

“Preston and the Galaxy Crew”

by

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Preston is an adventurous young Solar Scout, wide-eyed and full of life. He lives with his adoptive family on New Topia; a beautiful alien world in a far off galaxy. Today is his first big trip with his fellow scouts. He and his troop are bound for Botania-1; the outer most moon of Sky Haven, the closest planet to their own. Rocketing off with him is his best friend Samuel, along with his older sister Shelly. Both are fellow scouts, but together they're known as The Galaxy Crew; an affectionate moniker each wears proudly. Although very close, the three couldn't be more different. Samuel is the quiet type, shy, unassuming, a face in the crowd, but a bonafide genius. Shelly on the other hand is the quintessential older sister; over protective, responsible and always prepared.

The trip starts with a five hour shuttle ride filled with youthful chatter, cheerful sing-alongs and an air of excitement. However, the adventure really begins when the Galaxy Crew disembarks on Botania-1. After setting up camp, the troop is broken into teams of three; one senior scout with two junior members. Naturally, our crew makes up one team with Shelly tasked to lead.

Soon they're off, collecting and cataloging local plant life for their Non-Terrestrial Botany Badge. Each group is assigned a designated area, just beyond the campgrounds. By the luck of the draw, our three scouts are assigned a remote location, quite a ways off. Shelly takes note and is a bit apprehensive about the area they're tasked with exploring. However, Preston doesn't seem to mind, starting off in a sprint, leaving the others trailing behind. With Samuel and Shelly in tow; Preston quickly gathers their samples.

Ever the adventurer, Preston unintentionally leads the others off the main trail. They call to him, but he's always a few steps ahead out of ear shot. Preston darts in and out of view. He leaps over rocks and gullies then crosses small streams before pushing through overgrown thickets. They finally come upon him as they round a large rock face. At a clearing, not too far off, Preston is near the edge of a bluff. Gasping for a breath and eager to lecture him, Shelly scuttles to the young scout, but is overcome by the natural beauty before her. Standing in awe, the three overlook paradise. Off in the distance, white waters race down a plunging waterfall emptying in a deep ravine. There, it forms into a river that crisscrosses through a lush valley. To each side, emerald pines trace the base of purple cliffs that stand in stony witness. They are lost in its wonder.

Shortly thereafter, the shadows of twilight emerge and the sun dips behind a pink horizon. The scouts awake from their bliss. Soon it will be nightfall and with it the perils that accompany it. Desperate to outrun the darkness, they race back into the forest trying to retrace their steps. They dart past ancient oaks, downed logs and duck under low hanging branches as they struggle to find the main trail. Running blindly, each step takes them deeper into the woods and before long they come upon the broken path they've already taken. In a panic, Shelly huddles around the two and pulls out a radio from her knapsack. However, the thick canopy above interferes with the signal rendering only static.

Relying on her training, Shelly leads the team to a clearing where she starts a small fire. The scouts huddle together as the winds howl through the trees. Overhead, dark clouds billow towards them. The brisk night air bites through their clothes as they pull in close and try to keep warm.

But soon the weather turns; a few droplets become a light drizzle and before long it's a down pour. Quickly, they break camp, link hands and run for cover only guided by a small flashlight Shelly pulls from her bag. Trudging through mud and pushing past the thick alien brush, they break through the forest wall and come to an outcrop. To the far side, a dark mass covered in thick vegetation. Adjacent to it, an old oak with outstretched branches lined with thick leaves create a natural canopy. The scouts take shelter underneath. The skies flash and thunder rumbles as howling winds fling debris about them. They can hear tiny pebbles slamming into the dark structure behind them. Although faint, it's the distinct clang of metal. The unexpected sound draws their attention. Shelly rushes to investigate, desperate to find shelter for the team. With flashlight in hand, she walks the length of the structure. It's the side of a derelict; an old starship, seemingly abandoned. Shelly calls to the others and with their help, they clear off what they can. The hull is lined with four portside windows that stretch from the back half of the ship to the center. There, a heavy metal door. It has a large latch, turn at an angle. Upon close inspection, they discover it's slightly ajar.

The storm worsens and the three decide to take shelter within. They manage to pry the side door open and cautiously enter the ancient vessel. Shelly leads the way, illuminating the main cabin with her light. She cautions the others to stay close as they explore the dark room. The air is stale and musky. Rust stains paint the tall metallic walls of the ship. Cylindrical lights line its corners where it meets the ceiling. Heavy winds rock the ship as downed panels sway on thick black cables from above. Three dusty crates litter the back of the cabin. Next to them, a large turned over bin with bundled black cables spread across the floor. Behind it, an old door rusted over and to its side, an engraved plaque with a mysterious symbol. On the opposite side of the cabin, a large view screen flanked by three stations; each with a console, monitor and swivel chair. The center most station, a bit further back from the others is undoubtedly the captain's chair, with its smaller pivoting console turned at an angle. From the looks of it, it's a dead ship, abandoned long ago. From his photographic memory recalling old images from his studies, Samuel surmises that it's a Toren vessel. As a child, school children are taught their ancestors

wandered the galaxy in old cargo ships like these, before colonizing the system hundreds of years ago.

Exhausted, the scouts decide to settle in at the far corner of the cabin. They've gathered down cables to sleep on and Shelly makes sure she faces the entrance as a precaution. Before bed, each takes a small bite of their rations and shares a drink from a canteen. Shelly leaves her light on until her younger companions doze off before joining them for the night.

At daybreak, Preston is the first to wake. The storm has dissipated and sunlight peeks through the small view ports at the side of the ship. To the front, it streams through shadowy vines sprawled across the outside of the main view screen, illuminating the three consoles they saw the night before. Eager to explore, he decides not to wake the others and scuttles to the station on the far left. He admires the myriad of buttons, levers and switches, slowly running his fingers across them, imagining what they all must do.

Suddenly, something catches his eye. To his right, at the foot of the captain's chair, a large yellow helmet rests on its side. It mesmerizes the young scout. Its large yellow dome is adorned with red trim, a white crest and dotted with clear lights. He scurries over to it, picks it up, dusts it off then cautiously tries it on. It's an ill fit, clearly designed for an adult, but to his youthful eyes and imaginative mind, he couldn't look more heroic. He hops on the station, kicks his feet against it and spins himself around. He then clasps his hands, forming a pistol shape and simulates laser sounds. The rotating chair comes to a stop directly in front of the monitor. Before him, he sees a reflection of himself on the dusty glass distorting his image. In his mind he's a grizzly old military officer, in command of his own ship, locked in a desperate battle for survival. He then grabs the side of the helmet and presses an oblong shape button. The helmet flickers ominously, but it goes unnoticed.

A few moments later, while lost in play, Preston commands, "We've got to get out of here. Take us into Hyper-Space!" In that instance, every console comes to life. Lights flicker, sirens wail and all monitors including the main view screen power up. Then, the side bay door slam shut locking them in. Startled awake, Shelly and Samuel jump to their feet. Horrified, Shelly exclaims, "Preston! What did you do?!" She then runs to him and pulls him from the console, knocking off the loose fitting helmet. Just then, the ship's engines roar to life shaking the craft violently. To the top right corner of the main view screen, a three minute countdown begins. Above it, flashing red lights read "Hyper-Space Operation Countdown Initiated." The siblings stare at the screen intently and slowly creep back. An artificial voice then blares across the speakers exclaiming, "WARNING: Atmospheric gases detected-proceeding to minimal elevation." From beyond bulkheads, they can hear thick branches violently snap then break as the ship rises. Through the view ports, vines stream across them, stretch to their limits then tear off. In seconds, they're far above the tree line, racing upward, past towering mountain tops. Soon, they can see the moon's curvature. The scouts are then lifted aloft as the cabin loses gravity. They're now in low orbit. Stationary Items once weighted by the moon's pull, float

freely about the cabin as Shelly and Preston lose their grip on one another. Then as the countdown reaches its apex, the same voice they heard before announces, “Adequate elevation achieved, ten seconds to Hyper Space Jump.” The roar of the rockets die off as the ship powers down its impulse engines. There’s a momentary calm, as a deep hum begins to wail through the cabin. Then as the countdown rings zero, a luminescent blue haze envelops the ship culminating in a brilliant flash of pure white.

Sometime later, the craft is adrift in a vastly different part of space. Preston is the first to come to. The cabin is bathed in an amber hue, dimly lit by lines of track lights at the ceiling. He sits up, rubs his eyes and mutters groggily, “What happen?” Shelly is lying next to him, mumbling in her sleep. He then slowly gets to his feet, looks to the back of the ship and sees Samuel lying on a bed of strung out cables at the opposite end of the cabin.

Preston looks about then scuttles to the large viewport. There, he’s witness to an ocean of giant asteroids floating lazily around the ship. Off to the stern, a massive red planet rounds its axis, its gravity conducting the rocky giants in a celestial dance. In the distance, two asteroids collide violently, breaking off into smaller pieces before somersaulting out of view. Further out, twin stars cast their gaze through empty space between the asteroids creating streams of light that bathe the cabin in light and shadow.

Overwhelmed, Preston’s pudgy legs give way. He falls back as his heart beats from his chest. A thousand thoughts race through his mind but there’s only one that really matters. How do they get home?

Preston scans the room for clues; desperately reliving every moment before the event. Then off in the distance, behind a collection of random items flung about during the calamity, he notices something blinking. He scampers over to it, picks it up and exclaims, “My Helmet!” He looks it over and unintentionally nudges the button at its side. It powers off. Then in a moment of clarity he whispers, “I caused it.”

Before he can finish his thought, a loud siren wails through the cabin. The room turns from an amber hue to a deep red, as the lights begin to pulsate. A voice then blares through the speakers and exclaims, “Proximity Alert! Proximity Alert! Incoming body to the port bow. Collision eminent. Repeat, collision eminent.” In that instance, Preston’s helmet reactivates. He places it on his head and a surge of energy races through him and neurologically links him to the ship’s computer. It’s now his eyes and ears. Just then, tinted lens slide over his eyes. From them he’s able to see outside the craft. A massive, asteroid is quickly hurdling towards the ship’s port side.

At that moment, Shelly sits up and shrieks, “What? What’s going on?” She looks around, sees Preston and shouts, “What did you do?!” Behind her, Samuel stumbles to his feet; as tangled cables catch his right ankle.

Preston commands the ship to jump to Hyper-Space, but there's no response from the engines. The ship then flashes a red image of the drive with an "X" over it as the vessel blares out, "Hyper-drive inoperative, currently in charge mode, recommendation, retro-rockets and evasive maneuvers." Immediately, instructions appear through the visor, directing him to the station to his right. He then darts to the console, as an overlay appears over it through his field of view prompting him with the proper sequence. He then quickly flicks two switches powering it up then presses a series of buttons before nudging a lever forward. The ship rattles violently then roars to life. Massive rockets at the stern of the ship ignite, pushing the craft forward. A massive shadow then streaks over their port side, as they narrowly miss it, escaping catastrophe.

The cabin erupts in cheer, as Shelly and Samuel rush to Preston's side. But before he can celebrate with them- there's a bright flash off in the distance. From it, a small vessel, battered and bruise stumbles out of hyper-space. Moments later, a second larger flash directly behind it lights up the area, this time a mid-size battle cruiser emerges. It immediately begins to fire at the smaller craft. Lasers streak across the port side of the first ship, as it bears right avoiding the deadly barrage. In a desperate move, the small ship dives into a cluster of dense asteroids just beyond their field of view. The pursuing craft then launches a torpedo that coils through the field, seconds before peeling off. Moments later, an explosion lights up the area, sending debris hurdling. The pursuing vessel then circles the vicinity, presumably to confirm the kill. It then blinks off as fast as it initially appeared.

For a time, the young crew huddles on the cabin floor and stares silently at the main viewer. Fearful of the ships return, no one utters a word. But then, the silence is broken by a loud clang behind them as a loose panel crashes to the ground. They jump to their feet, then quickly turn around, look at one another and break into a nervous laugh.

Samuel then turns to Preston and asks, "Preston, how did you know how to pilot the ship?" Preston replies, "It told me," as he points to the helmet. Shelly presses, "You talked to it?" He then retorts, "Yup, it did this thing where I could see through the ship, then glasses dropped down and told me what buttons to push." Intently, Samuel walks over to him, circles slowly and closely examines the helmet. He then says, "I think it's some kind of neural interface. It seems to connect directly to the ships main computer. It's a little rudimentary, since it can only accept verbal commands." Shelly interjects, "So he can talk to it?" Samuel responds, "Yes, but it can't read his mind." Preston then exclaims, "Can I fly the ship then?" Samuel replies, "I think it can tell you how to fly the ship. It's like an instruction booklet. And this lens here," Samuel taps on the helmet's retracted lens just above Preston's nose, and continues, "It's like a view screen that shows you what you need to do when you're where you need to be. It just projects an image in front of your eyes. It can't send instructions directly to your brain." Preston exclaims, "That's right. A bunch of arrows with numbers popped up when I was flying the ship." Shelly then interrupts, "Well then take us home." But before Preston can answer, a heavy metal thud sounds from the ship's port side. Shelly quickly runs to the back of the cabin and hides behind one of the large crates at the rear of the ship. She calls to them. Samuel joins her, but, Preston runs the

opposite direction and peers through a portside window. Through it, he sees a small hexagonal craft attempting to dock over the bay doors. Its tiny rockets press it up against their craft, magnetizing itself to their hull, before burning out. Moments later, something is pounding from the outside. Without a thought, Preston darts to the door, releases the lock, unlatches it, then tries to pull the door open. Horrified, Shelly runs over to him, grabs his arm and pulls him back.

The heavy metal doors slowly swing open. Thick steam billows in as a shadowy figure steps forward. Standing before them is a scruffy, furry fellow with a worn out pilot hat. He's peculiarly dressed, sporting a brown bomber jacket, white button up, dark blue pants, big black boots and a green satchel strung across his chest. He's quite confident as he swaggers in, gives the place a one over and exclaims, "Whoa, haven't seen one of these babies in years. How is this old gal still flying?" He then extends his hand and cheerfully touts, "By the way, name's Jack. I'm the captain of the Peggy Sue; correction was her captain. Darn Krim battlecruiser!" Jack catches himself then asks, "So to whom do I owe the pleasure?" Preston runs over to him, looks up and takes his hand replying, "Hi, my name is Preston, nice to meet you." He then points to the others and says, "That's my sister Shelly and my best friend Samuel." Jack turns to each of them and tips his hat. He then replies, "Thanks for the save. So what may I ask are you doing in this neck of the woods? As you probably noticed, Krim don't take too kindly to trespassers." Shelly rushes over to Preston, pulls him aside and whispers, "Preston you need to be more careful, we don't know who he is." Preston then looks up and exclaims, "Of course we do, he just told us, he's Captain Jack." Jack is facing the opposite direction, pretending not to hear the exchange. Shelly then starts at him and timidly says, "Captain, we're not from around here." He then responds kindly, "It's just Jack." Then jokes, "Oh I kind of figured, you three are a little too short to be Krim troopers." She then replies, "No sir, what I mean is, we don't know how we got here." Preston jumps in, "We're lost! This old ship went swoosh and brought us here." "Brought you here?" he asks bewilderingly.

The scouts sit Jack down and share their story, each adding their part, with Preston's being the most animated. After hearing the colorful tale, Jack gets up, takes off his cap, scratches his head then puts it back on. He looks around a bit, pauses then says, "That's a really tall tale. And well if I weren't stranded in this part of the galaxy, standing in this here 300 year old cruiser, I'd be hard pressed to believe you." He continues, "Now you say you're from New Topia? I can't say I've ever heard of it. I've been all around these parts and I've never come across a place with that name. Where exactly is that?" Samuel jumps in, "We don't know. But I think we can extrapolate New Topia's spatial coordinates from the systems computers." Jack starts for the left console and says "Let me check navigation." Samuel follows him and watches him power it on. Jack pushes a few buttons and briefly explains what he's doing. Samuel then asks, "May I try?" Jack steps aside as Samuel navigates the terminal with ease. Impressed, Jack pulls back and says, "Son I could have used you on the Peggy Sue." Samuel looks up and gives him a smile.

Preston scuttles over to Jack from across the room. He hops on the captain's chair and chirps, "How do you know so much about this ship? Can you take us home?" Jack rounds the navigation console and walks over to Preston then replies "I've only had experience with similar vessels. I've piloted a lot of Protectorate starships so I know my way around them. But this old girl, she belongs in a museum." Sadly, Preston replies, "But you'll try though, right?" Shelly walks over, stands behind Preston and puts her hands on his shoulders to comfort him. Jack responds cheerfully, "Of course we'll try." Shelly then asks, "You said you've seen ships like this before?" Jack responds, "Something similar, definitely a later model. But this particular one looks to be from the First Galactic War." Shelly then asks, "What was that about?" Jack responds, "The usual, territory. It was fought between the Black Order, the ancestors of the Krim who wanted to expand their empire and the Protectorate, a group formed by several worlds that had been threatened by them. I actually use to be a member; of the Protectorate that is. So, during my time at the academy, I had to study up on its history and became familiar with its older vessels. So when I first saw it in the asteroid field earlier, I thought it was a derelict, thinking it was crippled during the Toren campaign." Shelly then exclaims, "Did you say Toren?!" Jack answers, "Yes, the campaign was named after one of the first planets the Protectorate liberated. Why?" Shelly quickly replies, "That's what we call ourselves. Our history tells us that our ancestors fled a distant war torn galaxy seeking a new region of space to settle."

Then from the corner of the room, Samuel exclaims, "I think I got it!" At that very moment, a large floor panel at the center of the room splits in two and slides away. An equally large square console rises up in its place. To each side of the station, a myriad of blinking lights compliment dozens of buttons, dials and switches, topped off by a glowing green monitor. And at its center, a smooth glass top with thin grid lines. Seconds later, the glass top lights up and a bright blue holographic projection streams upward, forming a three dimensional star chart. To its far upper left, a small blue icon of the ship blinks on and a yellow line from it, streaks across the image. The line travels across a sea of stars for a time then slowly curves downward towards a tiny system with seven planets. The line abruptly stops as a yellow icon circles a small green speck near the fourth planet. Samuel quickly hops off his station, scampers over to the center console and points to the image and says, "That's Botania-1, the moon we told you about." He then motions to two larger icons and says, "That's Sky Haven and here's New Topia."

Jack walks to the piloting station, leans over a monitor and studies the screen. He then turns to the children and exclaims, "This says that Botania-1 is over 48,900 light years from here!" The children's eyes light up. Jack continues "Even in hyper-space, it would have taken over 43 years to traverse this amount of space! This can't be possible. You said you weren't on the ship for more than a day." Jack scratches the side of his head and asks, "Wait this ship shouldn't even have a Hyper-Drive." From the piloting station, Shelly answers, "The Andorrans gave us that technology. Our history records that they joined the Toren caravan several years into the journey." Jack retorts, "Andorrans?" Shelly walks over to him and starts, "Yes, Samuel's ancestors. They were space faring merchants that shared their technology with us." Jack squints

his eyes as he listens carefully. Shelly goes on to say, “Yes, Samuel’s ancestors. The Toren encountered a small group of them before entering the Expanse where we later met the Medreal and the Tolac. Along with some of them we finally settled on New Topia some 270 years ago, after befriending Preston’s people, the Green Gills who originated on Sky Haven.”

Jack then turns to the display and manipulates its controls, accessing more data. “Okay, this is definitely a Toren transport vessel.” Talking to himself he murmurs, “Orion Class Sub-light Cruiser,” continuing, “Ships manifest- commanded by Captain Orala, first mate, helmsman with a twenty-seven complement. The cargo looks pretty standard.” The scouts huddle around him, listen attentively and try to get a glimpse of the glowing monitor in front of Jack. Jack then shouts, “Okay, here we go, hyper-drive specs.” Carefully, he examines the data then turns to the children and says, “From what I can tell, the Andorran hyper-drive is based on immersion wave technology, it looks to run on E115, primitive even by Peggy Sue’s standards. I just don’t see anything here that could have made that jump.” Samuel’s eyes turn to him and in a trembling voice asks, “Does that mean it can’t get us home?” Jack sinks back in his seat and whispers, “I just, I just don’t see how it’s possible.” Defeated, Shelly puts her hand on Preston and Samuel’s shoulders. Preston then shrugs her off and shouts, “We’re the Galaxy Crew. Never give up, never surrender!”

Jack stands to attention as Preston exclaims, “Someone has to know something.” At that very moment, Jack’s eyes light up as if recalling a memory. He enthusiastically replies, “You know what Preston, you’re right. And I know just where to find them.” Shelly asks, “Where?” Jack grins, “Where else, Charlie’s Tavern?” Shelly gives him a look as Preston asks, “What’s a Tavern.” Jack stumbles and says, “Never mind that. It’s not important.” Shelly shakes her head as Jack heads over to navigation. Samuel joins him as he plots a course. Jack then shuffles to the piloting station and fires up the engines. He then exclaims, “You better buckle up, we’re going to Charlie’s!” The vessel roars to life and in a moment they flash into hyperspace.

Later, the ship re-enters normal space just above a small grey planet. There are three main land masses surrounded by a blue-green ocean. Jack enters orbit, then pilots them to the smallest of the three continents. It’s a dreary world, mostly desert, dotted with sparse settlements overlooked by hazy amber skies. Jack explains that they’ll be heading to the outskirts of a mining town. It’s one of the few places to go for any kind of entertainment. The children question how he became familiar with such a place. He tells them that he use to run a route for the conglomerates that own the planet; hauling processed ore from it to the more industrial worlds just beyond the system.

As Jack sets the ship down in a clearing next to a rundown old building flanked by all manner of vessels, Preston and Samuel run to the side ports to see what they can. Jack then tells the scouts to stay with the ship and keep out of sight, explaining that this kind of place attracts colorful people who may not have the best intentions. Shelly seconds his warning as she grabs a thin hooded shawl from her knapsack. She throws it over her shoulders and pulls the hood over

her head. Jack then turns to her and exclaims, “Where do you think you’re going?” Shelly replies confidently, “With you of course. Who else knows more about the Toren here than me?” Jack relents to her logic, and concedes, “Well just make sure you stay close and don’t talk to anyone.” She smirks then turns to Preston and gives him a peck on the cheek, telling him to be good. He nods then runs to the side bay doors where he pulls the latch and opens the release. Jack pulls it open and exits the ship with Shelly in tow. She takes a few steps then looks back for a moment as Preston smiles and closes the bay door. She then continues forward with Jack.

Jack and Shelly enter the tavern. It’s a lively place, bustling with laughter and cheer. It’s brightly lit with large hanging fans spinning above them. Its high walls are tan and lined with old images depicting the everyday life of a mining town. Aside from the musky smell of sweaty workers and the hint of stale boos, it’s not at all what Shelly expected. Taking in the view, Shelly has fallen behind as she sees Jack nearing the bar.

Jack pulls up to the counter and hollers to the bartender who cheerfully touts, “There he is! Jack, you old cowboy, haven’t seen you for a minute. How’s the transport business?” Jack replies, “Great to see you. It’s been good. Lost the Peggy Sue, but I took up with a new crew. Say how’s Charlie doing?” The bartender retorts under his breath, “The Krim?” Jack chuckles, “Who else?” The bartender shakes his head and says, “Well let me fetch the boss for you,” as he lumbers into the kitchen behind him.

In a few moments, the kitchen door swings open and a well-dressed woman appears. She’s wearing a strapless red bustier and a black laced mini-skirt with a long train dragging behind her. Her long black fingerless gloves accentuate perfectly manicured fingernails as she glides over to them. She then grabs Jack’s cap and playfully hits him with it, exclaiming, “Where have you been? You don’t call you don’t right. Last word was that the Krim put a bounty on your head.” He takes his hat back and says with a smirk, “Didn’t know you cared Charlie.” She replies, “Of course I don’t, your furry tail owes me a few credits,” as she gives him a wink. Charlie’s attention then turns to Shelly, as she looks her over before turning back to Jack. She asks, “So what kind of trouble have you gotten yourself into?”

Jack pulls Charlie aside where he quickly explains what has transpired. He then asks for her help. She replies, “Jack you’re in over your head. I get that you want to help these kids but you have a target on your back and a large one at that. I mean how do you know if the story is even true? For all you know they could be playing you.” Jack replies, “Really? Look at her. Does she look like she’s from around here?” Charlie glances over Jack’s shoulder. Shelly is obviously outside her element. Charlie then turns back to him, cocks her head and concedes, “Fine.”

Jack continues, “She says she’s from Toren. You know the old stories. Is it that hard to believe?” Charlie dips her head in agreement and says, “How can I help?” Jack’s face lights up as he starts, “Do you remember that foreman who used to frequent your bar; the one you used to complain about?” Charlie replies, “Don’t remind me. He always asks for an extension on his

tab. Next time I see him, I'm going to set him straight." Jack continues, "Well, one time he brought this old guy." Charlie interrupts, "Jacob, his grandfather; very nice man." Jack exclaims, "Yes that's the one. Well, I once over heard him talking about the Toren. He claimed that he was a descendent and that centuries ago they use to have a vast empire that stretched across the entire sector. Apparently they ruled unchallenged for millennia; possessing technologies that made them god-like. He even said they were able to be anywhere, instantaneously." Charlie pushes back, "Now Jack, you know better than to believe tall tales." Assertively he responds, "But what if it were true?" Intrigued, she listens intently as Jack continues, "Isn't their sudden appearance in an old ship from 48,900 light years away proof that at least some of them weren't just stories?" She then replies, "Well then If they were so advance then how were they overrun by the Black Order?" Jack answers, "Maybe they were already in their decline at that time. It's not unheard of. Empires rise and fall. But what I'm getting at is, the old man might just know something. Is there any way we can find him?"

Then from off in the distance, a squeaky voice shouts, "Jack, Shelly help!" Startled, Jack and Charlie turn and see Preston running towards them from the entrance. He stops in front of Shelly as Jack and Charlie round the counter. Out of breath, Preston runs into Shelly's arms then quickly pulls back exclaiming, "You've got to come quick! There are a couple of monsters looking around the ship. They're trying to pry the door open." Shelly asks, "How did you get out? Where's Samuel?" Preston replies, "Samuel is back at the ship. We found a room with a bunch of stuff. In it, there was a ladder that led to a hatch. I used it and this jetpack we found, to get out and get help. But he's still back there. We have to go!"

The four quickly exit the tavern. Off in the distance, they catch a glimpse of a figure leaping aboard the ship. Jack exclaims, "It's the Krim! How did they find us?" He pauses for a moment then asks, "Preston, you said they didn't see you leave?" Preston replies, "No, Samuel and I snuck into the room in the back." Shelly asks, "The locked one?" He responds, "Yup, there was a small vent next to the door. We pulled out the cover and crawled through." Jack interjects, "Are you sure the Krim can't fit through there?" Preston responds, "No way. Samuel and I could barely fit." Relieved, Jack looks at Shelly and says, "Okay that means Samuel is safe as long as they can't bust through that door." He then looks to Charlie and says, "Since they know my face, Charlie you'll need to lure them out of the ship if you can." Charlie nods as he continues, "I'll enter through the top hatch, and try to get Samuel out if you can't get them to leave." He then turns to Shelly and Preston, telling them to stay out of sight until it's clear. He and Charlie then rush off in opposite directions as the others hide nearby.

Jack makes his way to the back of the ship and slowly pulls himself up. Hunched over, he quickly shuffles over to the open latch and quietly lowers himself down into the cargo hold. It's dark, with only the light from above illuminating the center of the room. Samuel is cowering in the far back corner behind two old crates when Jack discovers him. In the adjacent room, through the shaft connecting the two cabins, they can hear deep grunts and growls as the two Krim ransack the ship. Suddenly there's a pause. They can hear one Krim sniffing about before turning

abruptly. Heavy footsteps lurch towards them. The scales of his tail grate the metal floor as he moves ever closer.

Meanwhile, Charlie walks over to the side of the ship, bangs on the base of the bay doors and demands, "I'm the owner of this here establishment. I need to have a word." Moments later, a massive lizard-like creature lumbers to the entrance. It has thick dark green scales and is covered in plated grey armor. Its face, serpentine with thick jaws riddled with dagger like teeth. There are two large fangs protruding from each side of its muzzle. Charlie is visibly startled, but manages to remain composed as it snarls, "We are of the Krim. We were told that a wanted criminal was seen leaving this vessel. Where is he?" Charlie steps back and replies confidently, "The Krim have no jurisdiction around these parts. You are scaring my customers and as far as I can tell you just broke into that ship. Now unless you want me to call the Protectorate, I suggest you leave." In a deep guttural voice the Krim growls at her. He turns abruptly and calls out to his partner, who is violently tugging on the handle to the rusty door that leads to the cargo hold. His cohort then roars back at him and rumbles towards them. Charlie makes way, as the two stare at her intently. They then leap off the ship, before starting towards the tavern.

Once the Krim are beyond view, Preston, Shelly and Charlie quickly board the ship. Preston then runs to the small vent near the door and kneels down calling out to Samuel. Moments later, it unlocks. From the opposite side, Jack slides the heavy door open and exclaims, "That was way too close." He then makes a beeline for the bay door. He slowly cracks it open, peeks through then slams it shut, locking it behind him. He then darts over to the piloting station and activates the console. The vessel quickly powers up as Samuel hops on navigation and asks, "Where to Captain?" He replies, anywhere but here. The ship's engines ignite, roar to life and in moments, they're off and running.

Later that day, the ship is perched atop a dusty plateau some ways from the tavern. The twin suns have already set and distant stars struggle to peer through the natural thick haze above. They've just finished a small dinner of wild root soup and Solar Scout rations. Preston and Samuel are fast asleep inside the ship.

Outside the cruiser, Jack, Charlie and Shelly are sitting around a smoldering fire discussing their next step. Earlier, Jack had told Shelly about the old man who claimed to be a descendent of the Toren; the one who had boasted of their unrivaled technological advancements. Shelly asks, "Do we know where this old man lives?" Charlie replies, "He passed away some time ago, but I know where his grandson lives. Hopefully he can give us something more to go on." Shelly puts her hands on her face and begins to sob. Charlie consoles her as Jack gives encouragement, "From what I remember, this world was one of the main outpost of their empire, so it stands to reason we'll find something." Shelly looks up with a glimmer of hope as she gets up and says, "I appreciate all you've done. No matter what happens, I want you two to know I'll always be grateful."

It's mid-morning and the second sun has just risen. The ship is jetting off to the foreman's home just outside city limits. The crew is excited, but no more than Preston and Samuel who are calling out the local landmarks they can see from above. Below, their shadow rolls across the landscape as their vessel nears its destination. Soon, the ship touches down on a level clearing near an earth colored dwelling half the size of Charlie's Tavern. It's a humble home, surrounded by a white fence, dotted with plain white flowers.

Jack, Shelly and Preston disembark as the others remain on the ship. They are tasked with monitoring the airways for the Krim or others seeking to collect Jack's bounty. The three make their way to the residence. Jack takes the lead as Shelly and Preston are staggered behind him. He knocks on the door several times until an elderly woman opens. Mysteriously, she greets them by name, bids them enter and tells them that she's been expecting them.

The woman then explains that her husband spoke of their arrival years earlier. She goes on to say that before his passing he made her swear to give the three travelers his journal. She fetches the leather bound book and hands it to Jack. Atop the journal is a small envelope with the words, "Children of Toren." Upon handing it to them, it seems as though a heavy burden has been lifted from her frail shoulders as she whispers, "My work is done. I can offer you no more." Bewildered, but grateful, Jack, Shelly and Preston thank her and return to the ship.

Aboard the vessel, the crew eagerly scans through the journal. It's the written account of Jacob Wynn, a prospector who took part in a Doralite surveying expedition of the surrounding area some three decades earlier. He was part of a five person team that accidentally came upon a centuries old ruin. The experience however, claimed the lives of three of his colleagues, left a fourth in a vegetative state and himself plagued by visions of a time not his own.

Jacob claimed that the team stumbled upon a Repository, a device that held the cumulative knowledge of the Toren Empire; a highly advanced, ancient civilization that possessed unparalleled technologies. This massive database was a library of their culture and scientific achievements, so that if it were ever lost to time, only their most worthy descendants could access it. However, safeguards were put in place so only those with the purest intent and lineage could access its awesome database as it also contained forbidden knowledge.

He wrote that the Toren were masters of matter conversion, space/time manipulation, temporal realignment, linear flux and could even peer into the multi-verse. Gifted with the latter; Jacob was able to see, past, present and multiple futures. As such, he made the decision to destroy the Toren Repository so as to keep it from those who would use its awesome power to do harm.

However, in his final entry, he wrote that he discovered the existence of a second Repository. One that could lead to two very different futures; in the first, it would fall into Krim hands, harkening an age of darkness in the region. The second, where the progenitors intervene from the distant past, manipulating space/time, to draw their descendant's back to this part of the

galaxy, so that they may prevent such an outcome. Unfortunately, Jacob was unable to finish his last entry, managing only to scribble the word “Volan.”

The crew is stunned by what they’ve learned. It would seem that the old woman’s husband foresaw the scouts’ arrival. If what he’s written is to be believed, Shelly’s ancestors, were the ones responsible for bringing them to this part of the universe, using their ability to manipulate space/time in order to enlist their help.

The ship is silent and the entire team is lost in thought. Jack takes a step back and tries to wrap his head around it. He’s become fond of the children and wants nothing more than to keep them safe. Charlie has come to feel the same way as they whisper amongst themselves, trying to weigh the crew’s safety and what is ultimately at stake.

Shelly feels guilty. Although she was an unwilling participant, she can’t help but feel responsible. Her mind races as she thinks of what she could have done differently.

Samuel is perched next to Preston but the two can’t be more far apart. Preston feels the need to act, but doesn’t know where to start. Samuel on the other hand, is having difficulty grasping the complexities of what they’ve learned from the journal. The concept of a non-linear timeline would mean that time is fluid and multi-faceted. Samuel stares off into nothingness before emerging from deep thought only to whisper, “What can happen, will happen, because it’s already happened.” Preston turns to him, looks inquisitively, before Samuel answers by repeating himself. Samuel has come to the realization that their current predicament has indeed confirmed the concept of the multi-verse. He explains to Preston that it would also mean that in other realities the team has both succeeded and failed. Now the only relevant question to pose is, what universe does this current team belong?

Preston looks around at the crew’s long faces, then hops to his feet and darts to the center of the room. There, he looks at them and shouts, “What’s wrong?!” He clenches his tiny fist and confidently exclaims, “We were brought here for a reason and we know what we have to do. So let’s figure out how to do it!”

The crew’s eyes light up. Everyone gets to their feet, as Jack adds, “He’s right! If we don’t do anything, the Krim will find the database and they’ll wreak havoc.” Charlie looks to him in agreement and says, “If we’re going to do this, then we have to figure out what Volan is. I’ve never heard of it.” Jack replies, “Neither have I. Maybe the ship’s computer can tell us.” Jack races to the center console and accesses the ship’s database. He keys in an inquiry, requesting any information on the term.

Moments later, the monitor reads, “No matches found.” He then tries several variations of the word, but after a few attempts, the results are the same. Frustrated, he whispers under his breath, “Volan has to be a place?” Shelly replies, “It could have been a city, a moon or even a

planet. There's just no way of telling." Samuel then adds, "We'll find it, because your ancestors already saw us do it."

Charlie then exclaims, "Jack! Do you remember when we were running cargo for Phloxx and had to make an emergency landing on Tolan-1?" Jack looks to her and replies, "Of course, burned out half our systems when that solar flare nicked us. Why?" Charlie continues, "Remember that old port attendant who helped us install those induction coils?" Jack retorts, "The one who stormed off when you thanked him?" Charlie responds, "Yeah, he was insulted when I said most people should be as kind as Tolians." Jack responds, "Why would he take offense to that? He was Tolian." Charlie answers, "Well, not according to another attendant. Apparently there's a group of natives who call themselves Volians." Shelly jumps in, "Do you think Volan was Tolan-1's original name?" Charlie replies, "They do sound similar enough. But it's on the border of Protectorate and Krim space, a no man's land." Jack adds, "You know if I recall correctly, Tolan-1 was one of the last Black Order strongholds before they fell in the last days of the First Galactic War. And it's situated not too far from Toren, the planet your people came from." Preston jumps in, "Yes, it's there. I can feel it!"

Jack then says, "It's a long shot, but it's the only one we've got. Samuel, you know what to do?" Already at navigation, he shouts back, "Course already set." Jack turns to Preston and commands, "Preston, let's put that helmet you've got to good use. Take us out!" Preston smiles, taps the side of his helmet, powering it on and exclaims, "You got it Captain!" He then scuttles to the station opposite Samuel's and demands, "Computer, take us to Tolan-1, maximum speed." Immediately the ships engines roar to life, lifting them aloft. Soon they're off, rocketing to their destination.

Off in a distance, hidden from view behind one of the scattered hilltops dotting the nearby landscape, a mid-size cruiser also powers up its engines. It's the Krim bounty hunters. They've been tracking the team's ship. Unknown to Jack and the others, they've hid a tracker and listening device on the ship. They've heard everything that was said and now look beyond just claiming Jack's bounty once they're beyond Protectorate jurisdiction. They intend on taking the Repository for themselves and ultimately return the Krim Empire to prominence as the New Black Order.

The Team drops out of Hyper-Space and soon makes their approach to Tolan-1. It's a small moon, cratered through war and only sparsely populated near small bodies of water at its northern pole. Jack takes the helm and manually pilots the ship to the small repair depot he and Charlie met the Volian. Their vessel, perches itself at one of the four docking bays.

They are greeted by a crew of three workers but Jack informs them they've only come for supplies. All but one crew member leaves. He lingers about, then intently wanders to the rear of the ship. He stops near the rusted door then closely examines a raised inscription at its side. Shelly takes notice of the handsome young hand but is more curious with his behavior. She

glides over to him and asks, "Do you know what it means." The crew member then replies, "This ship. Where did it come from?" Shelly responds, "Botania-1." Befuddled, he says, "I've seen this symbol before. My grandmother use to tell us stories and she use to draw this symbol. It's the crest of the Toren." Shelly's eyes light up as she exclaims, "I'm Toren!" The crew member tilts his head in amazement, "That can't be true?" The other's notice the commotion and move to join him. Shelly responds, "Yes, my brother and I were brought to this part of the galaxy by this ship. We're trying to get home." At that moment, Preston pulls from behind Jack. The crew member immediately exclaims, "A Green Gill! I can't believe it. You're actually a Green Gill!" Preston shuffles over, extends his hand and says, "Nice to meet you, I'm Preston. What's your name?" The crew member answers, "I'm Tangen. The elders use to tell us about the Green Gills and the Empire, but I never thought they could be true!" Charlie asks, "Are you a Volian?" Tangen nods his head in amazement. Jack then says, "Looks like you've got as many questions as we do. Maybe you should take a seat."

Shelly guides Tangen to the center console where the team joins them. They each take a turn sharing their journey. He then reciprocates, telling them what he was taught by the Volian Elders. They listen intently as he recalls old stories.

He spoke of the great Toren Empire, the first to truly develop in the known galaxy, explaining that they were made of two different peoples, the Moen and the Green Gills. Separate species from twin worlds, each had developed independently but came together in hopes of becoming more enlightened. Through mutual cooperation they prospered and for over two millennia their Empire expanded across the region. In the beginning, they had a code, a directive of non-interference with less developed species. It was a charge that served them well for generations. However, as their knowledge of science and technology grew, most came to view the directive as a hindrance to progress, and it was eventually left by the wayside. Soon their abilities were unparalleled, eventually ascending to levels, less advanced peoples saw as nothing less than Devine. As such, many Toren came to believe the will of the Empire was beyond reproach, even if its actions were clearly unjust. Through its hubris, great wrongs committed on other worlds were left unpunished.

Being the moral center of the Empire, the Green Gills vehemently opposed the injustice. However they were also in the minority, so the Empire chose to ignore their pleas. The cruelty continued and soon many innocent lost their lives. Atrocities were committed on non-Toren peoples. It was then that the Green Gills collectively chose to sever all ties with their Moen brothers and sisters. Sadly, there was not a single voice of objection from the Moen. So with heavy hearts, the Green Gills gathered their people and set off into the Great Expanse, the space beyond Toren rule, never to be seen again.

With their brethren gone, the Toren Empire continued on their dark and sadistic path. They subjugated lesser species and brutally crushed those that would oppose them. Their cruelty and greed had no bounds for soon they began warring with themselves. Long bloody

intergalactic wars were fought; their once vast domain was left in ruin, until only one faction remained.

However, it too came to an end, not by war but by disease. As their people fell, so did their dominion. The only few to escape the illness, found refuge in a small uninhabited world whose unique atmosphere did not allow the deadly virus to propagate. Eventually, their scientists were able to develop a cure from the rare fauna found on the planet. Grateful for the second chance they'd been given, the refugees chose to start anew, adopting a more humble existence and dubbed their world New Toren.

Evident that hubris had driven them to near extinction, the Toren made the choice to liberate themselves from the technological shackles of their own doing. However, understanding that such knowledge should not be lost, they chose to create two Great Repositories. Each was said to be a sentient library; an A.I. database containing nearly two thousand years of Toren history and scientific achievement. It was their hope that a more enlightened, future generation of Toren, untouched by war and greed would be worthy of their cumulative knowledge. So as to not be tempted, it was also decreed, that the two repositories would be kept off world, within the sector they once ruled. Each was to be hidden on a primitive, barren planet.

However, when the Toren arrived on Volan, one of the moons under their old rule, they encountered a primitive humanoid race, they dubbed the Volians. The Toren admired the Volians for their simple yet virtuous nature and befriended them. Through a mutual respect and trust, they shared some of their most basic technology with the Volians. In return they asked them to become the keepers of one of the Great Repositories, until such a time a new generation of Toren returned for it.

Tangen explains that his people have kept their word to the Toren for over eight centuries. In doing so, they have remained mostly isolated from the outside world and the matters that govern it. Many have come and gone from Volan, be it settlers or soldiers. It has changed both name and rule for nearly millennia. However, it was not until his generation that some have abandoned their ancient charge and have sought to join the outside world. In doing so, they are looked down upon and are shun by their own people.

The crew is overwhelmed by Tangen's story but none more than Shelly. She feels a connection to him and senses his sincerity. For a time he sits there silently, overcome by his own words. He then turns to her and utters, "I never thought or could ever imagine I would be the one." She glides to him, cuffs his hands in hers and whispers, "You'll be the one to keep the promise." He smiles, and the two share a moment.

Suddenly, the side bay door swing open and a long shadow rolls over the crew. Tangen looks up. The color immediately rushes from his face. The others turn to look, as Tangen quickly pulls Shelly and Preston in close as if shielding them. Standing menacingly at the entrance are

the two Krim bounty hunters. The larger of the two turns to Tangen, grins, and maniacally hisses, “Please, don’t stop on our account.”

Jack puts himself between their unwelcome guests and the crew. In an apologetic tone Jack spouts, “Arkon, if this is about the bounty, I can pay you double what the Empire is offering.” He takes a step forward and continues, “Honestly I had no idea I was even in Krim space. And that communications array; well I thought it was just space junk. I swear I wouldn’t have blasted it, if I knew what it was.”

Arkon turns to the other Krim and laughs, “I told you Kry-ton, always the comedian.” Kry-ton smirks then replies, “Maybe we should show him how we Krim get our laughs?”

Attempting to defuse the situation, Charlie calmly interrupts, “Gentleman, gentleman there’s no reason we can’t be civil. Arkon glares at her. She freezes as he shuts her down menacingly, “We’re no longer in Protectorate space.”

He then promptly draws his blaster, holstered to his thigh, points it at Preston and demands, “Now Volian, if you don’t want me to make a mess, you’ll take us to the Toren Repository.” Tangen looks down at Preston who’s buried his face in his side. He then turns to Shelly. She looks up solemnly and nods. In defeat, Tangen answers, “As you wish.”

Kry-ton closes the bay doors behind him and locks it tight. Arkon, clearly the dominant of the two, orders his partner, “Take those two to the back” as he motions to Charlie and Samuel. Kry-ton nods in agreement and pulls out his weapon, herding them towards the rusty door to the rear. There, he forces Charlie to open it. He then turns to Arkon and asks, “What about him?,” motioning to Jack. Condescendingly, Arkon responds, “Do you know how to pilot a Protectorate ship?” Kry-ton draws back almost to a whimper. Arkon then grabs Shelly by the collar and pushes her and Preston toward him. He then commands, “Take them too.” Tangen lurches forward instinctively but pulls back when Jack gives him a look. Kry-ton takes the others then pushes them into the room as Jack calls out to Charlie. He stares at her intently and says, “Kora would want you to be strong.” Charlie gives him a look as she marches into the room. Kry-ton then closes the rusty metal door, locking it tight.

Sometime later, Jack is perched at the helm. Arkon orders him to fire up the engines as he hovers over Tangen who’s sitting at the navigation console. Jack does so, but not before turning to Tangen. Then in an awkward tone he whispers, “I’m going to need your coordinates,” as he darts his eyes back and forth signaling not to comply with their captors. Tangen understands his meaning and replies confidently, “Of course Captain.”

Arkon looks back for a moment and roars, “Kry-ton what are you still doing back there? Get your tale over here and watch him,” as he motions his blaster towards Jack. Kry-ton lumbers over to Jack and nudges the barrel of his blaster against his back and warns, “You’d better not try anything or I’ll make your little friends regret it.”

Arkon violently grabs Tangen by the back of the neck, his fingers curl, almost meeting at the center of this throat. He then thrusts him forward demanding, "Input the coordinates, now!" Tangen reluctantly complies and slowly keys them in. Jack confirms them, plots a course and steadily pilots the ship out of the dock. Moments later, the cruiser rockets westward towards a hazy horizon.

In the cargo hold, Charlie is on one knee leaning over the vent, listening in on the Krim in the opposite room. She then gets to her feet, promptly turns to the others and says, "Okay this is what's going to happen. Jack and I need you to be ready to move as soon as he comes in for a landing. He'll signal us by slowing down rapidly to a near hover, circle once then set her down slowly." At a loss, Shelly cuts her off and asks, "How do you know that?" Charlie chuckles, "Jack and I have been on more scrapes than I can remember. When he said Kora, I knew exactly what he wanted me to do. You see, on one of our cargo runs to Kora Prime we were boarded by a few unwanted guests which left us in a similar predicament." Preston jumps in, "I knew Jack wouldn't let us down!" Charlie smiles, then brings the group into a huddle before telling them the plan.

It's twilight as the ship perches itself in a clearing over downed vegetation just beyond a blackened forest. Jack leaves the engines on idle as he leans back at his seat. He gives Tangen a peculiar look, signaling him to unfasten his restraints and be ready to move. Jack then turns to Arkon and says, "Well we're here, wherever here is." Arkon slithers over to Jack's station and confirms the coordinates. He then turns to Kry-ton, barking orders in the harsh Krim tongue before turning to Tangen, commanding, "Volian, now you lead me to greatness."

Just then, a loud pounding sound booms from the side bay doors as both Krim jump to attention. Arkon orders his partner to investigate. Kry-ton lingers for a moment then grips his blaster before walking over to one of the port windows near the door. He peers through, but is unable to see anything and shrugs his shoulders at his partner. Suddenly, rocks pummel the main windshield. Arkon turns to attention then runs to investigate. He darts back and forth looking through the main view port but there's no sign of the culprit. Just then, shattering his frustration, something crashes against the vessel, again near the bay door. Angered, Arkon grips his blaster, stomps over and unlatches it before flinging it open. He turns to Kry-ton and commands, "Stay here and watch them!" before leaping off the ship. Kry-ton follows his partner with his eyes, tracking every movement as he rounds the side of the ship and looks underneath. He then hears rustling in the foliage and sets out to investigate as the dense forest swallows him. Kry-ton squints his eyes, trying to keep focus, but Arkon has all but disappeared into the night.

Kry-ton is jolted to task after he hears Jack whispering to Tangen. Both are at their station, but have rotated their seats one hundred eighty degrees to face him. Concerned, Kry-ton grabs his blaster and demands, "Don't think of trying anything." At that very moment, a scuttle of footsteps race across the top of the ship; then a loud clang. Kry-ton immediately leans out the door, his right hand gripping the top rim for stability as he struggles to see past the face of the

ship. Off to the back of the cabin, Charlie quietly peers through the lower vent just below the rusty door. She readies Jack with a wave. He responds by nodding silently. At this point the sound on the roof becomes even louder. Above the ship, Preston and Samuel are creating a ruckus, using objects found in the cargo hold to make all the noise they can. Shelly is halfway out, relaying messages from Charlie below.

Curiosity gets the best of Kry-ton as he steps to the edge of the cruiser. He holsters his blaster to his thigh; leaps then catches the edge of the ship with his fingers before pulling himself up to his elbows. His lower half is visible through the open bay door. Immediately, he sees Preston and Samuel. Kry-ton roars at them as he struggles to pull himself up. Off in the distance, Arkon hears the commotion and charges towards them.

At that moment, Jack and Tangen make a beeline to the bay door. On the roof, Preston and Samuel are harassing Kry-ton, keeping him distracted from the others below. Jack then grabs Kry-ton's blaster from his holster before he and Tangen slam the door shut, locking him out. From the back of the cabin near the rusty door, Charlie dips her head back into the cargo hold and yells, "Shelly, now. Bring them in!" Shelly relays the message to Preston and Samuel just as Kry-ton pulls himself up. Preston swings a metal bar back and forth trying to keep Kry-ton at bay. He does so long enough to allow Samuel to reach the safety of the cargo hold. However, Preston is now left fending off Kry-ton alone.

Below, Jack hops on the helm and fires up the still idling engines. The ship then roars to life, shaking violently causing Preston to stumble. Shelly looks on in horror but is unable to help. She then yells down the hatch, "We're not ready!" Charlie looks up, immediately understands and relays the message to Jack. He quickly brings the engines back to idle. Tangen turns to Jack, as if asking what to do. Jack leaps off the station, then darts to the door. Tangen goes to join him, but Jack yells back exclaiming, "No stay there, I may need you!"

Above, Kry-ton knocks the bar from Preston's hands, then lunges at him. Preston falls to his back as the Krim hovers above. Kry-ton snorts and snarls. Then in a bloodcurdling tone says calmly, "You wretched youngling, Do you have any idea what I'm going to do to you?"

Shelly calls out to Preston, as he starts to crawl backward towards her. Kry-ton exclaims, "Nowhere to run, meat." Then from the other side of the ship, another voice growls, "Oh no, he's mine." In the commotion, Arkon scaled the opposite side of the ship and is now on the roof with them. He surprises Shelly, grabs her by the neck and pulls her out from the hatch. He draws her to his face, glares at her then says condescendingly, "I have to admit, it was a cute plan. Too bad it failed miserably." He then hurls her over to Preston like a rag doll where she violently crashes into him. Kry-ton looms over the two as Arkon soon joins him. Kry-ton then asks, "What shall we do with them?" But before Arkon can answer, a voice says, "You can let them go!"

Immediately, they turn around. Jack has Kry-ton's blaster trained on them. He scaled the side wall from the bay door. However, unlike the Krim with their tails to help them balance on a

rumbling ship; Jack has trouble standing. With an inopportune jerk, he loses his footing and drops to one knee. Arkon lunges at him, knocking the blaster from his hand before the two roll on the roof violently. Arkon is faster, larger, stronger and more agile. Jack is no match for him and soon is on his back with both arms pressed to the ground.

Hovering above Jack, Arkon snaps down at him. His sinewy reptilian jaws drool all over his face. From behind, Kry-ton looms over them, urging Arkon to finish him. Arkon then shifts his weight pinning Jack's left arm with his right hand and slams his chest with his left. Jack struggles violently, but again, he's grossly overpowered. As if resigning to his fate, he turns his head to the left but then sees Preston. In the uproar, he and Shelly managed to make it back to the top hatch unnoticed. Preston motions to Jack, then points to his helmet, signaling him to hang on to something.

Physically exhausted, but with renewed vigor- Jack uses his only free arm to search blindly for something to hold on to. He manages to find the edge of a recessed panel and grips tightly with all his strength before giving Preston a nod. Preston then taps the side of his helmet and commands, "Computer, take us up, full burn!" The ship's vertical thrusters ignite as the cruiser rattles violently, jostling everything from side to side as it rockets upward. Kry-ton stumbles to the ground as Arkon loses his balance and is thrown off of Jack. At seventy feet, Preston then orders the vessel to level off and rocket forward at eighty nots. Jack rolls towards his right, then with his left hand, grabs the edge of the panel; holding on for dear life. The ship's rear thrusters fire up and jets the ship forward, sending both bounty hunters tumbling back violently. Kry-ton stumbles off the ship and crashes into the dense vegetation below. However, Arkon manages to grab on to an open vent and roars. Jack turns back and sees him starting towards Preston, near the open hatch. Arkon snarls and sharp black claws retract from his fingertips, as he digs into any crevice he can find. He remains low as the ship increases speed, moving steadily towards Preston. Jack then calls out to Preston shouting, "Kid you need to do a barrel roll!" Preston shakes his head in defiance, fearing it could throw his friend off as well. Jack then continues, "Close the hatch and do it!" Preston glances over to Arkon then to Jack, as he agonizes over the decision. He then nods reluctantly and slowly dips into the ship as he closes the hatch behind him. Jack then grips the recess panel with his remaining strength, closes his eyes and buries his face in his arms. Just then the craft executes a slow barrel roll as it dives towards the jungle below skimming the green canopy before regaining altitude.

A few moments later, the ship is at a low hover as Preston and Charlie lift up the top hatch. From the opening they look around the face of the ship, but there's nothing to be seen. Both Jack and Arkon are nowhere in sight. Preston begins to sob as he buries his head in Charlie's chest, lamenting, "No, no he can't be gone. He just can't be." Saddened, Charlie rests her head atop Preston's, comforting him, as her own tears begin to swell. Just then, from the corner of her eye, Charlie sees movement. A furry hand, slaps the edge of the ship and then another. Suddenly, Jack's scruffy mug peeks up from below as he slowly pulls himself up to his elbow. He sees the two, grins then chuckles sarcastically, "Miss me?" He slides back a bit then

exclaims, “But really, I could use a little help?” Preston and Charlie dry their eyes, smile, then quickly run towards him. They grab Jack’s right arm and pull him up. He plops himself on the roof, glances over to Preston and says, “Great work kid.” They both chuckle, then all three embrace.

Sometime later, Jack is at the captain’s chair. Charlie is standing next to him, as Tangen and Shelly look on from Navigation. Preston and Samuel are at the helm facing Jack as he finishes his story. Jack concludes, “So there I was, just hanging by my fingertips. I tell you, if I missed that metal grip on the bay door when we did that roll; old Jack would have been a goner.” The team breaks into laughter. Jack then turns to Tangen and asks, “So you mind putting in the correct coordinates this time?” Bewildered, the team turns to Tangen where he explains, “It was Jack’s idea to enter the wrong coordinates.” He glances up at Shelly, standing next to him. They steal a moment. Everyone then smiles as Tangen turns to his console and enters the correct coordinates. Jack confirms them and soon the ship races off towards the east.

It’s daybreak, and the ship comes to a landing on a small plateau, overlooking a vast forest dotted with near identical peaks like the one they’ve set on. The crew disembarks as Tangen takes the lead, guiding the optimistic crew down a path on the northeast side of the mountain. It’s a natural formation, carved by eons of rain, wind and natural erosion. The rocky path leads to a small opening near the base of the plateau. It’s an unassuming triangular shape crevasse, barely large enough for an adult to enter. Shelly pulls out three flares from her knapsack and hands the first to Tangen and another to Jack. Each ignites their flare as the three taller members dip their heads to enter the cave. The entrance leads them to a long corridor lined with ancient writing carved into the rock. Tangen runs his left hand across the base of one of the symbols, looks to Shelly and explains that it’s the ancient pictorial language of the Volian, telling the story of their first encounter with the Toren. They continue and the pathway leads them to a large cavern with a narrow walkway. It’s lined with countless stalactites reaching down from the ceiling above. The high walls are dotted with countless gemstones, each sparkling, like a million points of light, reflecting off their brilliant flares. To each side of the path, a black nothingness; it’s a seemingly endless drop to the bedrock below. The cave howls as the stale air is met by warm winds from the outside world, seeping through broken walls off in the unknown distance.

Tangen leads them through a maze of ancient stone; past narrow rooms, under hanging arches, around sharp turns and into a great hall. At its center, a pearlescent dome structure stands in witness; elegant, mysterious and otherworldly. The team is mesmerized by its grandeur, captivated by its magic, but none more than Shelly. As if in a trance she glides toward it. Preston then scampers to catch up. Jack and Charlie start towards them, but Tangen pulls them back, resisting his own urge to follow. He then whispers, “What will be spoken is for their ears alone.” Jack turns to him, and nods.

As Shelly and Preston approach the dome, its smooth white surface begins to pulsate; glowing a soft amber hue before lighting the room in a brilliant white. Then, a deep, calming voice echoes around them, “Welcome, children of Toren. I have been waiting for you.” Before them, an opening forms as the rigid surface melts away like liquid mercury. Preston grabs Shelly’s hand, pulls away slightly before looking up to her. The voice then says, “Have no fear young Green Gill. No harm will befall you or our beloved Toren daughter.” Shelly turns to Preston, smiles, then nods as they both step into the dome.

The domed structure seals itself behind them. Shelly and Preston find themselves standing before a luminescent orb, levitating a few inches above a crystalline altar. Through thought, it speaks to them. It shares its stories, knowledge and history; reaffirming what they learned from Jacob’s journal, that it did in fact set in motion events that led them to this part of the galaxy. Eight centuries ago, it had foreseen a dark future for this part of the universe. It had witnessed the collapse and enslavement of countless worlds, all at the hands of the Krim, who would inevitably find and abuse its awesome power. As part of its Toren programming, reflecting the ancient directive of non-interference, it would be unable to take direct action against the Krim. However, in its near infinite wisdom, it sought to circumvent its charge, by returning its creator’s own progeny so that they may be given the choice to save the galaxy with its power. In doing so, it inevitably created a divergent timeline.

The Orb explains that the burden of saving this galaxy must fall upon their shoulders, even as the natural order of time seeks to correct itself. It explains that before the intervention, the natural order was for its sister repository to be discovered by the Krim elite, seeking to rebuild the old Black Order from the shadows. However, by manipulating space/time and drawing them to this galaxy, it set in motion events that led to the destruction of the other Toren Repository. However, the orb explains that time will not rest until their divergent line resembles the other, one in which the galaxy is in ruin. The children are taken aback as the Orb then speaks aloud in a calm voice, “The fate of this galaxy rest on both your shoulders. Use the gift your four fathers have bestowed upon you to do what you know to be right. Your words are for me to obey.”

In that very instant, the dome surrounding them turns transparent. Beyond it, Shelly and Preston see their friends. Hidden in shadow, a monstrous figure looms behind them. Only the flickering light of the flare catch a glimpse of the creature’s scaly hide. Then in a flash, he grabs Tangen from behind and viciously hurls him onto a bed of stalagmites. His head slams violently into them as he tumbles to a stop. “It’s Arkon!,” Charlie exclaims. But before she can say another word, he cracks his thick tale across her chest; sending her crashing backwards. Courageously, Samuel then leaps on his back, wrapping his tiny arms around the massive beast. Arkon, with his left arm, grabs him by the collar and flings him to the side. Jack then charges at him and lunges, but is caught mid-air. Arkon has him by the chest as he leaps up and slams him against the hard granite floor, knocking him unconscious. Arkon then drags his limp body

towards the dome. Just beyond them, Arkon roars ferociously before demanding, "If you don't want your friends to die a bloody death, I suggest you younglings open this dome."

In a panic, Shelly runs to the edge and cries, "Open it. We have to help! Arkon is going to kill him!" Preston takes a step forward. He's about to give the order, but stops just short. He shakes his head and says, "No. If we do, he'll forcefully take the orb." Preston then turns to the altar and asks rhetorically, "That's how it happened before. Isn't it?" He then whispers, "What can happen, will happen, because it's already happened." He walks to the edge of the dome and continues, "I've always opened the dome and each time Arkon was able to take the orb." Shelly looks to him but has no words.

Preston takes a moment then whispers, "I know what to do." He walks to the center of the room, where Shelly joins him. He then removes the orb from its resting place and says, "I'm going to break the cycle." Holding the orb before him, he takes a step forward, preparing to confront Arkon. He then commands, "Repository, remove this dome." In an instant, the protective dome melts away dissipating into the granite floor beneath them.

Arkon immediately starts at Preston. His clawed hands clenched tightly around Jacks wrist, dragging him from behind. Preston stares at him intently, his head tilted downward with his eyes partially obscured behind the rim of the helmet. He then demands, "That's close enough," as he raises the orb with both hands. He continues, "Unless you want me to do something you'll regret." Arkon grimaces then snarls, "So what's it going to be? His life or the orb?" He then pulls Jack in, wraps his sinewy arms around his head and begins to squeeze. Jack twitches then moans. Preston responds, "Not here," then closes his eyes and commands, "Orb, take everyone to the ship." One by one everyone blinks away.

Instantly, the crew rematerializes atop the plateau. They are positioned as they were in the sanctum. A few yards from their ship, Jack is still in Arkon's vice like grip. The massive Krim looks about. He smirks, as if admiring the power he's about to wield. Charlie and Samuel slowly come to, as Shelly runs to Tangen's motionless body and kneels down next to him. She slowly lifts his head, cradles it in her arms and whispers, "No, no he's not breathing," as she sobs over him. She then looks to the others and says, "I think he's gone."

Jack slowly opens his eyes, realizes where he is and begins to struggle. Unfazed, Arkon tightens his grip before growling, "And he will be to, if you don't give me the orb." Jack then grabs Arkon's forearm, nudges it off his throat and yells, "Don't do it. There's too much at stake," before Arkon regains control and forcefully covers his mouth, silencing him. Under his breath, Preston whispers to the orb, "Obey Arkon's commands until he boards the ship then teleport him to the surface." He then stretches out his arms in front of him and commands, "Go to the ship."

The orb hovers steadily out of Preston's hands as the others look onward. Preston then says, "If you want it, it's all yours." Arkon tosses Jack to the side and starts after the orb. Charlie,

Shelly and Samuel run to Jack's side. Dazed but unharmed, Jack gasps for air, barely managing to ask, "Preston, why did you give it to him?" Preston remains focused, staring intently at Arkon as he approaches the ship, tightly clutching the orb. Arkon then commands, "Open the bay door!" The orb complies. Pleased with himself; Arkon turns to the crew and cackles, "I would offer you a ride, but unlike Krim, I doubt you could hang on." He laughs maniacally then boards the ship.

The vessel rumbles to life. The ship's vertical thrusters scatter dust and debris as it lifts upward. Preston remains focused on the ship as the rest of the crew shield their eyes. He then glances to a mountain peak just off to the ship's port bow. Preston quickly taps the side of his helmet as it powers on with a chime. He then commands, "Ship, give me helm control." The vessel's onboard computer responds, "Given." Preston continues, "Activate, control lens." From underneath the visor, a green lens slides over his eyes. He orders, "Lock all helm control. Set course through line of sight navigation; northeast peak, full burn on my command." The computer responds, "Course set; awaiting command." Preston dips his head forward and whispers, "Engage." The ship then rockets forward and slams violently into the side of the mountain. The ship explodes in a massive plume of fire and smoke. Twisted metal, ash and molten hull rain down, crashing into the lush jungle below. The orb and the ship are no more. Stunned, the crew looks to Preston, but before he can say a word a loud roar echoes from the jungle below. They immediately recognize its Arkon.

Preston then turns to the crew, plops on the ground and mumbles, "More than that jerk deserves." The crew breathes a sigh of relief and rushes over to him. Realizing what Preston has done, they all embrace. He has saved the galaxy from its dark fate; destroying the catalyst that could have set it in motion. However in doing so, Preston, Samuel and Shelly cannot use it to return home. In that sacrifice, they've become unsung heroes. With that, emotions are mixed as they laugh and cry.

At that moment, there's a stir off in the distance. Preston turns to it and in a booming voice shouts, "Tangen!" The others look. In amazement they see their friend staggering to his feet. He grabs his head, teeters for a moment then begins to stumble. Shelly immediately bolts towards him, wraps her arms around him and braces his fall. After regaining his balance, he turns to her and smiles. She meets his gaze. They pause and stare at each other longingly. Charlie then promptly exclaims, "What are you waiting for? Kiss her already!" They glance at her for a instant then Tangen cuffs Shelly's face lovingly before giving her a passionate embrace. The others erupt in cheer.

Suddenly, the moment is interrupted by the distinct sound of marching coming from the trail below. The team quickly positions themselves in a defensive posture with Jack taking the lead. As the visitors come into view, Tangen suddenly breaks from the group and rushes to the strangers.

Leading the procession is an elderly man, dressed in native attire. Tangen greets him respectfully, dropping to one knee then lowering his head. The man then gently taps his right shoulder, bidding him rise. Then in a foreign tongue they converse, occasionally turning to the crew as the elder's entourage looks on curiously. Tangen then gestures towards the team before guiding the man to them.

The elderly man looks upon them in amazement, searching for the words that never come. Preston takes the initiative and steps out from the side and says, "Hi, it's very nice to meet you. I'm Preston and these are my friends, The Galaxy Crew." The man smiles then replies, "I am Toma, Eldest of the Volian, it is very nice to meet you." He then looks over the team, gestures his arms out toward everyone and says, "Welcome home."