a matter of exclusivity. Provinces, states, kingdoms, territories and other governing bodies are rarely if ever formed around a specific species. Typically, it was

geography, belief system, or preference for a particular climate that landed one wherever they called home.

Each councilor, generally speaking, has an assigned role. For example, a science councilor, a theologian councilor, a public health councilor, and so on and so forth.

The Head Councilor and President of the Coalition, Madame Jun'Illiams, stands. She is a middle aged Lucasian-human, with red-brown hair pulled up and held in place with decorative hair sticks, wearing a loose-fitting toga-like robe over a skin-tight under suit.

She clears her throat which signals that the other council members and the audience should stop talking and begins.

"Billions of lives lost in a single flash. Environmental catastrophes the likes of which could not have come from our worst nightmares. This is clearly a game changer. If the Ninth Legion has an arsenal of this magnitude, we have nothing to counter it."

General Pace, Head Commander of the Coalition Military forces chimes in. She is also Lucasian-human, stout and fit with jet black hair pulled back into three tightly wound buns and wearing impeccable military garb adorned with insignias of merit, rank, and accomplishment earned throughout her distinguished career.

"With all due respect we have our ballistic missile stockade. Over five hundred warheads stand at the ready on the water moon Llundor."

The Theologian Councilor, Professor Jiuxbo, of the Gadah species (not human but human-like with flattened, nearly undetectable noses and green toned skin) and let's just say with opposing philosophical views from the General, replies.

"Is that what this has come to? Mutually assured destruction?"

"We need a response. We need to counterstrike," General Pace strikes back.

"They have a single weapon that took out an entire moon! We don't have anything that could come close to that!" notes the Science Councilor, a well-built Savralian, with a barreled chest and glorious mane of hair. This one from the more feline looking subspecies (the others baring resemblances to the wolf, bear, and apes of Earth).

"I don't propose that we do. But we can still hit them with what we do have," says the General.

The Councilor in Charge of Environmental Affairs, of the Aquilean species, chimes in via a translator on her all-glass water filled head cover. To put it bluntly she resembles a fish head, albeit a beautiful one with skin in shades of greens and blues. Her species cannot breathe above water thus the water filled head cover and translator-speaker system built into it.

"The General is right. This was a mere test. A warning shot. We can't wait around for what's to come next."

"That moon was a nature reserve and sanctuary to thousands of species that were on the brink of extinction and the Ninth Legion uses it as a testing site?" says the Theologian Councilor with more anger than most are used to seeing her display.

"I've never known the Ninth Legion to be sentimental," says a councilor representing the southern provinces, a cool headed Elafii whose glorious circular horns give them an air of royalty.

"You do not give the Ninth Legion enough credit. None of us do. Yes, this was a military test but more than that: this was a message. Have none of you been paying attention to the communication channels? They've blocked all communication in the free areas and replacing it with their state propaganda and mistruths. Saying it was *us*! This, my friends, was a publicity move to unify their masses and recruit more to their delusional cause," notes the Councilor of Public Affairs. A Khata, a reptile-like species, whose skin, scaly, dark green with bright orange highlights, shimmers under the lights.

"Well, what's our plan?" queries Head Councilor Jun'Illiams bringing the conversation back on track.

(Just as she releases this question to the council an assistant approaches the Head Councilor and hands her a communication

readout which she reads to herself as the conversation continues around her.)

"First thing we need to do is figure out what technology they used to build a weapon with that kind of power yield," says General Pace.

"No. We don't," interrupts Head Councilor Jun'Illiams holding up the readout that was given to her just moments ago.

"Excuse me?" questions General Pace.

"Intelligence report. My apologies to the audience but we must go into a closed Security Session as this new information is of the highest classification."

An area around the table frosts over, blocking the audiences' view and sound and there are more than a few grumbles and concerns from the audience about this, some boos and heckling even.

Once the council meeting space is closed the session continues and Head Councilor Jun'Illiams delivers the news from the readout, "We've just received word from our spies in the Chellion Province. The weapon they built...it's clear now why its powers were unprecedented. They used the Child Crystals themselves to create the detonation."

Shock and unease ripple amongst those at the table.

"So, the Child Crystals...they are gone forever?" wonders the Science Councilor.

"No. They are indestructible," answers the Theologian Councilor.

"But how then?" wonders the Science Councilor.

"The texts of old have always said that should the Child Crystals come in contact with one another they would unleash an unimaginable power. It appears they were right."

Head Councilor Jun'Illiams bows her head and rubs her temples as all her years of political training begin to waver.

"They've used our beacons of peace against us. Weaponized them," she says.

"Their moral chasm is indeed bottomless," mutters the councilor from the northern provinces, a Hikkon. Gentle giants, with thick muscular, elongated necks, a pronounced brow, stubby tusks out of their chins (remnants of larger ones from their ancestors but now deemed unnecessary by evolution), and their signature feature: an almost out of place looking patch of thick hair atop their head that extends down the back of their long necks earning them the nickname: Neckbeards.

All take a moment to absorb the news, lost in their own thoughts.

An executive-assistantBot rolls over to the Head Councilor and speaks to her, "Madam Head Councilor, incoming communication from Doctor Frod."

"Bring it up please."

A large four-sided display cubby rises from the center of the table. Then, a communication cable slides into a port on the cubby to establish the connection. The Coalition never takes any chances by keeping *any* device online unnecessarily.

Doctor Frood's face menacingly takes up the entirety of each screen.

"Greetings non-believers. I trust this communique finds you well. I'd like to inform you that a second weapon, as powerful as the one you saw today stands ready to wipe out your entire hemisphere. Your only choice is full surrender. Those who swear their loyalty to the Ninth Legion and pledge their allegiance will be granted immunity and welcomed into our troupe. Those who do not will be wiped into eternal damnation and your little Crystal Mother worshipping cult will be no more--"

General Pace cuts him off, "Now you listen here. It is the Ninth Legion that is the cult. You and your followers aspire to ascend to this cutesy little made-up 'Eternal Realm' of yours? Well, we would be happier than a lone Fotoon Bull in a stall full of Fotoon Cows in heat to accommodate you."

A keen eye would notice this irks Doctor Frood, he's not used to back talk, but most would not notice, and he does his best to remain composed.

"The choice is yours. There will be no bargaining, no negotiations. That is all. Hail to victory and long live the Ninth Legion."

The screens go dark and the network connector retracts.

General Pace addresses the council, "Do not give in. They're going to blow us into oblivion anyways, may as well put up a fight damnit," she says (and emphatically at that).

The Science Councilor disagrees noting in a shaky tone, "I really don't think that is the answer. Negotiations General. We could negotiate a peace. Or...a surrender even if necessary."

"Were we both just listening to the same crazy person just now? He said no negotiations," the General bites back.

"Perhaps he was posturing," the Science Councilor counters grasping at straws and all The General can do is rolls her eyes. Head Councilor Jun'Illiams cuts off their quarrel, "What about the Child Crystals? Is there any chance, any way of locating them?"

Councilor Kluug, Head of Intelligence for The Coalition, a well-mannered and reserved Lucasian-human of generous girth chimes in with his usual scholarly tone, "All these years and we still haven't been able to locate them. But they had them. And they used them. But we detected nothing. They could be anywhere on the planet right now. There's simply no way of detecting them I'm afraid. None that I am aware of anyhow."

While the debate and discussion continue, the Theologian Councilor discreetly types something on her notepad. We will get to this in a moment but for now, back to the meeting where Head Councilor Jun'Illiams says, "Let's not give up no matter the odds. For now, we stall. We feign negotiations or surrender. Do whatever will buy us time. Lock down the fortress. If we can stall and find the Child Crystals, it will give us a chance. That is the focus of everyone in this room. We just need a chance. Meeting adjourned."

The frosted privacy shield fades and they are back in the arena. The councilors exit without addressing the audience which sends entire room flaring into a frenzy.

"Wait. You're not going to tell us anything?!" an audience member shouts.

"Tell us something! Don't leave us in the dark," says another.

While the rest of the council have scurried out, the Head Councilor remains and turns to address the audience.

"These are dark times. That much I can tell you. Then again that much you probably already knew. We will need anyone and everyone to help us defeat the Ninth Legion and I can tell you that their numbers grow, whilst ours dwindle. Their propaganda machine is as powerful as that weapon you saw today, make no mistake. Be ever vigilant."

She senses the crowd is still anxious. Thousands of individuals may make up the audience, but it behaves as if one large organism of tension and unease.

She bows her head, takes a slow breath in, then slowly exhales, and addresses them further.

"Our freedom, our way of life, is built upon an idea. Not provinces, not physical attributes, not belief systems. Nothing of the sort. An idea that all beings are equal in the eyes of the Crystal Mother. That our one birthright is that there is a level playing surface for all. We've spent millennia building upon this idea. Massaging it, sharpening it. It means we may not always agree. In fact, it often means we won't agree. But the *idea* remains. So, no matter what happens, if the Ninth Legion destroys our homes, our villages, our cities, our continents. If they take our lives, they cannot take this idea from us. Stay true to it, that all creatures vast and slight are equal. The Ninth Legion seeks to destroy this idea. But remember the idea is not some tangible thing. It only exists in our minds and in our hearts and they can only change those if you *allow* them to. And so, I ask for your patience, your steadfastness, your courage. But mostly I ask you never to forget the idea that is the foundation of our way of life. It must never be surrendered. It must never fall."

As she quietly exits the crowd doesn't cheer but they don't boo either. They don't say a thing. Not one. The tension and anxiety have dissipated, and heads are high, and chins are up. Pride. Her words have inspired. Her words have served as a reminder of the common denominator that binds them all and what they are fighting for. What is at stake. Whether they started the fight or not.

...

Head Councilor Jun'Illiams walks the hallway leading to her office with *her* head held high. That speech was made up on the spot, completely improvised and, finally, a triumph however small. A stress headache had been building behind her eyes but that small win has injected her with a revived vigor. Her executive-assistantBot and her senior advisor are in tow as the door's part to reveal two individuals waiting for her: The Theologian Councilor and a gigantic cybernetic machine-man named Commander Sloane who towers over the others by five heads easily. A mysterious figure to most, there is debate around how much of him is still flesh and how much is robotics. Regardless, he is a tall, wide, and an intimidating figure to say the least. "I presume this is not a social visit?" jests the Head Councilor.

"Your presumption is accurate. Madam President what we are about to tell you is of the highest classification. So high that not even you know anything about it," says the Theologian Councilor. "Sounds like today is my lucky day. Very well, Abbess Superior, proceed."

The Head Councilor gives her senior advisor and executive-assistant Bot a nod and both know to duck out of the room not having the proper security clearance for such a conversation. "Madam President, with some degree of certainty, there is one possible way that we can detect the Child Crystals. This may sound a bit outlandish but, well, at this point, what have we got to lose?"

"Continue," says the Head Councilor hand under chin and leaning in, intrigued.

"The ancient texts say that the Child Crystals were extensions of The Crystal Mother. And that the Crystal Warriors--"

"I know the history can we get to the point please. Time is pressing."

"Of course. My apologies. The point of it all is that a Warrior of the Crystal Mother could detect the Child Crystals no matter where their location on or around the planet. None of the locating technologies could come close to their abilities."

"That's all well and good but I thought the Crystal Warriors were gone. Destroyed in The Darkest Days Massacre."

"Sadly that is true. Mostly. But we have one last shot. It is classified as Operation 2815."

"What does it entail exactly?"

"In brief, at the end of The Darkest Days Massacre one Crystal Warrior, albeit young and untrained—"

"It was just a baby, let's be clear," Sloane clarifies in his mechanized, reverberated voice so deep it seems to shake the room.

"Yes, Commander Sloane. Anyways, this *individual* was able to escape and has been hiding off planet ever since. This Operation gets them back here and provides the means for them to locate the Child Crystals. Once found and rescued the Ninth Legion's doomsday missile would be inert and the Magnificent Field would be restored. The pendulum would swing back in our favor and we would gain a significant advantage. This could turn the tides."

"I see," says the Head Councilor nodding with genuine intrigue.

"It's initiation and execution require executive sign-off. Yours to be precise."

"And what do you think of this Commander Sloane?" asks Head Councilor Jun'Illiams.

"I cannot protest enough bringing the child here. This operation is a futile effort that will only cause distraction. Odds of success are nil."

"But not zero?"

"I'm obligated to tell you there is some percentage far below one but not zero that it could succeed."

"Ever the optimist."

"The Ninth Legion could detect the child the moment the child arrives on Lucasia. An innocent life sacrificed to save millions."

"But if we got the child here safely, the exercise itself would not kill the child?"

Sloane hates having to be honest, "No. Very unlikely."

"It is our only option. Our last," pleads the Theologian Councilor.

The Head Councilor strokes her chin between thumb and forefinger in a thoughtful tick as she ponders her options. It's a long shot but she is no quitter.

"Very well. On my orders execute Operation 2815."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SERRETUS TELLS OF TRAGEDY ON LUCASIA: THE MOON DESTRUCTION

Back on Earth...

Inside a booth typical of any drive thru burger chain a clerk hands a customer a bag of food and a drink tray through the window. Transaction complete he activates his headset and takes the next customer's order.

"Hi what can I get for you?"

Through the crackling drive thru headset the attendant hears the following:

"Uh, hi, yes, can I have eight extra-large fries please."

"Anything else with that?"

"No that's it."

"Ketchup or sauce?"

"No thank you."

"Pull up please."

The clerk puts together the eight large fries tosses them in a bag and waits for the car to pull up.

But a car never pulls up.

Instead, a kid on a bike does.

David Paul.

He hands the clerk the exact amount (most of it in change with a few crumpled bills thrown in) and the clerk, still processing kid on bike in drive thru, hands him the bag.

"Thank you," shouts David Paul as he rides off.

[JASON: I'm wondering if Earth-based story should just start here (with some tweaking of course). Too much exposition before this?]

It's been months since Crazy Hoof (or Serretus if you prefer) rescued David Paul from the bullies (and they still haven't dared try anything with he or his friends). Once again, the seasons have changed. It's now Spring a time for beginnings, blossoming, and rebirths.

David Paul makes his way to the woods. Once there, after leaving his bike at the secret entrance, he starts to make his way up the usual path but he doesn't go to The Place instead he goes to the river's edge where there is now a permanent zip line installed. He grabs the handles (Rudy and Cooper built it from the front of a salvaged old bicycle - handlebars, fork, tireless rim that clutches the line) and glides over to the other side with abandon.

David Paul skips towards the shack like this is an everyday thing, and that's because it is, this is the norm for him now, his near daily visits to Serretus, and he enters without knocking. All part of a new after school routine.

"Serretus I got you some...," starts David Paul as he retrieves the fast-food bag from his backpack.

He stops. Serretus is in the corner, a deadly serious look on his face, and steeped in concentration. Held up to one of his ears Serretus has a frayed old headset from which indiscernible chatter and staticky beeps emit. Serretus pays David Paul no mind, focused intently on whatever he's listening to. The exact opposite of his usual jovial self.

David Paul quietly places the fast-food bag on a shelf, all the while staring in a curious and concerned way at Serretus, goes to a small cooler, grabs himself a cola, does his best to open it quietly, takes a long cool sip, and sits still noting the serious and distressed look on his friend's face. He's never seen him like this. These past few months Serretus has been nothing but jovial. Telling him stories about his parents, helping with his homework (most enthusiastic about science), and telling him all about Lucasia. Especially telling him all about Lucasia.

At last, Serretus puts the headset down. His demeanor is despondent, dour (the opposite of his usual cheery and positive self). Weary, he sits and kneads his fingers into his forehead attempting to disperse the stress.

"What's going on?" David Paul asks with genuine concern.

"Terrible news from Lucasia I'm afraid. Terrible news."

David Paul (amused, plays along): "Oh? What's that?"

"I'll need your help David Paul."

"My help. With what?"

"I was hoping this day would never come but it is time. I need you to come with me to Lucasia."

As he often does when Serretus talks of Lucasia David Paul struggles to keep a straight face but manages a reply while chomping on a dozen fries he has stuffed in his mouth, "Okay. And why do you need me to come with you to Lucasia?"

"The Ninth Legion. They've blow up the fourth moon of Lucasia. Loxbor Prime. It's gone. It's completely gone."

"That's...that's too bad."

"Yes. I know. Terrible. Even worse, the weapon that was used had a warhead that contained the Child Crystals. That's how the monsters did it."

"I thought the Child Crystals were kept in like the most secret locations on the whole planet and guarded by some sort of elite commando units or something."

"Yes, the Kaah'Huu, the Sworn Guardians of the Child Crystals. But I've not had a chance to update you on more recent Lucasian history. Not long ago a trusted agent betrayed us and revealed the location of all of the Child Crystals. They were then taken by the Ninth Legion, never to be found again. What followed was The Darkest Days Massacre."

"The Darkest Days Massacre?"

"Once the Child Crystals were taken, the Magnificent Field was all but no more and the Crystal Warriors powers were drastically reduced. Every last one was slaughtered by the Ninth Legion. And so began their tyranny. Ever since, Lucasia has fallen into the darkness of war and barbarity."

"So if the Crystal Warriors were still around they could help fight back? Kick some-"

"Yes though not nearly as effective without the Magnificent Field which is why even more important, a Crystal Warrior would be able to locate the Child Crystals. You see, the Crystal Warriors, have an ability to commune- Is commune the right word? Yes I suppose it is- Yes, yes commune with the Child Crystals."

"Wait I thought you just said they were used to blow up a moon. Aren't they...gone?"

"The Child Crystals cannot be destroyed. But if they come in contact with one another, just a touch, it produces an explosion of quantum proportions. And the Ninth Legion will use them again to wipe out those who stand against them. They have a second weapon at the ready. They've already threatened to use it. They will wipe out half the planet with it. These are the most desperate of times my young friend."

David Paul isn't sure how to respond. He's brushed aside Serretus's stories of Lucasia to this point thinking it was all from his imagination. A make-believe world. Something he'd made

up to entertain or perhaps cope with some past tragedy. And honestly all of the stories and ramblings were actually entertaining, they held David Paul's attention for sure. He just assumed it was fiction. And so, David Paul would humor him when he came to visit. And David Paul could tell Serretus about all his ideas and hopes and dreams. Inventions he had thought of, stories he wanted to write and turn into a book or movie. Serretus never once told him his ideas were silly or impractical like Auntie Pal tended to do. She wasn't trying to squash his dreams she just thought on a more practical level. "Remember David Paul, pipe dreams aren't just for plumbers" Serretus would tell him. Auntie Pal would likely say the exact opposite. Pipe dreams *were* for plumbers. Actually she wouldn't say that but she would say that becoming a plumber was a perfectly good way to make a living and a very *practical* one at that. And his friends would always listen to him but sometimes he felt like he was a burden to them going on and on about ideas especially because they tended to stay in his head and never come to fruition. But mostly? Mostly he just enjoyed an adult companion. Don't be mistaken he loved his Auntie Pal. He could not have hoped for a better guardian. But Serretus? Serretus was almost (he had a hard time even *thinking it* out of not wanting to disrespect his dad) like a father to him. Eccentric uncle at the least. Maybe

that was a better way of thinking of him. Point is he genuinely relished the time they spent and their friendship had blossomed.

"I need your help, David Paul."

"You keep saying you need my help? How can I possibly help?"

"Have you read what the First Rite into the Crystal Warriorhood is?"

David Paul gives him a blank stare.

"Perhaps I should have your friends Rudy and Cooper here to help," Serretus muses.

He delves into an explanation for David Paul's sake.

"On Lucasia there was a bottomless pool whose waters sprung from the very core of Lucasia, where The Crystal Mother resides. The First Rite is when a person is submerged in these waters. It is their initiation into the Order. If their character is true and their heart pure the submersion results in their ability, with proper training, to tap into the Magnificent Field created by The Crystal Mother and her Children giving them great powers."

"So why doesn't someone just take a dunk in the pool and commune away?"

"Not sure I would be here if that were the case. The pool was destroyed at the end of The Darkest Days Massacre. It was the first and last of its kind. There is no other. And there is only one precise location on the entire planet where it was possible for it to be located and the Ninth Legion has heavy occupancy

over that area. Therefore, I'm afraid to say, the Crystal Warriors are gone forever. Extinct. Except..."

Serretus gestures to David Paul.

"Me?" David Paul says, pointing at himself with surprised eyes.

"Just before The Pool of The Protectors was destroyed an infant was submerged in its waters. Shortly thereafter that infant was sent as far away as possible to be called on only in the most dire of circumstances. Unfortunately, those circumstances are upon us."

He looks down at the floor for a beat, then at David Paul.

"You were that infant."

"Uh, what?"

"You must come with me to Lucasia and help locate the Child Crystals. The war will only get worse. Billions upon billions will perish. Everyone on the planet will turn on everyone else and life will be no more. Trust me I've seen it before. Just ask Ellie. She knows and she never lies."

"I know, I know, I know. But Serretus, come on, I have to tell you, you're freaking me out a little here. I know you talk about Lucasia like it's a real place and that's totally cool but today you're taking it to a whole new level. Are you feeling okay?"

"No! I'm not feeling okay! Did you just hear what I told you? Listen to me, you must listen to me. I speak the truth. I do! Lucasia is real I tell you and what I just told you is the

truth. I beg you to come with me. You are the last chance we have."

"I-I don't know. This is a little out there, even for you Serretus. No offense."

Serretus takes David Paul by the shoulders as a pleading desperation washes over his face.

"I'll not take you without your permission and so I beg you to come with me. You are the last chance to save an entire world. Not only were you submerged in the Pool of The Protectors but your character is true. I've observed you for many years. You are kind, empathic, sensitive, a true friend and so much more. You possess all of the qualities of a true Crystal Warrior. You have what it takes. You are unique."

David Paul gets up.

"I want to believe you it just can't be true. It can't be. Why don't you get a good night's sleep and we can talk again tomorrow? I'm gonna go over and see my friends now. I'm sorry. I left most of the fries for you."

Serretus bows his head, defeated and deflated.

"Very well."

"Bye Serretus. Bye Ellie."

David Paul scuttles out of the shack and ziplines back over to The Place. He's frazzled for sure.

Everyone is outside. Reid is laying into the punching bag while at a ragged old table Juliette and Rudy play a game of Lucasian themed chess with Cooper looking on ever eager to offer up his advice however unwanted.

As David Paul approaches Reid calls to him, "There he is. How's old Crazy Hoof doing today?"

"His name is Serretus."

"Right, right. Serretus."

"Don't mock me! Don't mock him! I said his name is Serretus!"

"Geez alright already. Serretus it is. Someone got up on the wrong side of the bed today."

David Paul in a huff takes a seat at the table, arms crossed and pouting.

Rudy greets him with his usual always-positive smile but there's no reply from David Paul, not even for Rudy.

Juliette asks the obvious, "What's wrong?"

David Paul doesn't respond, just continues to sit there in his own spinning head, thinking, thinking, thinking.

Juliette snaps here fingers.

"Hey. You with us? Hello? Helloooo?"

"What? Huh? Oh. Nothing. I don't feel good. I have headache. Or something."

"You sure that's all?"

"What? Yea I'm sure. I'm fine. I just need some water."

He gets up to head into the Fortress then stops short as he thinks of something to ask Rudy and Cooper.

"Guys. Question for you. What's the First Rite of a Crystal Warrior?"

Rudy perks up and signs the answer.

"Rudy says it's submersion into an ancient pool whose waters spring from the core of the planet where the Crystal Mother resides. I can check his answer though."

Cooper rushes to the Fortress.

"No that's fine."

Cooper continues anyways and soon returns leafing through a book as he walks. Rudy rolls his eyes.

"Yes. He's correct. First Rite. Pool of The Protectors. There it is right there."

Cooper shoves a book in front of David Paul. There on the page is a detailed line drawing of a bottomless pool with a shaft of light emanating from it. The same bottomless pool the baby was thrown into by the woman warrior from the beginning of our story – the one inside the now obliterated dome. In the drawing, someone is being submerged in its waters in what is clearly a ceremony of sacred regard.

David Paul studies the drawing then mumbles, "He still could have made it all up."

"Made what up?" Juliette asks.

"Serretus was just talking a little crazy today. Kind of freaked me out."

"Cray Hoof talking crazy. Go figure," snarks Reid.

"It's not funny," David Paul snaps.

Reid can see David Paul is rattled by this.

"He hurt you kid?"

"No, no I'm fine. He was just talking about some weird sh-, stuff. Weird stuff."

"I'll break his toothpick legs. Just say the word."

David Paul waves him off.

"So what was it? What did he say?" asks Juliette.

David Paul pauses for a moment then tells his friends.

"He said I was the last hope for the planet Lucasia. That the Child Crystals have been taken and only I can talk to The Crystal Mother and find them. Something like that. That's the main idea. I didn't get details."

"Oh, so just your everyday average conversation?" says Juliette.

"He was so sure of what he was saying. So convincing. Like it was all real."

"That's because he *believes* it's all real."

David Paul gets up.

"Where are you going?" she asks.

"I don't know I just need to get out of here. Sorry guys I'll talk to you later."

David Paul leaves the Fortress and walks away into the woods.

The four friends are left there to look at one another.

Rudy signs.

"No, we shouldn't go after him he wants to be left alone," snaps Cooper.

...

LYING ON THE WINDSHIELD OF THE CAR

Later that night, David Paul lay on the windshield of his Aunt's car in the driveway staring up into a clear night sky awash with stars.

Auntie Pal approaches.

"Everything okay out here?"

"What? Oh yea."

She has a blanket under her arm that she unfolds and covers him with.

"It's getting cold out."

"Thank you," David Paul mumbles, his thoughts clearly occupied and elsewhere.

"You're sure everything's okay?" she says tucking him in.

David Paul nods 'yes' and Auntie Pal turns to walk back inside.

"Not too much longer," she calls out.

"Auntie."

She stops.

"What happened to my parents?"

She bows her head and turns back.

"I've told you what happened to them David Paul."

"The car accident. Is that what really happened?"

"Why would I lie to you?"

"I just get curious sometimes I guess."

She leans against the car and places a hand on David Paul's shoulder.

"I know it's not easy for you David Paul. How can it be? It was a tragedy. A terrible, terrible tragedy. And the only silver lining, for me, is you. But you, on the other hand, got stuck with me. I'm sure that's not always easy, but I do love you. I do care about you. Very much so."

"You're not *that* bad," David Paul jests.

"I'll take that."

"So what happened? Drunk driver?" asks David Paul getting the conversation back on point.

"No. It was a snowy night, roads were icy, big eighteen-wheeler --- I really don't think this is something you are ready to hear David Paul in any sort of detail."

"I'm old enough. I want to know."

She doesn't necessarily agree but can hear the resolve in David Paul's, he's not letting this go, and yields.

"It was snowing. It was snowing a lot. The kind of snow that comes down heavy and fast and builds up before you know it. And

the truck lost control, jackknifed, and side swiped your parent's car. Your mother, I was told, was killed instantly. The only solace I've ever taken is that they said she didn't feel a thing. Your father, he, well he, when I got to the hospital, he was already the way he is now. There's no good explanation for why he won't wake up. The doctors are baffled. Believe me not a day goes by when I don't wish they were still here. And then I could be fun Auntie all the time and not make you have to do awful things like brush your teeth and take a bath and *gasp* eat your vegetables!"

"I told you, you're not *that* bad."

"But still bad?"

"That's not what I meant."

"It's okay."

She smiles and hugs him, then turns to go in.

"Take your time out here David Paul. I'll be inside if you need me. And please know, I'll always be here for you. No matter what."

David Paul nods then wraps himself in the blanket and stares longingly at the stars, wondering if maybe, just maybe, one of them could be Lucasia.

...

AUNTIE PAL GOES TO THE CRYSTAL KEY INSIDE THE PIANO

Inside, Auntie Pal goes to the room with the piano. She opens the top of it and pulls out a lock box.

She looks out the window, ensures David Paul is still on the windshield, he is, then unlocks the box with the code: 0-1-2-3-5-8

When she lifts the cover, a glorious purple glow comes from within.

A look of sadness comes over her face, and she lets out a long sigh, then closes the cover, locks it and places the lockbox back inside the piano.

Her fingers glide over the keys and she plays a soft, solemn tune.

...

TRUST CRAZY HOOF DREAM

Later that night, Auntie Pal has fallen asleep in her reading chair, her snoring sending vibrations throughout the house. David Paul has fallen asleep on the windshield. He begins to rustle, to stir, having a dream. *The dream. Same as always. At least for starters.*

His father, young and vibrant, on that same small, slippery stack of rocks with no indication of losing his balance or falling off.

He doesn't say anything except smile and wave as usual.

David Paul is on the large, flat dry rock some ways away. Same as always.

His father motions to get David Paul's attention and shows him he has something small in his hand.

This is different.

David Paul's father then further indicates that he is going to toss it over.

He does and David Paul catches it.

It's a thin and flat and smooth river rock that fits perfectly in the palm of David Paul's hand.

David Paul looks up. His father indicates that he is going to throw another. David Paul puts the first down and readies to catch the next. His father tosses it over and David Paul, again, catches it.

It's another rock. Same size. Smooth as can be.

Once again, his father tosses yet another small river rock over. Once again David Paul adds it to the pile. This repeats itself many times. He keeps tossing the rocks to David Paul. One after another, after another.

And then his father stops and just stands there, hands in pockets, smiling. He indicates that David Paul should look more closely at the pile of rocks.

David Paul examines one and realizes there are two letters carved on one of its sides: **"ST"**.

He examines the rest and realizes there are some rocks that have letters and some that don't and sorts them into two piles: those with letters and those without.

He focuses his attention on the ones that have letters. Some have words, like the word "OF". While others have random letters like "TR".

He urgently flips over each of the lettered rocks and lays them out in a row.

They are laid out thusly:

OF TR YHO US TCR AZ

He can't make heads or tails out of any of this. He looks to his father and mimes: 'What am I supposed to do with this?'. His father gestures, encouraging him, to keep trying.

David Paul goes to task rearranging them. Still, it makes no sense.

He looks up every so often to check if his dad is still there. He is. Squatting on the same rock, balancing effortlessly and saying nothing. Still as a statue. But smiling a cheeky smile all the while.

David Paul arranges and rearranges them again and again, every which way, but nothing makes sense.

He continues, not giving up. Rearranging and rearranging.

Then he stops and stands up with jolt and steps back and stares at the six rocks in shock.

The rocks are now laid out like this:

TR US TCR AZ YHO OF

David Paul's finger slowly runs left to right over the letters.

"TR-US-TCR-AZ-YHO-OF. TRUSTCRAZYHOOF. Trust Crazy Hoof."

David Paul startles awake and screams.

"Trust Crazy Hoof!"

He leaps off the windshield and runs into the house.

He runs for his father's room going so fast that he nearly misses the doorway, sneakers squeaking in the hallway.

He goes to his father and takes his hand. He looks over at the clock. Nearly three in the morning.

"Trust Crazy Hoof? Trust Serretus? That's what I should do?"

David Paul's squeezes his hand. In all his years his father has never responded in any way whatsoever so what comes next is monumental to say the least:

His father gives his hand four quick but distinct squeezes as if to say **squeeze: trust**, **squeeze-squeeze: cra-zy**, **squeeze: hoof**.

David Paul can't believe it. Tears stream down his face.

"Okay. Trust Crazy Hoof. Trust Serretus," he says then bolts out of the room.

Outside, he takes his bike and rides it furiously away into the darkness as Auntie Pal watches him go from the window of the

piano room a tear streaming down her cheek. She had hoped this day would never come.

...

David Paul arrives at the woods so fast he couldn't tell you how he got there, leaps off his bike, not even stopping to put it down; it just rolls on, as it tends to do, eventually falling on its own.

He runs through the darkness just the beam of his flashlight as it silhouettes the trees.

He's at The Place, takes the zip line over the river, jumps off and without pause scrambles up the hill on all fours. Arriving at Serretus's shack, breathing heavy; puffs of misty clouds with each excited exhale.

Serretus opens the door before David Paul can as if expecting him.

David Paul still can't catch his breath.

"I. I-I'm in. I believe you."

Serretus doesn't say anything just gives a gratified nod then gestures for David Paul to enter.

CHAPTER TWELVE

TELLING HIS FRIENDS — THEY DON'T BELIEVE HIM

"His Aunt called my parents like fifty times last night looking for him. Then they drilled me but I had no idea where he was, but they kept on drilling away. I don't think they ever really believed so much as just got tired and gave up," says Juliette as she Cooper, Rudy, Juliette, and Reid approach the Fortress the next day and each says in turn that they went through pretty much the same exercise with their parents.

"This is not like him at all," says Cooper, "It's one thing for him to not tell his Aunt but to not say a thing to any one of us. Very peculiar. It has me worried I can tell you that."

"You guys think I should take a walk over to Cra-Cray's place? He's been hanging out with him a lot."

They all stop and look at each other.

"You don't think he would ever...hurt him, do you?" asks Juliette to the group.

"I've been telling all of you the guy's bad news from the beginning but what do I know."

Rudy signs. I don't get an evil vibe from him.

"Rudy says he's never gotten an evil vibe from him," translates Cooper.

"Let's not let our imaginations run too wild here just yet," says Juliette as they open the door to the Fortress to find...David Paul sound asleep.

Everything Crazy Hoof ever gave them is strewn out all over the table and the posters and such that were pinned up on the wall now have been marked up with notes and such.

Rudy and Cooper take an interest in whatever it is this project is supposed to be.

Juliette nudges David Paul and he stirs.

"Hey. Hey bud. What's going on? Why weren't you at school today? Your Aunt is worried sick."

David Paul rubs the sleep from his eyes.

"I was up all night. Guess I fell asleep."

"Doing what?"

"What the hell is all this?" Reid asks.

David Paul pauses before he is sure that he should be telling them the big news.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Hey. It's us. Give it up," says Juliette.

"No way. Trust me you won't believe me."

"You little---you're seriously not going to tell us?" says Juliette.

"Probably best you don't know anyhow."

A sly look comes over Juliette's face.

"So, by not telling us then you're technically keeping a secret from us?"

"No," David Paul replies immediately, knowing exactly where she is going with this.

Juliette calls in for back up.

"Cooper?"

"Agreed. A secret."

She goes to a dilapidated bookshelf and pulls off an old ratty notebook.

David Paul protests.

"No. This doesn't count."

Juliette begins her oral arguments:

"Members of the jury I submit to you Article 11 of our esteemed constitution. Mr. David Paul for the benefit of the court can you please read article 11."

She places the notebook in front of him.

David Paul rolls his eyes and mumbles through it.

"No member shall keep a secret from another member lest they perish in an eternal damnation. Eternal damnation shall entail up to and including a continuous and never-ending Math Class with Mr. Pearson."

"See? You can't keep a secret from us. Can't. Cannot."

"Fine," says David Paul.

He doesn't say anything at first allowing for a dramatic pause (at least that's how he means it to come across).

"Okay," says David Paul.

Another dramatic pause. (Again, how he means it to come across anyhow. The others are just getting annoyed at this point.)

"Okay," says David Paul.

One more dramatic pause. (They've worn their welcome.)

"Tell us already!" Reid barks.

David Paul finally gives up the goose.

"I know you're not going to believe this because I didn't at first either but here goes... All of this? Lucasia? It's real. It's all true. All of it. It's a real place."

"Oookay," says Juliette.

"And I'm going there."

"You've seriously got to be kidding me," says Reid.

Juliette does a double take.

"Wait. What?"

"I'm totally serious. Thousand percent. It's real. He's from there."

"Crazy Hoof?!" Reid scoffs.

"That's not his name!"

"Well it definitely fits now bro!"

"Alright. Everyone calm down. Why do you suddenly think this?" asks Juliette.

"Remember I said to you guys he was talking crazy yesterday. And I didn't believe him. I thought he was crazy, too. Legit crazy. Just like Reid thinks he is. Just like all of you probably think I'm crazy now. I can tell by the way you're all looking at me. And I got mad at him and walked out. But then? Then last night I had this dream and my father was in it--"

"-but you have that dream all the time," Juliette interjects.

"Right but just listen. It changed this time. It's always been *exactly* the same. My whole life. But this time it changed. This time he told me to, and I quote... 'Trust Crazy Hoof'. How could that happen? It can't be a coincidence."

Reid is the first to offer a counter.

"You ever think maybe that could be your brain playing tricks on you? That happens in dreams you know. It's like what they do."

"I'm telling you this is real. You have to believe me. It wasn't just a dream. It was a message. A calling."

"Okay so, benefit of the doubt, it's real. What does that mean exactly?" asks Juliette.

"Sure, sure. There's more. You're not going to believe this either."

"Why stop now you're on a roll," says Reid because who else but Reid would say that.

David Paul ignores his dig.

"I was born there. I was born on Lucasia. And because of that I have this special power. Not really a power more of a gift, well maybe not a gift but an ability. Yea an ability. I guess you would call it that. But I don't have this ability just *because* I was born there. It's because I was initiated in this special pool of...like water but not water. Or something. Crystal water, I guess? I'm not sure. The details are a little fuzzy."

Cooper perks up.

"The First Rite of the Crystal Warrior? You were dipped in the waters of the Sacred Font of the Mother Crystal! The Pool of the Protectors! So, that's why you were asking about it yesterday," he says.

"Yes! That's it. What he said. That's it exactly Cooper!"

Juliette places a hand on David Paul's shoulder.

"Dude. Maybe you should go home. Get some sleep. You're Aunt probably has the police out looking for you anyways."

"You don't believe me?"

"I believe you believe it's real but no, I don't think it is. I'm sorry. I mean another planet? For real kid?"

"See? I knew you wouldn't believe me. So what, you think *I'm* crazy now?" asks David Paul, fuming.

"I didn't say that David Paul. But listen to yourself," she snaps.

"No. I don't care if you don't believe me. Cause guess what? I'm going there and I can save the whole world."

"The world doesn't need saving," Juliette says softly.

"Not this world. Lucasia. I'm their last chance. He told me."

Reid just can't believe what he's hearing, "Whoa, whoa, whoa," then he lets out a long whistle and, "total dive off the deep end. You can't seriously be buying what he's trying to sell you."

"Who cares what you think anyways! Any of you!" David Paul snaps.

Juliette tries to calm things down.

"Hey, listen, I always believed in you. But what kind of friend would I be if I let you fall for this? Okay let's say it's true. Let's just say. How are you getting there? I don't see a spaceship anywhere!"

"I told you I don't have all the details yet. I just found out about this."

Rudy sits at the table, thinking it over, then walks up to David Paul, smiles and pats his shoulder.

He signs to David Paul: "I believe you."

"Rudy says--"

"I know what he said Cooper."

Then he turns to Rudy.

"Thank you," signing it simultaneously.

David Paul looks to the others.

Juliette says nothing.

Reid says nothing.

Cooper looks nervously around.

"David Paul, I would like some time to assess the data if I may."

David Paul walks out in a huff and throws the 'constitution' notebook against the wall.

"I knew I shouldn't have told you!"

Once he's left Reid says, "Maybe he should have kept it a secret after all."

"Must you?" chides Juliette.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

TRAINING BEGINS – Day One: intro to finder9000, relaxation incantation, etc. Just the first day.

The next day, as the afternoon sun pokes out from shapely clouds and the cool air announces the arrival of the autumn equinox, David Paul walks up the hill leading to Serretus's shack. A quick glance over at The Place and he notices Juliette, Reid, Cooper, and Rudy and the four catch eyes with the one, but David Paul quickly puts his head down and walks on, still upset with them that they didn't believe him. It took him an extra hour to get to this side instead of just going to The Place and taking the zip line over but he didn't want to chance an encounter with any of them.

Serretus had mentioned "training" he would need before being ready to find the Child Crystals but didn't give any details other than he would have to learn to tap into an "intelligent and invisible energy field" or something like that.

He's anxious as to what this training would involve and as he gets closer to the shack the anxiety heightens at what he sees, and his legs begin their familiar shaking and he can feel his heart thudding away. There are hundreds of string lights (the kind with small bulbs running the length of each wire; like Christmas lights) coming from the lone window of the shack each one running to a tree in the area where they wind up and around

the trunk and branches. Every tree in the area is wrapped like this.

He can hear his heart pounding away now as he stands at the door and he's sweating and feeling faint. He visibly shakes his head. "No," he tells the anxiety and it quickly obeys. He's not letting it get in the way of this.

"What's with all the wires connected to the trees? Won't that start a fire?" David Paul asks as he enters the shack where Serretus is sitting in one of the milk-crate-turned-chairs.

"No, no. No fires here. Above and below ground the trees have formed an intricate and beautiful network. Parts visible, parts invisible. They are one of the closest things on Earth that can mimic the Magnificent Field formed by The Crystal Mother and The Child Crystals. The trees will help us in your training," he says.

David Paul shrugs taking him at his word as he takes a seat in the other milk-crate-turned-chair. What is he going to do argue with him?

Serretus doesn't say anything more, just stares out the window, rubbing his chin lost in thought as is a curious tic of his. As soon as David Paul walked in, he couldn't help but notice that taking up most of the space is a moldy cloth tarp covering something large, and he can't help but wonder if it is the spaceship they will take to Lucasia. Though even by his

estimates it's small but what does he know about intergalactic spacecraft that can traverse space-time?

Serretus continues to stare out the window as if David Paul weren't there, moments of silent contemplation that David Paul has grown used to in the months when their friendship blossomed but he can't take the anticipation of what his training will entail or what is under the tarp so he breaks the silence, "I still don't see how I can help," but Serretus doesn't respond, "Serretus?"

"What?"

"I don't see how I can help."

"Oh. Yes. It's quite simple you see. As the last known being in existence to go through the First Rite—"

"—when I got dunked in that pool."

"Right. That combined with your empathic attributes and traits of high sensitivity gives you the potential to sense the Child Crystals. What you or others may have thought of as being 'too sensitive' or 'anxious', even 'too kind', are not faults, they are powers. All of this will allow you to connect with The Children. On a higher plane. An energetic level. Invisible, intelligent energy. It's all very esoteric on one hand but unbiased scientific fact on the other. It's true in every sense," he says as he grasps the cloth tarp that covers the something rather large and pulls it back and as the dust

sprinkles down through a light shaft the item beneath the tarp is revealed to be a quagmire of all sorts of junk electronic components atop a folding table that looks like it will collapse under the weight of it all at any moment. Included in this clump are several old CRT monitors, aged stereo speakers, analog 1950's-looking measuring instruments, three record players, keypads and rotary dialers from phones, and all sorts of wires and electronics soldered together or otherwise connected.

"Meet the FinderEngine9000. 'The Finder' for short. I apologize for the crudeness of its design. Given time constraints, supply limitations and other extenuating circumstances I was not able to build it to the scale, standards, or aesthetics that I normally hold myself to. The real one is on Lucasia of course but this facsimile will do just fine for the purposes of your training. The one on Lucasia will not only monitor the strength of the energetic commune between you and the Child Crystals but more importantly it can display a readout of their precise location on a map of Lucasia. We find them, they get rescued and we are on the path to making things right. It's just the first step in the quest to defeat the Ninth Legion but a very necessary one. This training version will also provide several physiological, this training will tax you physically, and energetic readouts, more important than physical, which I can

use to guide you in your training and assess progress as well as ensure we don't do any permanent damage--"

"--wait what?"

"As you learn to relax your body, calm your mind, and control and lead the invisible energy within, the machine will tell us so. Furthermore-- are you paying attention? Good. Furthermore, this stack of lights here," he points to a 2x4 piece of wood at the top of the FinderEngine9000 with seven lightbulbs crudely attached, "are the overall measure of your progress. Once every light is lit we're ready to go."

Serretus holds up what looks to be a soft helmet with a cluster of wires coming out of every part of it that then string along the floor back to the FinderEngine9000 and says with an encouraging grin, "Ready to get started?"

David Paul gives a not-so-sure look, "Um...yes?"

Serretus places the helmet upon David Paul's head. More accurately it's a cap with small suction cups throughout the inside all connected to one another. Also, it's wrapped in tin foil and duct tape and, no joke, has a wire coat hanger on top. Once placed upon his head, a suction cup is placed on his forehead at the area just above and between his eyes. From the head cap the bundles of wires string along the floor back to the FinderEngine9000. Next, Serretus wraps a cloth belt around David Paul's waist, and on the inside of this is another suction cup

goes right below his belly button. More wires come out of this and lead back to the FinderEngine9000. A second cloth belt, same as the first, is placed around David Paul's chest. It also has a suction cup which goes over David Paul's heart and it too has wires that lead back to the FinderEngine9000. Really, there are wires everywhere. Like a den of rabbits they seem to have multiplied exponentially in a short time.

"Up you go," says Serretus and it is then that David Paul notices two rocks about the size of basketballs in front of the FinderEngine9000. He steps up onto them, one foot on each rock. They aren't round to the point where they could roll away, but they aren't entirely flat either, so they're unsteady and rock enough to cause him to lose his balance a few times, nearly spraining an ankle. Serretus helps to steady him and at last David Paul can balance. Lastly, Serretus hands him two clear-glass globes, the size of large bowling balls, that look like very oversized light bulbs and indeed have a lighting filament inside and, surprise, surprise, these also have wires coming out of them that lead back to the FinderEngine9000.

"Hold these out in front of you, shoulder height, arms slightly bent," says Serretus and David Paul does as told but Serretus makes some precise adjustments, "a bit more out to your sides but not all the way out to your sides, 45-degree angles let us say but be sure to keep them at shoulder height and no higher.

Very important." These glass globes are light in weight so it is easy for David Paul to make the finer adjustments that Serretus is asking of him.

"Now, close your eyes," David Paul loses his balance immediately upon closing his eyes and Serretus must rush to catch him before he, all of the wires, and the two glass globes go crashing down.

"We shall start with eyes open," Serretus declares, "stare straight ahead at a point on the wall. And relax," says Serretus walking back around to his side of the FinderEngine9000. Easy for him to say thinks David Paul.

"Mmmm. You're too tense, you need to relax. Breathe in very, very slowly. Hold for a moment, then breathe out very, very slowly. Not bad. But you must relax. Relaxation is key. Imagine you are floating in water. Your arms wouldn't just fall by your sides, it would take very little effort to hold them up. Make sense?"

"Complete," says David Paul. A small fib as the truth is he's sweating, and his arms are burning from holding up the glass globes. They felt light at first but now in addition to being the size of bowling balls they are starting to feel like they weigh as much. And his legs are gelatinous from steadying himself on the not so stable rocks upon which he stands. Who would have thought "relaxing" would be so intense, so difficult?

"Now, relaxing the entire time, imagine a river of energy, coming up from the ground, through your feet, up your legs and swirling at your belly button. Imagine the same but from above, through the crown of your head down your spine and meeting the other. You can then direct this energy through your arms to your hands and to either of the globes and they will light up. Think it, feel it, and it will be so."

David Paul does his best to imagine what Serretus is describing but nothing is happening. He doesn't feel any different and the globes, if they're supposed to, don't light up at all not to mention they are getting so heavy his arms are shaking in uncontrolled spasms.

Serretus observes a variety of readouts from the FinderEngine9000 via a combination of paper print outs, 8-bit graphics on the CRT tube monitors, and an array of colorful lights upon a dashboard. Knobs and switches and clunky old keyboards with keys missing round off the mechanisms he uses to control and calibrate the FinderEngine9000. Using it to not only monitor brain activity and vital signs (heart rate, blood pressure, breathing rate) but also, and more importantly, the "invisible", "intelligent" energy as well.

"Hmmm...we need to get you to relax more. Let us try an incantation. Repeat after me.

Like the smooth river rock, I am still."

"Like the smooth river rock, you are still."

"No, no. You say exactly what I say. So, you say 'I am still' not 'you are still'. Got it? Let's try again. Like the smooth river rock, I am still."

"Like the smooth river rock, I am still."

"Good and when you say it I want you to imagine a smooth river rock, one that you can fit into the palm of your hand, and how still a rock is. Be like that rock. Still."

"Okay."

"Next, like the soft, sleeping Yochee, I am at peace."

"What's a Yochee?"

"It's a soft baby animal native to Lucasia. Like a puppy you might say."

"Can't I just say puppy?"

"Let's stick with Yochee."

"Well what does it look like exactly?"

"Soft grey fur. Light in color, with streaks of silver here and there on some. Sharp teeth. Round with big, inviting eyes. No legs though, they roll. The pups, the Yochiu are a bit smaller than those glass globes you are holding. The adults, the Yochee, grow to over 200 pounds."

"Alright, Yochiu it is. Like the soft, sleeping Yochiu, I am at peace," says David Paul imagining what Serretus described as a Yochiu and picturing it sleeping soundly, peacefully.

"Like the supple sapling, blowing with the wind, I am relaxed. Imagine a sapling, supple, flexible, enduring a strong wind. It will not break but would bend and ebb with the breeze."

"Like the supple sapling blowing with the wind, I am relaxed," repeats David Paul and pictures a young, resilient tree yielding yet strong against a sturdy wind.

"Good. Like the focused Crystal Warrior, my mind is empty. Empty your mind of any thoughts or visions. Nothing. Embrace the nothingness."

"Like the focused Crystal Warrior, my mind is empty," says David Paul and he tries to do what Serretus asks but this one is more difficult. Whereas the first three he had to focus on picturing *something* for this he is to picture *nothing*. Not as easy as his mind quickly fills with thoughts and visions. Everything, it seems, floods in. At one point, literally, the kitchen sink. But eventually, for just a half of a half-second he is able to make his mind go completely blank. And it feels, to his surprise, good.

"Now say all four over and over again. One hundred times," Serretus instructs.

"A hundred times! My arms are going to fall off!" he protests the weight of the globes feeling more like the rocks upon which he stands.

"They will become lighter as you learn to use energy and not

muscle David Paul. Now please begin," says Serretus in a stern tone, one David Paul has not heard before.

"Fine," and he begins the incantations.

At last, after what must easily have been twenty minutes and with the beginnings of a pounding headache, and his legs shaking like a train station when a big engine pulls in, and his shoulders burning, he reaches one hundred repetitions of the incantation.

"Good. Only took you an hour," says Serretus.

"It's been an hour!" says David Paul.

"Stay relaxed, my readings show this helped you to relax. Let's try imagining the energy flow again. From the ground up through your feet, from above down through your head."

David Paul does and senses himself going into something that feels like a trance and his body begins to tingle as he imagines the invisible energy flowing like water through him then he envisions it going to his hands and just barely, but there for sure, the filaments inside the clear glass globes light up if only for a blink.

"Good. Very good," Serretus whispers then claps his hands and David Paul comes out of his trance, "that's enough for today." David Paul looks up and notices that the stack of lights upon the 2x4 board haven't lit up.

"No progress on the first try or one of those would light up right?" he asks Serretus.

"You let me do the measuring of progress, you just worry about relaxing and letting things flow and directing the energy. Even a step back can be considered a step forward David Paul."

"I guess I thought it would be easier."

"Nothing worth dedicating oneself to is ever easy. David Paul. You must understand something. None of this will be easy. None of it. Hard work is the foundation upon which anything worth doing is built."

David Paul halfheartedly nods, not really buying it.

"Tell me you understand this," Serretus barks.

"I understand," says David Paul, though he's not sure he does.

"Good. Okay. Go home. Rest. Come back tomorrow and we shall continue," Serretus says fiddling with his equipment and not even looking up at David Paul.

When David Paul arrives at home, despite the early hour he is so exhausted he barely makes it to his bed. He will sleep fourteen hours straight then return the next day to continue his training. Whether his progress be forward or backward it will be progress, nonetheless. At least according to Serretus.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MORE TRAINING AND THE RIFT BETWEEN FRIENDS

David Paul's training continues everyday over the next several weeks and like the autumn air that grows cooler and brings the season's first frost the cold rift between him and his friends also continues.

Earlier today was typical of this new state of affairs when David Paul was traversing the school hallways and spotted Juliette, Rudy and Cooper coming his way. He darted into an unused classroom until they passed. He hasn't spoken to them in all these weeks when he *had* spoken to them every day since they were all three years old. Rudy being Rudy had, on several occasions, waved and said hello but David Paul ignored him outright. Why would he be mad at Rudy? No one ever gets mad at Rudy. Rudy was the one that told David Paul he believed him. Maybe it was just because he stuck with the others. He wasn't sure. A part of it for certain was that his training now consumed much of his time, and he just didn't have a lot of time left to deal with that situation right now but it was wearing on him for certain. He's never held a grudge against anyone in his entire life, not even the bullies (who by the way still haven't bothered him since the night Serretus came to the rescue and never will again; not those bullies anyways...stay tuned dear

reader, stay tuned), and here he was holding one against the best friends he had ever had.

Today, like every day after school, instead of going to The Place like he used to, he heads right to Serretus's shack for training.

As soon as he closes the door Serretus says nothing, not even hello, but goes right to work placing the cap and monitoring belts on him and handing him the glass globes to hold all with their many, many bundles of wires snaking back to the FinderEngine9000. He no longer stands on the two rocks. Now he stands upon two stacks of *three* rocks, having just a week ago graduated from a stack of two. David Paul had thought the stacks of two would be difficult but when Serretus first proposed stacks of three he thought there was no way he would be able to do it.

"This is impossible," he had protested.

"Saying it so makes it so," Serretus had retorted bluntly. And he was right. While certainly not easy, and requiring focus and attention, David Paul now leaps up onto the two stacks of three rocks with abandon and confidence.

Soon enough they are going through the training, which mostly involves David Paul just standing on the rocks trying to "relax" and "channel" the invisible energy or "bioelectricity" as Serretus has taken to calling it lately. Serretus monitors

things from his side, instructing him now and again, "Good. Slow breaths. Slow and shallow. Relax." The training is one hundred percent mental. Before they started he had envisioned, for some reason, it would be much more physical. Running, pushups, pullups, rope climbing. That sort of stuff. But there is none of that. Who would have thought mental training would be so much more difficult than physical? And yet, rather paradoxically, this mental training seems to take a lot out of him physically as he tends to collapse into bed every night exhausted. And if you were wondering valued reader, the dreams and sleep paralysis no longer occur.

As they continue the session most of the readouts on the machine are in the mid-range according to Serretus and so there is still work to do. And upon the row of bulbs on the 2x4 only the first two are fully lit up with the third a distant glow. When he imagines the energy going to the glass globes they come alive with light but it's the luminosity of a cheap flashlight, same for the string lights that go to the trees outside. If not for Serretus's encouragement and telling him this is all very normal, David Paul wonders if he would have given up by now.

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TRAINING PROGRESSES EVEN MORE

Over the next several weeks there is more progress. He graduates to standing on two stacks of four rocks, the globes he holds

light up brighter than ever (the inside of the shack never so brightly lit) as do the string lights causing his friends (ex-friends?) to wonder from way over at The Place what the heck is going on over there. And he's up to four lights on the 2x4. But today the training has reached an impasse with David Paul unable to focus. He can't take his mind off his friends you see and loses focus when he thinks of times like earlier today in the school cafeteria when Juliette, Reid, Rudy and Cooper were eating lunch at one table and David Paul walked right past and sat at his own ignoring them all along. Why can't he just let the past go? He may not know it, but his friends feel terrible about the wedge that has come between them. His friends may not know it, but he feels terrible about that wedge as well. This stalemate has been going on for far too long and he wonders at times, late at night especially, lying in bed staring up at the ceiling, if he's lost his friends for good. And he can't shake that thought from his mind today as he stands upon the two stacks of four rocks, the globes in his hands feeling heavier than usual and not lighting up at all. Nothing does. Not the string lights nor the lights upon the two by four progress bar. And the FinderEngine9000 doesn't give off its usual hum that seems to grow louder the better he is doing.

"You seem off. What's wrong?" asks Serretus after cutting the session short.

"I'm just not feeling it today," David Paul says, "I can't focus."

"Something wrong?" asks Serretus.

"My friends," says David Paul.

"Oh?"

"I haven't spoken to them in weeks. I think. Months? I don't even know what day it is. I can't remember how long at this point."

"And this is bothering you?"

"Yes it's bothering me. They're the best friends I've ever had. The only friends I've ever had," David Paul says.

"You made a commitment to your training, and you've been progressing nicely. We are getting close. You must continue. This 'friends business' is something you must deal with on your own time," says Serretus and David Paul is taken aback at his lack of advice but even more so his lack of compassion or empathy.

"I don't have any my own time because of the training! It's all I do," shouts David Paul.

"I'm not saying your friends are not important. I am simply saying your training is your priority."

"Yea well, that's easy for you to say you don't have any friends except for your pretend robot over there," says David Paul regretting it immediately.

"You are correct. I don't have any friends. Here. Except for Ellie. And you. But I've had many friends over my lifetime and I've lost nearly all of them. Too many to count. Your parents among them. But not because of some petty disagreement. My friends died because of the atrocities of war. So you get up there and let us continue with the training."

Serretus's directness, in particular mentioning his parents, zaps David Paul back to the task at hand though he's still frazzled and unfocused.

"I can't focus. I don't have it today Serretus. I'm sorry I just don't," says David Paul, defeated.

Serretus puts his hands on his hips, bows his head and lets out a sigh.

"Very well. I apologize that I got upset with you. I'm confident things will work out with your friends. I know they mean a lot to you. Here sit down. Go on."

THE ROCK FOCUS EXERCISE

David Paul sits in one of the milk-crate-turned-chairs and Serretus goes to a cubby where he retrieves three grey river rocks. Flat and polished, able to fit in his hand but each a different size: a small one, a medium and a larger one. He takes them to the windowsill where he makes a stack, largest on the bottom, smallest on top.

"Look at the three stones and memorize the image of them in your minds eye. Got it?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now close your eyes."

"Do you still see them in your mind's eye?"

"Yes."

"Excellent. Listen to me carefully. Use your mind, your imagination, to lift the top rock off the windowsill, bring it forward and to your right and keep it there hovering about three feet off the ground. Next, spin it in a clockwise direction whilst continuing to keep it elevated in mid-air the entire time.

Now do the same for the next stone, the medium sized one. Bring it forward but keep it centered, don't move it left or right, and spin it clockwise but don't forget about the smaller one continue to keep it hovering and spinning as well. Now do the same for the last stone, the largest. Move this one to your left and spin it clockwise as well.

What you should now see in your imagination are the three stones all in a row floating in mid-air all spinning in a clockwise direction. Do you see it?"

"Yes."

"Good."

Serretus next has David Paul, eyes still closed, visualize putting each stone back upon the windowsill one at a time. And as he moves each back, he must continue to keep the others hovering and spinning. It takes more concentration than David Paul would ever have thought, focusing on being mindful of the three stones and where each one is what they are doing. While the medium-sized stone for example is moving, he still must maintain an image of the others staying in mid-air and spinning. But this exercise is not over yet as once he moves them back to the windowsill Serretus has him envision the stack built not as it originally was but from the smallest stone at the bottom to the largest at the top, reversed as it were, and visualize a force holding them like this, balancing in an improbable way. He has him hold the stack like this for several moments then has him visualize the three stones, one at a time, return to hovering in mid-air but spinning counterclockwise this time and he holds this vision of the three floating and spinning stones in front of him for several moments.

Finally, he visualizes the stones moving back, one at a time while being mindful of the others hovering, into their original positions on the windowsill largest on the bottom of the stack, smallest on the top.

"Open your eyes," says Serretus.

David Paul does and sees the stack just as it was before he closed his eyes.

"Was I really moving those?!"

"Not even a little. It was all done using your imagination."

"Then what was the point?"

"Did you think of your friends or anything else while we went through this exercise?"

"Huh. No."

"Well then. Now you know how to re-focus yourself, and we can get back to the task at hand."

Serretus gestures for David Paul to stand up on the two stacks of four rocks and he deftly leaps up. He connects him up to the cap and straps with all their many wires and David Paul has one of his best training sessions yet. Glass globes alight, six bulbs light up nicely on the 2x4, and the string lights glow brightly outside.

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TWO MORE WEEKS OF TRAINING – RED RASH ON FOREARMS

The training continues for the next two weeks with David Paul advancing to standing on two stacks of five rocks.

"Good. Focus. Stay present. Let all other thoughts pass. Relax everything," Serretus coaches.

The beeping and whining from the FinderEngine9000 intensifies and the globes glow, lighting the room nicely. And then brighter

still as David Paul heightens his focus and slips into a deep trance. Serretus, satisfied with a good day's effort, decides to end the session.

"Very good. Very good indeed."

David Paul comes out of his trance and is a bit woozy on his feet, exhausted from his efforts.

"Yes, that's enough for today," says Serretus and hands him a cool glass of water.

"How did I do?" asks David Paul.

Serretus looks over his data readouts.

"You're making progress."

"Good progress? Bad progress? What kind of progress?"

"There's only good progress," says Serretus, chuckling.

"But still not ready?"

"Patience. Knoll wasn't built in a day you know."

"But what if it's too late? We have to get to Lucasia."

"We do. But not until you're ready."

"There might not be a Lucasia when we get there."

"We have time."

David Paul sits back thirstily gulping the water, then itches at the inside of his forearms where there are red rashes, perfect circles, each twice the size of a quarter. He doesn't notice, just a rash to him, but there's an indiscernible pattern inside each circle a monogram or insignia of sorts.

"Er, some kind of rash. Itches like mad."

Serretus puts on a pair of thick rimmed spectacles with extra thick lenses, of his own unique making (each side from a different pair and style of glasses, taped together), takes one of David Paul's forearms in his hands, grabs for a magnifying glass from a table, tosses it aside, and grabs for a bigger magnifying glass, and inspects the red rash circles.

"Interesting. Very interesting," he says intrigued, almost as if he knows something, "I'm sure it's nothing though. Stress. You must get your proper rest."

David Paul rolls his eyes and nods knowingly.

"Same time tomorrow?" Serretus says putting David Paul's arm down, moving to the Finder9000 to tidy up.

"Yes sir," replies David Paul with a fatigued-laced enthusiasm.

"Go on then. Eat well," he says as David Paul grabs his backpack. "And get your rest!" he calls after him.

NEW CHAPTER

FRIENDS MAKE UP

The next day, David Paul is sitting in a secluded corner of the library reading a book, "4-Dimensional Bio-spheric Domains (4DBD): The Definitive Guide for Beginners by Dr. Serretus Gepps". More like lumbering through. It's dry and boring, no offense to Serretus. The book was one of only a handful he had borrowed from The Fortress and since he hasn't been back he doesn't have many other choices. Not Lucasian centric anyhow. He pauses in his reading a moment and wonders if he should just go to The Place today and say *something* to his friends when who should rush up and sit down at the table but Juliette.

David Paul instinctively makes to get up but...is held down firmly in his chair by Reid.

Rudy and Cooper join them at the table.

The five friends sit.

David Paul isn't sure what to say so he doesn't make eye contact keeping his arms crossed and head down.

Juliette begins.

"Okay look, even you have to admit your story was a little out there."

David Paul looks up but still isn't sure what to say so she continues.

"But it's not worth ruining our friendship over. It just seems so 'out there' to me, completely out there, to all of us, well except for Rudy--"

Rudy gives a wink and a thumbs up, whilst Cooper quickly chimes in with his side, "Still assessing the data."

"Fine. Whatever. Point is, we're your friends so if you believe it's true, we believe it's true. Whether you start talking to us or not. And besides without you the whole group dynamic is thrown off. Three idiots throw off my mojo. I need a fourth to balance it out. But mostly? Friends don't leave friends behind, dude."

David Paul chuckles at the three idiots' comment and looks up after her 'friends don't leave friends behind' one.

"You really believe me? And not just that I believe it's real but that it *actually* is?"

"I do," says Juliette.

"I do," says Cooper.

Rudy signs (I always have).

"Rudy says he always has."

"We got that," Juliette and David Paul reply in unison.

Reid says, "I think you're nuts. I think your buddy Crazy Hoo-whatever his name is there is nuts. Quite frankly, I think all of you are nuts. I think this whole thing is nuts. But truth

is...I believe you, kid. And if he's your friend, he's our friend. *Serretus*. That's his real name, right? *Serretus*."

"Yes," replies David Paul a bit choked up.

"Alright. Friends again?" Juliette suggests.

David Paul doesn't even have to think it over because in his heart he's wanted to say it for so long.

"Friends again."

Rudy puts his hand out and gestures for the others to place theirs on top and they all do. Then he signs and Cooper translates, "Rudy says: Friends *forever*."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

FINAL EXAM

Weeks later, darkness comes early and the cool Fall air is now cold as Winter waits just off stage to make its grand entrance. David Paul zip lines over from The Place and skips towards Serretus's shack.

"Hello there," Serretus greets him when he enters then goes right into hooking him up to the FinderEngine9000.

David Paul notes there's something different about the two stacks of five rocks. Something very different. Each rock is a different size and the stack balances in some impossible way going from smallest on the bottom to largest on the top. The smallest is about the size of a candlepin bowling ball and the largest the size of a beach ball though all are flatter than a ball and not as symmetrical.

"Whoa," says David Paul.

"Final exam. Go on, up you go."

"Final exam! You didn't say anything about a final exam. You're serious? How are these balancing like that? Isn't this dangerous?" asks David Paul looking at the rock stacks quizzically.

"The time for questions and questioning has passed. Up," orders Serretus.

David Paul takes a breath, locking in his focus on the two stacks then leaps up onto them. He struggles to balance but his training to this point has taught him to relax, making his body heavy yet supple, to *not* fight it and let gravity do the rest. But the stacks do wobble and David Paul intensifies his focus, tries to put himself into that trancelike state but still he feels he could fall at any moment. Having the larger rock on the bottom of a stack of five is one thing, having the smallest rock there is something else.

"I'm not so sure about this-" protests David Paul but Serretus shoots him a look and David Paul quickly does an attitude adjustment on the fly, "Never mind. Focusing," he says steadying himself.

Serretus hands him the two glass globes and they begin.

Once David Paul is able to properly balance he is able to focus and get into the trance that he has grown accustomed to and the energy flows.

"Good. Good. Now channel the current to the globe in your right hand," Serretus says taking note of all the readouts on the FinderEngine9000.

David Paul relaxes his face as he focuses and upshifts his concentration, imagining the invisible energy going to his hand. The globe in David Paul's left-hand lights up.

"Your other right hand," commands Serretus trying to hold back a chuckle.

The left goes out and David Paul again launches into concentration mode, and he envisions the invisible energy going to his *right* hand but the right globe doesn't go on.

The machinery whines louder as David Paul struggles.

"Focus. Empty mind," he whispers to himself.

"Remember your training all these months, relax," says Serretus.

A flicker at first, just barely, and then the right globe glows brightly. And as David Paul is able to *relax* it grows brighter still.

When he uses muscle the globes flicker and dim but when he uses his *mind* they come alive. He's in a flow state for

certain. The stacks of rocks upon which David Paul stands may as well be solid posts now.

The FinderEngine9000 whines and beeps with more urgency. The 2x4 has five light bulbs fully alight with the sixth flickering.

"Very good. Keep it up!" Serretus shouts with the excitement of a parent encouraging their child to keep pedaling after letting go of the bike.

The right globe glows brighter and brighter.

"Good. Now the other!"

The left flickers. His legs begin to shake but he doesn't allow that to distract him, his mind is as calm as an early morning pond.

"Come on. You can do it. Remember: internal energy not muscle. Breathe and focus!"

David Paul slows his breathing and his shaking legs stop. A deep calm comes over him and his face melts into the very definition of relaxation.

"Good. Very good. Excellent."

The left globe lights up fully and then some more as does the right. Both globes are as bright as they've ever been and growing brighter still.

David Paul balances atop the inverted rock stacks, as still as a statue, with both glass globes glowing as bright as they ever have, lighting up the entire shack so brilliantly it is as if it the sun were shining from the inside out. And then brighter still so much so that Serretus must shield his eyes. And outside, the string lights come alive. Brighter and brighter and brighter when suddenly there are hundreds of asynchronous pops as the bulbs burst in a series of wonderful flashes.

Over at The Place, his friends are startled by the spectacle of bulbs bursting and the white light coming from the shack window and through the spaces between its slats, bathing the entire area in faux daylight. They all stand and stare in awe, having to provide cover for their eyes, hands acting as visors.

"What the hell?" says Reid.

Wow signs and mouths Rudy.

"Wow is right," says Juliette.

"That's either really, really good or really, really bad," notes Cooper.

Back inside the shack the FinderEngine9000 screams as urgently as it ever has.

The two globes in David Paul's hands erupt in a flash and the seven lights upon the 2 x 4 are too bright to look at when -pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop- those burst as well.

"You did it! You did it!" Serretus shouts with glee, clapping and skipping a dance.

David Paul is balancing and still as if nothing is going on around him.

Serretus flips the many switches that turn off the FinderEngine9000 and as it whirs down, David Paul, now out of his trance, opens his eyes and hops down, exhausted and hardly able to stand. Serretus helps him take off the cap and straps and untangle from the many wires then walks him to sit down, handing him a glass of water.

"At last."

"Good progress?" David Paul asks, still out of breath.

"Forget progress. You're ready."

"You're sure?"

Serretus smiles.

"More than sure," he says.

"That reminds me, there's something I've been meaning to ask you," David Paul asks as he takes a cola from the cooler.

"Go on."

"Where is the spaceship that we'll take to Lucasia?"

Serretus, leans back, takes a moment, then points down at the floor.

"Far below us. Below the river even. In a holding hangar I and a team of bots built when I first arrived here. But that is none of your concern. I'll worry about all of that. Go and grab us some dinner. When you get back we'll discuss final preparations."

David Paul leaps to his feet and gathers his things, excited for the next step in this journey as Serretus goes to tidying up his equipment.

"A bunch of large fries coming right up."

"David Paul. You are sure about this? I don't want you to do this unless it is your choosing."

"One thousand percent positive," he says.

Serretus nods but his face is still a photograph of nerves.

"I'll be back," says David Paul as he leaves and shuts the door.

He zip lines over to The Place to tell his friends the exciting news: it's go time then heads off to get the fast food.

"See you soon my friend," whispers Serretus once David Paul has left.

He then looks over at Ellie replying to what the faux-robot has just said, "No. I'm not sure at all Ellie. I'm not sure about any of this."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Dusk. The sun has nearly set, backlighting Serretus's shack with a gorgeous orange backdrop. While David Paul was out getting the food Serretus had dismantled the FinderEngine 9000 and the table it was on is now folded up and the various parts that made it up are piled up in leaning columns in the corner along with all of the wires wound up in loops that are also stacked. He even managed to unwind and take down some of the string lights. The place actually seems spacious with all of the equipment packed into the corner and with the floor swept. Serretus and David Paul sit and discuss final preparations as they dine on fries.

"You'll recall what we will do first."

"Flying lessons."

"Yes. And you'll recall you need to bring very little.

Everything will be provided for you."

"The clothes on my back. I remember. I remember everything."

"I must ask you again, are you sure you want to do this. Of your own volition?"

"I'm sure. I want to help."

"I've told you there is the chance that the Ninth Legion could detect your existence. They would come after you."

"You told me. I'm not afraid."

"I'll do everything I can to protect you, but it will still be dangerous."

"Don't worry. Everything is going to be fine."

Serretus shakes his head lost in a million and one thoughts.

"And the first thing you'll take on is flying lessons. I've got it on good authority that it could prove to be a very important skillset."

David Paul can't help but chuckle at the babbling and repeating himself Serretus is doing.

"Why are you the nervous one? You've been to Lucasia. I've never been there. I've never been to anywhere. You've done the whole intergalactic space travel thing. Not me. I should be the nervous one."

Serretus doesn't reply just stares off into the distance, talking to himself again, ticking off last minute details, a tangled ball of nerves.

"It's going to be fine."

"Your Aunt. What about your Aunt?"

"My friends and I got it all figured out," says David Paul kicking back his feet and placing his arms behind his head,

"We're all going to say we're sleeping at Reids for a few days."

His dad's hardly ever home and his mom is always working. They'll all actually stay there just in case Auntie Pal ever runs into one of the other parents. I'm not crazy about the dishonesty but it's the only way."

"You can say that again."

"You said we'll only be gone a few days, right? At least in Earth time or something? So easy peasy lemon squeezy."

"Something like that. You had better be on your way. You recall when to get back here?"

"Two days from now. Just after midnight. The engines need time for priming and you've identified a window when it will be most safe to leave without detection. Guess I'll see you then".

"Indeed. Thank you, young warrior. Good luck to you and safe travels."

Serretus watches David Paul as he exits the shack and trots down the pine needle covered slope, zip lines over the river, then disappears into the woods, homeward bound.

He sits on his milkcrate-turned-chair, places the headset over his ear, and holds the mic with a shaky hand and speaks into it.

"Begin transmission. STOP. This will be my final communication. STOP. When next we speak, it will be in person. STOP. I will be arriving shortly. STOP. As stated in previous communications my spacecraft was damaged and I have been unable to repair it.

STOP. I've therefore gone to Plan zero-dot-two which as we know

comes with its own set of risks and uncertainties. STOP. But there is no Plan zero-dot-three. STOP. Upon arrival I will ensure all necessary measures are in place for a successful reception and with my more sophisticated instrumentation on Lucasia I will be able to slow the perception of time here on Earth once a successful transfer has been made thereby bringing the time difference closer to a one-to-one ratio and shortening time in slumber. STOP. May The Crystal Mother forgive me for what I am about to do. End transmission."

He goes to a corner of the shack where there's a folded up tarp and retrieves a gasoline tank from it.

"Forgive me Crystal Mother for what I am about to do. Forgive me."

...

NEW CHAPTER

DEPARTURE

It's just before midnight on *the* night and David Paul is lying in bed not even close to being able to sleep. Can you blame him, dearest reader? He's about to embark on a trip to another planet. Lights are out in his room but he's wide awake. Too excited. His alarm goes off and he leaps out of bed, his sneakers already on. He quietly grabs his packed satchel and tip toes to the doorway of his aunt's bedroom. Her quaking snores and the rhythmic rise and fall of her chest assure him that she is sleeping and soundly at that. Guilt drips upon his heart like an annoying leaky faucet for lying to her about his whereabouts these next few days but he knows there is an entire world depending on him and in the long run she will forgive him because she has taught him that some things are bigger than just one person. That there are causes larger than oneself. He moves on tiptoeing into his father's room placing his hands gently on his arm.

"Dad. I'm going to make everything right on Lucasia. I promise. I'll make you and mom proud," he whispers and disappears out of the room faster than a shadow that has had light shone on it.

...

Outside, as quietly as a seasoned nocturnal animal, he retrieves his bike from the garage then turns to exit when...

"Hey!"

"What the freezing temperatures-," he screams then sees who it is. His four friends. "Why would you do that!" he whispershouts. His nervous system was already at a ten on a scale from one to ten and that just took it well into the twenties.

"What are you doing here?"

"We wanted to see you off. You've been a stranger lately what with all your training and well, you should know your friends have your back," says Juliette.

Rudy signs.

"Rudy says 'Friends don't leave friends behind-"

"We know!" say Juliette, Reid, and David Paul.

"You nervous amigo?" asks Reid.

"Me? No," says David Paul as his teeth chatter and his legs shake from the excitement.

"Right. You'll be okay. Wish I could go with you. To have your back or whatever. Anyways. You got guts kid I'll give you that," Reid says.

"Thanks," says David Paul as he and Reid stare at one another and for the first time David Paul senses that Reid might think him his equal.

"Alright you two you can hug it out when we get to the woods. Clocks ticking. Come on Cinderella, let's get you to Lucasia before your coach turns into a pumpkin," says Juliette and soon

our band of friends is pedaling down the dark street on their way to Serretus's shack.

...

Five flashlight beams clumsily bob and crisscross at the entrance to the woods.

Juliette stops, sniffing at the air.

"Do you guys smell that? And what's that crackling noise?"

"It's the spaceship!" says a giddy David Paul who darts ahead, running for The Place thinking he may just have the energy to skip the zip line and leap right over the river to Serretus's shack. He stops short as he gets closer and there before him, across the way, he sees the grandest of golden lights as if the gates of some paradisial nirvana have opened. His eyes widen at the sight before him, his face awash in the yellow lights from the grand spaceship.

The excitement has his knees buckling to the point where they almost give out and he nearly falls to the ground.

Then this short-lived mirage and surge of excitement fades and a singular thought courses through him: *Oh no. Please no.*

It's not a spaceship at all.

Serretus' shack is on fire.

"Serretus!!!" David Paul screams as he leaps onto the zip line.

Juliette tries to stop him, "No wait, don't!" but he's over to the other side and running towards the burning shack hoping with

every cell in his body that this is all somehow part of the plan. The Shack is supposed to be on fire. No trace or evidence or something like that.

The shack is overrun with flames and smoke pours out of it like water out of a squeezed sponge, but David Paul enters anyways. The heat is unbearable, the smoke suffocating, but he persists. He must find his friend.

There! His heart drops from chest to stomach. It's not part of any plan afterall.

He spots Serretus facedown and unconscious on the dusty floor and goes running to him. The punches he used to take from the bullies, even the ones right to his gut that knocked the breath out of him, were nothing compared to seeing Serretus face down like this.

"Serretus! Serretus! Wake up!" screams David Paul, coughing good and ugly, pulling and pulling at Serretus's long jacket but he can't move the unresponsive Serretus. He can't save his friend. Just then the main ceiling beam of the structure caves in, just missing them.

"Oh no. Help! Somebody help me!" David Paul yells, panic overtaking him and realizing it was a bad idea to enter a burning structure.

He continues to try and pull Serretus out. Tugging and jerking at his jacket. He manages to move him a little, but the smoke is unforgiving, unrelenting and he's just not strong enough.

Finally accepting that his efforts are in vain, he crawls for the door, staying low but still choking on smoke and soot, coughing it out but breathing it right back in. Not good. No one ever tells you until you've experienced it but smoke from a fire like this is much closer to being a solid than a gas. Everything is fading. Fading. He's weak and wheezing and he's stopped moving. He's on the verge of blacking out when a figure enters and grabs him by the shirt and drags him out.

Reid.

Once they are outside of the shack, Reid slaps David Paul in a panicked attempt to awaken him.

"David Paul! Kiddo! Come on! Wake up!"

David Paul barks an awful cough, gags up dollop of black phlegm and starts to come to. He's very weak but seems okay. Okay enough to look at the shack collapsing on itself. Crumbling. The unprejudiced yellow flames and blackest of black smoke consuming it like a snake a rodent.

Juliette, Cooper, and Rudy, the latter with arms around the other two, all stand and watch; tears streaming down sooty faces.

David Paul, a renewed energy from the fresh air, is struggling against Reid to go back in.

"Serretus! Serretuuuuus!"

"It's too late kid. He's gone!" And he's right as the shack is now one big blossoming bonfire just a few blackened studs poking up from the ground.

...

Not soon after a squad of firefighters is finishing up on what was the fire.

Crazy Hoof's shack, or what was Crazy Hoof's shack, is just a blackened pile of wet and foamy ashes.

David Paul is catatonic, in shock.

A firefighter goes to him and places a clear plastic oxygen mask over his face then lifts him onto a stretcher.

"No. I don't want to go."

"We have to get you to a hospital son," as two paramedics carry him out of the woods.

The four friends stand about.

"Guess the guy was crazy after all," says Reid.

"Must you?" Juliette snaps.

"Hey, that nut job just conned our friend, and almost got him killed tonight. I'm not feeling very sympathetic right now."

She considers this and for once must agree with Reid.

A firefighter approaches and asks some questions. Reid tells him they were all over one of their houses and saw the light from the fire and came running over. Their friend said he heard shouting from that shack and thought he could save the person inside. The firefighter buys it. For once, Juliette is glad Reid did the talking.

"You kids go on home. Go on."

At the entrance to the woods there are fire trucks and an ambulance.

David Paul, still on the stretcher, is loaded into the ambulance, oxygen mask still on, a single rivulet of tears crawling down his face forming a lonely line through the blackened grime.

He's weak. Barely able to speak.

"Serretus. Why? Why would you lie to me? Why Serretus? Why?" he wonders aloud in a hoarse whisper. He can't believe he was such a fool to believe the old man.

And in that very moment one of the worst things that can happen to a child happens to David Paul. He grows up.

25 YEARS LATER

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The multitude of shelves in the generously sized stock room are lined with multiple copies of toy action figures, toy aircraft, toy seacraft and toy land vehicles, all sorted and labeled, and all within captivating and eye-catching packaging. On one wall are a variety of books with illustrations and backstories for each of the toys. The packaging for every toy and every book, everything in the stockroom, has one word that leaps out at the consumer in a loud and attention getting font: LUCASIA! Yes, the entire Lucasia toy line, cast from the originals fill the stockroom of C.H. toys a shrine to Lucasia.

The proprietor of the shop, a middle-aged man, tidies up each item on the shelves, making inventory notes on a spiral bound notepad when one of his part-time employees, a teenager named Shellie wearing a bright orange T-shirt with C.H. Toys in blue, opens the door, "David Paul?"

"Yes?"

"Customer has a question."

"Sure thing. Be right there."

David Paul, now a grown up, emerges from the stock room, and navigates the bustling store, maneuvering around other customers and employees, greeting them as he goes by, to where a tired young mother and her hyperactive five-year old son are waiting.

"Hi there. What can I help you with?"

"Hi. Mostly just looking but my son has a question that he just has to ask."

David Paul gets down on one knee so he's at the child's level.

"How can I help you today, my friend?"

The boy squirms a little before garnering the courage to ask.

"Is Lucasia a real place?"

"Is Lucasia a real place? Is Lucasia a real place? I used to ask myself that same thing," says David Paul, nodding as he considers the question, his pause taking a bit too much time for the young inquirer.

"Is it?" the boy whispers with wide-eyes and wonder.

"It sure is real."

"How do you know? Have you been there? Are you from there?" asks the boy leaning in with a curiosity born of pure innocence.

"Nope. Not from there and never been there. But I had a good friend who was from there. He's the one that told me all about it. About all of this."

"Really?"

"Really."

The Mother smiles and rolls her eyes and gives a bob of the head that says: *thanks for entertaining his crazy imagination* while the young lad has taken a toy from the shelf and holds it up,

"Momma can I get this please?"

David Paul acknowledges the choice with enthusiasm.

"Ooh, a MAL-class fighter. I knew the lead engineer and designer on the original fleet of MAL-class fighters you know. A great choice. Er, um, if it's okay with mom of course."

"Max, your birthday is next month, why don't we wait until then?"

"Tell you what Max if you promise to be good and listen to your mom you can have this for your birthday today *plus* an action figure. Deal?"

"Wow!" says the boy like he just won the lottery.

"You really don't have to," the mother says.

"No, no. I insist," says David Paul directing her to the registers at the front of the store where he rings them up on a vintage manual register.

"You take care now," he says putting the items in a C.H. Toys bag and handing it to little Max.

"Thank you so much. You're too kind," the mother says.

"Happy to do it. Have a nice day now. Bye Max."

"Bye! Thank you!"

Once they've left Shellie turns to David Paul.

"So, are we like going to still have jobs cause you're like giving stuff away."

"Come on Shellie. A little generosity never hurt anyone. Sales are great and besides did you see how happy that kid was? It's important that we fuel their imaginations."

Shellie rolls her eyes and David's heart breaks a little. He knows she's lost it. The innocence of childhood, the "child's mind".

He looks out over his 5,000 square foot store and nods with pride. He did it. Took all of you-know-who's toys and was able to mass produce while also keeping kept the quality high (not the plastic pieces of garbage that Big Toy vomits out).

"Alright. I'm going to call it a day. Bobby. You're closing tonight, right?"

"You got it boss," his other employee replies.

...

After a tolerable commute David Paul pulls into the driveway of his childhood home, turns off the engine and sits staring at nothing in particular wondering: *Was this my destiny?* He's not unhappy. Not even close. Not about the everyday things anyways. Family, friends, his business. It's more the larger questions. Is this what he was meant to do? Things seem a bit routine at this stage. Grown up stuff. Responsibilities. Bills. Dreams floating away like a balloon you accidentally let go of.

A young girl, about five years old, comes running out of the house like a comet with a rainbow tail, snapping him out of his sullen stupor and reminding him of what's important in life.

"Daddy!"

He gets out of the car and she leaps into his arms. Nivedita.
His daughter. They named her after his mother.

Actually, things are fantastic thank you very much he thinks.

"Will you play catch with me Daddy?"

"You know I can never say no to catch."

"I'll get the gloves," she yells at the top of her lungs for no reason other than its fun to yell at the top of one's lungs and she runs off.

His wife, Emilia, comes to the door to greet him and he can't help but smile. She's short but slender, with brown hair that she wears in a bob. She's got a glass half-full outlook on life and is pleasantly naïve to the minutiae that gets most adults down. As with most, their marriage has had its ups and downs, its ebbs and flows but the imperfections and blemishes are what make it perfect.

"How was your day?" she asks after a kiss.

"Better now."

"Sales?"

"No complaints."

"Good. Because you're not allowed."

David Paul scratches at the inside of his forearms, itching at faded red spots, perfect circles, each about twice the size of a quarter.

"What's up?" Emilia asks.

"Just some rash. I used to get it when I was a kid but it's been years. Weird."

She takes his forearms in her hands.

"You're a goner," she teases.

"Nice."

"I'll grab some cortisone cream for you at the store."

As they walk through the house not much has changed structurally but there have been a few cosmetic updates and fresh coats of paint since David Paul's childhood.

Painted canvases hang on the walls and, really, are laid all about the home. Emilia's style could be described as having the free spirit of Van Gogh balanced with the decisiveness of a Monet.

David Paul stops in front of one of her latest leaning against a wall in the kitchen. Harsh purples and muted yellows dominate the landscape of a beach at sunset. The Atlantic seems to want to jump off the canvas while in the distance for the keen observer to spot are a pod of whales, her economic strokes perfectly capturing the mist from blowholes.

"I like this one."

"Really? There's something about it I'm not crazy about."

"No, I really like it."

"You've been saying that to me since art school. You've never not liked anything."

"I still think it's great."

"No take a look at the negative space. It's all wrong, see.

Here. Here. And, here. That's where I went wrong. The negative space. I've got a severe case of Horror Vacui."

David Paul takes a sincere look at the painting.

"Okay. I see it now. The ever-dreaded negative space. I still like it though."

Nivedita comes running in with gloves and a ball and slams into him with heavy dose of enthusiasm.

"Ready!" she shouts.

"Okay. Play ball! Let's go."

He starts to head outside with her, Emilia calls after him:

"Oh, David Paul. Reid called. Like nine times. He sounded like he's been um--"

She mimes drinking.

"You talk to Juliette?"

"She said she hasn't talked to him. She's had it."

"Are they coming tomorrow?"

"She and the kids are but who knows with him."

David Paul nods knowingly. His friend is in rough shape and possibly at the point of no return. He's done all he can think of to help him but the fact that he's been unable to eat at him like a cancer. Things like this. These are the things he doesn't like about being a grown-up. Things like this. Reid and Juliette

had married shortly after Juliette had graduated from college. It was right before Reid went off to fight in the war. The drinking started after he got back and only got worse as time went on. He was a little surprised that those two ended up together but it was working out nicely until his drinking started.

He follows Nivedita out to play, trying to take his mind off the fact that he's an adult now with adult worries, adult friends and adult problems and as they have their catch in the purple-pink light of early evening her innocence is contagious and, for a brief moment, he can hit the pause button on his grown-up worries and be a kid again. He longs for the days of going to The Place. Where did the time go?

...

Later that night, as soft classical piano music plays in the background and dinner having finished up, David Paul is cleaning dishes, staring out the window, zoned out as he often is these days, not entirely present. Emilia sidles up to him.

"Hey. Earth to David Paul. You still with us?"

"Huh? Sorry. One of those days."

"Everything okay?"

David Paul hesitates.

"Just...thinking about the store. You know me. Sorry. Can't leave the store at the store. I probably don't need to be there on Saturdays and Sundays. I never see you guys."

"Those are your busiest days. Besides it's only for a few hours and we know it means a lot to you. We're fine."

"I know you are. Sometimes I wonder if now is the time to sell."

"Sell if you want but to another small business or a family who will take care of it like you do. Just don't be a sellout."

"We could be rich?"

"I don't care about being rich, I care about being happy."

"I'm not going to argue with you."

"Hey. Listen. In the end, everything works out. Always does, right?"

She gives him a kiss on the cheek and walks off to steal another hour to work on her latest piece.

David Paul, who can't help but admire Emilia's not only is the glass half full but overflowing outlook on life, is left to ponder things while finishing the dishes. He's not overly concerned about the store that was just a ruse. Truth he still thinks about that night so many years ago. Serretus.

...

Evening has turned to night, little Nivedita is sleeping soundly, piano music still quietly fills the house, and David Paul is in his fathers room.

His father still lay in the bed. In the coma. His once salt and pepper hair now a shade of grey that's just shy of white. The room is brighter and livelier, Emilia has painted the walls a cheery yellow with plenty of her paintings hanging on each wall. Aside from the feeding tube and an IV for nutrition he still doesn't need oxygen but he still has not woken up.

David Paul sit's right next to the bed, staring at him, same as when he was a boy. The look on his face: begging his father to wake up. Same. After all this time.

He squeezes his hand several times.

Nothing.

"Love you Dad."

He gets up and leaves the room, giving his Dad a tender pat on the shoulder as he exits.

He walks down the hallway to another room, piano music getting louder as he approaches the doorway.

"Hey Auntie."

"David Paul! How are you my boy?"

"You still got it. Sounds good."

"Getting harder to play. Darn arthritis. Fingers don't listen the way they used to. Ah well. Sit down. Stay with me for a bit. How are you? Tell me."

David Paul sits on the bench next to her.

"I'm okay."

"Just okay, huh?"

"You know just...life. Nothing major."

"I hope I did right by you David Paul."

"You absolutely did. I hope I didn't drive you too crazy."

"Nah. Well maybe a little. I kid, I kid. I'm proud of you I hope you know that."

David Paul nods.

"Well, I'll let you get back to your playing."

"It's not bothering Emilia is it? You would tell me?"

"No way. You artists stick together. She loves it."

"Ah. Very good, very good."

David Paul turns to address his aunt before exiting the room.

"Remember Auntie Pal: the silence between the notes."

"You got that right kiddo!"

...

Moments later David Paul is lying on the windshield of his car gazing up at the stars legs crossed, hands behind his head just like when he was a kid. It's a clear night with a waxing crescent moon so the stars are in full bloom.

"Hi Daddy."

"Hey kiddo. I thought you were sleeping."

"Mom said I could stay up a little longer. Said you looked like you could use some company."

He helps her up onto the car windshield and holds her close.

They both stare up.

"Is one of those Lucasia?" she asks.

"Yes."

"It's real?"

"Yes."

"Real, real?"

"Yes, yes," a playful tap on the nose for each yes and she giggles.

"Which one is it?"

David Paul scans the heavens, his finger tracking the sky.

"There."

"Are you going there someday?"

"No way. I'll be right here with you."

"Promise?"

"I promise kiddo."

They lie in silence the rest of the time staring up at the glorious night sky until Nivedita falls asleep and David Paul soon after. When he wakes up he performs the standard parental

rite of passage: carrying the sleeping child into the house without waking them.

...

Over the course of many hours the starry sky transitions to a virgin blue. A new day. Monday morning.

The family is going through the everyday-like-the-day-before dance moves that make up the ballet of the morning routine.

Scrambling from this task to that as time seems to speed up and there is never enough of it.

Waking before anyone wants, showers, teeth brushed, breakfast, lunches, the lobbing with abandon of the 'did you remembers' and the 'don't forgets'. It's always a rush.

"Wouldn't it be nice if things slowed down once in awhile?"

Emilia says as they part ways for the day.

"Hey we can dream right?" and they kiss goodbye.

Nivedita is with David Paul today and soon he's in the drop off line at school.

"Bye Daddy! I love you!"

"Love you more. Have a great day kiddo!"

As he drives away, the voicemail he left for Reid this morning (somehow fitting it into the madness of the routine) plays over and over in his head:

"Reid it's David Paul. Emilia said you called. Let me know what I can do. If you need to talk I'm here. If you need...anything,

I'm here. Call me, okay?....and Reid, I'll always have your back. Friends don't leave friends behind. Bye."

...

Not long after, David Paul is in the woods, yes those woods, staring over at The Fortress. He's on the Crazy Hoof side where now there's nary a sign of his burnt down shack. *Do I call him Crazy Hoof or Serretus? Because he did turn out to be crazy after all* David Paul thinks. He comes here often. Why exactly he's not sure. Sometimes it helps. Sometimes it hurts. About twenty minutes pass, he's gotten whatever it is he comes here for and leaves for a morning appointment before work and soon enough is pulling into the parking lot of a professional building, finds a spot and shuts off the car. Let's out a sigh. Hesitates for a moment. Not really something he wants to do, more something he knows he needs to do. Sometimes it helps. Sometimes it hurts.

David Paul sits alone in the small, softly lit waiting room (there's no receptionist, typical of a private therapy practice) Sifting through one magazine after the other while running the pros and cons of whether to keep the store through his head when his therapist, Dr. Tippett, comes out to gather him. She's about his age, thin, with kind eyes behind stylish glasses and brown hair worn in a loose ponytail and a thick knitted shawl around her shoulders.

"David Paul?"

...

In her office they sit across from one another, each in a comfortable IKEA chair, pleasantries are exchanged, a few standard updates given and soon enough they are in mid-session.

"I told a kid in my store that Lucasia was a real place yesterday. Told my daughter the same thing. They believed me."

"To you it is real."

"Not really. I just wanted it to be."

"You were just a child, an adult you trusted told you something was real."

"So then how am I any better? If I'm the adult, telling kids it's real."

"Because you know it isn't. Children need fantasy and fairy tales. Peter Pan isn't real but it's okay to tell a child he is, right?"

"I just feel like a fraud. Like him."

The therapist nods but does not say anything letting his last statement hang in the air and slowly fade out but skillfully maintains eye contact. Silence. She more comfortable with it than he and so after a few more moments he breaks it.

"Thing is, he was a good person. I know he was. And he was my friend. He just had his problems."

"He was a good person. And he believed it was real and that was how he was so convincing."

"But how would he know about my parents?"

"There's records of their accident I'm sure. Made up the rest. Filled in the gaps."

"But then the dream."

"The dream with your father?"

"Yes. I mean that's one of the things that made me believe him. Probably *the* thing. My father, in my dream, said to trust him. It was just a dream, but it was as clear as day."

"Remind me again. You don't have the dream anymore, correct?"

"That was the last one. Ever."

A beat. More silence until David Paul continues.

"I remember my friend Reid said the dream was just my subconscious connecting dots. I remember him saying that clear as day. I remember being mad at him because he didn't believe me. But he was right. He was right. And now I'm the fraud."

"David Paul you've taken a negative event in your life and turned it into a positive. Your store. It's amazing. You should be proud of yourself."

"I guess. The weird thing is opening the store was almost like I was trying to fulfill his dream. Like if I did what he should have done with that stuff, maybe he wouldn't have done what he did. I don't know. It's just—"

He considers if he should continue, it's all so silly.

"Something more you wanted to say?" she probes.

"In my heart I still believe him. I know that sounds crazy but I still believe it's real. I do. My heart tells me it is.

Sometimes I'm not sure why I come here. No offense. I didn't mean it like that. It's not you or anything."

"It's okay," she reassures, "Go on."

"It's just...I don't know if- I'll ever be able to get past this. To accept that Lucasia is a made-up place, a crazy old man's fantasy."

He shakes his head in frustration.

The therapist nods an understanding and empathetic nod.

"Can I ask you something?" he says.

"Of course," she replies.

"What is my diagnosis?"

"Your diagnosis?"

"Yes what have you diagnosed me with? Or however you put it."

"Ah. Yes. I suppose we should have discussed this after all these years. Er, post-traumatic stress disorder suffered from an incident in childhood resulting in general anxiety disorder and dysthymia."

"I see."

"Does that surprise you?"

"No, no. It's fine. I sort of assumed as much. Here's a question: what if I remain absolutely one hundred percent convinced that it's all real. Wouldn't that be like delusion or something? Schizophrenia even? If *I* believed it's real. Like really believed."

She takes her time to think about his question.

"Do you believe it's real?"

"Yes."

"I think we should take a few more sessions to talk about this before changing or altering your diagnosis. There's a chance you're, as they say, having a moment. If it continues, we can certainly talk about that and take it from there."

"I see. Of course."

...

The session wraps up in its normal unremarkable fashion and David Paul walks towards his car. He questions even himself as to whether Lucasia is real. It's like a belief in... in what? He isn't sure. A belief in something that isn't there that can't be proven it isn't there and yet you *know* is there. He visibly shakes his head to wipe the whole business from the forefront of his thoughts and thinking. Enough of Lucasia. Real or not does it really matter? Not like he was going there anytime soon or ever.

And so as he approaches his car, his head cleared of Lucasia if only momentarily, his stress revs right back up when he sees the envelope under his cars windshield wiper. A ticket? Really? Just what he needed today. He looked up for the bird that had had oysters the night before to fly right over him and unload. It was that kind of day.

"Terrific," he says and swipes it from beneath the wiper. It's not a ticket at all but a plain envelope. Yellowed and worn. Aged. His heart sinks when he sees his name written on the front. But it's not the sight of his name that brings the butterflies, it's the neat cursive script that it's written in. The same writing upon the thank you note that accompanied the gifts Crazy Hoof left he and his friends so long ago. His heart is banging inside his chest like two cymbals being crashed together by a hyperactive percussionist. He rips the envelope open while at the same time looking around to see whoever left it might still be in the area but there is no one.

Inside is a letter. Written in that same neat cursive script. The date written in the upper right-hand corner, is one he recognizes immediately because it was the very month, day, and year before they were to leave. Before the shack burned down. He gulps down the lump in his throat and reads.

My Good Friend David Paul,

I wrote this to you long ago. And you've probably wondered why you are just receiving it now. I understand my death may have been traumatic for you and I do apologize for that. There was no spaceship to get to Lucasia as I'm sure you have figured out by now. The means to travel there is a scientifically complex one but the best way I can describe it is the transference of your essence to a cloned version of yourself that I have waiting on Lucasia. Take as much time as you need to process that before reading on but please do continue reading on.

Now, here comes the hard part: that clone will be your 11-year old self same as when I left you so many years ago. Your essence will transfer and your Lucasian body will receive it and you will awaken there, on Lucasia. Easy peasy lemon squeezy as you were fond of saying.

But there's more. Your current (by my estimates 35-year old body) will remain on Earth. Physically you will be fine, but you'll have no consciousness and so you will slip into a coma until such time that your essence returns from Lucasia. It's important that you find a safe place to lie down. That you not be driving or be anywhere that you could hurt yourself when you lose consciousness.

I debated whether to give this letter to you sooner but decided against it for the following reasons. Knowing a day would come when you could slip into a coma, though far away when you are

eleven years old, as the day got closer it could and likely would affect how you would live your life. Whether to get married, have children, or if it would have made you go crazy in some way. Driven to you to or beyond the brink of insanity. I assure you, that I debated this for quite some time and my final decision was made with your best interest in mind.

I hope that you will forgive me if you feel I've made the wrong choice or mislead you. Perhaps I should have told you all of this ahead of time. In person. But none of these choices are easy ones. I wish it were more straightforward.

Now, when you arrive on Lucasia you will only have the memories of your 11-year-old self. This is by design. An 11-year-old with the memories and experiences of a 35-year-old could prove disastrous in my estimation.

Once your mission is accomplished on Lucasia, your essence will return to your 35-year-old body and you will wake up back on Earth.

Time on Lucasia goes by slower than time on Earth. About one year for every ten years. Before you get upset do not think that you will be in a coma on Earth 10 years for a mere one year stay on Lucasia. Using my knowledge of mega-quantum physics as well as other sciences not yet discovered on Earth, I have brought Earth's passing of time into synchronization with Lucasia. A one-to-one ratio. This will drastically reduce the time you are

in a coma on Earth. Once again, easy peasy and so on and so forth.

I do not know where in your life you are when you read this letter. Career. Children. No children. Married or single. Education. Relationships and on and on. And so, I apologize for any disruption all this may cause you and they (if there is a 'they'). Deception was never my intent. As I had always stated the choice was to be yours.

I'll see you soon on Lucasia my friend. I certainly look forward to it. Though again you will not recall this letter or anything after the age of eleven.

Fondly...

Your Friend,

Serretus

The banging inside his chest is now the same percussionist only in a manic state and pounding on a big round bass drum instead of cymbals.

One more time he looks around for not only who may have left the note but for answers but he finds neither.

He gets into his car and slams the door shaking his head.

He crumples up the note and throws it onto the floor of his car then screams at the top of his lungs until he cannot any longer. He starts the car and drives off.

"I'm done with you Serretus. I'm so done."

...

The doorbell rings and David is first to it, Nivedita sliding in her socks across the floor and slamming into him.

"Hey, there they are," says Juliette her two daughters in tow. Her youngest is Nivedita's age, her oldest is eleven. They scramble into the house and run off with Nivedita the moment they see her while David takes some trays of food from Juliette.

"How's it going?"

"I've been better."

"Reid?"

"Don't want to talk about it but yes *him*."

"How about a drink?" though he immediately regrets asking, given Reid's recent struggles.

"Music to my ears," she says though.

They make their way through the kitchen, then dining room, then sunroom where sliding glass doors lead to the backyard where the lawn and landscaping are a welcoming average at best. They aren't showing off and they aren't trying to win any contests. They do their best but aren't obsessed with the perfect lawn over more important things in life. There are two folding tables

setup with trays of food and condiments. The kids play on the swing set and David goes to a cooler labeled adult beverages and sifts out a beer, opens it and hands it to Juliette.

"A little something to take the edge off," he says smiling.

"Thank you sir," she says taking a generous sip, "Ahhhh. Hits the spot."

"I bet," he says.

"How are you doing? I know this is sometimes a tough time of year for you," says Juliette referring to the fact that this annual gathering of the five friends (usually five anyways, no Reid this year) tends to fall close to or on the date when Serretus's shack crumbled in flames so long ago. Today, by chance, it's actually twenty-five years to the day.

"Nah I'm fine," says David Paul, a half-truth, especially given the letter from Serretus yesterday, but he doesn't have to elaborate as Emilia comes running over and gives Juliette a hug and clinks her bottle with hers and then Rudy and Cooper walk up to greet her as well.

Cooper stands at well over six feet but still with that skinny boyish frame, his unkempt hair has a few pinches of grey, and he looks as if he could be a college professor which is good because he is, teaching Physics at State.

Rudy is still stocky, height to weight ratio going a bit off the rails but overall he wears it well. His smile is still

infectious as is his glass-half-full-outlook that rivals that of Emilia's. He looks nothing like a college professor which is ironic because he too is indeed a college professor, teaching Theological Studies at a nearby liberal arts college. He and Coopers 'Faith versus Science' debates are the stuff of local legend.

Auntie Pal nimbly walks out of the house her joints creaking with each step and greets each with enthusiasm, glad to have seen them all grow into the fine adults they have.

As the day goes on and everyone has had their fill (and then some) of food and drink they settle in a circle of Adirondack chairs for some light chatter and banter. Juliette grateful that no one has brought up Reid, grateful for a break from all of *that*. The three children are in the house, out of the house, playing on the swing set, rolling in the grass, making up games on the fly, their never-ending energy on full display but they keep each other occupied and it's as if the adults aren't even there. Auntie Pal plays at times as well, then joins the adult circle for a rest until she is dragged back in by the energetic trio.

The conversation is light and there's a lot of laughing and memories shared. David Paul is enjoying himself though he's just noticing that he is suddenly sweating a lot which is kind of annoying to the point where his clothes feel soaked and he looks

up and checks that they are in the shade. They are and the sun is closer to setting than not. It wasn't that hot out earlier today, a crisp fall day, so it must be cooler now. He's only had a drink and a half, too. Maybe it was the grilling? But that was at least a couple hours ago and there wasn't much of it to do and he's been hydrating. Now the spots in his vision start as do the heart palpitations and he quietly excuses himself, rushing to the kitchen where he splashes his face with cold water.

Perhaps it was the letter from Serretus yesterday that spooked him and he's stressing from it more than he'd like to admit.

Sometimes repressing that sort of thing makes it rear its ugly head in untimely psychosomatic ways. He tries to call out to Emilia but can't seem to speak and his legs begin to shake like idling lawn mowers, and he holds onto the counter to steady himself.

He looks outside and sees the group of adults still in the circle of chairs. All five of them. Then there's ten because his vision has doubled and his panic revs to higher RPM's afraid of what's happening to him. Every instinct tells him to lie down because he's going to pass out, but he takes one last look out the window because there's shouting coming from outside. Did something happen to one of the kids? Nope.

Rudy, Cooper, and Juliette are passed out with Emilia and Auntie Pal kneeling down, yelling and shaking them to wake and arouse them but to no avail.

His legs won't hold any longer and David Paul is on his knees, one hand still grasping the counter.

"Wh-What did- What did you do Serretus?"

Then all goes dark.

PART II

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A white, sterile room, with ultramodern, otherworldly decor.

There's the beeping of various medical devices.

In the center of the room is a round bed with raised, cushioned sides all the way around. A slender, paper-thin bar moves slowly front-to-back, front-to-back along the raised sides, monitoring vital signs and a lot more.

We're not in Kansas anymore, Toto.

Laying in the bed is David Paul.

11-year-old David Paul.

He's in a light-grey one-piece, that's soft like cotton.

His eyelids flicker like butterfly wings and he wakes up.

Sleepy and disorientated, he sits up in bed, ducking out of the way of the slow rhythmically moving scanner bar each time it passes.

"Hello?" he calls out through a dried, cottony throat.

He gets out of the bed, noting the floor is warm on his bare feet.

He walks towards a door, part scared and cautious, part curious and impetuous. The door divides into four pieces that fold in a neat way and are absorbed into the wall.

Through the doorway he walks into a much larger room. This one has little in the way of furnishings either. Very nondescript. Wherever he is minimalist appears to be the preferred style. The half of the room opposite the door he just came through is one giant, curved, floor to ceiling window. It easily dwarfs the two figures standing before it, their backs to David Paul. One, a hooded figure. The other a slender bot, basically a pole with wheels, that strikes a chord of familiarity with David Paul though he can't quite place it exactly. Through the window David Paul can see that the landscape is a snowy one. Arctic-like. Near white-out. It's day but three moons can be seen in the sky and the debris of a destroyed fourth has formed a permanent ring around the planet. In the distance is a magnificent range of mountains. Massive in size and strangely shaped: more tall than wide and all tilt one way like they could all fall over at any point, formed this way over millennia by cruel and punishing winds.

The bot turns to David Paul.

"Hello David Paul. My name is L/E. Welcome," it says in a synthesized feminine voice.

Then the hooded figure turns towards David Paul.

"Hello my friend. Welcome to Lucasia," the figure says removing the hood.

Serretus.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"We made it?"

"We did indeed. Do you remember much of the trip?"

"I don't remember any of it."

"It was an eventful landing to say the least. I'm glad you're okay. Er, what do you remember last?"

David Paul searches for what he remembers last, his brain foggy.

"Last thing I remember... is...is being in bed at night waiting for Auntie to go to sleep so I could get to your place for the trip."

"Mmm. Interesting. A slight case of interstellar travel amnesia. It's quite common and not surprising given the rough landing we endured. But all will be fine. Perfectly normal. Come, let us get you into proper dress and get going. We have much to do and little time with which to do it. Matters on Lucasia have grown worse."

...

In another, more unfinished, cavernous part of the Ice Fortress (as Serretus told him it is called) David Paul and Serretus go down several staircases and walk along many thin catwalks. It's all very roughed in and rickety, unfinished. They end up in yet another room.

David Paul is now dressed in Lucasian clothing. Unassuming, comfortable and loose-fitting, made from the same cotton-like

material the clothing he woke up in is. The pants are baggy but wrap his ankles and waist tightly, the top a sort of robe, perhaps closer to a kimono but taught at the wrists. The shoes he is given are similar. Soft and comfortable, more like a slipper than anything but they ride up high on his shin like a boot. Overall more utilitarian than not.

Bots scurry about carrying out various functions according to their make and programming and David Paul is in awe at the very sight of them.

Serretus presses some buttons on a keypad attached to a telescopic pole hanging from the ceiling.

On the floor in front of them a small one inch by one inch square of blue light glows then the square extends along the floor forming a glowing line, one inch wide by about forty inches in length. As it pulsates there it then rises into a thin slab of blue light. A doorway. The light within the borders of this rectangle-shaped slab fade to reveal a world within. David Paul walks around it and to his shock this other world is truly inside the portal door. And then it dawns on him, he is pretty sure he knows what this is. A fourth dimensional biospheric domain. The ones he read about yet he can't believe they are actually real.

"David Paul take note. Your time inside this fourth dimensional biospheric domain will be many months, years if we wanted but it

will be but minutes here on Lucasia. An efficient way to train you up to say the least."

David Paul wants to ask more questions about the fourth dimensional biospheric domain but he read enough about it from one of the books on the subject Serretus had given him and his friends. They were actually not native to Lucasia. Rather an invention of Serretus and his family back on his home planet of Muren-Five. In sum, they were small (relatively speaking, they could be thousands of square miles in area if constructed properly) artificial worlds built up over a period of time that existed separate from the space and time of the actual world they were on; Lucasia in this case.

Serretus takes an exotic Lucasian hourglass, with bulbs that are large pyramidal shapes and a curvy and winding neck and a glowing purple liquid that drips once turned over, simple yet sophisticated in appearance, a masterpiece of exquisite design and time worn craftsmanship, and turns it over and the glowing purple liquid from the top starts to flow at a dizzying pace through the thin neck.

He gestures to the portal door and they both go through.

...

On the otherside of the portal door they stand upon an outdoor steel platform, that rests upon stilts raised many stories off the ground. There are no walls, though there are guardrails, and

no roof though there is an orange cloth covering to shield them from the scorching sun. Yes, the scenery is in stark contrast to the snowy one they just left. It is rocky, desert-like, with windswept cliffs of clay and buttes everywhere and an overall brownish-orange color motif. There are places on Earth like it but not exactly like it. The difference mostly subtle are there, nonetheless. For example, the colors jump a bit more as if out of a cartoon and the shapes of the cliffs and buttes are stretched out, again almost cartoonish like. Off in the distance David Paul notes a T-shaped structure, something that look almost like an oil rig back on Earth only this one in the middle of this land of rock and sand. He guesses, rightly so, that this is their destination.

The portal door, closes, and slides down into a thin blue strip on the floor and then the strip collapse to a square and then the square fades.

A short, stubby creature approaches them. A Nahwri. He is David Paul's height but stockier with a rusty orange toned skin and a grizzled and wise step to his gait. A bulky and overgrown mustache covers his entire mouth and chin so when he is speaking one can only see the stiff mustache hairs ruffling about.

David Paul is slightly taken aback by this non-human. Why 'slightly taken aback' as opposed to 'in complete shock' at sight of another intelligent life form the likes of which there

is nothing like back on Earth? It's simple really, this species was one of the many action figures Serretus had given he and his friends. Still, seeing an action figure and seeing the living thing right in front of you are two very different experiences. "David Paul I'd like you to meet Charsnick," says Serretus. Charsnick looks him up and down and speaks in an unfamiliar language.

"He says 'Hello and welcome'," says Serretus.

...

They ride a sleek, bullet-shaped elevator to ground level and board an orange-brown stage-coach-like craft that hovers above the ground by way of being tethered to a hydrogen filled balloon above and is then pulled by an Ogolton. A camel-like creature with purple-tinted fur, paws as wide as dinner plates and a ho-hum demeanor. The Ogolton drops scat with abandon.

Their destination is the platform further away, practically a speck on the horizon viewing it now from ground level.

Upon arrival at the structure it is anything but a speck. It is a humongous thing, a flat octagon on top, held up by eight towering columns.

Serretus, Charsnick and David Paul exit the hovering stage coach and walk into the cool shadow cast by the massive structure, a relief from the unforgiving heat of this land. Serretus walks

with the other two to one of the columns where there is an elevator built in, and to David Pauls surprise, bids him goodbye.

"This is where I leave you."

"You're leaving me?!"

"You'll be fine. You will undertake flight training here. There is a high likelihood it could prove to be an important skillset, as we discussed previously. Charsnick and his family will look after you."

Serretus notes David Paul's worried and skeptical look.

"I trust him with my life."

"But I can't even understand him."

"Me either, most of the time," says Serretus tongue and cheek, "You'll work it out. He's been working on his Standard and you will pick up Nahwriese quite quickly I'm certain."

"What about you. Where are you going?"

"Back to the Ice Fortress. I have other matters to attend to. I'll be back to retrieve you. The months will go by in no time."

"Months? Wait months. One month, two months how many months?"

Serretus says nothing but smiles, gives David Paul a pat on the shoulder and climbs aboard the hover-coach. A firm clack of the reigns accompanied by a clicking sound with his mouth and the Ogolton turns the operation around and begins the lumbering

journey back to the arrivals-and-departures platform where he will crossover back to the Ice Fortress.

"It's good to have you here David Paul," he says over his shoulder.

...

David Paul and Charsnick ride the elevator to the top of their platform and David Paul sees Serretus off in the distance, now a tiny dot on the heated landscape.

They reach the top and exit. The wind atop the platform is aggressive this high up and David Paul must steady himself. The octagonal-shaped landing platform has markings and lights like one would imagine a platform for such a purpose would have and its size makes David Paul forget he is even on a platform (until he looks over the guardrail and sees they are over sixty stories up).

In the middle of the platform is a seen-better-days, but at the same time glorious aircraft with the call sign MAL051748. Its colors are a mixture of greys and browns, with it's call sign letters and numbers painted on its sides in a faded yellow (except for the number five which is a faded red).

It has a massive wingspan and giant engines and its landing gear are elliptical rubber treads taller than two adults. But its signature feature is an all-glass cockpit that sits beneath the craft. Once again, David Paul, has seen a toy version of this

aircraft. But here again there is quite a difference between seeing the small toy version that he could hold in his hand and the actual aircraft that is before him now.

Charsnick motions for David Paul to go up a yellow ladder in the back. David Paul, followed by Charsnick climbs the ladder to the top where Charsnick opens a round hatch and they climb down into the belly of the hull where there are slits for windows and six seats (two rows of three) each with a connector that hooks into a track system in the ceiling above.

Charsnick sits in one of the front seats and motions for David Paul to sit in the seat next to him. Then he hands David Paul a helmet. It doesn't fit, too big, which David Paul tries to explain to him but Charsnick can see this to be the problem, sizes David Paul up and picks another helmet which fits nice and snug.

"Thank you," says David Paul and Charsnick nods and says what David Paul assumes to be 'You're welcome'.

Next, the floor of the hull divides and slides into the walls exposing the glass cockpit below and their chairs drop down giving David Paul that big-hill-on-a-rollercoaster feeling.

David Paul, feet dangling, takes in his new surroundings. He has a full 360-degree view, front, back and sides, plus down under his feet and a little above where the cockpit meets the hull.

The toy versions of MAL-class fighters were one thing but now to

be inside one, about to go for a ride, to take flight in one, was something quite different.

In front of David Paul is the most intimidating and overwhelming array of buttons, gauges, dials and other instrumentation he could imagine. A variety of controls, monitors, knobs and other means of handling the ship all at his disposal. All of it hangs from telescopic poles and cables originating from up in the hull ceiling.

Charsnick, instructs David Paul to put his dangling feet up on the foot pedals and leans over to David Paul's instrument panel and presses buttons and flips switches.

Lights in the cockpit come on, there's a whirring sound, and a voice from the omniscient built-in speaker system that perforates all parts of the craft speaks:

"Hello sir, my name is MAL051748. MAL for short if you please. Welcome aboard. Shall I prepare for take-off?"

The voice of the aircraft is a cheery one, male, smooth, and elegant sounding.

Charsnick talks to David Paul as if David Paul can understand him, encouraging him to reply to MAL: "Goonda. Goonda."

"Oh, um, hello. My name is David Paul Powers."

"David Paul. Hello, sir. Shall I prepare for takeoff?"

Charsnick nods his head 'yes', chiming in this time appearing to talk to the ship.

"Gi, gi. Gitonga, gitonga."

"Very well. Full take off. I have the controls."

Charsnick talks to David Paul again, growing impatient that David Paul cannot understand him.

"He wants you to confirm that I have the controls. So, when I say 'I have the controls' and, if you agree with this, then you say 'you have the controls', meaning me, I have them, the controls. Let's try again. Eh-hem: I have the controls."

A beat. Charsnick looks at David Paul.

"You have the controls," David Paul says, not so sure.

Charsnick nods his head and claps vigorously, happy with this small win. He will take it. It's the little things, right?

The engines awaken with a deafening roar and even more buttons inside light up on David Paul's instrument panel.

The aircraft rises from the platform and David Paul nervously grabs at his chair. The mighty craft hovers in place above the platform for a moment so the landing gear can retract in, then rises higher and higher still, until, once high enough, the rear engines spit fire and the craft lunges forward.

David Paul, not liking this at all (*what have I gotten myself into?* he thinks), is sucked back into his seat as the aircraft flies through the canyons and buttes and even climbs into the clouds.

If David Paul had had lunch, he would have lost it by now or be losing it at this very moment.

Charsnick speaks to David Paul, shouting over the rumble of the engines.

MAL knows David Paul cannot understand Charsnick and so translates.

"He says not to worry. You get used to it."

"Whoa boy I hope so," replies David Paul, not so sure. *Why do I have the feeling that if I looked into a mirror, I would be some shade of green?* He wonders.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Many months have passed inside the fourth dimensional biospheric domain (while only minutes passed on Lucasia) and into one of the glorious panoramic landscapes the aircraft MAL comes flying in, engines quaking an angry roar.

Inside, David Paul expertly flies the craft, his hair longer, his skin tanned from exposure to the unrelenting sun during his time here.

MAL rockets through the canyons and rocky outcroppings, one moment flying under buttresses and then somersaulting and looping over them the next.

Performing hairpin turns in mid-air and other acrobatic feats of flight.

They fly high, dashing through wispy clouds, a flock of grub gulls, the size of small cars, delightedly gliding in the aircrafts air wake then fly low to the ground as MAL's speed is ramped up to incredible levels and dust and dirt are swooped up in its circular wake turbulence and wildlife scramble for cover. David Paul shouts to the running herd of wildebeest-like animals called alcelaphine, "Sorry!"

Then it's back up into the sky, MAL's engines booming with unrestrained power and the sound barrier is broken several times over.

David Paul pilots the craft into a corkscrew turn and then downward and now MAL is headed straight for a rocky wall.

"Sir, I really think I should take over."

David Paul doesn't answer. He is in full concentration mode (though a cheeky smirk does make an appearance).

"Sir, I would really prefer it if you allowed me to take control. I do not think what you are about to do is well thought out. I don't have a great feeling about this!"

The wall gets closer and closer and closer which prompts MAL to blurt out, "Preparing high-impact emergency systems."

Lights blink with urgency and alarms beep and whir.

"Crash imminent. Crash imminent," a sedated synthesized voice within the craft announces.

At the last moment David Paul yanks back on the controls and pulls MAL upwards into a near ninety-degree turn missing the wall by mere inches as they head skywards.

"Woo-hoo! Yea! Yea!" shouts David Paul.

"This is not funny anymore! Centimeters! We missed that wall by only centimeters."

"Come on MAL, I'd say by a meter at least. We can get closer next time."

David Paul fingers at levers, switches, and buttons on his instrument panel like a maestro on a grand piano playing the most complex of pieces.

"Now for some real fun. You ready?"

"Oh please no. Don't say it."

"Tuukka's Talon."

"Oh, you know how much I hate Tuukka's Talon!"

David Paul pushes a lever and MAL goes surging forward.

Tuukka's Talon is a rocky, nature-made structure, in the shape of a bird of prey's talon such that the "thumb" and "fingers" touch forming a hole through which one could fly through, if one were daring enough. It is quite large, if you were standing upon it you would be dwarfed by it. But for an aircraft, especially one the size of MAL to fly through it, there is not a lot of room for error. To say the least.

A meeble, a small mammal about the size of a large, long house cat but with the temperament and gathering instinct of a chipmunk, scatters about the bottom half of Tuukka's Talon scavenging for scraps that she can store for the dry season. The ground begins to shake, tiny pebbles and rocks move along the surface, and her self-preservation instinct has her running for cover immediately.

Off in the distance MAL is speeding furiously towards Tuukka's Talon.

Inside, David Paul, is in full concentration mode, still as a stone except to make a few requisite adjustments.

"Any chance I could have the controls?" MAL asks in a panic.

"I have the controls," David Paul reassures the craft.

"Of course you do. Terrific. Good bye world."

David Paul tilts the aircraft thirty degrees.

"Sir you are at thirty degrees left bank. You do know you need to be at a minimum of twenty-eight degrees?"

"We can do this MAL."

"But the computers are calculating a minimum of twenty-eight degrees and they're never wrong! We've never gone in at thirty degrees," MAL protests as Tuukka's Talon is fast approaching. But there is no response from David Paul and MAL goes soaring through Tuukka's Talon, just making it, a wing tip scratching the edges of the rocky structure.

David Paul looks back at Tuukka's Talon, triumphant.

"Twenty-eight degrees! We did it!"

"Too close. Too close, sir. Please my circuit boards can't take much more of this."

"Ha ha! But we did it! Let's see how close we can get to the ground. Full descent!"

And with that David Paul cuts the engines completely and the craft floats in zero gravity, as if held up by the hand of an invisible giant.

"Stall. Stall. Stall," the monotonous synthesized voice from within MAL alarms again.

Once they begin to fall David Paul throttles the engines to full power and they shoot straight for the ground at top speed.

"Come on MAL, give me full power, full thrust, full speed."

"Re-directing all non-essential energy sources to main thrust engines. But who am I to argue? I'm only the aircraft."

Any outside observer watching the craft roar towards the ground at this rapid speed, nose down and perfectly perpendicular to the ground, would be a fool not to bet it would crash.

"I'm going to fry a system board," MAL shouts.

"We can do this," David Paul retorts.

They get closer. And closer. There's no question they will crash.

"Oh I can't look! Shutting off visual and tactile sensors," says MAL.

"Whatever helps you relax."

Then just when it appears there is no turning back David Paul pulls up at an impossible last second, performing a full ninety-degree turn.

He did it. They didn't crash, as they shoot right along the ground, mere inches from it, at an incomprehensible speed.

"Ok, *that* was a centimeter!" says David Paul, a smile from ear to ear.

"You will be the end of me, sir, I've no doubt of that! You will be the end of me."

The aircraft turns upwards flying off towards the horizon where it takes a wide turn skirting the edges of the 4d biospheric domain causing some tiles that project what makes the land look like it goes on forever flutter.

Then David Paul maneuvers the craft high into the sky, ratchets down the speed and they soar gently and slowly (relatively speaking of course) amongst the clouds.

David Paul removes his helmet, headset and some other flight gear, flips this switch and that and his chair rises up into MAL's hull and he kicks his feet up as the sound of the passing wind and the gentle swaying back and forth of the chair has an almost sedative like effect and he's completely relaxed, at peace.

"Okay MAL. Enough for today. Take us in. You have the controls."

"Will wonders never cease. I have the controls. Thank goodness. I live to see another day," as the great craft starts to decrease its altitude.

"Beginning descent to landing platform," says MAL while several hatches all along its fuselage open and dozens of remBots, small half-sphere-shaped bots, that cling to the outside of MAL perform cleaning and maintenance tasks. The little bots speak in a mechanical language of clicks and clacks and MAL is quick to chastise them for going too rough on the cleaning or pulling a wrong wire or really just about anything they do not perform to

perfection and the remBots argue back and sling insults MAL's way. Such as the crafts age and how it belongs in a museum. That sort of thing.

As they close in on the landing platform the wing mounted hover engines, that allow it to stay in place while in mid-air, fire on.

Then MAL stops forward movement and they float high above in one spot then slowly descend to the landing platform guided by flashing, colored landing lights.

The landing gear emerge, and the glorious craft lowers to a gentle touchdown; the hydraulics cushioning the landing.

"Ah. Terra firma. Thank the great creator," MAL says.

David Paul pops out of the exit hatch on top of the crafts hull, latches his helmet to his flight suit, both of which are now personalized with painted logos and patches of various flight accomplishments, and, skipping the rungs, fearlessly slides down the ladder, his hands and feet pressed to the outside of the rails, landing like a skilled gymnast at the bottom.

"Thanks MAL, that was great."

"You're quite welcome, sir. But 'great'? Really? Not how I would describe it but if you say so."

David Paul looks MAL over.

"Everything seems to be in place."

An assistBot comes over to take his helmet, gloves and respiratory pack from him.

"Thank you."

The 'Bot responds with a nod and a "click-clock" (which means "you're welcome").

On the far edge of the landing platform in his utility shed, Charsnick is sewing a patch onto a piece of sacred Nahwri cloth. It is the last of many patches he has sewn onto the cloth, all an indication of David Paul's progress as a pilot. He's now mastered the craft.

Charsnick approaches David Paul on the platform, fighting the winds attempt to blow him off, hands him the cloth and gives him a congratulatory pat on the back.

"Wow. Thank you."

"Coma hai togotta?" *How was the ride?*

"Fantastic."

"Beta conna grota? *Any problems?*

"None at all," says David Paul. "Hindacon." *Perfect.*

"Ei chre goloto!" *I can do better!*

"Goloto?" *Better? "I'd like to see that."*

But Charsnick is not listening any longer as he takes his toolBot and tool bag and heads to MAL to fine tune, tweak and repair. Charsnick is a master mechanic, specializing on the

older MAL-class fighters, and he takes tremendous pride in his work.

"Eh, you watch," he yells back to David in Standard the two having learned one another's native tongue over these last months.

Charsnicks wife and two children join him. The children play on MAL. He and his wife argue. She shouts at him and he throws up his hands in a "you're right, you're right" gesture.

David Paul looks on, sentimental embers warming his heart. He's grown close to this kind family who has fostered him for the last eight months. Then something else gets his attention. He spots a figure, just beyond MAL and Charsnick's family, standing at the edge of the platform. The wind and the heat wave effect coming off of the platform have him wondering if it is a mirage. He squints to see better.

Then it registers.

Serretus.

David Paul sprints to the other side of the vast platform to greet him.

"The time passes quickly does it not?" says Serretus unable to hide a smile.

"Hardly felt like a week."

"I see your flying has come a long way."

David Paul shrugs off the compliment.

"It's time to go back my friend. We have much to do. We packed your things while you were in flight."

David Paul looks back to MAL and Charsnick and family, not thrilled he has to leave. He's grown quite comfortable here.

"Time is of the essence. Please make your goodbye brief."

David Paul runs to MAL first.

"MAL. I've leaving. Thank you for everything. You've been a good friend. A great one."

"It's been an honor flying with you, sir. Scared out of my wits most of the time but an honor none the less. I consider you a friend and I don't make friends easily. And, I do hope our paths cross again."

"I hope so too."

David Paul then says his good-byes to Charsnick's wife and children who are all crying, not wanting him to go.

By now, it is dusk, as the little hover-coach plods along back to the arrivals-and-departures platform. Charsnick, Serretus, and David Paul are all crammed onto the bench that sits atop the coach, with Charsnick at the reins and David Paul and Serretus. They arrive at the arrivals-and-departures portal door platform, take the elevator to the top and pass through the portal door back into the Ice Fortress. David Paul is not sure why Charsnick came back through to the Ice Fortress as well but doesn't care, he is grateful for the extra time, however small, to spend with

his friend. He notes that the hourglass that Serretus had turned over before they went through has hardly made progress. Serretus was right, his time in the fourth dimensional biospheric domain was months while mere minutes passed by here at the Ice Fortress.

They walk back through innards of the Ice Fortress, along the rickety catwalks to the large round room where David Paul first met up with Serretus and L/E.

Serretus stares out the window not saying a word or looking at David Paul. Lost in thought perhaps. Or maybe, more likely, wanting to give Charsnick and David Paul time to say goodbye. David Paul and Charsnick just stand there.

David Paul breaks the silence.

"So? What now?"

"Now? We journey to the Hidden Fortress. There, we go before the Council of The Wise and locate the Child Crystals. My instrumentation is there. The *real* FinderEngine9000. This serviceBot will show you to a room so you can change and get ready. There are clothes and supplies for you. We will be leaving shortly. Time is of the essence."

The serviceBot approaches David Paul, "Hello sir. Please follow me, sir. Thank you, sir."

David Paul turns to Charsnick.

"Dar vas." *Thank you.* "Ba udo jo fredo bal ro?" *Will you be coming with us?*

Charsnick shakes his head no.

"Eh, no, no. I have my family here. My wife would, eh, how you say, 'murder me' if I left. And more work to do. Important work."

"I understand," says David Paul. "Dar vas. Dar vas." *Thank you. Thank you.*

Charsnick begins to tear up.

He grabs David Paul and hugs hard and won't let go until David Paul is forced to break the embrace.

"Edo. Edo." *Go. Go.* Charsnick waves him away, his wiry mustache dripping with tears and snot while David Paul exits through the doorway trailing the serviceBot.

...

Another bot, one with a large display screen for a head approaches Serretus.

"Commander Sloane for you, sir," the screenBot says.

Serretus gestures to a room off to the side. A door divides into four, they go in, then the door closes, the four pieces recombining into one.

The screen illuminates with the image of the massive cybernetic warrior, Commander Sloane.

"So, you did it then. You brought him here?" says Sloane, his voice is deep and synthesized.

"What choice did I have?"

"You had no right. His mother would not have approved."

"The Head Councilor approved and you were a part of that meeting as I understand it. And his mother is dead, just like the rest. He is our only chance of recovering the Child Crystals."

"You seem quite confident that he can. What if he can't?"

"What if he can. Would it kill you to be a little positive now and again? I trained him to find them."

"Okay. Then what? He finds the Child Crystals and you'll send him home? And that's it?"

"The choice to stay or leave is his and his alone as was the choice to come here in the first place. I've brought him here to locate the Child Crystals but even you have to admit he has the potential to do more. If he so chooses. He's already using his powers. You should see him flying MAL."

"He's flying? What does that have to do with finding the Child Crystals?"

"D'Votner said--"

"Don't tell me what D'Votner said."

"Any sign of him? D'Votner that is?" asks Serretus.

"No. Good riddance, I say."

"I hope he's okay," says Serretus, more to himself than to Sloane.

"I don't like any of this. Bringing the boy here," says Sloane.

"If you have a better idea, I'm all ears. This was not my first choice either Commander Sloane. But it's the last resort. What else is there?"

"You should never have brought him into this!" yells Sloane with such ferocity that the speakers on the screenBot pop and a drizzle of smoke snakes out and up.

Nothing is said for a few moments then Serretus breaks the silence.

"Have you seen him yet?" asks Serretus.

Sloane says nothing, just looks away, arms crossed.

"Here look," says Serretus tapping some buttons on the screenBot's chest and videos of David Paul during his time in the 4D biospheric domain play. Sloane is silent as he watches.

"If anything happens to him..." says Sloane, the sound undulating due to the speakers being blow earlier.

"That boy is like my own child. I'll not let anything happen to him. I'd gladly give my own life to save his," says Serretus with a firm tone of resolve.

"I say to you again: You had no right bringing him here."

"Well, he's here now and we must be on our way. I've no time for this circular debate. If that is all. I must be going Commander."

Serretus whacks the screenBot upside it's head and the screen fizzles out, "Eeeeeeeek," the screenBot squeaks.

And Serretus walks off, frustrated to say the least.

...

In a different section of the enormous Ice Fortress, one David Paul has not been to, Serretus walks alone down a series of hallways.

There's a beeping sound and he retrieves an audcomm (audio communication) device from his belt.

"Yes?"

"The boy is ready, sir," a serviceBots voice says over the audcomm.

"Very good. Tell him I'll be there shortly. I've one more item to attend to."

"Very well, sir."

Serretus clicks off the audcomm, continuing on down the long lonely hallway until he comes to an elevator and steps on.

It's an open concept one with thin, sparse rails to prevent one from falling off and takes it down many, many floors exiting onto a catwalk which hugs a wall of ice. At the end of this he goes down a short set of stairs through a doorway and onto a

balcony that overlooks a vast hollowed-out hangar, nine stories high at least.

There waiting for him is Charsnick.

They stand side by side never taking their eyes off what is far below in the cavernous, nearly empty, room.

"Eh, good kid. Hopefully D'Votner was correct about his needing flying lessons. I don't understand it myself but either way it was nice having him," says Charsnick.

"D'Votner's record speaks for itself," replies Serretus.

"But it's nowhere near perfect," says Charsnick.

"Future seeing is not a perfect art," says Serretus.

"Eh, have you been able to locate him?" asks Charsnick.

"No and that's concerning," says Serretus.

"Eh, you know him, always traveling. Past, futures, what have you," says Charsnick.

Serretus doesn't reply this time.

"He will turn up I'm sure," says Charsnick.

"Your Standard has gotten quite good I must say," says Serretus, changing the subject.

"Eh, I learned from the boy, he learn from me. Good kid. Very good. Take care of him," says Charsnick.

Serretus nods but that's all.

Again there's that slight drizzle of silence between them, Charsnick breaks it.

"The boy has potential, no doubts there," says Charsnick.

"He will make a fine warrior."

"You will send him for training then. With--"

"One thing at a time, old friend. One thing at a time. The Council of The Wise will want to weigh in I'm sure."

"Eh, if Council has their way, his only task will be to locate the Child Crystals. Seems like such a waste."

"You think it a waste to locate the Child Crystals?"

"No, no. I meant to bring him all this way. To risk so much, just to locate them? He has potential to do so much more. My opinion."

"Potential and actuality are two very different things. If the Council decides that his only task is to locate the Crystals then I will abide."

Charsnick begins to laugh.

"Yes, you. Always so subservient to the Council."

He continues his laughing fit.

Serretus even breaks a smile.

Then silence again as the echoes of Charnicks laughter bounce about then fade.

They both continue to stare down at something below.

"Are you going to tell him about the glitch?" Charsnick queries getting serious again.

"He's better off not knowing. It will be a distraction."

"What would you have us do?"

Serretus ponders before answering.

"Euthanize. It is the most humane way to deal with the situation."

Charsnick is shocked by this. "You are sure about this? That it will work as you say?"

"I'm sure."

"You were also sure it wouldn't happen in the first place."

"I worked with what I had given the circumstance I was in and time constraints I was under, not to mention where I was."

"Eh, still, ethically, it does not feel right."

"We are in the middle of world war. I'm afraid ethics went out the door a long time ago."

Charsnick shakes his head.

A bot approaches them and croaks, "Your ship and steed are ready for departure. We wait for you."

"Thank you. I will be there in a few moments," Serretus says.

"Safe travels. And one last time: you are sure about this?"

Charsnick presses as he gestures far below.

"I'm not sure about anything in these times but it's the only way. I know it's not easy but please: do the needful."

Serretus turns and walks away.

Charsnick is left to ponder and contemplate his task. He stares far below stroking his bushy mustache.

A medBot sidles up next to him and asks in its electronic raspy voice, "Shall I make final preparations, sir?"

Charsnick holds up a hand, "Hold for now. I need to think about this. Ei'fa yoset vaddar." *I'm no killer.*

"As you desire," replies the medBot.

NEW CHAPTER HERE

In David Paul's room, Serretus enters.

"Ready?" Serretus asks.

"Yes. Will it take long to get there?"

"The Hidden Fortress is far from here. The journey will indeed be long."

"Why not just take MAL? We'd get there in no time."

"Not an option I'm afraid. Recent intelligence reports show the Ninth Legion may have been alerted to your presence. Out here, in the middle of nowhere, MAL's engines will give off too much of an obvious heat signature and tip off those who might be looking to do you harm. Come we must hurry."

They ride an elevator down to surface level where doors open onto a launching dock, attached to the main support column of the Ice Fortress.

David Paul and Serretus are met by the unforgiving elements as they walk onto the icy dock.

They are dressed in bulbous orange hooded jackets wrapped many times over with a scarf to cover the face and goggles to shield

their eyes. Plump mittens and boots finish things off. Movement is difficult, but the attire is very necessary to survive even for a few minutes in this, one of the harshest parts of the Lucasia.

The wind is fierce and the conditions are blinding. A constant and unforgiving blizzard.

As they walk onto the dock, they must attach carabiner clips to safety rails so as not to get blown away. It's that bad.

Next to the dock is a hoverboat that floats on a cushion of air above the icy surface. It looks a bit like a fishing boat with the back open to the air and a cabin where the control systems and other equipment are and where one can stay out of the elements. At the back is an oversized plasma cannon. A one-seater so large it almost looks too big for the craft.

Attached to the front of the craft are two beasts of burden, called Nackari, with grand circular horns and fur that is dark, tangled and bushy, evolved to survive just this type of environment, and with enormous circular, flat paws that prevent them from easily going through the ice.

The Nackari eat from baskets filled with harvested snowgrass, the only vegetation that grows on this tundra and a treat to be sure, held out to them on poles by the dockBots.

Several other dockBots are scurrying about prepping the craft for the journey. One is blown off the dock and goes crashing

through the icy surface, the water beneath bubbling up to form a dark scar on an all-white canvas, the dockBot never reappearing, frozen forever in an instant. A common occurrence for the poor dockBots unfortunately.

Serretus yells over the wind through a voice amplifier built into his scarf, "We will travel the Goblin Snow Dunes, then through the Great Ablations and finally to the Land of The Forbidden. We should be fine so long as we can avoid any Ice Sharks in the dunes and Snow People in the ablations."

David Paul treading carefully on the dock, gives Serretus two thumbs up.

"Okay!" he yells, though he realizes he doesn't really have much of a say in any of this.

They board the hoverboat as it rocks and sways in the wind, David Paul slipping and sliding and nearly losing his balance. Finally, they are able to reach the cabin of the vessel.

Inside there's a large dashboard with instrumentation and several control sticks with colored knobs on the ends.

Serretus pulls on a knob, flips a few switches and pushes a button. A crackling of the ice surface is heard, and the hoverboat lurches forwards, as the Nackari trot along at a surprisingly fast pace. They are on their way and soon just a speck in the distance on the panoramic landscape. But what they do not know is that not far behind the surface breaks apart and

four gargantuan fins emerge and slither towards the hoverboat. All four fins belong to the same creature: an Ice Shark.

...

Inside the cabin, all is quiet. Serretus sleeps in a hammock while David Paul sits staring out at the nothingness and occasionally looking up at Lucasia's three remaining moons: Loxbor Minor (The Dead Moon), Llundor (The Water Moon), Kahmor (The Red Moon), as well as the ring formed by debris of, now non-existent, Loxbor Prime.

Suddenly David Paul gets thrown off balance as the hoverboat picks up speed and he notices the Nackari going from a walk, to a trot, to a fast trot, and then to an all-out run and then they start to zig and zag instead of going in a straight line. A light on the dashboard begins to blink on and off accompanied by an urgent beep.

He looks at a round sonar screen. There is the circle in the center which represents the hoverboat and coming up fast behind is a red triangle, rhythmically blipping on and off.

"Serretus. Serretus? Serretus wake up."

"Mmm? What is it?"

"Something's not right. We've picked up speed and it looks like something might be following us."

Serretus rubs the sleep from his eyes and squints at the screens.

"Oh dear. Ice Shark," Serretus mutters, disturbed but trying to provide an illusion of calm.

He scurries to get on his winter gear, hastily putting it on, and goes to the outside deck. Once there, he goes to a launcher on one side of the deck and fires off three large barrel-shaped yellow containers, but he doesn't fire them off straight out the back, he fires them about 45 degrees off of the stern.

The containers land far away from the craft crashing through the ice then burst back up where they bob up and down in the dark water. Then, BLAM!, BLAM!, BLAM!, the top of each bursts off and a red sludge slurps out into the water.

David Paul, still in the cockpit, is confused as Serretus comes in from the outside and shuts the door, his beard a solid block of ice upon his face.

He goes right to the sonar screen and stares hopefully at it.

But then frowns.

"That didn't seem to work," he says, disappointed.

"Were you trying to hit it with those?"

"No. They are Chum Munitions. I was hoping to get it off our track but it didn't seem to work--"

The craft lurches forward and its front dips towards the ice and Serretus and David Paul do all they can to not tumble over. As he steadies himself David Paul makes an ominous observation out

the front windshield. The two Nackari have disappeared and the hoverboat is getting dragged under by their reins.

Alarms sound with urgency.

"Oh dear," sighs Serretus.

He scrambles to open four small doors on the dashboard then turns an emergency release handle in each and the reins come free of the craft and slink into the holes in the ice where the Nackari were taken and the hoverboats front comes back up to level as it rocks back and forth a good amount until finally settling.

"You stay here," Serretus says.

Serretus is back outside, this time running to the rear one-seater plasma cannon. He frantically removes its cover, gets into the chair and buckles himself in.

Suddenly the Ice Shark bursts through the surface. It is a long giant creature, its head resembling the greatest of great whites while its body, with its four enormous dorsal fins, is long and sleek like a mythological serpent.

Serretus fires three plasma blasts at it from the cannon, PFFZZZZT, PFFZZZZT, PFFZZZZT, the recoil force from each blast sending the hoverboat hurtling backward along the ice surface. The first two miss their mark. The third hits but does little damage, only making the ice shark angrier as it shakes its head violently and lets out a deafening roar before it re-submerges.

It's four great fins glide eerily past the hoverboat, each one a smidge smaller than the one before it but all a towering reminder of the mighty beast below. The first fin at twenty feet high is a good ten feet higher than the hover boat.

There is a palpable tense wait as David Paul watches the fins circling the hoverboat many times, the gentle splashing of the ice water and the pensive pounding of his heart the only things he can hear. He's scared but wants to help so opens the door and whisper yells to Serretus.

"Serretus! Serretus! What do I do?"

"David Paul you stay inside and do *not* come back out, do you understand me?!" Serretus whispers shouts back at David Paul.

David Paul can easily sense the fear and urgency in Serretus's voice and quickly (but quietly) close the door to the cabin.

After some more tense moments of the fins circling and circling the hoverboat, they go under. And there is quiet. Spine-chilling quiet. The craft spinning slowly and eerily on its cushion of air.

Then there is a thudding bump from below and the hoverboat rocks sideways, nearly tipping over, and inside David Paul is thrown into the air and hits the ceiling. Engines whir as they strain to keep the craft right sized and though it does remain upright it spins out of control round and round, rocking side to side like a see-saw.

The creature breaches again and postures it's long, ashen, slippery frame nearly fully out of the water like a crazed show dolphin born from a science experiment gone terribly wrong.

Serretus fires plasma shots at it again and all hit their mark but do no damage, only serve to irk the creature more. It lunges and locks its jaws onto the plasma cannon and rips it off the back deck, along with the seat that Serretus is buckled into. Off and overboard!

"Serretus!" David Paul screams from the cabin.

David Paul clambers to get on his winter gear. He runs out to the deck where he slips and falls. He gets up, looking out for where Serretus might be but also keeping an eye on the creature that is still breached well out of the water. He notices some slender metallic fishing spears tied down along the sides of the deck.

He picks one up, takes a breath, and throws. Time seems to slow as he waits to see if the spear will hit its mark. It does and David Paul is pleasantly surprised at his accuracy. The beast shakes its head back and forth more annoyed than injured.

But there is a light on the spear that blips faster and faster until there is a pop and a BURST of electricity spews from it. The Ice Shark, stunned, shakes its massive head maddeningly, furiously, and mindlessly snapping at the air.

David Paul, for the moment, seems satisfied with this small victory, and even better spies Serretus (he's alive!) who struggles to get back to the craft, crawling over large chunks of broken ice.

But now the Ice Shark has recovered and lunges at the hoverboat biting into the side and breaking off a large chunk that it spits out. It then latches on to the hoverboat and does its best to shake it so as to flip it over and drag it under.

Alarms are going off and leveling engines are whirring to keep the hoverboat steady. Water rushes onto the deck and David Paul falls down and slides toward the opening where the ice shark ripped off the side.

Emergency air bladders fire along the sides of the craft helping to keep it afloat and for the moment David Paul stops sliding and struggles to stand.

And now there is once again torturous silence as the Ice Shark has once again submerged.

David Paul, breathing heavily, crouches, ready with another spear when suddenly from the hole in the side of the deck something comes bursting on board. But it is not the Ice Shark. It's too small. It's Serretus! Covered in a full body coating of ice and frost he is shaking uncontrollably as David Paul rushes to help him aboard.

"Are you okay?!" David Paul yells.

Serretus takes off his goggles and hood and assesses the situation.

With a determination from who-knows-where he gropes his way to a part of the deck where there is a spherical shaped emergency lifecraft tethered to the deck. He breaks the glass to the locking mechanism that holds it in place and pushes the large red release button but nothing happens. He pushes it again and again. Nothing.

"Come on you!" he screams at it.

Finally, he punches it and the tubular tie downs that hold the lifecraft in place go bursting off while the rest of the structure inflates.

The lifecraft is essentially a glass globe with a bright-emergency-yellow exoskeleton. There are two seats inside. Serretus rushes David Paul into the pod like a bodyguard ushering a head of state away from danger then scrambles in after him but in his haste doesn't shut the door, one leg hanging out as his attention is on the control panel where, hands shaking, he urgently programs in a destination. His only focus to get David Paul to safety. At the same time the hoverboat starts to rock again. The Ice Shark is back. Serretus instructs David Paul in the most serious tone yet. "Buckle in. Don't touch anything. And no matter what don't get out. Not matter what. Tell me you understand! Tell me!"

"I understand."

The hoverboat is partially underwater at this point, emergency systems and floatation bags failing.

The Ice Shark lunges onto the deck snatching Serretus's dangling leg and he cries out in pain.

"Serretus!" David Paul screams, the nightmare only getting worse by the second.

David Paul grabs Serretus by the arms and pulls. There's a tug-o-war between David Paul and the Ice Shark but, for some reason, Serretus fights David Paul off as water is now coming into the lifecraft.

"Leave me! Save yourself! I'll be fine. No time to explain.

Aaaaaahhhh!"

Serretus hits a button on the dashboard then closes the door to the lifecraft.

David Paul tries to open the door but it can't. He's locked in.

"Serretus! No please! Serretus!"

A countdown beeper starts.

The Ice Shark has Serretus up to the waist as Serretus jabs at him with one of the spears. Electrical shocks spew from the spear but they get both Serretus (who cries out in even more pain) and the Ice Shark (who ignores them this time; focused on the delectable treat) and David Paul can only watch in absolute horror.

The countdown beeper stops, Serretus lunges at the life-craft and puts a hand on the glass and David Paul mirroring this puts his hand on the glass as Serretus gives David Paul a look that says 'be brave, everything will be okay, you can do this'.

Then David Paul is thrown back as the life-craft fires off at a maddening speed, riding just above the surface.

David Paul watches the finality of his friend as the gruesome scene grows more distant: Serretus screaming in pain, half-eaten by the Ice Shark. Then just before the creature pulls him below the ice-crust, watery surface a calm comes over him, an acceptance, a peace and he closes his eyes and disappears into the icy depths, a small snack for the eating machine.

...

NEW CHAPTER HERE

The lifecraft soars above the ice at an unthinkable speed its only mission to get David Paul to safety. Problem is David Paul doesn't know this. Inside, there are no controls from what David Paul can tell, nothing he can use to pilot the craft. He's at the mercy of some programmed computer with a directive for a particular destination. Thrust for the craft is not an engine really but a burst of gas out of a single cylinder-shaped nozzle in the rear released from onboard storage cannisters.

Any water that had gotten inside is sucked up and sprayed out the sides by sensors designed exactly for that purpose. Steering

of this glass globed craft that sits inside a thin yellow exoskeleton is via four small stubby wings; two on the sides, one on top and one on the bottom.

As it zips away at a rapid pace towards the horizon David Paul can only sit there with the horrendous death of his friend haunting his every passing second. Arms wrapped around his knees, knees held close to his chest, and head resting on his knees he is dejected and near catatonic over his present situation.

And so it flies on towards a darkening night sky across the snowy desert tundra that seems like it will never end.

...

After some time has passed and night has fallen, hunger pangs and thirst prod David Paul to finally come out of his state of despair. He rummages through plastic containers within a storage compartment finding clear pouches whose pictogram indicate the clear fluid inside is drinking water. He tears one open and drinks its contents down, thirst overriding any sort of caution, but it is water, and he nods his satisfaction and relief.

Opening other containers reveals foil packets of different color powders, what appear to be dehydrated and made-to-last meals ready to eat. He opens one, finds a bowl and a spoon, pours the powder in and adds water. It bubbles and fizzes and turns into a blue slop. He sniffs it but gets nothing. Tentatively, with

just the tip of his tongue at first, he tries some, assesses it and then nods his approval (under the circumstances anyways) and he digs in, gulping it down ravenously.

...

As hints of dawn emerge on the horizon, the little craft continues its way across the snowy tundra that appears to have no end. But then, as he is finishing another meal, David Paul pokes his head up and notices the approaching ocean coming up fast. Apparently the 'never ending' snowy tundra does have an end. He panics and scrambles to find some sort of controls but of course there are none. He bangs on the glass door to try and get out. No such luck. The sea is approaching, and he will fall into it any second, and drown in this globe of a coffin. The craft flies off the edge of the ice shelf, a good twenty-foot drop, but luckily, by design, the navigational wings adjust upwards giving it some lift and so whilst, yes the craft does make contact with the ocean, it is but a skimming and it skips along, hitting some waves a few times over (causing an unsettling jarring inside for David Paul) but then rights itself and soon is hovering above the ocean at an even greater celerity than before; a frosty spray left in its wake.

...

The sun high in the mid-day sky, David Paul is bored and sullen once again, his situation gone from skimming along what seemed

to be an endless snowy desert to now skimming along what appears to be an endless salt water one (though there was a small victory this morning when he figured out that this little cocoon did have the facilities for which to relieve himself) but here is something new and interesting to break up the day: A pod of blue and orange colored creatures, dolphin-like and friendly, has taken a curiosity in the craft, easily keeping up with it, breaching the water in agile arcs then deftly diving back in, all taking turns riding its wake. David Paul smooshes his face against the glass in wonder and appreciation. Just to see another life form, and a friendly one at that, brings hope.

...

In the darkest of night with only the stars and Lucasia's three moons as navigational beacons, the pod plods along at a cruising speed of just over 120 miles per hour. David Paul sleeps in fits, waking from the strangest dreams where he can hear the faraway sounding voices of a little girl and a woman saying "Please wake up" and in the dream, he knows, somehow he knows, that the plea is directed at him. There's something familiar about them.

But how can this possibly be? These vivid dreams frazzle him and make it difficult to fall back to sleep, but eventually exhaustion gets the better of him and he is dozing again.

...

Hour after hour pass and the life craft is still going, still nothing but 360 degrees of ocean and horizon all around. David Paul eats yet another blue slop meal.

He's lying back. Bored. When will this trip end? When will he reach the Hidden Fortress? He tries to preoccupy himself by recalling his training with Serretus so he is ready to find the Child Crystals when the craft lands at the Hidden Fortress.

Although that does raise a question in his mind: without Serretus can someone else work the FinderEngine9000? There must be. Serretus would not have had him come this far, with so much on the line with no redundancy in place. Then again there's no redundancy for David Paul. But he stops this negative thinking loop with a dose of high-grade denial and focuses on his training and when that gets boring he sits and thinks of his friends back home at The Place and what they must be doing. Something flies into his view. Then another. And another. A flock of exotic sea birds. Grateful for the distraction, he observes birds as they dive into the water with such expertise that they make no splash and come up with a fish every single time. Over and over, bird after bird dives, dives, dives. Until one time when one is nosediving but pulls up short sensing danger as a slick sea creature with a mouthful of knives for teeth, breaks the water's surface and snares its wing. There is

a struggle, that doesn't last long at all, and the bird is dragged under never to be seen again.

As David Paul is watching all of this, pondering life and death and how one relies on the other what he doesn't notice is what is up ahead: Land.

A beeping sounds off accompanied by a sign blinking on and off indicating he should buckle up. He looks up and now sees the land approaching. And fast. He tumbles into his chair and buckles himself in. Amongst the pile of empty meal packages and other debris that have built up over the last several days he notices a helmet, grabs it, and quickly puts it on.

The land coming on so fast it practically gives the illusion that he is still and it is the land that is rushing towards him. "Whoa boy," is all he can say in preparation for land fall.

...

There's just a deserted island beach. Waves rolling in and out.

An island forest just past the white sands. A serene scene.

Then: The lifecraft blazes in from the water, across the sand and barrels into the forest. Water sprays, sand goes flying, a plume of branches and foliage blossom into the air and then...

there's nothing. Like it was never there. A serene scene once again.

...

The life craft drives ahead burrowing a hallway through the island forest, as branches and leaves whip against the glass though surprisingly, it navigates very well past the larger trees that would otherwise spell an instantaneous end to it and David Paul.

Then the propulsion system stops while on the outside of the pod large air bags burst to life and deploy in less than a blink of an eye.

The craft hits the ground and rolls along bouncing off this tree and that cushioned by the airbags outside while inside David Paul gets jarred about, then as the airbags deflate with a flatulent exhale it skids into the ground digging up a long trench until finally coming to an exhaustive but certain stop. All is quiet.

David Paul takes off his helmet and unbuckles. He tries to get the door to open but he's still locked in good. Trapped.

He looks around at his surroundings. It's a jungle environment with nothing in particular to see save for a few small and seemingly harmless exotic and indigenous wild-life species. He doesn't seem to be in any danger.

Until... a large bear-like creature approaches, an Augg.

Massive. Orange-brown fur with muted purple stripes. Paws the size of serving dishes with carving knives as claws and a set of

teeth, highlighted by two sabers, that would make any carnivore envious.

The only thing that separates it from David Paul is the thick glass of the lifecraft. What he was once cursing moments ago for trapping him inside is now saving him.

The Augg sniffs around to get an overall sense of things, then tries to bite into the glass its monstrous teeth digging in and scratching it up but thankfully the glass holds. But the beast clearly sees David Paul as a meal and isn't about to give up that easily. It pushes on the pod with its great paws, full bodyweight behind the shove. A push. And another. And another. It rears back on hind legs then falls forward with each, all the while David Paul is thrown, pitched, tumbled, and flung about like laundry in a dryer. Finally, the whole vessel rolls over so that it's upside down, containers, old food and water pouches raining down on David Paul. The mighty Augg tries a few more times to crack open what it thought would be an easy, served-up-on-a-sliver-platter meal but realizes it can't and loses interest. David Paul let's out a sigh of relief and settles against the glass looking up at the chair he had been sitting in all this time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Night.

Moonlight barely trickles through the jungle canopy, providing just a glimmer of luminescence. The only sounds: those of the nocturnal creatures of the jungle, and the crashing ocean waves way off in the distance.

David Paul eats blue slop. Again.

"What am I doing here?" he mutters to himself.

...

A few hours later, David Paul, wrapped in a silver thermal blanket, is sleeping soundly when suddenly the craft moves and he darts upright. Very awake. His first thought, born from nightmares, is that the saber toothed Augg must be back.

The pod moves again. And then it is rocking significantly back and forth, back and forth, until it flips over and is right side up again.

David Paul with wide eyes and adrenaline surging tries to see outside but he can't see anything in the darkness.

He scrambles for a lantern, shakes it to power it on and looks through the glass for the creature but it is not there. Instead, he comes face to face with a person. A woman with an athletically chiseled face, mean looking, with battle scars spread generously.

He jumps back.

And then as his eyes adjust he sees there are many of them out there. He does not know it yet, but these are the Sinewy Warriors. An ancient warrior class who utilize modern technology where it suits them but hold the natural world in the highest regard.

They shine lights into the pod, looking at David Paul with surprise and curiosity.

His heart beating well over the speed limit, once again, David Paul is realizing the benefit of being locked in here. Sure, he can't get out but then again nothing can get in.

"Stay calm. Benefit of being trapped in is that they are trapped out," he says to himself.

And of course, that's when the hatch, finally, but in the untimeliest way possible, unlocks with a hiss.

"Or not."

His flight or fight response most definitively kicks into flight mode and he scrambles out of the pod and makes a break for it, running for his life. He sees that there is a space between two of the savages large enough to get past and runs towards it but before he takes another step, like a klutz, trips on a thick vine that lay across the moist jungle floor and his face smacks down with a soggy thud.

One of the Sinewy Warriors grabs him firmly by the arm but he breaks away and runs again.

Two more come out of nowhere and grab hold of him with grips as strong as a machine. He screams and struggles. A Sinewy yells at him in a language he can't begin to understand (definitely not the language he learned while with Charsnick and family).

Images of his run ins with the bullies back home streak in like camera flashes going off.

"Get off me! Help! Get away!"

And then, with a power he did not know he had he shoves off the two warriors holding him who go flying much further than a boy (or anyone for that matter) should be able to toss them. As if a burst of invisible energy had sprung from within him.

But David Paul is too scared to realize this or take any sort of notice and he's away again, not certain where he's going just running as fast as he can to get out of there.

Just then his ankle is hooked in a loop of cabling and it tightens with a fierce hold. And then his wrist is hooked in another loop. And then his other wrist. The Sinewy have him at the end of long poles, caught like a mongrel.

"Get away from me!" he screams, as another loop encircles and tightens on his other ankle. He is struggling like mad, shaking and pulling and twisting but to no avail.

Once again, the warriors are yelling at him in a language he can't understand.

Finally, exhausted, he gives in, defeated and nearly weeping, as they carry him out of the jungle and towards the beach as the sun is just starting to come up.

But it is not the same beach he came crashing through when he first made landfall, this beach is made of dark crystal grit, and the group marches him onto it and over to an elder warrior, the leader it would appear, and they force David Paul to kneel before him.

When the leader sees how they have snared David Paul he yells at the warriors who protest back like children caught roughhousing indoors. They argue back and forth in their language until the warriors finally relent and kneel at the order of the leader who then approaches David Paul and crouches down to his level.

"I am so sorry for your treatment. My warriors did not mean you harm but said you tried to run and that this was the only way for them to get you to me."

David Paul is unsure whether to trust him.

"Who are you? How do you know me?" he asks the leader.

"I am friend to Serretus and I am sworn to get you to the Hidden Fortress. My name is Azrael. Trust, yes? If we remove the bindings you will not run? Do not worry. No hurt. We are your sworn protectors."

David Paul looks around. He sees there are more warriors than before and all are kneeling, heads bowed. This puts him at ease and he somehow "senses" things will be okay.

"I won't run," David Paul relents.

He rubs his wrist and ankles as they are released from the bindings, and the warriors all speak to him in their language, clearly apologetic.

The Sinewy Leader Azrael chimes in again, "Our journey is long but myself and my warriors have taken a vow to protect you with our lives. My people have worshipped The Crystal Mother since time began. We know you will help to locate the Children."

David Paul is led from the sandy part of the beach to a rockier part and then to a flattened ledge formed from purple crystal, considered the purest and most rare of all on Lucasia, where the water comes right up, lapping gently against it.

Sinewy Warriors are everywhere. Surrounding him with backs turned to him, on the lookout for anyone or anything that might do him harm. For the first time since leaving the Ice Fortress his fear of being harmed or worse has eased up.

From the ledge upon which he now stands there is a drop off that leads onto another flat ledge this one submerged under the water about two feet and extending outwards about five before it drops off into the depths of the ocean.

Azrael and his warriors step down onto this secondary ledge and wade out to the very edge looking out towards the ocean, for what he does not know.

Then, out of the purple darkness of barely morning, he sees them.

Fins, easily taller than one person standing atop another, protruding from the water. That and many bursts of blowhole mist bursting out in random gusts. Whatever they are, they approach slowly. Gentle.

The creatures, called Ruka, would best be described as Orca-like in shape and demeanor but a dark purple color and with large circular horns like that of an Earthen ram. As they emerge from the darkness David Paul sees that harnesses made from rope are attached to the mighty dorsal fins and that Sinewy Warriors stand on a thin board attached to this rope-harness. This is how they ride on the fins of these glorious animals who are glad to have them.

"You trust me, yes?" says Azrael. "Our means of travel must not garner attention. And so our meager steeds. Trust?"

"Yes. I trust you," says David Paul stepping onto the ledge so that he is waist deep in the cool water.

"Good. Here just in case something happens to me," says the Azrael.

He hands David Paul a device, a metal box about the size of his hand, to place around his neck then says something in his native tongue into it and then out of the device comes a translation via a computerized voice, "Hello my name is Azrael."

David Paul holds the device up to his mouth and looks at the rest of the group.

"Hello," says David Paul.

The device translates "Hello" into the Sinewy language equivalent: "Gradah."

The group nods their approval.

The gentle animals come in close right up onto the submerged ledge and David Paul is helped on to one of the fin harnesses.

The leader joins him on the same one.

The warriors make a "chlick-click" sound and the group speeds away through the water gaining speed as they go. David Paul holds on tightly as the whipping wind and splashing water cause his eyes to tear up but he can't help but smile at this joyous means of transportation.

The pod totals fourteen. David Paul and the Sinewy Warriors take up seven. Four are younger, smaller calves who do not carry a warrior, with three adults that scout ahead then swim back to the pod in intervals.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Mere dots on a vast ocean, the pod of Ruka makes their way with the tribe of warriors and David Paul riding on their fins swimming as close to the surface as they can but do occasionally dip deeper. At times David Paul is completely out of the water, holding onto the harness, and at other times he is chest deep, his Ruka somehow knowing how deep is too deep. David Paul is sopping wet but somehow warm and relaxed, still enjoying the ride, with the wind flapping his hair back and the seawater easing tension in his muscles.

They try to navigate foggy and cloud covered areas to avoid detection by Ninth Legion forces or bounty hunters who may be on the lookout for David Paul.

...

Day eventually turns to night, but the small group torpedoes on, the trusty and dedicated rides not skipping a beat, navigating effortlessly through the blackest of dark nights.

As they emerge from a foggy area into open ocean David Paul notes the squawking language of the animals and their overall demeanor has changed. He "senses" something is wrong.

"There's something wrong. What is it?" he asks

Azrael.

And just then a bright white light breaks through the darkness and shines on the pod and the deafening roar of engines can be heard from above.

"Who is that? What's happening?" David Paul shouts, beginning to panic.

"Poachers! For the tusks!" Azrael whispers back to David Paul. Many of the Sinewy Warriors dive into the water to allow their steeds to go down deep for cover. Fins quickly disappear from the surface one after another after another.

Azrael makes a clicking sound, and the animal that is carrying him and David Paul breaks away from the rest out of the light and hopefully out of sight.

Once in the dark, the animal they ride submerges significantly so that David Paul has to swim.

"What is that I feel?" David Paul asks feeling a thump-thump-thump against his chest.

"Just the animals keeping track of you with their sonar. They are hiding but are loyal and will protect you if it comes to it. They will not lose track of you. Stay down! Under water when possible. Here hold on to this to preserve your strength," says Azrael giving him a small tubular shaped rescue buoy to hold onto.

"And please keep quiet."

David Paul does as told but watches in horror at what unfolds before him...

A portion of the pod is herded away from the rest by the poachers.

The poachers' aircraft, made of a shiny steel material with a boxy shape reminiscent of a helicopter complete with opening in the hull and kept airborne by four enclosed prop engines on the top, hovers closer to the water.

David Paul sees the poachers laughing and drinking and generally whooping it up as they fire a large plasma gun mounted on tripod at the loving beasts. Each white-hot plasma pellet hits the water with a haunting thsssstttt! accompanied by bursts of steam.

And now, like the vile predators they are, the circling craft have targeted a youngling. One of the poachers, from the mounted gun, fires plasma blasts and flesh splatters everywhere and the water is stained with blood. The poor little one just cannot hold its breath as long as an adult and has paid the ultimate price.

"No!" David Paul yells.

Azrael swims over and puts a hand over David Paul's mouth.

"Quiet. You must not give yourself away. I know it is not easy to look at."

The poachers cheer and laugh at their good fortune. Bullies to the core they have only two cares in the world: profit and misery to those they deem less than themselves (which is most). A harness is lowered down and snares the dead baby by the tail fin. It is an awful sight. This beautiful animal, who did no harm to them or anyone else for that matter, it's whole life ahead of it, being dragged out of the water by these awful poachers a tendrilled stream of blood trailing its limp body. "This one will fetch us some right good loot boys!" shouts the Lead Poacher, Jon Sain.

The air crafts' engines protest as the crane lifts the baby out of the water, all the while the poachers still laughing like hyenas.

The remaining animals surface and circle, distressed squawks, squeals, and clicks, in their whale-like language, abound.

David Paul feeling sadness moments before, now only feels a boiling anger surging inside at the very sight of the laughing poachers. Tears stream down his face. He will not forget this. He will not forget.

Then, a large bull breaches the water with such surge that it is able to ram into the craft with its massive circular horns.

Jon Sain, the lead poacher who was leaning out the side and laughing is thrown from the craft and lands with a slap in the cold waters.

A large female grabs him by his foot and drags him under the water, dragging the man deeper and deeper until they disappear into the dark depths.

Back on the ocean surface all is quiet. Only the deafening mechanized WAAAAP-WAAAAP-WAAAAP-WAAAAP-WAAAAP sound of the poachers aircraft.

The poachers scan for their friend, gulping down the frightful thought that he is gone forever.

Then the female Ruka emerges with the man Jon Sain and tosses him high into the air and he comes crashing down splatting hard on the ocean surface. He bobs up and down, in a panic, coughing and throwing up water. A lifeline is lowered and he loops an arm through the leather harness and they reel him back towards the craft but the female Ruka is not done with him. She snatches his foot again, crunching it in her vice like jaws which causes him to cry out and let go of the rescue harness as she drags him under for another go round.

He's not held down as long this time and upon resurfacing desperately shouts up to his mates, "Shoot her! Shoot her!" Plasma gun now set to automatic they fire on anything and everything in the water causing hundreds of sizzling steam bursts everywhere tssst-tssst-tssst-tssst-tssst-tssst!

"No stop you idiots, stop! You're going to hit me!" cries Jon Sain. The plasma fire stops and once again Jon Sain loops his

arm into the rescue harness and they attempt to reel him in but locks onto his foot and Jon Sain fighting to hold on screams in agony as he is getting stretched in two, the center of a tug-of-war between the crafting reeling him in and the mighty Ruka. "Slack! Slack!" yells Jon Sain, in a desperate attempt to not get torn into two bloody halves.

They provide slack and she immediately takes the opportunity to drag him under yet again and the spool of rescue line oozes smoke, the line released at a pace beyond its design.

Then line goes limp and once again there is silence but for the engines overhead WAAAAP-WAAAAP-WAAAAP-WAAAAP-WAAAAP. Everyone is wondering the same thing. Did she decide to take his life after all? After teasing him that she may grant him a stay?

The poachers look desperately all about for their mate, none of them liking the odds for his survival.

And then, again, the beast resurfaces with him! Amazing!

Jon Sain can hardly speak, breathless, choking on water but does manage to cry out orders.

"Let the baby go! Dump its body! That's what she wants you idiots! Let the baby go!"

The poachers in the craft look at one another wondering if their friend is worth it.

"Babies is worth the most, they is," says the poacher Jakk Sain.

"That's your brother, Jakk Sain!" says the other poacher Mel Joon.

"Well it's a lot of money!"

"You sure about this Jakk Sain? I mean if you says so?"

"Ah hell. Let the baby go. He owes me for this," relents Jakk Sain.

The limp body of the baby beast is pushed off the deck of the aircraft, flopping over the edge and splashing down into the water. Completely lifeless, tendrils of flesh waving in the wake.

The she-beast turns her head and flings the man across the surface of the water and he skips out of control for a good 200 yards before coming to a stop.

Finally, at last, his mates are able to reel him into the aircraft, he is weak and limp but alive.

But now, several bulls from the pod breach the water at amazing heights in an attempt to ram the poachers aircraft. One hits it with a good jarring shot but the poachers are wise to this and they pilot the craft higher, out of range before any others can do the same finally giving up on their poaching efforts. But being the degenerates that they are as they are flying away from the scene in retreat they rain more plasma blasts on the group, striking several of the breaching bulls and killing two. A horrific scene to top off a horrific night. Then, ever greedy,

the poachers fire cabled harpoons at the downed bulls, which hit their marks with a splattering of flesh and blubber, and drag them off through the water, a crimson streak in their wake, now for certain, in full retreat.

"Two measly bulls ain't worth a baby by a long shot but better than nothing s'ppose," says the lead poacher Jon Sain to his brother Jakk Sain, chest still heaving trying to catch his breath. "Ah shut up Jon Sain," as he shoots him an ugly glance. David Paul is devastated and angry as he watches the poachers, their craft faraway just barely visible in the moonlight, fly off, a beacon of cowardice.

What happens next is heart wrenching.

The large female, the one who punished Jon Sain, takes her dead baby and noses it through the water. She then swims under the baby so that she carries it on top of her. The other animals swim up and give the baby a lick with their pink tongues or simply nose it gently, paying their respects.

All of the Sinewy are brought up to the baby and they place a gentle hand on its forehead and say a prayer for the fallen little one.

David Paul is lifted up out of the water by the beast that was his ride before this tragedy and is brought over to the mother and her baby. He places a hand on the dead baby, senses no life,

only the coldness of death, and starts to sob, and the rest of the pod and the mother let out heart wrenching whines and whistles in a communal mourning.

And then the baby is let go and sinks into the depths. A burial at sea.

The pod of animals moves on. Only the mother staying, making the most gut wrenching of sounds. Clearly devastated at the murder of her baby. Circling, circling, circling. She may never get over this.

David Paul is hugging the fin of his beast, crying, but also with a look of resolve on his face. He has much work to do here on Lucasia.

...

At last, they come to a shore. The sun is just coming up. A new, different beach. Like the one of the island beaches the sand is a crystal grit but this one is a darker purple crystal, larger and more coarse, more commonly found across all of Lucasia. The trees are much, much taller and the foliage different shapes and sizes and colors from the island as well. The Ruka swim in as close to the beach as they can get. Some of the Sinewy leap off and help David Paul from his steed. It is hard going through the crashing surf but every time he thinks the water is too cold or feels a wave crash into his ribs he thinks of the poor baby Ruka and pushes on.

He gives a most appreciative pat on the snout of his beast and it lets out a happy mewl and a massive burst of mist emerges from its blowholes. Then it turns and disappears with the rest of its pod.

Now it is just David Paul, two Sinewy warriors and the Sinewy leader Azrael on the beach, the rest having gone with the Ruka. The waves are crashing onto the beach over and over and over which David Paul finds calming, a reprieve from the many catastrophic events he has witness these last days, when out of the jungle emerge giant four-legged animals taller and larger than elephants and covered in matted purple-grey fur. A Sinewy rider atop each.

Umi, as they are called, have back legs shorter than the front, and though hoofed, when they run or trot they do so in more of a sideways manner, like a great ape.

Asrael gestures to the handsome steeds.

"Our new rides."

They climb aboard the Umi and are off into the jungle for the next leg of their trek.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The center piece of Ninth Legion City, a metropolis of homogenized architecture that serves as the capital of the Ninth Legion Empire, is a 326-floor edifice casually referred to as Ninth Legion Tower but officially known as The Ever-Victorious, Iron-Willed Leader Doctor Frood Tower. This high-rise headquarters of the Ninth Legion always has a massive military presence on guard with thousands of tanks and armored vehicles on the ground and droneFighters patrolling the skies above relentlessly on the lookout for any threat.

In the buildings penthouse Doctor Frood is prepared by his devoted staff for a meeting of the highest importance. Dressed in golden ceremonial attire he has been summoned by the "The Supreme Chosen One", the great Za, a deity whom followers of the Ninth Legion believe will deliver them immortality in the afterlife and, just as important, elevation in this one as the planet's supreme beings. That they too are chosen and must do whatever it takes to convert all of Lucasia to their belief system and exterminate from existence those who do not.

Doctor Frood is led down a hallway where he is met by a small entourage from his trusted inner circle including his Chief of Staff Joo'dah Poidd, a repugnant weasel of a man with a pronounced overbite and the bluest of bags under his eyes as well Lord Dogen (who is accompanied as always by his faithful,

undersized protectorBot) and other minor executive assistants present less for their aptitude and more for their trustworthiness and loyalty. The entourage is also dressed in formal and ceremonial attire worthy of this sacred convocation. They ride an oversized golden elevator down, down, down hundreds of stories finally arriving in a cavernous sub-basement. The décor of the elevator receiving room, like everything else in this subterranean hollow, is over-the-top extravagant. Every wall, floor, ceiling, statue, idol, decorative piece, frieze, and everything in between molded from Lucasian gold and dedicated to Za.

From the receiving room they enter a series of hallways passing through a multitude of security doors and guarded passthroughs along the way. The final hallway is as wide as a bus is long and three times as tall. Named the Corridor of Beasts its walls and ceilings are adorned with taxidermized heads, horns and tusks of Lucasia's most exotic, extinct and on the brink of extinction animals.

At the end of the Corridor of Beasts are double gold doors, titanic in height and heft, that automatically open for them and they enter the complete darkness of a vast, echoey chamber, many stories high and wide. This is the Hall of The Supreme Chosen One Za.

In the center of this hallowed and foreboding place there is a raised golden platform with a smaller platform upon that. Truth is that's all one can see in the darkened room and the further truth is there's not much else in here anyways.

Hovering above the platform are the projected faces of the Panel of the Shrewd. Six men who speak for the Supreme Chosen One. All that can be seen are their grey oversized faces.

Doctor Frood and his clan all climb the set of glorious golden stairs to the top of the first platform and then, aside from Frood, kneel on one knee, heads bowed.

Doctor Frood alone climbs the second set of stairs to the higher platform takes a knee and bows his head and as soon as he does a spotlight from above mattes him in a white circle.

"Who dares call upon the Mighty Za," bellows one of the projected heads of the Panel of the Shrewd.

"It is I, Doctor Frood who seeks an audience with his Greatness," says Doctor Frood in a most humble tone, one that many beings that have ever encountered him have never and will never hear.

"Doctor Frood of Muren-Five, proceed," says another of the projected heads.

"You called Supreme Chosen One?" says Doctor Frood trembling.

A rather interesting point should be noted here: Doctor Frood, and only Doctor Frood, can hear Za speak. Indeed, there are

rumors (not so much in the Ninth Legion because it would instantly lead to a death sentence, though they have been there, but certainly throughout the non-Ninth Legion expanses) that this is all just a ruse. That the good Doctor is delusional, having a nonsensical imaginary conversation with himself. The others in the party, Lord Dogen for example, only hear Doctor Frood. They do not hear Za.

But Doctor Frood hears Za and this is what he hears and how he responds:

"The buffoon D'Votner Rite was correct. His sight for futures yet to come is more accurate than we give him credit. A Crystal Warrior has arrived on Lucasia. This is a threat to the Grand Plan and unsettling to say the least."

"How is that possible? They were all destroyed in the Great Purge."

"You question my resources Doctor Frood?"

"Of course not. My sincerest apologies. I don't mean to question; I seek only your divine enlightenment."

"The Child Crystals. Can they be detected by this newly arrived warrior? By anyone for that matter?"

"They cannot be detected. This I guarantee," answers Doctor Frood.

"You're sure of this Doctor Frood? I'll not tolerate failure nor anything short of excellence."

"Yes, Your Great, I absolutely guarantee the Child Crystals cannot be detected under any circumstances while they are in the Zelerium Glass. The glass is my creation, brought into existence for the sole purpose of The Grand Plan. One that I spent a lifetime working on and for which I used every cell of my being and every gift bestowed upon me by You to perfect. I swear to you they cannot be detected."

"And you would guarantee this with your life?"

"Yes of course I would guarantee this with my life. The Grand Plan is all I live for and should I fail, may You take me from this life and welcome me into the Eternal Realm or, if I am not worthy, damn me to the Undying Zone."

"How was it that this warrior was not detected by the Ninth Legion with all its resources?"

"Your question is an excellent one Your Great. I humbly submit that neither intelligence gatherings nor the supernatural are areas where I can claim expertise. I move to hold an emergency meeting of the Head Ministers to understand why we did not detect this new threat. This Crystal Warrior. I too would like to know. As always the Supreme Chosen One is wise to question."

"Very good Doctor Frood. You have done well as always and I hold in reservation a seat by my side in the Eternal Realm."

Frood begins to tear up.

"Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you Supreme Chosen One."

"Hold your meeting. Find the threat and eliminate it. And carry out the Grand Plan."

The projections of the Panel of the Shrewd members disappear, the spotlight above Doctor Frood goes out and he descends from the upper level rushing over to his Chief of Staff, Joo'dah Poidd.

"Call all Principal Ministers for an emergency meeting of the High Cabinet."

"Yes my liege," says Joo'dah.

...

Later that night on one of the highest and most secure floors of The Ever-Victorious, Iron-Willed Leader DOCTOR FROOD Tower, a meeting of the Principal Ministers is taking place. These are the topmost leaders in the Ninth Legion and the architects behind its genesis and cancerous expansion.

In the *Mastermind of The Revolution and Dearest Leader DOCTOR FROOD Grand Conference Room*, they all sit around a conference table fit for men of their importance.

Present are:

Doctor Frood: Grand Minister of Science and Propaganda, undisputed Leader of the Ninth Legion, and Scion of The Supreme Chosen One which grants him the only one with the ability or access to speak with The Supreme Chose One.

Lord Sam'el Dogen: MSO (Minister of Special Operations), CPO (Chief Punishment Officer) and Overlord of Klan Extos.

Several other ministers including: Minister of Special Affairs, Minister of Conversion, Minister of Enlightenment, Minister of Justice, Minister of Finance, Minister of The Interior, Minister of Intelligence and Counterintelligence, Minister of Arms and, finally Minister of the SP&O (the Supernatural, Paranormal & the Occult).

The purpose of the meeting is to discuss the supposed emergence and unexpected arrival of a Crystal Warrior.

Doctor Frood's Chief of Staff, the gaunt Joo'dah Poidd, clears his throat and announces the commencement of the meeting:

"I bring to order this emergency meeting of The Principal Ministers. Doctor Frood, Grand Minister of Science and Propaganda, and undisputed Leader of the Ninth Legion, you have the floor," punctuated by the slamming down a gavel. There is near immediate silence and Dr. Frood stands.

"My Ministers. Recent intelligence, brought to my attention by The Supreme Chosen One, has surfaced. Intelligence that could pose a serious threat to the Grand Plan. In my commune with The Supreme Chosen One, I was told by His Greatness of a sudden and most disturbing presence. The appearance of a Crystal Warrior." Shock and uproar vibrate the room.

"Order. Let us have order I say," barks Chief of Staff Poidd.

Things quiet down.

The Minister of Intelligence, a tall lanky fellow with beady dark eyes, stands and addresses the assembly.

"Impossible. That warrior cult was eradicated years ago. There was never an indication that one survived. Not one. There has been absolute silence for nearly two generations. Why now?"

"Interesting you of all people should ask. As the Minister of Intelligence one would think you would know," counters Doctor Frood.

"Perhaps the enemy feels a sense of desperation with the recent milestone we reached by weaponizing the Child Crystals. Maybe they've been hiding this option only to be used in an 11th hour scenario?" queries the Minister of Arms, a balding, overweight man, with out of control sweat glands.

Doctor Frood considers this.

"Unclear. But a valid point. Noted for the record."

"Even if there is truth to this, it will be a futile attempt. Without the Child Crystals in place, a Crystal Warrior would not even have a fraction of the powers that those of old had," says the Minister of Intelligence, a tall lanky fellow with sunken cheeks and great purple circles under his tired eyes.

"Agreed. However, I propose that while that being's powers would be drastically reduced their ability to *detect* the Child Crystals may not. And that would be a valid threat," says the

Minister of The Interior, a young, overconfident up and comer, with a deathly pale complexion indicative of rotting from within.

There is silence in the room.

Doctor Frood breaks it.

"The Child Crystals are being held in Zelerium Glass chambers of my own design in a top-secret location. Nothing, not even the Magnificent Field, can penetrate it."

"Perhaps it's a ruse. To distract us," ponders the Minister of Intelligence.

"Let the record show that twice now The Minister of Intelligence has questioned the message gifted to us by the Supreme Chosen One," barks Doctor Frood.

"That's not what I meant--"

Doctor Frood holds up a hand to shut him up and the Minister goes silent.

Dogen stands forward to speak.

"There is another matter at hand. A question really. And I pose that question to all of you: why did Doctor Frood have to learn of this from the Supreme Chose One and suffer such embarrassment? Minister of Intelligence what say you? Why was this not picked up by your agents and other systems of detection?"

The Minister of Intelligence responds in deference, "This type of detection is of an otherworldly category. We would not be on the lookout for such matters. It is outside our realm of responsibility."

Dogen spits back, "I see. The mythical Crystal Warriors don't exactly fall into the realm of military intelligence, you say? Very well, very well. Minister of The Supernatural, Paranormal, & The Occult, what say you? Why was this not detected by your division?"

"There has been no shift in our monitoring systems. Readings have been the same since the Great Purge. We've nothing," says the Minister of Supernatural, Paranormal and Occult one of the few non-Lucasian-humans in the group. A Pugnatoor, a short, hairless species with the not pale but white, white skin, an oversized head relative to body and red eyes.

Doctor Frood, pacing, ponders what he just heard then says, "Your responses, or perhaps more accurately *excuses* are interesting to say the least. Ministers you are both hereby relieved of your positions effective immediately, your executions will move to the top of the capital punishment queue along with those of any relatives, and Za willing, you will all be damned to the Undying Zone for your incompetence. Please remove the Ministers," says Doctor Frood.

Four guards move for the two ministers but they put up a fight.

"This is an outrage! I will not be a scapegoat! Unhand me!"
cries the Minister of Intelligence.

"Take your hands off me you damned-. My record speaks for
itself! The Great Purge was my doing! Mine!" shouts the Minister
of the Supernatural, Paranormal, and the Occult.

Lord Dogen, his patience taxed, walks over and without
hesitation grabs the Minister of SP&O's large melon-like head in
his massive robotic arm and squeezes so hard that light pink
blood seeps from his ears and eyes. Still with a death grip on
the Ministers head, he then lifts him up and throws him against
the wall, knocking him unconscious (but likely worse). Then
without hesitation, he goes to the Minister of Intelligence.

"No please! Please no! I give up."

But despite the Ministers begging, Dogen does the same with him,
hurling the man so hard that a dent in the shape of his body
dimples the wall.

Guards scurry over and drag the listless ministers out of the
room, the commotion settles and the discussion continues.

"With the utmost respect, if the Supreme Chosen One said such a
being is on Lucaisa who are we to question. But I pose this to
you all: we are on the brink of planetary domination; do we want
to entertain a 'distraction' at this point?" asks the Minister
of The Interior.

"Still, it would be wise to find and eliminate this threat however small and however unlikely to disturb the Grand Plan," says the Minister of Arms.

"I concur with the Minister of Arms. Deploy all spies, commit all resources to finding this being and destroying it. Eradicate the weed before it has a chance to grow and spread," adds the Minister of Conversion.

Doctor Frood stands and paces, mulling over the discussion and debate. He saunters over to a pedestal where a Thadd, an orange with blue stripes colored feline-like creature with blackened oversized eyes, sits lazily atop it. Curled up and comfortable. He tenderly picks up the pet, which releases a purr of protest, and holds it in his arms, rhythmically stroking it from head to tail.

"While we do not want to distract from the Grand Plan and I standby the fidelity of the Zelerium Glass, I nevertheless concur. Minister of Arms, I charge you with appointing a new Minister of Intelligence and a new Minister of Supernatural, Paranormal and The Occult with haste."

"Yes good doctor," replies the Minister of Arms clicking his heels together.

"Those individuals and their divisions will proceed with a full onslaught of intelligence gatherings within their respective domains. Any leads however small should be brought to my

immediate attention and that of Lord Dogen," he says as he continually pets the appreciative pet sleeping in the crook of his elbow. "Lord Dogens sole focus shall then be to track down any credible lead, find this vermin and terminate it. We will then redirect our full attention back to the Grand Plan."

Doctor Frood walks over to a wall where there is a long rectangular glass case built in, its floor lined with a layer of softwood shavings. He opens a door in the case and places the Thadd inside giving it a last scratching behind its ears, which the pet leans into, letting out an appreciative purr and indolent yawn.

Then he closes the case and presses a button on the outside of it and a door inside the case, on the end opposite the Thadd opens and a giant grotesque rodent, with jagged yellowing teeth and soulless eyes, emerges. A Tera'rat. The pet Thadd hisses and shows its teeth but it's futile because in a fraction of a fraction of a second the Tera'rat is on top of it, slicing open its jugular, tearing its intestines out and finally settles in for a feast of the still dying Thadd. Frood smiles with the glee of a child who just won a carnival toy. Others in the room do their best to stomach the sight.

"Let us not lose our focus however," says Doctor Frood, "Or there will be consequences," standing to exit and nodding to Chief of Staff Poidd to end the meeting.

"Meeting is adjourned. Long live the Grand Plan!" shouts Poidd who stands at full attention and the rest of the room follows suit.

"Long live the Grand Plan!" bellows everyone in the room.

"Long live the Ninth Legion!" shouts the Chief of Staff.

"Long live the Ninth Legion!" parrots all in the room.

"Dismissed," says the Chief of Staff and all bow then exit the room with renewed purpose and enthusiasm.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR — HANS PAHCHE VILLAGE

David Paul along with his Sinewy Warrior protectors race through the jungle atop the Umi who navigate its uneven floor with the grace of a seasoned ballet dancer.

He hears the snap of a twig from somewhere behind them and looks back to see a pack of predatory animals tracking the group.

Instantly he recognizes them. Yochee. Serretus had him picture sleeping Yochee pups, called Yochiu, as part of the focus exercise in the shack. But to see them in real life, the large adults especially, is something quite different. They are cunning and devastating predators similar in bulkiness and build to a lion but with the longer snout and pointed ears of a wolf and with a thin mane of hair going from forehead down their back all the way to their rear. And their front teeth meant for snaring prey and holding on are so long that they protrude from their lips even when mouths are closed. Some have an overbite, some an underbite, others a bit of both.

David Paul's nerves are playing a thunderous concerto as the Yochee gain and he senses the Umi are unnerved as well. The expert hunters equipped with skillsets handed down over a thousand generations are in a fully coordinated chase and gaining still. Though the Sinewy riders take note of the Yochee they do not seem overly concerned, just another day to them apparently.

Azrael atop his own Umi rides up close to David Paul.

"Do no worry! Just hold on tight! Trust me!" he shouts as he turns his hands over again and again wrapping the reins securely around his wrists and gesturing for the David Paul to do the same.

And then just as one of the Yochee surges for a takedown the Umi seamlessly go from running along the ground to leaping up and grabbing onto the canopy of hanging vines provided by the surrounding trees and move gracefully through this vegetative network as easily and with the same speeds as when they are upon the ground.

How do they do this you may be wondering? They have two long and powerful fingers and one thumb that retract behind their hooves, an evolutionary gift that affords them the luxury of escaping from predators such as the Yochee, who by the way, give up pursuit once all of the Umi are floating through latticework of vines.

Azrael maneuvers his beast to be next to David Pauls.

"Not bad eh? The Yochee. They are prey animals. Very dangerous but they have their part to play in the natural order. Some call them vermin but since the taking of the Child Crystals, they are confused. They normally would not have given chase to us. They are actually quite shy. Typically they hunt alcelaphine and other herd animals. This is good for the balance. But now they

no longer hunt them and so the alcelaphine numbers have multiplied, they have eaten the vegetation down to nothing, resulting in flooding, famine and eco-disaster. No more balance. This is the beauty of the Crystal Mother, while the Yochee may seem cruel, they only take what they need and trim the herds and in doing so keep the balance. A powerful lesson my young friend."

...

As the day passes and the jungle ends, the Umi and their riders, come down from the treetops but continue on without skipping a beat now running through an ocean of high-grass plainslands at speeds that defy imagination for such large creatures, hooves clomping rhythmically along the ground.

And as the sun sets they at last arrive at their destination. An ancient village called Pahhche Village spread out over a large area of flattened grass and bordered all around by a barrier made of the curly, intertwined branches of the indigenous Flekten trees. It's as if nature built castle walls. At the entrance, sentries are there to greet them riding upon the mighty Nabath, large hairy beasts of burden with long twelve foot tusks that protrude out in twists and curves. With a friendly demeanor and a more lumbering way about them than Umi they greet the newly arrived visitors good-naturedly, with hindside in the air like a playful puppy would.

"Greetings my friends. We come in peace and seek shelter and asylum for the night," says Azrael.

The lead sentry dismounts and walks to Azrael a smile upon his face and nods his head in respect. He and his fellow sentries, each a different Lucasian species, are dressed in modest garb and carry non-lethal weapons: Thick, polished defensive spears made from fallen branches of the Flekten tree, a sling for throwing the sap of the Flekten trees, and a bow and arrow set with arrows whose ends are rounded and topped off with a glob of Flekten tree sap. As I said, non-lethal. It should be noted, that each is missing an eye. Some wear a patch, others a bandage of sorts, another covers his scarred, missing eye with nothing at all.

"Anyone seeking asylum is so granted. But may I ask, what is your business?" asks the lead sentry.

"With respect, I am an old confidante and friend of your Enlightened Mystic Mallaroy. We seek his counsel and bring him a gift," says Azrael.

"Your name, my friend?" queries the lead sentry.

"My name is Azrael of the Sinewy Clan Ramilek."

"One moment please."

The lead sentry goes to a booth where there is a timeworn communications system setup, puts a headset to his ear and speaks into a microphone. From the booth wires are strung up and

run through the village on leaning poles; an indication this village is behind the rest of Lucasia technologically (though this is by choice).

The sentry emerges from the booth and states, "Ali'Hai Mallaroy was most pleased to hear of your arrival and looks forward to your meeting. He's asked us to bring you right to him. This way please."

The lead sentry bows and instructs two other sentries to lead our little band on their way.

The village has one main road of dirt and stone that runs down its center and they ride down this main throughway atop their Umi's, catching the eye of many a curious villager who come out of their homes, beautiful bell tents each a gorgeous bright color orange, yellow, blue, turquoise, green, and more to see these new visitors. But they do not look upon them with suspicion or mistrust. No. There are only smiles and waves and respectful nods. Bouncing atop his umi David Paul is struck by the colors and craftsmanship of the bell tents and the fact that the villagers are all manner of shape, size, color, species and so on. He does not know it yet, but it is their peaceful belief system that bind this village together not physical superficialities or birthright lineages. Lastly, he also notes a disturbing observance: all of the villagers, every last one, just like the sentries at the entrance, are missing an eye.

Finally, they are led to the back of the village, the furthest from the entrance, where there is the largest and most elaborate bell tent in the village. Really, it's a collection of bell tents extravagantly built into one another with the main tent, the largest, as the centerpiece. And, like the rest, the cluster of bell tents sits atop a stilted wooden deck. The entire village from the bell tents to the watering wells is a cherished and proud work of art.

A thin being emerges from the main bell tent. He, too, has one eye, the other missing one is covered over with scar tissue just like the rest of the villagers.

This is Mallaroy. The Mystic. He is not human but human-like with a flattened, nearly undetectable nose, teal toned skin, and hair that is curly and white and unkept with larger patches on the sides of his head than on the top. While his frame is thin he has a pleasant puffiness in his cheeks and his compassionate face, gestures and everything about him give an aura of warmth and kindness.

He greets them with a smile and says something to the sentries, an all-clear or something, because they ride off to the entrance at the other end of the village.

Azrael dismounts and goes to the Mystic Mallaroy. The two embrace like old friends (because they are) and have a quick

whispered discussion and then Azrael signals to his group and the Siney dismount their Umi and kneel before Mallaroy who is humbled, and waves them off, immediately gesturing for them to rise and shakes each one of their hands, bowing his head as he does.

Then they bow their heads, and he palms their foreheads, his long bony fingers extending skyward, and states an incantation, for each Siney.

"Let the Crystal Mother be your guide. If you do, all will be well."

Lastly, he approaches David Paul a smile on his face the entire time, "We have been waiting for you my friend. The Crystal Mother is good," says Mallaroy.

David Paul simply bows his head unsure of what else to do, which Mallaroy returns with a jolly chuckle.

"Yes. We've been waiting for a very, very, very long time. Thank you for coming."

"Happy to be here," says David Paul nervously.

Mallory chuckles again and gestures to the large bell tent from which he emerged. David Paul looks to the Azrael who indicates that it is safe for him to go in.

The inside of the bell tent is spacious but there is little in the way of furnishings or decorations. A few trinkets here and there but not much else. A pad on the floor for a bed and some

round cushions around a hefty wooden table polished with a mirrored shine.

"My name is Mallaroy. This is my tribe. My village. Hans Pahhche. Welcome. I am the leader, the chief mystic but none of that is as big a deal as it's sounds. We don't give much credence to titles here. You will find nothing but good people here. No one will harm you. There is no need to be afraid."

"Thank you," says David Paul.

"Ha ha. You are my guest. It is I who should thank you. The Sinewy said you would be staying the night and then continue on to your final destination?"

David Paul nods 'Yes'.

"Very good. Very good."

Mallaroy does not say much more. He seems content, happy, just to have a guest.

Silence hangs in the air.

"Serretus. Did you know him?" asks David Paul.

"Oh yes. He is a very good friend. A good friend indeed."

"He was my friend, too. I miss- Did you know that he didn't...make it?"

"I sensed it, yes," says Mallaroy tapping his index finger to his temple.

"I wish he were here."

"It is okay to be sad but have faith. One day, you and Serretus will be reunited. The Crystal Mother is good. Trust in her."

David Paul appreciates the kind words but the thought of one day seeing Serretus in some theoretical afterlife doesn't ease his pain. It hits the same nerve when he thinks of his mother who he will never see.

"He was the only one I knew here. On Lucasia. Now I have nothing," he says.

"Nothing is something," says Mallory cryptically.

David Paul mulls that over. It resonates somehow. He's not sure why. Like he's heard it or a version of it before. He makes to respond to ask Mallaroy what he means when a mob of villagers come bursting through the doorway. Three dozen or more crowd into the spacious, but not *that* spacious, tent. Some tall, some short. Some heavy set, others are toothpick thin like Mallaroy. Old and young.

And all have only one good eye. About half wear a patch over theirs, while the rest bare naked the scar tissue that has formed over the missing eye.

They rush to David Paul and to place a hand on his back or shoulders or hold his hand or just try to be near him in some way. Even more enter the tent and try to do the same. And then more still.

They keep repeating the phrase "Te'Squal" over and over again. They are all smiling, overjoyed to see him for some reason as they crowd around him.

For David Paul it's just...awkward.

Mallory speaks to them in another language and gently shoos them out but they ignore this and continue to swarm David Paul.

"Te'Squal, Te'Squal, Te'Squal," the villagers keep repeating.

At last, Mallaroy is able to get all to leave.

Then he sits back down at the table, still smiling and shrugs a shrug that says 'what are you going to do, right?'

He serves olives from the exotic land of Tie'l and from a kettle of unusual but beautiful design pours Presleeian tea; some for himself, some for David Paul who takes a sip and does his best not to make a face, not to offend at the awfulness of the taste but he's so thirsty that this drink, any drink no matter the taste, is a welcome thirst quencher. He continues to drink while unknowingly staring at Mallaroy's missing eye.

"You're wondering what happened, eh?" asks Mallaroy.

"I'm sorry I didn't mean to--"

"It is okay. It is okay."

Mallaroy puts his hands together, bows his head and lets out a sigh, then begins.

"The Ninth Legion came. We will not convert to their way so they take an eye from each and every one of us."

"That's awful. Were many of your people hurt or killed in the battle? I mean other than the eye of course."

"No, no, no. No battle. No battle. We Pahhcheans are pacifists. And proud ones at that. We do not fight. It's core to our thousand generation belief system. We believe the Crystal Mother and Her Children will protect us in the end. Fighting? Never an option."

"You worship the Mother Crystal?"

"Oh, yes. We worship Her and the bountiful energy she provides. The Magnificent Field. Through The Field, Her and The Children balance all things. And when the Balance is good, the planet is good. And really, everything is good. The Balance. Very important."

"But your eye. She didn't protect you then," David Paul says, though regrets it as soon as he says it realizing he might have just said something offensive.

"Lose one, better than losing two, right? You see? Ha. Nothing is something and something is better than nothing. Ha, ha, ha," Mallaroy says laughing.

David Paul is pleasantly surprised at the positive outlook he has on even the most awful of things but wonders if he should take the planetary crisis more serious and Mallaroy seems to sense this and takes a serious tone.

"That said, these are dark times. Very dark times. The Balance

is gone. There's no more Magnificent Field. Not good. Lucasia is in bad shape. Poverty, famine, despair. War after war after war. Very bad. And so bad times," he gestures to his missing eye, "bad things happen."

David Paul ponders all of this for a moment then asks, "What does Te'Squal mean?"

David Paul doesn't pronounce it correctly and Mallory chuckles. Giggle is probably the better way to put it.

"Te'Squal."

"Te'Squal," repeats David Paul.

"Te," says Mallaroy.

"Te," repeats David Paul.

"Squaaaaalllll," says Mallaroy.

"Te'Squal," says David Paul.

"Very good. Very good."

"So what does it mean?"

Mallaroy smiles at him again and nods a knowing nod but David Paul gives him a look like he's not in on the joke.

"Te'Squal means: 'savior'," and points at David Paul.

"Me? I'm no savior."

"Yes you are."

"No, no. I'm not. I'm just here to try and help find the Child Crystals."

Mallory laughs so hard he nearly topples over.

"'Just here to try and help find the Child Crystals'. That is a good one. I enjoy your joke. No, no, no Te'Squal you are here for so much more."

"I don't understand. Once the Child Crystals are found the Magnificent Field returns to full power, the balance will be back. And then the good guys win right?"

"I'm afraid that's only the half story. Yes. Find the Children and The Magnificent Field is restored. The Balance returns. *Lucasia begins* to heal. But sadly, it will take more than just the reunion of the Mother and Children."

"What do you mean?" asks David Paul curiosity piquing. Apparently, according to Mallaroy anyways, there's more to all of this than what Serretus had told him.

"There's a powerful force out there. Very, very bad. We Pahhchean call it Var Nekrosis. It translates roughly in Standard to, eh, Great Darkness. Var Nekroisis came to *Lucasia* a long time ago. It feeds off hatred and conflict. It wants us to destroy ourselves. For *Lucasia* to implode upon itself, metaphorically speaking that is. The more people with hate in their hearts the more Ver Nekrosis grows stronger. It's all just very bad."

"You mean the Ninth Legion, right? They are what you call the Great Darkness? The Var Nekro-whatever."

"No, no, no. Not the same. Var Nekrosis is much worse."

"And by reuniting the Children with the Mother this won't get rid of this Darkness?" asks David Paul wondering if perhaps there is just something being lost in translation here. It could be as simple as that.

"Don't get Mallaroy wrong every journey has a first step. The reunion of Mother and Children is the first. But the journey to peace, the journey to balance is long one but without a first step, there's no second step, no third step, yes?"

"How will this Darkness go away for good?"

"The Pahhchean believe only a Warrior of The Crystal Mother can destroy Var Nekrosis."

"But...Serretus said all of the Crystal Warriors were destroyed."

"Yep. Tis true," Mallaroy says smiling slyly at David Paul, "Until now."

"Me?"

"Yes."

"No, no, no. See I'm just here to *find* the Child Crystals. That's all I've been trained in. I'm no Crystal Warrior," says David Paul.

"Not yet."

"But how—"

"Don't know. Listen to the Mother. She will tell you."

David Paul frowns, skeptical. Serretus said he went through the First Rite as an infant and that gave him the ability to commune with the Crystal Mother and The Child Crystals but he never mentioned actually training to become a Crystal Warrior. He was just here to locate the Child Crystals and that's all. Mallaroy picks up on this.

"Pahhchean have a saying. 'On Ba Thanna, Te'Squal ah Var Nekrosis'."

To which David Paul gives him a quizzical look.

"An end to the Great Darkness the Protector will bring."

"But I've done nothing yet."

"Nothing is something," says Mallaroy smiling again.

David Paul is overwhelmed. This isn't exactly what he signed up for. This Darkness. This Var Nekrosis or whatever. Why didn't Serretus ever mention any of this to him. Perhaps there is something still being lost in translation. Maybe Mallaory and his people refer to the Ninth Legion as this Var Nekrosis? That must be it. Or maybe this tribe of ancients has a different theory on all of this. One unique to them. But David Paul's head is spinning nonetheless.

"Enough talk, mmm?. Too serious. We must have fun too, yes?

Balance, after all, right? Come on."

...

They exit the colorful collection of bell tents, David Paul's head still swirling from their conversation. A large feast and celebration are underway and the entire village is partaking. It reminds him of a the Topsfield Fair that he and his friends have been attending the last few years. Games. Dancing. Fun. Food. Music. Rides. There are fire pits all over the village around which villagers partake in ceremonial dances. There is the fast-paced Utze Dance with participants moving along with the beat of thunderous drums and the slower paced movements of the Hummnu Dance performed at a Tai-Chi pace done so slow one might mistakenly believe the participants are not moving at all. Craftspeople make elaborate origami-like decorations to hand out to child and adult alike. Other partake in games where one has to walk atop a slack of rope strewn between two stakes in the ground whilst balancing cups of cooled tea in each palm. Those who make it are rewarded with sweet sticks of honey. And all over the village food stands have been propped up from which the proprietors cook their own special cuisine with such pride that to call it an art form would not do it justice.

David Paul and his Sinewy companions join in on the food and drink and festivities.

David Paul is playing with other children, a game similar to lacrosse called Kurosuu. It's fun times all around and he's

happy to just be a kid again able to forget the weight of responsibility on his shoulders, if only temporarily.

Later in the night, there is a Ceremony of Lights to celebrate the gift of life where millions of tiny birds called Daque birds whose four wings flap faster than a hummingbirds and whose bioluminescent backsides burn brighter than a high lumen light bulb are released and float up in the sky.

There are acts of kindness all around, the young rush to get their less abled elders food and drink, the old and wise patiently teach the little ones the ancient Paki dances, an unspoken exchange of youth for wisdom between them, a group of teenagers dancing and laughing in their own circle notes another is sitting down and not participating and they all go to get her and welcome her into their band. David Paul is offered food, drink, and dance many times over as he wonders why the loss of balance on Lucasia hasn't affected these wonderful people and then he recalls their missing eyes. To say that's a small price to pay is an understatement to say the least. But as he further ponders this he wonders if the purity of these people makes them more impervious to reacting to the evils and atrocities that have overtaken the world. Anyways, the party goes on. Mothers and fathers introduce their children to him. Some even introduce their beloved family pets. He is overwhelmed by the kind

treatment he and his escorts receive and the small acts of kindness he continues to observe amongst the villagers. But this all changes as a Sinewy rider rushes urgently through the village's central pathway atop her Umi.

David Paul, from afar, sees that she appears frazzled and even scared as she leaps off her ride and runs to Mallaroy and Azrael, breathless. He can't hear what she is saying, what he wouldn't do for Rudy's lip-reading skills right now, but it's clear from the demonstrative waving of her arms and the scared look on her face that something is clearly not right.

Azrael gives her an appreciative pat on the shoulder, then shouts to the other Sinewy. They all rush out of the village, two stay behind with Azrael.

Mallaroy huddles with his sentries and is pointing and directing them. David Paul is sure now that there is something very wrong and whatever it is it has ticked up the tension and urgency among Mallaroy, a few of his sentries, and the Sinewy. Though it all happens within its own contained little shell as the celebration around them continues in blissful ignorance.

Azrael and Mallaroy lead David Paul to the back of Mallaroy's tent, away from the crowd.

"What's going on?" he asks, voice shaky.

A Meemooh, a bumbling and ho-hum beast of burden quite similar in appearance and personality to a donkey, is brought forth. It

has large traveling packs on its back; so many and so high that the possibility the Meemooh will topple over at any moment from being top weighted seems well within the realm of possibilities. But these are but an illusion as they are mostly empty, with hidden compartments, optical illusions and mirrors within much like a magicians trick box, the kind they use when they "cut" their assistant in half. Mallaroy pulls on a collection of traveling bags atop that turn out to actually be a hidden door with a small space for someone to hide inside and with angled mirrored doors within to give the illusion of emptiness if anyone were to discover it.

"We use for refugees seeking asylum. I'm very sorry. It's all we have," says Mallaroy.

"It's perfect. It will do fine," says the Azrael.

"Uh, what's going on?" asks David Paul.

Azrael and Mallaroy don't answer him they but direct David Paul into the tiny hidden compartment and he scrambles into the cramped space barely able to squeeze through the opening and needing to twist and bend his body to fit into the space, suddenly thrust into the unexpected role of a contortionist. It is uncomfortable to say the least and he is shaken and scared.

"We must be going. We have it on good authority that the Ninth Legion are aware of your presence and have put out an All Points

Bounty. I'm sorry for the tight quarters but we must take every precaution," says Azrael to David Paul.

"Be safe Te'Squal, be safe. I sense one day we will see each other again," says Mallaroy.

They head out of the village where a large group of other Sinewy are at the entryway to greet them. Azrael quickly and urgently gives forceful instructions and the faction breaks off into smaller groups, at least a dozen, and head in different directions to act as decoys.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The next day as dawn breaks the small group trots along a lonesome muddy path through a murky forest of thin but tall bending trees and bogs.

Azrael and the other two Sinewy are disguised in peasant clothing, David Paul still crammed inside the hidden compartment atop the Meemooh.

Somewhere ahead the choppy and obnoxious motors of magcycles can be heard and the noise only gets louder. They are coming towards them. And sure enough a group of three riders approaches.

Ruffians. Louts. Bounty hunter types. From Batha City most likely. A place you do *not* want to go to after dark. Magcycles are so named because the seat and handlebars float atop a thin magnetic field that sits between that part of the bike where the rider sits and the motorized section surrounded by one single

tread that cuts through the road with abandon slinging mud everywhere.

"Oy! Hold up there mates," shouts the group's leader stopping and getting down from his magcycle.

"Word is there is a Crystal Warrior on Lucasia. Ninth Legion paying top price for him. Dead or alive."

As they converse, the other ruffians walk around the Meemooh, even poking and prodding the many packs atop its back (a.k.a. the secret-compartment) and David Paul can do all he can to not visibly shake as tensions heighten and one starts poking around the doorway to his compartment just a little too closely. David Paul's heart vaults into his throat while one of the Sinewy warriors slyly slides her hand to her hidden firearm. There's a good chance the cherdoo is about to hit the fan.

"There are no Crystal Warriors here. Haven't been for years," feints Azrael.

"Where are you going?" asks the ruffian leader, rather aggressively.

"Just myself and my children coming from a trading post a ways back. Had some ripe fruit. Fresh too if you can believe it."

"You've no mate?"

"My partner was killed by the damned Sinewy sometime after the Great Purge in one of their ideological rampages against the

Ninth Legion. Tough to talk about, if I'm being honest with you. Just trying to string one day to the next at this point."

"What 'bout them Umi? They look like Royal Umi. Only Sinewy Warriors ride those," notes the ruffian leader as his partners continue to lookover the packs upon the Memooh.

"As I said, me partner was killed by Sinewy. The group did that, they got killed by Ninth Legion soon after. Got what's coming to them you ask me. These Umi was left over so we took 'em for our own. Figure least I could get for losing me partner."

"Damn Sinewy. Think they better than everyone else. Good for you," says the ruffian leader.

"Got that right. No doubt."

The ruffian leader loses interest in further small talk, "Find anything?"

"Ain't nothing here boss. They's clean. No one would be dumb enough to try and send a Crystal Warrior with these three. Would be more well-guarded is my suspicion. Bigger group," answers a ruffian cohort.

"Alright let's move out," growls the ruffian leader, "Stay off the paths old man if you know what's good for you and your family. Not everyone looking is as nice as us. These are dangerous times."

"Fine advice sir and greatly appreciated," says Azrael.

"That bit is free. Any more will cost you, so be on your way," says the ruffian leader.

"Good luck with your search. May any remaining luck I have in my life, become yours," says the Azrael doing the best thespian work he can muster.

The ruffian leader gives Azrael a nod, kickstarts his magcycle and revs the engine bringing the hammering motor to quaking decibel levels. The other two do the same and the ruffian gang departs, magcycle unitracks skidding in the mud providing our little band with a mud shower as they leave. After several moments the obnoxious noise of their powerful engines finally fades in the distance indicative that they are away and the threat has passed.

Once they know this for certain Azrael and friends turn off the main pathway and looking around to ensure no one else is around stop and open the door to the hidden compartment.

"Everything okay in there?" asks one of the Sinewy Soldiers. David Paul, sweating, scared, and exhausted gives two thumbs up. Azrael shoos the other Sinewy out of the way and his head appears in the little square doorway.

"Close call. We have found a place to make camp. Once we setup you can come out, but you must stay hidden the entire time and be prepared to climb back in at a moment's notice. No

exceptions, okay?" says Azrael to which David Paul nods most certainly in the affirmative. That short run in with the ruffians was all the reality check he needed to know he is a wanted person and a prized one at that.

...

Later that night a fire crackles at a makeshift campsite they've setup complete with walk-in tent tall enough to stand up in, though it's nothing compared to the more permanent and elaborate bell tents back in Pahhche. David Paul and Azrael hide out inside the tent eating a stew of mashed spleroffel potatoes while the two sinewy soldiers sit outside on guard while they eat the same slop from wooden bowls around the fire.

One lets the Meemooh lick his spoon and face between bites while the other shakes their head and rolls her eyes at this. The Umi are tied off nearby heads down mindlessly munching away on grass.

...

Meanwhile...

An architectural phenomenon of blackened steel Mollock Castle is a historic fortress that dominates the skyline from its position atop the rocky island of Skellique the Greater. It also happens to be the personal and fortified stronghold of Lord Dogen who presently sits in the quietude of his private chambers deep within the citadel, self-secluded save for his protectorBot

(always by his side of course). Who knows (and who would even want to know) what evil thoughts pass through his wicked mind during these lonely times of contemplation.

A circle-shaped conferencing screen indicates an incoming call and Dogen breaks his meditation to answer knowing the call would not come through if it were not of the utmost importance. Sure enough the image swirls into focus to reveal Doctor Frood.

"Doctor Frood. My liege. How may I serve thee?" answers Lord Dogen.

"Lord Dogen. Intelligence has come in that the actor we seek has taken refuge in the Village of Pahhche. I charge you to go there and end him."

"As you wish. For the glory of the Ninth Legion. It would be my honor."

"He is a threat to the Grand Plan, Lord Dogen. His *permanent* elimination is of the utmost importance."

"Failure is not an acceptable outcome, Doctor Frood."

"Succeed and I would consider a grant of early retirement."

"And I would be forever grateful. I swear to destroy him."

The screen swirls out to black and Dogen gets up from his chair and prepares for battle. He is as serious and focused as can be (and this is a guy who is always serious and focused) as he gets into his battle armor, selects fighting weapons from a wall full of them, attaches explosives launchers to his wrists and checks

his many plasma guns and rifles each one with a deadly purpose. Everything must be just so. There must be no room for error or lapse in preparedness. His concentration is heightened and his focus is dialed in and he is prepared to do some monstrous and heinous damage as he strides from his private chambers into a main hallway where there are special forces soldierDrones, the best of the best of what the Ninth Legion has to offer, waiting for him and ready for the attack.

"Is the Zulu ready?" he commands, referring to his personal attackcraft. Similar in size, though slightly smaller and more sleek, to a MAL-class fighter, the Zulu also has a hull but its cockpit is in the very front of the craft.

"Yes sir," a soldierDrone replies through its tinny voicebox. On runways and landing platforms on the western side of the castle sits the Zulu and a squadron of Ninth Legion special forces aircraft. Soon enough they are in flight. It's a small group, this shouldn't be too difficult, and they fly low to avoid detection so as to spring upon their victims with a surprise attack.

In a Ninth Legion Drone Control Center, Pilots for the attackcraft and Controllers for the soldierDrones prep for the attack, encased in their control hives and surrounded by monitors, lights, controls, switches and dashboards whilst commanders walk the narrow ramps amongst the stacks of

claustrophobically close hives ready to call out even the slightest misstep.

As they break over the horizon, Pahhche Village comes into view.

"Lord Dogen we stand at the ready and await your orders to proceed," a soldierDrone announces.

"Attack at will. Only the leader lives. Tolerance for mercy is zero," a cold and emotionless Dogen orders and the Ninth Legion aircraft fly in and the massacre begins.

...

At the same time back at their campsite David Paul and Azrael continue to eat supper in the tent, David Paul shovels the thickened stew into his mouth. Spoonful after spoonful.

"Hungry, mmm? Good. Eat. Eat. Make you strong like Sinewy, eh?" says Azrael. "Ha. Ha."

"It's delicious," says David Paul.

Suddenly he puts the bowl down, not feeling well, sweating and dizzy. Anxiety? Vasovagal attack? It has been a stressful day. Then there's a ringing in his ear and with his inner eye he keeps seeing Pahhche Village.

The voice: *"Tragedy will soon befall Pahhche."* **[JASON: should the voice/voices alert him?]**

"What's the matter? I thought you liked, no?" queries Azrael. David Paul is finally able to somewhat steady himself.

"Sorry. It's not the food. Something bad has happened. Oh no. Oh no. No, no, no," he says clutching at his temples.

"What? What has happened?"

"Mallaroy. The village. They're in trouble. We have to go back."

"Go back? We cannot go back! I've sworn an oath to protect you. I cannot take you *into* the vipers den!"

"But they're all going to die. We have to go back!"

"Impossible. Please I beg you," says Azrael.

Without stopping to think David Paul runs out of the tent and leaps onto one of the Umi.

"I hope this works," he says aloud to himself and he places his hands gently on the Umi's head, closes his eyes, relaxes himself, thinking only of he and the Umi, and speaks to the animal, "Take me to Pahhche," and the Umi takes off, a trail of dust in its wake.

"No wait! Come back," shouts the Azrael after David Paul.

He barks orders at the two Sinewy guards and points to the fleeing David Paul. They toss off their disguise clothing. One chases after David Paul on foot (though it's a futile attempt since the Umi goes much faster) while the other hops onto the remaining Umi and gives chase.

Azrael runs into the tent and pulls out a bulky military-grade suitcase and opens it.

There are plungers and buttons and all sorts of speakers and microphones and other communications gizmos within.

He starts to push and press and pull then speaks, voice shaky, "Code Zenith. Code Zenith. Fiver One is on the run. Repeat Fiver One is on the run. No chaperone. Repeat no chaperone. Likely destination Pahhche. That's Proton-Astro-Kenner-Zenith-Ion-Fusion-Ion-Kenner-Wavelength-Astro. In pursuit but chance of catching is unlikely. Please send all available units. Ninth Legion attack imminent."

...

In his office, Doctor Frood sits at his desk within his obnoxiously large laboratory in the penthouse of Ninth Legion Tower.

A conferencing screen indicates an incoming call.

Doctor Frood presses a button and Lord Dogen appears on screen.

"Did you get him?!" Frood spits.

"The village is no more but the target was not there," reports Dogen.

"You're sure?! I was told by Ninth Legion intelligence they were!"

"Nothing was left unchecked. He's on the run and--"

"Grrrrr-aaahhhhhh!" Doctor Frood screams and rips the screen from its base, hurling it at a wall.

...

At the Ninth Legion Intelligence Agency Headquarters...

A massive domed space with terminal after terminal of intelligence analysts, methodologists, auditors, and specialists, known unofficially as "The Eyes and Ears" are spying on every micrometer of Lucasia.

A junior analyst listens with great interest. A curious look on her face. She goes to work on her computer terminal.

Her eyes widen as she can't believe what she just intercepted and unscrambled.

She takes a data key out of her terminal then presses a button which blinks a light on and off above her workstation the purpose of which is to alert her superior; she's not allowed to leave her workstation. Ever.

No one shows up so she presses the button more urgently.

At last, a chief intelligence analyst comes over.

"What is it agent?" asks the impatient chief analyst, "this had better be good."

"We've intercepted a message. Actionable intelligence. Fugitive located. Heading *back* towards Pahhche," replies the intelligence analyst.

"How sure are you about this? We've had one intelligence fail and today I don't want another," presses the chief analyst, knowing he would be terminated *permanently* (as was the officer he replaced a short time ago) for a *second* one.

"High degree of certainty sir. Or may I never see the Eternal Realm."

The chief analyst mulls it over. Either choice is risky. If he chooses to ignore the report, to play it safe, but the target is at the village he will face consequences. If he chooses to send Lord Dogen back but the target is not there for the second time in less than an hour he will again face consequences. Both consequences would be of the tortuous then death by unsightly means type.

He sticks out his chest and raises his chin hoping to give an air of his resolve and decisiveness in front of a lowly technician, silently pleading to Za he is correct.

"Fine work agent, now back to work," then to another minion, "get me a secure line to Lord Dogen stat."

...

A few hours later at the Village of Han Pahhche, the sky has given birth to a breathtaking dawn...

David Paul rides atop his Umi with profound urgency when they come upon the outskirts of the village. Plumes of smoke snarl into the sky from beyond a hill where the village lay.

Having pushed his poor Umi to physical limits it may not have known it was capable of David Paul arrives at the village entrance where the sentries and their steeds are dead.

He continues on like a bolt into the village, down the main pathway.

There is smoke, fire, destruction and dead bodies everywhere. A part of him wants to curl up into a ball and cry and given the carnage one could not blame him but pushes on and continues down the main pathway to the back end of the village where he sees Mallaroy standing alone, what was his glorious tent is now a smoldering puddle of fiery ash.

He leaps off the Umi before the animal even stops noting Mallaroy and a small team of old and rusted laborBots have dug hundreds of shallow graves in neat rows, many empty still to be filled, many filled with the cloth covered bodies of fallen villagers. They continue to work, a lot more to do based on the slaughter. The only living being he has seen in the entire village is Mallaroy who's other formerly good eye has a bloodied bandage over it so that now he is completely blind.

Mallaroy holds up his shovel in defense, "Ba gatta ga! Ba gatta ga! Who's there?"

David Paul advances with tender approach.

"Mallaroy. It's me. David Paul."

Mallaroy reaches out. David Paul takes his hand and Mallaroy feels his face.

"Te'Squal?"

"Yes. What, what happened?"

"You must go. They could come back."

"No. What happened. Please tell me."

"They came looking for you. Asking questions at first. But we say nothing. So they made me watch. Watch as they slay all of my people. And then when all were gone they take my eye. I would rather they'd taken my life. Even though I'm now blind, the memories of today's atrocities are something I will never unsee."

"This is all my fault. I never should have come here. It's all my fault."

"No. No, no, no. The fault, lies with ones who did this. Let there be no guilt. For now, I need friend. Stay with Mallaroy if only for bit. Your presence brings me comfort."

David Paul takes in all of the devastation and fights back tears and panic. First the massacre on the ocean with the Ruka poachers, now this.

"Nothing like this is ever going to happen again. Ever. I promise you Mallaroy," says David Paul.

"Vengeance is a circular path to nowhere. It will only bring more of the same."

"Then I will find the Child Crystals. The Ninth Legion will be defeated. I promise you."

Mallaroy, prodding about with a stick, finds his way to an aged log where he sits. David Paul goes and sits next to him.

Mallaroy is clearly broken.

"We are a peaceful people. A loving people. Doing our best to live in harmony with the Crystal Mother. We have no weapons. We have no warriors. Our ancient code is never fight. It was a good way of life. The right way. Why I wonder? Why is there cruelty in world like this? This is a question I shall contemplate for the rest of my days."

He says nothing more, just "stares" ahead, shock setting in, a blood laden tear, meandering down his cheek out of the bandage that covers his recently taken eye.

David Paul says nothing, knowing anything he tries to say would be inadequate so he sits with Mallaroy. Sits next to his friend, by his side. To try and comfort him. What else can he do? Nothing to say just...there for him which he believes is better than saying anything at all. Nothing is something.

...

They sit for at least an hour, probably more until day breaks. They've not said a word to one another; sometimes nothing said is the better option.

Suddenly, as the morning sun goes from a sliver to a sickle on the horizon, David Paul begins to feel nauseous and there's a ringing in his ears and a buzz vibrating in his head that runs down his spine. He wonders what's wrong with him, what's happening. Then he realizes there's nothing wrong with him.

There's just something "off", something bad is about to happen and his empathic sensibilities are telling him so via these sensations. Then the voice in a whisper confirms it: "Danger. Get out of the way."

David Paul's eyes widen, and he grabs Mallaroy out of the way and a nanosecond later there is an explosion right where they were sitting.

He leads Mallaroy to a downed tree for cover.

"They're back! Go! You must go!" shouts Mallaroy.

"I'm not leaving you!"

Other explosions go off all around them. Deafening and deadly. David Paul takes Mallaroy by the hand and leads him to another spot.

Ninth Legion attacking aircraft pounce onto the scene like a swarm of angry wasps. soldierDrones leap out and as soon as they touchdown they start to indiscriminately fire plasma blasts, blanketing the area in a blizzard of the deadly pellets. The number of attackcraft and soldierDrones is five times that of the previous attack even though the previous attack murdered every villager but one. Because now they know their target is here and the predators have picked up the scent of their prey and they are salivating at the anticipation of a kill.

Mallaroy pleads with David Paul.

"Please. You must save yourself. You're the only one who can stop this from happening again. I'll a cause distraction. Listen to me. Under where my tent was, under the wooden platform, there is a door in the ground, you may have to dig a bit. Take the tunnels. It will lead you outside the village. To safety! Run away. You must run away Te'Squal!"

"No. Not a chance. You're coming with me," and again, he takes Mallaroy by the hand and leads him to another hiding spot. He knows they have a goal now: get to where Mallaroy's tent was and get under it. There they can escape through the underground tunnels.

They run, hide, crawl and do whatever they can to avoid the soldierDrones, David Paul guiding the blinded Mallaroy the entire way but things are getting desperate as the entire place is nothing but hundreds of predatory soldierDrones so ravenous in their zest to kill David Paul that they bump into one another in an almost comical way. And the skies above are filled with the darkened cloud that is the hovering Ninth Legion air assault.

Soon enough, they are hunkered down, trapped more like it, behind a crumbled stone oven. soldierDrones are everywhere and there is no escape.

"Te'Squal. You must go. You must."

And with that, Mallaroy breaks away, trips and falls, gets up again, running with hands in front trying to navigate as he makes loud cackling and clucking noises to cause a distraction. "Hey! Come on you beasts! Here I am! Come and get me! Come and get old Mallaroy," he shouts.

This is David Paul's chance. He can see it. The door in the ground.

But then he sees that Mallaroy is shot in the shoulder. And another soldierDrone has him in his sights. An easy target. Several soldierDrones turn to face Mallaroy, fingers on triggers one second, and the next, they depress the triggers. No doubt a kill shot.

David Paul runs out of hiding arms outstretched but there's no way he will reach Mallaroy in time.

"No!" David Paul shouts in a guttural scream of horror and desperation and the plasma blasts, instead of slicing through Mallaroy, somehow splatter in mid-air as if some invisible egg-shaped shield were there to protect him. But how??

David Paul, having stumbled and fallen now lies in the mud, covered and out of sight for now, not believing what he just saw.

The soldierDrones heads are circling in confusion their drone controllers wondering what happened.

...

At the Ninth Legion Drone Control Center inside the combs of workstation hives a Drone Controller wonders as well, "What was that? He was dead! I know he was! I had him my sights!"

Drone Troop Commodore, "Just shut up and get them! Focus on the primary target who cares about the old man anyways!"

...

David Paul scrambles to get to Mallaroy and when he does, he grabs him and dives again for cover, he looks Mallaroy over and to his shock, aside from that first shot to the shoulder, he is alive and well.

In the not-far-off distance, a sleek and unique aircraft lands, Lord Dogens personal attack craft, the Zulu. He's back and he exits with an angry purpose accompanied as always by his trusty protectorBot.

David Paul is laying on the ground, shielding Mallaroy, and on the lookout for a way for them to escape but they are surrounded by several squads of soldierDrones who are about to blow them to smithereens until-

"No! He's mine," shouts Dogen and the soldierDrones lower their weapons in a blink.

Dogen walks right over to David Paul and Mallaroy and raises his massive weapon to shoot.

David Paul begs for his life, "No! Please!"

Then Dogen disappears.

At first David Paul blinks his eyes over and over not believing them and wonders if the same mysterious power from before is at play again, but on closer examination he sees that Dogen has been tackled by a hulk of a warrior. None other than Commander Sloane himself. The armored from head-to-toe cyborg (parts machine, parts flesh) standing over seven feet tall with broad shoulders and all sorts of weapons on his person. And he's brought his handpicked Strike Force with him (jokingly referred to as "The Shrimp Patrol" by many in the Coalition armed forces, because they are anything but). And they start kicking some serious...well you know.

A full out brawl breaks out as the small but lethal squad of Coalition warriors fire away and destroy the dumbfounded soldierDrones causing screens to go dark back at the Ninth Legion Drone Control Center.

David Paul and Mallaroy make a break for the tunnels again.

"Almost there!" David Paul yells while Dogen and Sloane take on one another in a hand to hand combat battle for the ages.

It's a close match but at one point a few soldierDrones join in to help Dogen and while Sloane does a good job of fighting them off, the odds eventually sway the other way and he seems to be in trouble.

This gives Dogen a respite from the fight and he spies David Paul and Mallaroy escaping and breaks free from this skirmish launching a grenade from his on-person wrist launcher arsenal and the area with the door that leads to the secret tunnels is blown to smithereens, a smoldering and smoking crater in its place.

David Paul can't believe their bad luck; they were so close. Now David Paul and Mallaroy are in the open with no cover, sitting ducks if there ever were ones, and Dogen is fast approaching, protectorBot following.

His purposeful gait oozes one intention and one intention only and that intention is to kill David Paul.

In the distance Sloane sees what is about to happen and breaks towards Dogen but without skipping a beat Dogen quick draws a plasma pistol, fires and hits Mallaroy.

"No!" David Paul screams in horror gathering the lifeless Mallaroy in his arms.

"Remember Te'Squal. Do not underestimate yourself. You...can save...the...world...," and then his final breath leaves him in the most peaceful of ways and he is gone.

"Mallaroy no please--"

But his pleading words are interrupted a growl and he looks up to see Dogen looming over him.

"Do you know what he said to me before we slaughtered his village and took his other eye? 'I forgive you'. Ha, ha. Can you believe that? 'I forgive you.' What about you? Do you 'forgive me' boy?"

"I hate you!" spits David Paul.

But without a second thought Dogen quick draws from his other sidearm and fires it at David Paul just as Sloane comes in with a flying arm bar, knocking Dogen out of the way and saving David Paul once again.

Only he didn't.

The plasma blast hit its mark and got David Paul right in the center of his chest, a frisbee size glowing hole of blackened flesh and burnt clothing. As the color drains from it, his face is one of pure shock, still not having comprehended what just happened. His eyes roll up into his head and he collapses to the ground.

All he can hear is a faraway wheezing and he realizes it's the sound of his own labored breathing and the last thing he sees, before the world goes dark, is Sloane pounding on Dogen uncontrollably in a full fit of rage. Now the wheezing breaths become shallow and more infrequent, at some point turning to hiccup like gasps, then there is no more breathing and everything fades to black as David Paul's world is no more.

...

Plasma blasts are fired on Sloane who is able to ignore them, they splatter off of his glorious armor doing little in the way of damage, and concentrates on pummeling Dogen into oblivion.

"I will end you today! I will end you!" cries Sloane.

The soldierDrones are decimated.

A Coalition soldier pulls Sloane off of Dogen.

"Commander Sloane. We must go. The boy is in the most critical of conditions, sir. We need to get him help. Time is crucial."

Sloane snaps out of his fit of rage and runs to David Paul.

Lord Dogen gingerly gets to his feet, swaying a bit, his mechanized eye hanging off by a few wires and sparking.

The Zulu lands nearby called in by his ever-vigilant protectorBot and Dogen and the little 'Bot board and take off.

As the Zulu quickly becomes but a dot hovering high in the sky

above, inside Lord Dogen sits in a chair as medBots work to

repair his robotic eye and face plate. The face plate that

covers most of that side of his face is removed but no one is

allowed to see the dreadful sight behind it. Sparks fly from the

work being done on his face then a device presses to his face

and there's the sound of staples being pumped into his wounds

but Dogen does not flinch from any of it.

"What is the status of the target?" queries Dogen.

A soldierDrone is looking through a telescope-like device that

threads directly onto its head.

The device comes to focus on the body of David Paul. We see the orange-red heat signatures of others around him but there is very little around David Paul. Its mostly blue, and a readout indicates he is no longer alive: TARGET DECEASED. ACCURACY OF REPORT 99.98%.

"Mortally wounded, sir. Death imminent. Nothing can save him," replies a soldierDrone.

"Fall back, full retreat. All forces pull out," says Dogen, "Inform the High Command. Threat terminated."

"A victory for certain, my lord. The ultimate cost to the Coalition," offers the soldierDrone.

"Yes, their 'savior' is no more," smiles Dogen.

...

Carrying David Paul's body with the greatest of urgency Sloane runs over to a sleek and powerful triangular shaped aerodynamic hovercraft. Five of his most loyal troops from the "Shrimp Patrol", one specializing in battlefield medicine, follow and board.

Sloane places David Paul down. The medic rushes over with suitcases full of rescue and other lifesaving equipment and with several of her medBots in tow.

"Sir, I'm not sure there is much I can do for him, sir," the medic pleads.

"Keep trying!" Sloane screams then rushes to the controls of the hovercraft, slams all of the forward thrust throttles down and the craft zips away into the distance with such urgency it was like it was never there, a rust colored dust cloud in its place.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

An hour later, the hovercraft with Sloane still piloting and having passed over several horizons, races towards a massive, flattened mountain. It's low to the ground as mountains go, but very wide, as if a normal triangular shaped mountain had its upper two-thirds sliced off. Sloane pilots the craft right up the side, the engine whining against the steep slope. Quickly they reach the top, but there is no top, the mountain is really just a shell of sorts, a hollowed bowl and down the inside slope they ride. They reach the bottom where there is an entire ecosystem contained within. Mostly, there is an exotic forest of trees with trunks that look like upside down icicles, trunks of crystal smooth and alive, topped with orange and yellow leaves that make for a gorgeous canopy. Glass Tree Forest. A place very few know about and even fewer have ever seen.

Sloane's Shrimp Patrol troopers sit side by side in silent anxiousness as the medic and medBots still try in vain to save an unresponsive David Paul. His face is ashen and pale, lips blue. Various monitoring devices signal that his heart has stopped and he is not breathing. One of the medBots tries repeatedly to shock him back to life with "hands" designed for the purpose. Nothing.

One of the warriors sitting off to the side whispers to his mate, "Where are we going?"

"I don't know," replies the other.

~~As they zip deeper into the forest, dotted all about there are glowing green lanterns shaped like upside down wine bottles and filled with a gas that's lighter than air so they want to float away but are held aground by a piece of thin twine.~~

The hovercraft is headed for the largest and thickest knot of trees you've ever seen their crystal trunks all tangled and twisted together. Vines and thickets fill in any empty space. Sure, the trees have a glassy opacity but when tangled together, even the light barely gets through. Instead of slowing down Sloane crushes the speed controls forward, making everyone aboard lurch forward and fall to the floor. He's on a crash course for the cluster of trees. There's no way the hovercraft has a chance.

"Commander Sloane! What are you doing--," one of his warriors exclaims, while others ready to jump overboard. Sloane lets go of the steering mechanism, removes a customized plasma shooter from his utility belt and fires at a heretofore unseen round target that seemingly floats in mid-air. The shot hits its mark. He spins and shoots another, then does the same with another and then another and another. There seems to be some specific order he is shooting them in. Some rhyme or reason. And there is for just when the craft is about to crash the tangled mess of trees

untangles and parts and the craft flies right through the opening.

Now the hovercraft is on the other side of this tricky gateway, still in the glass forest, still flying at uncontrolled speeds, a mistake of only millimeters and the craft hits a tree and it all ends right there. The trees may look like glass but rest assured they are crystal grown from the core and are stronger than steel. But just as quickly as they zip through the forest on this side of the gateway, they come bursting out onto a body of water, hovering just inches above it and not slowing down in the least. If you guessed this is the mythical Lost Lake you are correct. With choppy waters lit up by bright blue bioluminescent algae the secret, sacred, and hidden lake of the ancients soon has a misty wake line cutting through it from Sloane piloting the hovercraft across it at heart pounding speeds.

A curious lake bird from high above takes a curiosity at this speeding craft (a little excitement for once) and sees what part of the lake it is headed for. A spillway hole in a large etched out but secluded cove.

Sloane brings the craft to a stop just before passing over the hole, the engines screaming to make this stop happen. If the craft had gone past the water line, down they all would have gone into the bottomless spillway hole.

Sloane puts the craft into idle as his cadre of fellow warriors look on wondering what exactly the heck he is up to.

He runs to David Paul slapping away two medBots tending to him, sending one over the side. It struggles to stay afloat and to get back into the hovercraft eventually doing so by using its own built-in grappling hook system, cursing all the while in a croaky, synthesized robotic lingo of blips and beeps.

Sloane picks up David Paul over his head and holds him there.

He's got David Paul's limp body pressed right over his head. And he stays like that and everyone onboard the hovercraft is speechless, wondering what exactly he is going to do and then just like that Sloane tosses David Paul's body overboard, down the spillway hole!

The warriors say nothing; all in complete and absolute shock.

Then Sloane kneels, palms floating down to rest on his thighs as he eases into a meditative state and his warriors follow doing the same.

...

Far down the spillway hole the water from above thins out to the point where it is more a dense mist in perpetual downfall. An Oslee bird curls up in its nest warming her recently laid eggs. The Oslee are small birds with a distinct but pleasant chirp that have used the cliffs of the spillway hole for a millennia. The mother Oslee ruffles her feathers then readjusts to a warmer

position settling in for a nap when she looks up and sees something she has never seen down here amongst these purple crystal cliffs: A boy's limp body falling from above, then past her, then continues right on down the hole.

David Paul's lifeless body having reached terminal velocity continues to plunge to greater depths, passing through misty cloud after misty cloud; passing more and more Oslee that have setup nests along the walls who look on with surprise and curiosity at the falling body that zips by.

Soon he has fallen to depths where there is no light but there are wall crawlers, creatures of the darkness dotted with glow-in-the-dark spots and with massive shimmering eyes that detect, to their disbelief, the falling boy as they scatter about the slick walls. The ones large enough consider whether to flick out their tongues and slurp him up for a meal but think twice as his scent is foreign and therefore deemed likely to be poisonous to their sensitive digestive systems.

David Paul's limp body continues its descent down, down, down, disappearing into the infinitesimal darkness.

...

The planet core is a colossal hollowed out spherical space with a bright spiny crystal orb at its center, so bright it could be a sun. Crystalline stalactites formed since time began, all

point towards the orb in the center of this mega-cavern drawn to it by its massive gravitational pull.

Circling the central orb, thousands of rings made of small crystal rocks, smaller crystal powder, and water droplets have formed perpetual orbits around it.

This brilliant orb is the Crystal Mother.

A small speck falls through a tiny hole in the surface of this hollowed out spherical cavern and gets pulled toward its center, towards the Crystal Mother. That small falling speck is none other than David Paul. His flaccid body falls through the crystal and water droplet orbital rings, disrupting them momentarily, they make wind-chime like sounds as this happens, but they soon fall back into their orbital rings or end up joining another.

David Paul's body continues to fall and fall until it finally reaches the Crystal Mother at the center and disappears into it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

He jars awake taking in a desperate life-giving breath.

David Paul is shirtless and has a scar, a well healed one (albeit packed with tiny purple crystals), in the form of an X in the center of his chest where he was shot. He is fazed, still in a fog but otherwise he feels okay. Wherever he is everything is bright. And it's all made of shards of ice that rise up so high he couldn't see a sky if there were one and yet it is bright as day out. Well what looks like ice anyways, it's not cold. It's actually crystal. Some clear, some white, a handful with a purple hue.

Someone approaches. Bare foot and wearing a cloak. Face hidden by a hood but not in some mysterious, something-to-hide sort of way. No there's only warmth and comfort emanating from behind the hood.

This person walks to David Paul and removes her hood.

"Hello there," says the mysterious woman beneath the hood.

Somehow David Paul knows who it is. He senses it. She is somehow neither old nor young. She is stately and wise, but with a young complexion.

David Paul stares at her then it dawns on him.

"Crystal Mother!" he says his head still spinning, "I wasn't sure you were real."

"Some things can be like that, can't they?"

"Am I dead?"

"That depends. Do you want to be?"

"No. No of course not."

"Why?"

"Well, I'd say generally speaking I don't want to be dead. But specifically speaking I need to get back. They need my help. Actually, you need to help, too."

"It is your desire to help?"

"Yes."

"Come."

She walks to a cavernous nature-made room walled off by tall crystal stalks all packed together. A string of water falls from high atop one of these crystal stalks splashing on the floor below. The floor is solid crystal, ice looking (minus the cold). In the center of this space a light from above shines on a pile of healthy brown dirt from which sprouts a lime green stem, thin and tender. At the top is of the stem is the last petal of what was a Crystalline Flower.

She plucks the petal. The stem and dirt turn to crystal dust and fade away into the wind.

"The last. No others after this," says Mother Crystal.

She puts it to his mouth.

"You are a believer?"

Somehow, he understands the question as vague as it is, and stranger still he knows the response.

"I believe."

"Eat."

He sticks his tongue out, she places the petal on it, and he eats.

A warmth, best described as unconditional love, runs through his entire being. His grogginess lifts.

"Walk with me," she says.

He gets up. They walk around this place, the domain of the Crystal Mother. Where giant stalks of crystal are everywhere and grow so tall one can barely discern where their tops are. Some have grown together at their tops forming thatched crystal canopies high above.

"It is not often that I am able to commune so directly this way with a sentient being. I don't necessarily look like this you know. I'm a bit more omnipresent. Well now that sounds pretentious saying it aloud like that. Not meant to be, just stating fact, you understand. I've taken this form to help you better comprehend my presence. Something you could wrap your head around. Didn't want to frighten you. Wanted to comfort you. What do you think?"

"It's working for you."

"Ha, ha. Thank you," then stares off and sighs, "They've taken my Children. You know this?" asks Mother Crystal.

"Yes."

"My only Children. My gift to the world."

"I'm here to find them."

"I know. I would appreciate that very much. I wish you success. They are well hidden."

"Do you know where they are?" asks David Paul.

"No. I see *nearly* everything but not all. Well-hidden indeed."

They walk in silence for a bit. Curious crystal rocks, the size of a small animal (a rabbit let us say), roll up and make cooing noises. Then they roll away having satisfied their curiosity.

"Someone, a friend, told me that I was here to do more than find your children," says David Paul.

"Yes. Defeat the Darkest Darkness. It goes by many names. Some call it Za. The Ninth Legion. They're on one of my lists. It's not the good list. Others, the friend you're referring to I believe, Var Nekrosis. Still others by different names. Many different names," she says.

"But once we find the Children, sorry your Children, won't the balance be restored and this Darkness be defeated. Easy peasy right?"

She stops walking, places a hand under a thin strand of a waterfall. Smiles.

"I wish that were so. The Darkest Darkness exists outside of the Great Balance. With the Great Balance there is good but not too much good, there is bad but not too much bad. Not too much feast, not too much famine. Balance. Always balance. My design. Not bad, mmm? Then again not too good either, right? Ha. But the Darkest Darkness? It does not abide by the rules of the Great Balance and therefore can destroy anything and everything."

"How do I defeat it?"

"I do not know how, only that you can but..." her voice trails off unsure of whether she should tell him.

"What?"

"It will take the *ultimate sacrifice*."

She places her hands on his shoulders.

"*The ultimate sacrifice*," she repeats.

David Paul can only nod.

She takes her hands off of his shoulders and smiles at him.

"This has been a lovely talk," she says.

...

Later, at the spillway hole, as the setting sun paints the scene in a glorious orange pastel, Sloane and his warriors are still kneeling in meditation aboard the hovercraft. Its been hours but they have not moved.

Then...

One of the warriors spies something and points.

"Look!"

Sloane rises to his feet. They all follow suit and look on and stare in wonder as David Paul's limp body in a white kimono rises from the mist of the spillway hole. Floating, somehow, magically it would seem, in mid-air.

His body drifts to the edge of the spillway hole and Sloane reaches out and grabs him bringing him into the hovercraft.

He sets David Paul down on the deck. David Paul's face is flush with pink and filled with...life.

David Paul's eyes flutter awake and he starts to come to.

Sloane's warriors cannot believe it. They rush over to him and surround him. They pull back his shirt to reveal his wound is completely healed. Just a scar. Almost like it never happened. Place a hand on his chest where his wound was and marvel.

Sloane, unemotional, gets up and goes to the controls of the hovercraft and they take off. Speeding away.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

"The Invincible and Triumphant, Supremely Wise One Who Descended from the Divine Eternal Realm Doctor Frood Missile Control Center – Subterranean" is the official name of a newly built Ninth Legion secret base housed miles below the planet surface beneath the unknowing peaceful metropolis called Knoll. The purpose of the base is singular. It is the location from which they will launch their next missile. The Finality. Once they locate the main headquarters of The Coalition they will launch the missile and wipe out half the planet. And victory and planetary domination will be theirs. What Doctor Frood refers to as the Grand Plan.

The main hub within the subterranean base sits above a lake of lava not far below. They are that far down. Steam rises eerily. The space is retrofitted from an ancient and long retired water supply and processing plant for the city far above so there are remnants of that infrastructure everywhere.

There are two rooms. The main room is round and domed with metal industrial flooring and a maze of thin catwalks all about. The floor is raised and around it, water flows in from several old sewage pipes that feed into this sort of moat. Look over the moat and you would see the lava lake hundreds of feet down. Towards the back of this room along a rocky wall, high in the ceiling above and encased in metallic exoskeleton hang four

globes made of Zelerium glass. The Child Crystals inside. They dangle above the lava lake, the rising haze causing the globes to steam over.

The adjacent room is the carved-out missile silo. The gargantuan missile, The Finality, much larger than its predecessor, The Revolution, stands at the ready and edifice of destructive potential never known to anyone. The Revolution was just a test, this is the real deal. Bigger. Faster. Built to deliver the Child Crystal payload to anywhere in the world with lethal precision.

The missile is being tended to by various staff members working atop scaffolding. There are many teams all performing the many tasks one would need to check off their to-do list to launch a killer missile with success.

As with the test launch, other staff are in a glassed-in missile launch control center that overlooks both rooms. This is Mission Control. Inside here, staff sit at state-of-the-art computer terminals and other control and monitoring equipment. The Ninth Legion has spared no expense.

Just as before, "custodial crew" for the missile are blessed in a ceremony by a Ninth Legion High Priest, the Vicar General. Then they board the missile – for the ultimate martyrdom and the guarantee of spending all of time in the Eternal Realm. Where they will have all worldly possessions and desires provided to

them and have riches beyond their greatest hopes. Better than immortality. Or so they've been convinced.

Inside the missile launch control center, Doctor Frood, escorted by Lord Dogen and his protectorBot, walk along a high, narrow catwalk that overlooks the many underlings.

"I'm glad you decided to stay with us for this glorious day Lord Dogen. Your elimination of the recent threat to our Grand Plan will go down in history."

"It's an honor to continue to serve you doctor."

Frood presses on a button which activates a microphone that he then speaks into.

"Status?"

"Ready to load Crystals my liege but awaiting target coordinates," states a control center technician.

"Is there any word from the Ministries on a target yet?"

"Not yet sir."

Frood shakes his head in frustration at this.

"Load the Crystals but keep them in the Zelerium containers until launch."

"Yes sir."

The Zelerium glass globes are taken down by a crane and loaded onto treaded moving carts.

Similar to the Revolution launch the four globes, Child Crystals inside, are rolled out by payload specialists in hazmat suits,

hazBots assisting, then loaded onto an elevator and taken to the missile head where they standby.

In the Ninth Legion subterranean missile launch control center personnel scurry about, saying things like "Crystals ready for loading - steady hold".

A control center technician makes the announcement that is relayed throughout the subterranean base: "Ready for launch. Hold on idle. Waiting on target coordinates."

The missile starts to rev up, but it's not ready to take off just yet. They need a target.

Doctor Frood paces impatiently for the coordinates, with his beloved missile as a backdrop, poised to strike like viper at a moment's notice.

But they need the coordinates of the Coalitions secret base!

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The largest lake on Lucasia is The Great Reflecting Lake. So named by the ancient Sinewy because, despite its oceanic size, it is as still as if it were frozen solid, a perfect mirror. Most parts are so wide one cannot see the land on the other side but there are sections where it narrows, and a good swimmer could not only see to the land on the other side but get there as well (assuming the legendary and mythical monsters within didn't eat them).

As dawn breaks on the secluded edge of one these narrowed areas, in the distance an enormous mountain, more tall than wide, a perfection in triangularity and truly an otherworldly spectacle to behold, is echoed so precisely in the lake that one would be challenged to tell real from reflection if not for the lazy morning fog skating in. It is none other than Mt. Nebbulus where the Hidden Fortress is burrowed within. Behind it, as if painted by a god, Lucasia's three moons and the ring of debris from its lost speckle the sky.

This particular area of the lake is completely isolated with no sign of civilization anywhere to be found.

There is a rustling in the foliage of this isolated and far-from-civilization-area, and out of the bush emerge several Umi, Sinewy atop some, members of the Shrimp Patrol riding the others.

The Sinewy, led by Azrael, stealthily dismount and scan the area, commando style, weapons at the ready. Decades of training, handed down through the generations, has taught them to use their eyes, ears, nose, every sense really to scan anywhere and everywhere, nothing left to chance. Seasoned trackers, they leave no stone unturned, and finally, they all nod to one another signaling an all clear and one mimics the sound of local wildlife: "Caw-Chooh. Caw-Chooh. Caw-Chooh."

The brush begins to rustle again, two more Umi emerge.

Sloane is mounted on one.

And David Paul on another.

Sloane dismounts his Umi and the great animal gives a shake and lets out a neigh of relief having been relieved of the man's massive weight.

Sloane walks into the lake, stopping knee deep.

He squats down and lifts a large rock out of the water and tosses it aside like an average person tossing aside a throw pillow. Then he reaches back into the water and pulls out a thick cable with a waterproof keypad on the end. He types in a code then let's go and the cable retracts back into the water. He picks up the rock and places it back where it was.

Then...

There are ripples in the water, a strip of them from the shore to the middle of the lake. Then the rippling water stops and there is: nothing.

Sloane raises a foot out of the water and makes to step forward but his foot doesn't go into the water it remains on the water's surface. He lifts himself out of the water and takes a few more steps staying above the water, boots only a few inches deep. He turns and gestures for David Paul to follow to which the latter queries, "But how?"

"Come on," Sloane barks, no patience for questioning.

"Can I say goodbye first--"

He turns to say goodbye to the Sinewy and the Shrimp Patrol but they have already slipped back into the forest like they were never there.

Sloane grasps him by the shirt collar and lifts him like a mother dog carrying her puppy by the scruff above the waters surface then lets him go but David Paul doesn't fall in. There's a thud and David Paul lands on a ramp. It's a ramp. A thin clear as glass ramp leading out to the middle of the lake.

David Paul follows Sloane, cautiously staying in line right behind him as it's nearly impossible to tell where the transparent ramp is exactly, where its edges end. His strong preference is to not fall in for who knows what occupies this Lucasian lake. Of course, Sloane marches on without hesitation.

When they reach the middle of the lake Sloane stops and David Paul bumps into him (well more like bounces off him).

"What are we doing?"

"Quiet. Wait."

The water begins to ripple, barely perceptible but it's there for sure contrasted against the perfectly still water. Then it bubbles and bubbles so much that it seems as if it's boiling. Four enormous dark green fins emerge each one taller than the mighty Sloane. Then the round bulbous body, the same dark green color as the fins emerges. And then it stops. The creature does not rise any further just stops and is perfectly still. David Paul's heart is pounding four miles a minute. *Another* beast of burden? Is this creature friend like the Rukka or foe like the ice shark?? But Sloane doesn't make a move. And the creature is eerily still.

It begins to roll onto its side, the four fins flopping over into the water away from them. And soon enough a large rectangular transport car, the size of a shipping container, is revealed. It wasn't creature at all just a disguise for this submarine.

Doors part with a rusty rattling and they walk down a set of wet decaying stairs into the interior then the doors jangle shut with a metal-on-metal groan and a clang of finality.

The transport car starts to shake lowering atop rails that slope at a 45-degree angle and disappears into the depths of the lake. And then, the walking platforms retracts back into place, and the lake is once again perfectly still. Like no one was ever there.

...

Inside the submariner transport there is only muted red light by which to see. There are round porthole windows that David Paul looks out of and every now and again exotic fish, some large, some small swim over to satisfy their curiosity then sputter away.

It gets darker and darker the further away from the surface they get and the fish that are coming over now have glow-in-the-dark tentacles and markings.

"Where are we going? Is this the Hidden Fortress?"

Sloane says nothing. Just stares ahead, giving off an air of one who has been put into a disposition having to rescue and care for this ward, as if it were beneath him.

At last, there is a clank and the transport car abruptly stops moving, sending David Paul flying forward.

The red lights inside go off and now they are 100% in the dark for several moments.

"Um?" David Paul wonders aloud nervously.

Sloane says nothing and for several moments more there is just the dark.

Then lights, very bright ones, come on from outside the transport car and the water drains outside down past the porthole windows.

The front wall of the transport car slides apart to reveal they are in an empty room. A spacious one with vaulted ceilings and a grated floor that the water drained down into.

Sloane moves forward to a set of elevator doors that slide open and he enters signaling for David Paul to follow.

The doors swish shut and the elevator ascends and when it stops, the doors open and David Paul sees a militaristic shock team (some human, some not) with plasma weapons aimed at he and Sloane. Unsettling to say the least.

Startled he takes a step back his scarred chest a reminder of the not so fun feeling of getting shot. Sloane (it will not surprise you dear reader) is statuesque.

After what seems like several minutes but in reality is only seconds: "Clear. It's them. All clear. Stand down," states the leader of the team and they all lower their weapons. Relief washes through David Paul.

The leader, a stocky bloke with oversized military goggles, comes forward and salutes Sloane then addresses David Paul with

a smile, "Sorry about the drama. We have to take every precaution. It is good to have you here."

They now find themselves inside the largest hangar you can imagine with ceilings at least five stories high and so wide that it is almost impossible to see from one side to another. It's practically an indoor city. Really it *is* an indoor city. The Hidden Fortress.

The shock team members can't help but stare at David Paul with great curiosity. David Paul, perhaps insecure, perhaps accurate in his reading the looks on their faces, knowing what they are thinking: '*A child? A child is supposed to be our saving grace???*'

From the back of the crowd a voice addresses David Paul.

"Welcome to the Hidden Fortress old friend."

The voice is familiar but David Paul can't place it right away, a quizzical look on his face.

Then...the crowd parts to reveal: Serretus.

David Paul runs to him, not believing it.

"But how?"

Serretus chuckles.

"A story for another time. Come we have much work to do."

CHAPTER THIRTY

Inside a green room, where they can prep for the big show, Serretus and David Paul sit in chairs facing one another.

"I can't believe you're alive." Serretus is pristine. No scars or anything suggesting he had escaped with his life from the jaws of a monster. How can this be?

"As I said a story for another time. I understand you had quite the journey to get here. I'm sorry you had to go through so much."

David Paul waves him off, "I'm fine. I'm just glad you're okay."

"You'll remember something that looks like this?" Serretus asks pointing to a corner of the room where a massive contraption, a much larger, full-scale but polished version of the smaller model Serretus and David Paul had worked with back at his shack stands. The FinderEngine9000. It almost looks like a torture device if one didn't know better and yet there is a design about it that is elegant, artistic even, to the point of having a renaissance like craftsmanship to it, timeless even.

David Paul walks around it in awe of its magnificence as he runs his fingers over the surfaces.

"The Finder. It's how we find the Child Crystals," says David Paul.

"You are the only missing piece and the time is now. Ready?"

"Now? No practice?"

"The council has grown impatient waiting for your arrival. We've not seconds to spare I'm afraid. An attack is imminent but if we locate the Crystals and they can be retrieved our untimely demise can be avoided."

"Okay. Let's do this."

David Paul goes to the FinderEngine9000. A drizzle of fear trickles down his back. This version of the machine is much larger and intimidating. Can it hurt him he wonders to himself while the words of The Crystal Mother about the 'ultimate sacrifice' echo in his head.

But he gulps down any trepidation goes to get into the Finder but Serretus stops him.

"No, no. The presentation must occur in front of the council. It's to be on public record. Welcome to the wonderful world of Lucasian politics. Come, this way."

"Wait, what about a 4D biospheric domain? It would give me plenty of time to practice and no time would pass here."

"You are wise to think of this but I couldn't build one strong enough in time."

David Paul gives him a confused look.

"You see when you begin scanning for the Child Crystals you and the Finder will be giving off a powerful energy signature. One that the Ninth Legion could detect. They know you are here on Lucasia and are listening. The more we practice the more their

chances of finding us are, even inside the most hardened of 4D biospheric domains. But especially one that would have to be put together with haste. There are a few domains in existence that could work, but none close to here. So I'm afraid there will be no time for practice here on Lucasia."

Now David Paul gives a worried look.

"But you've had plenty of practice already. I believe in you. Now believe in yourself. Trust in our practice. Remember: focus. Energy not muscle. And relax. Now, come. It is, as they say, showtime."

"No pressure or anything, right?" says David Paul with a nervous laugh.

Serretus signals to a group of laborBots who come rolling over to the Finder push it through a doorway that is off to the side, where it just barely fits through.

This doorway leads to a maze of behind-the-scenes type hallways that they walk through which finally lead to the Crystal Warrior Memorial Auditorium, the public arena from earlier in our story. Where the council meets. The center stage no longer has the large conference table, that area is completely empty. The Council of The Wise sits in the front row with citizens sitting in the risers all around and spiraling way up. The seating rises at a steep angle, higher more than back, so the audience is really on top of them; claustrophobic to say the least.

A spotlight shines at the center stage, on David Paul, Serretus, the Finder.

The laborBots, the pit crew of the operation, organize and plug in the multitude of cables the great contraption utilizes. Some, coming out of the great machine, plug into various types of outlets in the floor, many other cables drop down from the ceiling and plug into the machine.

The thirteen seats in the front, where the council members will sit, are presently empty.

A steward of the event, a Bailiff, comes forward.

"Silence please! All rise for The Council of The Wise!" she shouts.

The audience rises and from a side entrance the thirteen council members enter staring ahead, stoic looks, then take their seats.

"Be seated!" the Bailiff shouts again and the entire audience sits in near unison.

The Head Councilor stands and addresses all.

"Good day. Today, we have a special guest. Welcome young one. Don't be shy."

David Paul standing behind Serretus gives a timid wave.

She continues...

"Dr. Serretus *Gepps*, as previously discussed in Session 818-44-GWLJ a small but vocal minority," she glances over at the Theologian Councilor, "believe our guest is the last being alive

who may be able to commune with the Child Crystals and The Crystal Mother and that you have developed a means by which he may do so and present this very information to us here today. What say you?"

Serretus steps forward. Clears his throat.

"That is correct Madam Head Councilor. For the record I would like to call on Science Councilor Chamberlain and ask that he verify the authenticity of what we are about to do."

The Science Councilor stands to address the rest of the council and the audience, grasping his coat lapels as he does.

"The Science Council has done a full peer review of the good doctors' devices and practices and fully signs off on their authenticity."

"Noted for the record," states the Head Councilor.

"Thank you. We are ready when you are," announces Serretus.

Now David Paul is really starting to get nervous. The moment of truth is nigh. All of the work back at Serretus's shack, the long journey it took to get here and all that he and others went through to make it so. The fate of an entire world on his shoulders.

"Before we begin are there any last statements or objections by any members of The Council?" asks the Head Councilor.

General Pace stands and addresses all:

"I would like to reiterate my previously stated objections. And continue to raise my concern. One, as mentioned, if any of this hocus pocus is true, we believe strongly that an energy signature could be given off that could alert the Ninth Legion to our presence. Therefore, I resubmit that The Council grant me full authorization to mobilize our military, that it be on the ready for a full offensive strike at the heart of our enemy. The fate of the world rests on our winning and I for one am none too comfortable putting my faith in this boy, that machine, those Crystals or his finding of said Crystals."

Now the Theologian Councilor stands to speak.

"Let the record show that the General once thought The Crystals to be a mere myth until the Ninth Legion used them to destroy the living moon of Loxbor Prime."

"I was speaking to certain myths and the mysticism that surrounds them. Not to their actual existence."

"Have faith General," says the Theologian Councilor in a sly way.

The Head Councilor breaks in.

"Enough. This bickering is only giving precious time back to the Ninth Legion. General Pace as previously stated The Council has granted you full military authority if, and only if, The Crystals are not located by this boy. But may I remind you that a nuclear option is left to Council vote."

"I say again, have faith General," says the Theologian Councilor.

"Don't get me started," retorts General Pace.

"Order. Order please. The Aquatic Councilor has the floor," barks the Head Councilor.

"And what if the boy does locate the Crystals? Then what?" queries the Aquatic Councilor.

"Full military strike. Including nuclear option," inserts General Pace.

"Are we concerned at all about the welfare of the Child Crystals?" asks a Councilor who seems to have woken from a mid-meeting nap.

"As has been stated definitively innumerable times, based on the facts, that they themselves cannot be destroyed. Our attack would be without prejudice. It would be quick and violent with the objective to completely neutralize the enemy and then retrieve The Crystals," states the General in a matter-of-fact manner.

"We are certain the Child Crystals are indestructible?" asks another councilor directly addressing the Theologian Councilor. The General shakes her head in frustration (how many times have they said the Child Crystals were indestructible?) while the Theologian Councilor reluctantly admits:

"It is true. Though I object to a military strike I concede that the Child Crystals are physically indestructible."

"Any other statements or objections before we proceed?" asks the Head Councilor.

"I resubmit my plea for negotiations," says the Theologian Councilor.

"General, do you object?" asks the Head Councilor.

General Pace stands, and begins to pace back and forth, hands behind her back as she delivers her sermon:

"Friends, fellow council members. I understand that war can be scary. And there are things about it that are not for the faint of heart. But even more scary is our enemy. After all, look at us now. Here we are in this underground bunker holed up like some scared prey animal fleeing a predator. Our enemy does not negotiate. They cannot be trusted. Have we not already learned that they do not value life and will spin their propaganda machine to convince their followers that their ways are righteous? They are a cruel and monstrous cult and they must be stopped. Unpleasant as that may be to some. Thank you."

The General takes her seat and turns to her assistant giving him a 'nice speech huh?' wink, to which the the assistant responds with a enthusiastic nod of agreement.

"Your words are noted for the record. I ask again, does the council accept the General's new proposals regarding military

strike if the Child Crystals cannot be retrieved?" asks the Head Councilor, "I accept."

All the other councilors, except for the Theologian Councilor, chime in, all with: "I accept."

The Theologian Councilor, is in deep thought, clearly conflicted.

"I accept but under formal protest."

"Noted. Serretus? You may proceed," says the Head Councilor.

"Thank you, Madam Head Councilor. I was beginning to wonder if you had forgotten about us," he jests.

"Your attempt at humor is noted for the record."

There is a palpable excitement in the arena as David Paul is hooked up to the Finder.

The Theologian Councilor calls out to David Paul.

"Stay strong young one. Remember, the Crystal Mother watches over you. Always."

General Pace can only rolls her eyes at all of this time wasting nonsense.

Serretus and the laborBots continue to help David Paul get hooked up.

Serretus whispers to him, "Don't be afraid. Just focus on the task at hand. Just as we practiced. Relax."

"Right. Relax."

David Paul is now fully hooked up and the laborBots roll off to the outskirts of the arena and plug into their charging bays. Serretus goes to a control panel with buttons and dials and instrumentation of all sorts.

From the top of the machine a light turns on and from that high resolution holographic images of Lucasia and its three moons are projected for all to see. "ooh's" and "aaaah's" ripple throughout the space. **[JASON: this could possibly use a better description].**

The machine spins up, whirring to full power.

David Paul closes his eyes and concentrates.

Serretus addresses the council and audience like a showman.

"First, my young friend will attempt to commune with the Mother Crystal, and you will see this on the hologram above."

David Paul strains to make a connection, brow frowning, and the globes he holds in each hand begin to glow.

Once again the Theologian Councilor coaches him from the sidelines.

"Concentrate, young one, concentrate," she whispers.

Another hologram spits from the machine. This one shows the audience what David Paul sees in his mind's eye, as they are taken through a 4x speed fast-forward journey across Lucasia, finally arriving at a body of water, to the spillway hole, down the spillway hole, then darkness, then into the planet core and

there, of course, is The Crystal Mother. Or at least the star-like orb that houses Her.

On the other hologram, the one of the entire planet, a red dot glows brightly in its center indicating the location of The Crystal Mother.

The audience stirs, excited.

"Silence please!" the cranky Bailiff growls.

...

At the same time...

Inside a darkened room within the Ninth Legion's Ministry of The Supernatural, Paranormal, and the Occult Primary Listening Post, there is cylindrical glass cage filled with a clear, conductive liquid called Isochloryll and floating in it is a sedated long haired, ape-like creature called a Jumddar. Her eyes are taped shut, a breathing tube is crammed down her throat and all manner of sensory wires are hooked up to her. She is lit from below by lights that give off an eerie purple glow. The Jumddar are a near extinct creature (to the point of being a mere myth to most) that has unique organs and cavities which allow it to have a connection to the Crystal Mother, the Child Crystals and The Magnificent Field. The Ninth Legion is using the poor animal as a sort of living listening antennae.

The wiring she is hooked up to all merge into a single plug inside the glass casing which then feeds it to a hub on the outside, from which hundreds of wires exit and split off into every direction all about the room terminating at hundreds of "listening" computers in the quiet and subdued room.

Every staffer is listening, working for days on end, fed intravenously (a diet which includes various stimulants and hyper-focus narcotics to keep them going).

One officer at her station suddenly has a confused then excited look on her face. Did that just really happen? After all this time of listening? She double checks what she's seeing and hearing. Yes. Not any sort of error. This is the real deal she believes and taps away on a keyboard with an almost violent urgency, waits impatiently while a report is printed out onto a clear glass diskette, and dashes like mad over to her commanding officer.

"Sir, energy source detected. Four-zero-thousand degrees by seven-four-thousand degrees," says the Listening Post Officer.

"You're certain of this?" snarls the Commanding Officer.

The Officer takes a moment, second guessing herself, a mistake here would have her sent to the crystalline-rock breaking prisons in the Rettreell Zones.

"Aye sir."

"You best be," he turns to a bank of communications technicians at the front of the room and yells, "Get me the minister on the line stat and inform Doctor Frood and all military forces of this location! We have them!"

Then he turns to the officer who is thinking perhaps she will get some praise for this, or *gasp* even a promotion:

"Back to your station technician," he snarls.

...

Back inside the Crystal Warrior Memorial Auditorium...

"And now to the Child Crystals," says Serretus in staying with the grandiose, showman-like flair but unaware that energy signature that David Paul is giving off has just alerted the Ninth Legion to their locale.

David Paul closes his eyes again and, paradoxically, strains to relax his face and, really, his whole body as he attempts to focus his mind.

Again, the audience sees what David Paul sees in his mind's eye as it searches: taken through a speed-of-thought, fast-forward-like journey across Lucasia. Around and across all different landscapes, diving underwater, shooting up into the sky. And on and on. It just keeps going and going. And, so far, nothing appears on the holographic projection of Lucasia indicating the location of the Child Crystals, as was the case with the Crystal Mother.

Serretus, looking slightly concerned, turns dials and presses buttons, and makes this adjustment and that.

Impatient mumblings ripple throughout the crowd and wash into the arena.

More of what David Paul sees in his minds eye is displayed on the holographic projections dedicated for displaying this.

For a very brief moment it holds a second on a mountainous region but quickly moves on from there and is on to other landscapes, cities, sky cities, underground, everything.

But still. Nothing.

David Paul strains to focus more, he is sweating now and he begins to shake. Clearly under duress. Trying to use energy not physicality but the allure of muscling through it is a tempting one.

The voice whispers to him. **[voices?]**

"Don't give up."

David Paul is shaking and sweating and straining even more. On Serretus's machine a dashboard of vital sign indicators break serious, life threatening thresholds.

"Aaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhh! Grrrrrrrrrrrrrr!" he screams.

David Paul legs are shaking, feeling like they can't hold him up, he's nauseous, he's pouring sweat, shaking, and wonders if he is going to die but he knows he mustn't give up. Not until he finds the Child Crystals. And then it dawns on him. Perhaps this

is what the Crystal Mother meant by 'the ultimate sacrifice will be needed'.

"We're killing him!" shouts the Theologian Councilor in horror.

"Abort! Abort the exercise Serretus!" she adds.

Sparks fly from the machine. Pop. Pop. Pop. Then there is an electronic sizzling and smoke rises from it.

The crowd stirs, uneasy and quite frankly afraid.

The lights in the arena dim, then go off, then come back on.

"Order! Order!" shouts the Head Councilor to the grumbling crowd.

Serretus inspects the machine frantically.

"This can't be right. This can't be right," he says to himself

David Paul continues to scream but has not given up and gives his all to stay with it.

"Please wake up!" he hears someone cry as if from a great distance. But it's faint, out of focus, and garbled. He's delusional.

Many clusters in the crowd are whispering to one another as they observe him shaking, sweating.

The 4x fast-forward trip around Lucasia has sped up even more. More like 16x now.

~~We then see what David Paul sees in his mind's eye as all goes quiet:~~

~~His father on the rock in the river.~~

~~"My son. Keep going. Don't give up."~~

~~David Paul opens his eyes and shakes the vision off.~~

He's breathing hard, he's reached his max, like someone who has peaked on a stress test and then some.

But he will not give up. This was his purpose. This is his purpose. Save the world.

The instrumentation measuring his effort levels and vital signs cry out in a panic as he is now well over several dangerous thresholds. As in, this could cost him his life.

Right there in front of him, he sees his father standing on the rocks in the river. He is holding the staff that David Paul and his friends gave to Crazy Hoof. He throws it to David Paul who catches it. David Paul looks down at the hieroglyphic writing he had etched into it. He still doesn't know what it means. *I'm hallucinating* he thinks to himself.

Then his father speaks to him:

"It means: Look to the emptiness. Fear not the emptiness. Seek the emptiness. Embrace the emptiness. That is your answer my son. The emptiness. The emptiness."

The vision and his father's voice fade.

David Paul collapses onto the floor, dropping the glass globes which shatter. He's on the brink of vomiting and in and out of consciousness.

Serretus goes to him to help him up.

General Pace, satisfied that this is a dead end, stands and starts to leave talking to her assistant.

General Pace leans into her assistant: "Assemble the Senior Leadership Team and the Security Committee for emergency sessions."

"Yes General," replies the assistant.

The crowd stands and shouts. Some even boo at Serretus and David Paul.

"Failure!"

"Lies!"

"Hoax!"

"Fraud!"

"You are a fraud!"

"You gave us false hope!"

"We're doomed!"

"Silence! There will be silence!" screams the Bailiff.

David Paul, nearly unconscious, Serretus and the Theologian Councilor tending to him, is seeing and hearing all of this in some weird, trippy slow motion. What his father said, continues to echo, inside his head, slowly fading with each iteration:

"The answer lies in the emptiness. What you cannot see."

Others' voices flash into his minds ear.

Mallaroy: "Nothing is something."

Auntie Pal: "The space between the notes."

He feels like he's heard some version of it throughout his entire life and leaps to his feet as if jumpstarted by a car battery.

"No wait! I know where they are!" he screams.

"I know," he whispers assuredly to Serretus and the Theologian Councilor catching his breath.

"I know I didn't locate them exactly, but I know where they are."

"What do you mean?" asks the Head Councilor.

"Everywhere I looked they were nowhere to be found. Obviously. You saw that. I couldn't, uh, what's the word, commune with them. But there was one place where I couldn't see anything at all. Like they were blocking me. Like they encased them in something that I couldn't see through. That's where they are. That has to be where they are. It has to be," David Paul explains.

"That's not exactly the certainty I was hoping for," says the Head Councilor.

"Is that even possible? That they could hide them. Like he says," she asks Serretus.

Serretus, ponders the premise, subconsciously twining his beard between his thumb and fingers as he thinks.

"Zelerium. It has to be."

"Zelerium?"

"Yes a rare element native only to Muren-Five. If it was brought here, and he was able to stabilize it then mold it into some sort of holding containers. It's never been done before. Since time recorded but it's not impossible. And if anyone could do it, *he* could. The lengths he will go to for his delusional ideology."

"He?" queries the Head Councilor.

"Doctor Frood. But that's not important right now. The important thing is they could hide the Child Crystals and there would be a blank space just as the boy says. The boy is right."

"What did you see young one? Where they were blocking you? What did it look like there?" The Theologian Councilor asks David Paul.

"I saw a city. Big. But old. On top of a rock. A massive cliff-that looked like it shouldn't be able to hold the city up but it was. And some of the city was on top of the rock but the rest hanging from the bottom of it. Buildings upside down. Anyways, far beneath that city, underground, that's the only place on the planet where I *couldn't* see. That has to be where they are."

General Pace who was about to leave the room but made U-turn and charged back in when she heard David Paul start to speak slams a fist into the table in front of her, "Are we seriously going to bet the survival of all that is good in this world on where this boy is guessing they *could* be?"

"It's not a guess!" barks David Paul surprising even himself as Serretus places a hand on his shoulder to keep him in line.

The Aquatic Councilor, is frantically typing away on some keypads brings up photos, maps and other schematics onto the projection space.

"Where he's describing. That's Joorg's Tower. The ancient City of Knoll sits atop it...and below it," he says through his voicebox.

The projected hologram of Lucasia is replaced by a close up of of Joorg's Tower and the City of Knoll. The projection shows a massive rock formation, roughly in the form of a 'T'.

Skyscrapers sit atop it, but just as many are also built below the cross of the 'T', hanging from the bottom of it.

"That's it! That's where I couldn't see anything," David Paul shouts, pointing at the projection of Joorg's Tower.

"They are a peaceful people with no real army and few weapons. Of course, the Ninth Legion would shield themselves with innocents," says Serretus.

The Head Councilor addresses the arena.

"Public session adjourned. All council members will meet in private quarters for emergency session. Serretus, bring the boy."

Bailiff: "Session terminated. All rise. All dismissed."

The crowd disperses none too afraid to share their thoughts aloud, and loudly, with their fellow audience members or cry out to no one in particular their opinion of the events that just took place.

"We're about to get obliterated and they go into secret session," says one to another.

"Our lives are at stake. There's no more time for your secrets! Tell us what you know!" shouts another and others cry out in agreement.

The Head Councilor pulls her assistant aside.

"Go to the Knollian refugee center. Fourth level. See if you can find anyone who might be familiar with the city layouts. A city worker, an architect, anyone. The older they are the better. Here take my access badge and move quickly. You have the full authority of The Council behind you."

"Yes Head Councilor," he says and rushes off.

...

Private meeting room inside the Hidden Fortress...

Several members of the council are seated at a conference table as others still usher in from the public session. The Head Councilor paces back and forth.

All the councilors are seated but the session she hasn't started the session.

To say that General Pace is getting agitated would be putting it mildly.

"Are we going to begin soon?"

The Head Councilor ignores her doing her best to delay. She only hopes her assistant delivers and as if on cue her assistant walks in with an older man trailing behind. They go to the Head Councilor and her assistant whispers in her ear for several moments.

The Head Councilor nods, whispers a thank and gives her assistant a 'well done' pat on the shoulder then starts the session and addresses the rest of the room.

"Attention. Attention please. The council calls Mac'Nor L'Lette."

The grizzled old man, with a broken down body but keen mind, trudges forward, head held high. Proud and dignified.

"I understand you are a refugee here from the Ancient City of Knoll," states the Head Councilor.

"Yes Head Councilor," answers Mac'Nor.

"It is our understanding that you were employed as a Senior Civil Engineer there?"

"Correct Head Councilor. Since I was a lad. My parents were civil engineers and their parents before them. And my great grandmother before that. I know the place damn well, far better than anything else I know."

"And you have been briefed on why you are here?"

"Aye. I have."

"Tell us what you know."

Mac'Nor types at the keys of a computer terminal built into the table and a three dimensional topographical map is projected onto the glass in the middle of the table.

"Beneath the City of Knoll is a largely unknown tunnel system. Used for water and sewerage treatment hundreds of generations ago but long since forgotten by most. I remember poking around down there as a young lad. Got to know the old ways of building and architecture. It's quite impressive actually. Anyway, somewhere in this tunnel system, that *has* to be where the Ninth Legion built their base. It's perfect really. From their perspective I mean. Long forgotten and shielded by a city full of one million innocent and unknowing beings from above. The tunnel system is vast with several hubs connecting them. But one hub, the main one, this one here, is as big as this fortress. And I'd bet my life that that's where the Ninth Legion is."

"Thank you. You may step down. You've done a great service," says the Head Councilor.

"What do we propose?" asks Serretus.

Sloane steps forward.

"My strike team and I will infiltrate the tunnel system. We spun up and staged a 4D portal where we've mocked up the entire

layout based on the information the old man provided and we'll go through a multitude of simulations until we have it down. We will make our way to the main hub where we will engage the enemy and rescue the Child Crystals."

"Confidence level?" General Pace snarls.

"Impossible to say. While outer defenses appear minimal, likely not to attract attention, we have little knowledge of their defenses inside. We know the layout as it *was* but not how it *is*. The subterranean nature of the base makes it impossible for any of our satellite scanners to provide any intelligence on that front. Who knows how fortified it is?"

"Remember none of the Child Crystals can come in contact with the others. If they do, even for the briefest of moments, the whole place goes up. The city and half the world with it," says General Pace with a know-it-all tone.

"I'm more than aware," Sloane snarls. "Our hope is that they will still be in the separate Zelerium containers. It will make it easier to take them."

"When do you go?" asks Serretus.

"Departure time is in three kiloseconds. Simulation training is complete. That side of the planet is still in darkness which provides us with an advantage. We have no time to waste."

David Paul steps forward.

"I should go, too! I can let you know when you are getting close!" he states with conviction that even surprises himself. "Absolutely not. Go home. Get as far away from here as possible. You're done here. We don't need you," states Commander Sloane, and he turns and exits.

David Paul slumps forward, ego bruised, and Serretus gives him a comforting pat on the shoulder.

Commander Sloane points to the old man, Mac'Nor.

"You. With us."

The man hobbles to keep up as they leave the room.

A cadet officer walks up to the General and hands her a communication readout.

"General."

General Pace: "Terrific. Enemy forces are mobilizing.

Intelligence and other resources calculate this fortress is their destination. In short, they've found us."

She presses a communications button.

"Lieutenant-Colonel take us to Defense Condition Delta. Repeat D-Con Delta. Go forward with Operation Shield and Hammer, launch all forces. Sending authorization code now."

General Pace addresses everyone in the room:

"We are seriously walking a precarious course here. If Commander Sloane cannot extract The Crystals, I restate that I have full authorization for a pre-emptive military offensive."

"Acknowledged," says the Head Councilor, defeated.

"This includes the full nuclear arsenal," Pace reminds her.

"Acknowledged again. Though I do beg you to use it with restraint," she replies.

"Noted. But I have to say we are playing a dangerous game here. I've no doubt the enemy, right at this very moment, is preparing to launch their super missile at this very fortress. Let me be abundantly clear: We are target zero. This covert mission has a zero-failure tolerance."

There are nervous glances all around.

The Head Councilor tries to bring an air of positivity to the room.

"Well then. Let us hope The Crystal Mother favors us today. Council dismissed."

...

They leave the private meeting chambers and go to a larger but still intimate conference room, the Hidden Fortress Situation Room, where they can monitor Sloane and the Shrimp Patrol's efforts.

The Situation Room is equipped with secure, advanced communications equipment for the leaders of the Coalition to maintain command and control of forces around Lucasia. The place is wall-to-wall large screens, maps and holograms. Workstations and everything they need to remotely monitor the entire mission

are in the room. They will see satellite imagery, spy craft imagery from the skies, and more, including a 360-degree livestream from a myriad of tiny camera systems stitched into the uniforms and helmets of the team and a computer takes all of the feeds and stitches them together giving headquarters a near perfect 360-degree livestream.

There is a palpable tension in the room.

A senior officer greets them.

“General, Councilors. Commander Sloane and team just launched.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

In the darkest of night, flying low along the landscape leading up to Joorg's Tower three triangular-shaped charcoal-colored aircraft, all with the latest stealth technology, quietly make their way to their destination.

They fly so low in fact, that a meemooh herder they pass over (who they scare the ever-living wits out of) could, if he were so daring stand on his tippy toes and graze the bottom of the aircraft with his fingertips. But he's more concerned about his scattered herd that the aircraft spooked and vaults curse word after curse word at whatever the heck it was that just swooshed over him.

Inside the cabins of the delivery aircraft the Strike Team (the Shrimp Patrol) all sit in studied silence. Well, mostly in silence. A few jokes are lobbed here and there to ease the tension.

"Hey Jona, you hear they changing their name to the Tenth Legion?"

"That so. And why is that?"

"Glad you asked. Cause seven-eight-nine," the commando bellows out a chorus of laughs at his own absurd joke.

"You idiot. You complete idiot," his team member replies.

"I take that as a compliment you know."

The rest of the Shrimp Patrol laugh as well. Except for Commander Sloane of course. He hasn't even moved.

As they get closer to their destination the mood gets serious and they check and recheck every last detail from equipment to the game plans, the backup plans and the various backup to the backups. In the distance the rocky landmark that is Joorg's Tower comes into view. A sight to behold and a wonder of the world, it is a tall rocky structure in the shape, roughly, of the letter "T". An entire city is built on top of it, as well one hanging beneath each side of the "T". An architectural achievement built into a nature made one.

As the delivery aircrafts approach the hazy light of the city, the taller buildings reveal themselves.

In the lead aircraft: Sloane and the Shrimp Patrol prepare for the assault. Body armor, night vision goggles, a cornucopia of commando arsenal weapons everywhere on their person.

The aircrafts come to a stop hovering several stories above a large drain tunnel (so large the craft itself could fit in) butting out of the cliffside. Water still flows out of the ancient drain tunnel, forming a thin string of constantly flowing foam as it falls far, far below.

The aircraft hover like helicopters and a large door in the back of each opens and one by one the soldiers fall backwards out of the craft, free falling down, down, down.

They yank on pull strings attached to their vests, deploying PWS's (Personal Wing Systems), wings made of parachute type material that expand from their backpacks, catch the wind and the soldiers glide gracefully, right into the large drain tunnel, staying just above the water inside. A small, silent propulsion tank built into the PWS's spits out thrust that propels them along.

Further into the tunnel they fly, the best of the best, masters of stealth (passing beneath several oblivious enemy soldierDrones who are stationed on pillars throughout the tunnel) using hand signals to communicate. Not a sound is made.

...

Back at the Hidden Fortress Situation Room everyone watches on the multitude of screens. The feed courtesy of the strike teams numerous on-person live video cameras as well as spy-satellite shots.

Everyone is on the edge of their seats, not to mention just being on edge in general, nerves hitting and holding the highest of notes.

...

In the tunnel, the Shrimp Patrol turn corner after corner making their way deeper into the lion's den.

One of the soldiers, via a readout inside her night vision goggles, is alerted that there is hidden laser-based detection

system in place ahead. If anything breaks through a laser beam, alarms will sound and the gig will be up.

Using hand signals she alerts the others and they all come to a stop, landing without a sound in the water. Waist high, and the wings of their PWS fold back into their backpacks.

Another soldier pumps a type of gun and fires a single shot towards the ceiling. A glob of gooey gel hits its target and sticks there. Encased inside is a small round silver sphere that starts to make a hissing sound.

The naked eye can't see a thing but through their night vision goggles they see that the sphere is emitting an invisible, colorless (and odorless) gas, its purpose is to expose the laser detection system. And sure enough, a tangle of lasers guard this part of the tunnel.

They look to Sloane for further direction.

Sloane scans the system, his cybernetic eyesight can see the lasers, and an onboard computer built into his brain establishes a subtle but do-able pattern through which the team can slink through the lasers. And so they do, with much trepidation and caution. And back in the Hidden Fortress Situation Room no breathes until the team is through and everyone takes a moment to wipe the sweat from their brows and upper lips.

Past the laser detection system, the team re-deploys their PWS and the small exhaust jets, that don't make a noise, once again propel them along.

Rounding corners and even dropping down into tunnels that run vertical to the one they are in, further they go into depths of the complex tunnel system.

As they travel along one of the larger tunnels they freeze as something comes towards them. It is a giant Ninth Legion service vehicle. Its many wheels in an 'X' shape run along the four "corners" of the rounded tunnel. They are all forced to cut ways with the PWS's and quietly splash down into the shallow water and become one with their surroundings to avoid detection. In the Hidden Fortress Situation Room, breathing stops and brows become slick with perspiration once again.

There are soldierDrones on this slow moving truck so our commandoes just lie there, as fully submerged as they can get, ninja-like skills in full effect. Perfectly still. So still that a hefty tera'rat (luckily just a kitten) swims and walks right over the face of a commando whose face is just breaking the surface but they don't even blink.

Once the truck is far enough away, they slowly emerge from the water as if they are the water, electing to forgo the PWS's and walk-on through the waist-deep water.

...

They arrive, at last, at an enormous fortified entrance. It looks like a colossal bank vault door but it's bottom there are bars for water to flow through.

The team notes that there are SoldierDrones up on pedestals high above on each side of the entrance, standing guard. Six of them. Sloane gives the signal, his communications tech pulls out a box with a myriad of antennae poking out. The tech then hits a series of buttons and waits, then gives Sloane the thumbs up. Sloane then signals for six others of his team who all fire their silenced weapons dropping the enemy soldierDrones, the evil metal carcasses topple over and fall into the water below. At the Remote Control Drone Command Center, controllers note for half of a half of a second a blip on their screens then all is normal. The techie with the antennae box nods to Sloane. All good.

Next, one of the commandoes, a breach specialist, launches a grappling hook that pins into the ceiling. She then activates a device on her utility pack and is pulled up above the door to where a control panel is.

The others, still in waist-deep water, spread out, taking their assigned posts. Always alert, always blending into their surroundings, masters of camouflage and invisibility.

The breach specialist goes to work on the door's control panel and after a few tense moments the door starts to raise up and just when it reaches the water line, the tech makes it stop. They all go submerge and snake under the door.

They're in.

...

In the Hidden Fortress Situation Room, there's some tepid excitement, a glint of optimism, and hope in the air.

...

Once inside the Ninth Legion evil lair Sloane ducks behind some stone outcroppings and takes in his surroundings. The old man, the engineer Mac'Nor, was right.

This place is something else.

It's a massive, cavernous space with an elevated main floor so that the water goes around it.

But this works in favor of his strike team as they fan out, staying in this water mote, under the lipped edges of the raised floor, hidden. Just the way they like.

There are crisscrossing catwalks everywhere, so many it's difficult to figure which takes you where, and, Sloane notes, encased in floor-to-ceiling glass is the Ninth Legion missile launch control center.

And then he sees it, confirmation that they're in the right place, in another space is the largest missile one could ever imagine, white exhaust pluming from all parts of it.

And opposite the door where the strike team entered, way, way, way on the other side there is a rocky wall where four large glass globe-shaped containers hang from a pulley system along a thick steel beam. Each globe is big enough to fit several people inside.

From somewhere far below the hanging globes there is the orange glow of a lava river, steam rising and misting over each globe. Sloane assumes as much and knows if the glass globes were to be released, they would fall far below into the pool of lava.

Sloane's cybernetic visual scanners focus in on the globes and his visual sensors scan the four steamed over globes. The readout is:

MATERIAL: UNKNOWN

The Crystals. They have to be in there.

Sloane whispers back to base: "Four holding containers. Made of an unknown material. And they're steamed over so can't see inside. Cannot determine if Child Crystals are still within. Standby commencing further scans of area."

Sloane scans other areas of the lair then sees his archnemesis, Lord Dogen standing in a stoic pose high above on one of the catwalks admiring the mighty Finality as it readies to launch.

His trusty protectorBot always by his side. Sloane forces himself into a calming trance in order to maintain the goal of the mission instead of climbing up there, tackling Dogen to the ground, and beating him senseless but not before making him watch as he snaps that puny protectorBot of his in two.

But he keeps his cool and focus and looks to the missile which he scans up and down and then scans the catwalk near the hanging globes.

"The globes are not being guarded at all. But there is a large guard presence at the missile base and the missile head. I suspect The Crystals have been moved out of the globes and loaded onto the missile already. Going to Plan Bravo. Team Four and Team Six--"

Suddenly an alarm goes off in the lair and lights are strobing. Sloane and team take cover, most submerging.

At first they think they are caught but then realize this signals a prepare for launch sequence.

"All clear. Move out. Plan Bravo," Sloane whispers to his team. Then: "HQ. Be advised. Launch sequence has been initiated, I repeat launch sequence has been initiated," whispers Sloane back to the Hidden Fortress.

They get the all clear from Sloane and then, slowly, each member of the team appears from the water, just poking their eyes above its surface.

...

Lord Dogen, still on the catwalk, receives an urgent transmission:

"Lord Dogen? My Lord of Lords, apologies for the interruption on this glorious of days but we've lost contact with perimeter soldierDrone teams. It's probably just a communications glitch My Lord of Lords. Scanners didn't pick anything up. Perhaps even just tunnel rats again. They've developed a taste for--"

Dogen cuts off the comms officer-

"I'll look into it."

As he exits, the scene is buzzing with the activities necessary to launch The Finality missile. On a launch status indicator (a vertical row of six lights) the last light turns on signifying launch sequence is go.

The place starts to shake and rumble as the missile readies to launch.

Sloane provides an update:

"HQ be advised they are in full launch sequence. Repeat they are a go for launch."

...

Inside the Hidden Fortress Situation Room...

"Strike team you are hereby advised to abort rescue and blow the place up," Pace commands.

"Are you serious?" asks the Head Councilor.

"It's too late damn it!" advises General Pace.

...

"Roger that. All teams fall out. Repeat all teams fall out. Go to Plan Zenith," orders Sloane.

His team members start to retrace their steps and go about sticking explosives wherever they can; light bars indicating they have been activated.

...

"What's Plan Zenith?" queries the Head Councilor.

"Blow the place up. No rescue. But it buys us time," answers General Pace, defeated.

"But the city," gasps the Head Councilor.

"What choice do we have. I do not make these decisions without conscience, I assure you."

...

Outside, the three stealth aircrafts fly to the tunnel entrance.

Pilot: "Recovery team on standby."

...

Sloane takes out a remote control that will set off all the explosives. He goes about setting a timer on it.

"All Strike Teams. Are you out and on your way back to retrieval craft."

"Affirmed Commander," the replies come in.

...

At the same time...

Lord Dogen is checking out the entrance and sees that there is indeed sabotage. The crumpled metallic frames of the soldierDrones in the water below.

...

Sloane is ready to activate the explosive devices when he is kicked in the head really, really hard and drops the controller.

"Ahhhh."

And the one who kicked him is: Lord Dogen.

...

Outside, at the tunnel entrance where the recovery team aircraft await a flock of enemy droneFighters swarm in and fire on them.

The Coalition Pilot screams: "Retreat! Retreat!"

All three aircraft, taken by surprise, try to put up a fight but are blown to smithereens. This all happens so far beneath the city of Knoll that its citizens are oblivious.

...

At the same time...

The rest of the strike team in the dark tunnels making their escape when suddenly the lights come on. White hot and bright making it as light as day in there. **[JASON: this description was used earlier in the story at least one other time. Modify one or the other]**

A fire fight ensues. The coalition combatants give it all they have but tragically do not last.

...

Inside the Hidden Fortress Situation Room...

Gasps and "Oh no's" all around. Everyone is in shock as they hear the screams of the soldiers and realize the mission has failed (not to mention the lives of the team lost).

"Commander Sloane! Commander Sloane do you copy? Can you confirm if ordinance was activated? Can you--"

Then Lord Dogen comes into frame of Sloanes multitude of on-person cameras.

He has the remote in his hands and smiles at the screens.

Then his foot comes down on the cameras and there is just static on the screens in the situation room, transmission from cameras cut off.

David Paul, in the corner, whispers to himself in quiet devastation, "Oh no."

...

General Pace rushes into a large war room with banks of monitoring screens three stories high and stacked technician workstations that go even higher. She walks with an urgency and purpose. Focused.

"Strike team failed. Take us to Defense Condition Echo! Repeat: D-CON ECHO! All available forces go full offensive. Go to

formation code: Flashing Wings. I repeat full offensive.

Destination: Joorg's Tower," she yells to the room and it instantly erupts into a controlled chaos as everyone in the room amps up their urgency, running instead of walking; full bore this-is-not-a-drill mode.

A buzzer sounds and alternates with a pre-recorded voice over and over again: "We are at D-CON ECHO. Repeat, we are at D-CON ECHO. This is not a drill."

...

Mile after mile of round silo doors, hundreds of thousands of them, dot the underwater landscape of Lucasia's water moon, Loxbor Minor. As the missiles inside come to life and enter "ready mode", air is released to relieve the pressure building inside and so billions of bubbles are formed and gush to the surface where a fireworks-like display of hundreds of thousands of bubbly frothing circles boil the ocean. It would be a thing of awe and beauty if not for the lethality and deadliness of what is causing them.

...

All across Lucasia sea, land, and aircraft, each varying in design, size, and capability depending on what province they are from, set off all with one goal: defeat the threat that is the Ninth Legion. The Coalition is not going down without a fight

and is going to throw everything they have at this ubiquitous threat to their world.

...

Likewise, in Ninth Legion military bases across the world, this military activity is detected and in response, everything in the Ninth Legion military arsenal (and then some) races off for battle at various hotspots and theatres of war around the world.

...

A newsperson, an attractive Elafii whose circular horns he's yarnbombed in bright colors, reports from one of the few remaining free areas. Sitting in a ragtag, makeshift studio, he addresses the audience, unsure who will even see the broadcast given the immense effort by the Ninth Legion to suppress communications of any variety, but he tries none-the-less.

"And so, it has come to this. An all-out World War. The battle to end all battles has commenced. May good overcome evil. May The Crystal Mother watch over us all."

Over his reporting news footage is shown of a variety of landscapes and cities all over Lucasia where air and land battles ensue, the bright tails of anti-aircraft missiles and plasma bursts launching into the night sky and the blaze of air-based missiles hitting their land-based targets resulting in explosions that cause the screen to go full white-out for a

blip. Then a thousand points of orange light fly across an otherwise dark screen as plasma gun fire is exchanged.

The Ninth Legion state run news is also in full cycle spewing propaganda and already declaring the Ninth Legion the victor of the battle.

Their "news footage" shows:

The Ninth Legion winning anywhere and everywhere on and in every theatre of war possible. And decisively at that.

A Ninth Legion military parade, the largest ever the commentator notes.

Children, thousands of them dressed in identical Ninth Legion school uniforms, standing in "The Great and Glorious Sun of the Ninth Legion DOCTOR FROOD Square", smiling faces abound, enthusiastically waving the Ninth Legion flag.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Inside the Hidden Fortress, in the Mah'kkquorrii Memorial Launch Hangar, David Paul mopes along, hands in pockets, head down and sulking. The hangar is immense; going on until you can't see the other sides, though the ceilings are of modest height. There are four massive circular shafts, each one at least 350 yards in diameter, bored into the floor. These bottomless chasms are the aircraft launch shafts. Three are spot lit from above, while the fourth is in darkness, no longer in use.

Stampedes of pilots scramble past David Paul many bumping into him in their rush to get to their fighters.

"Someone get this kid outta here!"

David Paul goes to the railing of one of the launch shafts and looks down to see hundreds of pilots scramble down open stairwells or ride skeletal elevators to make their way down to the hundreds and hundreds of aircraft that cling all the way up and down the walls; noses pointed up.

When they are given clearance for launch, the aircraft release from the wall and free fall when at some point their noses flip over and point straight down and they fall, fall, fall, then, at the bottom, they take a ninety degree turn, where massive turbines propel them forward even faster and then they shoot out of the ground, at top secret locations, and skyward towards their mission.

Another running pilot bumps into David Paul.

"Get outta here kid you're in the way."

Another pilot shouts to no one in particular.

"Oh for the sake of The Crystal Mother, someone get this kid outta here!"

...

Inside the war room General Pace ponders carefully on whether to launch nuclear options and if so when.

Nuclear technician: "General, nuclear arsenal is armed and ready."

"Call for launch codes," the General states in a clinical tone.

The technician picks up a secure phone.

"Launch codes requested in the main war room."

The Theologian Councilor sidles up to General Pace.

"Are you seriously thinking of using the nuclear arsenal? I beg you to reconsider. Billions will perish."

"How did you get in here?" the General asks.

She doesn't answer him.

"Please I beg you."

"Don't put this on me. The enemy has left us no choice. What about the billions that don't perish? You ever think of that? They'll be tortured into submission by the Ninth Legion," though anyone could see that the General is having an internal debate about this decision.

A bot rolls in from another area and makes its way into the war room. Built into its extended arms is a rectangular shaped case. "General. Launch codes and keys are here," a nuclear tech states.

The launchBot holds out codes and keys case, the General goes to it and places her palm on it. A scanner scans her hand, a light on the launchBots "face" lights up and the case opens with the sounds of several locks clicking out of locked mode – click, click, click.

Inside there is a launch code generator screen: three rows of ten small screens. The screens are all flipping through digits at a rapid pace. Slowly but surely each little screen stops scrolling and stays with one digit. The launch codes are being generated.

Also in the case are three key cards required to launch the nuclear arsenal.

Launch Executioners wearing shiny silver headwear that hides their faces behind expressionless face shields and dressed in foreboding blackened attire enter. They go to a large computer terminal, a mainframe, with a lot of blinking lights and status screens. The launchBot rolls over to the same terminal and the case that it carries is plugged in.

The Executioners each retrieve a large key card from the case (after proper credentials are checked and passcodes entered on a

keypad), then they walk with purpose to their posts at the mainframe computer, where at each one thick glass covers a red launch button. Each inserts their key card and a red light goes dark whilst a green light turns on and the glass cover slides open to expose the launch button.

"Nuclear arsenal ready for launch on your order General," says the nuclear technician.

"Very good. Stand at the ready."

The Executioners take an 'at ease' stance.

...

In the launch hangar David Paul has made his way over to the fourth unused aircraft launch shaft, the one that is in the dark away from the buzz of activity, and leans on the railing. He's brooding. Sure he found the Child Crystals but the mission to rescue them failed and so really: was it all even worth it? A part of him just wants to go home.

...

Inside the massive Ninth Legion Drone Command Center, drone pilots of every kind (for troopers, for aircraft and on) scramble to their workstations and ready for the battle. Alarms and sirens blare.

Mechanized male voice: "This is not a drill. Repeat this is not a drill."

A commander walks down the narrow hallway amongst the massive hive of workstation pods, yelling.

"Take no prisoners. Show no mercy. For the glory of the Ninth Legion!"

...

David Paul, sullen, is leaning on a railing looking down the unlit fourth launch shaft.

It's more aged than the others and its rather obvious that no aircraft have docked here for some time.

Serretus walks up.

"There you are. Why so grim?"

"The world is about to end. Was it even worth my coming here?"

"You did what we asked. You found them. I am so very proud of you."

David Paul rubs his head like he has a headache; doesn't feel well.

"I don't feel well. I can't explain it but I'm seeing images in my head. It's like I can sense the fear of everyone on this planet. So many. Afraid. Suffering. The entire world is so very scared and there isn't a thing I can do about it."

"It is your connection to The Crystal Mother and the Magnificent Field that allow you these connections. They are a gift and a burden."

"Feeling more like a burden right now."

"I know. Will you be alright here by yourself for a few moments?"

"Where are you going?"

"I'd like to try and convince the General that obliteration of the planet is perhaps not the best course."

"I'll be fine."

"If she and I don't see eye to eye we will have to move quickly and get as far from here as possible. Be ready, okay?"

David Paul gives him a sullen nod.

Serretus walks away but turns to David Paul as he walks.

"Have faith my young friend. It will all work out."

Serretus walks away and David Paul just returns to looking out over the railing into the abyss below.

Depressed. Dour. Sullen.

Then he notices something. It catches his eye and instantly brightens his day as much as one's day can be brightened when a world is on the brink of annihilation.

"No way."

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

[JASON: add a little scene here where a Nawhri (Charsnicks species) is working on MAL. They have a quick conversation. David Paul says something like "Yes I know him." Something.]

Without hesitation or fear David Paul descends a set of rickety, rusted stairs going down many levels; small clouds of rust puff with each step.

He sprints further down the dilapidated staircase towards the object of his renewed excitement: MAL.

Nose up and tethered precariously to the side of the shaft wall. Same pre-launch position as the other fighters over in the active launch shafts.

At last David Paul reaches MAL's level.

"MAL!"

"Why hello, sir! A pleasure to see you again."

David Paul walks along a catwalk that connects to the top of MAL's hull and where he enters the craft.

He takes a seat inside the hull (which means he, like MAL, is looking up).

"How'd you get here?" David Paul asks.

"Oh you know this way and that."

"It's good to have you here."

"Everything alright, sir?"

"Not even close. I found the Child Crystals but the mission to retrieve them failed. Now all-out war. End of the world. Fun times."

"This planet has known war for far too long I'm afraid. I suppose I wouldn't be here if it didn't. But before that it never knew war. Ever."

"I just feel so helpless. I wish there were more I could do."

"Well..."

"What?"

"YOU could try and retrieve the Child Crystals."

"If Sloane failed, I won't stand a chance."

"Mmm...One never knows. After all they did use the wrong entrance. By my calculations anyways. The upper tunnels would have been a much better option. Tactically speaking of course. Just my opinion though. But what do I know. No one listens to me."

"Upper tunnels?"

"Why yes. Granted I do have the advantage of hindsight. But going through the upper tunnels would have been the way to go. I suspect they're not well guarded if at all. Spy networks are showing 10 minutes for launch of the Ninth Legion Super Missile if you were curious."

"You have the schematics to the tunnel system in your computer MAL? You know where this place is?"

"Indeed I do. It's all available on the central network if one knows where and how to look. These modernized aircraft are above all that I suppose. But again, what do I know?"

As MAL continues to ramble on about "what does he know" David Paul is mulling over a major decision, then he starts to buckle himself in and flip a few switches and press some buttons.

"Um, sir? What are you doing?"

"Preparing to launch."

David Paul flips more switches and presses more buttons.

Doors in the hull floor slide open and David Paul drops into the all-glass cockpit that sits below the mighty craft.

"MAL."

"Sir?"

"I have the controls."

"Me and my big mouth. You have the controls."

"Launch!"

MAL disconnects from the launch shaft wall and falls backward.

Down, down, down, eventually nose going over end and pointing straight down towards the bottom, continuing to fall.

As they scream through the darkness they at last come to the bottom and David Paul pulls back on the controls and MAL levels off, and they shoot at a ninety-degree angle into a connecting horizontal wind shaft, that runs perpendicular to the launch shaft.

Inside this massive duct, gigantic turbines scream to life providing an extra burst of air that pushes MAL forward and David Paul is sucked back into his seat as they go sizzling along.

“Whoa!”

In an unassuming rocky landscape with Mt. Nebbulus far off in the distance, a small Pressern Lizard, brown with bright yellow stripes, scurries along the warm rock searching for its next insect meal. Everything begins to shake, and small rocks and pebbles bounce about. Seconds later MAL comes flying out of the hidden launch shaft hole, and the little Pressern Lizard runs back to a shady area for cover.

Out in the open now, MAL and David Paul race along, just feet above the ground, headed for Joorg's Tower.

...

All across Lucasia battles rage on.

The Coalition Air Force clashes with the Ninth Legion Drone Force.

The Coalition Naval forces clash with Ninth Legion Grand Navy. Submariner battles take place far below the ocean and sea surfaces all over Lucasia.

In outer space, satellites for one take out satellites for the other and vice versa, evaporating into space dust.

Ground forces (tanks, troops, helicopter-like craft) also clash and of course missiles launch from everywhere. From the ground, from air, from space, from ocean ships and from aircraft both large (enough to easily cover twenty-seven city blocks) and small.

The ugliness and bravery and cowardice and heroism of war are on full display everywhere.

Death reigns. Unfortunately.

The brewing war has come to a boil.

...

Along the landscape leading up to Joorg's Tower MAL soars mere inches above the ground.

"There's the upper tunnel entrance, sir. 9 degrees.

Unfortunately, it's guarded; they are on high alert now. Best we turn around, wouldn't you say?"

"No way. We can do this. They won't know what hit them."

David Paul pushes on the controls and they sprint ahead faster.

At the tunnel entrance alarms sound as large plasma super-cannons fire at the approaching MAL-class fighter.

The flurry of plasma blasts come flying at them and David Paul with seasoned expertise far beyond his years pilots MAL to avoid these, going high into the air. In addition, he flips a switch and a flurry of defensive flares are released that deflect many of these blasts.

Next, David Paul goes on the offensive, flying MAL towards the cannons and launching missiles and plasma blasts at them and they explode into nothing.

He turns away from the entrance then circles MAL back around, lining up, and they fly in. Into the labyrinth of tunnels.

...

At the same time, inside The Drone Command Center where enemy drone pilots control droneFighters a commodore bellows out to several of his best pilots: "Follow that MAL-class fighter! Bring that antique down!"

...

In the sky high above the tunnel entrance nearly a dozen enemy droneFighters break off from their current course and fly down into the tunnel.

Inside the tunnel MAL roars at breakneck speed. There's not a ton of room in here to maneuver and it is dark and difficult to tell if they could run into a dead end at any moment but David Paul presses on without fear as the water running along the tunnel floor gets swept up in their wake and a mischief of tera'rats scurry for cover, their day disrupted, by this bellowing flying giant.

"I really think I should have the controls," MAL begs.

"Don't worry. I told you I've got this."

"Our first 'fork in the road' as it were coming up. By my calculations we go right."

"Right? I was going to go left!"

"Based on what?"

"Uh...a feeling. No time to explain." **[JASON: should this be a feeling or the voice(s)??]**

"A feeling?!"

"Don't worry it's a good feeling," says David Paul then, "I think," to himself.

They go left, racing down another tunnel.

Suddenly plasma blasts rock the sides and ceilings of the tunnel.

"Why didn't you tell me we were being chased?" says David Paul.

"I didn't know. Let me check. Yes just what I thought. They're using a cloaking program. And a simple one at that. Give me a moment. Few more seconds and, there, okay I can see them now.

Not good. Eleven of them to be precise. We're a sitting duck in this tunnel. Would you please reconsider?"

"I can't hear you. Releasing protector flares!"

Hundreds of flares spit out the back of MAL and plasma blasts collide with them preventing them from hitting or at the least minimizing any significant damage.

A cluster of flares hits one of the droneFighters and loses control and hits the side of the tunnel bounces off and then

hits another of the droneFighters. The two crash into the sides and ceiling of the tunnel breaking apart; parts skidding and scraping all about.

...

Back at the drone Command Center one of the drone pilot's screens turns to snowy static (and all the lights in her station go out) and she slams her fist into her control panel over and over and over again.

...

Still pursuing MAL and David Paul, the remaining droneFighters continue to fire away as David Paul pilots MAL around a corner and they get some very temporary relief from the onslaught but the nine remaining droneFighters are still in hot pursuit.

"Sir, I just want you to know it's been an honor flying with you."

"Have some faith MAL. Come on!"

"We're an easy target sir. Too easy. How can you possibly think we can get out of this? Actually, don't answer that. No, no, no, what are you doing? Why are you turning down here? What are you doing??!!"

David Paul takes a turn and pushes on the accelerator so that MAL goes full speed. It's a bigger tunnel they turned into with more room to maneuver but still not *that* big.

The real problem is they are headed for a dead end as the walls and ceiling having completely caved in. Large chunks of massive bricks made from ancient stone form the wall that is the last thing they will see.

"Sir?!"

The droneFighters are at full speed too, obviously with less on the line (except the pride and reputations of their pilots back at the command center) but no lives on the line.

As they close in on the end, and let's be clear there's not nearly enough room to turn around in the tunnel (not to mention the droneFighters would likely smash into them) David Paul pulls back on the controls and quickly pushes at another lever and the following occurs simultaneously and within a fraction of a second:

MAL's forward engines completely shutoff, the hover engines turn on to keep it floating in the air, while at the same time the crafts "braking" engines **ROAR** to life and there is this just awful sound as the craft groans against the forces of forward momentum.

MAL stops in mid-air but it's such a close call that MAL's front bumps hard against the dead-end wall, enough to rattle David Paul (whose eyes are closed by the way) inside but not enough to do any real damage.

On the other hand, six of the drone fighters aren't so lucky as they go smashing into the dead end and each other, pow-bang-pow-pow-pow-bang-crunch, parts flying everywhere and sandwiching the fighters into discs of metal. The other three droneFighters are just able to maneuver, using a smaller size to their advantage and avoid the wall and one another and go screaming the opposite way. Okay, spoke too soon, one catches the side of the tunnel and spins out of control crashing into the watery bottom of the tunnel.

Two left.

"Ha, ha! I told you we could do it!"

David Paul spins the hovering MAL around, the crafts wing tips scraping the tunnel side causing sparks, and races out of this part of the tunnel towards the two remaining droneFighters.

David Paul has the onboard targeting systems zeroed in on the fighters ready to blow them into tiny pieces.

"Sir, I don't recommend firing upon those enemy fighters, the debris could take us out."

David Paul considers.

"You're right. I have another idea."

"Oh no."

David Paul throttles MAL past the two remaining droneFighters who then fire on them and take chase.

David Paul then turns into one of the many intersecting tunnels.

"No, no! Wrong way again," MAL protests.

David Paul pushes on the accelerator as the two remaining droneFighters pursue and shower plasma blasts upon them. Many making their mark. Hit after hit after hit. A combination of defensive flares and MAL's vaunted armored exterior saving them (but it will only hold for so long).

At the far end of this tunnel it is once again blocked but this time only partially. There's a sliver of an opening. Wide enough for MAL but *not* tall enough.

David Paul drops the hammer and goes full speed, this time *towards* this latest obstacle.

"There's no way we'll fit! Give me the controls!" MAL protests.

...

In the Drone Command Center the drone pilots smell a trap: "He's trying the same trick as before. Be prepared to fall back," notes a drone pilot.

"There's no way he can't stop at the speed he's going. It's a trick of some sort. What are they up to?" says their counterpart. "Holographic illusion or something. Has to be. Full pursuit. Full speed."

...

As MAL roars towards the purported "holograph" the droneFighters follow in hot pursuit at a maddening speed. In fact, David Paul kicks in some afterburners for even MORE speed.

...

In the Drone Command Center there are doubts: "You're sure about this?"

"Absolutely. Full pursuit I said!"

...

David Paul is not even coming close to slowing down.

"MAL, I'm going to be honest with you. This is going to hurt."

"Hurt? What do mean hurt? Stop! Deploying all emergency air bag systems. I have the controls! I have the controls. Please!

Please say I have the controls."

"I have the controls."

"No I meant I as in me, so you say 'You have the controls MAL!'"

"Don't worry MAL."

And with that David Paul pulls on two handles behind his head and his chair goes shooting up into the MAL's hull.

And then MAL, still at top speed, *partially* fits through the crack where the tunnel is blocked. The below-the-hull glass cockpit where David Paul was seconds ago shatters into a thousand pieces and is ripped from MAL's hull. It spins out of control behind them, skipping along the water, just missing a droneFighter, finally coming to a stop, partially in the water, partially sticking out. Alarms whir and David Paul watches from the hull above as emergency doors slide shut closing off the hole in the hull with an airtight seal. They're through!

And it has the desired effect as the two droneFighters go smashing into the "holograph" that isn't.

...

In the Drone Command Center the drone pilot's screens go static and they are not happy, especially the one who was skeptical that it was a holograph.

"I told you!"

...

Back in the tunnels David Paul is thrilled.

"Yes!!!!!! Yes!!!!!! Yes!!!!!!"

"Oh come on. That really hurt!!" MAL cries.

"Sorry. Sorry. Okay, let's go get 'em."

"I assume I have the controls since you can no longer see?"

"No. Don't ask me how but I can still see. Sort of. And I know where the Child Crystals are."

Little does David Paul know, but he is tapping into the power of echolocation, typical of a trained Crystal Warrior. And with the Child Crystals out of the Zelerium glass, it has been amplified.

"Please don't say it."

"I have the controls."

"Of course, you do. I've instructed one of the tertiary computers to put the finishing touches on my last will and testament."

"Funny."

"I wish I were joking."

David Paul pilots MAL "blind" down various tunnel ways, taking turns and still going at blazing speeds; they're running out of time as The Finality is scheduled to launch any moment now.

At last they come to a large circular hub where all of the main tunnels converge. There is also a tunnel going up from this hub and one going down.

David Paul brings MAL to a stop, forward engines singing down to a fade out, hover engines igniting, and hangs here, floating in this hub.

Inside MAL's hull David Paul closes his eyes to help him focus. "Where are you? Come on. Come on," he says aloud, "There you are," he says smiling. The Crystals he's sensed where they are and he goes to work pulling some knobs, flipping some switches, the hover engines start to whir down from idle to off and MAL drops.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Inside the Ninth Legion subterranean missile launch haven...

Doctor Frood, Lord Dogen, Lord Dogen's protectorBot, a crew of non-military underlings and a section of soldierDrones are on the catwalk that overlooks the lava river far below. Now hanging from where the Zelerium glass containers that held the Child Crystals were, is Sloane and two of his remaining commandoes. All very much beaten to a pulp. They've even managed to put several dents in Sloane's "indestructible" armor.

Steam from below rises up to set an eerily and unsettling yet apropos scene.

Their wrists are bound, and they hang from the pulley beam via a wire that connects to these cuffs. Their ankles are also cuffed and attached is a *really* heavy weight so they can't try to kip up and swing over the railing (though they do try).

Doctor Frood addresses Sloane and friends.

"Well, well. If it isn't the infamous Commander Sloane. Number one on the enemy of the States most wanted charter. At last we meet in person. Such an honor."

"I do not share the sentiment," growls Sloane.

"I meant what an honor for you."

"Let my compatriots go. Do with me what you will."

"Perhaps."

He gestures for a group of vidBots to come forward. It is, essentially, a camera crew and they scramble to get setup. Position. Angle. Lighting. Etc.

Doctor Frood continues...

"Confess to your crimes against The State and pledge your eternal loyalty to the Ninth Legion for all the world to see."

"Go to hell!" Sloane barks.

Doctor Frood gestures and an attendant presses a control button that lowers one of Sloane's commandoes down to the lava river below. The commando's feet touch the lava and their guttural screams of agony echo up. **[JASON: need to standardize on**

'solider' v. 'commando' v. 'warrior' etc. In some places it may be fine but keep an eye on it]

They are then lowered a bit more, and a bit more until they are to waist level in the boiling lava. The commando screams even worse than before. A scream that should only exist in the worst of nightmares.

Sloane tries to struggle out of his shackles but can't, even with his mighty strength, so he lets out a heard-all-over-the-world yell in the direction of Frood.

The commando below screams and screams and cries in agony until, finally, mercifully even, until...they are fully submerged...and the screams are no more.

The wire that they were tethered to is retracted minus the solidier hanging from it. The end burnt off and glowing.

Frood: "Mmm. That was a bit too quick for my taste. Slower next time!"

"Yes Doctor," says a cowering subordinate.

"I will have your hide! I swear it!" shouts Sloane.

"Don't blame me. You could have avoided that entirely with a pledge and a confession."

"Never."

"Kneel and confess for all of the world to see. Go on. Read from the prompter. Pledge eternal loyalty to the Ninth Legion and your other friend here, will be spared. You have my word."

Sloane says nothing.

Frood gestures.

The soldier is lowered down.

As the soldier is being lowered down Frood continues:

"Just pledge and she lives. Simple."

The soldier shouts up at Sloane.

"Don't do it! Don't you dare do it! The cause is bigger than I. The cause is bigger than just one person!"

The soldier reaches the lava but is only dipped in up to their ankles. They let out the most gut wrenching of screams as their feet are melted and burnt off.

Doctor Frood continues the bargaining game.

"Now? Mmm? Confess and pledge. No? Her feet are gone but robotic prosthetics will be like the real thing."

Sloane says nothing.

"This one will suffer much, much longer. I promise you that."

Sloane still says nothing, his head slumped in defeat, and the soldier is lowered further, to just above the knees. Her screams are louder and more desperate now.

The soldier cries out.

"Please! Please! Ahhhhh!-", she cries out in desperation but then adds, "I-, I spit on the Ninth Legion!"

Sloane remains perfectly still as if he shut down so as not to have to hear the soldiers agonizing cries.

"Well, I certainly don't question your loyalty to your cause but I must say I do question your loyalty to your fellow soldiers. Shame. Perhaps they can be convinced."

Again Frood merely gestures and the metallic click-click-click of the pulley system echoes in the horrid chamber as it lifts up the other soldier. Her legs, from just above the kneecaps, gone. She's pretty much passed out from the pain at this point.

"Perhaps a confession and pledge from this one then? My good soldier are you ready to confess your crimes against The State and pledge your loyalty to the Ninth Legion?"

The soldier says nothing.

Sloane yells at the soldier.

"Do it. Save yourself!"

Solider: "I-. I. Will-"

"Excellent," says Frood, satisfied.

He gestures for the camera crew, the vidBots.

"I. Will. Never confess or pledge," finishes the soldier.

"No don't!" begs Sloane.

"My loyalty is-"

Before she can complete the sentence Doctor Frood gestures to a subordinate who hits a large red button and the wired tether that holds the soldier is released and she falls down, down, down splashing into the lava below. And just like that is no more.

Sloane is livid with anger.

"I will kill you!!! I swear it! If it's the last thing I do! I will kill you! You want a pledge? That is my pledge to you!"

"Now, now, now. You're being a bit dramatic. I would think, casualties are a normal part of your line of work. But enough theatrics. Commander Sloane. Before your demise I will allow you the honor of bearing witness to the greatest feat this world has ever known. One that will solidify the Ninth Legions rightful place as the single source of Truth on all of Lucasia. You are my personal guest for the launch of... The Finality. The super-missile that will change *everything*. Enjoy."

Frood turns to one of his attendants.

"Launch the missile."

The attendant turns a dial and speaks into a microphone:

"Missile control. This is Bay Four. We are go for launch. On the orders of Doctor Frood, we are go for launch." **[JASON: Bay Four? Correct vernacular?]**

Inside the subterranean missile launch control center, keys are turned buttons are pressed. The rocket boosters spit fire and smoke, rocking the entire lair. Dust, debris and small rocks come shaking from the ceiling. The entire cavernous space shakes as the missile's engines coming to life.

Steel structures holding the missile upright fall by the wayside and crash to the sides smashing into pieces.

The missile's boosters burn brighter, lighting up the entire hangar so bright it's as if this subterranean fortress were outside under the sun.

All over the city above, citizens panic from the quaking ground beneath them unaware what is going on beneath. And next, ancient buildings that stood for a millennia crumble to dust. Others, the ones that hang from below the rocky formation fall hundreds of thousands of feet smashing into the rocky terrain below. The missile bursts through city surface and citizens watch with a mixture of awe, confusion, fear, panic and concern as they see the brightly lit missile take off, as a city crumbles in its wake.

Back inside the lair, Doctor Frood, Dogen and Sloane watch as the missiles contrails spiral into the sky, it's white-hot engines spitting devilish fire. And just like that the missile is just a small sun spot that goes higher and higher into the night sky.

Doctor Frood covers his eyes with dark goggles and looks up at the awesome weapon on the way to its target, the sight nearly bringing him to tears. Tears of joy.

"Magnificent. Absolutely magnificent."

...

Inside the Hidden Fortress...

Alarms klaxons blare.

A technician alerts the base: "Launch detected. Repeat launch detected."

"What do we estimate its target coordinates to be?" asks General Pace.

"Longitude knot, knot, niner, latitude one, seven, five."

"What location is that? Nearest cities?"

"It's us General. Here. the Hidden Fortress. We are target zero."

[JASON: it was already mentioned that the Hidden Fortress was the Ninth Legions target for their super missile but need to decide if it's here or earlier]

"But the blast radius will take out half the hemisphere," says the Theologian Councilor.

"They're legit crazy. Suicidal. That includes many of their own strongholds," says the General.

"As fortified as this fortress is we will never survive that," states the Head Councilor.

"Isn't there an offsite, secure bunker where we as councilors should go? We need to keep the government intact. Continuity is essential," a panicked Councilor suggests.

"This *is* the offsite, secure bunker," spits back General Pace.

" the other councilors and all essential personnel be taken to the offsite secure bunker, stat."

A junior technician speaks up.

"General they are taking out our communication satellites now. Communication with Moon Base may be compromised soon, sir.

Decision on nuclear launch?"

"General. Please. By launching the arsenal you guarantee mutually assured destruction. Life will cease to exist on the entire planet. The planet will cease to exist as a planet!" begs the Theologian Councilor.

The Launch Executioners stand ready with the keys while on the Nuclear Arsenal Moon Base thousands of nuclear missiles shake in their silos primed and ready for launch at a moment's notice.

[JASON: again if water moon talk about bubbles]

Everyone looks to the General for the launch order as she holds and holds and holds.

"General?" asks a nuclear technician.

Just then Serretus runs into the space.

"General? A quick word if I may?"

"I'm a little busy right now?!"

"Please General. This is relevant to our current predicament."

The nuclear technician and the Launch Executioners all stand ready to launch the full nuclear arsenal and watch, somewhat dumbfounded, as the General slams down her headset and walks over to Serretus.

They also watch as Serretus then calls over the Theologian Councilor and the three huddle up.

They cannot hear discussion but sometimes the General gets animated though keeps the volume to a whisper.

Others, the Head Councilor included, everyone in the room, all look over at them wondering what could be so important.

"General?" the nuclear tech finally checks in.

The huddle breaks.

"Hold here. Stand at maximum ready and keep me posted on the status of our comm sats," says General Pace.

"Yes General. Copy that," the nuclear technician says not so sure.

The Theologian Councilor lets out an audible and visible sigh of relief.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Inside the Ninth Legion subterranean missile launch facility... Now that the missile is away, Frood and company return to the matter of Commander Sloane.

"I'm afraid I have more important matters to attend to. Our glorious triumph is just moments away," says Doctor Frood as he gestures to the missile in the sky, "Now, we are going to release you but if you first confess and pledge your allegiance to the Ninth Legion, upon your death, you will enter the glorious Eternal Realm. Refuse? Your essence spends eternity in The Undying Zone. The choice is yours but I grow weary of asking."

"I'll gladly accept death over pledging my allegiance to your sick cult with its made up realms and zones. Because that's all it is: a *cult*."

"Heresy!" says Frood, truly offended, "Know this before you pass from this world: This day marks the dawn of the Ninth Legions reign over all of Lucasia for the rest of time."

Frood gestures to a subordinate who makes to hit the red release button when...

CRASH!

Through the gigantic high circular ceiling above MAL comes crashing in, plasma blasters spewing away!

The subordinate, in shock, forgets to hit the red release button on Sloane's hanging mechanism.

Everyone scrambles.

Every soldierDrones in the place starts firing away at MAL in a blizzard of plasma blasts. MAL's automated offensive weapons system (AOWS) detects this and dozens of guns on its exterior return fire while at the same time MAL's automated defensive system (ADS) spews out flares and other munitions that explode like fireworks blocking many of the plasma blasts.

Dogen and his protecotBot escort Doctor Frood to the control center where there is a bunker for his safety.

"Come. We must get you to safety Doctor," says Dogen as he takes Frood under the arm and rushes him along.

Doctor Frood yells back to the subordinate regarding Sloane:

"Are you an idiot? Release him!"

The subordinate gives a confused look. Release him? Let the prisoner go? Frood picks up on this.

"No you fool! Release him so he *falls!*"

David Paul, via a periscope inside MAL's hull, sees the attendant go for the release button and slam their palm down on the button.

Sloane is released!

But...

David Paul pulls on the yokes to make MAL sidle over sideways directly towards the rocky wall (taking a few catwalks, soldierDrones and Ninth Legion lackeys out in the process), its wing banging hard against the rock wall but...

Sloane lands on the wing!

Just one problem: the weight tethered to his ankles is weighing him down and slides off just catching his hands on the wings edge. He is uses all of his strength to hold on but it begins to fail him, the weight too heavy even for this mightiest of warriors. And all this while soldierDrones from everywhere it seems continue to hail plasma blasts.

David Paul flicks a switch and a targeting viewfinder on a retractable pole drops from the ceiling, while at the same time, on MAL's exterior a plasma gun with targeting camera comes to life.

David Paul looks through the viewfinder: various targeting graphics bounce about all at his disposal. David Paul fiddles with the controls in front of him until the cabling that holds the weight onto Sloane is in the cross hairs and he fires and...misses.

"Come on you," he says to no one really.

He fires again and this shot hits its mark, snapping the cable, and the weight falls, falls, falls, finally splashing down in the lava far below.

Sloane pulls himself up, kipping up onto the wing and somersaulting forward, then makes a mighty leap and roll onto the top of MAL's hull.

"Commander Sloane confirmed to be outside hull. Opening top hatch," reports MAL to David Paul.

The top hatch opens and Sloane, exhausted and beaten, falls into hull, still in wrist and ankle shackles.

He quickly rolls over onto his back and puts a foot between his shackled wrists and pulls mightily against the wrist restraints, his body armor shaking and groaning with the massive effort until finally they shatter.

Then he somersaults to a wall. Hanging there is an emergency axe tool. He sits with legs extended out in front and without a second thought brings the axe down on the chain between his ankle restraints.

He's free.

During all of this it should be mentioned, many soldierDrones and guns are firing on MAL. MAL's hull is pockmarked with plasma fire and the entire time MAL is spitting out anti-aircraft flares and return fire.

"Let's go!" David Paul shouts and he pilots MAL so that the aircraft does a 180-degree spin and the rear is now pointed at the soldierDrones.

David Paul hits a button and the rear engine thrusters light up going into full after-burn sending the soldierDrones into every direction like dust and most fall into the lava river far below. MAL, with plenty of blackened pock marks from the fight but overall just fine, flies through the silo that the missile left from; the force from its engines making the remaining catwalks and other infrastructure collapse and crumble.

David Paul pilots MAL up and out of the missile silo.

Shaken citizens throughout the city pause to look as another streak of light goes flying from below their beloved city at impossible speeds into the skies above.

...

Inside the Ninth Legion missile launch control center Doctor Frood heads towards a set of doors set in the rear private quarters. The doors slide open revealing an escape craft.

He addresses one of the higher-ranking officers in the room.

"Director see that The Finality makes it's mark. Our location has been compromised. This area is no longer safe for me. I will monitor the situation from my personal quarters."

"Of course, Doctor. Glory be to the Ninth Legion."

Doctor Frood turns to Lord Dogen.

"Lord Dogen! That MAL fighter is going after my missile. Take care of that 'situation'."

"Of course, my liege. I will not fail."

"You've failed me once already Lord Dogen. You said the boy was dead. Failing a second time could lead to the loss of another limb. And perhaps not just one of your own."

Frood turns and gets into the escape craft, the doors zip shut and the craft speeds away along an underground tunnel and track system disappearing around a corner.

Dogen speaks into a communications device on his shoulder.

"Flight deck, ensure the Zulu is fueled and fully armed."

Inside a hangar within the underground lair the awe-inspiring fighter jet like nothing of its kind is prepped by nervous crew who scramble frantically to ensure everything is just right.

Dogen enters the hangar, followed by his protectorBot as always, gets on a lift which elevates him to the entryway, and he boards the glorious craft.

The aircrafts side hatch closes, engines roar to an eardrum-bursting level and then Dogens fighter, the Zulu, is sling-shotted out of the hangar and is soon enough is in pursuit of MAL.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Froods escape craft speeds on tracks at unthinkable speeds. At last, it comes to a stop inside his personal laboratory located in the penthouse of Ninth Legion Tower. Like an observatory, it is all glassed in with a 360 degree view in all directions.

An underling addresses him.

"Congratulations Good Doctor. Um, intelligence has detected launch sequence initiation of the evil doer's nuclear arsenal. It may be safer for you elsewhere?"

"Don't be foolish. This will go down as the greatest day in the history of the Ninth Legion. This day marks the dawn of the Ninth Legion's reign over all of Lucasia for the rest of time. I want the best seat in the house."

The underling bows.

"Of course, good doctor."

Doctor Frood goes to a workstation with hundreds of screens and other monitoring devices where he can sit back, kick up his feet and watch from afar as The Finality, his precious weapon that he practically regards as a his child, takes out billions of lives and destroys half the planet in a fraction of a fraction of a millisecond but without the messiness of atomic fallout and therefore: a fresh start. A clean slate. A blank canvas upon

which he can paint in the Ninth Legion's colors. And *only* the Ninth Legion's colors.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Meanwhile halfway across the planet, in the skies above, MAL quakes through the air, in hot pursuit of the missile.

David Paul and Sloane inside the hull (recall MAL's all-glass below hull cockpit was shattered off).

David Paul, in the pilots seat, the controls he needs built into the chair (a brilliant design feature and he silently thanks whoever designed this brilliant craft), and what isn't built into it is at his disposal ready to extend down on periscopic poles from the hull ceiling. Sloane is in a co-pilot's seat and it is readily apparent he knows the ins and outs of a MAL-class fighter.

"MAL diverting all non-essential power to your rear engines. Go full afterburners," says David Paul.

"Acknowledged," says MAL.

MAL's rear engines shoot out the bluest of flames and the craft bursts forward. BOOM! They break the sound barrier.

A close up of a speed gauge indicates they are going faster, and faster, and faster still. Accelerating exponentially.

But Sloane has his doubts. He has been around the block many more times than this child.

"Do you seriously think you are going to catch a missile?"

"If anyone can catch it. MAL and I can."

"Fool!"

"No listen. The missile path is an arc, right? Ours will be a straight line. We can do this."

"No. Put on an air suit and get off the ship. I'll take care of this."

"You had your chance," David Paul says, wincing and regretting the smart aleck comment immediately.

Sloane unbuckles, gets up and gets right in David Paul's face.

"And what are you doing to do if you *do* catch it?!"

"Uh, not sure yet. Kind of making a lot of this up as I go along. But...I have a 'feeling' I guess you could say."

"You're a civilian with no business being here! Get up!"

David Paul shakes his head no.

"Stubborn. Just like your mother was."

"You knew my mother?"

"It doesn't matter. Get out now and let me--"

Just then something slams into the side of MAL and they are jostled about inside. Alarms sound.

David Paul looks at a monitor that shows Dogen in hot pursuit.

"Not good!"

Inside the Zulu, Dogen is the epitome of focus and single mindedness as he sits at the controls of his personal and customized fighter jet, pursuing MAL and firing on them with everything in his arsenal.

Another blasts rocks MAL.

"Sir, all power has been diverted to the rear engines. Including defensive flares. My hull can't take many more hits like that. And at the speed we're moving we can't use our full array of evasive maneuvers. I suggest--"

Sloane, frustrated, and ever impatient, gets out of his chair and goes to the rear of the hull. He hits a button and a windowed door between the front of the hull, where David Paul is, and the back, where Sloane is, slams down with an airtight seal.

Then Sloane goes to a control panel punches some coding into a keypad and the back of MAL's hull opens, air blasts in, and the windowed separator door starting to frost over due to the high altitude. Sloane starts to frost over too for that matter. Then Sloan opens his arms and allows himself to fall backward out of MAL.

In mid-air, falling back, Sloane does a somersault, then straightens his mighty body in a perfect line, arms extended in front, streamlined, and headed straight for Dogen's fighter craft (which is still quite far away).

When the time is right, he brings his feet out in front of him and his arms out to the side to cause drag then he pulls hard on small handles hidden in his armored suit just by the shoulders. Parachutes are deployed from the upper back of his suit, jerking him to a mid-air stop and he serenely floats downward a contrast

to the maddening action that has been going on the rest of the time. And he waits. Dogen's fighter, at first just a dot so far away, quickly and ferociously is catching up. Sloane releases the parachutes, and he goes falling straight down but he timed it perfectly and lands atop Dogens fighter!

Dogen didn't hear the clang when Sloane landed. He is focused, in pursuit of MAL, determined not to fail. In fact, he's got the aircraft in his sights, just about has it lined up, he wants to be 100% sure it will be a full and complete kill shot, targeting systems scream the MAL-class fighter is in target, so he depresses the triggers on his yoke but before he can fire...

Sloane rips off a hatch door on the top of the Zulu, jumps in without a second thought, and lands with authority inside!

...

The aircraft is forced to slow down as alarms blare and air whips in and out of the space and a vacuum is created as air pressure is lost.

Dogen, furious to say the least, unstraps himself from his seat. He is wearing a specialized helmet that fits just so to his robotic eye plate and he snaps on a breath mask so as not to be affected by the altitude and loss of pressure. The decompression vacuum winds swirl about and mere mortals would likely be sucked out but these power houses remain grounded and inside.

Dogen opens a latch to reveal a keypad, types in a code.

The Zulu's onboard computer alerts: "Auto-pilot engaged."

Dogen and Sloane, in the close quarters of the Zulu's hull, air swirling in and out in a fit, size one another up in what seems like an inevitable clash of titan-versus-titan.

Dogen's protectorBot takes cover but watches the entire thing, his many audio sensors and video camera "eyes" taking it all in as it clings to a wall and puts out a distress call to Ninth Legion outposts in its language of beeps, clicks, and whirring (weirdly similar to the Earthly sounds of dial-up) for reinforcements and rescue.

"Traitor! I end you today!" growls Sloane.

"I welcome the challenge," Dogen spits back in a venomous snarl.

Dogen unholsters a plasma handgun and fires several shots.

Sloane dives and rolls able to avoid some while others splatter off his armor.

Sloane retrieves a device from his on-person arsenal. It's a disc with handle attached. The handle is held in his hand, disc facing out on the knuckle side, looking like a miniature shield. With the depression of a button, -POP!-, just like that it expands like an umbrella made of material strong enough that the plasma blasts bounce off.

Sloane then tosses a glass tube to the floor that breaks and creates a screen of fluorescent yellow smoke.

Dogen struggles to see where Sloane is when...

From the smoke screen Sloane emerges like bird of prey and tackles Dogen to the ground. Sloane lands a few good shots but Dogen is no slouch and manages to get his foot into Sloane's chest then kicks his leg straight sending Sloane off of him so high and hard that Sloane goes slamming into the ceiling of the hull and then crashes to the floor.

But this is a heavyweight match for the ages and Sloane is not easily fazed either. He takes several throwing discs, each one with ten sharpened tines, from his utility belt and hurls them at Dogen. They hit their mark, all of them, from Dogen's wrist up to his shoulder. Whap, whap, whap, whap.

Dogen screams in pain. "Aaarrghhh!"

Dogen, with his robotic arm, takes a weapon from his belt. It's a barbed electro-mace. A devastating weapon with bludgeoning as its sole purpose: a medium-sized handle with a large spiked ball on the end. And, with the snap of his wrist, the ball comes alive with deadly bolts of electrified sparks and Dogen runs at Sloane, swings, and the weapon hits its mark right across Sloane's face who goes slamming to the ground. Pieces of his shattered helmet and face covering fly everywhere and sparks spew from the hole.

Sloane rises to his knees, shakes his head to clear it and regains his bearings. It is just in time, too, as Dogen comes at him with another swing of the weapon but Sloane is ready and

parries the attack and tosses Dogen to the ground. He stomps on the electrified ball and it shatters into pieces with an electric explosion sending shocks through both of the warriors and sending them both back into opposite walls of the Zulu's hull.

Dogen, tiny electric bolts still snaking around him, takes a blocky, short-barreled rifle and fires it, spewing a blob of plasma pellets at Sloane while running towards him.

Sloane, in an attempt to avoid the mortal blast, leaps up and does a backflip and mostly dodges the deadly discharge but some of it got his lower legs and he comes crashing down and slides right in front of Dogen who sees that he has an easy target now. But never one to quit, Sloane quickly does a leg sweep and brings Dogen down hard.

Dogen on one elbow cocks the weapon for another shot, aims and fires but Sloane is quick and kicks the weapon out of his hands as it fires and so the blast misses Sloane but hits the interior of the aircraft making several debilitating holes in the hull. Alarms blare as air rushes in.

The Zulu's onboard computer voice: "Hull breach. Hull breach." Sloane gets on top of Dogen and they struggle as one tries to best the other. Sloane puts his thumb into Dogens robotic blue eye and presses with all his might, dislodging the eye, it hangs limp by just a braid of wires and sparks emit from it.

Dogen screams and reacts violently kipping up and throwing Sloane off of him.

Out comes another electrified weapon. Shockchucks. Dogen attacks with the ferocity of a wild beast gone mad with these two electrified sticks connected by their swiveled ends by a thick cable.

He rains the weapon down on Sloane again and again and again. Sloane does everything he can to avoid it, but it's not so easy. Some volleys he blocks with his forearms, eventually splintering his armor, whilst others hit more vital areas. The weapon is doing its job: Sloane is weakened, electrocuted, and parts of his armor come off in chunks and pieces. The air is filled with a rancid smell of charged air.

Dogen finally stops and gets up and goes to a side compartment and pulls out a large and long axe weapon, its typical purpose one of an emergency tool in the event of a crash. But today is a killing weapon made all the more apparent when with the flick of Dogen's wrist the entire thing sparks with electrified bolts that sizzle and snake all about it. Its weight is apparent in the way that even the mighty Dogen has to work to drag it over to Sloane. And Dogen has only one intention and one intention only: End the mighty Sloane once and for all.

Sloane is lying there, both organic and non-organic consciousness fading, sparks crackling from his suit. Breathing: wheezing and labored.

Dogen's protectorBot wheels out of its hiding spot to get a better view of the final kill shot. The little 'Bot, in its own unnerving way, seems to want a front row seat, and if it could would be smiling it seems.

Then, Dogen, with his protectorBot just off to the side, brings the mighty axe overhead for the killing blow but Sloane moves just enough to the side and the axe comes down on Sloane's shoulder taking his arm completely off. But on the bright side he avoided the kill. For now.

Sloane screams a magnificent roar but the pain seems to give him renewed energy and in his anguish and anger he grabs Dogens protectorBot by its thin little neck and rushes to a side door in the aircrafts hull. He kicks at the door with everything he has causing a large dent while the door itself comes partially off and more air rushes in.

Dogen upon seeing this goes into a panic.

"No!" he yells.

Sloane kicks at the door again and it comes completely off.

He almost gets sucked out but jumps back, gets sucked towards the opening again but plants his legs on each side of the doorway to prevent himself from going out and then tosses the

poor little protectorBot out of the aircraft and it lets out a fading squeal as it falls and fades away.

Dogen bellows out a terrible, angry cry then snatches up a parachute pack and clips it to his armored suit.

Next, he goes to a control panel and breaks a button enclosed in glass and rains a fist down upon it.

The Zulu's onboard computer warns: "Self-destruct initiated. Thirty seconds to self-destruct."

Dogen rushes for the door.

Sloane, still straddling the open door and resisting getting sucked out, sees Dogen running at him, pushes off with his legs to the other side of the hull and grabs hold of some cargo netting. He's so weak he can barely hold himself up.

Dogen, ignoring Sloane, rushes to the entryway and leaps out of the aircraft after his beloved protectorBot, hands by his side, air rushing past, he is in full dive position to make himself as streamlined as possible desperately trying to reach the poor little protectorBot.

And soon enough, the little 'Bot is in sight and Dogen spreads his arms and legs apart which causes a braking effect, and he slows down then grasps the 'Bot, which lets out a squeal of relief, then connects it to him via a carabiner clip. Then he pulls a cord and an exotically pyramidal shaped parachute with

the colors of the Ninth Legion deploys and they float down as
Dogen looks up to see:

His customized fighter craft, the Zulu, destroyed in a glorious
blue explosion. Self-destruct complete.

He smiles. Hanging there in mid-air, a sitting target. But what
may seem like a defeat to most is not because he has just ended
the mighty Sloane and he is confident that without Sloane's help
the boy will not catch the missile. And besides, even if he did
what is he going to do to stop it?

(Let us find out, shall we?)

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Miraculously, David Paul & MAL have caught up to the missile, indeed they are actually ahead of it.

The custodial "pilots" aboard the missile fire shots at them. Not plasma blasts but mammoth five-bladed death-discs. They spin so fast they look like a solid, harmless even, circle hurtling through the air but rest assured their design is of a single purpose: tear through an aircraft like the teeth of an apex predator.

"Okay. Those are new," says David Paul as he pilots MAL to dodge the onslaught but others hit their mark lodging into MAL's hull and shortly thereafter exploding: BAM! BAM!

MAL's remBots scramble out and along its hull. Some to fix damage already done. Others rush at the weapons that have not yet detonated dislodging them and they and the weapons go flying off and away, exploding in mid-air. The ultimate sacrifice. He scrambles to a gunner position.

"Let's see, let's see."

He is scrolling through a catalogue of weapons to fire.

"Need to decide soon please!" MAL says.

"Here we go."

He fires and a large grey ball, officially known as "Expanding Foam Spheroids (EFS's)", launches out at the missile hitting one of the cockpits and bursting into a grey foamy substance that

grows and swells, and gets everywhere both outside and eventually inside as well.

The co-pilot inside is furious as the foam engulfs him and his cockpit, invading every crack and crevice.

The lead pilot, seeing this, is not happy about this at all.

"You fool! Get that thing off of the missile! It's causing drag! We're slowing down you idiot!"

The co-pilot responds: "Sir, I don't know how sir!"

The lead pilot, furious, types in a code sequence on his dashboard and then presses a button and...

The co-pilot along with a lot of the grey foam and really the entire cockpit shoots out of the missile **[JASON: should it drag along for a bit?]** and tumblind and falling towards the ground but soon enough a parachute deploys. *Problem solved* thinks the lead pilot, with no regard for the life of his fellow pilot. It was a problem, he fixed it.

David Paul sees the parachute.

"One pilot down. Two to go."

He presses a trigger and fires off two more EFS's.

Neither hits one of the cockpits but each does hit the missile body and the foam again begins to expand causing drag.

MAL gives a status update, like it or not.

"Good news: The EFS's are causing significant drag on the missile. They're slowing it down. Bad news: Only one EFS left in the arsenal."

"Of course. Of course, there's only one left."

"Make it count, sir."

David Paul takes careful aim, fires and hits the cockpit of the other co-pilot.

The main pilot seeing this, slams his fists into the dashboard in a fit of rage and tantrum.

He goes to his dashboard controls as he did before and presses some buttons and the other co-pilot explodes out of the side of the missile and just as it becomes a speck in the distance a parachute blossoms.

Meanwhile inside MAL David Paul wonders, "How do we get the last pilot out of there?"

"I have an idea. Get into an air suit and then harness yourself in."

"You have the controls?"

"I have the controls."

David Paul gets out of the gunner chair and gets into an air suit, a big, bulky get-up with air-tight life support and parachuting systems, designed for very high altitudes. From a harness on the suit he clips himself into a safety rail in the side of the hull.

MAL opens the emergency doors in the floor that had been shut because of the whole glass cockpit being smashed into smithereens and ripped off thing. Air comes rushing into the hull. Alarms sound off at the sudden change in air pressure and David Pauls is spun about but luckily isn't sucked out since he clipped his harness to the safety rail.

"I hope you know what you're doing!" David Paul yells.

"No more or less than you, sir."

MAL moves all six of its seats, along their tracking rails in the ceiling, off to the side of the hull.

MAL races at the same speed as the missile, then maneuvers so they are over the last cockpit on the missile (the one with the lead pilot in it); right over it. So close they are but a few feet above it. David Paul is doing his best to hold on through all of this as the air is still rushing around with the fury of a hurricane inside the hull.

MAL fires two cables at the missile whose powerful magnetic ends stick. MAL then reels in the cables until the cockpit is inside of MAL's hull with David Paul and the pilot staring at one another! Separated only by the glass of the cockpit's canopy.

The pilot screams at David Paul through the glass, cursing up a storm in a language David Paul can't understand and but can sense for certain that he is being bombarded with curse words. As he screams and swears the pilot is looking around to figure

out what he can do to escape. This was never part of the plan. He only ejected the others to get the grey goo from the EFS's off and keeping the drag from slowing the missile down. Bailing on the mission, *exiting* the cockpit was never an option they considered. It would be dishonorable to say the least. They and their kin would be banished to the Undying Zone.

David Paul walks to the Finality's cockpit doing his best to balance with air rushing in and out of the hull not to mention battling the bulkiness of the air suit. He leans up against it and pulls a handle on the side and turns. The canopy door comes sliding open, hissing a mechanical groan as it does but it can't open all the way inside MAL's hull such that it is, so it keeps sliding shut then trying to re-open and repeating and this all just further enrages the missile pilot.

David Paul grabs a paralysisTaser from a holster on the wall and points it at the pilot. The end of the weapon is three-pronged, and at the end of each is a shiny ball (about golf ball sized). The pilot, seeing this, hurls more insults at David Paul.

David Paul fires and taser balls shoot out from the gun, hitting the pilot and splattering large amounts of liquid all over him then a chemical reaction takes place which causes an electrical current to be sent surging through him and he shake and shakes from the stun until finally passing out.

David Paul unbuckles him and clips a cable onto the pilot's suit then uses a crank to pull the pilot from the cockpit, who is now dangling from the ceiling.

David Paul gets into the Finality's cockpit and frantically looks around.

"The missile. I don't see how to disable this thing!"

"Plug me into the main computer. Let me do an analysis."

A small utility box sidles along the rail system in the ceiling of MAL's hull. It stops when it is over the missile cockpit and a bundle of cables all terminating in a single, bulky plug is dropped down.

David Paul takes hold of the bundle of cable, looks around the missiles dashboard for a moment, and finds where to plug it into the missiles main computer terminal.

"Anything?" asks David Paul.

"Analyzing."

Every light and screen along the missile's dashboard are blinking like mad.

"It's what I feared."

"What?!"

"The destination coordinates are hardcoded in. Not even I can change them. The pilots are a mere symbolic gesture of sacrifice and nothing more. They really aren't needed at all."

"So the missile can't be disarmed?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Ugh! Seriously! Seriously!" David Pauls shouts, frustration finally able to goop up his overly optimistic outlook on the situation.

Just then David Paul is bashed across the face by a foot.

The pilot has woken up.

Another kick just misses and David Paul scrambles out of the missile cockpit and back into MAL's hull. He rolls over a few times to ensure he is as far away from the pilot as possible but as soon as he stops and looks up he sees the pilot. But not with a stun gun pointed at him, a full-fledged and highly lethal plasma gun and the pilot fires away.

David Paul, unknowingly guided by newfound hyper reflexive instincts that crop up during times of distress and born out of his connection to the Magnificent Field – one he is oblivious about (it's as if he can perform a million calculations about the next few seconds into the future all within a nanosecond and without having to consciously think about it) ducks, somersaults, dives out of the way, and swings from cables hanging from the hull ceiling to avoid blast after blast after blast from the mad pilot.

"Ouch! Ouch! Ouch!" Mal shouts.

The floor is covered in cooled off plasma blast splatter that is also getting blown all about. An almost stunning sight when

taken out of the context of the crazed pilot trying to kill young David Paul.

After barely dodging the most recent plasma blast, David Paul misses a grab for one of the cables in the ceiling and lands on his behind and sure enough he is in the sights of the pilot who smiles, lifts the weapon and fires-

But then the door between the back of the hull and main hull slams down blocking the shot. And then the rear hatch opens, as it had for Sloane, and the pilot is swept away and out.

David Paul scrambles to his feet and looks through the window and sees the pilot falling away, just the tiniest of dots in the sky. Then, like the others, when he is out of sight, in the far off distance a parachute deploys and the pilot floats slowly down cursing the whole time whilst he shakes an angry fist up at MAL.

"Wow. That was close. And crazy. Okay need to focus. MAL, Can we pull the missile off course at least. Or something?!"

"Negative I'm afraid sir. My engines can't overpower its boosters. Not a chance."

The missile continues to race skyward with MAL attached, up higher and higher it goes still not having reached the apex of its wicked flight path for, like all missiles of its size and distance traveling capabilities in order to reach its target it

must breach the atmosphere and briefly enter space and then back down for its final deadly descent.

David Paul uses a joystick in the wall to maneuver the pilots chair so that he can sit back in it. He buckles himself in, struggles against the bulkiness of the air suit and helmet.

"MAL. I've got an idea."

"I really don't like it when you say things like that."

"I know. I have the controls."

"You have the controls."

David Paul, releases the two magnetic cables and pulls back on the yoke which lifts MAL off of the missile. The underbelly doors at the bottom of MAL's hull go slamming shut and air pressure is restored. He gladly unbuckles and removes the air suit, then gets back into the pilots chair and buckles in again. MAL falls back and down toward the planet as the missile speeds on ahead, higher and further and further away from them.

Once MAL has fallen nose over tail and is right-side, David Paul brings the craft to a halt in mid-air: rear thruster engines go off, hover engines fire on, and they sit there in mid-air idling.

"Um, sir?"

David Paul closes his eyes.

The missile is out of atmosphere and has entered outer space where several of its boosters fall off as it reaches its flight

path apex then re-enters atmosphere and shoots back towards the planet straight for target zero: the Hidden Fortress.

...

In the Ninth Legion missile control center a Ninth Legion Technician is happy to report the progress.

"Missile is back in atmosphere. On target."

There is a palpable excitement in the air. Cheers go up.

...

In his Private Penthouse Laboratory, Doctor Frood watches, through a high-end telescope, a light, far off in the distance, falling from the sky. The Missile. Every display in his laboratory shows in colored graphics that the missile has reached apex and is on final route to glory. The good doctor smiles. The Grand Plan. Unfolding before his eyes. Za will shower him with praise and many ordainments.

...

In the Hidden Fortress Situation Room, a technician is not so happy to report progress.

"Missile has entered atmosphere and is on full descent. TTI 120 seconds."

"What's TTI again?" asks the Theologian Councilor.

"Time To Impact."

"Oh right. Oh dear."

Nervous looks panicked ones even, all around.

General Pace has accepted the likely outcome of her demise, the Hidden Fortress and everyone inside of it and is in full tactical mode.

"Do we still have contact with our moon base."

"Yes General. That is an affirmative," replies a tech.

"Go for full launch. I repeat," she clears her throat, "full launch of the entire nuclear arsenal."

The nuclear launchBot wheels over to the General.

launchBot: "Your Personal Identification Code please General."

The General types in a very long alphanumeric sequence. The tick, tick, tick of the keys the only sound in the room.

A light along the launchBot's dashboard indicates green for go, a buzzer sounds (pretty much indicating the end of the world) and the whole place is bathed in a red light.

The three Launch Executioners turn their key cards and depress the blastoff buttons.

...

On the Moonbase, 500 missiles' roar to life inside their ocean floor silos, engines spewing fire and smoke that causing millions of bubbles to ascend to the moons ocean surface, giving the appearance that the ocean is boiling.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

MAL is still floating in mid-air. Idling. Hovering.

David Paul sitting in the pilot's chair, eyes closed, in full concentration, fully alert yet still as a stone, once again trying to tap into a power he seems to have but has not come close to mastering: playing out a million different outcomes before they happen, all in the time it takes anyone else the time it takes to figure out 2+2.

Then:

He opens his eyes and jams all engine controls forward and pulls back hard on the yoke control and goes into full afterburn, the fastest MAL can possibly handle, the fastest MAL has probably ever gone.

A full vertical ascent and before you can blink MAL is a speckle in the far-off distance just like that.

David Paul is sucked back in his seat from the G-forces, his stomach having a heated debate over whether to keep or discharge his lunch.

Then once again he closes his eyes. Now focused on one thing and one thing only and that is for what is to come next...

MAL and the missile are on a crash course.

The missile speeds along, downward, towards Mt. Nebbulus, towards the Hidden Fortress. It's closing in fast but still so

high that it would be near impossible to see for anyone looking from ground level with the naked eye.

MAL is speeding at a devastating velocity yet *still* accelerating as the missile continues its cataclysmic descent.

David Paul pilots MAL to turn skywards *towards* the missile as the words of The Crystal Mother echo in his head: *The ultimate sacrifice will be needed.*

The two titans of flight are on a direct collision course.

A suicide mission???

No. Because then:

BAM!

But there is scarcely an explosion.

With the precision of a seasoned surgeon David Paul has piloted MAL with such speed and accuracy that MAL's wing clipped off the missile head (where the Child Crystals are) separating it from the rest of the missile. The speed with which it was done is such that MAL's wing is 99% unaffected.

"Yesssss!!!!!" David Paul shrieks in triumph with everything in his very being.

But there is little time for celebration. They *must* reach the missile head. For if it hits the ground a catastrophic and eruptive detonation is still a very real outcome.

The missile body meanwhile, now separated from the head, fizzles out and sputters and corkscrews towards the surface. Without its

Child Crystal payload just an impotent hunk of metal and computer parts, whose onboard sensors detect the descent and altitude and deploy parachutes. It then floats down slowly, gently even, where it will eventually come to a soft landing in a wooded area near Mt. Nebbulus. ~~Large puffs of harmless white smoke, mostly small parts, dust and fire-foam plume up through the tree.~~

"Let's go Mal. Full speed ahead!" David Paul shouts.

...

Doctor Frood in his private laboratory takes a step towards his displays, eyes wide with shock.

"No."

He can't believe it. This can't be. His legs weaken beneath him, he begins to hyperventilate.

Then reality hits home and he throws a tantrum the likes of which would be the very envy of any three-year-old from any galaxy near or far. Face red, blood vessels on the verge of bursting, throwing any part or Bot in his way off of walls and completing it with the removal of his shoe as he slams it against a table over and over and over again all the while screaming:

"No! No! No! No!"

...

In the Ninth Legion subterranean missile launch control center alarms and alerts wail like a parent losing a child. Nervous technicians now fearing execution scramble in hopes of some consolatory outcome.

A Ninth Legion Major-General, keeping her composure and trying for best case scenario, shouts orders.

“Ensure that missile head lands! It will still explode on impact. Divert all air squadrons to the area! Divert all air squadrons to the area! Protect that missile head. Retrieval teams should still stand by for rescue of Child Crystals post impact!!”

...

In the Hidden Fortress Situation Room there are uproarious cheers abound.

General Pace screams: “Stand down on nuclear launch. I repeat stand down. Stand down!”

Technicians scramble to do what they can.

One technician in touch with the moon base trembles as she relays the message.

“That is correct this is a full stand down. Repeat full stand down. Do not launch!”

...

At the missile farm on Loxbor Minor, where the missiles angrily vibrate in anticipation of launch, shut-off foam floods into

each silo as technicians initiate a de-launch sequence to settle the missiles back into a slumber.

...

In the Hidden Fortress Situation Room a nuclear technician reports on the status.

"All missiles withdrawn. All missiles inert," she says with a smile she cannot help.

Sighs of relief ripple throughout the space.

A cadet officer approaches the General.

"General, enemy forces closing in on the area."

The General has to compose herself for a moment, her nerves having just been put through hell, then gets to work.

"Call all air forces to the area! Everything we have. Give that damn MAL fighter our full support. That kid is now our only hope. The missile head cannot touchdown. Repeat missile head cannot touchdown."

General Pace takes a moment to compose herself, closes her eyes, rubs her forehead and takes a breath, the stress still throwing a flurry of punches inside.

The Theologian Councilor walks to The General and leans in with a cheeky smirk.

"The Crystal Mother watches over us, General," she whispers.

[JASON: the general would realize that if the missile head touches down then it would still blow half the world to smithereens. She may have the nuclear arsenal stand down but maybe still be on high alert?]

...

David Paul and MAL are in full pursuit of the falling missile head. They both know that if it makes ground fall, the impact would still be enough that the Child Crystals would come in contact with one another still resulting in Armageddon.

"MAL. Any estimate on wing damage."

"I can't believe my own readings but it's minimal. Perhaps my sensors were damaged--"

"No. We're good. Hey, we're still flying right?"

"Um, well, yes technically speaking but can we please NOT do that again?"

"I make no promises."

"Of course. Missile head falling fast, sir. It's going to touchdown and when it does...well...not good. Not good at all."

"I know. On it."

With renewed focus and determination, David Paul yanks left then pushes down on the control yoke and MAL shoots downward in a spiraling descent towards the falling missile head. As luck would have it, the missile head being quite light in weight compared to the rest of The Finality descends more slowly

(relatively speaking) getting swept up by air currents so high up.

He lowers another periscope and on the outside of MAL a four-pronged cable gun awakens and orients itself to the desired target. **[JASON: NOTE: this was also used a few pages earlier. Come up with something else for one of these scenarios.]**

David Paul, looking through the periscope with the gun locked on the target, fires and four cables flail out. At the end of each cable is a high-strength adhesive and as each cable hits the missile head CLOMP! CLOMP! CLOMP! CLOMP! it securely clings to it.

"Yes! Nice!" David Paul shouts as he pumps his fist then taps a button to reel in the missile head.

Outside MAL, the four-pronged cable gun spins in reverse as the missile head is reeled in and they fly, missile head in tow, back towards the Hidden Fortress.

"I can't believe this is actually going to work," David Paul comments, giddy.

"I've let them know we are coming in hot and we have the Child Crystals, sir. They suggest a soft landing in the southern bay of Lake Repleksha and I can't stress the 'soft' part enough."

"Roger that begin descent."

"I also took the liberty of attaching some airbag canisters to the outside of the missile head."

"Oh yea. Nice work, MAL."

"Oh and sir?"

"Yes MAL?"

"Good job, sir. Good job indeed."

"I couldn't have done it without you MAL."

They did it. Mission accomplished.

But it's never that easy now is it?

"Sir, very sorry to put a damper on things but I've some bad news. A self-destruct sequence was just activated on the missile head. You've got to get the Children out to have any chance. Otherwise my estimates of damages are still devastating. Just as devastating as if the missile made full impact. It will be no different."

"You've got to be kidding me."

"I must say the Ninth Legion really has a thing for self-destruct mechanisms. But come on sir. You've gotten this far. Don't give up."

"Right we can do this. Think. Think. Okay, I've got something."

David Paul reels the missile head closer to MAL until the two are nearly touching.

He throws on the bulky air suit again, then grabs an insulated and padded satchel bag and throws it over his shoulder. Next, he takes four padded cargo blankets with which to wrap each Crystal.

"This is crazy. This is crazy," he whispers to himself.

Then, he latches himself on to a safety strap and ziplines down to the missile head, slamming into it, and spinning round and round from the onslaught of rushing air.

Finally, he gains control and maneuvers along the missile head until he reaches a windowed hatch door. He's thinking it would be best to bring each Crystal over one at a time. Four trips carries more risk than one but if he packed all the Crystals inside the bag, even with each wrapped in its own cargo blanket inside, there's still too much risk. Yes, four separate trips is best. And besides, really, he just has to get three over to MAL. If the fourth remains in the missile head, well, the Child Crystals are indestructible so no real harm.

Then he looks inside, and this is what he sees:

A child, an actual child. A girl, about five years old, and as scared as can be. And then he sees that inside the missile head it is divided into four quarters separated by thick see-through walls. And in each quarter section there is another child.

Another girl, and two boys.

"What? Where are the Crystals?"

"Sir, those ARE the Child Crystals."

"Of course. Child. Crystals. Child Crystals. Oh boy."

He looks down at his satchel bag and realizes *that* plan is scrapped.

David Paul yells to the children inside.

"My name is David Paul. I'm here to rescue you! But we don't have much time."

Then David Paul aside to MAL: "MAL. How am I going to rescue them? How am I going to do this?!"

"Thinking. But we have only 75 seconds left until the missile self detonates. We've got to somehow get them over here."

David Paul tries to open the door but it won't budge.

"Okay. If I can get the door open I could make a separate trip over with each one. Or actually, new idea we can drop them separately into the lake. As long as they don't touch they're good. And they're indestructible, right?"

"Affirmative. But sir? 40 seconds left to until detonation."

"Oh no," whispers David Paul, defeated.

Then there is a nearby explosion.

Then MAL chimes in over the radio:

"Sir. We've got some very unwelcome guests. I count seventeen squadrons of Ninth Legion fighters and more on the way. I've got to change course. Taking evasive action."

MAL starts to move in a different direction and David Paul, still tethered on, gets spun around and slammed into the missile head.

Hundreds of enemy droneFighters are in hot pursuit like a swarm of furious wasps, all firing away. Inside the Ninth Legion Drone

Control Center every drone pilot is focused on one thing and one thing only, taking down that MAL-class fighter with the droneFighters they control.

MAL is sending off evasive flares at a diarrhetic pace.

Explosions are going off all around and it's hard to maneuver as normal whilst dragging the missile head.

"Sir, may I remind you that a direct hit on the missile head of any kind and we and half the planet are wiped out."

"I'm aware, I'm aware. Working on it."

Then hundreds and hundreds of fighters from the Coalition Air Forces arrive on scene to help out, taking on the Ninth Legion droneFighters. It's a close-range air battle. Live pilots taking on the droneFighters.

"Every squadron do whatever you have to keep them away from that MAL-class fighter! Go, go, go!" the Coalition squadron leader shouts.

More exploding munitions rock near the missile head whilst plasma blasts zip by in a blizzard. One of the four attachment cables comes loose.

"Oh no. Not good. What should I do?" David Paul asks aloud.

Then recalls the words of The Mother Crystal her voice echoing in his head from his time spent with her.

"The ultimate sacrifice will be needed."

David Paul closes his eyes for just a beat, tears stream out, then he opens them and with a new resolve wipes them away. He knows what he has to do.

"MAL. Can you handle space flight?"

"Affirmative. Not for long but yes I can."

"Okay, reel me back in."

David Paul is reeled back into MAL's hull.

Once there, and once the back hatch is closed, he rips his helmet off and climbs into the pilots chair.

...

Both sides watch from their respective bases around the world. Nerves singing a high note.

...

Inside Doctor Froods penthouse, an underling (who had been hiding during tantrum time) does a countdown to self-destruct for him.

[JASON'S NOTE: TIMES ARE HIGHLIGHTED JUST TO REVIEW FOR CONSISTENCY AND REALISTIC SAKE]

"Thirty-Eight seconds until self-destruct, sir. Our simulation models calculate an altitudinal blast would be 98.99 percent as effective as a ground detonation."

"Excellent. This will work out after all. Very good. Very good indeed," he says accompanied by a giddy cackle.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

David Paul sways inside the cockpit as explosions from the air battle outside are going off all around.

The voice again: **"The ultimate sacrifice will be needed."**

David Paul shakes his head of the voice, tears streaming down his face.

"Sir? Are you with me sir? I said 31 seconds until detonation."

David Paul takes a deep breath. Closes his eyes for a moment.

Opens them, wipes tears away and takes a deep breath.

"Setting course for 100 degrees along the x-axis," says David Paul.

"I think I understand your plan, sir. I'm sending an encrypted message to headquarters with the coordinates for where the Child Crystals can be retrieved. Upon detonation...that is."

The tears waterfall down David Paul's face.

"I have the controls," he is able to croak out.

"You have the controls."

"I'm sorry MAL. I'm so sorry. This is the only way. I'll be with you the entire time. I won't leave you. I promise.

Friends...friends don't leave friends behind."

"It's been an honor flying with you sir. An absolute honor."

"Repeat. I have the controls."

"Acknowledge. You have the controls."

The mighty aircraft turns ninety degrees upwards and David Paul puts on the afterburners and shoots directly up, up, up, the missile head still in tow. The slitted windows in the hull begin to frost over the higher they go. Then as they climb higher still everything inside the hull frosts over as well.

David Paul can see puffs of white with each breath as tries not to hyperventilate.

Enemy droneFighters begin to sputter out and fall away or are forced to fall back.

In the Ninth Legion Drone Control Center a dronePilot acknowledges the reason:

"They've entered the upper reaches of the atmosphere and are still climbing. Our droneFighters can't handle those altitudes."

"Pull back."

"No keep going you never know if one can maintain pursuit! Za looks over us!"

But just as the dronePilot says this all of the droneFighters freeze up and spiral down for an inevitable crash.

..

In his laboratory, Doctor Frood takes up another fit of rage, tossing any bot in his reach off of a wall. The place is a mess as sparks spurt from the sophisticated and one-of-a-kind equipment and wires flail about like broken hoses, all from the good doctors tantrum.

"No! No! No! No!" Doctor Frood cries out.

...

Inside MAL as they continue their ascent...

"Are you scared, sir?"

"Yes. Very," David Paul says visibly trembling, more from fright than the cold.

"I am too. It's okay to be scared though, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"This will be a day for the history scribes. You will be remembered and revered for finding and saving the Child Crystals. Saving the world."

"MAL, can you get a recording down to Serretus."

"I can sir but it must be quick."

"Please tell him to get this to my friends back home: I will miss them. Um, make my strength their own. And, remember me. Please always remember me. And tell him if they don't understand what happened to me to tell them...tell them 'Friends don't leave friends behind'. They'll understand then. And to my Auntie Pal. Please just tell him to tell her...tell her. Thank you for everything. I'm sorry I wasn't a better nephew. And that I love her very much."

"Recorded and sent, sir."

"Thank you. Getting harder to breathe," David Paul says and puts an air mask on.

He grits his teeth and closes his eyes and recites the following as his last words and to keep his mind from his impending demise:

"On the darkest day,

In the brightest night.

No matter what others say,

No matter the enemies might.

Even in the most dire circumstances in which we find,

Friends don't leave friends behind."

Modesty."

Strength."

Compassion."

Integrity."

"Fifteen seconds until detonation," MAL reports.

Outside, it is clear they have nearly reached the limits of the atmosphere as the sky is nearly black and the stars can be seen more clearly.

David Paul hears the voice again.

"Don't be afraid."

"MAL, I couldn't have done it without you. Thank you."

An urgent alarm beeps and MAL starts to slow.

"Oh dear," MAL reports.

"What is it? What's happening?! We're not high enough yet,"

David Paul says suddenly alert.

"Not good. Fuel line is freezing. Hold please, injecting anti-freeze coagulant. Curses, circuitry to the pump is frozen up as well. You'll need to prime the pump manually. But please hurry we only have twelve seconds left and technically we are still in atmosphere."

"How do I do that?"

"In the rear maintenance closet. Here I'll flash the lights. Do you see it?"

"Yes."

"Okay. You'll have to give me the controls."

"You have the controls."

"I have the controls."

David Paul unstraps himself from the pilot seat and runs to the back of the hull. There is a small room, the size of a closet. He enters and looks around for what to do.

"Okay what do I do? What do I do?"

"It's been an honor sir. If I may make one request. Please tell them it was a MAL-class fighter. It would mean a lot to me."

"What?!"

A door on the "closet" slams shut. There's a large round porthole window built into the door.

"MAL no!"

The "closet" is actually a life capsule and MAL blasts David Paul out of its hull, and he goes hurtling back towards the planet.

David Paul places a hand on the glass.

"MAL!!! Noooooo!"

And David Paul falls, falls, falls.

MAL's engines roar to full power as the mighty aircraft drags the missile head higher and higher until he disappears from sight and out of atmosphere as David Paul continues to fall towards the planet closing in on landfall quickly.

Then the life capsule sprouts wings and a parachute to help slow the descent and make for a soft landing.

Then there is a mammoth explosion from high above in outer space, though out of atmosphere. The sky lights up brighter than the clearest day at high noon.

The force of the explosion sends David Paul's life capsule faster towards terra firma but it crashes into The Great Reflecting Lake with a triumphant splashdown disturbing the perfect painting of Mt. Nebbulus reflected upon its surface.

The sky just one bright white light that slowly recedes and then there is blue sky and nothing on the planet seems any worse for the wear.

MAL did it.

CHAPTER FORTY

Several days later, at four precise locations on Lucasia, locations equidistant apart and perfectly opposite one another, the following takes place...

It's a move in day of sorts as the Child Crystals are transferred to their new abodes. The coalition forces were able to retrieve all four after the blast that destroyed MAL and hand them over to The Kaah'Huu, the Sworn Guardians of the Child Crystals.

In body, they have and will always live forever as children. In mind, given that they have lived for millennia, they are wise and experienced and know enough to take a long-term outlook all chapters of their lives. The recent ordeal of being weaponized had its psychological effect of course, but these are no ordinary children, they are deities, born of the Crystal Mother, and so they have a resiliency that easily rivals any mortal adults. They will be okay.

Needing little in the way of food (they eat only small portions of fruit and vegetation every thirty-three days but mostly they are fueled by the Magnificent Field and their connection to the Crystal Mother) they will reside in top-secret, hidden, subterranean temples surrounded by so many security checkpoints, most of it covert to avoid attention but some overt to discourage ambitious curiosity, and both combining the best of

ancient and modern methodologies, that reaching them would be impossible for even the most determined of those with ill intent.

Each location, to the unknowing passerby is non-descript. This is intentional. But every small cottage, every village or town in the area is packed with the most highly trusted guardians in the world.

Each locale happens to be a different climate and geographical terrain. There wasn't much of a choice in that regard. As determined by the ancients, the Child Crystals must take their place at locations where energy abundant vortices will provide for the strongest commune with The Crystal Mother.

For the next twenty-four days the Child Crystals will intensely meditate non-stop, no food or drink; a hibernation one might say. They will do so upon a pyramidal shaped megalith with a flattened top, residing in the center of each one's underground temple. This will restore the Magnificent Field to its fullest power.

As each Child takes its place on their particular throne an energy beam surges down through the planet, down to the core, where it connects with the glowing star-like orb that houses the Crystal Mother. And as each makes its connection, the orb grows brighter and stronger until the fourth connects and the orb is at the brightest and strongest it's been since the Child

Crystals were taken by the Ninth Legion so many years ago.

Brighter and stronger even.

And the Magnificent Field is restored.

And then, all across Lucasia things get better as balance is restored.

Drylands get rain.

Floods subside.

Near dead plants and flowers, dried and withered, wake up and stretch.

Croplands thought forever barren sprout vegetation anew.

A man, bedridden for years with chronic and debilitating despair and depression, gets out of bed and goes outside for the first time in years. And smiles.

In a war decimated bombed out city, poor and run down as can be, a scrawny and starving and for some time now homeless Lucasian-human is hunched protectively over a loaf of starch, ripping off chunks and shoving them desperately into his mouth, all the while suspiciously looking around, paranoid that someone will take this precious meal.

Suddenly, they have thought: Be kind. Be kind to others. And if they are not kind in return? Be kind still. The spies a family of four nearby, homeless and starving with rib cages easily seen through taut skin. The loaf of starch is broken into pieces and shared and there are smiles abound.

Something is suddenly right once again on Lucasia. At least for now. Not perfect. But a start.

The start to a new dawn. A dawn of hope.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

There is the beeping and hissing of medical devices of all sorts.

A medical scanner bar passes lazily back and forth over a patient who is lying still as can be in a round med-bed. Eyes that have been closed for the last several days, flutter open at last.

David Paul.

Half-healed cuts and bruises dot his face and arms, his ribs are so sore that breathing brings pain and his shoulder feels like it was dislocated (it was) then relocated back in place several times over (it was). He's in the Hidden Fortress in a brightly lit private medical bay. A variety of beings, of varying species, heights and girth tend to him as do many a medBot.

David Paul lifts his head up (ouch, hurts just to do that) and notes Sloane standing guard at the door. He assumes he's standing guard anyways, for Sloane does not move at all. He also notes that Sloane has a what appears to be a new armored arm: shiny, new and unpainted. Other areas of Sloane's exoskeleton armor, including his helmet, are patched and buffed, awaiting final paint coatings. Not that David Paul would know why, he wasn't there for the brawl-in-the-sky between Sloane and Dogen. He then turns his head and sees Serretus, along with the Theologian Councilor, stands by David Paul's bedside.

"What...What happened?" David Paul asks.

"You did well young one. Very well," says the Theologian Councilor.

"Amazing, I would say," says Serretus.

"Indeed. Amazing."

"The Child Crystals?" David Paul asks.

"All recovered...by the Coalition," Serretus reports.

"Back where they should be?"

"Back where they should be."

He's not sure why he asked the question because somehow, he's not sure exactly how, he knows. A fog has lifted.

The Theologian Councilor detects he may be feeling something and offers her advice.

"Your powers have grown stronger, your abilities sharpened. In time you will understand but your instincts are correct. Trust them. With the Child Crystals in new locales, ones the Ninth Legion will never find, the Magnificent Field has been restored. Now, the planet begins to heal. We are grateful to you, young Crystal Warrior."

David Paul sits up with a startle.

"MAL!"

"Rest old friend," says Serretus.

"He saved us. He saved the world. He saved me," says David Paul.

"Wouldn't be the first time he saved someone," says Serretus.

The Theologian Councilor shoots Serretus a look meant to quiet him then says:

"A sacrifice was needed. MAL made the ultimate."

David Paul starts to tear up. *So that's what Mother Crystal meant. It didn't necessarily mean **he** would have to make the ultimate sacrifice. But that someone would. Or something. MAL.*

"Rest easy. Soon, a new phase begins. Your training," she says. Serretus steps in.

"Let's not get too ahead of ourselves. The choice is yours David Paul. You and you alone must make the decision. You can go home or--"

"Decision. What decision?"

"Do you wish to train to become a Crystal Warrior?" she asks him, rather pointedly.

"But I thought with the Child Crystals returned everything would be okay."

She lets out a sigh.

"I'm afraid not. A cancerous phantom that lurks in the shadows and pulls the strings from behind the scenes is at play. It is worse than evil itself. Prophecy says that only a Crystal Warrior can end it. The planet will heal but only to a certain degree so long as this invasive weed lingers. As long as this it exists there will continue to be war and the Ninth Legion, though egos bruised, will be back and stronger and will never

sleep until it achieves its goal: total domination of the planet. If not worse."

"I'm not sure I fully understand."

"Understanding is not needed at this step of your journey. You simply need to decide," she says.

"I think at this step of the journey he needs his rest,"

Serretus says taking a protective tone.

"Everyone's sacrificed so much," he says and he is thinking of MAL, Mallaroy and his people, the Sinewy, the Rukka's, Sloane's Shrimp Patrol. So many. The entire planet really in one way or another, "I can't leave things like this," says David Paul.

"David Paul, training to become a Crystal Warrior is not easy. It is a difficult path and not for the faint of heart. Many do not pass the trials. Some have not *lived* through the trials. The grandmaster who you will train with. I know her quite well.

She's not the easiest person to get along with. Believe me. Are you sure you want to do this? I'll not take you without permission. The choice is yours and yours alone," says Serretus.

"I want to train. I will become a Crystal Warrior. I promise that I will," says David Paul.

The Theologian Councilor smiles.

"You show more bravery than a thousand of your elders combined. You will go with Serretus. He will take you to the training temple. It's a top secret 4D biosphere. I don't even want to say

its location aloud. Good luck to you. May The Crystal Mother shine upon you always. And I do hope our paths cross again."

The Theologian Councilor exits, followed by Sloane.

"The medBots will help you get ready. I'll be outside waiting. You are absolutely sure about this? You can go home at any time you know. You've done more than I asked," says Serretus.

"I've never been more sure about anything in my life."

Serretus nods, tries to hold back a smile but can't, and exits.

...

Later, David Paul is dressed for travel, with a backpack of supplies and several bots in tow tending to whatever he needs. Military and other personal scramble in every direction with urgency.

David Paul sees Serretus and goes to him.

"What's going on?"

"Evacuation. The Ninth Legion knows of this location now. They're licking their wounds, but they'll be back. And in massive numbers and with a thirst for revenge. A temporary world-wide cease fire was agreed upon. But the Ninth Legion has agreed to these before and gone back on their word so there is no telling when they will rise from the ashes of their loss. The tides of war have washed out for now but rest assured they will come roaring back in I'm afraid."

"I never knew war was so horrible," says David Paul, his head still spinning from recent events.

"Unfortunately, for many, it is an easier path than peace.

Perhaps you could change all that. Ready?"

David Paul nods yes.

"This way," and Serretus leads him to the Mah'kkquorrii Memorial Launch Hangar, the one with the four 'bottomless' launch shafts. They walk over to the unlit one, the same one where David Paul had found MAL. But whereas then David Paul took the stairs down, now they step into a dilapidated freight elevator which takes them down hundreds of stories, finally stopping at a large opening in the side of the shaft wall. Here it connects to a track system and they proceed forward, rattling along through a duct system just large enough to fit their transport.

They ride the rickety cage until, at last, they come to a stop at another colossal of a hangar room (though not as large as the mega-hangar that is the Mah'kkquorrii).

And it is in here, that David Paul spies a MAL-class fighter, the latest model, and starts to get teary eyed as their ride rolls closer to it.

"A MAL-class fighter."

"I know it stirs up emotions for you and that nothing can ever replace the one you knew but your familiarity with the model will be to your advantage."

"I know he was just a machine, a thing but he was my friend."

"Friends come in all forms. Perfectly understandable for you to be upset."

They exit the transport and approach the MAL-class fighter. It looks just like the MAL David Paul knew only new, with a shiny coat of paint and not a dent or scratch anywhere.

David Paul runs his fingers along the all-glass cockpit on its underside as he gives the entire craft a good inspection. It's brand new, sure, but where's the character he thinks to himself. Then suddenly...

"Oh. Hello sir. Very good to see you!"

"MAL?"

"It is I. Better than ever I might add. What do you think? I look good. I feel good."

David Paul turns to Serretus.

"How?"

"You know I was one of the lead engineers and designers on the original fleet of MAL-class fighters. The first generation of MAL's had a central processor that was forged from petrified Lucasian Crystal forged over millions of years. Indestructible. Subsequent models weren't so lucky. The costs couldn't be justified. But our MAL, your MAL, this MAL, was first generation. Everything besides the central processor was destroyed in the blast so the rest is all brand new, the latest

and greatest of technologies. But I can assure that your friend, same spirited personality as ever, is still in there.

David Paul sees that MAL has the same call sign: MAL051748. No longer faded but freshly painted in vivid yellow (except for the five which is red).

As happy as can be, he scrambles up the boarding ladder and down into the hull, takes the pilots seat then descends into the glass cockpit.

Serretus gestures for a bot to wheel a lift over and is elevated to the top of the hull.

He sits in a seat and it descends down into the glass cockpit next to David Paul.

MAL turns on the primary systems. Dashboards light up. Engines start to whir louder.

"MAL?"

"Yes sir?"

"I have the controls," says David Paul, smirking.

"You have the controls," returns MAL and if he could smile, well he would be.

Serretus smiles as well.

A door in the hangar slides open, MAL drifts sideways through it into one of the horizontal launch tunnels. The massive wind turbines growl to life behind them and David Paul throttles the

forward engines they shoots out of one of the hidden exits in some obscure part of the nearby landscape.

Away into the sunset.

...

With David Paul piloting and Serretus sitting in the seat next to him, MAL flies at a relaxed but not too relaxed cruising speed. They fly through all manner of landscapes and cities. Low altitude over the landscapes, high altitude over the cities. Each choice made with the caution of detection avoidance in mind.

At last, they arrive at a remote land, sandy and rocky, mustard yellow the dominant color, with hundreds of mountains that are tall and very thin, like towering stalagmite skyscrapers. Hardly any vegetation or trees are anywhere to be found.

Serretus directs David Paul to land MAL on a large, flat rock cliff near the base of one of the taller mountains and they exit the aircraft.

Built into the mountains is a set of stairs winding all the way to the summit. At least it looks like they go to the summit because right now the summit is currently in the clouds. The stairs aren't carved on the outside of the mountain, rather there is a sort of hallway carved into its outer edge and within that are the stairs. Crudely cut out windows line the hallway walls at various points along the way.

Serretus has a walking staff. Looks just like the one the gang gave him way back when. *Seems like decades ago but was it even a month* David Paul thinks.

"Ready?"

David Paul nods 'yes'.

They begin the ascent, going higher and higher, taking a break here and there along the way and having to cross several sections where the ancient staircase has eroded and crumbled making for a breathtaking leap across a chasm. One false step and they would plummet thousands of feet down. Game over. No second chances.

At the summit, they come to a door made of clear-green crystal shards that come together like extended fingers of opposite hands. The shards part and they enter a cavernous room with a cone shaped ceiling (the inside of the tip of the mountain) dotted everywhere with glorious green crystal stalactites of every shape and size.

They are standing upon a flat rocky ledge. It's not very large and when David Paul looks over the rail-less edge he sees the entire inside of the mountain has been hollowed out, bottom-to-top, and if he or Serretus were to trip they would fall down into the darkness below and at some point soon after would presumably have the not so pleasant experience of meeting the hard rocky bottom.

Connected to the ledge upon which they stand is a thin, rocky walkway that leads to a circular rocky platform in the center. It's held up, inexplicably by a thin stalactite that originates from the base of the mountain far, far below. The platform is large enough and the pedestal of a stalactite that holds it up thin enough that it doesn't seem possible that this setup would be stable for one to walk upon.

David Paul looks at Serretus.

Serretus gives him a nod of reassurance then gestures for him to move forward.

"Another step in your journey begins now."

David Paul gulps down any trepidation or doubts regarding the engineering of the rocky walkway and platform and their accompanying support structures (or lack thereof) and walks forward onto the thin walkway to the round platform in the center.

And there he stands.

And nothing happens.

Until:

Green laser lights from the crystal stalactites in the ceiling beam out and begin to crisscross in the space in front of him. Thousands of them, interacting in such a way that they form...a face. A blurry green face, four stories high at least.

As the laser lights add more and more detail, a life-like holographic projection, nearly solid looking but not quite at one hundred percent opacity, forms. It is the face of a man.

"Hello David Paul," it says, smiling a most kind smile.

David Paul studies the projection then realizes who it is and his heart drops into his stomach, his head spins, and his eyes widen with surprise.

"Dad?"

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

At the Ice Fortress, where David Paul first came to Lucasia, snow and wind swirl outside while inside within the large hangar, high up on the balcony, the one where he and Serretus had a discussion about "euthanasia" our old friend Charsnick is overlooking the same *something* that was at the heart of their debate.

What *is* he looking down at?

Let us go down to floor level and see dear reader:

medBots wheel all about swerving in and out and around four round Lucasian medical beds just like the one David Paul woke up in; medical scanner bar and all droning back and forth, back and forth.

And in the beds are:

The eleven- and twelve-year-old versions of Juliette, Rudy, Cooper, and Reid as they begin to stir from a very long slumber.

THE END...

...FOR NOW.

And so, for now, our story comes to an end.

But all is still not well on Lucasia.

For there is a greater threat, even greater than the Ninth Legion, that we have heard a bit about but not yet seen. The Phantom Darkness (The Darkest Dark, The Great Darkness, Var Nekrosis).

And there are questions yet to be answered.

What will become of David Paul and his training?

Can he pass the trials and become a Crystal Warrior and defeat this threat?

Is that holographic projection *really* his father? How can that be?

What of his friends waking up on Lucasia? What will become of them?

And perhaps even I, D'Votner Rite will make an appearance at some point in our story.

So many questions.

And answers.

Coming soon.

Join us next time...

...as the adventure continues.