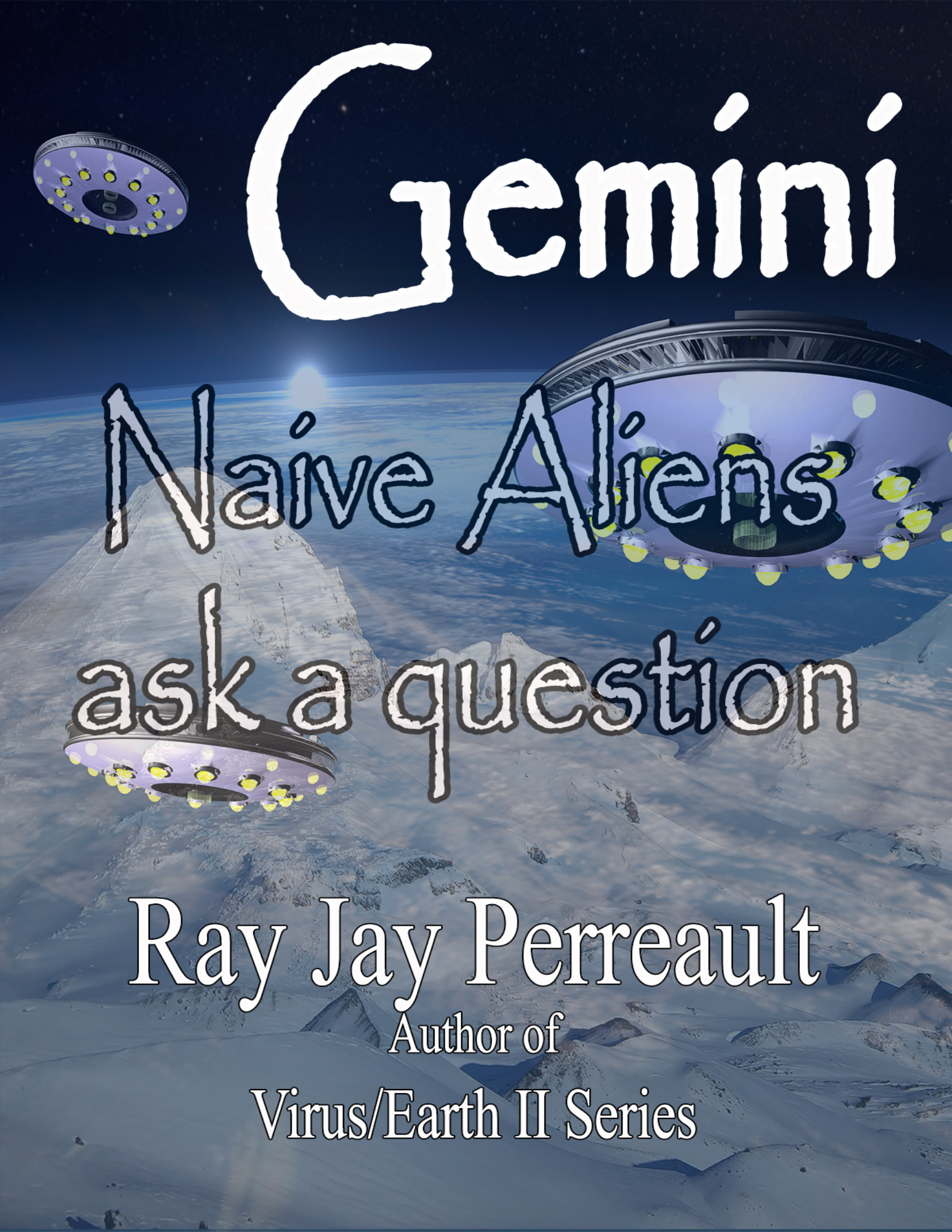
Gemini
Naive Aliens
ask a question
Ray Jay Perreault
Author of
Virus/Earth II Series

“Gemini”

#GeminBk

Ray Jay Perreault

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Introduction

I love action science fiction, and I also love reading a story that makes me think. When I write, I'm trying to make the reader think a little. I love action, but I want a story that could be happening somewhere. In my sci-fi books, I've tried to create characters dealing with reasonable real-life issues, and yes, they are aliens. I like to focus on main characters that are different than what you'd expect. In a way, I'm saying, 'Hey, aliens are people too.'

Gemini is about a civilization that was complacent and perhaps naïve. They investigated the solar system around them and found that not all creatures were like them. The Raog were forced to mature, defend themselves, and change to survive.

Ray Jay Perreault

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EPILOGUE

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1-The Launchers

Doctor Wong was about to witness the launch of the Observer satellite, which was his satellite. It had been his only goal for most of his working life. It would answer the fundamental question that some Raog had been asking for years, “What was out there?”

Putting a simple satellite in orbit halfway between Varo and the potential twin planet was the only way to answer that question.

Doctor Wong was a Raog who lived on the planet Varo. Varo was mostly rock and minerals, with a couple of major mountain ranges and a gently rolling surface. It rotated with almost zero inclination to its axis. Each rotation yielded long days and nights, and the days were the same length throughout the year.

Their world-mother was Varo. The planet Varo was the provider; the soil, wind, and rain were its spiritual elements. All of that was in balance, and the people were happy. Yet, despite a comfortable existence, there were those among them that looked to the skies and wondered how they fit with what they saw.

Doctor Wong was a large Raog, compared to others. He was almost ten hands tall with light tan fur, beginning to grow patchy on his head. His eyesight had deteriorated over the years, and he was forced to wear eye lenses. Most times, he was gentle, but when others doubted his resolve, he could present a very formidable presence. He had never worried about dressing fashionably, as his body coverings were functional, and he put little thought into what he wore.

Doctor Wong had studied the skies for his entire life. When he went to school, he was always more interested in anything in the sky than on the ground. During his career, he improved the telescope designs and traced the paths of all of the planets within their solar system. Because of this, he was able to improve the accuracy of the clocks and calendar.

Before Doctor Wong’s work, the passage of time was recorded when a faraway star named Eron emerged from behind the sun, signifying the

beginning of the planting season. The period between each emergence was one Eron. Tradition broke each Eron into eight segments, called Eronses, and within each Eronses, there were 48 days and nights.

Through Doctor Wong's work, he determined that one Eron was 383.89 days and nights instead of 384. Thus, the present-day calendars were called the Wong calendar in recognition of Doctor Wong's contribution.

As an additional acknowledgment of his contribution, the major University within the capital was called Wong University. This honor had always embarrassed him a little, but secretly he was proud of his accomplishments and that some people appreciated them. He was also proud of his son Ornage who had graduated with honors from that university.

It was during Doctor Wong's observations of the sky that he saw an approaching meteor. He painstakingly measured its approach and predicted its path through the solar system. He rarely saw moving objects in the sky, and observing one transit in the sky was exciting. As it approached the sun, his prediction said that it would pass behind the sun and continue its orbit to the far reaches of the sky. To his shock, when the meteor emerged, its trajectory had changed by five Degrees.

Unknown to him at the time, that observation would dominate the remainder of his life. It took two years of calculation for him to conclude that something had to be there. If there were another planet on the other side of their orbit, that planet's mass would have caused a change in the meteor's orbit.

"Is there another planet orbiting the sun?" was the question he would spend the rest of his life trying to answer. After finally getting approval to build a rocket and satellite, he was at a point in his career where he either found success or failure. He had to be correct because he realized there weren't enough years left to accomplish anything else of significance.

"Father," his son Ornage said, "I hope things go well; I know how important this is to you." Ornage was standing next to his father; he was also his unofficial junior partner, who had worked closely with him.

"Yes, my son," Doctor Wong responded, "this could be one of the greatest moments for our people." But, he continued under his breath, "and

hopefully, it will be the end of begging for resources and dealing with our leadership."

Dealing with the planet's political leadership was always a matter of frustration for Doctor Wong. He couldn't understand why they weren't curious about the solar system, particularly if there might be a planet opposite to them in their orbit. Having to ask for resources was never-ending. Each time, they would point out that every hour spent was one less hour used to grow more Jabom or some other 'more valuable effort.'

Ornage finished his career training five Erons ago and had been at his father's side as they designed and built the rocket and satellite. He was taller than his father, almost 11 hands. He was a lean young Raog, and his light tan fur was like his father's, which was typical of Raog from lower elevations. His temperament was still young. He hadn't shown his father's strength because his job was helping his father technically and not dealing with the frustrating elements of building a rocket.

Ornage was equally proud of being a Raog, and he was very aware that he and his father were doing something exciting, which would gain a lot of information for the Raog. He was also a typical young person, and he dressed in nice clothing and made sure that he groomed his fur for every occasion.

Doctor Wong was leaning on his resting pad, pensively touching his birth pouch. The birth pouch was a pouch of Jabom seeds that every Raog carried around their waist; it was given to them at birth to remind them that Jabom and the Raog had a mutual history. Jabom lived and died as the people of Varo lived and died. So the pouch was a continuous connection between them and the soil and Varo, which was the source of everything important.

The observation room was large enough for 10-15 people to walk around, talk and rest. Along the back wall was a table of Jabom dishes for the guests to enjoy. The room was plain and painted one color, typical of a work area. They had covered the walls with a mix of schedules, plans, and pictures of the spacecraft, along with some pictures of the scenery and farmers tending the Jabom. On the front wall was a large window that allowed the occupants to look into the adjacent launch control room where Doctor Wong's technical assistant Albot and his crew readied the rocket for

launch. Each of the technicians was resting on their pads with their backs to the observation room, and they were busy monitoring the various screens and data output devices. They were busy, so none of them looked up, beyond their consoles, where there was another window that showed the rocket on its launch platform ready to launch. In the corner of the observation room was the traditional container of Varo soil found in almost every structure on the planet. The container was simple and made of twisted Jabom stalks with a dish full of Varo soil resting on top. That design was typical of most homes and professional buildings. It might be more ornate in some areas, but it was always made in a common yet respectful way. Occasionally, during the day, each of them would touch or caress the soil as a soothing gesture or hoping for some good luck.

Every building or large meeting area had containers of soil, revered through its relation to Varo. Throughout the day, Raog would seek the soil to re-establish their connection to everything important.

The doctor glanced across the observation room to the Grand Leader and wondered what was going through his mind.

Grand Leader Invrok, who was the leader of the entire planet Varo, was standing on the other side of the observation room. His reason for being there, his interest in that folly, and what he hoped to achieve from it, was all very different from Doctor Wong’s. He was making inconsequential talk with a staff member; he wasn’t interested in the proceedings, but his hearing was focused, listening to what was going on.

The Grand Leader was small for a Raog and was at a midpoint in his life. He was about nine hands tall and perhaps had eaten a little too much Jabom. However, his head fur hadn’t started to gray or thin yet, and he was still good-looking. He was wearing his ceremonial robes, which designated him as the Grand Leader. The Grand Leader's robes had 5 rings on the sleeve, one gold ring on the top representing Varo, and below was one brown ring for Varo's soil, one green ring for Jabom, one blue ring for Varo's water, and one silver ring for Varo's wind. He loved those robes, and when he walked, he made sure they flowed with the movement, so everyone could see. His demeanor and poise showed him to be a person accustomed to making decisions.

Ornage was aware of the strained relationship between the two men and wanted to reduce the tension. He thought that if he made a positive comment for them to hear, they might find something of mutual interest to discuss. So he made a point of speaking in a clear voice for everyone across the room to hear. He pointed out to his father, “Father if our launch is successful and we do find a twin planet, it will truly be a major event for the Raog. “Ornage knew that statement would certainly get the attention of the Grand Leader and hoped to get the two of them talking.

When the Grand Leader heard any statement regarding the people of Varo, he had to participate. After all, he was a politician, and when anyone was talking about all of the Raog, he had to contribute. So he casually strode across the room, making sure he got the most effect from his robes, and said, “Doctor Wong, I agree with your son. We are fortunate that we have been able to make a commitment of such magnitude and attempt to answer that question. Answering that will allow us to move forward and focus on the important issues facing our people.” Upon completing his statement, he put a hand on Doctor Wong’s shoulder and offered the best smile he could. A political smile which Ornage recognized from the leader’s many pictures and personal appearances.

The Grand Leader was focused on ending the irritant. Doctor Wong was a nice enough fellow, but his persistence on that subject had worn their relationship thin over the years. The Grand Leader was concerned with the people of his planet Varo. What was in space was a minor concern to him. His people were growing food, caring for their young, building cities, and growing in numbers. Committing resources to any distraction was frustrating and hopefully near its end.

Dealing with the Doctor over the years was interesting at first, then aggravating, leading to frustration and finally irritation in the last couple of years. There were intellectuals among them that asked the question, “How do we fit in this existence?” Even though they were interesting to talk with at parties, their demands for resources would be trying and sometimes too much. After all, with no clear benefit for the people, why make the expenditure? From his perspective, the launch would quiet them and allow him to go back to leading his planet.

The Grand Leader's thoughts were on the launch, and not necessarily its success, but on how these talented people and expensive devices could be used to improve crop yields, transportation, and improved building construction. In fact, he thought, that room would be an excellent storage facility, and as soon as this distraction was over, he could put all of those resources to better use.

Doctor Wong was well aware of what the Grand Leader meant with his comments. He responded, "Yes, Grand Leader, it will be a major event, and regardless of the outcome, learning and moving forward go hand in hand to help the people."

The Grand Leader removed his hand from Doctor Wong's shoulder and continued smiling towards the remaining attendees. He moved away, flowing his robes, and talked with the others present. He had made his statement and reestablished his position within the room.

The Doctor felt that he had diverted the Grand Leader's hidden attack. Yet the comment just added another layer of importance to what he did and another realization that if it failed, his career would be over. The Grand Leader wasn't vengeful, but once you're not in a position to support the Grand Leader or the people, then you're not important. If he failed, he would still be invited to the occasional party, but he would be greeted with simple head nods and smiles when he talked. No one would listen or take his statements too seriously.

The Grand Leader's many years leading the planet had taught him to focus on the important things that brought health, shelter, and nourishment to the people. It was because of that, he had remained their leader. However, achieving the position of leadership was more of acquiescence on the part of the residents rather than taking control or being elected.

Leadership was informal. Those who made decisions and provided benefits were followed by more people. Over time, a leader developed a following, and as long as their decisions improved the Raog's lives, the residents accepted their leadership. At each level, the objectives were clear; produce Jabom, share Jabom, nurture the young, care for the elderly, and communicate with others. The leaders assumed their roles based on how well the process worked. If the proper decisions were made and the production increased to each level of the organization, everyone was happy,

and the leader remained in place. On the other hand, if changing weather patterns, breakdowns in transportation, or other calamities occurred, and the leaders didn't react properly, the leader changed, usually without a lot of fuss. It just happened.

As long as the Raog of Varo could plant their Jabom, feed their families, and care for their young, who was leading was less of a concern. They respected their leaders and knew that they were needed, but leaders were only a part of caring for the Jabom and their families. Therefore, the leader's importance was based on his success more than his position.

Ornage didn't feel any stress reduction, but at least they talked. Now he wanted to reduce his stress, and he casually strolled across the room to the daughter of the Grand Leader, Sonyata.

Just seeing her, he forgot about the stress between their fathers, which helped reduce his stress. She was the focus of his life, and as he approached her, it made his life better. Was it something about the way her fur glistened in the light or was it the way she moved? For some reason, the air was lighter near her, and it even had a hint of fragrances that smelled like a beautiful day. Regardless none of that mattered now that he was near her.

Sonyata was an average-sized young female. She stood about nine hands high and had a beautiful smile. Her fur had many shades of light tan, which shined in the light. Because she knew that she would see Ornage, she took extra time fixing her fur and even put a beautiful Jabom flower over her right ear.

Fashion was functional, not too ornate, and not too simple. Most Raog took pride in how they looked; their grooming was meticulous. There was little difference in the body coverings, except subtle differences in coloring. The fabrics and coloring were made from the Jabom plant. The fabric came from the stalk of the Jabom, and the coloring came from the Jabom fruit. As the fruit matured, it constantly changed color, and anytime during the growing cycle, the fruit could be harvested and the color extracted and used as a dye. Each growing area had segments set aside that were harvested in small quantities almost daily to extract the changing colors.

"Wow, the tension between our fathers is thick," he spoke gently to her.

“Yes, I wish they could calm down a little,” Sonyata responded. “What do you think we’re going to find?” she asked.

After she had spoken, Ornage hesitated because it was pleasant hearing her speak. Then he focused on her question and answered, “Sometimes I hope we find a twin, and sometimes I’m worried that we might,” and after a pause, “I know that I’m curious,” he said.

Sonyata smiled and responded, “I don’t know what I want you to find; you know about the pet Orack that put his nose in too many holes?”

Ornage laughed, “Yes, he put it in one too many.”

She had made her point, and Ornage realized it.

Doctor Wong knew that the launch was getting near, and he passed by the container of Varo soil and touched it, hoping for some help from Varo. Then, he moved to his reserved resting pad. As Doctor Wong got comfortable, the others in the room sensed their cue and began finding their pads. Finally, the Grand Leader approached and leaned on his pad beside the Doctor and waited.

The room wasn’t large by any standards, and although it had the best technology, putting a satellite into orbit that far from Varo would be a major technical challenge. There were fourteen co-workers involved in the launch who worked in the control room. They were all leaning on their rest pads at their consoles in the final stages of preparation.

Doctor Wong and the Grand Leader looked straight ahead through the window in the observation room and beyond, through the additional window in the launch room, upon the rocket. It sat on its launch pad with vapor escaping, which blew some distance downwind. From their location, they couldn’t hear any noise outside of the observation room, so the rocket poised there might have been a picture if the escaping vapors weren't moving.

The rocket was 500 hands tall and had taken the best engineers two Erons to make. The satellite rested on top of the rocket and looked like the tip of their Jabom planting tool, the Pointer of Life. It looked poised to penetrate the clouds of Varo like the pointer penetrated the soil and

provided the Jabom. The rocket's design was similar to other rockets, which they had used to launch maintenance crews into space to repair satellites.

Their space program was developed to meet immediate needs. There was no extra effort to explore or develop the technologies further. Many satellites had been launched and were regularly used to monitor weather and crop growth, so the space program was a natural necessity to maintain the satellites. The weather wasn't so bad that they needed satellites to monitor, but the Raog were consumed by the need to plant Jabom. They searched for the best weather, the best soil, and the best winds. They had ample supplies, but planting and growing Jabom was more like a religious experience than merely planting food. They had been successful with those flights, which was encouraging for that launch.

The rocket outside the launch facility could carry a satellite and put it in a low orbit. Then after one orbit, a small onboard rocket would accelerate it, and the satellite would leave the planet's gravitational pull. The satellite's acceleration continued on a course veering slightly towards the sun. The satellite would continue to accelerate and stay within Varo's orbit. If the path weren't towards the sun, the added velocity would move the satellite to an orbit further out of Varo. The onboard rockets would cease firing at a predetermined time, and the satellite would use its excess energy to move outward to the proper orbit. When it reached a point in the orbit halfway between Varo and its possible twin planet, an additional rocket firing would slow the satellite to achieve orbit. Even though that flight plan wouldn't yield a perfectly circular orbit, minor eccentricities wouldn't hinder the goals. This path was chosen because it would get the satellite into position in the shortest amount of time. At that point, it would observe if there were a twin planet and communicate with Varo.

The launch wasn't trying to accomplish a lot. The small satellite had a radio receiver, telescopes, and a transmitter. It was a minimal attempt to resolve Doctor Wong's calculations and determine if there was another planet opposite to them. By receiving any radio transmissions, the satellite would determine if there was life on that planet and, by transmitting a short message, let them know that the Raog existed.

The satellite was going to survey the space where the twin was thought to exist and take pictures with a telephoto lens. Then, it would send a

prerecorded electronic message for a precise amount of time and listen for any radio transmissions during a pause of the same length of time. It was hoped that any intelligent life would recognize the pause as an opportunity to respond. After a short time, it would transmit the images back to Varo. If radio transmissions were heard, they would be recorded and transmitted to the home planet continuously as long as the satellite remained in orbit. The plan was to detect the twin, but there was no plan to establish a continuous link. After all, there would be a language difference, and it could take a great deal of time to translate any data or communications.

The investment in resources was significant, but the overall emotional investment was guarded. Most Raog were a little curious, but they were too focused on their lives to have a real concern about the outcome.

Determining if there was another planet was the main goal and pretty much the only goal. Very little thought had been put into the impacts to their planet and society. After all, they had everything they needed; what impacts could affect them? Verifying a twin planet only provided an answer to some of the curious among them. There was no immediate impact foreseen. After all, what could happen?

Ornage took his resting pad next to his father, and he was nervous. At that point in the launch, he had no direction for his energy. Nevertheless, the plan was complete, the rocket was ready, the satellite was ready, and it was in the hands of Varo and the technicians.

He shared his excitement with his father, Doctor Wong, “Father, that satellite is an amazing accomplishment. I pray to Varo that we’ve taken care of all of the details and our calculations are correct.”

His father responded with a simple squeeze of his son’s hand.

Doctor Wong was proud of his heritage, yet he was frustrated that more of the Raog didn’t look to the sky, wanting to understand their place. He had fought hard over the years to get the resources, and the battles had been long. The project was more complex than launching a Raog in a rocket for satellite maintenance. Safety was a major concern when they had a Raog piloting the craft, but this mission was different and required more precise timing, and many events had to happen at the perfect instant. When a Raog was flying, the pilot's skills controlled the events, but the rocket carrying

the communication satellite was controlled by many finely timed devices which had to activate at the exact moment for success.

Early in the design stages Doctor Wong, Ornage, and their team had long debates about using more electronics and computing devices. Those other options definitely had their place, but the consensus was that they should stay with a technology that was well known and had their confidence.

Computers were used in the society but creating complex timing mechanisms was a matter of pride, and if done well, they could handle the requirements. However, the flight was in a demanding environment, and computers became unreliable in high stress and high vibration conditions, so staying with mechanical systems was an easy decision. Raog computers were large but not sophisticated. Their computational needs were simple, and although they enjoyed programming, their needs had been satisfied.

Ornage didn't express it, but he had a significant amount of pride and wonder in his father. After all, he had put the entire project together. He was caught up in the excitement of the activities and yet somewhat detached, his father was the key, and he accepted that he was his assistant. His father treated him with respect and always listened to his suggestions. He felt that his place alongside his father was the proper place, and he was happy to be there.

Success for his father would mean success for him. He had worked closely with his father over the years and made some significant contributions to the project, but success was less important to him. His youth provided so much optimism that the potential of failure was just that day's failure. He couldn't foresee any changes to his life as a consequence of a failed mission.

Ornage had a major distraction and someone of interest; Sonyata, who he kept in the corner of his vision. He was sure that she looked his way a lot, yet he realized that she must maintain her composure in public. After all, she was the daughter of the Grand Leader, and she had to act in a dignified manner in public. Furthermore, they both had roles to play, and if they paid too much attention to each other and the mission failed, they would be criticized for not being focused on the launch.

He looked her way whenever possible, and he caught her looking his way many times. Ornage and Sonyata didn't grow up together or even circulate in the same social circles, so he sought out any occasions to spend time with her. He was part of the satellite team, and his father was the leader, so they had obligations to socialize with the Grand Leader and his family. During those occasions, Ornage was able to spend time with Sonyata and get to know her. Their time together was fun and full of laughter with a shared enthusiasm in the launch. Unfortunately, beyond those social encounters and the rigors of the project, they weren't able to spend as much time together as they wanted. However, the times they did spend together were full of excitement and pleasurable discussions. Ornage respected Sonyata's intelligence and insight. She had made many observations that were clear and concise. She had a different way of approaching the problems, and it was refreshing to hear her inputs. Aside from that, he enjoyed having her with him.

There was something about the way she carried herself and the subtleties of her fur that attracted Ornage. Raog women moved with a certain elegance and Sonyata, in particular, moved in a manner he enjoyed watching.

Sonyata was more than just a socialite, and he was more than the son of an engineer. After all, he had contributed much to the project, and she was the daughter of the Grand Leader. She was intelligent, thoughtful, and cared a great deal about Ornage and the project.

Resting on a pad next to the Grant Leader was his spouse, Lretta. She and the Grant Leader had been paired for most of their lives. She was mildly interested in the result of the launch. Doctor Wong was an interesting fellow; at times. He was so interested in that theoretical twin planet that she saw a one-sided person with only one thing he could talk about. At times that was boring; at other times, she was intrigued, and sometimes she was frightened.

Lretta was very statuesque. Even though she was a very gentle and friendly person, the many years of being the wife of the Grand Leader had given her a certain formal air and carriage. She was about the same height as her husband.

Lretta gently touched her mate's arm and said, "Don't worry, it will be all over soon enough."

The Grand Leader's response was a simple nod and sigh. Both realized that the statement meant different things to each of them.

Life on Varo was good, and her position as a spouse to the Grand Leader was a comfortable one. Lretta had everything she wanted, she was respected, and as part of Varo's leadership, she contributed a great deal. Her spouse was the Grand Leader, and as his partner, she was the family value leader and mother to all of the Raog. The people of Varo called her the Orb.

The roles of Grand Leader and Orb had been partnered for so long, they appeared to come together naturally. The husband of the Orb was the Grand Leader, and the spouse of the Grand Leader was the Orb. Likewise, Lretta and Invrok had been partnered for so long, the combination of their titles seemed appropriate and necessary. The two titles weren't combined by history or law, but it seemed natural and was so.

The Raog had a simple lifestyle, and their society was based on Jabom, so each member of the society performed roles that supported its growth and distribution. If a male performed a job better, it was assumed that he would. If the female performed the job better, she would be expected to satisfy the need. Many Raog worked as teams where the male would do a portion of the job, and the female would do the other. Often farming teams were a duo, the husband would work a few days a week, and the wife would work the others. So the Orb and Grand Leader sharing the decision-making and leading of the world was typical of how the Raog lived their lives.

The title, Orb, represented Varo and signified a globe that had no beginning and no end, such as the soul of Varo. It was more than a ceremonial role. She was the moral compass of the Raog and often provided guidance where a decision that affected the soul was needed. Morality and how they treated each other was a key element of the society. After all, the decisions that her spouse made always had an impact on the family and society. They made decisions in concert; he explained 'the what,' and she explained 'the why.' He, the practical part of the decision and her, the family, and the ethical part of the decision; each comes together to make a complete decision which helped the Raog the most.

The spiritual part of the society was broken into two parts: the soil and soul of Varo. Varo had given them the soil and Jabom, which was cared for by the soil tenders. The Raog were part of Varo's soul, for which the partner of the Grand Leader, the Orb, was responsible. Varo's soul was endless and included all. It was symbolized by a sphere, so the Grand Leader's wife was called the Orb.

The only people with unique body coverings were the Grand Leader, the soil tenders, and the Orb. Being a key element of their relationship with Varo's soil and weather, soil tenders wore soil-colored body coverings. That indicated their dependence and connection with the soil. On the other hand, the Orb represented all that was good, such as family, morality, and overall spirit. Because of that, the Orb wore brightly colored robes that flowed like the wind when she walked.

There was something about that launch, which concerned Lretta. Finding out if the twin planet existed might have a profound impact on her people, and she was a little frightened that it would not be a good impact. However, her concerns were for the Raog, and she couldn't get distracted by actions that didn't provide a benefit.

Lretta was well aware of the attraction between her daughter and the son of the project leader. It was somewhat humorous, and though she didn't know if it would lead anywhere, being a mother, she subtly encouraged the relationship just to see her daughter happy. Ornage was a very nice young man, and he treated her daughter well.

Sonyata was enjoying herself; in her own estimation, she was a closet engineer. She loved the technology and intricacy of what they were doing. And, even though she heard many times from her father about the frustrations of dealing with Doctor Wong, she shared Ornage's enthusiasm about answering the question.

When she heard Doctor Wong and her father talking about the project, they were times of enthusiasm and imagination for her. She would listen to the technical discussions, problems, and possible solutions, and she would let the information feed her imagination.

Given those little pieces of inside information, she would go to the library and read any publications available, trying to put the subjects

together. Her education wasn't in engineering, as she saw parts of the discipline boring, but her intelligence allowed her to fill in the gaps and extrapolate them to far-reaching conclusions that stimulated her thoughts.

Sonyata was very aware of Ornage on his pad next to his father. Ornage's presence only added to the heady atmosphere of the launch. She enjoyed their discussions and debates about the project's technical elements. She knew that Ornage was very intelligent and hoped that he enjoyed their time together as much as she. She was also impressed by the contributions that he had made. Of course, Ornage would never claim the credit, but he had pointed out numerous technical problems that surely improved the chances of success.

She suspected that he was in love with her although he hadn't said it yet. Of course, she hadn't said it either, but when they are together, the beginnings were there, and they just needed to be nurtured and tended to. After all, love was like growing Jabom; once the seed was present, just add some water, nourishment, and wait, soon it would blossom.

Orto was the last member of the dignitaries watching the launch. He stood in the corner so that he could observe the participants. That way, he could collect all the information that he could use to his advantage in the future.

He was the local leader, and the capitol fell within his district, one of 73 across the planet. He was subordinate to the Grand Leader but aspired to fill that position. In his mind, that project was a waste of time if it failed, but if it succeeded, he had to find some way to be part of the success. If it failed, he would make sure the Grand Leader was blamed for wasting valuable resources. In the very unlikely event that it succeeded, he would blame him for not being more aggressive and answering that question a long time ago. After all, the primary responsibility of the Grand Leader was to look out for the Raog. If he didn't use resources properly or anticipate their needs, he was at fault, which needed to be pointed out. Of course, Orto would point those failures out in a subtle way. After all, he couldn't appear to be maneuvering for the position, but if it were thrust upon him, then he would accept graciously. Orto was encouraged, knowing that failure's downside was more likely to help him than the slim chance of success.

Orto assumed that the mission would be a failure; his mind was already focused on how he could claim the relationship between the Grand Leader and Doctor Wong as an obvious lack of leadership. After all, wasting resources finding a twin planet was very questionable.

Ellig was standing in the back of the observation room. From that vantage point, he could observe everyone and watch their reactions. He was only a minor player in all of the activities. He represented the Newsource, an organization that provided print information distributed freely to all of the residents. When a planet-wide broadcast of important events was needed, Newsource produced it. He would often record information about the district's Jabom yields and publish that for all to see. Most of his reporting was about Jabom and the occasional changes in leadership around the planet.

All of the cities had their facilities and Newsource personnel. It was their job to pass information to the districts and communicate the leaders' activities to the people. The Newsource was a communication tool. It rarely brought up any controversy; because there usually wasn't much. He was the Newsource person assigned to the capitol, and he followed the Grand Leader and district leader passing their statements and observations to the districts.

Ellig's only involvement there was professional. Nothing that affected the people had happened yet; the launch by itself didn't mean much, but watching the interplay between the Grand Leader and District Leader was more important. He could sense the beginnings of a leadership struggle.

Leadership struggles weren't the Raog's way. The population followed their leaders, and when they were unhappy, a new leader seemed to emerge. That didn't often happen, and it was a peaceful transition; one just took on the responsibilities of the other.

Ellig suspected something different. He had been around leaders his entire career, and he knew that leadership changes weren't that casual. He knew there was a constant, low-level amount of maneuvering and positioning that occurred. It wasn't obvious, but to a keen observer, it was apparent. Perhaps this was the beginning of a new struggle.

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The Capitols' soil tender Vortus was one of the many spiritual leaders representing the other half of their spiritual life. He wasn't at the launch, he wasn't invited, didn't care about the result, and didn't see any need to verify the existence of a twin planet. That issue was of no interest to him. All that was important was right there in front of him. The Jabom the planet produced, the people who lived on the planet, the weather the planet provided, the existence that he saw was because of Mother Varo.

Vortus was one of the more senior soil tenders, and he was also one of the most vocal. The soil tenders focused on their local people, the soil, the weather, and how bountiful Varo was. They spent their time with the people, helping with crops, planting, harvesting, and serving the planet's bounty. The food that was produced represented the food for the soul of Varo, and it had to be respected. Because he was one of the senior soil tenders and worked in the capital, he dealt with the local leadership. He helped resolve important issues, such as crop plantings, weather effects, and food distribution.

Varo provided the weather, nutrients, and seeds to produce the crops. The Raog of Varo had the responsibility to plant the seeds, harvest the crops, share the bounty, cook the meals then return their essence back to the soil. That was the soul of the planet, and they only had a part. If they did their part, the nutrients would be returned, shared, and used again in subsequent generations. Varo would continue to provide.

2-The Event

The time for the launch had finally arrived, and the technicians indicated to Doctor Wong that the rocket was ready. He looked at his smiling son, then moved his hand up and down, indicating, go ahead. Everyone in the room looked at each other momentarily then they looked forward through the windows.

The roar of the rocket started as a low rumble and rapidly increased in volume and vibration, and it provided a definite rumble in the observation room. The brilliant flames emerged from the bottom of the rocket and lit up the surrounding area, as well as the interior of the launch and observation rooms. The monitors showed the systems performed well, and the view through the small windows somehow reduced the magnitude of the launch.

As the missile cleared the launch platform and went on its way, the response in the room was less than ecstatic. After a moment, the vehicle passed from the window and continued on its path into space. Most of the personnel were glad their jobs were done to perfection and the launch achieved, but concerns about the remaining flight and the existence of the twin planet were less on their minds than going home. After all, that wasn't their concern; it was the leaders' interest and those who would monitor the remainder of the flight. What any impacts a twin planet would have on their lives was beyond their immediate concerns.

Doctor Wong felt a little relief. His life's work was on its way, and he would no longer have to beg for resources and explain why the twin planet question was worth all of that. Instead, he could trust in the mastery of the mechanisms that would control the flight path and events of the satellite.

Doctor Wong rose and hugged his son. He turned to the Grand Leader just as the leader said for all to hear, "This was a critical moment for the people of Varo. Let us all congratulate Doctor Wong and wish him a successful use of resources."

The room broke out into warm applause, and hand pumping as Doctor Wong said, "We, the people of Varo, hope to have a fundamental question answered, whether we are alone or if we have a twin planet. Let's all hope

this mission succeeds in answering that question." Once again, there was applause throughout the room.

The rocket would send periodic updates as it reached orbit. After stabilizing, the rocket and satellite would separate, and the rocket would complete its orbit then decelerate and burn up in the atmospheric reentry. Once the satellite separated, it would fire a smaller rocket and accelerate to leave Varo's gravitational pull. The success and failure depended on the onboard mechanisms, and ground control had very little to do but wait.

The Grand Leader was satisfied that the resources performed well and the emphasis on the launch was behind him. He doubted Doctor Wong would continue pressing him, and he could get back being the Grand Leader. His thoughts immediately went back to how he could refocus those resources and facilities for the benefit of the people.

Lretta, the Grand Leader's spouse, was also relieved. She shared in their congratulations, and she could quickly begin to think about other pressing problems of the residents. There was a part of her that was frightened. A failure would have been a minor point in their lives; discovering a twin planet would raise many questions that she didn't have answers for, and having no answers would disturb her Raog. They didn't need that kind of distraction, and hopefully, that would come to pass, and she could regain her focus for the wellbeing of her people.

Sonyata was relieved; after all, the success was good news for Doctor Wong and Ornage. Perhaps she could find a way to spend more time with him. The technical part of her was happy that the technology succeeded; the female part was excited because a man who meant a great deal to her, had been successful. But the daughter of the Orb felt something foreboding about those events.

The Raog were strong, yet change wasn't something that set well in society. If a twin planet were discovered, it could lead to some major changes. Her mother, the Orb, would have to deal with them, but as her daughter, she felt the pain and uncertainty that her people would have.

Orto was the only member of the delegation that was disappointed. Catastrophic failure would have ended the issue quickly and provided him

with material for his benefit. Having a successful launch merely delayed the inevitable failure and waste of resources.

Orto thought it would be a good time to score some points. He positioned himself beside the Doctor and Grand Leader saying, “Now that the first step of this major commitment has succeeded, I hope that our focus on other pressing issues can be renewed. I’m sure we all hope that this mission will succeed, regardless of what it cost, but let’s remember what is truly important to my district and Varo.”

The Grand Leader knew what Orto meant, and even though he noted the veiled threat, he agreed to some extent with the sentiment. “Yes, Orto, we have taken the first step, and now we can focus on important issues.”

The Grand Leader and Orto diverted their discussion to a pending review of planting issues, gardens, and warehouses in Orto’s district. However, they didn’t plan to stay until the satellite left orbit, so they exited the launch facility together to conduct their business.

Lretta knew that her life partner would be worried about other matters for the rest of the day, so she took a transportation vehicle home. Once she left the facility, it was easy to put the subject of the twin planet out of her mind and think about more important matters.

Ellig noted the interchange for posterity and made a mental note that finding a twin planet could be newsworthy and important to Varo's people. So he decided to stay close and see how the news developed.

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Vortus knelt in his garden and noticed the rising rocket on the horizon. He picked up a hand full of soil and felt a connection with it. The rocket that moved through the sky was a mere distraction from what was important. The soil of Varo would continue producing Jabom, and the people would continue eating and contributing to the soul of Varo. Nothing would change, and the small sliver of metal that moved into space was disappearing from his thoughts. Where would he plant more Jabom today?

Vortus had never found a life partner, which was typical with either male or female soil tenders. Soil Tenders felt the calling to the soil early in their lives. They wanted to focus on Varo's gifts and usually weren't interested in the other aspects of Raog life, like bearing and raising their youth. Their focus was the soil and Jabom; bringing up children was left up to those who felt that need. He was focused on his people and what they needed that day. Vortus was a focused man, and his only mission was to monitor Jabom while it was within the responsibility of the people. That was a solemn responsibility that took all of his time and dedication.

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General Aarm gave orders to his staff regarding the many preparations that he wanted them to do. They always seemed to have excuses and reasons why they weren't getting things done. Supplies had to be inventoried, packaged, and moved. Crew members had to be allocated, trained, and organized. His commands must be acted upon quickly, or steps would be taken to increase motivation.

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Romaa moved quietly down a side street and often turned to make sure no one was behind her. This was a dangerous meeting for her. So many events were coming together, and it would be only a matter of time before those events would change their future.

She expected to be called to duty at any time, so this meeting had to occur quietly and quickly.

She stopped one last time and checked behind her, good she didn't see any movement. She made a gentle knock on the door with some subtle taps to follow. She then slid through the door before it fully opened.

The room was full of familiar faces, and they all stood to acknowledge her arrival. She took a deep breath and began to speak. "I'm glad that you are here. I see that everyone is present, and that gives me courage. Many

events are happening that we feel aren't good for us. Our leadership has made decisions that will continue doing harm to us. That is why we are all gathered here. We met before and agreed that we must act together if we are to be successful. It appears that time is rapidly approaching. Each of you represents other groups whose members are unknown to me. I know that has been difficult, but it has been necessary, so none of us knows the number and names of our full membership. I expect many of us to be called into service in a short time, and when we do, we'll be leaving. I know that we'll be forced to take the necessary steps at some time on our trip. When we do, we'll get the word back to you so that you can put your parts of our plan into motion here. There will be no other meetings. We have made this commitment to each other, and we'll be expected to act in a short time, and we must all be ready. Go now and prepare your groups."

After a couple of quick side discussions, the room emptied quickly. If they were caught, everyone knew, the punishment would be swift. Romaa remained alone in the room, thinking. She didn't start this but inherited it from her predecessor; he had been found out, and the leadership took care of the problem.

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Irrm was sitting at his controls, waiting for direction. His job was to sit and wait. They would tell him when they needed him. Until that time, he would sit and wait, all day if necessary. He knew that somewhere in the back of his craft, they were being loaded. They wouldn't tell him how many were loaded, where they were loaded, or why they loaded them. When told to leave, his job would be to operate the craft to its designated drop-off point and then sit and wait for them to be unloaded. Then the process would start again unless he was lucky, and he was instructed to return with an empty craft. If that happened, that's the part he would enjoy; he enjoyed operating the craft by himself.

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Now that the satellite was on its way, Sonyata and Ornage sensed an opportunity to talk. They maneuvered to a corner of the room, and Ornage asked, “What did you think?”

Sonyata responded enthusiastically, “It is very exciting, and I pray to Varo that everything continues on schedule and we get pictures of something.”

Ornage leaned closer and said, “My only disappointment is that we might not be able to spend as much time together talking about the launch.”

“You’re right, Ornage,” Sonyata said in a near whisper, “but now, we can spend time talking about the point in space where it will take photos and communicate.”

Ornage sensed that something had just happened, but it took him a moment to realize that Sonyata suggested that they spend time together. Now that the launch was done, Ornage was afraid they wouldn’t be together as much. Her suggestion to spend time with her excited him. Should he ask to go somewhere together, he thought.

“Sonyata, you didn’t go home with your parents,” he paused, repositioned himself, and continued, “Can we go somewhere and eat?”

Sonyata’s heartbeat faster while thinking, good he picked up on my hint. “Ornage, I’d love to.”

While they waited, the rocket reached orbit and discharged the satellite. The satellite fired the necessary onboard rocket per its internal timing mechanism. It moved out of the orbit of Varo along a trajectory that it would follow for almost two Eronses until it reached the point of its next event. Being a machine, it had no feeling of doom or jubilation. It had no concerns about the effect that it would have on the lives of the people on the planet Varo. After all, the satellite was merely a bunch of little pieces that are fit together to accomplish a goal, nothing more.

The satellite was on its way to the mid-point, Doctor Wong finished the congratulations to each of the remaining technicians, and they made their

way out of the facility. Doctor Wong had some paperwork to do, so he excused himself and went to his office.

As Sonyata and Ornage looked around the room, they realized that they were almost alone. There were just a couple of technicians monitoring the remainder of the launch and finishing up in the launch room, but they were alone in the observation room.

Ornage asked, “May we go?”

Sonyata smiled and moved towards the door.

As the door opened, they were confronted with the heat of mid-day. The weather was extreme at times. During the heat of the day, the sun would heat the surface, which Jabom thrived on, and during the night, the temperature dropped considerably. Because of the planet’s slow rotation, the air at the equator, the hottest point, rose, and opposite the planet, the cool air descended. That circular movement provided a constant flow of air from the cooler side of the planet to the warmer side. The storms formed at the transition point between light and dark. That is where the mixing of warm and cool air occurred. As the planet rotated, the hot point under the sun was usually clear, and the point where dusk or sunrise was occurring was usually stormy. Each day the morning awoke the Raog with a rain shower to nourish Jabom, and in the evening, they were welcomed with a rain shower to wash off the grime and sweat of the day.

They took Ornage’s vehicle into the capitol to find a nice eating location near her home, which they would both enjoy. Each eating establishment had their own specialties. After all, Jabom could be prepared in 1682 different ways. Some restaurants specialized in bread, others stews or soups, some focused on juices, pudding, or pies. As Ornage and Sonyata drove, they had many options for enjoying Jabom and each other.

While they drove, very little was said. They just enjoyed each other’s company and the momentary quiet of being away from the launch site. They were lucky; there were few Jabom harvest vehicles on the road. They encountered mostly private transportation. At that time of year, between the harvests, the streets weren’t very busy, but during the harvest, there would be many transportation vehicles on the road moving the Jabom harvest. There always was some Jabom moving around. It was stored locally, so

distribution was constantly occurring. When the local storage was consumed, larger shipments would come from the northern caves to the city's distribution centers. Then it would be distributed to local centers then homes.

The vast majority of transportation on Varo was done on the ground. Air travel existed but was rarely used. The planes weren't very large and were suited only to transport a small number of passengers. The Raog had no need to leave their home areas, the Raog lived near their families, and their young didn't move far away. Air travel was for specific purposes and was usually used by the leadership. Family and friends stayed where they grew up, so there was no reason for them to travel. Everything they needed was usually within a short walk.

Traveling to sightsee never occurred. The planet was pretty uniform and what you saw around your home was what you would see around other homes across the planet. The mountains and few lakes were enjoyed on occasion, but the main focus always remained on the Jabom and family.

The buildings on each side of the road weren't large or ornate. The buildings were generally 2-3 levels high and had many windows to enjoy the environment and sustain their connection to the soil. In most cases, they were made of stone and were the same colors as the local soils. Over the generations, as the cities emerged, the architecture became simple and functional, representing the commonly shared legacy with the soil.

The cities housed the administrators, the laborers, the machine drivers, the thinkers, the builders, the creators, and the organizers. All worked together and shared the food that the planet produced. Everyone knew their place in society, and each knew they would get their share of Jabom and support from others when needed. Some of the cities focused on the special needs of the Raog. Furtar, which was the city closest to the capital, was a manufacturing center. Another city's strength was building transportation vehicles, and other cities focused on art, music, and fashion.

Homes were usually built of rock that accomplished two purposes: first, removing the rock from the soil allowed better Jabom production. Second, because of the large temperature differences between the day and night, the heat warmed the cool rocks during the day, and the rocks shared the heat with the occupants at night.

The Raog recognized the soil as a gift from Varo. Any barrier to that soil was a barrier between them and the soil. Rocks and mountains were part of the planet, but they were a barrier, and when necessary, they were removed. The process of removal was a sensitive part of their relationship. Picking a rock up and moving it was one option, and using explosive powders was another. Picking the rock up was easy and caused no concern, but using explosive powders would disturb the soil and the soul of Varo. The explosive powders were part of the Varo soil. When used, great care was taken after the explosion to return the soil to the proper position, which meant leveling it, smoothing it, and preparing it for planting. It was more like a healing process than merely filling a hole.

The only thing of value to the Raog was Jabom. It was the primary and only food source. It was traded, exchanged, donated, given, and shared. Its roots were a delicacy because they were soft and full of moisture and flavor. Its fibrous stalk provided material for fabrics. Its leafy display provided garnish and was shredded, folded, dried, crushed, or just eaten cold. The fruit was the main part of the plant and provided nourishment, medications, and dyes for the fabric and could be eaten cold, cooked, fried, boiled, baked, fried, or roasted. While the plant was growing, the color of the fruit changed almost daily. It started with light greens, which turned darker, and as the plant matured, the fruit turned to pink, reds, eventually dark reds, and finally black. Jabom could be harvested at almost any point in its growth and would yield unique dishes to enjoy. There were 1682 ways to cook and prepare Jabom.

All of the people knew their dependence on Jabom, and each recognized the need to do their part so they could share in the bounty.

The restaurant Sonyata and Ornage selected was one of Sonyata's favorites. That particular establishment specialized in puddings, pies, cakes, sweet drinks and often had live entertainment. They entered, and the waiter walked them towards a table with two resting pads near the garden. Sonyata liked that restaurant because the garden meandered around the tables, and each had secluded areas. Between each of the tables, there were partitions with Jabom styled designs. The gardens had Jabom plants growing in sculptured sections, which helped the privacy. And, of course, the air was scented with a fresh and rich smell of maturing Jabom. That was a great place to spend time with someone special.

While they walked to their table, they heard comments from the other dinners. One particularly vocal patron with dark fur recognized Ornage and questioned him, “Ornage, I saw your rocket launch. So you still think there is another planet that we can’t see?”

Because of his dark fur, Ornage recognized the man as being from the mountains. If he were from the lowlands, his fur would have been much lighter. Ornage responded, “Yes, we are orbiting the sun, and it would explain the variation in my father’s calculations. Another planet would have the gravity to pull that meteor off of its trajectory. So if we do have a twin planet, we may share a great deal. Maybe not today, but if we have neighbors, we must contact them, maybe we could help them, or they could help us.”

He responded, “what help could they give us. We have our Jabom, we have Varo; what else would benefit us?”

“We only know of today. Varo has provided for us, and in the future, there may be ways that knowing our twin would benefit us. We trust in Varo, and we must also trust in our future.”

The patron continued and directed his comments to Sonyata, “If we find another planet, we won’t be alone. Does Varo care for them also, do they have the soil of Varo on their planet, and are we all part of the same soul of Varo?”

Sonyata was gracious in her response, “You ask many good questions. I know my Mother, the Orb, is asking them also. I don’t know what the answers are. Perhaps Varo will tell us what to do and help us welcome our new neighbors; if we find some.”

He was satisfied with their answers and directed his comments back to his partner sharing his table. While Sonyata and Ornage walked to their table, the conversation continued.

Sonyata and Ornage finally reached their table and got settled, and they soon lost interest in those around them and focused on each other. That was one of the rare occasions they had, to talk about each other, to each other. There were no parents, no launch issues, and no other distractions. The subject of the launch had dominated both of their minds for a long time.

That lunch was a chance for both of them to put the rocket and satellite out of their minds, and they talked about relaxing subjects.

The live entertainment finally started, and the two settled in for the extremely complex music. Raog music tried to recreate the sounds of nature, so their musical compositions had many instruments with many complex movements and subtle sounds. That was all possible, with numerous musicians playing hundreds of gentle notes in unison.

The couple that sang along with the musicians sang with complex and gentle harmonies. The Raog language didn't have many harsh sounds, but their singing smoothed the note's transition. At times, humming blended more with the nature sounds of the musicians, and other times hand and body movements went along very well with the rhythmic sounds. The music was always flowing from one point to another, and the motions of the singers fit the smooth flowing feel of the music.

As Ornage listened, he paid attention to the musicians' fast fingering and noted that it was that dexterous skill that allowed them to build rockets and satellites. Each musical device was like a finely crafted timepiece, which they had taken great pride in building. His mind wandered, and he thought about the other elements of the rocket and satellite design. Aside from the propulsion, the control mechanisms were brilliantly crafted analog mechanisms that accomplished the tasks. The only items that weren't mechanical were the camera and radio equipment which were simple in design yet perfectly crafted. In a way, even the propulsion systems were a finely crafted mix of explosive powders found in many locations on Varo. All of that craftsmanship and attention to detail would make the vehicle a success.

The lunch went too fast for either of them, and Ornage offered to give Sonyata a ride to her home. As they moved through the streets, Ornage thought about the rocket and satellite. He knew they were opening a new door in their history. He wasn't too concerned or too complacent. He and his father had a question that needed to be answered. Resolving the question was at least as significant as the impact of the answer. Sonyata touched his hand, and Ornage was immediately brought back to her and the pleasure of her company.

When they reached her home, Ornage leisurely drove up a long driveway that wound slowly around the small hill towards her home. Sonyata's home was on top, surrounded by maturing Jabom fields. As the daughter of the Grand Leader, she lived in a larger home than most Raog. The size wasn't a sign of wealth but more a solution to the need. Wealth for a Raog wasn't the accumulation of property. It was the breadth of their families. Jabom was the currency and the symbol of their success as a society. The Grand Leader had many meetings and even provided interim storage facilities for harvested Jabom.

The building was a typical structure. It was made of stones pulled from the surrounding fields. The color of the stones varied from region to region, and near the capitol, the stones were a grayish-brown rock. They were mostly flat, which allowed easy stacking and shaping. The rocks might have been rounder or other colors such as gray, brown, or even black in other regions.

Ornage stopped his vehicle and got out, and walked around to escort Sonyata to her front door. As they walked up her path, they talked about small things like the weather and their dinner. They walked slowly to delay the goodbye.

Once they reached the door, that was the moment that Ornage wasn't sure about. He thought that Sonyata liked him, but he wasn't sure how much. How should he say goodbye to her? He didn't want to be too aggressive and offend her, but he didn't want to miss an opportunity to show his affection either.

Similar thoughts were going through Sonyata's mind. She could sense that he was uncomfortable, and she didn't want to press him and expect too much. On the other hand, she could easily have shown her affection for him because a Raog female had the right to make that expression. Who would show the attraction first was up to each couple, and it usually solved itself pretty easily?

They reached the door and faced each other. Ornage felt that moment might be his one chance, so he leaned towards her, hugged her, and placed his nose in the nape of her neck below her ear. The transition between their head and shoulders was gradual, but there was a natural space in which the partner's face fit perfectly. The connection was natural and pleasant.

Sonyata sensed his approach and eagerly did the same to him. That was a sign of deep affection, and they just stood there holding each other and enjoying the position. Both breathing deeply and enjoying the scent and closeness of each other.

After a long time, they parted reluctantly.

Ornage said, “I hope we can spend a lot of time together.”

Sonyata liked the sound of that and said, “I look forward to that.”

3- The Wondering

A couple of days later, Sonyata and her mother were in the garden. “Sonyata,” Lretta said, “I’ve got concerns about that twin planet. Will you accompany me to the capitol museum? I’d like to review some of the ancient writings, and perhaps walking through the exhibits will help me put everything in perspective.”

“Yes, mother, I’d love to go with you.”

“Good, it isn’t fair. Would you like to walk?” asked Lretta.

“I’d love to walk. The smell of the fields is so pleasant this time of year. The Jabom will be harvested in a couple of Eronses, and the air is full of its fragrance.”

They walked down the driveway from their home and followed the short road to the outskirts of the capital. Once in the city, walking the busy streets was a nice diversion, allowing Sonyata and her mother to think.

As they walked, almost everyone would greet them and show some kind of respect. There were many friends who they often saw, who merely smiled and nodded. They were attempting to respect the privacy of a mother and daughter talking.

“Sonyata,” Lretta said as she walked, “we are a family-oriented society. We treasure our families and our relationship with Varo. Varo’s soul nourishes us through the soil. I’m not sure finding another planet orbiting our sun will fit our vision.”

“Mother, if I'm wrong, correct me, but I didn’t think the ancient writings said that another planet was impossible. The writings tell us how Varo cares for us, but they didn’t say that Varo might not be caring for others,” Sonyata said.

“You’re right. Perhaps we have limited Varo by assuming that it cares for only us. Perhaps Varo is much larger than we understand. Varo might be much broader and all-encompassing.”

They approached the capitol museum and felt dwarfed by the massive structure. The museum was six levels high and made of stones from all of the districts. That gave the structure a mosaic look, with many colors and textures, and in the heat of the day, the colors were most brilliant. Next, they entered the ground floor garden and enjoyed the smell of fresh soil, which was being tended by many soil tenders. There were several sections of the garden. Numerous couples were strolling through, along with a hand full of families enjoying the smells of Jabom. Finally, Sonyata and her mother passed through and entered the structure.

The first floor contained information about Varo, the planet. Many displays showed the entire planet and the northern and southern poles. Sonyata had traveled a lot with her parents, and she enjoyed traveling. Seeing the entire planet displayed helped her remember and visualize the world and the places she had seen.

The main entrance had a large globe that rotated and showed the entire surface of Varo. Sonyata and her mother stopped and watched the display make a rotation. The globe showed that only about 20% of the planet's surface had lakes and rivers. Some lakes formed at higher elevations, and the rivers flowed into the lakes at lower elevations where the few larger lakes formed. Virtually all of the moisture on Varo was in the lakes, in the air, in the plants, and in the soil.

Water and rain were the key elements of Varo's soul. Therefore, the water's movement from Varo to the air to the Jabom was important. The orbiting display had lights that showed water movement from the higher elevation lakes to the lower ones.

The next exhibits showed how the weather patterns formed and moved around the planet. The weather was critical for growing Jabom. During the heat of the day, the water in the lower lakes evaporated and was carried by the wind to the transition point of light to dark. That was where the storms formed, and the moisture was returned to the surface. Almost all moisture was caught in a cycle of evaporation captured by the plants, soil, and storms.

The soil on Varo was thin, rocky, and not very rich. What little soil Varo had was enough for the Jabom. Other plants grew, such as trees and brush in the mountains, and they were used for wood and other uses. Where the

soil wasn't proper for growing Jabom, grasses covered the soil. Even though there were many flowering plants, none of them was as interesting as the flower of the Jabom plant.

There wasn't a lot of surface water, so its evaporation was inconsistent. When lakes were in the highest heat of the day, a lot of water would evaporate, and that evening the storms would be more severe. When the sun was falling on mountains or unproductive land, the evaporation would be much less, and that evening's storms could be mild or nonexistent.

The final groups of displays showed the vast storage facilities at the northern poles. Maps and three-dimensional views showed the tunnels and how Jabom was stored and then transported to the population centers between the harvest seasons. The northern pole was the largest and contained a great deal of moisture. The southern pole was smaller and not a primary storage area. Both poles retained a lot of moisture, and the equatorial region was best for Jabom production. The further from the equator, less Jabom was produce, but it could be grown, to varying degrees, any place without snow. The poles were permanent, and the ice and snow were many arms thick. Over time, the northern pole had become the storage facilities for most of the planet. Many tens of thousands of arms of tunnels and storage rooms had been built and stored a great deal of the planet's Jabom crops.

Over time, the tunnels had become a permanent city. At times, many Raog were needed, and other times only a few were working in the caves. The snow and ice had been tunneled out, and many facilities had been built inside for the workers. The northern pole facilities had volcanic sources of heat and energy buried deep under the surface, so it was self-sufficient.

There were exhibits about the other animal life on Varo. There was a mix of smaller creatures, birds, and insects that fit in their particular segments of life on Varo. They weren't considered part of Varo's soul, but they were recognized as part of Varo. Many of them were beneficial and helped to fertilize the soil, and some were harmful, but none of them was a threat to the Raog. There was evidence of other larger creatures in the far past which may have competed with the early Raog. However, in later evidence, those creatures we no longer evident, and it was unclear if they died off naturally or became extinct because of the early Raog.

The upper floors had exhibits that showed different periods of their history. The first floor was the ancient times when the people were widely scattered on the planet, and they lived in caves and later rock dwellings. During those times, Jabom was prolific, and the native population quickly became dependent on it. The early Raog had few tools and began the basics of crop husbandry, developing Jabom and increasing the amount they could produce.

“It must have been difficult times back then,” Sonyata said. “They were so spread out and living by themselves, their lives were dependent on how well Varo provided good soil, moisture, and a good crop of Jabom.”

“Yes, even though Varo provided for them, the crops varied a lot, and many people couldn’t live in certain areas. They had to move a lot to find good crops and weather,” her mother observed.

The Second floor showed some of the hard times in their history. “As the society grew and the demands on Jabom production grew, struggles also grew. Good crops meant easy times, and bad crops put pressure on the civilization. The stress never reached the point of open conflict, but there were constant pressures between the groups. When they reached a certain point, they realized that working together would provide more for all with less stress, and the people of the time began living in larger groups and harvested Jabom in a more organized manner.

As the population groupings grew, the pressure to grow and distribute, more Jabom grew. It became obvious that the farmers were better at farming, and the other skills separated themselves and developed. The farmers could work the fields, and the technicians and support disciplines could do their parts in the smaller towns and villages. The struggles forced progress, and the communities came together.

“It’s obvious how the dependency on Jabom brought everyone together, and everyone realized that only by growing and sharing the Jabom, everyone could live happy and healthy. The harder they worked to produce Jabom, the more Jabom they produced. That helped bring society together. I wonder what would have happened to us if Jabom wasn’t so prolific and Varo hadn’t been so good for us.”

“If Varo hadn’t given us so much Jabom, I guess we would not have developed as much, and maybe we would have fought over the food,” Lretta said thoughtfully.

“Mother, I like the third floor the best. I like seeing how much we have developed our technologies in the last five hundred Erons, how we’ve developed as a species, and how we’ve learned to live and work together. That paints a much nicer picture,” Sonyata said with pride in her voice.

As they walked through the third floor, Sonyata gave her mother a running documentary on the exhibits and how much she enjoyed them. Lretta just smiled and enjoyed listening to the enthusiasm in her voice.

Sonyata was the most excited about the improvements in technology. She loved seeing how ground transportation was developed. How it grew into automated ground systems, and eventually flight and even space travel. All of which was focused on the growing, processing, storing, and distribution of Jabom.

Over the years, a modest effort was spent developing flight vehicles and finally rockets. These efforts were limited in scope, and they were focused on supporting the growth and distribution of Jabom. The families were local, the food source was local, so building better or faster aircraft didn’t seem relevant. Communications were limited, again, because everything important to an individual was local. Why did they need to communicate with a Raog on the other side of Varo? The technological improvements provided a gradual step from surface-dwelling creatures to creatures with an awareness of the sun and planets in the sky.

There were also exhibits showing the intricate timepieces and small mechanical devices that demonstrated the Raog dexterity. In many ways, those displays showed those mechanical devices as the pinnacle of their society. The complexity represented the complexity of Varo’s soul and the many parts that it had. Because of the many generations using their long arms and dexterous fingers working the Jabom, their fingers and hands became mechanically adept. That dexterous skill became a source of enjoyment, achievement, and technical progress—fantastic builders and adept at creating small devices and mechanisms.

The devices and mechanisms took on a life of their own. The complexity and level of integration required to create excellently functioning mechanisms that provided for their daily lives. If something was small and intricate, the Raog enjoyed it.

Creating integrated mechanisms was functional and such a source of pride that it became an art form. They reveled in complexity and proudly showed it as an example of their dexterous skills. All that was Raog was mechanical and intricate. The timepieces were mechanical, the transportation machines were mechanical, the mathematical manipulations were mechanical, food preparation was mechanical, and the medical devices were mechanical.

Sonyata enjoyed seeing the many displays that had examples of the small and intricate devices that Raog had built. Over the years, the Raog's fascination with small metal parts and the need for them to fit together forced them to develop a sophisticated knowledge of metallurgy. There was an interesting display that Sonyata loved, which showed the smelting process and how raw metals could be heated, and at different levels and temperatures of the process, metals with different characteristics were produced.

The fourth floor was the most popular. It was about Jabom, their primary food source. It also contained information about how they became dependent on Jabom. The first exhibit showed the plant and each of its parts. A mature Jabom plant was as tall as a Raog and provided fruit and usable material from the roots to the top of the plant.

The next exhibit showed where the Jabom would grow best on Varo. It showed that Jabom would grow almost everywhere, but because of the inconsistency in rainfall, the crop yields could vary by large amounts. Anticipating the good crop yields and planning food distribution from the good growth areas to the weaker areas was always a challenge.

They walked further and saw an exhibit on how Jabom was planted and cared for. Planting Jabom was a labor-intensive and ritualistic job. The plant grew pretty well on its own, but history and thousands of generations of planting and growing the plant provided a detailed method that increased the yield significantly. It also became part of the tradition and ritual of

planting their most cherished possession. Once the soil was level and fertilized, a layer of decaying Jabom leaves was put down.

On top of that first layer, a layer of the unused Jabom stalks was placed. Finally, the last layer was the unused roots of the plant, which contained moisture and more nutrients. The layers represented the plant from the top down but reversed for the planting layers. When the layers were complete, they were topped off with an additional layer of soil, and when everything was ready, a long pointed stick was used to penetrate the layers and insert Jabom seed.

The long stick symbolized the Jabom. It was usually hand-carved by the planters, and its design was ornate and detailed. Because it would penetrate the soil layers and represent the importance of the final step, the pointed stick shape was symbolized in many of their designs and art. Thus, it was called the Pointer of Life.

The last section on the floor showed how the Raog had developed with the Jabom, and through their dependence on it, they evolved to be physically better able to care for it. The Jabom was dependent on them, and they were dependent on the Jabom.

The people of Varo were a uniform society. As the regions developed over time, the languages eventually combined into a universal language of the planet. The typical Raog was 8-10 hands tall or about 1 ½ arms. The length of their hands and arms being the two standard measurements. Raog had evolved to work the land and remained erect most of the time.

The Jabom needed a lot of manipulations with their fingers to cultivate and harvest the fruit. Through the many ages of evolution, their arms grew longer and ultimately reached the ground, which allowed them to tend Jabom without having to bend or stoop. When tending Jabom, Raog would simply kneel by the plant, and when kneeling, they could reach around the plant and all the way from the ground to the top. Using their fingers to tend the crop was an honor and was a major part of their reverie for Jabom. That fruit was all that the Raog needed for survival, and its harvest and care dominated their development as a society.

Caring for Jabom had always been a team effort. For many generations, groups worked together caring for the crops. Raog had evolved with an eye

on each side of their heads equal distance between their ears and nose. They had developed a third eye higher on their forehead, in the middle between the other two. The three eyes allowed them to work as groups and see and coordinate movements with each other without having to move their heads. This arrangement also enhanced their feeling of community. Always having others in their view tended to bring them together in many social ways. Their world was what they could see, and what they could see was their world.

They were squat to the ground and walked with two legs. Their movement was more of a side-to-side wobble instead of a strong stride. Their bodies were more round than tall, with thin fur covering them. Their legs were relatively short, and their physiology allowed them to easily kneel, and for resting, a sloped panel with a resting pad was all that was needed. They would lean against the pad and take their weight off their legs, allowing them to enjoy long periods of relaxation. They had three very nimble adjacent fingers and one opposing finger on each hand. Their arms were muscular, and even though they didn't need to move fast, they became powerful and nimble.

Lretta thought about the fifth floor. That was her target because it contained all of the ancient writings. Access to that floor was controlled but not restricted. Anyone could go there, but they needed an appointment. As the Orb, she was one of the few that could access the ancient writings without calling ahead.

Lretta and Sonyata approached the entry point, and they were recognized and immediately let in.

"Mother, is there something specific that you want to see?" Sonyata asked.

"Yes, there are only a couple references that might be construed as referring to a twin planet. I just want to read them in context and see how relevant they are," The Orb said.

Lretta knew which sections to go to. Sonyata followed her to a stack of books that were dusty and looked very fragile. Lretta looked for a bit then withdrew a book. She rested at a nearby table and opened it. After a moment of turning pages, she focused on one section.

“Mother, is that the part of the ancient writings that you want?”

“Yes, it was written during one of our dark times when Imot was alive. I’m sure you remember he was one of the greatest soil tenders and was critical to our understanding of the soil and soul of Varo. Here let me read it to you.”

‘We are the growers of the food, we are part of the soul, and we are part of Varo. We are good early in the day, and our twin is evil in the night. Therefore, we must be in balance with our twin, for he may come and fight for our food.’

“Mother that has always been interpreted as meaning, the sun is good for Jabom and the cool of the night isn’t. The battle is always between the warmth of the sun and the cold of the dark. I don’t see a clear reference to a twin planet, but I suppose that interpretation could be valid,” Sonyata said.

“Unfortunately, you're right. Not a clear reference to our possible twin planet, and I don’t think it is clear enough to worry everyone." Then she continued, “The other quote was also from Imot, but he wrote it many Erons later.

"Here it is," she said as she found the right page, "'Brothers are but one, one brother grows Jabom and shares, the other wants to eat and enjoy but not grow. Being one, they nourish each other and hurt each other.’"

Lretta and Sonyata rested for a moment, dwelling on the last quote, and tried to imagine how it fits the current situation. Finally, Lretta asked her daughter, “What do you think that means?”

Sonyata thought for a moment, and she responded, “It’s like he’s saying that the two brothers need each other, but they also hurt each other. Two forces are fighting each other, and they must find a balance to survive.”

Her mother rested and absorbed what her daughter said and agreed, “I think you’re right. Within the family, there are usually pressures that force people together and also apart at the same time. To survive, they have to find a balance. Perhaps that is what we must find, some kind of balance so that we won’t hurt each other.”

While they walked home, they continued to reflect on the writings and how they related to the launch. Upon reaching their home, the Orb went to

her office to reflect on the ancient writings, and Sonyata decided to visit Ornage and discuss the writings of Imot with him. She left her home and walked towards Ornage's residence.

It was still early in the evening, and the showers were stopping as Sonyata moved through the passageways to Ornage's home. As she approached, she could see Ornage and his father in the garden, and it appeared they were preparing for a rebirth ceremony.

The rebirth ceremony was done at least annually by each family to reconnect to the soil and Jabom. It was usually done during the Jabom harvest season, but many times during the year, when a family felt under pressure and needed reassurance, they would conduct the ceremony. Thus, it was a ceremony of connection but also refreshment.

During the ceremony, each Raog returned the seeds in their birth pouch to the soil of Varo and placed fresh seeds in the pouch. That created a renewal with the soil, and it refreshed their connection with Varo. At a larger level, it represented the continuous birth and death cycle of the Raog and Varo.

It was a family ceremony, but also one eagerly shared with others. The ceremony wasn't solemn, but a celebration and a way to find peace during trying times. Ornage looked up and saw Sonyata. His mind quickly wandered from the ceremony. He excused himself from his father and rose to greet their guest.

"Sonyata, it is a pleasure to see you," he said as mature as he could, considering the distraction in his heart. "Please join us for our rebirth ceremony. It is always a pleasure to share it with others." Sonyata was pleased to be welcomed into the family ceremony.

The ceremony had three steps to it. The first step was the preparation of the soil. A small area was smoothed, then the three layers of the Jabom plant were placed in the correct order. Once the materials were placed, the final layer of soil would be spread on top, then leveled and smoothed. The second step was removing individual seeds from the pouch and using a miniature pointer of life to penetrate the soil; the seed would be planted. The third and final step was to sprinkle the soil with water to represent the

gifts of Varo. These steps were accompanied by spiritual songs that sounded like weather and gentle rains.

After the ceremony had ended, Doctor Wong realized that he had lost his son's attention for the night. He rose, saying, "I sense that the two of you would like to speak together." He smiled at Sonyata and said, "Please extend my good wishes to your parents, as well as accept my departure for the night." He bowed, left the garden to them, and moved to the Jabom preparing area.

"Ornage," Sonyata began, "My mother and I went to the capitol museum to look at the ancient writings, hoping to found some guidance regarding a twin planet. We found a couple of famous sections written by Imot. The first writings said, 'We are the growers of the food, part of the soul, and Varo. We are good early in the day, and our twin is evil in the night. We must be in balance with our twin for he may come and fight for our food.'"

"And the second writing was, 'Brothers are but one, one brother grows Jabom and shares, the other wants to eat and enjoy but not grow. Being one, they nourish each other and hurt each other.'"

Ornage was familiar with both writings, but having them interpreted towards the twin planet was unexpected. He sat there for a while and thought about how they applied.

After a few moments, Sonyata said, "I think the first quote means the sun is good for Jabom, and the cool of the night isn't. So the battle is always between the warmth of the sun and the cold of the dark. I don't know if the twin reference is meaningful, but it might be."

Sonyata added, "The second piece of text is the one that relates the closest, I think. 'Brothers are but one, one brother grows Jabom and shares, the other wants to eat and enjoy but not grow. Being one, they nourish each other and hurt each other.'"

Sonyata gave Ornage another moment to absorb the words, then added, "It's like he's saying that the two brothers need each other, but they also hurt each other. So two forces are fighting each other, and they must find a balance to survive."

Ornage was a little worried and finally said, “I agree with what you see in the writings, but I have only one interpretation.” He waited a moment, then added with emphasis, “Proceed with caution.”

They both agreed to that.

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General Aarm was moving among his offices, and a messenger approached him, "General Aarm, our Supreme Leader has sent me to bring you to a meeting," was all the little creature dared to say.

"Yes, I will return with you immediately," Aarm said just before he threw out some last-minute orders to those scurrying around him.

The trip to the Supreme Leaders building was always fast and easy. His escort cleared the streets for his vehicle, and they made sure the streets were clear. He encouraged his driver to go fast because he knew what would happen if he were the last to arrive at the meeting. If the Supreme Leader were in a foul mood, she would be happy to make one of her generals an example.

Aarm was relieved that he could enter and seat himself in the front row as the attendees were rising to attention for the entrance of the Supreme Leader. Once the entrance procession had reached the front of the room, all were allowed to rest on their pads. Aarm glanced around and noticed all of the key generals were in attendance. A meeting with all of these important generals was only for big announcements, he thought.

"My generals," VanMacca started with, "I have called you together to give you clear direction. Those from the technical cast have given me information that I find very interesting. For the advancement of our race, I have found an opportunity for each of you to gain glory and fame, an opportunity for us to demonstrate once again that we are the ones who dominate. Your instructions are on your craft, load them and prepare to leave. You have a job to do.

All rose and cheered, including Aaron, although his enthusiasm was more to be seen as part of the group than a sincere show of emotion. He

noted that Orana, a competing general vying for attention from the Supreme Leader, showed an overabundance of enthusiasm and cheered louder than anyone in his vicinity.

VanMacca's procession left the room, and each of the generals was allowed to leave. Imbata, who was one of the Supreme Leaders key advisors, approached General Aarm. In a low voice, he said, "Your orders will put you in a very important position, and our leader wants to give you as much support as possible to be successful. She has directed me to accompany you on this adventure."

"I am honored to have you with me. I'm sure your presence will be a tremendous help for me to accomplish my orders." General Aarm said. While smiling, he thought, *“and I'm sure you'll make sure that I do what I'm told.”*

4- The Point

The Observer satellite progressed to the final stages of its mission. Reaching that point was a success, but being just a satellite, it had no apprehension, dread, or anticipation. Instead, it merely waited for the next event in its timing sequence, one that would insert it into the proper orbit.

As expected, the timer actuated, and the onboard rocket fired, stabilizing the satellite in orbit approximately the same distance from the sun as the planet Varo and in a theoretical mid-point in orbit. It was then in a position to accomplish its mission.

Leading up to that event, a smaller crew of technicians and observers were waiting in a small control room on the planet Varo. That group was much smaller than were present at the launch. There were Doctor Wong, his son Ornage and his lead technician Albot with his staff of technicians who were ready to receive any transmissions. The only others present were Doctor Lauto and his lead translator Ivroc who would attempt to interpret any information received.

Albot has been Doctor Wong's technologist since the start of the project. He was a hard worker and a friend. He understood the mechanisms and was intrigued with them. Although he wasn't as enthusiastic about that twin planet as Doctor Wong, Albot was a traditionalist. Like most, he did not enjoy change.

The Grand Leader wasn't present. After all, he didn't expect anything to be found, and per his encouragement, his wife and daughter were elsewhere. Sonyata asked to be present, but the Grand Leader didn't want any significance made of the event. After all, if the satellite either failed or found nothing, the further he and his family were away from it, the better.

The only official in the room was Orto. Since the support team was from his district and the launch was in his city, the capitol, he had an obligation to witness the result of using his resources. He didn't expect or want success, but he did want to be present in the event of a failure. He would not gloat, but he would feel better thinking that he would have made the

right decision. Being there to witness the failure would be a period at the end of a sentence that he was sure was already written.

Ellig was also present, hovering in the corner near the Varo soil container. His job was to observe and communicate. Now he was observing.

The Observer Satellite waited for the prescribed time after the final rocket fired, then a tiny thruster pointed its cameras, radio transmitter, and receivers to a point in space. It turned on, per a timing event, and focused its telephoto lens to the maximum, and began to take pictures. What it saw was of no consequence; it just did what it was timed to do.

After 10 minutes of filming, the Observer Satellite turned on its radio and played a prerecorded message. The message was simple. “We, the people of the planet Varo exist, and we wish to know if there is a planet opposite to us, please respond in some manner.”

Doctor Wong was waiting patiently for the first images to be processed and passed to his projection system. Everyone in the room knew that the images would be first and likely all they would have for a long time. Even though the event had already happened, it took time for the signals to travel from the orbit point to their receiver. No one expected a radio reply to the message, because after all, what language would they speak? Instead, they made a simple, clear statement that could eventually be translated into the appropriate language for the twin’s inhabitants.

When the images were sent, it took more time for Albot and the technicians to receive and process than a moment for them to be sent to Doctor Wong’s display. The delays were killing him. The first image suddenly began to appear on his screen, and it was amazing.

As the image formed, it was clear that there was a planet. The room was silent for a long time while the technicians, Doctor Wong, and Ornage realized what they were looking at. Everyone was unsure how to respond until Doctor Wong gave some indication. Finally, Doctor Wong took a deep breath and said, “This is going to cause a stir.” Even he was more wrapped up in the question of what was there than the repercussions.

Albot continued doing his work, but he felt something wasn’t right. He processed the information and passed it to Doctor Wong. He trusted him

and yet was concerned about what he was seeing. Finding a twin planet somehow violated part of him.

Orto was irritated; that would cause problems, many more problems than he wanted to deal with. “What a mess,” he said in a low voice. His first inclination was to get up, walk out of the room, and convince himself that seeing the planet didn’t happen. But, instead, he decided that he must wait, and after a few moments, he accepted that he would have to deal with it somehow. All he could say to Doctor Wong was, “Congratulations,” then he left.

Ellig noted the leader’s exit but elected to stay and watch for further interesting developments.

Ornage rested there with a smile while he wished that Sonyata had been there with him. He knew that she would be as excited as he, and he wished that they could have shared the moment. He stood and gave his father a hug.

Ornage said, “Father, I never really imagined what to hope for, but that is beyond what I expected. So there really is a twin planet; what do we do now?”

“Wait,” was his father’s reply.

He already thought ahead for the audio portion of the mission. The timing mechanisms for the satellite would transmit the images first, then its limited computer storage would be used to listen for any planet’s electronic transmissions. It would search a preset list of frequencies and transmit the results back to Varo. Doctor Wong knew how much time that would take, so he held his emotions in check until he had all of the information. Then he would appraise the outcome.

To subdue his son’s enthusiasm, Doctor Wong pointed out, “Remember Ornage, we are recording, and we are waiting to hear those results.” There are 96 frequencies, and each frequency was monitored for one minute. If a signal was found, it was recorded then transmitted to Varo. If there was no transmission, it moved on to the next frequency. That used the least storage onboard the satellite. When all of the frequencies had been tested, the satellite would start over and go through the entire sequence.

Of course, Ornage knew this, regardless his excitement was hard to contain, and he found the wait intolerable. During that time, he looked at the twin planet's image. The twin planet appeared to have some very large bodies of water; in fact, they covered more than half of the planet. Ornage had never imagined such large amounts of water. He could see portions of two continents in the image. The little land that was visible between the clouds varied in both texture and color. It appeared that it had mountains similar to Varo, but Ornage noticed that it didn't have any ice covering its poles. He also noticed that it had light brown areas that were in the center of the landmasses. It wasn't clear what these could be, as Varo was consistent in its coloring. He also noticed a circular object about 10 planet diameters from the planet. What could that be, Ornage asked himself.

"Father, look at these giant bodies of water, what a large amount. They have much more water than we do. They also have a smaller planet that appears to be orbiting."

Doctor Wong leaned over his son's shoulder and said, "Yes, the planet could have a smaller body orbiting it. There is no reason why any two bodies can't be attracted to each other," the Doctor clarified.

"Yes, I've studied such a theoretical system, but I never imaged what it would look like," Ornage said, and he continued, "and what effects it might have. That would be interesting to study."

Father and son observed the planet and deduced that it was about the same size as Varo. The planet did appear to have much more cloud cover than Varo. Varo didn't have much moisture that wasn't captured in its moisture cycle. They could see that about half of the planet had cloud cover, and there was a couple of patterns that suggested storms that must contain a lot of moisture. Varo's clouds were usually found around the termination point of light and dark and over the poles, but the twin planet's clouds were turbulent and showed circular motions.

Ellig was resting in the back, taking all of the activities down. He wasn't sure what it meant, but something told him that everyone's life would be changing. Ellig felt obligated to share that extraordinary news with the people, and he was interested in how the leadership would handle it. Orto leaving immediately after the discovery gave him some insight into how he was going to handle it, but he wished that the Grand Leader had been there

so he could have noted his reaction. Unfortunately, the events didn't play into either of their agendas.

Ornage was caught up in the excitement of looking at the planet, so he wasn't concerned with the timing of the radio transmissions. His father was enjoying the visual analysis, but he was acutely aware of the upcoming radio transmissions. He realized that finding a twin planet was one thing, but confirming intelligent life was much greater. He kept two eyes on the observations his son was making and one on the clock.

As the time approached, Doctor Wong slowly paid less attention to his son and more to the technicians receiving the radio frequency recordings from the Observer satellite. He finally saw Albot jump as he heard the start of the transmission, and with a quick acknowledgment, as he looked in his direction, Albot turned up the speakers with the first frequency recording.

When the speaker turned on, everyone immediately looked at it, and they were shocked. The first frequency had a recording of something that sounded like music. It was melodic with a definite beat and periodic sounds of a creature. The sounds were very unique, and they were definitely from some living organism.

Again, the second frequency was a creature, and it had a definite change in frequency and was more monotone, with less melody and rhythm. It must have been a creature speaking that continued through the entire one-minute recording.

The remaining recordings were other types of music, creatures speaking, or combinations of the two. There were a couple of frequencies that were more mechanical and many with just electronic noise. Out of the 96 frequencies inspected, 76 had recordings that indicated a rich number of transmission sources on the planet. That was greater than Doctor Wong anticipated and to him indicated a mature technical civilization.

As soon as his mind made that observation, the implications of it shocked him. What had he done? Were they in a position to deal equally with another civilization that was their technological equal, or what if they were more technical?

Ornage rested there listening to the recordings. His mind didn't draw any conclusions. He was just mesmerized by listening. Those were sounds

made by other living creatures who lived on a twin planet. What were they like, what did they look like, what did they eat, what did all of that mean to us. The enormity of what he was listening to quickly took his breath away, and he, too, was feeling something foreboding.

Ellig was awestruck. He thought about the possibility of finding a twin planet, but finding that it did exist made his mind stop as if it just struck a wall. He was trying to put all of that together and understand what it meant, but he was so overwhelmed that it was hard to process. He knew that it was up to him to communicate the events to the people. But a part of him recognized that he might have to go a step further to help them understand the implications of what he was saw and heard.

As soon as Ornage calmed down, he thought of Sonyata, and he wanted to rush to her and share the experience, which he would do as soon as he could.

When the recordings were completed, everyone in the room talked shared their excitement, and asked their questions.

Albot rested at his terminal and thought for a moment about what he has just seen and heard. He was uncomfortable and unsure. He knew something was happening that was unsettling, but he couldn't verbalize it. It was just a bad feeling.

Ornage hugged his father and said, "This is amazing, everything that you've fought for has been accomplished, and you've answered the big question. I'm so proud of you."

His father responded quietly, "Son, you are a big part of it, and you're going to have a much larger part in the future. Up to this point has been my part of the process, and you'll have to be prepared for yours."

Ornage didn't have a clue what his father meant, and he responded, "Father, this would not have happened without you, and you're responsible for all of it." He hugged his father once again for assurance, yet he suspected that there was a deeper meaning.

Ellig approached Doctor Wong and asked in a firm voice, "Doctor Wong, what are your plans now? What are we going to do?"

With that statement, the room fell silent. The Raog tended not to look too far into the future, and maybe Doctor Wong failed to do that. He responded, “I’m not sure what we should do, I’ll meet with the Grand Leader and the Council tomorrow, and we’ll discuss options.” That seemed to satisfy those in the room, yet they all shared the same feeling that something major had happened in front of them, and none of them were sure what the next step should be.

The excitement in the room quieted down a little, and the group began to disperse, the technicians worked on summarizing the data, and Doctor Wong thought about what to say to the Grand Leader.

Doctor Wong knew there was one piece of information not yet received. There hadn’t been a response to the satellite’s recorded message. It was being transmitted continuously, and if the twin planet was listening, it surely heard the transmission. He wasn’t expecting a response immediately, but one could come at any time and take everything they believed and turn it upside down. He feared that even he had not anticipated all of the implications that information would have.

Ornage let his father know that he was leaving for a while and where he was going. His father knew that Ornage would confide in Sonyata, and her father would find out. Of course, that caused a little concern, but he trusted his son, and his instincts told him that Sonyata was a thinker and she would be a valuable resource for his son at some point in the future.

Ornage walked quickly, making his way through the streets of the capitol to Sonyata’s home. He didn’t see the Raog on the streets or think about their future on his way there. Instead, he thought about the amazing planet they had just discovered and about seeing Sonyata.

When Ornage reached Sonyata’s home, he was excited as he walked up to her entrance path. Climbing the small hill gave him a beautiful view of the surrounding Jabom fields. There were no gates or barriers on the approach to the Grand Leader’s home. The Raog being a very trusting species, always allowed access because they had no concerns about their neighbors. Ornage approached the front door and announced his presence. Sonyata acknowledged him and allowed him entry. They walked quickly to the garden area in the rear of the home. They weren’t trying to be

clandestine or to avoid her parents, who were also there. They were just anxious to spend time together and share the exciting news.

Every home on Varo had a garden area. Not all of them were used for growing food, but they connected everyone with the soil. Many of the gardens, in smaller homes, were just a small area where the residents could till the soil and have ceremonies for important occasions or just dinner. In larger homes, the gardens had bedding Jabom and ornamental plantings in various pots and suspended planters. Regardless of the size or amount of decorations in the gardens, they were tranquil areas. They provided a respite from the outside world, a place of worship, and most of all, a place of individual solitude. The garden was a place they could maintain a connection with their ancestors who worked the soil.

The Grand Leader's garden was impressive. He had many visitors, and they all enjoyed the time in the Grand Leader's garden. He had many meetings there, and in some ways, it represented all of Varo, so some areas had pictures of mountains, or fields of Jabom, or the workers that tilled the soil. A full-time soil tender took care of it and ensured that every path and Jabom plant was clean, watered, and well taken care of.

As they entered the garden, Ornage almost shouted with excitement and said, "We found it. There was a twin planet just where my father said it would be." He described the planet, the vast bodies of water, the mountains, and everything else he could remember. Then, finally, he paused and said, "We heard them!" That statement made Sonyata's face turn white.

"You heard them?" she whispered.

"Yes," Ornage responded. "We think we heard music and talking but aren't sure." "The music was strange but pleasant in a soothing way. They accentuate the notes differently than we do. I think they also have different instruments. We also heard them talking, I think. It was also melodic because their voices are smooth, and they just flow from word to work. Their talking isn't too different from our singing. I suppose that if we worked at it, we could sing like them, but I don't particularly like the sound of their music."

Sonyata rested there, processing the information for a few moments. Then she said, "We are not alone. There are others" out there. What are they

like, how do they live, what do they eat?" and after a pause, she said, "What will they do when they find out about us?"

That last statement caught Ornage off guard. Up until then, the quest he and his father followed was one of discovery. Now they had to deal with the results of that discovery. The implications of dealing with such an alien creature suddenly overwhelmed Ornage, and he grew silent as some of the questions that Sonyata asked sank in.

Sonyata and Ornage rested in silence. Part of them wanted the comfort of yesterday, but they knew that they had to continue down a path they created. What tomorrow would bring might be scary and unknown, but they were committed to following the path.

The Grand Leader walked by the garden area and saw the expressions on Sonyata and Ornage. He knew immediately that something was found. That disturbed him; he had almost put the entire project out of his mind but realizing that they found something told him that it would flare up again. He would be dragged into something he was uncomfortable with, and his apprehension grew as he thought about it. Tomorrow he was sure that Doctor Wong would seek him out and tell him what he found. He must gather the council in the chamber.

He didn't want to disturb Sonyata and Ornage, so he continued to his resting pad with his life partner and thought about the future. *"What now,"* he thought to himself.

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The Supreme Leader had received information confirming that she was destined to achieve another great advance for her people. All of her plans were laid out in front of her. Her generals had received their orders, and they were on their way to another great victory.

General Aarm was not comfortable. Something about this mission didn't seem right. He felt like a caged Illot, who had been poked and prodded too long. He didn't know how his people got into that position, but he knew it was the wrong path for his people, and something needed to change. But, like the caged Illot, something unpredictable was going to happen.

General Aarm also knew to keep those feelings to himself. If he let Imbata see any lack of enthusiasm on his part, he would replace him and take command. He also knew that when you replaced a General, many around him were also replaced.

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The long trip had begun, and now they were beyond the chaos and turmoil that was always part of a departure. The daily routines were finally settling down, and everyone knew their jobs, routines, and schedules.

Romaa was surprised that she had been assigned to the Supreme Leader's craft. It was supposed to be an honor, but it was an opportunity and put a lot of pressure on her in her case. She was at the center of power, and also she was going to be at the center of change. After she had begun her duties, she searched the crew list, and she was relieved to see many names of those that supported her. She had many followers on the craft, and when necessary, that would make her next steps easier.

She didn't know what her next step would be, nor when she would take it, but she did know that the time was coming, and she must act.

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Irrm was enjoying himself. He didn't care where he was going, and what happened upon arrival wasn't up to him. His job was to operate the craft, and that was all. If he knew little, then little would be expected of him. *"Less chance of failure that way,"* he thought.

He was glad that he would be in a support position and might never have to get involved. Again that was the best place to be when things became unpredictable.

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After a long night of working with Doctor Wong, Albot left the building, carrying worry and confusion. He needed to speak with someone who would put everything into perspective and tell him that it would work out; he would seek out Vortus, the soil tender.

Albot entered the yard of the soil tender and approached him, “Soil tender, may I have a word with you?”

“Absolutely,” responded Vortus, “how can I help you?”

“Soil tender, I am of the soil, yet I am seeing things that confuse me,” Albot continued, as he rested on a simple resting pad next to the soil tender who was kneeling in the soil. “We have found the twin planet, as Doctor Wong professed. It has water, land, weather and,” he hesitated before the next words could come out, “and we heard a radio transmission from them!”

The soil tender had stopped tending the soil while he listened. Then he looked at Albot, and after a speechless moment, he screamed, “Violation!” The birds were shocked and flew away. Albot was shocked and felt the need to hide.

“This is a violation!” Vortus spit out between clenched teeth. He wasn’t sure if Varo had violated his faith by sharing the soil with another planet or if somehow that twin planet had violated Varo and his soil. Vortus swayed between rage, confusion, pain, and violation. Somehow his connection with his soil and his planet was thrown into disarray.

Vortus saw the look of shock on Albot’s face and realized that his outburst was distressing him. He worked hard to gain control over his frustration and confusion and spoke to Albot, “Please, my friend, do not let that confusing situation distress you. The soil is ours; it provides for us. Varo has given us rain, wind, water so that our soil could provide for us. We give back to our soil so that we continue, and Varo continues. It will all work out in the end.”

That gave Albot some comfort.

The soil tender continued, “Albot, we are at an intersection on a path where we must be careful to choose the right direction. At this point, I’m not sure which is right, and Varo has not made the path clear. Please continue working with Doctor Wong and keep me informed about future developments. We must help him, and Varo’s leadership follow the correct path.”

Albot didn’t understand what that meant but responded, “Yes, soil tender, I will let you know all that happens because I don’t want anything bad to happen.”

After Albot had left, Vortus knelt for a while, tending the soil, thinking about what everything meant. He was convinced that some injustice had occurred, and he wasn’t sure who had committed the offense. The soil tender needed to speak with someone who shared his love for soil and Varo. He left quickly.

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Orto was leaving his home while the gentle early morning rains were falling. He was preparing to investigate storage problems that were occurring in one of the city’s warehouses. He had spent the last couple of hours trying to deal with the image of the twin planet. Dealing with it was beyond him at the moment, so he was seeking refuge in what he knew, administering the district. He saw Vortus approaching and was a little offended, wondering why he was being approached so early in the day without a formal request for a meeting.

Vortus greeted Orto with the general phrase, “May your soil always bear Jabom.”

Orto responded in the usual manner, “And so may yours.”

Vortus continued hesitantly, “Your Leadership, something has come to my attention that I think we need to discuss.”

“I only have a few moments, but please inform me,” said Orto, expecting some boring issue of no consequence to come up.

“Doctor Wong has found a twin planet,” blurted out Vortus. “It has soil, water, and weather. That is not right. Varo provides for us. Varo has soil we are part of. Varo has rain and the wind to nurture the soil. So what does having a twin planet mean to us, to Varo, to the soil?”

Orto stopped in his tracks and immediately tried to put it all in focus. Up until that morning, he had moved beyond Doctor Wong’s project and sought relief in his role as leader of the district. That all changed when he was confronted with that image earlier today. After seeing the planet, he tried to put it out of his mind. Now he was being accosted by his district’s spiritual leader who, apparently knew of the twin planet. All of that made it painfully apparent that he had to deal with the situation and decide what to do.

“Vortus, let’s talk,” Orto said as he put his arm around the soil tender and he walked him gently towards his garden. Once in the garden, he rested quietly and offered Vortus a resting pad next to him.

“How did you hear about Doctor Wong finding the planet?” Orto asked.

“One of his workers was concerned about finding another planet, and he told me about it,” Vortus responded.

“This development may be important, to us, to Varo, and to our soil. However, we must be careful and make sure that we make the best decisions. We don’t want anyone to make decisions that are bad for us, Varo, or our soil,” Orto stated as Vortus listened intently.

He continued, “I don’t know what our next steps must be, but we must watch, listen, and I’m sure at the proper time, Varo will lead us.” That sounded good to Orto as he said it, and he could tell by the signs of agreement from Vortus that he agreed with it also. Orto believed more in himself than the soil or Varo. After all, he was a leader, and leaders do what is best for their people. If the steps he took improved his leadership position, so be it; after all, the two were almost the same. Improving his position helped the people, so anything he could do to improve his position would help the people.

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At the mid-point of the day, Doctor Wong and Ornage left the launch facility and made their way to the capitol building. A meeting with the Grand Leader and representatives from the districts had been arranged.

Doctor Wong didn't feel prepared and couldn't anticipate what would happen. Once again, he had not thought much beyond the launch and finding the twin planet. What they needed to do only became an issue if they found a planet. To be honest, Doctor Wong was overwhelmed and tired. He had found his planet, and there was a fog around the next steps.

Ornage was energized. Since his time with Sonyata yesterday, he had a hard time resting. His mind felt like a blank piece of paper, and when he tried to rest, he saw images and plans and possible outcomes. He wasn't clear about the next steps, but he was confident that something must be done, and he was anxious to be part of it.

The capitol building was similar to the capitol library and was formed with stones from each district. The gardens were expansive and encircled the entire structure. There were four towers on each corner representing the wind, the rain, the sun, and the soil. These were the elements that Varo provided for them.

Ornage and his father walked in silence as they approached the building and entered through its garden. Ornage could see many people strolling through the gardens and sensed that all of their lives were changing.

They passed a soil tender, and Ornage noticed the delicacy of working with the soil. Those were such simple acts, with so much reverence, so important and perhaps overshadowed by his knowledge. What would all of that mean? What would happen to Varo, the people, and the soil? Ornage knew the coming changes would be profound, yet he was optimistic that they would be good for everyone.

They were met at the main door by the Capitol Greeter and escorted to the meeting chamber where the Grand Leader and other representatives were waiting. The hallway seemed long and full of echoes. The walls had beautiful pictures of the fields of Varo and photos of Raog working them. The images appeared to be from each of the 73 districts because they

showed mountains, cities, rivers, lakes, and broad expanses of Jabom, all of which were reminiscent of the districts.

Upon entering the chamber, Ornage looked around. That was the first time he had been in the council chamber. It was impressive yet simple. The walls were covered with hanging drapes that had fine pictures woven in them for their full length. The floors had heavy carpeting with images of farmers working the soil. The men and women, who were the district leaders, rested on simple but comfortable pads. The pads were placed on a gentle incline, all facing the central speaking area with a soil container on one side.

Ornage was immediately impressed with the soil container. I was made of Jabom stalks woven together to stand for the soil dish to rest upon. The stalks were polished and shined so much that small sparkles reflected the light of the chamber.

Ornage and Doctor Wong entered, and the loud background discussion quieted, and all eyes moved to the forward portion of the room. The Grand Leader rose, and all those present rose with him. He approached Doctor Wong, greeted him, and all three passed the soil container and touched it briefly to re-establish their connection to the soil. The Grand Leader then offered Doctor Wong and his son resting pads in the front of the hall.

Ornage looked around and saw that each resting pad was occupied, which implied that each district leader was there. In the center of the front row, he could see Lretta, Sonyata's mother, and the Orb. She was sitting quietly with her hands crossed. When she saw Ornage, she smiled warmly. He also noticed Ellig resting to one side, glancing at his father, himself, and the district leaders.

As they arranged themselves on their resting pads, the Grand Leader looked over the room and attendees. There was still a murmur of voices in the rear, and after a motion by the Grand Leader, they became silent. The Grand Leader addressed the meeting, "I want to thank all of you for being here today, and may your soil always bear Jabom."

The attendees all responded with, "and so may yours."

The Grand Leader adjusted his stance and glanced towards Doctor Wong while he said, "I'm sure all of you know why we are here today.

Doctor Wong launched his rocket and satellite with our support and resources and made some very exciting discoveries. It has come to my attention that a twin planet has been found, and we have received recordings of radio transmissions from that planet."

There was an immediate uproar within the chamber. They all knew of the discovery but having it stated in a formal meeting required a response. The Grand Leader let the uproar continue for a while until he finally raised his hands to silence them.

"The good Doctor and his son Ornage are here to tell us what they found; please greet them," said the Grand Leader.

Doctor Wong rose and tentatively walked to the center of the speaking area and said, "May your soil always bear Jabom," the audience responded, "and so may yours."

"Thank you for being here. As the Grand Leader said, we have discovered a twin planet. It was precisely where we anticipated. We have images, and we have recordings of their radio transmissions." Once again, there was an uproar among the attendees, but Doctor Wong let them quiet themselves.

After the room was silent, Doctor Wong presented images of the planet and played some of the recordings. For the most part, the attendees were silent throughout the presentation. Doctor Wong wasn't sure if the silence was because of interest in what he found or fear. He suspected a mix of both.

During the presentation, Ornage noticed that his father was hesitant and appeared a little unsure of himself. The subject was exciting, but his father didn't show much enthusiasm. Towards the end of the presentation, Ornage was a little frustrated and wanted to leap up and take over.

After the presentation was complete, Doctor Wong just stood in the speaking area and waited. He acted like his job was done, and there was nothing else to do. For the first time in his life, Ornage felt the need to help his father, so he rose and joined him in the speaking area. As he walked, one of the attendees rose and asked permission to ask questions.

Doctor Wong appeared hesitant, and Ornage made the bold move of acknowledging the attendee, and he accepted the question.

“Doctor Wong,” and after a brief hesitation, “Ornage, what do we do next?” questioned one of the senior representatives.

Now it was Ornage’s turn to be speechless. Finally, after a brief moment, he spoke, “Great Leaders, we have found a twin planet. Now we must choose and either disregard that finding or put together a plan to deal with it. Our plan should start with efforts to communicate with our twin and possibly, eventually, expand our space program and travel to our twin. Yes, that takes many resources, and yes, the results may be in doubt, but if we fail to do something, we may miss out on a major step forward for our people. After all, we have a satellite transmitting our existence to our twin planet, so regardless of what we do, they know we are here, and they may do something.”

Ornage let that point settle for a moment before he continued, “We already have translators working on their transmissions, and once we understand what we heard, we should consider communicating back to them.”

While Ornage was speaking, Orto rested on his pad seething. Why was this discussion occurring? A twin planet is only a distraction from what was important? *“This must be stopped,”* he thought. I must find a way to save us.

Ornage continued, “My father and I suggest that we continue the translation effort, and assuming success with that, we design and build a satellite to communicate regularly with our twin. By the time it is built, we should have the language skills to communicate with them.” With that statement, the room fell silent. Everyone present realized the significance of what was said and was unsure of where it would lead.

As if timed to happen as Ornage concluded his account, he saw Albot standing beside the speaking area, acting like he had something to say. Ornage indicated for him to approach, and as Albot moved to the speaking area, the room developed a low murmur, not paying much attention to Albot as they were trying to digest the previous statements.

Albot approached Doctor Wong and Ornage and, with a secretive whisper, “They have responded.” Doctor Wong and Ornage were speechless and stared at him with blank expressions while the implications were processed in their brains. Ornage looked at his father, and he nodded for Ornage to make an announcement. Ornage walked slowly to the center of the speaking area, and the representatives quickly noticed that something was happening. They silenced their discussions and listened to him.

Somewhat hesitantly, but with the voice of a man making a pronouncement, Ornage said, “Representatives, we just received word that we have received a transmission from our twin planet. They made a transmission to our Observer satellite on our transmission frequency and timed to fit between our transmissions, clearly a response to our message.” After a stunned silence, the audience exploded with debate and shouting. Some were standing, trying to make their voices heard. Others were resting motionless with blank expressions.

Ornage glanced briefly at Sonyata’s mother, and she remained resting on her pad, although she did look distressed.

Ornage just stood in the speaking area, not knowing what to do, and he just accepted the overpowering response from the audience. Finally, after a few moments, the Grand Leader stood and approached Ornage. He gestured with his arms and hands for the representatives to quiet down, and they slowly did.

Once they were under control, he spoke, “Representatives, that’s startling news. We all knew about the Observer Satellite, and perhaps we should have anticipated this result, but we remained focused on what we considered important. Now things have changed, and we must respond to this new information. This is shocking to me, and I’m sure to many of you. I recommend that Doctor Wong and Ornage continue with their translation efforts and let us know what resources they need for the next Observer satellite. Once they tell us, we should consider the resources needed and consider the possible results of communication with the twin planet. Let me point out that we must consider what happens if we don’t respond. We will make a decision based on what we feel is best for the people of Varo.”

There were no dissenting comments, so the suggestion was accepted. The Grand Leader turned towards Doctor Wong and said, “Please do as we

ask and report back promptly with your needs."

Doctor Wong and Ornage nodded and moved to one side of the speaking area.

Orto continued resting on his pad, and during that entire period, he had not raised his voice, stood in agitation, or given any sign of his feelings. Instead, he remained focused on one thought, *"I must find a way to save the people, by any means necessary."*

Ornage looked at his father and, in a subdued voice, said, "Mother Varo, what have we done?" Doctor Wong looked back, and with a blank expression, he responded, "This could be the greatest or the worst day in our history. Things will change! We must find the will to prepare ourselves."

Ornage glanced towards Lretta and saw the partner of the Grand Leader looking at the floor by her feet, with a deep look of concentration on her face.

Orto rested in the chamber after the presentation. He was disgusted and still felt offended and insulted. He was the district leader of the capitol, and finding another twin planet was totally irrelevant to his responsibilities for the people in his district. The more he thought about committing more resources to that irrelevant question, his frustration increased. He already had to cut back on other important activities within his district. The district always had more requirements to fill than he had resources to apply.

That was a violation of Varo, and he decided that he wanted to speak with someone who was close to Varo and would help him. He rose quickly and exited the chamber even though many cohorts were still talking loudly and animatedly about the problem.

The Grand Leader was surrounded by two of his senior leaders, Erom and Tomar. Erom was the leader of one of the larger districts responsible for manufacturing and science, and Tomar handled local storage and the transportation of Jabom. They were expressing their concerns in an agitated manner.

Erom practically yelled, "What are we to do, Varo provides for us, and now we found another planet, is it also part of Varo. We must take steps to

protect ourselves?"

Quickly Tomar chimed in, "I don't understand how there could be another, we are the Raog, and our planet is Varo. The soil, the wind, and the rain belong here. How could there be another?"

The Grand Leader was listening to the conversation as he usually did on controversial subjects. He would let the leaders talk and complain, and speculate, and finally, suggest answers. Then he took his position. What they were discussing was such a complex and threatening problem. His instincts told him to wait a long time and listen to many people before he spoke. Perhaps the steps of a wise leader or a coward, he wasn't sure.

He responded in the best way that he could to the tumult around him, "Leaders Erom and Tomar, I understand your shock, fear, and revulsion. None of us knows what finding another planet will mean for Varo and the Raog. We only know that the twin planet is there, and we must take appropriate steps. Let us talk among ourselves and wait for the Doctor to present his resource needs. At that time, we can debate the options."

Reluctantly they both became silent. Tomar moved off to express his opinions to the others who hadn't left, and Erom became silent and rested on a nearby pad. Finally, he decided that he needed to think and plan.

The Grand Leader walked to the side of the speaking area and watched how each of the remaining representatives conducted themselves. He could tell who was overwhelmed with the information, the ones that were still forming opinions, and the ones that had apparently resolved the issue in their minds. The latter were the ones that he would focus on; the others could be swayed. Invrok was an astute leader. He knew that it was easier to find the trends and get in front than to find the correct answer.

Ellig remained on his resting pad and watched all of the proceedings, and he sensed that life on Varo had changed; he started to get worried. In the past, reporting information from the capital was a job, but now the news might affect him and his life, and he wasn't sure how to respond. Still, he must prepare the announcement to the people. He had already written the announcement as the presentation occurred, so he just had to put on some finishing touches, and he gave it to his assistant. That happened quickly,

and as he saw Orto leave, he decided to follow him because he knew Orto would lead him to something interesting.

After the representatives had left the chamber, the information passed rapidly to the home districts, and news articles were released by the Newsource. Within hours, the entire planet was talking about the startling news, and everyone was discussing the possible outcomes. Panic broke out in some urban areas, some areas were quiet, and some were overwhelmed. Many needed to talk with someone, and they sought guidance from their soil tenders. The majority of the people continued their work, anticipating going home to care for their families and working the next day;

5-The Days After

Doctor Wong and his son Ornage slowly walked out of the meeting hall, walking away from the presentation's stress and walking towards the fear of the future. They walked quietly and with no apparent purpose. They knew that they were likely responsible for the greatest or worst event in their history.

Albot walked with them, but his thoughts were more remote than theirs. Doctor Wong and Ornage were fearful for what might happen to everyone around them; Albot was fearful of what might happen inside him.

Now that they had pictures of their twin planet and the planet had even sent a message back, the impact of knowing could be far worse than the burden of not knowing.

None of them talked; they just walked. They enjoyed the gentle breezes of Varo and the smells of Jabom in the air. The sun was shining, and the Raog on the streets were enjoying the beautiful weather. It was still early in the afternoon, and the evening showers hadn’t arrived.

It created an odd feeling when you knew something that affected everyone you saw. They didn’t know, and they were enjoying their lives. Albot, Doctor Wong, and Ornage did know, and the burden was like a cloud over their heads with a sound barrier around them. The happy sounds of the Raog walking by were muted by the intensity of the dread they felt.

Ornage looked at the residents walking on the streets, and he imagined what their discoveries would mean to them. He saw a mother approach with two small children. One of the children dropped a toy, and by bending her knees a little, his mother retrieved it. As he passed, she smiled, and Ornage wondered how the lives of that mother and her two children would be altered?

Should he stop them and encourage them to stop and enjoy every moment of their lives? Should he tell them to find shelter, should he tell them that everything they believed in would be changed. He didn’t know what to tell them, so he remained quiet.

As they walked further, a delivery man sweated to unload a load of Jabom from a delivery vehicle. He grunted and pushed against the load until one of his friends came over to help, and Ornage wondered how the life of the driver and his helper would be changed.

He saw a couple of people in their garden visible from the street, and he watched them tend Jabom. They were doing what gave them peace and comfort. What he and his father had done may change all of that.

When he began helping his father, he was caught up in the technical challenges and the naivety of youth. The challenge was seeking success, success being a single event. Now he had to deal with the ramifications of that event and how it would affect the people.

Doctor Wong walked and was dealing with very intense internal thoughts. He made the discoveries and asked the question which led to building the Observer Satellite. He was focused and felt that solving the unknown was worthwhile and necessary. When his mind was overwhelmed, he wrestled with his thoughts, trying to get them organized and separated. The emotional parts of the issues distracted him. The only way he could deal with them was to filter out the actions and the specifics that he could control. He couldn't deal with the subjective parts of a problem. He could only deal with the numbers, facts, and objectives.

He wasn't a person that thought about what his discoveries would do to others. He was just an engineer. Engineers asked questions and sought answers, leaving consequences to others; civilizations and cultures were too abstract and not easily measured, so he left those questions to others.

Albot's thoughts were less about the impacts of those around him, but they were about the impacts that were happening within him. He defined himself by his beliefs. What he believed was the foundation that his life was conducted upon. Those beliefs gave him strength and confidence that there was order around him, and he could trust that order. However, seeing what he saw shook that order. It made him ask questions about his beliefs which threatened the strength they provided. Even though he was a very intelligent Raog, his intellect was not structured to question his beliefs, so the conflict caused turmoil and created a disturbance that scared him.

When they passed a major intersection, it was time for Albot to take a different route to his home. They stopped and looked at each other. They shared the worry, but they shared no words, they had concern on their faces, and they hugged, then shook their hands and rubbed their forearms together, showing respect and mutual support. Finally, Albot turned and walked away through the crowd. Ornage and his father watched for a moment, then turned in their own direction. After a short distance, Albot turned off his path to another destination.

Neither Ornage nor his father wanted to talk, and likely neither were able to express their thoughts, so they just kept walking and thinking. However, they knew that they would eventually reach their home, and at that time, they must talk and plan.

Ornage and his father finally arrived at their home. Doctor Wong went to his garden and removed his foot coverings. Ornage went to the Jabom preparation area to get some juice. He walked to the garden and took off his foot coverings to feel the soil with his feet and toes. That was always a good way to relax.

After a few moments, Ornage spoke, “Father, we must outline a plan to complete the translations and build a satellite capable of communication with our twin.”

“Yes, we must,” responded his father. In the Doctor’s mind, he was doing what engineers usually did, making lists, setting concrete objectives, deciding on success criteria, and getting his thoughts organized.

Ornage, on the other hand, had a broader perspective than that of an engineer. His mind was dealing with the engineering and also the broader issues of what would happen to Varo and the Raog. Unfortunately, the engineering part of his brain was providing concrete results while the emerging leadership part of his brain was wrestling with the possible good, bad and disastrous outcomes. He realized that he had to solve all of them.

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The Grand Leader remained in the chamber until most of the representatives had left. At that point, he had categorized each of them into

the groups he could predict, those that were uncertain, and those he had to worry about.

Now that the meeting was breaking up, he looked at his spouse and knew that she needed support. He rested next to her, and they held hands. The Grand Leader knew that those revelations would directly impact her. She was expected to 'have the answers, ' and he knew that she was dealing with those revelations in the only way she could. She was praying to Varo to show her the way, and he hoped that it would be shown.

They slipped out of the chamber and went to their home to contemplate their future and the future of Varo.

When they entered their home, Sonyata immediately knew that something was amiss. She suspected that the meeting today with Ornage and his father was the source of the stress, so she decided to stay close but not be intrusive.

Invrok and Lretta sought the comfort of their garden. They took off their foot coverings, rested, and thought. Sonyata waited a few moments to give them some privacy then she entered.

Invrok hesitated and said, "My dear Sonyata, events have happened that will change everyone's lives. Doctor Wong has verified the twin planet, and he received a radio transmission from them. We have no idea what that means and how it will impact our lives, but something about that is very stressful."

His spouse, Lretta, was wheeling with the thoughts of how that would affect everyone's life. She cautiously asked, "What does that mean for Varo and the Raog? If we contact these creatures and develop a relationship, we will be changed forever. If we do nothing and ignore the reality of a twin planet, we will be changed forever. Our future has been changed, and we must change,"

The Grand Leader nodded and continued, "Doctor Wong and Ornage are working on a translation from the radio transmission, and when it is done, we'll decide what the next steps will be."

Sonyata heard everything and was shocked to know that Ornage received a direct transmission from the twin planet to Varo. She knew that

she must find Ornage and talk with him. So, she suggested, “I want to visit with Ornage and talk this over with him.”

Her parents nodded, and she quietly rose and left their home.

Lretta thought, *“I must prepare the Raog.”*

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Orto moved quickly through the streets of the capitol. He knew where he was going and what he needed to do. As he approached the soil tender’s residence, he saw another form in the garden along with the soil tender. He slowed his approach and slipped into the garden. It had taken a moment before he realized who was speaking with the soil tender, and he was initially confused, then relieved as the name Albot came to mind.

The pair noticed him as he approached, and he could tell from their body language that there was initial hesitance, then reluctant acceptance.

They stopped talking as he approached, and he broke the silence, “Soil tender, Albot, I see you are talking, and I presume talking about our twin?”

The soil tender paused then said, “Yes, Leader, we are sharing our mutual concerns about the progress that Doctor Wong has made.”

Orto needed to move cautiously until he knew how they felt, “There are those who are unsettled by these developments. There may be impacts that none of us can foresee.” He waited for some sign or reaction.

Vortus continued with caution and said, “Albot and I are just sharing those concerns and,” after a pause, “wondering if there are others; leaders, who shared them also?”

Orto patiently lowered his head in a sign of agreement, and Vortus and Albot responded in kind.

Ellig had remained in the shadows and saw the exchange. He knew that he had just witnessed a change in the course of Varo events. He didn’t know where that change would lead, but he realized that he had to remain observant.

Orto thought quickly and said, “We must protect the people of Varo. Vortus; soil tender, please speak with the other soil tenders, select the strongest men from the farms, don’t take too many from any one area, and move them to the northern ice caves. We must protect the Jabom.”

Vortus quickly understood what Orto meant and agreed, “Yes, Leader, I will do as you say. But, unfortunately, we have no means to defend the ice caves.”

“Yes,” Orto added, “Regardless, it will take time to move the farmers to the ice caves, and protecting Jabom is our primary concern. I know we don’t have any tools to defend ourselves. Right now, I don’t know if we’ll need to. I don’t know what or whom we may need to defend ourselves from. We can only trust in Varo to provide answers at the proper time.”

Orto redirected his attention to Albot and said, “Please keep me informed of developments with Doctor Wong and Ornage.”

“Yes, Leader,” responded Albot.

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The evening showers were heavier that night. The rain cast a gloom over the streets as Sonyata walked to Ornage’s home as the heavy showers ended. She approached their home and expected them to be in the garden, so she went down the side entrance to the rear garden area. Ornage noticed her approaching and said, “Sonyata, please rest here with me,” as he gestured for her to join him on the resting pads.

“Ornage, I heard from my father that you received a radio transmission from them?” she asked with a mix of trepidation and anticipation.

Ornage wasn’t sure how to respond, the obvious answer was yes, but the implications were much larger. He felt the need to provide more than a simple answer, “We have a response to our message. Of course, we haven’t been able to translate it yet, but because of the recordings on the other channels we have for comparison, Doctor Lauto is making progress.”

Sonyata wanted more details, but she felt the strain the Raog would feel in the back of her mind. She imagined steps that her Mother, the Orb, would

need to make. Sonyata thought, *"The Orb must help the people understand these changes and prepare for what's to come."*

Ornage continued, "Our translators think that they might have a rough translation in the next couple of days. Of course, we won't be positive of the meanings, but I think we might have something usable. They are assuming that other languages have patterns and syntax similar to ours. If that wasn't correct, then we might have problems. We'll wait and see. How are your mother and father handling it?" Ornage asked.

"Not well," Sonyata responded. She continued, "I think they are scared, after all, that went against who we are….my father is not the type to make a radical policy change, and my mother is trying to understand what this means. A lot of the district leaders are confused. My father must decide how to protect the people and reach an agreement within the chamber, and my mother knows that many will ask her for answers, and I don't think she has them. I also suspect that some of the leaders may do something unpredictable."

She and Ornage talked for a while about what information they had, and Ornage asked her to remain part of the team and help with the planning. That was a new phase for them, and she was thrilled that he had asked her to remain involved.

After a long discussion, Sonyata and Ornage had a basic plan put together, and they approached his father to review the next steps with him. While Doctor Wong listened, he felt good seeing the attraction between them and how much they enjoyed working together.

Doctor Wong was sensitive about bringing up Ornage by himself. Losing his life partner was difficult, and it made him happy to see Ornage with Sonyata. Perhaps that was something that would develop; a father could only hope.

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The Grand Leader decided that he should make an announcement to the people of Varo. News had spread about the twin planet, and they must be apprehensive. He directed Newsource to arrange a planet-wide address to

transmit his message and image to thousands of public viewing screens across the planet. As he prepared, he was frightened by some of the implications of his message. *They must know, but they must be given confidence and assurance,* he thought to himself.

The next day when the transmission was set up, he began his message first, “People of Varo. There have been recent developments which I am sure you have heard about. As you know, our Doctor Wong launched the Observer satellite some time ago, and we were waiting for the results of his investigation. Even though we knew of the possibility of a twin planet, most of us remained concerned with providing for you and caring for Varo's day-to-day management. If he found no planet, then our lives would have continued unchanged, and because finding another planet seemed unlikely, we felt no need to plan. We have all been shocked; he has located our twin planet orbiting our sun opposite to us.” The Grand Leader paused because many of them needed time to absorb that information, and, in fact, the effort of announcing it almost took his breath away.

After a moment, he continued, “This was shocking to all of us, and we need to understand its implications, for us, for Varo. Doctor Wong has photos of that world, and he has received electronic transmissions from them, which his team is translating. We anticipate the translation will be completed shortly, and although we expect a simple greeting, we will let you know what the message says. The Doctor and his team are preparing their resource requirements to put a satellite capable of full-time communication between our twin and us. Your leaders will consider those requirements and discuss our options. When we receive that information from Doctor Wong, we’ll decide if it is the best thing to do. I want you to remain calm, and we will inform you of further developments. As is the tradition, the Orb will now address the people.”

Lretta prepared to transmit her message to the people of Varo. She knew that they were frightened, confused, and threatened. Yet, all she could do was put those developments in perspective, assure them and reinforce their beliefs; she knew that would give them strength.

The Orb said, “People of Varo. We are strong, we share many important values, and we must remain focused on our soil, our families, our mother, Varo. Discovering another planet with life was not mentioned in our ancient

writings, so we don't know how that will impact Varo and our way of life. Varo has cared for us and provided for us; we must have faith that she will continue. There is no reason to lose that faith. We must remain loyal to our beliefs and trust that Varo will show us the way. When our leaders are told what Doctor Wong needs for that satellite, they will make the best decision. Until then, remain focused on what is important…and may your soil always bear Jabom."

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Immediately after the council meeting, Erom flew to Furtar, which was in his home district, and rushed to his home to spend some time in his garden thinking. Sitting in his garden with his feet feeling the soil always connected Varo, which allowed him to think clearly.

While he rested his life partner, Iorata entered and took the resting pad next to him. She didn't say anything because she knew that he was deep in thought and would speak when he found a concrete idea to express.

"My dear, Iorata. I fear we are coming upon troubled times. Doctor Wong has found the twin planet, and he has photos and recordings of them. Many of us are very concerned, and we worry about what we must do next to protect the people and Varo,"

"Erom, I have spoken with many of the life partners of the district leaders. The general feeling was that something was going to happen regardless of what we did. Our technologies are improving, and I'm sure theirs were also. If we hadn't found each other now, it would have happened shortly. The path we are going down was leading us in a direction that Varo wants us to go. Varo knows that any living creature is like a Jabom plant. It must grow and change for it to find what it will become. Maybe, we have yet to find out what we'll become," she said.

Iorata paused, then continued, "I have spoken with Lretta several times about this. Even though she was worried, she also knows that we must move forward. It was up to the Raog to discover the right path."

"My dear, I have directed my technicians to design and build defensive tools for us. We don't know how to make them, but they will try. I'm very

uncomfortable building any tools that might be used against other living creatures. I don't know who these creatures are, and I'd rather have some protection rather than none," Erom said while Iorata listened intently.

"I can't think of any other way to defend ourselves. We use tools to prepare the soil, use hand tools to prune the Jabom, use tools to remove the weeds, and use tools to build our homes. I know of no other way to defend us but to create defensive tools."

"That doesn't surprise me. We talk among ourselves about what our partners are doing and what we think needs to be done. I am worried, and I guess I am comforted that we might have a defensive tool available if we need one. You are the district leader, and you have many obligations to the people of your district. As your life partner, I also have obligations to support the people in our district. We both accepted those roles because it is best for them. We must do what is best for the greater good," Iorata said as she held her life partner's hand.

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The next day, Erom was in his office, resting on his pad with his team as they heard the planet-wide broadcast from the Grand Leader.

Even though his team heard the information from their District Leader, Erom; hearing it from the Grand Leader and Orb made it more 'real.' After a moment of silence, Erom spoke, "We must prepare for this, I fear that finding that twin planet will be a problem. In the past, we haven't needed defensive tools. I think the time has come for us to consider defending ourselves. I pray their use will never occur, but no protection is far worse than having tools we never use. Please use the manufacturing expertise of our district and build defensive tools and respond back to me."

Each of the team members nodded in agreement and left the meeting room. Erom rested on his pad, contemplating the steps he just began and was fearful of where they may lead.

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Mortog rested in the garden in his residence, with his family around him, and heard the words of the Grand Leader and the Orb. After the speeches, he rested quietly, and his wife reached out and touched his hand. Then, his children began playing and chasing each other out of the room.

Mortog's partner, Ilana, asked in a quiet voice, "What do you think that will mean to us?"

Mortog's response was soft but cautious, "I don't know my partner, but I fear that our lives have changed, and sometimes change is not good. I will meet with our soil tender, Ilrod, tomorrow and discuss this." After a deep breath, he said, "Please, let us rest tonight, and I'll do something about it tomorrow."

Ilana knew her partner, and she knew her people. She agreed with what he said, and she also agreed with his concern. They must both be prepared for the changes that seemed inevitable.

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Mortog rose at the beginning of a new day and took his ground transport to his working field, where he began to organize the workers on his team. In the corner of his eye, he watched for the soil tender so that he could talk with him. Eventually, he saw his friend moving across the field, and Mortog went to intercept him.

Ilrod walked across the field, enjoying the soft soil and the clean air. Last night he received a troubling message from an old friend. Vortus told him, "Bad things will come from that twin planet," and he asked all soil tenders to find good men who would go to the ice caves to defend the Jabom.

As Ilrod walked, he thought about the request Vortus had made, who was the best man for that responsibility? As his thought formed, he saw Mortog approaching. *What a stroke of good luck. Here comes the best man,* he thought.

“My friend, soil tender. May your soil always bear Jabom,” Mortog said as he greeted his friend.

“And may yours also,” the soil tender responded.

“Did you hear the transmissions last night from the Grand Leader and the Orb?” Mortog asked.

“Yes, I did, and I also had communications from another soil tender, an old friend,” Ilrod responded in a hushed tone. “Let us speak about important steps we must take,” he continued.

“You and your team have done well preparing Jabom for the next harvest. Now I’d like you to consider doing something for the Raog,” Ilrod said in a conspirator’s tone.

“I will do what is necessary for the Raog and my family,” Mortog said.

“Excellent, my friend. I have received word from Vortus, and he has spoken with Orto, the capital district leader. They are very worried about these developments. They want us to send people we can trust to the ice caves to protect the Jabom stored there. These satellite launches and communications with a twin planet may lead to a point where that Jabom is critical for our survival. I’d like you and your team to go to the ice caves and wait for further instruction,” directed Ilrod.

Mortog was shocked and confused, he took a few moments to think, and it made sense. The ice caves were significant to everyone, and he was honored to be asked to protect them. “It will be my honor to contribute in that manner; I will prepare my team and leave tomorrow,”- he responded.

“Excellent, may the spirit of Varo remain with you,” Ilrod said.

Mortog knew that would be hard on his team, especially his family, but he knew it was the right thing. His partner Ilana was strong, and with the help of their neighbors, he knew his family would be safe. So he went and spoke to his team.

After his team had agreed to do what was asked, Mortog released them to go to their homes and prepare their families.

Mortog went home to discuss the request with his life partner, Ilana. He walked into the home earlier than normal, and she immediately knew that

something had changed. “Ilana, I spoke with Ilrod, and he asked me to take my team to the northern ice caves and stay there. He, Orto, the capital district leader, and others are concerned about this twin planet. They feel that we might have to defend the ice caves and the Jabom that is stored there. I agree with their concerns.”

Ilana stood and thought for a moment; her first thoughts were about her family, then she realized that her family was one among many, and everyone depended on the Jabom. The need to put good Raog in the caves made sense, although she didn’t want Mortog to go. She then took a deep breath and was proud that her partner was asked to go.

“I hate to admit it, but going to the caves makes sense. I wish we could all go, but the Jabom needs a lot of care, and we must continue preparing for the harvest,” Ilana pointed out.

“Yes, we must continue. While we are gone, I hope you will continue coordinating the teams and their life partners. We can do a better job in the caves if we know that you are helping everyone here.”

“I will do take over your responsibilities, as long as you do your part by taking care of yourself. Now we have to explain it to our young.”

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Ornage finished looking at the parts they had on hand and what the new requirements would be. After analysis, he approached his father and announced, “Father, we have all the parts and systems we need. We just need to change some of their operations a little. Once that is done, we’ll be able to put it all together.”

Doctor Wong was relieved and said, “Great, things will go a lot better if we don’t need resources. That will help us put it together and launch quicker.”

They continued working on the plan's final details when Albot sought them out and made the startling announcement that the translation was complete. That shocked both of them, as they had been concentrating so

hard on their satellite plan, and they weren't expecting the translation to be completed so soon.

The three rushed through the launch facility until they were in Doctor Lauto's area with his translation team.

They entered, and Doctor Wong spoke with the lead translator, Doctor Lauto, "Albot said that you have completed the translation?"

"Yes, Irroam just completed it, and you must hear it, let him play it in its native form first," Doctor Lauto said, and he indicated to Irroam to play the recording.

Ornage and Doctor Wong had heard that melodic tone many times, but it was a good idea to hear it in context with the translation.

After it was complete, Doctor Lauto read the translation his team had created,

"We are the Ora, from the planet Trrem. Who are you?"

The room was quiet as they thought about what they just heard.

Doctor Lauto continued, "We think that by now they have located the Observer satellite. It appears their radio transmission was aimed at it. So, if they know of the satellite and its location, then they know where we are."

Ornage thought, *They know where we are. That is either an interesting point or a threatening one; I'm not sure which.*

Doctor Lauto also added, "They have a limited amount of our language, so it may take some time for them to translate our message. However, all they know is that it is from an intelligent source. Perhaps that is why they responded in such a manner."

Ornage offered up the information, "We have a plan to launch a communication relay satellite soon, so we should be able to establish a link between them. If we speak their language better than they speak ours, we could use that to establish a connection. Doctor Lauto, it might be prudent

to take what parts of their language we understand and create a translation primer that we could send them to help them understand our language."

"Excellent suggestion Ornage, we'll start on it immediately." Doctor Lauto responded, and Irroam nodded in agreement.

As Doctor Wong and Ornage left the room, Doctor Wong said to Ornage, "I think we have enough to seek approval from the council of leaders." Ornage nodded in agreement.

6-The Next Step

Doctor Wong and Ornage approached the Chamber of Leaders, and he said to his son, “Ornage, please take the lead on this. You’ve done a great deal of work, and I think you’ll be a larger player as we move forward.”

Ornage was a little shocked, offended, and excited by that statement; he responded, “Father, you are the leader, and I’m a helper.”

“Son, you must become more of a leader. You have many skills I lack, and I’m afraid that the challenges we face will benefit more from your talents than mine,” Doctor Wong pointed out.

Ornage was silent for a while, then he said, “Father, thank you for your trust. I will do my best for you and the Raog.”

Walking down the entry hall was much different this time. Instead of paying attention to the beautiful wall hangings, they looked straight ahead and walked with a purpose. They entered the chamber and immediately felt the tension as they approached the ceremonial soil container. The representatives were quiet; that did not bode well for an easy and quick agreement. Everyone was resting on their pads and looking at them as they entered. The Orb was sitting in the middle of the front row, and she smiled and nodded.

The Grand Leader rose and greeted them, “May your soil always bear Jabom.”

Ornage responded with, “and may yours.”

The Grand Leader addressed the representatives gathered, “Leaders, Doctor Wong, and Ornage are here to present their resource requirements to launch another satellite. Let us hear their needs, debate our course of action and decide what is best for the people and Varo." Then Grand Leader changed his focus from the chamber to Ornage and his father, "You have the speaking area.”

Ornage centered himself in the speaking area and addressed the chamber, “Leaders, before we review our resource requirements, I’d like to

announce that our team has translated the radio transmission from the twin planet." The response from the chamber was silence.

Ornage continued, "I think you should hear both versions of their transmission; here is a recording of what they sent us." Ornage played the original recording from the twin planet, then he continued, "Our translation experts have compared the many hours of radio transmission traffic we have recorded. They compared it with that transmission they sent to us. They feel that the twin planet's response is, "We are the Ora, from the planet Trrem, who are you?" the chamber became uneasy and quiet,

"Our team feels that was a reasonable response assuming that up to this point, they have not been able to translate our message. Apparently, we have a better understanding of their language than they do of ours," Ornage explained.

After a difficult pause, Ornage reviewed the resource requirements and plans with the leaders, and when he was done, he felt the mood of the chamber change. Immediately debate began, not about the schedule or resource needs, but of the twin planet. Was it a threat, a friend, or a violation to the soil and Varo?

Ornage noticed that none of the leaders included the Orb in their discussions of Varo and a possible violation. They debated around her, yet no one asked her opinion. Ornage sensed they were trying to influence her indirectly; perhaps they hoped she would hear them and change her views.

The debate raged for some time, and Ornage and his father just watched and listened. As it progressed, different veins of opinions emerged. The representatives who thought that Varo was being violated were verbalized by Orto, the group that feared the contact and felt they were being threatened was verbalized by Erom.

The discussion began to lessen, and the Grand Leader moved to the center of the speaking area.

"Representatives, we have different schools of thought, that I think, represent all of our concerns. I fail to hear anyone saying we shouldn't launch the satellite, but I do hear many concerns about what will happen after we establish contact. The unknown has always been hard for us to face, but now we are faced with it. Either we do nothing and let the

unknown become known on its terms, or we launch a satellite and found out what we must deal with." The room was silent with some murmuring; the Grand Leader paused, then continued, "I propose that we proceed with the launch." The representatives responded with reluctance, and a few hands rose, then others rose until a majority had accepted the next step.

Doctor Wong indicated to Ornage that it was time to leave. He could see no advantage in remaining after he had received the approval. Ornage and his father exited through a side door while the chamber rested in silence for some and grim acceptance for others.

They walked quickly through the streets to the launch facility so they could begin preparations. That evening there was just a gentle shower falling, which helped to clean the streets and air. It left a light smell, the smell of cleanliness with a hint of hope for the growing Jabom.

Orto listened to the uneasy silence in the chamber after the vote; he rose with determination, took a deep breath, and left. He had work to do.

Erom didn't pay attention to the others who left; his thoughts were on his staff's progress with defensive tools. He left while his thoughts remained elsewhere.

Ellig remained in the chamber, making a note of who left. His instincts told him that those who exited first were the ones that had immediate objectives, and the ones that left last were lost and didn't know where their future would take them. Ellig knew that it was time to renew his contacts in some of the key districts.

The Grand Leader and the Orb returned to their home and updated Sonyata. She listened in silence as her father repeated the translation and summarized the debates from within the chamber. She realized the significance of what had happened, and when he was done, Sonyata and her mother moved to the garden to confer about the future of the Raog and how to help them. Sonyata grew in her empathy and desire to help the people and her Mother, the Orb, was impressed. The Orb was beginning to rely on her daughter's suggestions and comments, and she definitely needed inputs now.

"Sonyata, my dear. What are your thoughts? How do we prepare everyone for this change?" Lretta questioned her daughter.

“Mother, the people are strong. Sometimes strength is the ability to resist change, sometimes it is adjusting to change, and sometimes…strength is broken by change. I feel we should keep them calm and focused on who they are, and perhaps our greatest strength will be flowing with the change and see where it leads us,” Sonyata said thoughtfully.

Her Mother, the Orb, thought of that for a while and responded, “I agree, we know change is coming, and we must be prepared. However, preparing for the upcoming change by anticipating a struggle won’t help. We must become adaptable and choose, on our terms, how to face the change.”

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Mortog left Ilana and his children with a great deal of reluctance. His neighbors and the life partners of his teammates were eager to help, and he knew that his family would be taken care of. He and his team traveled in a ground transport vehicle to the northern ice caves, and the ride was a mix of enthusiasm and uncertainty. None of his team had ever confronted anyone fearing for their safety. Now they were being asked to defend their Jabom, which they would do eagerly, but against whom. None of them understood or could answer that question.

The district was at a northern latitude, so the travel distance was minimal, and they arrived the next day. During the trip, there were many discussions between the team members. Mortog didn't have answers to the questions they asked, but he knew it was important to listen to them.

This time of year, the ice caves had a small crew of workers, as the harvest was months away. It was staffed by workers that helped distribute Jabom in scheduled shipments between the growing cycles. The ice caves did contain past harvests of Jabom and had plenty of room for that year’s harvest. The ice caves were immense and had living facilities, transportation systems, and power systems. They were large enough for many years of crops or thousands of Raog if needed.

When Mortog and his team arrived, they found one of the ceremonial soil rooms and took their foot coverings off to enjoy the feel. They couldn't

leave their feet bare for long in the cool climate, but they had to feel the soil for a few moments. For many generations, each team that arrived for the harvest storage brought soil from their local areas and created numerous soil rooms. There was one soil large soil room for ceremonies and meetings where they shared the soil from each of the districts. Throughout the Erons, the soil in the rooms grew deep and rich. The soil rooms were important and often used by the Raog. Visiting them often allowed them to maintain a connection with their home soil while they are in those frozen ice caves.

Mortog still wasn't clear why he was there, but he was soon distracted as many more men began arriving. That caught him by surprise, and he heard from many that their experience was the same as his; their soil tender had asked them to move to the ice caves and protect them. None of them knew what or whom they needed protection from, but it had become their duty.

Mortog was a natural leader, and because that was the first time he had ever been to the northern ice caves, he needed to look around. He found a friend who was one of his team members, "Maln, let's explore the caves; I've never been here before."

"Neither have I," responded Maln.

"I saw a diagram of the caves marked on the wall near the large soil room. Let's look at that first, then decide where to go."

They were a short distance from the diagram, and Mortog said while they were walking, "I'm glad there is a storage of body coverings and thick foot coverings here for us. I would have been very uncomfortable if there were none."

"I have large feet, so it took me a while to find some coverings big enough, but I found them, and it helps a lot to walk on these icy paths."

"I'm glad you found some coverings; at least your big feet will make it easier to walk on the snow," Mortog pointed out while his friend grimaced back at him.

When they found the diagram on the wall, they stopped and looked it over. "What do we have here," Mortog said out loud. "There are many storage caves around the northern ice, but this one is the largest, and it has

the most facilities. I guess the others are for longer-term storage, and they don't appear to have many facilities."

Maln pointed out, "It says that this facility is the only one that has Raog working all Eron. Maybe the other caves aren't used as much. It shows that the ice isn't as thick there. We have the deepest caves here."

"I suggest that we start and follow the flow of Jabom down to the lowest levels. It says here, there are 16 levels, to the bottom. It's going to be a long walk."

"Or slide," Maln said with a grin.

The walk took a while. As they descended the ramps, they could see that the Jabom bails were brought in through a large vehicle entrance, then they were slid down ramps next to the Raog walkways. That was the same pattern all the way to the bottom. The last 8 levels were full of Jabom, and some of the permanent workers were busy moving the bails from one end of the large room to the other. Mortog and Maln followed them and saw that the workers would drag the bails to an opening with a vertical shaft that carried the bails back to the surface.

"Well, I think we've seen almost all of it. These rooms are huge, and they contain a great deal of Jabom. I had no idea there was so much of it here. Let's go back to the top; I want to see where these bails going up the shaft go and what happens to them," Mortog said.

"Are you going to carry me?" Maln asked.

"No, but I could drag you," Mortog made it clear to his friend.

Maln shrugged, and they both started the long walk to the top level.

When they reached the top level and found the exit of the vertical shaft, they could see the bails of Jabom being removed and loaded into vehicles where they would be driven out of another large vehicle entrance.

"Apparently, this is where they are distributed to the cities and storage areas before the next harvest. Now how are we going to defend this place?" Mortog asked his friend.

They talked as they walked back to the large soil room began organizing the men into teams, units and groups so that communications and living

facilities could be coordinated and arranged. The numbers of Raog kept increasing, and it was apparent that more would come for many days in the future. As the new arrivals were settled, they began cleaning the ice caves making sure all of the systems were working, and wondering what to prepare for.

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Ilana hated to see her partner leave, but she knew something scary was happening, and she realized that the future of her people depended on keeping the ice caves and stores of Jabom safe. Her job now was to care for her family and help organize the partners of her spouses' team to care for themselves. She assumed the position of leader. Her husband was the team leader, and it was natural for her to take the role in his absence. She knew the people, she knew what they needed, and she knew how to support them.

She started by getting everyone together and talking with them. She felt it was important to listen to them and hear their fears and what they needed. Then she made suggestions, and her friends began listening, and they started getting organized.

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Ornage and his father worked long days, preparing for the next launch. Doctor Wong made it clear to Ornage that he was expected to take charge of the overall project while working on the details. Ornage was aware that a leadership change had occurred. He was worried about that strong leader, who was his father. Nevertheless, he accepted his father's desire to remain involved. He was comfortable and allowed the project's broader aspects to move to Ornage's hands.

Ornage worked closely with the translation team. Everyone knew that it was critical to speak to the twin planet creatures in their own language. So, the team was working very hard to reproduce the melodic sounds of the twin planet's inhabitants. The sounds weren't too different from what a Raog produced when they sang; they were just more abrupt and distinct.

Instead of a smooth transition in pitch, the Ora sounds were distinct, with definite beginnings and endings from one level to another. Many note combinations went together, so the speaker began at a certain frequency then went through two or three others to complete the phrase. Everyone realized they would have to work many hours to reproduce the Ora sounds, but everyone felt it could be done.

After a lot of work and practice, they began creating a message that was to be sent through the communication's satellite to the twin planet, with the hope of opening communications. The satellite would receive the transmission from Varo and pass it to the twin planet and wait for a response. Once the response was received, it would be transmitted back to Varo. Then they would translate it into their language.

"Father," Ornage said, "we are debating what our first message should say to our twin planet. We think it should be brief and simple; after all, we're trying to use their language, and it would be terrible to send a garbled message, they can't understand."

"I agree; what have you achieved so far?" his father asked.

"With the limitations, we have, here is our first attempt," Ornage said.

"We are the Raog from the planet Varo opposite to yours on our shared sun. We want to communicate with you. We have recorded some of your radio transmissions, which allows us to translate our language into yours and communicate. We are friendly and wish to know about your civilization."

Doctor Wong thought for a few moments and said, "I agree with your judgment. That appears to be an adequate first effort." Then he asked, "What does it sound like in their language?"

Ornage played the recording in the Ora language, and it sounded pleasant, although it didn't have the nature sounds that were inherent in the Raog music. "Their language is very melodic, and we think eventually we'll be able to verbalize it. As far as we can tell, our physiology is capable of making almost all of those sounds." That encouraged Doctor Wong, after all, how could a species with such a pleasant-sounding language be a threat. *They must have a beautiful society,* he thought.

Doctor Wong spoke to his son, “I’m looking forward to communicating with that species; I hope both of us benefit.”

Ornage updated his father on progress understanding the twin planet language, “Father, a couple of our language experts have a lot of time listening to their transmissions. They are confident they can translate from their language to ours as it is spoken. That will be beneficial for us.”

Doctor Wong nodded in agreement.

“Father,” Ornage continued, “it appears that we’re making excellent progress on the communications satellite. Do you agree that it will be ready in only a few more days?”

“Yes, Ornage. The major systems are installed and functioning; we’re just going through the final stages of the test and check out. Feel free to schedule a launch in seven days,” Doctor Wong said.

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Erom entered his conference area and brushed his hand through the soil in the container in the corner, then adjusted himself on his resting pad. He intended to review his team’s progress in building defensive tools. He was apprehensive about building those devices, but something about dealing with an unknown planet concerned him.

“What progress are we making?” he asked his team.

“Leader, we share your reluctance to make tools of that type, and we all pray on the soil of Varo that they won’t be needed,” said Molt, the lead engineer.

He continued, “But if we must defend ourselves, we are doing the best we can with the limited experience we have. We have a couple of categories that we’re working on. The best design would be using our powders to fire small projectiles with a mobile tool. That will take some machining that we’ve never done before, so we are experimenting. We think having the most tools with simple designs will be the most effective. We’ve taken some of the hand tools that we use to till the soil, planting the Jabom, and harvesting, and we’re trying to make them useful for defense. We’re also

trying to use some of our other tools, such as the grappler, which we use to launch ropes across canyons. We think this device could launch projectiles and perhaps explosives that will explode on impact. I don't know how effective these will be, but we're doing our best."

Erom was pleased with the progress and said, "Friends, I know how uncomfortable you are with defensive tool development, but I fear that it might be needed, continue your progress and keep me informed. Please document your progress as you proceed and don't let too many Raog know about...," he hesitated for a moment then continued, "this use of resources."

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Vortus was a Raog on a mission. He could feel the burden on his shoulders of countless generations of Raog before him. It was clear that some kind of violation was occurring, he might not be able to explain it to another, but he was convinced that it was happening and he must do what he could.

Vortus was also on a journey, one where he was meeting with as many groups, gatherings, and other soil tenders as he could. His message was simple, Varo either had already been violated, or it was about to be. On that day, he was at an old friend's house in an adjacent district and leading the discussion.

"Varo is who we are; we are Varo. All of our essences have come from Varo, through the soil, and we will return and contribute to its soul one last time upon our death. To discover another planet that they call our twin suggests that Varo is not only ours but is shared by other creatures that we have nothing in common with. We don't know how they contribute to Varo and their soil, or even if they feel part of Varo's soul. That is wrong and a violation…." As he completed his statement, many of those in the room nodded and enthusiastically showed agreement.

"All I ask of you to spread the word and say that bad things are coming, and when it happens, we must band together in the name of Varo. After all, if we lose the connection to our soul, then we will be lost," he concluded with relish and a demonstrative movement of his hands.

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Lretta and her daughter Sonyata could feel the stress among their friends and people on the streets. While they walked, they were often stopped and questioned about the meaning of the twin planet and how it would impact the Raog. Their answers varied but consistently had a similar feel, “We have found a twin to our Varo. We know very little about them, but you can be assured, we will move cautiously, and I’m sure we’ll be able to embrace them and share who we are. We may find many benefits from such a meeting, and let's look forward to a better understanding of our twin planet.”

This assuaged the fears of many on the street, but, unfortunately, neither Lretta nor Sonyata felt as strongly as their words. Perhaps they found comfort in repeating the message, and perhaps by repeating it, they hoped it would become true.

Lretta, the Orb, and her daughter decided that the best way to communicate with many people was to have weekly discussions on the view screens. So, they worked together and collected the questions and provided answers about every two hand counts. Eight days between discussions seemed like a good span.

It appeared that the people needed that periodic information from the Orb and her daughter; it kept them current on the satellite’s assembly and calmed their fear of the unknown alien planet. They were short presentations, but a large percentage of the population listened.

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Ornage said to his father, “This launch is becoming much more of an event than the previous one. It was difficult to get enough resting pads in the room for all of the dignitaries.”

Doctor Wong responded, “Leaders like to attend predictable events where they can have pictures taken and make statements. They don’t like being where they are, unsure of the outcome. This launch should be predictable.”

Ornage thought, how humorous that this launch is significant, but the previous one wasn't? All of the leaders present want to be associated with this one, have their picture taken, and be seen in a broadcast over the planet's network.

Ornage was torn between monitoring the launch details and being with Sonyata. He wanted both but needed to make sure the launch was successful. Even though he was concerned with the launch, part of his mind was focused on Sonyata and what she was doing at that moment.

Ellig was in his prime. This was his job, communicating with the people. This was a large event, and he was aware of the importance. Because of its size and significance, he was nervous. He had technicians taking care of the setup, and before his interviews, he was able to wander the crowd a little and get a feeling for their mood. He knew that was a momentous event, yet he knew there was an undercurrent that he needed to monitor.

Over the Erons, Ellig's voice and picture had become a source of reliable information for the Raog. He was the one that told them the good news of the planet. When he told them of the bad news, he was able to support them and comfort them in such a way that his voice became the voice of the people.

Ellig had already prepared and broadcasted introductory segments about the launch and the progress to date. However, the time for interviewing the key members of the audience was approaching.

He could see each of the leaders, either working the crowd or being aloof and maintaining their distance. He knew each one had a hidden agenda, and he hoped that he could learn from their actions which ones to watch in the future and how they might react to future events.

Now was the time for him to interview each of the dignitaries for the broadcast. He was sure that each of them would have something to say, and his instincts also told him that each of them had something to hide.

Ellig watched the Grand Leader, and at his first opportunity, he approached him and asked, "Grand Leader, what are your thoughts about this launch?

The Grand Leader was eager to talk yet guarded. He responded with his, ‘talk to the Raog smile,' “We are all excited about this launch; we are eager to communicate with our twin planet and the Ora.”

Ellig continued, “What benefits will the people and Varo receive from that communication?”

The Grand Leader acted like that question was a little too pointed, but he responded, “The mere acknowledgment that we share the sun with another planet will be major news. That alone will change their lives. I’m sure that any changes that occur will be positive and beneficial for all of us. Thank-you.”

It was clear to Ellig that he touched on a subject that the Grand Leader didn’t want to discuss. He was able to answer without answering, typical of many of the leaders.

Ellig noticed that after he had finished his statement, he remained smiling; it was obvious that the smile was artificial, and Ellig was sure there was more to it.

Ellig also sensed that the Grand Leader didn't want any other questions, so he decided not to go further, "Thank you, Grand Leader."

The Grand Leader nodded, still smiling, and he moved away, ensuring that his robes moved as he walked.

Ellig moved around the crowd looking for other opportunities to interview a leader, and he found Orto, the local district leader.

“Leader, I’m sure that this must be an exciting event to have the launch occur from your district,” Ellig asked.

Orto hesitated and looked straight ahead with little emotion while he thought. The wait was almost too long before Orto responded, “Events like this are important and have important impacts. As we accomplish events like this, we must be wary and step with care; we must be prepared for what we discover.” As his statement ended, he walked away.

Ellig knew a lot was going on behind the scenes with Orto, and he also knew that he would stay close to the leader in the future.

As Ellig turned from Orto, he was approached by Erom, who obviously wanted to be interviewed. That caught Ellig a little by surprise because he liked to form his questions before speaking to someone. Being approached by a leader who obviously had something to say put Ellig at a disadvantage.

“Welcome, Leader Erom, and what comment would you like to make about this day?” Ellig said with some reservation because he knew that Erom would say what he wanted.

“Thank you, Ellig, for finding an opportunity to speak with me. I suspect that this launch is similar to seeing a storm approaching on the horizon. The storm may provide rain, but it can also cause a great deal of damage; we seek protection and prepare for what the storm might do. That is what we must do, and that is what I am doing,” Orto stated with finality and continued, “I find there are many others that share my concerns and are seeking protection. But, unfortunately, we can’t build a shelter for all of the Raog, so we must seek protection through other means.”

Erom had made his concerns clear, and Ellig remembered an old friend in Erom’s district that he should contact; immediately.

“Thank you, leader,” he said to Erom as the two of them separated, Ellig with a feeling of apprehension and Erom with a sense of accomplishment.

The Grand Leader saw and heard the interchange between Ellig and Erom and knew that forces were at play that might be beyond his control. He worried about the people and Erom and wondered if he was capable of leading them through this.

Ellig moved through the audience, and he saw an opportunity to talk with the Orb and her daughter Sonyata.

“My Orb, may we speak?” he asked as he approached her.

“Yes, Ellig, I’d love to,” she graciously responded.

“My Orb, communicating with another planet can be confusing for the people; how can we prepare for this?” Ellig asked.

“Yes, this is a trying time for us. Finding another world with inhabitants that we know nothing about will be a challenge for us. None of our ancient writings or beliefs accounts for that possibility. So, we must trust in Varo

that this new path of our lives will be productive for the Ora and us," she expressed warmly and openly.

"This is a major technical achievement," Sonyata contributed, "and we must be proud that we are reaching into the sky to a planet where we can share the benefits of Varo and our soil. We are confident that Varo will help us deal with that, and both of our worlds will benefit."

Regardless of Ellig's concerns, talking with the Orb and her daughter gave him comfort and reduced his apprehension about the launch and what it would mean to the people of Varo. As he moved to the other dignitaries for interviews, he focused more on his work details. He had interviewed the main players; the others would just be background and fill until the launch time.

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Vortus reclined on his resting pad along with a room of local soil tenders and key people from the local district, watching the transmission from the launch site. Recently he traveled as much as possible and talked to everyone who would listen. That room was filled with others that passionately felt as he did. Each person in the room was aware of the apprehension, each thought doom was approaching, and each was unsure how to prepare for it. All of them looked to Vortus for someone to follow.

Under Vortus' breath, yet heard across the room, he said, "How each of them acts like that is acceptable, how foolish they are."

In various forms around the room, each of them showed their agreement.

Vortus continued, "We must all be prepared to deal with the unknown, for I fear that it will become known too fast. We must be prepared to do what is needed for the protection of Varo and the Raog."

Again the others showed their agreement, although it was louder, more united, and enthusiastic.

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Mortog was resting on his pad, and almost a thousand others gathered in the ice caves. Many of them had come as individuals, and some, as in his case, came as entire work teams, and all had come to the ice caves to protect the Jabom stored there. In addition, there were numerous other areas in the ice caves that had large numbers of people watching the launch.

They had organized themselves and were preparing to protect the Jabom. None of them had experiences in the common defense. So it was a case of mutual discovery. Organization seemed necessary, physical fitness seemed logical, and communication seemed important. Beyond that, they didn't know how to defend; they had never needed to do that. Conflict was not part of the recent Raog history, but the concepts of organization and communication were fundamental to managing Jabom farm teams.

Mortog had become the leader of all those in the ice caves. He was unsure how that happened, he just made suggestions, and they followed him. His suggestions seemed logical, and each of his subordinates agreed and passed the information on to other groups in the ice caves.

While he rested, he watched preparations for the launch and was unsettled because it was the next step down the path that could lead to a place that he was unsure of. Mortog was worried about his family and wished that he could be with them in these uncertain times.

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Ilana rested on her pad while her children played on the floor. A couple of the families of other members of Mortog's team were with her watching the launch broadcast. Even though the launch frightened her, she was comforted because she was sure that Mortog was watching. She wished that she could be with him, but she knew that she was helping her community.

Ilana had organized the families after her spouse left, and her influence was growing in the community. She had already become the leader of her group, and some talked about her becoming the leader of her region. All of

that was just happening to her; she had no agenda to increase her role; it just happened.

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Ornage had just checked with each of the key technologists, and he was confident that they were ready for the launch.

He approached his father and said, “Father, I think we are ready.”

Doctor Wong responded with a simple nod.

Ornage moved to the front of the room and indicated to all present to seek their resting pads. After they were all in place, he spoke, “Thank you for being here, all preparations are complete, and we are ready to launch.” He knew that his comments were brief, but he was an engineer, and he would leave the speeches to those that were best at it. His job was the launch.

As he completed his announcement, he moved to his resting pad and adjusted his position to indicate a go-ahead to Albot. He caught the eye of Sonyata, and she smiled at him. Then, for a moment, he hesitated and smiled to himself.

Ornage looked through the window to Albot and repeatedly moved his arm up and down, indicating to proceed. Albot turned and glanced at the other technicians while he pressed a button to initiate the launch. The room rumbled, and the attendees saw the rocket lift-off through the window on the wall in the technician’s room. It moved slowly at first, and then with increasing noise and smoke, it accelerated into the Varo sky.

Initially, the room was quiet; each one present knew that their world had changed. Finally, the Grand Leader rose and moved his arms back and forth with a low, comforting hum, which was to say, “We have done well, and the soil and Varo are with us.” That comforting movement caused each of the attendees to rise and do the same.

Ellig watched their reactions as he made appropriate comments closing out the broadcast. He knew that watching the attendees and how they responded could indicate what they would do in the future. He noticed two

distinct reactions, some of them socialized and appeared less concerned, and others were focused and would likely leave early. The ones that left early had places to go and things to do. Ellig suspected these were the ones that he should monitor in the future.

Sonyata never took her eyes off of Ornage. As soon as the launch was complete and the attention was off him, she crossed the room to be with him and talk.

Ornage saw her approach and terminated his discussion with an attendee, and immediately focused on her. “I’m so glad that you are here,” Ornage said in a private tone to the only one he cared about.

“Ornage, I’m so proud of you and what you’ve done,” Sonyata said softly. Her concern about the twin planet was overshadowed by the relief that the launch has gone well. The worries she had about the impacts of the launch were put behind her, and she just enjoyed talking with Ornage. Ornage and Sonyata quickly became involved in a private discussion about more important things than the launch; they focused on each other more than those around them.

Doctor Wong rose and was immediately approached by the Grand Leader.

“Doctor, that was an excellent achievement; I want to congratulate yourself and your son,” the Leader said.

“Grand Leader, thank you for your attendance and congratulations. It means a great deal to both of us,” Doctor Wong expressed. Then said in confidence, “Now if you would, please excuse me, my son and I have worked many long days, and suddenly I feel very tired. I’d like to return to my home. If you or anyone else have questions, I’m sure Ornage can handle them.”

The Grand Leader immediately put an arm on the Doctor’s back and said, “Absolutely, Doctor, please take care of yourself.”

The Doctor walked through the remaining attendees, receiving congratulations and giving the appropriate platitudes as he left the room. However, he did notice Ornage and Sonyata in a corner and recognized that

he shouldn’t disturb them. “Leave the young space to be young,” he thought with a smile.

7-The Pause

The next couple of days were still busy for Ornage, but they were at a slower pace. The rocket had worked flawlessly, and the satellite was on its way to the orbit point between Varo and the twin planet. If all went well, it would be in a position to begin transmitting in about 60 days. Now that his talents weren't required as frequently, he could spend more time with Sonyata.

Doctor Wong was feeling better after a little rest, and he was sure that he was in good health. He realized that he needed to slow down at his point in life and enjoy watching his son take the leadership role in the project.

The Grand Leader quickly moved on to what was important, worrying about the Raog and the Jabom. He easily put all of those distractions from the launch out of his mind.

Lretta and Sonyata reverted back to a quieter life. The Orb, Lretta still had a couple of transmissions to the people of Varo. Now that the launch had occurred, the tension among them was subsiding, and they have focused again on their daily lives and needs.

Sonyata had time on her hands, and she decided to spend more time with Ornage. For the first time in her life, she felt that he might be her life partner. The first time she actually said it to herself, it had a nice sound, and she liked the thought of having Ornage in her life.

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Ellig was resting with an old friend in Erom's district, and his friend reviewed what he knew, "Erom has begun to develop defensive tools. He has committed a lot of resources, and his teams are building tools for defense. Many of us are concerned about defensive tools; we don't understand them. We also feel that something is happening to the Raog that we don't understand. But we don't want to be helpless."

Ellig listened to everything, and it fit with much of what he heard from other sources. It concerned him, but it also intrigued him. What events would lead them to use defensive tools, he asked himself, and the answer was always scary and unsettling. Erom might be wrong, but what if he was right? The latter scared Ellig more.

Ellig's next trip would be to talk with Vortus and feel what was on his mind. Vortus has been very active and difficult to speak with. He was never in a location where Ellig could talk with him. That told Ellig that Vortus was busy, and Ellig needed to know what he was busy doing. He had been told that Vortus would be in his home district in a few days, and Ellig made a point to be there and find him.

Ellig knew that to understand Vortus, he couldn't approach him as just a reporter for Newsource; he needed to be more sympathetic. That would get Vortus to talk and let Ellig know what he was thinking. That level of deception was unusual for Ellig and not typical of a Raog. Ellig had not resolved personally how he felt about the launch and communicating with the twin planet. He thought he could approach Vortus and honestly say that he needed to understand the risks for the Raog. That was a valid approach, and one that Ellig was confident would relax Vortus and encourage him to say what he was thinking.

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Erom was walking along an aisle in one of his production facilities, and some of his key staff members were talking as they walked.

"Leader Erom, we're eager to show you our production area. We have one area that is making small projectile launchers. We've been able to set up machinery that runs without a worker, and it can make large quantities of projectiles. We've taken our explosive powder and placed it in small capsules that will send a projectile at a considerable velocity when ignited in a tube. We think that this could be used anytime a creature is attacking or doing harm."

Erom nodded as he walked and was encouraged by what he heard, "We must continue and do everything we can to prepare. I want you to duplicate

your manufacturing tools and move a copy to the northern ice caves."

His team nodded and made a note to do as he suggested.

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Mortog did his best, but something was really starting to bother him. He understood the need to protect the Jabom, but the question was shouting in his head, "What do I defend the Jabom with?" he almost screamed. "Do I have my Raog stand in lines in front of the ice caves and wait?"

Mortog pulled Maln aside and asked, "Please seek out Ilrod, and if you can't find him, go to Vortus, and if necessary Orto, and ask them how we are to defend the Jabom. We are just farmers; we need some means to protect the ice caves. Please go quickly and bring an answer-back; I fear our preparations may be tested shortly."

Maln quickly agreed and left the ice caves.

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Ilana was now the sector leader. She felt overwhelmed, worrying about the needs of everyone that she was responsible for. She made decisions each day, which she worried about. She made those decisions based on her instincts, and over time it appeared that the lives of her people were improving.

Caring for the growing Jabom was complicated and needed a lot of supervision. Harvest was still some time away, so Ilana was constantly organizing teams to care for the growing Jabom. Also, she had to arrange the transportation of existing Jabom from the storage facilities to the Raog. To support the growing, she coordinated the movement of all of the tools and other needed supplies. Her duties also included the training and education of the young in her group and making sure everyone was happy and healthy.

She tried not to think about the satellite launch and pending communication with the twin planet. She couldn't imagine what it would mean, and she had no time to worry.

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Sonyata's interest in Ornage's activities was growing, and the technical part of her brain still needed stimulation. She decided that the best way to participate and learn was to find Ornage and work with him at every opportunity. She left her home and walked through the streets to the launch facility.

When she reached the facility and found Ornage, he was working with Doctor Lauto on improving their translation techniques. Some of the technicians were developing their speaking skills in the Ora language. The ability to speak another language intrigued Sonyata, so she joined the team and spent as much time as possible with them. The Observer satellite continued sending recordings of the radio transmissions from the twin planet, which helped them improve their understanding of the language. Ornage also began developing similar skills; he did well, although he was far from the most proficient. Sonyata really had an ear for the melodic tones of the Ora language and was almost as good as Doctor Lauto's best. Ornage joked with her and offered her a job helping Doctor Lauto if she had nothing else to do.

Ornage and his team had reviewed the script for the welcoming message the satellite would send in its initial transmission. There was much debate about the message; it needed to be short yet cover enough of the important information so the Ora would respond.

Regardless of what Ornage did during the day, any time Sonyata wasn't at the facility working with him or Doctor Lauto, his thoughts were about her. At the end of every day, he either walked her back to her home, met her at her home, or they had special evenings out by meeting at other places in the city.

That particular day he left the facility early and was meeting Sonyata at a local public garden. His intention that day was clear, he was going to ask

her to become his life partner, and he prayed to Varo that she would accept. Needless to say, his mind was not on his work.

The man asking the female to be his life partner was typical, although not expected in all cases. Often the women were the ones asking, but in most cases, it allowed her to accept or reject the offer, and most of them liked being in that position.

After all, she was the daughter of the Grand Leader and Orb, so Ornage felt that he should ask her.

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Sonyata and her Mother, the Orb, were talking about the recent information they had received. They had heard about discontent in some of the districts and also hints of some strange behavior. That concerned them; they were aware that the level of stress was increasing, and apparently, there were those among them who were traveling, talking to groups, and increasing the stress. Most of that agitation was being spread by Vortus and the other soil tenders. They had the right to do this; after all, communication with a twin planet was causing everyone distress. Many were seeking guidance and comfort, but Sonyata and her mother were concerned.

Lretta and Sonyata had also become aware that Erom was building defensive tools within his district. That disturbed them; after all, the concept of violence to another was not part of their psyche. Yet, many said that a tool like that wasn't beyond a reasonable Raog's imagination.

After a discussion with her Mother, Sonyata was fatigued. Those were stressful times, and stress was never pleasant. She hastily left her home and hurried to the public garden to meet Ornage. Those were always pleasant meetings, and no matter how difficult her day had been, a meeting with Ornage made it better.

As Sonyata entered the garden, she saw Ornage from some distance away. He was pacing and appeared nervous, she couldn't imagine why, but his actions were obvious. As she approached, he looked in her direction and quickly approached her.

“May your soil always bear Jabom,” he said in a soft, intimate tone.

Sonyata responded, equally soft, “and may yours.”

They walked for a while. Ornage was talking about simple things and avoided the topic of the satellite. There was less anxiety about the weather and the Jabom than imagining what a twin planet was like.

Sonyata sensed that something was on Ornage’s mind. She hoped everything was acceptable, but he wouldn’t be talking about such little things if something wasn't bothering him.

After some time, Ornage took Sonyata’s hands in his and spoke in a soft whisper. Sonyata immediately sensed that something was happening, and she listened very intently, “Sonyata, our time together is precious to me. Varo has been good to me, and I think that I have a great deal to share with someone.” Ornage paused, and Sonyata took a deep breath, “I would like you to become my life partner.” He let out a breath because he had just accomplished a major step in his life.

Sonyata stood for a moment, not to think about her answer but to enjoy the sound of the question, and she wanted to give her answer in the best way she could. She began quietly, “Ornage, you are the love of my life, and Varo has been good to me also. I will be honored to be your life partner.”

Immediately the stress was gone from the air, and they hugged, placing their noses under the other’s ears, and the talk exploded from both of them. They talked about the joining ceremony, their lives together, and the great times they would have. The afternoon passed quickly, and they didn’t notice the movement of the sun and the evening storm clouds building on the horizon.

Ornage and Sonyata went to her residence first to announce their plans to her family and finally to Doctor Wong’s residence. Everyone was excited, and they all said that it wasn't a surprise and thought it had taken too long for them to figure it out. The ceremony was planned to occur in five days.

Ornage had already planned ahead and found a home for them. Homes for Raog weren’t bought or sold; they were provided. There was nothing of value except the Jabom, so when a newly partnered couple needed a home,

one was usually made available. The homes weren't ornate or elaborate, but they were functional, and each couple was happy to have a place of their own. The particular home that Ornage had found was almost an equal distance between both of their parents.

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Ellig hurried through the streets. He suspected that Vortus was in his home and now was one of the few opportunities he had to talk with him. Ellig always approached interviews with caution, and as he approached Vortus' home, he paused to assess the situation before entering. When he did that, he was shocked to see Vortus, Erom, Orto, and a stranger standing in his garden. They were in a solemn discussion, and Ellig approached slowly.

Upon seeing Ellig, Erom spoke up and said, "Ellig, please approach, and may your soil always bear Jabom."

Ellig, surprised by the welcome, responded, "And also may yours." With that statement, he entered the garden and was welcomed by silence.

All of them were a little hesitant until Erom spoke. "Ellig, the three of us, share concerns about communicating with our twin planet. We are meeting to discuss our options, and we welcome your opinions."

Ellig was surprised by that openness, yet it was refreshing to feel the shared concern for the people of Varo.

Erom continued, "Although we all aren't in total agreement about the risk and the preparations we need to make, we do share the opinion that we need to be prepared. Vortus and Orto are concerned about the impacts a twin planet will have on Varo and our planet's soul. Although I too share that opinion, I'm taking it a step further, and I'm building a set of defensive tools because I fear we might need them. Let me introduce you to Maln, who has come from the northern ice caves. We sent many Raog there to protect the Jabom, and his leader Mortog is waiting for direction. I have been producing defensive tools, and when possible, I will send them to the ice caves to be used protecting the Jabom."

With that open admission, Ellig was totally taken by surprise. Of course, he knew most of what he had been told, but hearing from those responsible was shocking.

“Yes,” Ellig contributed. “I am aware of much of what you say, and I also share your concerns, but I’m not sure why you are telling me this?”

“We are leaders in separate districts, and we need to communicate better, both between us and ultimately to the Raog of Varo. You are an expert communicator, and you have the prestige, connections, and tools to make that happen. We need your help; please be our voice to the Raog,” Erom asked.

Ellig considered that for a moment, and suddenly he realized that he did have an important role, and the people of Varo needed his support. He responded with, “I am at your disposal, and I will assume any role that benefits the Raog.”

They stood in Vortus’ garden and coordinated the future of the people of Varo. A future none of them wanted.

8-The Next Point in Orbit

The bonding of two Raog into a life partnership was generally small and intimate, including only family members. The ceremony was done in the home's garden, where each guest removed their foot covering, and by standing in the soil, they renewed their connection to the soil and Varo. The actual ceremony was when the pair announced their intention to become a part of each other's life within the soul of Varo. The only gift they received was a simple life container. To conclude the ceremony, the couple and guests each knelt and retrieved some of the soil they were standing on and placed their handfuls in the container. That symbolized their connection to the soil and their guests. Finally, the couple carried the container of Varo soil to their place of residence, and it would become the start of their garden.

Once that simple ceremony happened, they were bonded for life, and separating that bond never happens to a Raog; bonded for life was bonded for life.

Ornage was scared. He asked Sonyata to be his life partner, and she accepted. He was excited, but he was also scared. He knew that this was the right thing to do; after all, she was the one Raog that he wanted to be with the rest of his life.

Ornage dressed in his partnering clothes, which were similar to what Sonyata was wearing. Both would be wearing soil colors similar to what a soil tender wore. The colors signified the union as part of Varo and the soil which Varo provided.

The two future life partners dressed by themselves in separate rooms in the Grand Leader's home. The solitude signified that they were alone coming into the ceremony. When joined, they would depart together, partnered for life.

The waiting groom paced a little, waiting for a knock on the door. While he paced, he had thoughts of his life and growing up. He thought of his mother, who had been with the soil for some time. He remembered his

mother and father's close bond and how it was obvious to anyone they loved and were devoted to each other.

Ornage missed his mother, and this was one of the many times in his life that he wished that she was there. He was confident that his mother would love Sonyata and welcome her into their family. Ornage knew that his father loved Sonyata also. Every time Ornage was with Sonyata and glanced at his father, his father looked happy and content. He hadn't expressed his thoughts, but Ornage could tell that he was happy with the union.

Eventually, Ornage heard a gentle knock; he took one last deep breath and exited the room. He entered the main room, and all he was looking for was Sonyata. He saw her entering the garden from another direction, and she was beautiful. She moved slowly and effortlessly and seemed to glide into the room. Her eyes were on him and his on her.

The only guests in attendance were the two families; on his side were his father and his mother's sister, Lonra, and her husband, Jauam. After his mothers' death, they helped a great deal as Ornage was growing up. Sonyata had both of her parents and her Uncle Ingott and his wife, Obsom. From her mother's side were her Aunt Illa and her life partner Billog and their two young, Ibaz and Ortuz. Her uncle Ingott and her Aunt Obsom were the ones she loved the most. They were never blessed by Varo with young, so Sonyata was their surrogate daughter.

Sonyata and Ornage walked to each other in the center of the garden, and after, what felt like a long walk, Ornage and Sonyata joined hands. Each had a prepared speech which was supposed to include the keywords that declared their love for each other and promise to care, protect and provide for each other for the rest of their lives.

The tradition was that who asked the other would go first. Thus, Ornage was supposed to go first as if he was asking her for the first time. Then, after a pause, he began the most important speech of his life.

"Sonyata, I am in love with you, and you are the one who will fill the hole in my heart. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I know we will have hard times, good times, sick times, and sometimes we will be angry with each other. I am asking you to be my life partner to protect you,

care for you and provide for you. Will you accept me and become my life partner?"

"Ornage, I am in love with you also. I agree we may have hard times to help you, provide for you, care for you, and, when necessary, protect you. My heart is empty, and becoming your life partner will make it complete. Yes, I will become your life partner."

Then they said together, "As we stand here on Varo's soil, we commit our lives to each other."

After the ceremony had ended, all guests hugged each other and then knelt and picked up a handful of soil, which they placed in the life container. Many of them added a second handful of soil which they brought from their gardens. Bringing soil together and combining it demonstrated how all of the families had joined and each shared the common soil of Varo.

When the ceremony ended, they all shared a traditional Jabom meal. The traditional partnering banquet had a series of small Jabom dishes. Each dish was from a different part of the Jabom life cycle and showed how the plant grew, changed, and improved. The meal was concluded with a toast of Jabom wine made at the last stages of Jabom growth when it was the sweetest. That progression of dishes was a symbol of how a partnership was supposed to develop. Each stage getting better until the final stages, where the best tasting wine was produced.

After the wine had been poured, it was an appropriate time for comments. With the occasion of the Grand Leader's daughter partnering with Ornage, it was too much of an opportunity for the Grand Leader to pass up.

He moved to the center of the garden with his robes flowing, and he lifted his glass. "We are here to celebrate the partnering of my daughter Sonyata with Ornage. This is the happiest time in a mother's and father's life. Many events are going on around us, but none is as important as what we just enjoyed here. I ask all of you to taste the sweet Jabom wine and let it remind you of how good a union theirs will become.

There was a gentle pumping of arms and subtle grunting as the guests indicated their approval.

Doctor Wong was not a public speaker, and he knew that. But he also knew that this was the most important time in his son's life, so he owed it to him to make the appropriate remarks.

"Guests, having you participate as part of this great day for Sonyata and Ornage adds to its importance. They are young, and they are starting on a long journey, and they will soon know how exciting that journey is. I wish them everything and that their future is full of happiness."

The gentle hand pumping and grunting subsided as it was Sonyata's mother's turn to speak. After all, she was the Orb, and her comments were special.

"My daughter Sonyata and Ornage have decided to become life partners. That is a solemn commitment because we know how important it is. But it is also a happy commitment because we know the joy that it will bring. We are all aware of the stresses around us …but Varo is good, and it will protect us and this new couple. Let us sip the Jabom wine and share it, sweetness."

After the partnering ceremony, the entire entourage walked to the young couple's new home. On the way, they were recognized as a young, newly partnered couple, and many Raog on the street stopped them and wished them well in the future. When the party reached their new home, they helped spread the soil in Ornage and Sonyata's garden. That was the final step in the ceremony, and after a reasonable amount of congratulations and celebration, they were left alone to spend a few days together in their new home, enjoying the beginning of new life.

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The days passed, and the satellite approached its target, and Ornage knew that he needed to spend more time at the launch facility preparing for the transmission. He was reluctant to leave his home with Sonyata, but they both understood that he had to be ready.

Instead of staying alone in their home, they decided to spend their time together supporting the satellite. It was part of both of them, and they wanted it to succeed.

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Finally, the day arrived, and Albot received an indication that the satellite was in the position to transmit to the twin planet.

Ornage was worried, but as he looked around the observation room, he felt it humorous that none of the dignitaries who attended the launch were present now. The only one who returned was Ellig, who functioned as the communications person who would pass the results to the Raog.

Apparently, the other leaders thought the launch was more significant, and no one expected a quick response from the twin planet. Politicians only wanted to be at an event where there was excitement and a predictable outcome. None of them thought there would be excitement, so they were elsewhere. Many thought or hoped that it might be many days before any response occurred, and if they were lucky, there might never be a response.

Ornage was on his pad next to his father, and on his other side was his new life partner Sonyata, who was just as anxious as Ornage. Finally, Albot indicated that the satellite was in a position. Albot waited for an indication from either of them to transmit their message to the twin planet.

“Father now is the time to transmit,” Ornage said to his father.

His father hesitated then responded, “Ornage, we have come far and proven a lot. We have discovered a great deal, and now I’m concerned about what else we’ll encounter. Let us pray to Varo that this communication is the right thing to do.”

Ornage said in a solemn voice, “Yes, father, we have come to a bridge that we must cross.” Then, just as Sonyata reached out and touched his hand, he made the vertical hand motion to Albot to send the message.

Ornage reviewed the message in his head as it was transmitted. It hadn’t changed much from the first version many days ago. He hoped that it would be appropriate and that the Ora would respond quickly.

We are the Raog from the planet Varo opposite to yours on our shared sun. We want to communicate with you. We have recorded some of your radio transmissions which allow us to translate our language into yours.

We are friendly and wish to know about your civilization, and we look forward to hearing a return transmission from you.

Just as he completed his thought, he saw Albot jump in the control room. Albot looked at Ornage and his father with a very shocked look on his face. He slowly reached for a switch that transferred what he heard to the observation room.

At that instant, Ornage and his father heard a second transmission from the twin planet. Ornage immediately recognized that it was different from the first one received many days in the past. This message was longer, and the tone was noticeably different. While they waited, Albot and Doctor Lauto began working on the translation; Ornage was ready to panic; he was not ready for transmission so fast.

Finally, Albot and Doctor Lauto indicated that they were ready. Doctor Lauto moved the switch that allowed him to read the translation through the speakers into the observation room. Ornage and his father listened.

'We are the Ora. We received your transmission. We are interested in you and your planet. Tell us about your planet's resources, metals, population numbers, organization, food, and if your military will be aggressive towards us?'

Doctor Wong looked at Ornage and said, "I understand all of that, but what is a military?" Ornage was at a loss and opened the door to the control room, asking Doctor Lauto to join them.

As Doctor Lauto entered, Ornage asked him, "what does the translation Military mean?"

The Doctor responded, "As far as I could determine, a military is an organized group that is used to maintain order or discipline within society. Perhaps they are afraid that if we have a military, we might be aggressive towards them. The other transmissions we heard on their standard broadcasts talked about their military."

The Raog never needed to develop tools for defense. If there was some violence, the community dealt with it, and then their lives went on, growing crops, moving food around the planet, caring for the young, living and dying.

“Father, perhaps we should consult with the Grand Leader and the Orb before we respond. This is happening much faster than we thought, and we should have someone else’s input,” Ornage cautioned his father.

Doctor Wong agreed, and a messenger was dispatched to the Grand Leader’s home.

While they waited for the Grand Leader and Orb to arrive, Ornage, Sonyata, Doctor Wong, and Doctor Lauto worked through some appropriate responses. They wanted to answer the questions and make sure that the Ora was comfortable talking with them. They wanted to assure them that the Raog had no military and they were no threat to them. The draft message they prepared was:

We are excited about your rapid response. We have many resources and Raog. We need time to answer all of your questions but be confident we have no military, and there is no reason that we will be aggressive to you. We share our sun and are eager to communicate with you.

After a reasonable time, the Grand Leader and the Orb arrived, and Ornage and Doctor Lauto reviewed the message received from the twin planet and what they thought would be a reasonable response.

The Grand Leader was overwhelmed and wasn’t sure what to do. He was definitely out of his area of expertise. He never thought that a response would be so sudden, but there he was, and he had to give his opinion.

“Ornage, Doctor Wong, your response seems adequate, we want to be open with our twin, and we don’t want to cause any fear on their part,” the Grand Leader contributed.

The Orb was silent, and when everyone looked at her for a comment, she hesitated then said, “Caution must be our leader. Our translations may

not include each other’s true meanings.

Doctor Wong thought then said, “Yes, we must be cautious.

With that said, Ornage gave an indication to Doctor Lauto, who translated the text into the Ora language, and on Ornage’s hand motion, he transmitted it to the twin planet.

Everyone in the room was aware that everything they knew had changed. They were waiting for a response, and they were afraid that they might get one.

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General Aarm's craft had arrived. His orders were clear, and even though he didn't like them, they must be accomplished. Imbata hovered around like a Perota waiting to pick up a scrap of food.

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Irrm was happy, he had arrived, and his cargo was unloading. His job was to sit and wait. At some point, someone would tell him what to do, but it wasn't his place to ask.

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Romaa wasn't in the ideal position. The craft that she was on was in the area but not directly involved. She knew that VanMacca, the Supreme Leader, would want to be near, watch, and ensure that all of her generals did as they were told. If Romaa was too far away, it was unclear how or when she could start her plans. She would have to wait and assume that the opportunity would become obvious.

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Erom sat in his conference room with most of his staff. The room was dead silent, and they were barely breathing. Erom was very deep in thought and asking himself, was there anything he could have done better to prepare for this? He knew that he had already done a great deal, but that, sometimes, is not enough. He kept going over his staff's preparations in his mind and wondering how to improve them, who needed them, would they need them. Those and many other questions were almost haunting him.

He was worried about his life partner. Iorata was a strong Raog, but she was also very sensitive, and this turmoil within the soul of Varo would be hard on her. She was very close with Lretta, and Erom knew they had talked a lot about the changing times and the impacts to the Raog.

Erom was a man who acted, and although he had sympathy for those who worried about the subtleties, he found comfort in his actions. He prayed to Varo that Iorata would be able to cope and help Lretta if she needed it.

9-The Realization

Ilana left her meeting structure where she had just completed a late-night meeting with her regional coordinators, and she heard a very loud noise in the sky. She turned and looked up and almost shrieked at what she saw. There was a giant structure lowering itself from the sky of Varo. It made enough noise that Ilana's hearing was hurting, and it caused the soil to shake beneath her feet. The structure had tremendous clouds of smoke and flames coming from its bottom that lit the sky and ground around her it as it descended.

She had seen a couple of the Raog space flights returning from satellite maintenance, and that structure was a hundred times larger than anything she saw before.

Ilana was so frightened she was unable to move from where she was standing. Some of her companions approached her and stood with a mix of awe and horror.

One of them spoke to the group in a loud voice so they could be heard, "My Varo, what is that, what is happening?" None of them had an answer.

Finally, as the structure approached the soil, Ilana yelled at the top of her lungs, "Please, someone inform the capitol and go to your homes, tell everyone to go to theirs. Protect your young and stay in your home. Now please go rapidly, and may Varo be with you."

With her admonition, they parted quickly and moved away, leaving Ilana standing in front of her meeting dwelling. After a moment, she realized that she also needed to rush to her home and protect her young. She moved away as fast as possible, still watching the descending structure with one of her eyes; she thought, *"I hope my Jabom won't be damaged."*

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Ornage rested on his pad with his father, Doctor Lauto, and the Grand Leader beside him. None of them knew how long they'd have to wait for a

response after the message was sent. It could be immediate or take many days. So, they waited.

After a long time, Ornage felt that they had waited long enough, and he said, “It appears nothing major is going to happen. I suggest that we go to our residences and wait for a response. We will have the control room staffed throughout the day and night, so if something is received, we’ll be notified.” That made sense to all present, so they made their departing congratulations and encouraged a quick response.

Ornage and Sonyata made their way home, and Sonyata was in a pensive mood; Ornage asked her, “You seem quiet since we left. What are you thinking?”

Sonyata had hesitated for a few moments before she responded, “Ornage, the Ora from our twin planet, asked some curious questions in that second transmission. For some reason, I’m uncomfortable, and maybe we should have thought more before responding.” She hesitated a little more before saying, “They asked about us but provided no information about themselves.”

Ornage thought as he walked. Then he responded, “Perhaps so. We may have been too optimistic about their motivations. Not all living things are like us. Let us pray to Varo that we’re worrying too much.” Sonyata nodded, and they continued walking to their home.

They were both tired and planned to make it a short evening and get some rest.

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Ornage was drowsy and felt like he was emerging from a dark room when he realized that someone was pounding on their home’s front door. He reached aside and touched Sonyata’s hand, “Dear, someone is trying to wake us.”

For some reason, that startled Sonyata, and she woke quickly and stood up, saying, “What is happening?” Ornage rose to see who was seeking entrance.

Ornage opened the door to his home, and one of the Grand Leader's assistants enthusiastically said, "Please come; something major is happening. I'm here to transport you and your life partner to the launch facility immediately."

Ornage hurried to his resting area and spoke with Sonyata, and they prepared themselves to leave. Ornage mentioned that maybe there was a response to the last message that they had sent. Both of them assumed that is what happened, and they were anxious to hear a response.

While they rode with the transport driver, they asked him if he knew what happened. He didn't, he was just told to escort Ornage and Sonyata to the facility immediately, and he emphasized how strongly the Grand Leader had said, "Immediately."

When they arrived at the facility, Ornage and Sonyata rushed inside and were met with turmoil and hurried movements. They found the Grand Leader, Lretta, Ornage's father, and Doctor Lauto resting in the observation room, and they appeared stressed.

"Ornage, something terrible has happened," his father exploded, "Late last night, a spaceship landed outside of the capitol."

Ornage was speechless. That was something no one had anticipated, and it was beyond everyone's comprehension. Ornage looked at Sonyata for a moment, then said to his father, "How could that be? If they are from the twin planet, I'm confused. We just sent a message last night!"

His father had no response and could only respond with a confused expression.

The Grand Leader said, "We must go there and try to communicate."

Sonyata suggested, "Father, perhaps we should have one of our aircraft fly over the landing site at first light and see what it looks like."

"Good idea," said the Grand Leader, and Doctor Wong nodded his head in agreement. The Grand Leader spoke to his assistant.

Once that was said, the entire room was quiet for a moment, then Ornage said, "Doctor Lauto, please pack anything necessary to allow us to communicate."

Doctor Lauto nodded, rose, and began organizing his team.

The Grand Leader said to his assistant, “Please inform district leader Orto, and I want Ellig from Newsource to be present and broadcast our first communication. Please have them there right after the morning showers.”

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Orto was woken with a start. The messenger at the door told him of the craft landing outside the capitol. He was shocked but not surprised. Something bad was bound to happen, and that was it.

While Orto dressed, he spoke with his life partner Shola, “I’m afraid what I feared the most has come to pass. There has been a spacecraft landing outside of the capital. The Grand Leader is going to the landing site to communicate with the visitors, and I must be there.”

His life partner was worried but understood the responsibilities that her life partner had. He must be there.

Orto thought as he climbed into the transport, *“I must be prominent as we speak to these visitors. I must be seen as a natural leader, one that could lead the planet.”*

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Ilana stayed in her home caring for her young. She had many visitors updating her on events at the landing site. Apparently, the creatures that exited the structure immediately started building a wall. Unfortunately, it was difficult to see what they looked like in the dark, no one was able to get close enough, and all of the activity was behind the wall.

Ilana wanted to go to the site and see for herself. As soon as her young were provided for, she would go there, and she wished that Mortog was with her.

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Ellig was leaving his home when the Grand Leader's Assistant ran towards him and blurted out, "The Grand Leader wants you to prepare a broadcast from a site outside of the capitol. Last night a space vehicle landed, and the Grand Leader and Ornage are preparing to go there and try to communicate."

Ellig stood motionless for a moment while he tried to absorb all of what was said. *"What is happening?"* he thought? Then the professional part of him took over, and he knew that he had to move quickly to make the arrangements. "Can you provide me transport to my work location?" he asked the assistant.

"Yes, I'm at your disposal." The assistant said formally.

Ellig thought as he entered the transport, *"I must get word to Vortus, Orto, and Erom."*

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Ilana and some of her group leaders moved cautiously through the structures and approached the landing site. A thought kept popping up in her head, I hope they don't damage too much of our Jabom. She then realized that the Jabom must have been destroyed; the amount of flame she saw coming from the bottom of the landing structure would surely have destroyed some of the plants.

The group emerged from between two structures and were able to see the landing site, and Ilana saw Ilrod, the soil tender standing there. As she approached, she saw the worry on his face. They didn't speak; they just stood there and shared the sight of the alien vehicle in front of them. Both were speechless and confused.

The large flying structure was in the center of a circular wall that completely surrounded it. They couldn't see over the wall, but there was obvious activity behind the wall; they could hear mechanical noises.

Ilana realized that it wasn't wise to work in the fields that day, so she sent word to a couple of the group leaders to the other groups to remain in their residences. Ilana decided that she needed to stay there and monitor the activities at the landing site while she waited for word from the leadership. Ilrod's home was in a good location, so he suggested moving to his residence and making themselves comfortable while watching the visitors.

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Ellig arrived at the landing site after chaotic work preparing for the sudden broadcast. As he approached the site, he decided to move around its periphery to find the best viewpoint. When he moved between two structures, a local resident exited a structure and approached him.

Ilana introduced herself and said, "I am the sector leader. I saw the Structure land yesterday. Do you know who they are and what we should do?"

Ellig responded, "I am Ellig. I am from Newsource, and I've been instructed by the Grand Leader to be here and prepare for a broadcast. He and his team should be here shortly. I suspect that I know who these visitors are, but I'm not sure."

Ilana then recognized Ellig and felt a little comfort knowing that the leadership was soon to arrive and they would be able to explain what was happening.

"That craft is huge; it's much bigger than our spacecraft. We could fit a couple of our buildings in it," said Ilana.

"Yes, it is immense, I've seen almost all of our spacecraft, and I've never seen anything so big fly. It must have tremendous power," said Ellig.

"Yes, it does; look at the soil and damaged Jabom beneath it," responded Illana.

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Erom was already at his work location when he received word from Ellig about the pending broadcast. He immediately assembled his staff and waited in his meeting room.

His fear was growing and becoming real in his mind. Fear of the unknown was difficult to deal with, but now his fears were materializing in front of him.

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Vortus entered a friend's home and was accosted, "Vortus, a terrible event is about to be broadcast. Strangers have landed in a vehicle from space near the capital. The broadcast will be starting in a few moments. I am very concerned; please rest and watch it with us."

Vortus stood for a moment thinking, then slowly moved into the viewing area and took a resting pad. His thoughts were jumbled, and there was a little panic; he knew that they were moving into an unknown area, and they weren't prepared. Vortus sensed that something horrific was about to happen.

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Ornage and Sonyata were in the second transportation vehicle following the Grand Leader; his father and Doctor Lauto were in the forward vehicle. They approached the area where the landing had occurred, and they slowed their vehicles when they saw Ellig and a female standing between two structures. Ornage and Sonyata exited their vehicle and approached the two, with the Grand Leader and Doctor Wong close behind.

When they turned a corner to speak with Ellig and the female, they got their first clear view of the spacecraft. The group stopped and looked in awe.

"Tremendous, isn't it?" Ellig said.

“Yes, it is, and I’m worried,” responded Doctor Wong.

The Grand Leader hesitated for a moment then spoke, “Ellig, are you prepared for broadcast?”

Ellig responded, “Yes, leader, and I was just talking with Ilana, who is the district leader, and she saw the object land yesterday.”

Ilana reviewed what she saw, and they congratulated her for taking the proper precautions.

Ornage and the Grand Leader stood and looked at the craft as Orto arrived in his vehicle. Ornage commented, “It sounds like it has rockets like our space vehicles, but it is so much larger. Their rockets must be a lot more powerful than ours.”

The Grand Leaders said, “I wonder why they’re building a wall. It must be protection, maybe they’re just cautious, and they might be afraid of us.”

Ellig then suggested, “There is a clear path to a flat area just by the wall; I recommend that you follow that path, and I have a good view with our image sender. That is a good approach path to approach the visitors.”

The Grand Leader agreed with the recommendation and spoke to Orto and Doctor Lauto, “I suggest that the three of us approach the wall and see if we can get a response. Orto and I represent the leadership, and Doctor Lauto could attempt translation if indeed these visitors are from the twin planet.”

Lretta chimed in and pointed out that the people might be more comfortable if she was part of the initial contact. She was the Orb, and they all knew her, and seeing her as part of the group would be reassuring to them.

The Grand Leader felt that was reasonable, and if communication started, then Ornage and his father could move down the path and participate. It did make sense not to approach them with a large group; it might seem overpowering.

Sonyata touched her father’s arm and said, “Our aircraft hasn’t been able to get here yet. Should we wait until it flies by before you walk down?”

The Grand Leader thought for a moment then said, “No, I don’t think so, a plane flying over might scare them. We want to meet them first before we make an aggressive move.”

The Grand Leader turned, and Lretta, Orto, and Doctor Lauto looked at each other, took a deep breath, and started down the path.

Ellig remained with the technician holding the image sender and continued speaking along with the broadcast. The word moved quickly, and his technicians told him that almost the entire planet Varo was watching.

Ornage and his father were petrified but stood in plain view, waiting for their turn to follow the path to the wall.

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Vortus sat with others that were as fearful as he. His fear had turned into something personal and as solid as the pain in his stomach. The room around him was full with other soil tenders, watching the broadcast with as much intensity as he. There was a murmur of chanting and praying occurring within the room, and they each tried to draw comfort from each other’s presence.

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The welcome team arrived at the wall and stood waiting for something to happen. Finally, a part of the wall separated after a few moments, and the visitors could be seen.

Everyone watching was awestruck. They saw that the visitors were truly alien beyond their comprehension, and their appearance was shocking. Each of them had many legs and appeared to be wearing some type of covering. The creatures had four legs on the ground they used to walk, and two forward appendages appeared to function as arms.

The initial creatures that passed through the opening in the wall were carrying tools, and they formed a line in front of the opening. They wore

brightly colored garments, and each of them had a red hat on their head. After a moment, two creatures passed through the opening and took a position behind the front line. Those creatures had similar body coverings, but they had many patterns and designs instead of solid colors. Their head coverings were ornate and had items attached. The visiting creatures and the welcome party stood face to face for a moment, and nothing happened.

Suddenly the air was filled with loud explosions. The tools that the front line of aliens held, spit fire, and then there was silence.

The welcome party stood for an agonizing moment then all of them fell backward onto the soil. Falling onto the ground was not what Raog did; that was not natural for them. It was obvious that something extreme had happened.

The silence continued while the group leaders turned and entered the compound, followed by the others with the red hats. When they passed through the opening in the wall, the opening closed.

Ornage, his father, Sonyata, and Ellig just stood there, not knowing what to do. They realized that the Grand Leader, Lretta, and Doctor Lauto would need help to stand up. It was very difficult for Raog to regain their stance from a prone position. So, they hesitantly moved down the path, hoping to help them. Ellig followed them to get a good view of the wall and to speak with the party.

As they approached the welcome party, it was obvious that something was drastically wrong. None of them moved, trying to regain their standing position. Ornage grabbed Sonyata's hand as they approached.

They stopped abruptly and saw a scene that was beyond their understanding. The party had been torn apart and were all bleeding on the soil of Varo.

Ornage, his father, and Sonyata stood for a moment. Then they all screamed at the top of their lungs.

Ellig captured that image and, for a moment, didn't know what to say. Then he realized that the welcome party was all dead; he quickly turned and raced back to the structures, still not knowing what to say.

Ornage immediately recognized that they were in danger and moved Sonyata back, almost dragging her. His father hesitated for a moment before Ornage could get him to move.

They stopped at the beginning of the path and continued screaming.

Ellig didn't know what else to do, so he terminated the broadcast.

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Vortus rested on his pad in a state of confusion and disbelief. All of the greatest fears in his life had just exploded on him. Those with him rested in dumbfounded silence.

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Erom was resting on his pad, and his team all stared at a blank screen. After the broadcast was terminated, he rose, pounded his desk, and shouted, "Send information to our manufacturing area and produce as many defensive tools as possible; we must protect Varo."

10-Confusion

The entire planet of Varo was sickened, confused, distraught, and lost. They had just witnessed five of their leaders slaughtered in front of their eyes during a planet-wide broadcast. Raog began walking the streets in a daze, and the young were feeling the stress of their parents.

They were not accustomed to violence. They were a peaceful race who were content to grow their Jabom, care for their young, and share it with each other. Death was not unknown to them, but death was with dignity and compassion. On rare occasions, death occurred as a violent act while at work understood and very rare. The death that occurred due to the violent act of another was unheard of. Death by a violent act committed by visiting alien creatures upon Varo was beyond comprehension.

Sonyata, Ornage, and his father, Doctor Wong, moved away from the horrific scene where Sonyata's father and mother were just slaughtered. They had stopped screaming in pain but moved slowly and in a confused manner. Ornage held his life partner's hand. At least she could move on her own; his father showed no ability to navigate or take care of himself. He was in a world of his own and couldn't take care of himself or help those around him.

Ornage realized that he and his father were responsible for that terrible violation of Varo and the Raog. He helped his father investigate the twin planet. He and his father convinced the Grand Leader to expend the resources necessary to build a rocket and satellite to communicate with that twin planet. It was he and his father that communicated with that twin planet...and led them here.

He just witnessed the slaughter of Sonyata's parents, and it was his fault. He painfully accepted that, but then it was his job to save the people of Varo. He had a part in that horrific incident, and he owed it to his life partner, the Raog, and their planet Varo.

Ilana motioned for them to enter the residence by the head of the path. As she did, she saw Ilrod, the local soil tender, standing and staring at the massacre site.

Ornage positioned his father on a resting pad, and he did his best to calm his life partner. He did all he could do, but she was still shaking and visibly very upset. Behind him, he heard another enter, and Ellig approached him.

“Ornage, do we understand what happened? Why they did this to us?” Ellig questioned

“No, I have no idea. We don’t know if these creatures are the Ora, although it is likely they are. We just sent and received our first messages with them yesterday, and there was no indication of anything like that happening.”

He remembered the caution that Sonyata had risen about their questions and particularly the question about the military. He thought, *“Oh my Varo, if this is related to that transmission and question, then we have made a terrible mistake.”* That only added to his despondency and feeling of loss.

It took some minutes for the group to gain any control. During this time, Ellig received messages indicating other ships had landed near most major cities, and similar horrific acts had occurred.

Ellig approached Sonyata and said, “Sonyata, daughter of the Orb and the Grand Leader, the Raog of Varo, saw what you saw. They are ill-prepared for what just happened. I know that it has hurt you more than them, but they need the Orb to speak to them.”

Sonyata heard this and responded, “But the Orb is dead.”

Ellig replied, “I think the people of Varo will agree; you are the Orb now. They have seen you, heard you, and received comfort from you. You are the natural one to assume the responsibility, and the people need you.”

Sonyata’s face changed from one of pain and confusion to one of determination and resolve. Her people needed her, and she must find the strength.

“Give me a moment,” Sonyata whispered to Ellig.

Ellig turned to Ornage and said in a low voice, “The Raog have lost their Grand Leader, Orb, and district leader; they are lost. They know you,

and being the Orb's life partner, they'll appreciate words from a leader and providing information. Please be next to Sonyata and provide leadership."

Ornage thought for a moment and was painfully aware that he was responsible for this. But he did know the Raog and how they responded to leadership. After such a horrific event was a time when they needed a leader, someone speaking with a clear voice. It seemed obvious, the least he could do was support his life partner, and if words from him could provide any comfort to the Raog, he would help as necessary.

"Yes, Ellig, I will help the people of Varo," Ornage said with a formal resolution.

Ornage heard the noise of the approaching airplane, and he looked at Sonyata. She noticed it at the same time and said, "I forgot about the airplane."

Ornage looked around the room and noticed that Ilrod was no longer in his home. There was something about that which distressed him. Ornage rose and looked through the window towards the alien craft and was shocked at what he saw. He could see the airplane flying in a circle around the craft, trying to look at it, and he also saw that Ilrod was walking down the path towards the alien craft and the bodies. Ornage couldn't think why he would do that unless Ilrod wanted to bury them so that the soul of Varo would be complete.

Ornage watched in horror as Ilrod walked towards the bodies of the welcoming party. He had no concept of what might happen next. Just as he was about to shout to Ilrod to return to his residence, a single explosion rang out, and Ilrod went to his knees then fell forward onto the soil. He died in contact with his soil.

With the now-familiar sound of the explosion, everyone else rushed to the window and screamed once again at the new addition to the fallen welcome party.

Immediately after the explosion, a large panel on top of the vehicle slowly opened, and a long cylinder rose into the air. Suddenly the air filled with another larger explosion. A moment later, the small Raog airplane exploded in mid-air and fell to the ground. They stood in shock; after seeing two more deaths, they were too numb to react to the violence. They

recovered quicker, and they felt their resolve hardened, and they knew they would have to deal with that great violation of their planet.

Sonyata, the Orb, grabbed the hand of her life partner and nodded to Ellig.

“We must speak to the people of Varo,” she said with firm authority.

Ellig conferred with a technician and indicated to them that they were now broadcasting to the people of Varo.

Ellig opened the broadcast, “People of Varo. We all witnessed a painful and distressful event a few moments ago; I apologize for that and the abrupt termination of the transmission. I am now with Sonyata, the daughter of the Orb, and her life partner, Ornage leader of the technical team. Please listen to them.”

Sonyata opened, “People of Varo. We have all seen something we don’t understand. We have done nothing to these creatures from our twin planet, and we don’t know why they have inflicted such a violation on Varo and us. I don’t know how to respond, but I know that we are strong, our families are strong, and we will find a way to help each other. My mother, the Orb, and my father, the Grant Leader, came here today because they wanted to meet our visitors, and hopefully, it would have brought about good changes for Varo and us. Unfortunately, our visitors are not like us, and they decided to act violently against us. My mother and father did not expect this, but I know that they would now be worried more about the Raog and Varo than about their deaths. Please remain calm and also focus on what is important to us.”

She looked at her side, and her life partner Ornage began speaking, “To the people of Varo. My father, Doctor Wong, and I led the team that established contact with our twin planet. It appears that they have known of Varo for a long time. To have traveled that far through space, they must have already been preparing and would have taken off immediately after our first contact. They have more skill in space, and, unfortunately, the results of their arrival have been disastrous. We must work together and find a way to protect ourselves and those we love. Please say a prayer to Varo with me that we’ll find a way to deal with this violation. All of you should

remain in your residences and wait to hear from us. No one should drive any vehicle or fly an airplane in the vicinity of this craft."

With the conclusion of those remarks, Ellig ended with, "Thank you for speaking to the people of Varo. Let us all hold our young and pray for a resolution to this horror." And he ended the broadcast.

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Mortog watched the presentation with members of his teams in his cave's viewing area. The Raog in the room had gone through many emotions, from fear to loathing to pain and confusion. It finally ended after the last transmission with a feeling of completeness; now they knew why they were there, in the ice caves guarding the Jabom.

In the last couple of days, additional men arrived, bringing some unusual tools with them. At first, Mortog didn't understand what the tools did, and even after a demonstration, their purpose wasn't clear. Now he understood what the tools did and why they were needed.

He rose and spoke to his team, "It is clear what we have been asked to do. It is up to us to defend the Jabom. We must work with the defensive tool makers and help them make many more tools, we must learn how to use them, and we must do what is needed." His team aggressively pumped their hands up and down and grunting due to their extreme agitation.

"We need to look at these caves and devise plans to defend them. We must use all of our experience to plan and organize ourselves so we will be effective. I don't know if or when we might have to act, but these ice caves contain Jabom, which is our food, our lives, and part of our Varo. If the harvests and movement are disrupted, then what we have here will be key to the Raog's survival."

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Ornage felt a surge of necessity which translated into resolution and determination. Nevertheless, he must take steps to protect those around him

and particularly Sonyata.

Ornage spoke in a clear voice, “Unfortunately, Ilrod did what he thought necessary, and he paid with his life. It appears that he has no life partner; let’s set up an observation facility here to monitor the aliens. During the night, let’s retrieve the bodies of our welcoming team, and tomorrow we’ll begin organizing what we’ll do.”

While they waited for the night, they avoided looking at the scene and alien craft. Ornage did the best that he could to comfort Sonyata. Doctor Wong remained physically and emotionally separate from them. He rested in a corner and was not responsive to activities around him.

Another group, sector, and division leaders came to Ilrod’s home, and the start of resistance began. Ilrod’s residence would be the viewpoint from which they would watch the invaders.

Slowly the sunset and the night began. The solemnness of the evening showers brought quiet and the air of isolation upon everyone. Once the sky was dark and the storms had cleared, movement in the area would become difficult to see; Ornage led a team of volunteers cautiously down the path towards the wall. It was a typical Varo night, and he saw only a few arms in front. As they approached the wall, they slowed and tried to determine their location with respect to where the bodies should have been. The team spread out and continued a slow search, and finally, they concluded that their friends' remains were no longer there.

“How could that be?” Ornage thought. “They must be here; we must find them.” He whispered to his search party to spread out and look closer. After a long time of searching, he finally admitted that they were not there, and Ornage worked his way among the group, telling them to return to Ilrod’s residence.

Ornage was confused. “What creature would have such little regard for another,” he thought, “What have they done? Why did they do it?” As he made his way back to the home, those questions kept going through his mind. The soul of Varo would have a hole until they could return their friends to their rightful place in the soil.

When they reached the home and spoke among themselves, they were all upset, confused, and indignant. Reluctantly, they knew that they had to

wait until the next day to see if there was any evidence of what happened to their friends.

Not finding her parent's bodies greatly upset Sonyata and Ornage did his best to comfort her. It was important for all people to return to the soil so that Varo's soul would be whole. Not finding them caused pain to all.

It remained quiet within the Alien Wall, almost seeming like an insult to the pain they caused... The Ora had returned to their ship, and everyone was waiting through the night for the return of the sun.

As the sun rose and the morning showers passed, each of the Raog within Ilrod's residence rose and moved to the window to view the nightmarish scene from the previous day. It took a few moments to realize that the scene had changed. It was obvious that the Ora had done something with or to the remains of the welcome team. They weren't where they fell, and there was no evidence of what happened. No one understood the reason for that, but they all knew that there was much more to learn about those invading Ora.

Ornage decided that he had seen enough, and he and Sonyata needed to return to the capital. First, he must return to the launch facility and plan. He knew his life partner, Sonyata was worried about the Raog, and she needed to get involved and comfort them.

The group's remnants put themselves together the best they could and loaded the transport vehicles for what would be a long emotional trip back to the capital, even though it was only a short distance.

Doctor Wong remained in a state of shock. He was not talking or aware of others around him. Ornage was worried. He couldn't take him to the launch facility, so he had to be taken home. When they arrived at his father's home, it took only a few moments to find some of his longtime neighbors who were eager to look after him. Ornage was worried about his father's health and the effects those events would have on him, but he must do what he could for the others around him.

When they reached the launch facility, its former use seemed irrelevant and, to some extent, offensive. Ornage determined that no other transmissions had been received, and he told the stunned staff to go home and care for their families.

They also received a message from Ilana at the landing site, which said that 20 of the Aliens had left the site and moved fast towards the capital. No one knew where they were going, but the fact that they had left the walled area was a major concern for all present.

Ellig knew that he must talk with Ornage and Sonyata and explain the other activities. He asked them to rest on their pads while he told them of Vortus, Erom, and Mortog, “Erom is building defensive tools and moving them to the northern ice caves. Fortunately, he was afraid of something like that happening, and he prepared in the best way he could. A leader, Mortog, is well established in the ice caves, and soon we will have the ability to defend ourselves.”

Ornage and Sonyata recognized the significance of what they heard. In an unsettling way, they were starting to see the people fighting back and defending the soil of Varo. That was not part of their history, but it was now part of their future.

Sonyata spoke to Ellig and asked, “Can we have another broadcast. We must inform everyone to stay away from the Ora and remain in their homes until we can do something to ensure their safety. They need to hear our voices periodically to reassure and comfort them.”

The capital was the center of the planet, so the Newsource was centered there, and it was where the broadcasts originated from. Because of that, it was relatively easy for Ellig to get another broadcast initiated, and in a few moments, Sonyata and Ornage were informed that Varo was waiting.

“People of Varo,” Ornage began, “the planet Varo is under attack. Space vehicles have landed near many of the major cities, and, unfortunately, there have been additional horrific attacks. We still don’t know why they are doing this to us. But be assured we are taking steps to protect you from these invaders. I encourage all district leaders to monitor alien movement and protect your citizens.”

Sonyata added her concerns, “Please remain in your residences, do not confront these creatures. If you see them moving from their landing sites, avoid them at all costs. We will find a way to protect ourselves and Varo. We will transmit again as we learn more.”

As they concluded the transmission, Ellig heard very disturbing news from the Newsource technicians at the capitol facility, “They’ve heard that Ora were moving through the capitol approaching the Newsource facility.”

One of the technicians rushed into the launch facility shouting, “They are approaching.”

Everyone in the room thought he meant that Ora were approaching the Newsource facility until they realized he meant the launch facility, their location. They moved as fast as possible, and Ornage and Ellig carried all of the translation equipment and notes they could. They ran from the building and crossed the street, and entered another structure a short distance away. Then they waited.

Suddenly many Ora appeared, moving down the street towards the launch facility. They moved quickly using their four appendages, and to Ornage and Sonyata’s surprise, they fired their tools at anyone they saw. There was several dead Raog shot with the Ora tools.

When the Ora reached the launch facility, they broke inside and exited after a brief period. Within a few moments, the structure began burning. Ornage, Ellig, and Sonyata watched as it burned, and off in the distance, they could see another plume of smoke they assumed was from the Newsource facility. Their future suddenly took another strange and frightening direction.

Losing the launch facility had little impact, its use was behind them, and it played no role in their future. However, the loss of the Newsource was disturbing; how could they organize everyone.

Ornage spoke to Ellig, “If the Newsource facility was destroyed in the capital, how can we maintain communication with the other cities and districts?”

Ellig thought for a moment, then said, “I know-how. Each Newsource facility can broadcast; they are generally coordinated through the main facility here in the capital. If it is destroyed, each of them can still broadcast but only to their area. If we want to communicate with the entire planet, we must get the information to one of the facilities, and they can broadcast to their area. They can then pass the message to their adjoining area. Many of

these transmitters can be moved and dispersed, so they, hopefully, remain out of reach to the Ora. We just need to use them wisely."

Ornage thought about the new developments and said, "We should move to the ice caves. We are not safe here. Once we get to the ice caves and get organized, we can protect the Raog and Varo. Here we are too dispersed and vulnerable. If we speak too much, the Ora may come after other leaders and us. The leadership of Varo must go to the ice caves until we can defend ourselves. I wish we could fly there, but it is obvious that the Ora have weapons that can shoot our unarmed planes down. I think flying would put us all at too much risk."

They all looked at each other, and the answer seemed self-evident. They nodded and began preparations to move to the ice caves; they would have to walk or find other transportation.

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Erom walked among his facilities and gave directions to everyone he saw. He was overstressed and frantic. What he saw happen at the landing site, and knowing what probably happened at the other sites, caused him physical pain, and his only response was action. He realized that what he did may be the only defense they could mount against the invading Ora. His mind was in turmoil over what he needed to do and what they might do. To add to his panic, he was just told about the attacks on the launch facility and home facility of Newsource, that news told him that his facilities might be next. He must disperse the tools that he had already built and the knowledge of how to build them to the ice caves. As an added precaution, he should move as much of the manufacturing equipment as possible.

It would be a great deal of work to move their manufacturing capabilities. When the machines were built, they weren't made to be mobile. The larger machines would need to be broken down and moved as separate units, and the smaller machines had to be packaged and protected. During the time everything was being moved, he wouldn't be able to manufacture any defensive tools.

Erom had to make a difficult decision. He didn’t want to lose the manufacturing time, so he thought of a solution. Many of the machines were similar to others in his district, so he could move the other machines along with the knowledge of how to use them. Then once they were set up in the northern ice caves, they could be started faster, and he wouldn’t lose the manufacturing time local.

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Vortus paid attention to only one thing, recapturing the sanctity of the soil and Varo. Both had been violated and taken from them. Until that was corrected, the soul of Varo was in turmoil, and everyone on the planet was at risk. He must act; he left his friend's residence and looked for a transportation vehicle. As he moved along the street, he noticed that it was quieter than usual, and the few Raog that he met looked confused and walked in a daze. Raog were usually friendly and smiled or spoke to each other on the streets, but those he met kept to themselves. Finally, he found a vehicle that could take him to where there would be tools to fight back. Erom was building those tools.

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Ilana did not like to see the leaders leave her area. Having them present provided her and her group leaders with a little comfort. At least they weren’t alone when they were there. Now they had gone. She usually found comfort in the normal sounds of the farming activities around her, but now those comforting sounds had been replaced with the din of activity from behind the walls. Now her job was to observe the alien landing site and pass status changes to the leaders.

Soon after the leaders left, the wall reopened, and 20 aliens left at a fast pace. They had tools that she saw the fire come from, and they moved quickly towards the capital. She didn’t know where they were going, but she was scared for anyone that got in their way. She sent word to the

leaders, and after that group left, the opening closed, and the level of activity within the walls increased.

Ilana was slowly gaining control of her fears, and she increased her concentration on the landing site. She knew that her life partner Mortog was a long way away in the northern ice caves, and she suspected he would be involved at some point. Her concern was that any confrontation at the ice caves would be much larger, and after seeing what they did to the welcome party, she feared for her partner. Her only way to help protect him was to do a good job here. She continued coordinating with her group leaders so their families would know what was happening.

11-First Confrontation

Ornage, Sonyata, Ellig, Albot, and other technicians who had no life partners moved from the launch facility area. Ornage wanted to go to his father's home and bring him along. Ornage was worried about him, and he wanted his father with him. They moved slowly through the streets until they reached his father's home.

Ornage and Sonyata entered through the front door and noticed the silence in the house. As they walked past the Jabom preparation area, one of the neighbors caring for his father hurried to Ornage and touched his hand.

"I'm so sorry. I tried to get word to you, but…," she paused and took a deep breath then continued, "after that terrible broadcast, getting word to anyone had been difficult. Your father went to the garden, and we found him there later."

He and Sonyata rushed to the rear of the dwelling, and they slowed, taking hesitant steps into his father's garden. His father was still inclined on his resting pad; he had removed his foot coverings so his bare feet could touch the soil. His eyes were closed, and even as Ornage touched him, he didn't move. Ornage's worst fear had just been realized.

Sonyata touched Ornage's hand and said that she was sorry. They held each other for a while until the reality of that day's events came back to them. He must protect, Sonyata, those people with him, and the other people of Varo. His father would agree; he must do what is necessary and then what was important for the living.

He called the others into the garden, and they all spoke of the greatness of Doctor Wong and how unfortunate it was that his discovery would have such an impact on the Raog. It wasn't a condemnation of what he had done, just a realization that the results were beyond what anyone was prepared for.

The ceremony was solemn for all of them, but it was also hurtful for Sonyata. The burial ceremony was an important part of providing continuity for the soul of Varo. They felt that they came from the soil, and they knew

that they received their nourishment from the soil, and only by returning their remains to the soil could they return to the soul of Varo. Unfortunately, she was not able to do that for her parents, and she was grieved.

The ceremony expanded to include eulogies to the Grand Leader and his wife, the Orb. Those present spoke as if their remains were there with them and were being buried properly. Unfortunately, that was all they could do to give Sonyata closure. Perhaps someday they would be able to properly bury her parents, but not today.

Ornage, Ellig, and the others dug three holes in his father's garden, and that was where Doctor Wong was returned to the soil and the soul of Varo. Beside him, the two empty holes were also filled as if Sonyata's parents were also buried. The ceremony was incomplete, but at least they were able to have a ceremony. All present picked up a hand full of soil to carry to their gardens.

After a few moments of comforting each other, the group knew they must leave. So they took what provisions were at hand and packed as much as they could carry and left the residence of Doctor Wong, the father of Ornage.

Leaving his father's home, Ornage fondly remembered the many Jabom gathering trips he and his father went on. After Ornage's mother had passed to the soil, his father tried very hard to spend more with his son.

They would go to Lake Orosh and walk along the shore, enjoying the fields of Jabom. Jabom varied slightly depending on where it was grown. Ornage remembered the cool breezes and how the air moving would cause the Jabom plants to sway and make a shuffling sound.

Because of the moisture in the air and the cool breezes, the Jabom by the lake had a sweeter, smoother taste. When they got back to the residence, they would use it to make jellies, jams, and wines.

On other exploratory trips, his father took Ornage to the mountains, and there the Jabom had a different texture and was not as sweet. Ornage liked the climbing and the beautiful views the mountains provided. Like most Raog, he spent most of his life within a small community, and the land in the vicinity was flat and used for growing. The mountains opened his views and perhaps his mind. The mountain Jabom was better for bread and meal.

When he and his father brought the mountain Jabom home, they made amazing bread that, when warmed and covered with Jabom jelly, made a breakfast that Ornage loved.

As Ornage walked, he enjoyed these fond memories. They were all he had now that his father and mother had passed to the soil and the soul of Varo. Perhaps someday, he would take Sonyata on those trips and share the experiences with her. Perhaps, they would have a son or daughter to take with them.

Sonyata walked quietly next to Ornage, remembering her mother and father. She had many fond memories growing up with them and her aunt and uncle. Because her parents were so busy, she spent a lot of time with her uncle, Ingott, and his wife, Obsom. She knew her parents loved her, and they did spend a great deal of time with her, but she also enjoyed the company of her aunt and uncle.

While growing up, she learned leadership from her father and compassion from her mother. They took her on many of their trips across Varo, and she had the opportunity to watch them. She saw her father's confidence in making decisions, and she saw her mother's emotional connection with everyone she met.

These memories were pleasant, but they were just memories, and because she had no future with them, she was sad while she walked

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It took a couple of days for Vortus to make his way to Erom's location. On the way, he saw evidence in a couple of places where the Ora entered, and in every case, there was destruction and death, which only intensified his horror and determination. Vortus finally made it to Erom's location, and he found a lot of activities.

He approached Erom and said, "What are you doing to protect Varo?"

Erom was a little offended at the direct remark. He retorted, "We have done a great deal, and because we think this location is at risk, we are

moving our efforts to the ice caves and other locations where we can protect ourselves better."

Vortus realized that he had jumped to the wrong conclusion and added, "Leader, I'm sorry for my comment. I've seen a lot of destruction and death coming here, and I want to defend Varo."

"I understand," Erom responded, and he continued, "We are all under stress and want to defend Varo. We are setting up production machinery in the northern ice caves and trying to maximize our production here. We hope to reestablish our operation in the ice caves within a few days. Until then, we are vulnerable here."

Vortus felt better, although he was still seething with the need to do something, so he asked, "May I be trained with the defensive tools? I want to be doing something."

Erom agreed and told Molt, who was one of his key staff, to work with Vortus. Vortus spent the remainder of the day and most of the night training and using the defensive tools. The tool that fired projectiles seemed to fit him well, and he learned how to load, aim and fire the tool. He was impressed with the damage that it could do, though he could only load one projectile at a time. He had no idea how effective that defensive tool would be against the invading military, but he was eager to found out.

At the end of a long day and night, Vortus had to rest, and they provided him with a resting pad in the back of the large manufacturing facility. His sleep was unsatisfying, and his visions were full of pain and loss. When he arose, he felt like he had rested only a short time. After his early day nourishment, he heard loud shouting and noise from the other side of the cavernous room.

He jumped up from his eating table and moved towards the sound, and he heard Molt talking to Erom in a very agitated manner, "Leader, they are coming, and we must do something."

Erom was listening intently and asked, "How far are they from here, and how long do you think it will take them to arrive?"

"They are moving slowly as they move through the city. I don't think they know exactly where we are, but they are definitely moving in our

direction. I think they'll be here in less than an hour," Molt said with a major concern in his voice.

"Good, then we have some time to prepare. This may be an opportunity to use our defensive tools and achieve victory for Varo and us. Let's prepare the facility so we can defend ourselves," Erom directed, and immediately his team closed the doors and positioned defenders at various points around the building.

Vortus was determined to be part of their defense, and he approached Erom, "leader," he said, "I must be part of defending this facility and the Raog. I want to take my position with the others."

Erom knew that arguing with Vortus was unnecessary. He saw the pain in the soil tender's eyes, and he knew that he must be part of the solution.

"Yes, Vortus. I will be honored to have you part of this action."

Molt was standing next to them, and he overheard the conversation. "Leader," Molt said, "We must speak. We think that you are too valuable to stay here. You are key to the defense of the Raog and Varo. "If we defend ourselves here and lose, you will be lost. We suggest that you leave for the ice caves and work there to build a strong defense for all of Varo."

Erom's first emotion was shock and disbelief. How could he leave and ask others to stay?

"I must stay and defend the Raog," he almost yelled.

Molt, Vortus, and the remaining members of Erom's team stood firm and said, "Leader the Raog, and we need leaders. Our attempts here might be in vain, and your loss will be a waste. We encourage you to listen and move to the ice caves where you can help others prepare for their defense."

This logic infuriated Erom, but there was truth in their statements. He lowered his head and said, "You are right, and I hate it. We need leadership, and we must work together, and I must create many more defensive tools for Varo's defense. I don't want needless losses; if you get to the point where you're no longer effective, please withdraw. Please fight with honor, and may your soil always bear Jabom."

Molt and Erom’s team responded in unison, “and may yours also.” With that statement, they moved to other areas of the room, helping the others prepare.

Vortus looked at Erom and said, “They are right. You must go. I must stay. I must avenge the violation I feel, and I wish to do it here." Erom put his hand on Vortus’ shoulder, turned, and left.

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Erom went quickly to his home and spoke with his partner Iorata. "I must go to the northern caves. I don't think you should go; the Raog in our district need you, and traveling with me might put you at risk. Please stay and support our Raog," Erom said to his partner.

"I will stay and do as you say because I agree we must fight, and you are the only one that has taken the necessary steps; please be safe."

They parted with a painful goodbye, Erom to defend the planet and Iorata to help the Raog in her district. Each knew they might never see each other again, but each also knowing that they must do what Varo has directed.

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Defensive tactics were not something that Raog were familiar with. Their instincts didn’t apply directly in that situation. They did, however, have other experiences upon which to draw. All of them knew that, when watching for approaching storms, they needed a clear sightline. They also knew that to keep vermin out of their residences, they must cover every opening, and basic logic told them that to protect each other, they must keep their enemies in front of them. All of that simple logic allowed them to set up a perimeter with openings to use their defensive weapons. If the enemy got inside the facility, the defenders would keep their friends to their back and face the aggressors.

Molt didn’t expect to win this encounter, so he decided to have an escape plan. After all, when they were working in the fields and a bad storm was approaching, it was natural for a leader to make sure that he knew who was working. He needed to know where they were working and that they had a building designated for them to move to when the storm broke. He set up bails of Jabom at key positions on the production floor, all providing an escape path leading to a small rear entrance. Assuming the enemy attacked from the front and he was forced to tell his Raog to fall back and leave the facility, then these bails provided a path to follow.

The defenders were broken up into groups of 8. Each group had one leader who was to watch, yell instructions and move additional projectiles to them. That allowed them to use the defensive tools without having to look for supplies. That allowed the leaders to work with the other teams and coordinate their defense. That tactic was exactly how teams worked in the fields tending the Jabom, which was similar to them, and in a way, it provided some comfort.

The teams were all in place, and stores of projectiles were piled by the leaders. All of them were peering through windows and openings, waiting to see the Ora.

While the apprehension of the battle thickened the air, a couple of Raog were moving in and out of the facility providing updates about the Ora’s progress and location. It was apparent that the Ora had become aware of the facility’s general location. They must also have known of their attempts to produce defensive weapons though they didn't appear to know their exact location. They had not encountered resistance yet, and they were moving slowly around the neighborhood, looking for the defenders.

Suddenly Vortus heard a shout as one of the teams saw the Ora. By then, they knew where the facility was, and they were moving among adjacent structures, forming small groups. Apparently, they were waiting for all of them to be in position before they approached. That provided time for the defenders to pick out the best targets and prepare themselves for the attack.

Eventually, all of the Ora was in place, and the waiting ended. Suddenly each of them fired their tools. The defenders quickly realized that the Ora also paused to put in a projectile between each shot. So, if they if could time

it correctly, they could shoot while the Ora was reloading and hide when they had to reload. Initially, that was very efficient, and many Ora fell.

Vortus was firing when able, yet he became a little distressed, wondering what the blood of an Ora would do to his soil and the soul of Varo.

Many Ora fell in front of them, and a few of the defenders had been injured, but over time they kept coming. Unfortunately, their tools were a little better than those of the defenders, and eventually, the Raog's defensive tools started to fail. The mechanisms had just been designed and built; the metal was formed and machined quickly, so the immature design could not withstand continuous use.

As a tool failed or someone was injured, the teams were forced to consolidate their positions, and they had to withdraw from the openings and revert to the back portion of the large room. As they moved back, they were able to seek refuge behind the Jabom bails that had been placed on the floor. Over time, it became obvious that their defense was crumbling, and per Erom's instructions, they should withdraw and blend into the surrounding structures.

But as they attempted the exit through the back door, they realized Ora were behind them, entering the rear of the facility. They had only a few moments to react, and Molt knew that the rear was the only way out. Vortus also saw that, and with a moment's thought and many days of pain behind him, he charged the Ora, who blocked their withdrawal.

A Raog was about the same weight as an Ora, and his long, strong arms could do considerable damage to an Ora if he were trained in combat, but Vortus was neither. His attack was valiant, and he was able to disable one of the attackers, but the others brought him down with a couple of shots from their tools. Molt saw the brave effort that cost Vortus his life, and he saw an opening and directed the remaining defenders to attack the Ora still standing. Their numbers were able to overpower the remaining Ora, and as Molt exited, he picked up a couple of their tools and projectiles. Before he went through the door, he paused for a moment and looked back, remembering Vortus' bravery.

After they left the facility, Molt spoke quickly to his group leaders; the first team was led by Loran, and the second team was led by Iban. He told each of the leaders to take separate paths and blend in with the surrounding buildings. They were to avoid others so as not to put them in danger. Loran was directed to continue along the path that Erom had taken and catch up with him, and if unsuccessful, they were to continue to the ice caves and become part of the defenses. Molt gave him the defensive tools that he had recovered from the fallen Ora and explained, “The Ora’s defensive weapons are better than ours, and they lasted longer. Perhaps Erom can understand how these tools work, and it will help his design.” Molt told his companions that he would travel to the capital city, monitor the Ora, and help the locals. Molt suggests to Iban that he should remain in Furtar and do the same.

Loran understood his team’s role and the urgency to get those captured weapons to Erom and the ice caves.

Iban led his team to the left, and Loran took his team straight ahead. Both had the same strategy, which was to cover as much ground as possible in the first few moments after the withdrawal from the manufacturing facility. They hoped the Ora slowed as they went through the facility searching for defenders. If they did, then those groups would be able to put some distance between them, and it would give them had a better chance of evading any other Ora.

Molt was counting on the Ora not charging out of the facility. They appeared to be after the machinery more than the defenders. But if they did come right out, he planned to stay behind with his team and provide some defense while the other two teams withdrew to a safe distance.

Molt’s team took a position about 100 arm lengths down a street but still with a view of the facility's exit. That way, if the Ora left in large numbers, perhaps he could slow them down. If they didn’t leave the facility, he had the knowledge of the city on his side. He could take his time and blend into the surrounding structures avoiding contact as long as possible while moving to the capital...

Molt found a structure for his team, and they waited. He saw no Ora leaving the facility and noticed flames beginning to grow in the facility. After a while, the flames engulfed the entire building, and it was obvious what their strategy was, burn not to capture and occupy. Once the

production facility was fully engulfed in flames, Molt saw no advantage in remaining. He knew that he must move slowly and cautiously to the capital. He also knew that there had been other landings and because he didn't know where it was best to assume the worst and choose his path wisely.

After they had cleared the immediate area of the production facility, Loran and Iban went in two directions. First, Loran needed transportation to the northern ice caves, so he had a simple near-term strategy. Second, all of the larger cities had sophisticated transportation corridors to the ice caves in the north. After each growing season, there was a large quantity of Jabom that had to be moved into storage, and then later in the growing season, smaller quantities were moved back to the cities to feed the residents. That gave Loran multiple options for transportation to the ice caves; they just had to avoid any contact with the Ora.

Loran was fortunate and immediately found long-range transportation leaving for the northern areas and caves. He instructed his men to board the transport and hide their defensive tools and the captured tools from the Ora. There usually wasn't a large number of Raog traveling in those vehicles, but still hiding the defensive tools would save a lot of questions and generally make movement easier. Once his team was settled down, he relaxed and hoped for a boring trip.

Iban and his team weren't as fortunate. When they moved to the side of the production facility, the contour of the streets forced them closer to the front of the facility. They hoped that the Ora had either left or were inside, and they could pass by without contact.

Cautiously they moved forward and approached an intersection where they found two solitary Ora at a corner. They appeared to be communicating with each other and not paying a lot of attention to the activity around them. Iban didn't want to confront them directly and use their defensive tools for fear of drawing attention from any others in the area. He directed his team to go through some other back streets to avoid them. For some reason, as they passed by, at what they thought a reasonable distance, they turned a corner and came face to face with both of the Ora. Neither were prepared, and both froze for a few moments, then something inexplicable happened; the two Ora turned and casually walked back to their corner in a direction away from the defenders. One of Iban's team

members raised his defensive tool and was taking aim when Iban put his hand on his friend's shoulder and quietly indicated not to use the tool. His team member hesitated, then relented and lowered his tool.

Iban didn't understand what happened, maybe the Ora were afraid, and that was their way of running away, maybe they were confused, or perhaps they were going back to get reinforcements. Regardless, it didn't matter, the confrontation was avoided, and he and his men would live to fight another day. So he moved his Raog away quickly.

Now he had to decide where to move within the city so he could provide the most help. He thought for a few moments, then realized that he didn't know where those Ora had come from. He was aware that one vessel landed by the capital, but he wasn't sure if one landed near this city. Considering the large number that attacked the facility, he concluded that they must have a craft nearby. So the logical conclusion would be to follow the Ora back to where they came from, and then he would have a place to monitor.

He assembled his team and moved to the burning building. By that time, it had burned almost to the ground, and he wasn't sure that any Ora would still be in the area. If there were any Ora in the area, they moved so fast that he questioned if he could keep up with them and not be noticed.

As he approached the front of the building, he was lucky and saw three remaining Ora. He wasn't sure if they were guarding the building, waiting for others, or just standing there, so he waited. Finally, after a few more moments, two others joined them, and they began moving down the street in the direction from which they came.

Soon after Iban saw them, they group together and move down the street; Iban and his team followed them. He thought he could stay in visual contact with them, and he tried to stay parallel to them on side streets, but after a while, that became too difficult. Finally, he decided to move in behind them, and he hoped that because they were on their way back to their point of origin, they might not bother to look behind them. He was right, they moved casually and never looked back, and Iban and his team found it easy to stay far enough away but yet close enough to follow them.

They appeared to be following the same path by which they entered the city. Everywhere Iban looked, he saw dead or injured Raog. As the Ora

moved down the street, any remaining Raog on the streets did anything possible to get out of their way and hide. These Ora don't seem as concerned with the occasional encounters because they didn't do anything.

After following the Ora for a long time, they were getting closer to the edge of the housing in Furtar, and Iban became concerned that he couldn't stay hidden while he followed them. So when they finally got to the last row of structures, Iban and his team were forced to stop and seek cover.

Iban's team entered the last structure, and there was no one there. It had been abandoned, and when they approached the window, the reason was obvious. About 500 arms away, Iban saw a huge craft with a wall around it. Obviously, it didn't belong there because considerable damage was done to the Jabom in a circle around the craft and wall. The area had been disturbed, and the soil and Jabom violated. As they watched, the group of Ora that they had followed approached the wall; it opened and allowed them access. Once they entered the enclosed area, the wall closed.

Iban decided that location would be a good place to stay, at least for the near term. He had to watch and understand those violent visitors. He or one of his teams would stay at the window and monitor activities in the enclosure all day and night. They couldn't see much, but they could hear a lot of mechanical noises.

As the day continued and the evening storms began to form, Iban noticed that the level of activity behind the wall decreased, and as the temperature fell, there was an additional noise reduction. Finally, as the sunset, the night coolness set in, and the showers stopped, all action behind the wall ceased, and the Ora sought shelter within their structure.

Iban was confused by that. After all, Raog dealt quite well with the evening chill, and it was not a reason to seek shelter. Most Raog enjoyed the coolness, and that was when they socialized and met each other. Those creatures must be more susceptible to the changing temperature than they were. Iban made a note of that fact intending to include it in a report he was producing that would be sent to Erom.

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Loran and his team were well hidden in the rear of the transportation vehicle. The ride had been quiet, and they hoped that it would continue that way until they were at the caves. They weren't experienced at hiding while they moved. All of them were resting the best they could. Some had made a type of resting pad while others were kneeling and leaning against the bails of Jabom.

Suddenly they were all shaken from their rest. The vehicle stopped very abruptly. That was unusual, and Loran got his team together and prepared for the unknown. He crept to the side opening and saw a group of Ora gathered around the front of the vehicle. They had just dragged the driver out, and one of them shot him with a defensive tool. That didn't shock Loran as much as it would have a couple of days previous. He saw death before, although it was usually the result of natural processes, In the last couple of days, he saw violent death, and he was learning to deal with it.

After the Ora had murdered the driver, they separated into two groups, and some of them moved down the length of the vehicle and approached his team's location. The other group moved away from the vehicle in another direction.

As the first team approached Loran's position, he had to think fast. He directed a couple of his teammates to exit their compartment on the other side of the vehicle, and when the Ora reached the end, they were to make a noise to attract the Ora's attention. At that precise moment, the rest of the team would exit behind them and directly on them. Then all of his group would be attacking at once. He cautioned everyone that they must be fast and quiet for fear of the other Ora hearing the commotion and coming to help.

As the Ora approached the end of the vehicle, a couple of Loran's team made a sound and showed themselves briefly, and at the exact moment the Ora hesitated, the remainder of the team was on them. Each team member was about the same size as the Ora, but these Raog were workers and had much stronger upper body strength, and the fight lasted only a few moments. That was the first time that any of them had fought the enemy in close contact, and even though they were initially excited, it soon turned to

distress. Killing was not part of their nature, and being so close and done by their own hands bothered them.

After the confrontation, the silence was almost deafening. Now Loran had to decide what to do. The attacking Ora hadn't damaged the vehicle. They just killed the driver. Half of them left the area. Like many of the other farmers, Loran was familiar with driving those kinds of vehicles, so there was no reason why they couldn't take over and continue traveling to the caves. Of course, they assumed they might have another encounter with other Ora, but if they did, they weren't going to wait; they knew they could win if they took the initiative.

Loran had a thought, those creatures were strange, and maybe taking a couple of their bodies to the ice caves would provide additional information that Erom might be able to use. After all, leaving them here on the soil would only add to the violation of the soil and Varo. He decided that he would do all of the Raog a favor by bringing the dead Ora with him.

Loran and his team loaded the bodies in the last compartment, then Loran moved to the front of the vehicle and saw the deceased driver's body on the soil. He paused for a moment and thought of that Raog's life and the loss of it there. Loran was distraught because he couldn't bury him, as was their tradition, so he decided to take him with them, and they could provide the proper services in the ice caves.

He took over as the driver and continued the drive to the caves.

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Ornage, Sonyata, and the others moved through the capitol and were cautious as they approached intersections. They didn't know how many of the Ora were still there or what the enemy's plans were. They did know that they were not prepared for recent events. Any future steps deserved caution on their part.

For the most part, they didn't meet many Raog on the streets. Apparently, most of them were still in shock after what they witnessed on the broadcast, which was good because it allowed a small group to move without distraction and to listen for any disturbances. After some time, they

encountered what appeared to be either the path of the Ora into the capitol or their exit. There were numerous dead and many others walking in a daze, some were wailing at the loss of loved ones, and others were still in a state of disbelief. It was apparent that killing was not an issue for the Ora.

That heightened the group's resolve; they must get to the ice caves and help organize the defenders and help them and all Raog recover from the attack. Sonyata carried the burden of her people, and Ornage carried the responsibility for what he and his father had done.

It seemed that, at every point where they stopped, Ellig knew someone or someone sought him out. He was getting periodic updates on what was happening around the capital and elsewhere. He was constantly taking notes and passing information from one contact to another. He also sent word to the other cities and Newsource locations about what he knew and how they could use their local facilities to communicate with the population.

After the first day of travel, Ellig approached Ornage and Sonyata and asked them to speak into his portable recording device. He would arrange for it to be copied and sent to each of the Newsource facilities for broadcast to the residents. Ellig said that it would soothe everyone to hear words from the daughter of the Orb. Sonyata was uncomfortable in that role without her Mother, but Ellig reminded her that all of Varo was familiar with her, and she was the best one at that time to build that relationship and help everyone.

Sonyata agreed, thought for a few moments, then began, "May your soil always bear Jabom. We, the people of Varo, have been invaded by creatures that are apparently from our twin world. They have violated our soil and the soul of Varo. We must be strong, remain in our residences, care for our young and prepare for tomorrow. Many of you witnessed the murder of my father, the Grand Leader, my Mother the Orb, Orto the Capitol District Leader, and Doctor Lauto, the lead translator. They all died trying to establish contact with these visitors. We will deal with these events in a manner which they would be proud. We have all suffered much, and we must stick together and trust that Varo will provide leadership. Please be strong and trust in Varo to protect and care for all of us."

Ornage then spoke into the device, "The people of Varo are strong. Our leaders are working to prepare our defense and tell us how to deal with

these invaders. We are moving towards the location where the leadership will confer and develop their plans. Sonyata and I will pass that information to all of Varo."

Ellig then arranged for the messages to be passed to each city for transmission to their local populations.

12-The Aftermath

The worst day in Ilana's life was over. The showers had ended, and the coolness of the evening was upon her and her group leaders. They were still with her in the residence of their friend and soil tender, Ilrod. They had watched the invaders and their wall for the last three days. They had heard a constant din of mechanical noise but saw little activity. Now that it was becoming night, all of the invaders had once again returned to their structure. Ilana thought that was curious, but she couldn't understand why they did that every night. Maybe she would understand tomorrow.

Her thoughts went to Mortog in the northern ice caves. They had been able to communicate a little, but they were so busy. The families that she was responsible for always needed support. Her job only slowed down as the night approached, but it never stopped.

She was lucky, Mortog's sister lived only a few homes away, and she was able to take care of her children. Having them with someone that she trusted made the separation almost tolerable.

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Molt was able to move from Furtar to the capital with ease. The transportation vehicles were empty. Apparently, most residents were staying in their homes, and Molt could understand why. His team was all resting, and they had hidden their defensive tools so no one would ask questions. He knew from the broadcast where the first landing occurred, so he was headed towards that location. The transportation vehicle would get him within a couple thousand arms of where he wanted to be. That would be adequate, and he and his team could walk the rest of the way.

The transportation vehicle came to a halt in the capital, and Molt and his team unloaded their supplies and exited onto a dimly lit street. It was towards the end of the night, and he expected the sun to begin a new day in a short time. However, he felt that he had enough time to get to the landing location before the showers came, and ultimately the sun rose. He hoped

that was true because he wanted some time to get located and set up before being too obvious.

As Molt approached the landing site, the showers ended, and he slowed his pace, trying to find a place where he could observe the landing site and still be under good cover. Finally, he approached a home that fit his needs, and to his surprise, the door opened, and he was welcomed.

Ilana introduced herself, “I am Ilana, and I am the sector leader. These others are my group leaders. I witnessed the landing three days ago, and I also witnessed the horrific results of our first meeting. Are you here to help us?”

Molt was shocked and slowly responded, “I don’t know if I can help, but we encountered other aliens in Furtar and fought with them. I was helping Erom build defensive tools in case we needed them, and, unfortunately, we were right. The aliens attacked our location, and we fought them. Then I escaped. I came here to watch them and report what I see to Erom in the northern caves.”

“My life partner, Mortog, was asked by our local soil tender, Ilrod, to go to the ice caves to protect them. He is there now, and I wish that he was here instead. This home belonged to Ilrod, but, unfortunately, he is with the soil. After that terrible event at the wall, Ilrod went to the bodies to bury them, and he was also killed. It was so terrible, none of us could imagine why they would do that to us. I feel so bad; I saw Sonyata lose her mother and father.”

After Ilrod had lost his life, one of our planes was flying over the alien craft to observe them, and it was shot out of the sky by a powerful tool on top of their craft. Our plane crashed near their craft. Ornage went out at night to retrieve their bodies, but the invaders had removed all of them. They disposed of them somehow, and we weren't able to return them to the soil.

Molt could only imagine what that terrible event was like to witness and said, “I saw it all happen on the broadcast. Erom suspected that something bad would happen, and we were building defensive tools in Furtar. The Ora found out somehow, and they attacked our facility. Many Raog lost their lives, and we killed many of the Ora.”

“When Ornage and Sonyata left after the attack, they asked me to remain here and watch and report what I see. I propose that we can work together?” Ilana offered.

Molt agreed immediately, and both of them walked to the window to look at their assailants. The sun was rising, and they heard a rapid increase in mechanical sound. After a few hours, the opening in the wall moved, and a large machine drove out, followed by two Ora with bright body coverings, redhead coverings, and carrying defensive tools. As they watched, other machines moved out, followed by other Ora with defensive tools. Molt and Ilana both gasped; they saw how the machines scared the soil. The Jabom was ground up, and the soil surface was broken. That violation of the soil pained them, and they feared for the people of Varo.

To the Raog, the soil was part of Varo, as they were also. A violation of the soil was a direct violation of Varo. Jabom was a gift to them from the soil, and they worked it by hand and nurtured each plant. Using giant mechanical monsters was not their way; it was impersonal and would separate them from the soil. Watching giant mechanical monsters disturb their soil was almost as painful as watching their leaders murdered. Ilana and Molt, along with the others in the room, stood and watched for a long time, not knowing what to do or how to react to that invasion of their planet, their soil, their soul, and their world.

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Erom arrived at the ice caves after a long day and night of travel. When he arrived, he wasn’t sure what he would find, but he was hopeful. As the transport vehicle came to rest, he was recognized and besieged by inquisitive defenders. They’re all starved for news and comfort from a leader. He did his best to answer their questions while looking around and hoping to find someone leading the group. Finally, a man emerged whom he recognized as a leader. Mortog approached Erom, and they began coordinating.

“Leader, may your soil always bear Jabom. My name is Mortog, and I have been organizing these men and preparing to defend the Jabom in the caves. Allow me to show you around,” Mortog said formally.

“And may yours,” Erom responded. He was impressed by that man. Generally, Raog fell into two categories those who waited to be led and those that led. His initial opinion of that man was that he was from the latter. A good man to have on his side, he thought.

Mortog took Erom around the ice caves and showed him where the different groups of Raog were housed, where Jabom was stored, and finally where his late-arriving machinery and defensive tools were set up. Mortog still didn’t know the full meaning of how to use the defensive tools, but he had already developed a strong opinion on their need.

This impressed Erom, and he knew that Mortog would learn everything he could about the tools, and he could be trusted with defending the northern caves.

Erom was already impressed with how Mortog had set up his defensive tool manufacturing facility. It showed an innate sense of organization and flow, and even Erom saw that production would be more efficient and faster here than in the facility he had built. The machinery was already running and creating parts. The technicians that he sent were already dirty, working, and assembling. There were piles of completed defensive tools and stacks of boxes containing projectiles, and they were growing larger as they spoke. Erom was impressed.

“Mortog, you are a leader, and you have done great things already. I’m encouraged and joyed that you are here, and we have sent the tool-making ability to the right place,” Erom said with a smile as he put his arm on Mortog’s shoulder.

Mortog and Erom retired to a nourishment area to talk about defending the ice caves, increasing production, improving designs, and finding raw materials.

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Ornage, Ellig, and Sonyata had successfully avoided the Ora. As they passed through the capital, word spread of their movement. Many people welcomed them into their residences and shared their Jabom. It was said

that Sonyata was the new Orb and the residents flocked to her for comfort and guidance.

Sonyata relished the responsibility of providing comfort and guidance, but she wasn't sure about being the Orb. Her mother was the Orb, and it hadn't been that long since her death that she could think about replacing her. So, for now, she maintained her typical method of dress and hadn't taken the robes of her mother.

Ornage was also known. Not just because he and his father had asked the question that resulted in such painful answers, but because everyone thought of him as a leader. He came across with confidence and knowledge, and when he spoke, what he said made sense and inspired others to follow. The Raog didn't blame or hold a grudge. They needed leaders, and after all, he was joined with the Orb. For many years, the Orb and Grand Leader were joined, so if he was joined to the Orb, he must be the Grand Leader.

In Ornage's mind, that leap was much further than assuming Sonyata was the Orb. He was uncomfortable with the title; he didn't feel that he deserved it. Yes, he wanted to help, and people agreed with what he said, and they even followed his direction willingly, but making him the Grand Leader was a large step, and he wasn't ready.

Ellig saw what was happening. He felt that Sonyata was indeed ordained to be the Orb. She had done well for the people, and all who spoke with her felt comforted and calmed. But, on the other hand, assuming that Ornage was the Grand Leader was a natural assumption, he too felt that Ornage wasn't ready for the responsibility.

Regardless of the roles, each was supposed to play, they made their way through the capitol and headed to the village of Mortar, which was between the capitol and the northern caves. They decided to go slow and spend time with the people comforting and supporting them. Once they realized that they had avoided the Ora, they could have taken a transportation vehicle, but spending time with the scared people felt more productive. It took a couple of days to move through the capital, and each day Ellig had Ornage and Sonyata make a tape for broadcast. Those tapes were inspirational and offered hope for the people of Varo. Ornage and Sonyata provided comfort and confidence to everyone who spoke with them or heard their messages.

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Molt and Ilana watched as the remainder of the giant machines exited the walled area around the alien structure. Each machine had two Ora with red hats and defensive tools and four smaller Ora without any defensive tools wearing no body coverings. Those with red head coverings appeared to herd the ones without the tools. At first, that confused Molt and Ilana; they realized that the Ora without the defensive weapons were reluctant participants and forced to work.

As the giant machines moved around the soil, they destroyed the Jabom and scarred the soil. The Ora, with the defensive tools, directed the smaller Ora to clean the area around the machine, bring refreshments to them and the operator; they were obviously subservient.

Molt and Ilana noted those pieces of information in their report, which would be transmitted to Erom and the others in the caves. They weren't sure what implications those observations had, but they must be important.

The machines worked throughout the warm part of the day. They continued destroying Jabom and agitating the soil. It wasn't clear at first what their goal was, but after a while, Ilana suggested that they were preparing to plant something. That seemed logical, and it was included in the report.

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Iban watched the landing site from the home he had chosen in Furtar. He had observed the same machinery as Molt and Ilana, although he wasn't aware of that yet. His viewpoint was further away from the landing structure, wall, and machinery; he could move easily around the local residences without being seen. As he was investigating his area, he found a warehouse of explosive powders. He wasn't an expert in their use, but like many others, he had used them to remove rocks from Jabom growing fields. While he was looking at the selection of powders, he realized that he could use them to slow down the scarring machines, as he called them. He knew enough about the powders to mix them properly to get the largest

explosions. He could put bundles of the powder in places where the machines would go, and when the machines compressed the powder, it would explode.

He had some idea of how much to use, but he was unsure what the effect on the machine and following Ora would be. Given his experience, he felt ‘a little more’ was better than ‘not enough.’ He mixed what he thought was the best combination of powders in a large container and left the building. If it were successful, then he would retrieve more powder and do it more often.

The Ora at his landing site were like the others, and as the evening closed in, they went back to the landing structure. But, they were a long way from any residences, so perhaps, they felt safer, and they left their machines in the fields. That gave Iban a fantastic opportunity for him and his men to do a little damage. They filled some smaller containers with the explosive powder mix and snuck out after the full cool of the night set in, and they crept up on three of the machines. They didn’t know if any of the Ora were watching, so they took their time and made sure they didn’t hear any noises inside the walled area. They dug small holes in places underneath each machine, where the machines would have to pass over the containers. After a night’s work was done, they moved quietly back to the observation residence and waited.

After the morning showers, the sun rose at the beginning of a new day, and as on previous days, the Ora walked out of the walled area. The drivers climbed into their machines, and the larger Ora herded, the smaller ones without tools, getting them organized. That day was going to be different, though.

There were eight machines, so Iban was hoping for a nice surprise. The first machine moved, and suddenly the soil erupted, and a moment later, Iban heard an ear-deafening sound. The machine rose high in the air, tumbling end over end. As it rose, other pieces separated and rose in different directions, moving away from the center. At the point on the soil where it started, Iban saw nothing but flying soil. The machine finally stopped rising in the sky and slowly fell back to the soil, landing and creating another giant cloud of dust and machinery parts.

While the shocking sound and flying soil erupted, two other drivers moved their machines, and similar results occurred. Iban saw Ora running all over the field and more streaming out of the walled area with defensive tools.

By that time, the remaining machine drivers had determined that moving their machines was not in their best interest and another surprising thing happened. While two of the drivers were sitting in their machines, the Ora, with red head coverings, attacked the machine's drivers and tore them apart. They ripped off the creature's limbs and threw them in the soil, and the remains were pulled off the machines and thrown in the soil also.

What a shocking thing to do, Iban thought. Why kill the drivers? They had nothing to do with the soil erupting. As Iban watched, he saw that the remaining smaller Ora had formed a group and huddled together as if afraid. One of the Ora with a red head covering approached the group, and after a few moments, Iban saw the tool fire, and one of the workers fell into the soil.

It appeared that the Ora with red head coverings were the leaders, and they weren't too happy about the recent developments. Once the red hats were convinced there were no other explosives, they forced the remaining machines back into operation and, to Iban's surprise, and left the remains of the fallen Ora on the soil. The new machine operators drove over them, and they were blended with the disturbed Varo soil.

Iban was shocked, then disgusted. His soil would have remains from the invading Ora. Their blood would mix with the blood of his ancestors and be part of the soul of Varo. That saddened him, and he made a note of that in his report.

Iban watched, and after a while, he was surprised to see the remaining machines and many Ora with red hats move across the field to his location. That development was unexpected and left his team in a vulnerable position. He yelled instructions to them, and the team moved fast, and they left the home. He passed by the warehouse with the exploding powder, and they packed as much as possible and set fire to the building. As they moved further into the city, they could hear the explosions behind them. He was sure to record everything that happened in his daily report to the caves.

Early the next day, Iban returned to the previous place and saw that the Ora had used their machines to destroy any residences near them. From the nearest remaining home, Iban could barely see the wall and the landing craft. He would move towards the wall during the night to observe and then return to a safe home during the day. That was annoying but the obvious result of the damage he had done.

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Molt and Ilana had watched the area of violated soil expand in the last two days. They weren't sure what to do; they just knew they didn't like what was happening. While resting and eating their Jabom, one of Molt's team yelled, "They're coming." Molt and Ilana rose and saw the machines and a group of Ora with red hats climbing the hill towards the residences. They had a moment to pack and rush out, trying to stay out of the machine's path of destruction.

They were fortunate, there were hills in the area, so they could move the observation point to a home on the top of one of the hills, and they had a good viewpoint to watch the invaders. The Ora used their machines to destroy all of the residences in the area. They created a large open area, many thousands of arms in diameter. Obviously, they decided that they needed a protection zone.

Although they were caught by surprise, they knew what Iban had done and the result in his city, so this action wasn't too surprising. Moving the observation point to a different location was inconvenient, but they felt better knowing that Iban had caused turmoil with the Ora.

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The people of Varo were growing accustomed to the periodic broadcasts from Sonyata and Ornage. In some vicarious manner, each of them knew that battles were occurring, and by listening to the broadcasts, they could share in their survival and struggles to overcome the Ora.

The Raog worked and felt as a group. Their entire existence was based on working together and meeting each other's needs. They worried together, they were happy together, and while listening to the broadcasts, they shared the pain and fear together.

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Mortog and his men crowded into the viewing areas where they could watch or listen each time there was a broadcast, but now it was pleasant to have Erom and his men with whom to share the broadcasts. There were about a thousand men and women in the ice caves, and even though they were a busy nest of activity through most of the day, while the broadcasts, everyone stopped and listened. While listening, they shared the struggles and determination of all of the Raog. Even though they were in the ice caves and detached from the population centers, hearing of Sonyata and Ornage's struggles while moving towards the ice caves, the broadcasts become a shared experience for everyone.

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It was slow-moving for Sonyata and Ornage. In each city, they passed through areas that had been attacked in one way or another by the Ora. They found death and suffering, and they thought the most important service they provided was comfort. Ellig realized how important those messages were, so he tried to have a broadcast every night. The movement of the leaders through the cities symbolized the unity of the people and their struggles.

Finally, after too many days of travel Sonyata, Ornage and Ellig were at their last stop before reaching the caves. They were worn out and needed a rest; they planned to spend the night there and leave the next day. They expected to arrive at the ice caves early the following day. Their location was the small village of Mortar, where many of the transportation vehicles passed on their way to the caves.

They spent the night gaining some well-earned rest and were enjoying a late morning meal of boiled Jabom with the local group leader named Iam and her family. Her husband was a local Jabom processing plant leader, and Iam had four young; two males and two females. Their home was very nice and was built with thick walls made of local stone.

Suddenly their host's oldest child charged in the room and blurted out, "The Ora are coming!"

It took a moment for them to understand what she meant. During their travels, they saw few Ora, but they had witnessed their wanton destruction. Having Ora in the area was surprising.

Ornage reacted first and asked, "Where are they, and what direction are they moving?"

The young girl excitedly responded, "I've been told that a craft landed south of the village, and three groups are moving towards our village." She took a deep breath then continued, "We fear they are after you!"

Ellig, Sonyata, and Ornage's eyes all grew large, and they took deep breaths. The idea that the Ora might target them hadn't occurred to them, but now it didn't seem so improbable, and they didn't know what to do.

Ornage thought for a moment and said, "We must leave the village and move to the ice caves as soon as possible. If they are after us, they might spare the village!"

All of them immediately knew that was the best thing to do, and they began packing.

Ornage spoke to their host, "Please find us transport."

The host left in a hurry, and Ornage and Sonyata hugged each other and spent a moment holding on.

The host entered and said, "Come quickly; I have transport."

They ran from the home, boarded the transport, and moved out of the village. As they exited the village, they immediately realized that they were in trouble. There was a group of Ora approaching them from the right. Ornage accelerated the vehicle, and to their dismay, the Ora were still

gaining on them; they could move very fast with their four appendages, and they were still overtaking the Raog vehicle.

Ornage's worry was replaced by fear as they saw two other groups of Ora approaching from the front. Ornage realized they were cut off, and he had no plan for escape, so he stopped the vehicle while he thought.

The three groups of Ora slowed as they were within 100 arms of them, then suddenly they stopped.

Ornage took that brief pause and looked at his attackers and noticed that all of them were wearing red head coverings except one that was wearing brightly colored patterned body coverings. He realized that his markings looked like one of the leaders of the attackers that killed Sonyata's parents. He looked at Sonyata and realized that she had made the same connection, but the look on her face was one that he had never seen. If he didn't know her, he would have been frightened by her expression. He saw that she was eager and willing to attack the Ora if she could.

Ornage looked back at the Ora surrounding them and decided that it was time to fight. He climbed out of the transport, and Ellig, Sonyata, and the others climbed out also. They placed themselves so their backs were covered by the vehicle, and they prepared to fight hand to hand if necessary. They remained poised, and for a moment, the attackers looked disorganized and unsure of themselves; Ornage wondered why. Then something surprising happened.

The hills around them began moving. Ornage saw hundreds of Raog cresting over the top of the surrounding hills. They were screaming and carrying farm tools. The flow continued down the sides of the hills as water flowing over a rock.

The Ora saw what was happening. They moved to each other, seeking comfort in a group, and they prepared for the onslaught, firing their defensive tools as fast as possible.

The flowing blanket of villagers quickly overtook them and flowed over them like a wave. The confrontation was over in a few moments, and there was nothing left of the Ora but a pile of broken bodies.

For a few moments, the flow kept moving around the valley, looking for other prey, then they settled down, and one of them approached Sonyata and Ornage.

“Leaders, may your soil always bear Jabom,” he said with breathless cadence.

“And may yours,” Ornage responded, unsure of what just happened.

“We the Raog of our village heard of these approaching Ora, and we feared for your safety. We felt that any lives lost on our part were worth the price to save you. You are the Orb, and you must continue the fight. We are just farmers, but we can defend you with our lives,” the leader said with a tremendous amount of pride, with his chest out and head held high.

Ornage and Sonyata were at a loss for words. Then Ornage slowly said, “Thank you,” and after he had paused, he continued with a very emotional “and may your soil always bear Jabom.”

The leader paused and said, “And may yours.”

Sonyata spoke, “The Raog of Mortar have made a tremendous sacrifice. We are not accustomed to violence; it is not our way to fight for our defense. Each of you was willing to put yourselves between our attackers and us. I don’t know how to thank you. Ornage and I are only two Raog; we don’t feel that we are worth your sacrifice. I suppose that is the nature of sacrifice. It is the decision of the giver, not the receiver. We will always be in your debt, and the Raog of Varo will hear of what you have done here.”

He turned, spoke with his friends from the village, retrieved their wounded and dead, and left, returning to their residences. Sonyata and Ornage stood, showing respect while each of the casualties was taken care of.

Ellig stood behind Sonyata and Ornage, making a note of the activities and talking into a recording device. When he was done, he talked with one of the Raog and passed a copy of his recording to him, then he slid back into the vehicle. They rested in the vehicle for the longest time, not knowing what to say; finally, Ornage said with conviction, “We must go to the ice caves.”

Sonyata and Ellig nodded, they drove off, and somehow they didn’t feel the bumps in the road as they drove.

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General Aarm was resting in his private space, thinking about the last couple of days. These creatures are hard fighters. I'm sure that VanMacca never thought they would fight so hard. Our attacks have not provided the results that she wants, and I'm sure that heads will be lost.

Just then, his thoughts were disturbed by a reluctant assistant, "General, I have some troubling news, may I speak?"

"Yes, you may speak."

"I'm troubled to inform you, but grand leader Imbata was unsuccessful in his attempt to capture the enemies' leadership. Unfortunately, he...lost his life," the assistant reluctantly announced, fearing that the general might take his anger out on the messenger.

General Aarm sat there thinking. He didn't smile, but inwardly he was satisfied; Imbata was a little rock-worm whose loss wasn't significant. Regardless, someone would be blamed for his loss, and General Aarm was going to make sure that it wasn't himself.

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Romaa was directing the same boring drills with her guards when she was ordered to VanMacca's quarters. When she arrived, VanMacca wasn't present, but a mangled remnant of an Ora was laying in the middle of the room. Two of VanMacca's assistants were standing next to it, and the senior leader directed Romaa to dispose of the remains.

Romaa was not able to ask what had happened, but she did hear the two assistants talking, and one of them said that VanMacca reacted to getting some bad news about the campaign on the planet. Apparently, one of her

leaders put himself in a dangerous position to impress VanMacca and was killed by the locals.

Romaa thought to herself, I better be careful. The Ora deserve better leadership than this. Then she removed the body and dumped it out of an airlock, with no ceremony or acknowledgment.

13-The Ice Caves

Men and women continued flowing into the ice caves. At that point in the season, the ice caves had more than enough room for storing the coming season's harvest. When Jabom was harvested, a large amount was stored locally in the cities and people's homes. After all, they preferred it fresh and easily obtained. The remainder of the harvest was moved to the northern ice caves for long-term storage. Later in the growing season, as the fresh supplies diminished, the Jabom moved from the ice caves to the cities and, in turn to the residences.

Erom and Mortog rested in the viewing area with their defenders waiting for the evening broadcast, and they spoke of the progress they were making, then the broadcast began.

They heard the familiar voice of Ellig open the broadcast, "This broadcast represents a change in the people of Varo. You won't be hearing from Sonyata and Ornage." Those in the room had a collective inhale, as they feared something had happened to them. Ellig continued, "I will be telling you about the strength of the Raog and how they saved Sonyata and Ornage." Once again, Ellig paused for effect, then spoke with a different level of emphasis and emotion, "Last night Sonyata and Ornage rested in a friend's home. Today they were eating with their hosts in Mortar when they were told of a pending attack by the invaders. They immediately thought of those around them and decided to leave the village's security and meet the Ora where no one else would be harmed. As they left the village, they were surrounded by three groups of Ora whose intent was clear. They wanted to murder our Orb Sonyata and her life partner Ornage." He paused again, and the defenders in the ice caves were silent, listening for Ellig's next words, "But the residents of that village said no. All of them massed on the hills surrounding the attackers, and they moved upon the Ora and killed them, defending our leaders. Many lives were lost, but all of the attackers were dealt with. These Raog showed us how strong we are and how confident we are that we will prevail." Ellig concluded the transmission with, "May your soil always bear Jabom."

All of the defenders in the ice caves responded with, “And may yours also.” Followed by cheering and high spirits. Each of them knew that a change had occurred. The Ora were far away from them, but having the Ora identify, follow and track their leaders made the invasion more personal, and it affected each of them in the caves. Winning one battle felt like a major victory.

Later that day, Erom received word that Sonyata and Ornage were approaching. He spread the word to the others, and when the intrepid party arrived, they were greeted with a road lined with cheering hand-pumping defenders.

Sonyata and Ornage thought that someone important was behind them, and the crowd was mistaken, but Ellig leaned towards them and said, “You are the leaders of the Raog now. They all know about the attack, and they have heard all of your broadcasts. They need leaders, and you are the ones they have chosen.”

Sonyata and Ornage didn’t know what to do, how to acknowledge such a welcome, so they timidly waved back, and that only incited the crowds to cheer louder and pump their hands with more vigor.

As they approached the cave entrance, they were greeted by Erom, who reached out to both of them, put his arm around them, and escorted them into the caves.

“Sonyata, Ornage, I want to welcome you to the ice caves where many men and women are here to defend Varo, the Jabom, and you,” Erom said with a formal flair. He continued, “You must be tired; let me show you to a rest area where you can get some Jabom nourishment.”

They were exhausted and allowed themselves to be led to their chambers, and as they were moved away, Erom added, “When you are rested, we will meet and review our preparations to defend Varo.” Sonyata and Ornage both smiled and continued on to their chambers.

At the start of the next day, Erom had organized the soil room where the leaders could meet and discuss the future of Varo. As Sonyata and Ornage entered the room, they were greeted with a morning meal of Jabom cake, Jabom juice, and Jabom pudding. Those were all foods of celebration, and they felt they were celebrating the beginning of the new Varo.

When they were done with nourishment, Erom said to those present, “I would like to welcome the Orb, Sonyata.” All in the room cheered. Erom then continued and said, “And I would also like to welcome the new Grand Leader, Ornage. I have spoken with many of the District Leaders, and they have heard the struggles these two went through on their journey here. They showed leadership, compassion, and love for their people. All of the cities they traveled through, and each of those they spoke with, were comforted and encouraged. All of the district leaders were united in recognizing Ornage as our leader.” He continued by introducing each of the key defenders, and with each introduction, the room cheered.

This was the first time that Sonyata had heard words calling her the Orb. She found the strength and demeanor to accept the title and recognition, but she was quickly saddened by her mother's loss. After the cheering had ended, two defenders with the appropriate robes entered the chamber. One had a set of colorful, flowing ceremonial robes for the Orb, and they were placed on Sonyata’s shoulders. The other had a set of robes for Ornage, with the symbolic five rings on the sleeve, and they were placed on Ornage’s shoulders.”

Ornage and Sonyata were shocked, and they rested on their pads, not knowing what to do. Everyone cheered, and those next to them touched their robes in reverence.

They rested in silence and with humility as Erom continued, “We are all saddened by the loss of Sonyata’s parents and shocked by the violation of Varo by the Ora. Those of us here, in the northern ice caves, represent the defense of the Raog and Varo. As we accept that challenge and as we prepare for our future, let us work together and use the best of us to defeat the worst of the Ora.” Once again, the room exploded with cheers.

After the speeches were complete, Erom decided to update the Grand Leader and the Orb on what progress they had made and escorted them from the meeting. As they walked, he was approached and told of Loran’s arrival.

Loran was excited as he approached the caves. He was proud of how his team had fought to protect the soil and the Raog. Now he is proud to be bringing the Ora’s tools and some dead invaders to Erom. The transportation vehicle stopped at the entrance to the ice caves, and he told

his team to bring in the Ora remains, and he carried the defensive tools that Molt had captured.

As his team carried the remains, those defenders in the vicinity had mixed reactions when they saw the dead Ora. All of them had heard the broadcast, and some of them had seen the Ora for real, but many had not; they had heard only rumors. Upon seeing them, they were shocked, repulsed, and yet interested and most of them followed as Loran entered.

Erom, Sonyata, Ornage, and Ellig moved to meet Loran at the entrance.

Loran entered and approached Erom formally, “May your soil always bear Jabom,” he said.

“And may yours,” responded Erom, and he introduced Sonyata, the Orb, and Ornage, the Grand Leader. Loran hesitated, then recognized them from the broadcasts and the robes they wore. He immediately accepted them and felt better having them present.

Erom said, “I am glad to see that you made it out of the manufacturing facility. I pray that our losses were minimal.”

“Yes, leader, we survived. We had some losses, but we inflicted many more losses on our enemies. Unfortunately, as we were leaving, some Ora entered behind us, and we became trapped. Vortus saw that we were cut off, and he sacrificed his life attacking those that blocked our exit. He fought bravely, and because of his efforts, we were able to leave the facility.”

All of them knew Vortus, and they took a moment to remember him and thank him for his sacrifice. Sonyata spoke, “He was brave, and his loss helped many Raog to survive. I will remember him.”

After the pause remembering Vortus, Loran continued, “After we had moved out of the facility, Molt went to the capitol to help. Iban stayed in Furtar to monitor the Ora's movement and to support the resistance.”

“You are good men, I’m glad most of you survived, and Molt and Iban are helping to defend the cities. We are getting periodic reports from them. What have you brought us?” Erom asked.

“Leader, while we battled the Ora at the production facility, Molt captured a couple of their defensive tools. I’ve brought them, hoping you’ll

be able to improve our tools. As we fought them, we found their tools were more reliable than ours, and they lasted longer. Ours broke and stopped working," Erom nodded, and Ornage took the tools, and he began looking at them. He was an engineer, and engineers thought better with their hands.

"Leader, we fought with the Ora on our way to the ice caves. So I thought that bringing some of their bodies would provide us with valuable information," Loran added just as his team was entering with the enemies' remains.

Erom, Sonyata, and Ornage were disgusted but intrigued. These were their enemies. These creatures had landed on Varo and were killing their Raog. Their hatred was replaced by interest because now they saw a real Ora, and perhaps by studying them, they could understand them better.

Ornage looked at the dead Ora and immediately observed, "It is an insect. It has a hard, segmented shell just like many of the creatures we deal with on our farms."

Erom lifted up one of the appendages and said, "These four appendages are their source of motion, and the feet are small and have pads which rotate in different directions. I guess that allows them to walk."

Walking towards the creature's front, Ornage lifted up one of the two shorter arms and observed, "The creature's arms are shorter and thinner than ours, and its hands are much different. Instead of soft bony fingers like ours, the Ora's hands are hard, with long fingers. And look at this, they have two long hard fingers and one opposing, and the wrist articulates, but it doesn't have the same range of motion as our hands."

Erom commented on the Ora's head, "Their head, rests on this narrow neck and transitions into the arms with no shoulder like ours."

Ornage and Erom looked at the eyes, and Ornage said, "Look how each of the eyes has many small eyes grouped together; their vision must be different from ours. We have our three singular eyes which allow us to see to our sides and straight ahead, but with their vision, they must see a bunch of pictures."

Erom looked at the rear end of the creature and said, "Look how the body is long and circular except where the legs and neck are connected.

This extension to their body on the back appears to balance the head and neck."

All present agreed that the Ora had a strong resemblance to some of the insects they had in Jabom fields. Yes, there were many differences, but there were also many more similarities.

"The two forearms look weak and small and notice how the two front legs are longer. Where their two front legs connect to the body, there is a break in the hard body scales. Apparently, that allows the two front legs to rotate up to help the small forearms. Perhaps this is where their strength is if they fight without the defensive tools," Ornage observed, and everyone agreed.

Sonyata and Ornage had seen enough. Although they were disgusted, now that their curiosity was satisfied, they changed their attention to the defensive tools as Erom directed the medical experts to remove the remains and continue investigating the creatures.

Erom, Sonyata, and Ornage took the Ora's defensive weapons to the tool work area. Ornage wanted to disassemble them and see how they worked and then compare them with the tools that were being made in the caves. On his way, he grabbed a couple of his key tool makers.

After laying out the Ora's defensive tools on a workbench, their first impressions were that they were crude and much heavier than theirs. However, the bulk allowed them to last longer, and the Raog pendant for small and delicate contributed to their tools failing sooner.

As the team continued dismantling the Ora tools, they found crude parts that were too heavy for their requirements, and the overall feel of the weapon was heavy bulky, and it felt more like a club than a tool.

Ornage removed the projectiles and looked at them. Like the overall tool, they were large and not well made. He saw many imperfections on the surface, and there is a rough feel to the metal. A technician next to him slowly removed the round projectile from the explosive powder chamber and poured out the contents. The explosive powder grains were not uniform, and they had only one color and texture. The Raog's explosive powder was a much finer grain, and they found that a mix of different powders was much more powerful than any one.

Ornage picked up one of the remaining defensive tools and just held it and felt it for a few moments. Then, it occurred to him that there was no way to aim it at anything. They didn't have any means to point it at a particular subject and to fire a projectile at what they were aiming at, he thought. That bothered Ornage, and he felt that something major was missing, and he said, "Apparently, these defensive tools were made to be fired in the direction of the target, but not necessarily at the target. Seems like a real waste."

At that point, Ornage raised the weapon so he could see down the firing barrel better, and he asked out loud, "Why can't I just point it like this and aim better?"

The other technicians in the room stopped for a moment and answered, almost in unison, "Why not?"

Then it became clear, "They have no shoulders," Ornage shouted.

His team looked shocked, and then the idea began coming together while he added, "The Ora don't have shoulders, so they can't raise a tool and aim it better. So they must hold it between their two front arms and just discharge it."

His team looked enlightened but still not clear. Then they realized what he said. "Ornage, we should be able to build a much better tool if we design it to be held at our shoulder and aimed." They said it with so much enthusiasm others looked at the group.

"I think their eye design makes aiming very difficult. It might be a concept they are unable to comprehend. We can use our center eye and one on either side to look down the barrel and aim it accurately."

Ornage suddenly felt better and almost optimistic. Finally, he said, "Let's sit down and put together a new defensive tool, one that uses our skills, our methods, and is best for us." His team cheered, and they all felt better.

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Ilana and Molt had repositioned themselves to nearby hills, and Ilana sent word to her group leaders about the changes in Ora activities. She also made a note in her report.

As they surveyed the action by the wall, one of Ilana's group leaders trudged up the hill with a messenger from Iban's team in Furtar. He told Molt about how they used the explosive powders to destroy some of the machines. He also told them about the bizarre behavior the red hats did after the explosions. It's nice to know that we've done something that distresses them.

Molt turned to Ilana and asked, "If we have any sources of exploding powders nearby, we could cause problems for them also."

Ilana liked the sound of that and spoke with her group leaders to find a local source. After a few moments of conferring, she returned to Molt and said, "Good news, we have a local source, and I've arranged to have a large amount brought here."

"Excellent, Molt responded, "now we can do damage to them like they did to us."

They had heard the previous night's broadcast and were also indignant that the Ora attempted to murder the Orb and Ornage. Now they were able to take steps against the Ora, which made them feel better.

They coordinated all of their information with Iban's messenger and send him back to Iban. He left immediately, and Molt and Ilana began working on their next phase.

That night they make their first bombs, and during the darkest part of the night, Molt, Ilana, and a couple of the team snuck to the area around the wall and buried a couple of explosive packages.

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After Iban's successful destruction of three of the invader's machines, they changed tactics. They brought their machines within their walls each night, and when they begin working the next day, the red hats forced the smaller Ora to march in front of the machines looking for any explosives. There were occasional explosions, and more Ora were killed, but over the next couple of days, there were incremental changes on both sides. The Ora learned to find the explosives and the defenders learned to hide them better. Nevertheless, each day at least one of the machines was damaged, or some of the Ora lost their lives.

Iban felt sorry for the smaller Ora without the red hats. They showed their reluctance to walk in front of the machines, yet they were forced to each time. They were reluctant participants in everything, and they were losing their lives also. He made a note of that in his reports.

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Molt and Ilana in the capitol and Iban in Furtar agreed, with dismay, that the Ora was making progress in destroying Jabom and replanting their fields with something else. The destruction and damage of their machines just slowed them down, and it appeared that they had a large number of workers to supplement the machines regardless of the losses. Every couple of days, the invaders destroyed more residences and expanded the amount of soil they scarred. Thus, the Ora was winning the soil war, and the Raog were losing the Jabom. That was also noted in the reports.

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Suddenly the situation changed in the capital. Molt and Ilana were aroused from their resting pads with news that some of the red hats had moved into the city and were taking hostages. They entered all of the nearby residences and forced the residents into the streets. They had

murdered a couple, and now they were moving the crowd towards their walled area.

Ilana and Molt were shocked and couldn't imagine what was going to happen to these captured Raog. As the group was herded into an open area, some red hats forced them to separate into small groups of 4-8 per group. They then forced them to march in front of the machines.

Ilana and Molt panicked, there were four explosive packages in the soil, and if one of the captives stepped on it, it would explode and kill them. They both screamed and didn't know what to do; Ilana yelled to herself, and Molt said, "We'll kill them; we're going to kill our Raog."

It was too late, there was a loud explosion, and four were killed. Molt and Ilana were silent from the numbing pain. There were three more explosions, and neither looked through the window.

That night, no explosives were hidden in the soil, and word was sent immediately to Iban. With reluctance, those terrible events were noted in the reports.

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When Iban heard of that frightening turn of events, he immediately stopped planting any explosive packages. They were fortunate, their local invaders had not gone to the point of kidnapping residents, but they didn't need to. The events in the capital solved the problems for them. That was noted in their reports.

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Sonyata, Ornage, and Erom rested quietly as they read the disturbing reports. They were beginning to understand the Ora, and they didn't like it. Apparently, the Ora thought little of the Raog, and for that matter, they also thought little of the smaller Ora that were forced to work. It was apparent to all of them that the battle for Varo was far from over, and that was a burden

on them. They knew many more would die, the soil of Varo would forever be changed, and the soul of Varo would never be complete.

After the meeting, each of them went about duties that allowed them to think and deal with the burdens they carried. Then, at the mid-point of the day, Ellig asked Sonyata and Ornage to make another broadcast. Despite their pain, they knew the Raog were suffering as well, and they must comfort, and support them, so they agreed.

Ellig opened the broadcast with a new introduction, “People of Varo, the Orb Sonyata, and the Grand Leader, Ornage have made it to the northern ice caves. They are safe, and they wish to speak to you.”

Sonyata was better prepared and took the lead, while Ornage was still shocked by hearing himself called the Grand Leader. However, he immediately sensed the gravity of his position and calmed himself while he listened to his life partner speak.

“We the People of Varo have suffered, and we will continue to suffer until these invaders are removed. We have arrived at the northern ice caves and are meeting with other leaders, and we are developing plans to help and protect the people of Varo. We still have a long way to go, but be confident we will find a way to solve this crisis. I have been made aware of many deaths in our cities and farms, and I share the pain we all suffer. There was a giant hole in the soul of Varo, and it may never be repaired. There will be more deaths and more sacrifices before we regain our soil. Please help me with this burden. May your soil always bear Jabom.”

There was a pause, and Ornage knew that it was his time to speak. He took a deep breath and spoke for the first time as the Grand Leader, “People of Varo, I too share the pain that our Orb spoke of. Fighting battles is not the way of the Raog, but now those battles have been thrust upon us, and we must unite and be prepared to defend ourselves. The leaders of Varo are developing defensive tools to help us protect ourselves, and we have learned a great deal about the invaders. Soon we hope to bring battles to the invaders and to defend ourselves, our families, our soil, and our Varo.” He paused, then ended with, “and may yours.” Closing Sonyata’s ending statement.

Recently it seemed that every time they made a broadcast, the feeling of formality increased. It was no longer one speech but quickly became two leaders of a vast planet talking to the entire planet. They've become ceremonial…, and Ornage said, "From now on when we do these, I want to be in our soil room."

Sonyata and Ellig immediately saw the significance of that and nodded.

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Molt and Ilana were dealing with their shock over the last disastrous incident. They knew that the conflict had risen to a higher, more costly level, and they also knew that they must proceed slowly and anticipate the Ora's actions.

Ilana spoke to her group leaders, "Tell the residents to move away from the landing sites and to avoid contact with the Ora. If any of them encounter an alien, they are to monitor them from a distance, spread the word to others in their path, and possibly let me know about their actions."

She hoped that would reduce any chance encounters and also save the lives of her fellow Raog. She also knew that was a no-win action and, as she watched the ever-expanding area of scarred soil just avoiding the Ora would not gain back Varo and its soil. For the time being, she had no choice.

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When Iban received information about how Molt and Ilana handled the new developments, he immediately agreed and passed word within his city.

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For the next two days, the planet of Varo was relatively quiet except for the machines scaring the soil and destroying the residences.

Erom, Ornage, and Mortog continued working on the improved defensive tool designs and were so focused they saw or thought about little else. Sonyata focused on the men in the ice caves and spent all of her time caring for them, ensuring that they took the time to eat, and she also spent many hours just listening to them. Most of them talked about their families, their young, and the soil where they grew Jabom.

Sonyata was a listener, but she was also an observer. As she moved around the ice caves, she liked to see how things moved and reacted. She was intrigued by movement. The ice caves had many levels, and the constant movement of Jabom from level to level was labor-intensive. Over the many Erons they had been using the ice caves, they developed some interesting methods to move the bails of Jabom. To move Jabom from a higher level in the cave to a lower level, they had carved sloped ramps where Jabom bails could be slid down, and the men on the bottom waited and grabbed them.

The men bundled the bails in long bundles that were round in the middle, and on occasion, the bails were made round like a sphere. She noticed that the long bundles moved down the sloped ice in a very orderly manner, and when they reached the floor, they slid forward and waited to be picked up. But, on the other hand, the circular bundles bounced as they came down the ramp and often fell off before reaching the bottom.

Why would one bundle move so easily and uniformly while the other bounced all over the place and seemed to create more work? She had spent a long time in thought before realizing that the elongated form of the bail caused it to remain on the ramp while the round shape allowed it to bounce off the ramp. She passed those observations to the crews and suggested that they avoid making round bails.

After a while, she was tired and wanted a diversion, so she sought out Ornage and Erom to listen in their technical discussions. That always took her mind off her immediate problems and let her think about other enjoyable, technical issues.

As she entered the room, Ornage and Erom talked about the projectiles and how they could be improved. Sonyata recognized the shape was circular and similar to the round bails.

“Ornage, I have a suggestion,” and she explained what she just observed; Erom and Ornage saw the importance of what she said, and they debated it for few moments. While they talked, Ornage cut a piece of Jabom meal from a loaf in front of him. He tossed it in the air like a circular projectile, then he tossed the remainder of the loaf into the air, and it tumbled.

This confused the discussion, and the debate continued.

Ornage was handling the loaf, saying, “The projectile is traveling down the barrel, and when it comes out, we don’t want it to tumble.” He then tosses it across the room to Erom, and his hand caused it to spin, and it flew straight.

All four of them stared at each other for a moment, and Ornage spoke excitedly, “If we make it spin, I think it would fly straight. Maybe if I put grooves along sides of the projectile, it will turn as it goes down the barrel.”

Mortog agreed and suggested, “Please do it fast, and I’d like to test it before we start building new defensive tools.”

Mortog sat listening to Ornage and Erom about the new projectile design, and he saw pieces of ice fall from the roof of the cave. For those living in a cave, that wasn’t unusual. Then he saw more fall, and it continued. Then he felt the rumble.

“Something is happening,” Mortog said in a hesitant voice.

They looked up, felt the rumble, and ran for the entrance. When they reached it, Ellig had already arrived, and many others who felt the rumble were assembling. Those outside the cave were making their way as fast as possible to the cave openings.

Ornage and Erom looked in the direction of the roar and saw a horrible sight. Three Ora landing ships were descending through the clouds. They filled the Varo sky with smoke and noise, and it seemed that even the clouds ran away.

Mortog yelled to those around him, “Into the ice caves, distribute the defensive weapons and gather at the entrances where you have been assigned.” He then ran into the ice caves to get them organized. Sonyata and Ornage looked at each other, then quickly followed Mortog.

Erom just stood at the cave entrance and thought while he looked at the descending craft. He knew they weren't ready, and fear grew inside him. They had a little less than 1,200 Raog and only about 700 defensive tools. He walked slowly into the caves.

14-The First Wave

In previous planning meetings, Mortog knew that he had three openings in the ice caves to defend. One was the vehicle entrance, one was the vehicle exit, and the third was for workers. The two-vehicle entrances were large; they went a long way into the ice caves without any turns and would be much harder to defend. The worker's entrance was for two or three Raog to walk side by side, so it wasn't very wide. It had one tunnel for a short distance, then there were many turns as it wound through the ice to the main floor; it would be easier to defend. The smaller worker tunnel could be defended at each of the corners. The larger vehicle entrances could be defended only at the entrance and then far into the ice where the first entrance to the lower levels was located. If they had to pull back from the entrances, they had to move a long distance before the next defensive position could be established.

The cave's main entrances and personnel areas were on the main floor, then multiple levels of Jabom storage on the lower levels. The defensive tool manufacturing was done on the first level below the main level.

Mortog had enough defensive tools for about 700 defenders, and he hoped that would be enough to guard the three entrances. Unfortunately, he had many more defenders than he had defensive tools. The additional workers operated the tool-making machinery and the transportation within the caves. Those defenders were to stay back and get involved only if those with the defensive tools were falling back and needed help. They had found many sharp tools used for farming or cutting, and they could use them as they needed. Many of these farm tools were powerful, sharp, and lethal if used properly.

His overall strategy was to dismantle as much of the machinery as possible and move the pieces to the lower levels. Then he would defend the three entrances with all of the resources available, and if necessary, he could draw back from the main level and defend the lower levels. If the invaders were able to capture all three entrances, Mortog knew there was no way out, and they would have to fight to their death to recapture the main level.

Ornage, Sonyata, Erom, and Mortog took turns going to the entrances and monitoring what the Ora were doing. After they had landed, they stayed in their craft for the remainder of the first day, which surprised the defenders. On the second day, they left the craft for only a short time during mid-day and began building their walls. That continued until the walls were complete.

Mortog expected them to attack much sooner, but he was happy to take the time and organize his defenses. After the walls had been completed, the leaders met to discuss events and plans.

Ornage opened the meeting by posing the question, “Why are they remaining behind their walls and not attacking. Are they waiting for something?”

No one had an answer, and after more debate, they discussed the current distribution of defenders. Erom and Mortog would guard the main vehicle entrances, and Loran would guard the personnel entrance. Ornage would coordinate between the defenders, and Sonyata would coordinate with the storage areas for moving projectiles to the Raog that needed them.

After the meeting, Ellig approached Sonyata and Ornage about making another broadcast that night. They immediately recognized the gravity of the situation and knew it was important to tell the people of Varo about the new developments. So Ellig left them to prepare, and he went to find the broadcast technicians.

In a short time, they were ready to broadcast, and Ellig opened with, “People of Varo, I am here with the Orb and Grand Leader at the northern caves. We have been surrounded by three landing craft containing attacking Ora. Please hear the words of the Orb and Grand Leader.”

Sonyata opened with her solemn words, “People of Varo, may your soil always bear Jabom. As Ellig said, we are surrounded by many Ora with many brave Raog, defending the ice caves and Jabom. They have come here, leaving brave partners defending their young in their residences. We know many others across Varo defending their families and their Jabom, who aren’t here. These are grave times for us, and we ask each of you to care for your families, protect them. We will fight a gallant battle and

finally, remove the Ora from Varo. Please continue to have faith in Varo and the Raog."

After a short pause, Ornage spoke, "We have many brave defenders here. We have defensive tools that we have built, and we are confident that we can defend the Jabom and finally defend all of you. Please take care of yourselves first, and pray to Varo to help us win this confrontation. We are aware of defensive efforts being conducted in many of our cities. Unfortunately, too many lives have been lost in those cities. When possible, you should do anything you can that disrupts or delays the Ora. We don't want you to take unnecessary risks and put yourself in danger unless you can be effective. We are communicating with many leaders in the cities, so please seek them out and see how you can contribute."

After the broadcast, Mortog spoke with Ornage, "Excellent words Grand Leader, you give me hope, although there are parts of me that want to take that hope away. May Varo be with us."

"I have the same feelings," said Ornage

During the next day, Sonyata moved among the defenders, listening and providing comfort. As she walked, she thought about the Ora and why they had not attacked. "They are like insects, and why won't an insect attack?" She asked herself.

She suddenly stopped and said in a loud voice, "They aren't attacking because they are insects." She raced to find Ornage, Erom, and Mortog, and she found them near a vehicle entrance reviewing how to defend it.

She rushed up to them and yelled, "They are insects…," she got a confused look. Then she said, "They don't like the cold. Their planet is probably warmer, and when it gets cold, they can't move well. So every night, they go back to their living area to stay warm. That is what insects in our fields do, so these invading insects are doing the same?"

Slowly each of them smiled broadly, and Mortog said, "I'm not sure how to use that, but I'm positive that it will help us; thank you, Sonyata." Ornage put both arms around his life partner and hugged her.

They each spent the rest of that day dwelling on the new information and how they could use it, and at the early evening meeting, they discussed

new strategies.

“If they came to Varo and are surprised by the night temperatures, then here by the ice caves, they must be surprised by the colder temperatures. The night temperatures must be very hard for them. Maybe they’ll be forced to attack us only during the day when the temperature is the highest. Then we’ll have time to recover between attacks,” Mortog summarized.

Erom added, “I think they might attack in large numbers trying to push us back, but they can't sustain the attack for a long time. If they are unsuccessful then, they’ll drop back to their craft and try again the next day.” He paused for a moment, then continued, “They will try to capture the ice caves all at once because they won’t be able to capture and then hold it through the night. I think we might be able to hold them off.”

Mortog provided more information, “I’m feeling a little optimistic. I’ve been working with our defenders and training them how to aim their tools. We are far from proficient, but I think we’ll have a range advantage over their more reliable tools. Their tools may last longer, but ours should be more efficient.”

Ornage added, “I’ve been working on a new projectile based on our last meeting, and it should be ready in a couple of days. I don’t know if it will work, but I want to try it.”

For a few moments, some optimism grew within the group. Then Erom brought up a difficult subject. “Ellig, you are welcomed to use one of the defensive tools and position yourself where you want. Sonyata, I suggest that you remain near the soil room coordinating the projectiles, and perhaps Ellig will stay with you. If we have problems and must fall back, then you’ll need to move to the lower levels.”

Ornage looked at his life partner and knew that she had mixed emotions. Her parents were murdered, and she needed to defend her defenseless Raog. He was sure that part of her wanted revenge against the Ora, but being the Orb, taking life was very painful. She must be torn between two very basic needs.

Sonyata thought for a few moments, then looked at Ornage and said, “I will remain with you coordinating the projectiles. I will guard you, and if you are in danger, I will fight; I want a defensive weapon. Regardless of

what they did to my parents, I'm not willing to take a life unless I am defending my life partner."

Ornage smiled and touched his partner's hand.

Ellig said, "Yes, I want a defensive weapon, but I also want to be where Raog are defending the caves. I may not be much help, but I want to be part of our defense.

The next day the Ora attacked

Mortog, Erom, Loran, and Ornage were standing at one of the entrances, and around mid-day, the Ora emerged from their craft. When they exited the walled areas, they formed into groups of 500 in front of each walled enclosure. By counting the rows and columns, it was very easy to determine their numbers. Apparently, they could house about 500 Ora in each of their craft.

"Less than 1,200 against 1,500; it should be a challenge," Ornage said out loud.

They noticed that each group had unique body coverings, wore red hats and a matching banner, which appeared to be some kind of group designation. Each group had a leader dressed in bright clothes and a hat.

This movement by the walls went on for a few moments. Then they began moving toward the caves. When the front lines began going up a slight hill to the cave entrance, the defenders began using their defensive tools. They were still unsure how to aim, but it was evident early that the defensive tools were effective on the attackers.

Loran's position was to the left of the vehicle entrances, and his portion of the slope had a steep wall on one side. So, as the attackers come up the hill, he had a wall to his left and clear shots to the attackers on his right. That was an advantage for his defenders.

Erom was leading the defenders on the far right vehicle entrance, and he had a wall to his right, similar to Loran on the other side, so his fire was directed to his left at the attackers.

Mortog was defending the middle vehicle entrance. Because he was in the middle, the full force of the attackers were in front of him, and his

defenders were taking most of the tool firing from the Ora.

Ornage moved back and forth between the vehicle entrances coordinating, giving the defenders guidance, and telling them to remain calm and take the time to aim their tools. He realized that he was training the defenders while the attack was occurring. When he saw one technique being more effective than the others, he moved between the tunnels passing the new information and helping the defenders aim their tools better. He also reminded them to remain behind the barriers they had constructed, regardless of how many projectiles were being fired by the Ora. The defenders had no experience, and they were scared and disorganized, but Ornage did his best to keep them in order.

The Ora losses were significant, and the defenders had only a couple wounded, which was news that encouraged everyone. The battle went on until the end of the warm period, and it was obvious the Ora were having trouble in the cooler air. They slowed down, and towards the end of the battle, many had difficulty getting back to their craft, even though they weren't wounded.

When the first day's action had ended, the leaders met to discuss the attack and plan for the next one.

"We have done well," Mortog said enthusiastically, and the entire room agreed with loud cheering and hand pumping.

"Yes, we have done well, and I've taken steps to care for our wounded," Sonyata added, and everyone nodded with appreciation.

"The next day, I think they will attack harder. They have learned today, and they will try to force us back," Erom said.

Mortog added, "Ornage did a great job, passing information to everyone, so they could learn as they fired their tools. Aiming our tools had been very efficient, and the Ora's tools are only effective at close range. Now that our defenders have learned to aim and stay in their positions, I think they will do even better tomorrow."

Ornage offered up, "And my improved tool with the new projectiles should be ready soon."

Everyone encouraged Ornage to complete them as soon as possible, and they hoped the tools would be more effective.

The rest of the meeting continued with more congratulations and encouragement for the next day. They finally left and began preparing.

Ellig, Sonyata, and Ornage agreed that keeping up with the night's broadcasts was important for the defenders in the ice caves and across the planet. Quickly the broadcast was ready to begin.

Ellig suggested that Ornage opens the broadcast, and then Sonyata ends it. Ellig didn't feel he could contribute much.

Ornage began, "May your soil always bear Jabom." He paused, knowing that many of his listeners were responding in turn, then he continued, "The invaders attacked us today, and we were successful in defending the ice caves and Jabom. The brave defenders only had minor injuries, and we inflicted heavy losses on the enemy. They remain outside the ice caves, and we expect them to attack us again tomorrow. Please pray to Varo that we are successful once again."

He handed the recording device to Sonyata, and she leaned forward and said, "The defenders in the ice caves with us, fought bravely and you should be proud of them. They fight for all of you. All of you should hold your young, touch your soil, and birth pouches as you pray for our defense of the caves. We are encouraged and pray that the next day we will continue to be successful."

As the sun rose the next morning, the cold air rested heavy in front of them. Mortog and Erom surveyed the slope in front of the ice caves. Mortog observed, "The Ora are strange creatures; they left their dead where they fell. Their blood is seeping into the soil of Varo and violating it. I don't understand how any creature can forget their dead so fast."

"Yes, Mortog, they are very different from us. They don't value what we value, and they care little for life. They will find that a race without values may be a race with little value," Erom commented. They walked back to the ice caves, towards their defenders, to help them prepare.

The sun continued to rise, and the Ora once again exited their craft and gathered for the assault; Mortog watched and waited.

As the sun approached its zenith, they began moving up the slope to the caves. Their plan today was immediately obvious as they moved much quicker. The onslaught broke into three waves and moved up the hill so fast some of the defenders could only fire their tool once. They hit the defenders at the three entrances with force, attempting to engage close in. The fighting became hand to hand in some places.

Mortog didn't want the front lines to be broken; he told Ornage to have the additional defenders with hand tools prepare to help if he moved his defenders from the entrance. Ornage arranged the defenders just behind the entrances, and if they pulled back, the additional defenders would be able to fight hand to hand to slow the advance.

The fierce fighting continued, but eventually, Mortog ordered the defenders at the entrances to fall back to the next defensive point. Ornage led the additional defenders with farm tools, and they got involved as the others moved back. The fighting was close, and when the lead Ora fired their tools, the defenders could overpower them before they had a chance to reload. The Ora weren't well organized, the ones in the rear were afraid to fire for fear of hitting the ones in the front, and the ones in front were overwhelmed after they fired. Ornage had a long hand tool with a blade on the bottom, which was used to cut weeds. He quickly found that by sweeping the tool along the floor, he could injure their legs, and when they fell, other defenders could overpower them and take their tools. Once immobile, the Ora were soon dealt with and were replaced by others behind them.

The movement along the floor of the tunnels was bloody, and there were many Ora losses. Surprisingly the Ora had more losses than the defenders, but the movement was still backing them until they reached the entrance to the lower caves.

By the time the defenders had reestablished themselves at the tunnels to the lower levels, they had lost the two-vehicle entrances, and that was the last tunnel for the defenders from the personnel entrance to fall back. If the defenders lost that point, the defenders from the personnel tunnel would be trapped. They had a very narrow but easily defended position, and even though the losses were high on both sides, it was a stalemate for a long time.

When the tide began turning, Mortog told Ornage that he should pull the defenders at the personnel entrance back. Ornage took a defensive tool along with two defenders and rushed through the tunnels to the worker entrance. When he reached the entrance, the fighting was fierce, and he told Loran to pull back. Just as Ornage began moving to the first corner, a new wave of attackers stormed into the entrance, and he saw Loran fighting hand to hand with them. Loran ordered his men to fall back, and he continued fighting as they moved to Ornage's corner. When they reached the corner, Ornage saw Loran fall and the swarm of attackers coming down the tunnel. He directed the remaining defenders to go all the way to Mortog's position and to give up the worker entrance.

A few moments later, Mortog heard the defenders coming down the tunnels backward, defending themselves as they withdrew. When the last of them exited the tunnel, he saw Ornage firing his tool one more time, then turning to join the others. As they approached, Mortog was saddened to see that Loran wasn't among the defenders falling back.

The fighting was in close quarters, so the effectiveness of the tools was less effective for both sides. That forced the fighting to be close and hand to hand. As the attrition continued, Mortog made the fateful decision to move to the next level and defend at the tunnel entrance to the third level.

They were giving up much of the heavy machinery for their defensive tools by moving to that level. They were able to move much of the material and smaller machinery, but the larger pieces, which were difficult to install, were the hardest to move and also the hardest to replace. That was a significant loss, but a necessary one.

Slowly as the fight moved lower in the ice caves, the temperature was dropping. Initially, in the heat of battle, neither the Ora nor the defenders were conscious of that, but slowly the Ora began slowing down and become less efficient. It took a while, but the defenders could push the insects back to the main level and eventually out of the ice caves as the sun set. But, unfortunately, that wasn't done until after the machinery had been damaged and some of the key parts carried away.

This was a brutal day for the defenders. Unlike the previous battle, that battle was almost lost, and they feared they would lose the next attack. The enemy had more creatures to attack than they had defenders.

The mood throughout the ice caves was dismal as the leaders come together to confer about their losses.

The somber mood was increased because of the loss of Loran. Ornage and the defenders with him told of Loran's bravery, staying to fight the Ora hand to hand so his defenders could move down the tunnel to the first defensive corner.

"We had many losses, and the defenders are scared for their families, their soil, and Varo," Sonyata said in a whisper. She then continued, "I've asked the defenders to collect their dead, and we'll find a way to return them to the soil."

They all nodded solemnly, then Mortog added, "We don't have enough defenders to cover all three entrances, but perhaps the enemy doesn't know what damage they did to us. After all, they don't know how many defenders we have."

"Unfortunately, if they attack again, we will likely lose the ice caves and Jabom," Erom admitted.

"Let us prepare our defenders, the best we can for the next attack, may your soil always bear Jabom," Ornage said. All of them responded, "And may yours." Then they went in their own private directions.

15-The Second Wave

While Ornage walked to the lower level to assess the damage to the machinery, he thought about his new projectile and defensive tool. He continued to the level below the machinery and looked for the technicians working on the device. He walked into a side cave, and they had a very worried face. “Grand Leader, we know that we had a bad day defending the caves. We have no defensive tools here, so we worked as hard as possible to finish that new tool and projectiles. We hope that it will be a help in the next battle.”

Ornage showed his appreciation by talking with them for a few moments and sharing Jabom scraps on the table, leftovers from a long day's work. Then, he picked up the new tool, and he liked the feel of it. He lifted it to his shoulder, and it seemed to fit him well. It made him feel better, although he thought, is it too late?

“I am proud of what you have made. This is a marvelous piece of machinery, and I see your fine craftsmanship. Regardless of what happens in the next battle, this tool is something to be proud of,” Ornage said in a clear and proud voice. They presented him with a new defensive tool and projectiles that had spiraling ridges cut in their sides. He thanked them once again and went to his quarters where Sonyata was waiting. While he walked, a thought began forming in his mind.

At the beginning of the evening, Ellig, Sonyata, and Ornage met in the soil room for a reluctant broadcast. They agreed that one should be short but optimistic.

It would be started by Ornage because it was more a leadership issue than one of morals, family, and comfort. Ornage took a deep breath and began, “People of Varo, may your soil always bear Jabom. “ He took his customary pause, “our battle today was intense, and, unfortunately, we lost many brave defenders. We are preparing for another battle tomorrow, and we are confident that we will prevail. For the families of those we lost today, they all fought bravely, and I am proud of having them by my side. Their losses will not be forgotten. They will be remembered when we beat

the Ora. Regardless of what happens here tomorrow, the fight for Varo has just begun, and all of you must take any opportunity to remove the Ora from our planet. I know that each city is developing defensive actions, and each of you should seek out your leaders and find out how you can contribute. If all of us take any step necessary and contribute in any way possible, then I'm sure we will regain our soil."

Sonyata was handed the recording device and began, "All of us grieve for our lost comrades. I pray that the partners and families of these lost loved ones realize that they fought for them and all of Varo. Those remaining will continue the fight until we are victorious. Your Grand Leader, Ornage, said, if each of you can find a way to contribute to your local city defenses, then you will help the soul of Varo remain whole. So please continue your prayers to Varo, we can feel them, and they help us. May your soil always bear Jabom?"

When they were done, Ornage said in a low voice, "I think we should make another recording for broadcast. If the attack tomorrow goes badly and we are losing the caves, Ellig... if Sonyata and I are lost, you must find a way to send that broadcast to the people of Varo.

Ellig knew that the events in the ice caves were going to determine their fate. He also realized that the next broadcast might be their last, and he wanted to give the planet a true image of the sacrifices that he was sure were going to happen. So they went to his room and began preparing their final words.

The early snowfall ended, and finally, the sun rose the next day, and its light fell on many Ora dead on the slopes to the caves. Inside the ice caves, there were also many dead Ora and destruction. The few defenders who remained made themselves visible at each of the entrances trying to show a larger force.

Mortog and Erom met in a tunnel. As Sonyata approached, Erom asked, "Where is Ornage? We must prepare."

Sonyata responded, "I'm not sure where he is. He left our room early, and I haven't seen him since." They jumped as they heard a shot from the entrance to the caves. They hurried to the source of the sound and found Ornage firing his defensive tool for the second time.

They arrived at the entrance, and Sonyata asked, “What are you doing?”

Ornage’s response was to use his tool for the third time, then he spoke, “I’m trying out the new defensive tool and projectiles.” And then he smiled.

Erom and Mortog looked at him, then looked at the walled aliens.

“How effective is it?” Mortog asks.

Ornage smiled once again and said, “Very effective.”

Mortog continued with, “Why are you shooting at them? They haven’t come out of the walls yet?”

Ornage smiled once more and said, “This defensive tool has a long-range, and I’m just experimenting with it.”

Erom pointed out, “Too bad we don’t have hundreds of them.”

They all nodded except Ornage, who was adjusting two small bumps that he had glued to the front and back of the barrel on his defensive weapon.”

Coincidently, after Ornage made his last adjustment, the walls began to open. Due to the losses of the past two days, there were a lot fewer attackers. When the Ora lined up, it was easy to estimate and determine the approximate size of each group. The group in the middle appeared to have its full complement of 500 Ora, while the group on the right had about 375, and the one on the left was down to about 150. Thus, it appeared, the smaller groups were the attackers for the first two days, and the middle group would lead it that day.

They milled around for a few moments as they formed up for the attack, and the three Ora with ornate head coverings moved together to talk.

Mortog yelled to his few remaining defenders, “Raog, take your positions. They will be coming soon.”

It took a few minutes for the three Ora leaders to move to each other, and as they stood close to each other, Ornage’s defensive tool fired. Sonyata, Erom, and Mortog jumped with surprise and almost ran into the cave. They looked at Ornage for a moment, then looked at the Ora.

Suddenly the Ora leader on the left dropped.

They looked in disbelief, and they heard Ornage reloading his tool, and he suddenly fired it again.

Their heads and bodies moved quickly as they looked back at the Ora, and to their amazement, the middle Ora leader dropped. They remained transfixed on the Ora while they heard Ornage loading his tool once again. Then something shocking happened.

The groups of Ora on either side attacked the middle group. The battle erupted fast, and the fighting was fierce. The Ora on the right immediately isolated their leader so Ornage couldn't use his tool again, and they were able to protect him while he scurried back behind the walls. The battle outside continued as the two smaller groups attacked the larger middle group. Over time, they began to win, but the losses were terrible. Finally, after a prolonged battle, the fighting on the ground subsided, and it appeared that the middle group of attackers were dead; the other two groups had won. Only about 300 of the Ora were alive, and they moved among the dead retrieving tools and other items.

The victors moved back to the craft on the right, entered it. After a short time started its engines, and it rose into the air. Once the craft was airborne and lifting into the sky, there was silence.

Erom, Sonyata, and Ornage watched in horror as the battle occurred. There was nothing in their experience or imagination that could describe the activities. The defenders at the cave entrances were all equally confused. They had gone from sure death to watching their attackers kill themselves, and even though it appeared they were now safe, the scene before them was too horrific to understand or cheer about.

For a long time, Erom, Sonyata, and Ornage stood and looked in disbelief. The scene before them was beyond their ability to explain. Ornage's improved defensive tool had been amazing, and it brought about events they didn't have words for.

As they watched, some of the other defenders from the cave entrances slowly walked to where they were standing, and as a group, they looked. None of them had anything to say.

The defenders had sustained major losses. The machines used to build defensive tools had been dismantled and damaged. The loss of life was

painful and almost overwhelming.

Slowly the defenders at the ice caves began moving around and dealing with the aftermath of the attack. None of them were happy, although now they thought that they had a future.

The leaders moved among the defenders, encouraging and supporting as they made their way to the soil room. When they were all there, they hugged and started to feel the burden of the last couple of days lifting off their shoulders.

“Varo heard our prayers and did something amazing,” Sonyata began.

Erom contributed, “Ornage, the improvements you made to the defensive tools are amazing, and if it weren’t for those, we would have lost the caves. All of Varo owe a great deal to you.”

Ornage accepted the praise quietly and thoughtfully.

Sonyata pointed out solemnly, “We must care for our dead.”

Erom said, “And we must also decide how to dispose of the Ora dead.” They debated that for a short time while Sonyata sat in silence. Then, after the debate had continued for a while, Ornage sensed her unease and asked what her thoughts were.

She sat for a moment then started talking in a quiet voice, “Death is important to a Raog. We cherish life and accept death. When we die, we know that we go to Varo’s soul, and we are welcomed by our ancestors. In a way, Varo’s soil represents life, and Varo’s soul represents death. When we discovered our twin planet, many asked if they were part of Varo, were they part of Varo’s soul, did Varo share soil with them? At the time, my mother and I had no answers, but now I’m wondering if Varo is bigger than we think and if Varo represents all life and Varo’s soul represents all death. If so, then the Ora dead may also be part of Varo’s soul. If we assume that Varo is just for us, I feel like we are missing something very basic. We are now discovering that life is elsewhere; life may be everywhere. If that is so, then Varo is everywhere, and it represents life, everywhere. For now, I agree that we should not damage the soil of Varo by burying them, and I agree to place them in unused ice caves. But I’m not sure if that will be their final resting place. This is something that I have to think a lot about.”

The defenders of the ice caves moved their dead to an area further down the valley where they could access the soil of Varo. At that location, they made preparations to return their dead to the soil.

Because of the ice and snow, the defenders were forced to make a single large grave for all of the dead. Each defender was placed in the grave, and some soil was used to cover them. When all of them were placed, the Orb and Grand Leader spoke.

“Please, Varo, we pray that you accept these brave defenders into the soil of Varo. They fought bravely and gave their lives to defend your soil and our soul. May they all rest in peace within the soil,” Sonyata said solemnly.

When it was Ornage’s turn to speak, he took a deep breath and said, “Our world has been invaded. Many of our fellow Raog have lost their lives. Over the last couple of days, the invading Ora have tried to take our Jabom from us. They felt that if they took our Jabom, we would lose our will to defend it and Varo. They were wrong; many Raog fought, and yes, many died, but they have shown all of us that we can beat the Ora. The Raog can defend ourselves, our Jabom, our soil, and our Varo. We must carry the knowledge of this victory to every part of Varo and encourage all Raog to defend what is dear to them. Let us rejoice that this victory is the first of many, and we will finally rid Varo of the Ora.

After their dead had been cared for and the leaders returned to the ice caves, Ellig, Sonyata, and Ornage prepared for broadcast with a much better outlook, a broadcast they were eager to make.

Ornage opened with the words, “People of Varo, may your soil always bear Jabom.” He paused, then added, “The defenders of the northern ice caves have successfully defended the ice caves from the attacking Ora. We have lost many brave defenders, and that saddens us. The invaders have left, and now we can restore the ice caves and began distributing our Jabom. We will continue this fight with the Ora wherever they are found.”

Sonyata added, “The brave defenders of the ice caves have done something amazing. They have defeated the invaders that tried to capture the ice caves and deprive you of the Jabom stored here. Varo has helped us defend the ice caves and its soil. All of Varo should be proud of those who

lost their lives in these caves. We have already returned those fallen to the soil, and they have been able to join their ancestors in the soul of Varo. Let us pray to Varo for continued success in the future, and may your soil always bear Jabom."

All of them felt good about that broadcast and were eager to send it. Ellig quickly prepared it for transmission, and when everyone in the ice caves heard the broadcast, they felt better and were able to look forward to the next day.

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Ilana and Molt were sitting in the observation residence along with Ilana's group leaders and many other sector leaders when they heard the broadcast from Ellig; they cheered, pumped their hands, and hugged each other.

Molt spoke during the celebration, "Finally, some good news. We have beaten them in a major battle, which gives me a lot of encouragement for what we are doing here."

Ilana nodded enthusiastically and added her piece, "We must find ways to interfere with the Ora without putting anyone at risk. We have seen the Ora foraging in the city over the last couple of days, trying to find materials and water. So far, we've been able to keep the residents moving fast enough to keep them out of the Ora's path. We've been lucky, our plan of spreading the word fast has proved effective, and encounters had been rare. I suggest we use our explosive powders in the city. We can train small teams who can wait along the paths the Ora follow and throw the explosive powders at them and disappear into the residences."

The other sector leaders looked to Ilana for direction, and after a moment, she said to them, "Go find residents willing to be part of these teams, and we'll train them to use the explosive powders. Then we'll be able to harm the Ora and slow down their destruction of our soil."

The room broke open with cheering and optimism that their destiny might finally be in their hands, and they could do something meaningful to defend Varo.

Molt took Ilana aside and pointed out, “Orto was the district leader of the capitol. You have been doing a great job, and now he was with the soil. I think you should become the capitol district leader.” He paused, then continued, “I have spoken with most of the district leaders and many of the sector leaders, and they are in agreement.”

Ilana was not prepared for what she heard, and it took her by surprise.

“I must think about that…,” she paused, then continued with a little reluctance, “what is best for them is best for me.”

16-The Captives

Mortog felt good after winning the battle at the ice caves, yet he knew that much more was coming. Inside the ice caves, he directed that the defensive tool machinery should be reassembled on the lowest level where they could be defended easier. Once they were reassembled and the modifications made to create the improved tools, they began production. The production rates would be slow until the replacement parts were delivered, and when they were, he knew the rates would increase dramatically as the craftsmen become more proficient.

Mortog also knew the next task was to remove the Ora dead and set them in unused ice caves. He assembled a group of defenders with defensive tools and moved cautiously down the slope. There was a possibility that some of the Ora were wounded, still alive, and might pose a threat, but he hoped that the cool of the northern night had solved that problem.

His team moved down the slope, encircling a group of dead Ora, stopped, and had the Ora bodies removed while they watched the others. Then they moved to the next group. After a couple groups of dead Ora had been removed, they heard loud noises from one of the walled areas. They slowed their pace and approached the opening in the wall, and Mortog peered in. Initially, he couldn't see much, then he saw two Ora moving supplies up a ramp into one of the landing craft. He observed them for a few moments and noted that they didn't have their defensive tools. He also noted that they wore green head coverings instead of the red ones the attackers wore. There had already been too much death, and he didn't want to kill these two unless necessary.

Because they didn't have any defensive tools, he was hopeful that they were the only ones inside; Mortog rose and yelled. The two Ora froze and looked at him. They showed no aggressive moves, so Mortog and his team moved cautiously towards them.

While approaching, the two Ora slowly lowered themselves, so their bodies and heads were flat on the ground with their legs spread out. That

appeared to be a posture of subservience because it was almost immobile for them. Nevertheless, Mortog sensed that he could walk up to them and slaughter them with no difficulty.

He approached them slowly and spoke to his team in a low voice, “Surround them and as long as they stay prone on the ground, do nothing. But if they move, use your defensive tools.”

Then Mortog shouted, “One of you in the back go to the ice caves and bring Ornage and his translator; maybe the two of them can communicate with these Ora.”

Mortog and his team maintained their positions until Ornage and Ivroc arrived. They entered the walled area and approached the captives slowly. When Ornage was at Mortog’s side, he asked, “Do you think we can communicate with them?”

“I hope so. Maybe we can get some information that will help us understand what is happening.”

Ornage and Ivroc coordinated with each other in low whispers, then Ornage spoke in Ora to the closest prisoner, “My name Ornage, what is your name?”

The prisoner looked startled, hesitated, then said in a soft melodic Ora voice, “I am Irrrm, and you speak our language. What will you do to us?”

“We will treat you with respect if you must answer our questions,” Ornage said in his melodic voice, almost signing to the prisoners.

Irrrm responded with tones, “You have dominated us. I will answer your questions with respect.”

“Why did you attack us? Kill us.”

“We need your soil.”

“You need our soil?”

“Yes, we have poor soil and too many to feed.”

Ornage spoke to Mortog, “He said they have too many to feed, and they need our soil.”

Ornage redirected his attention back to the captive.

“Will you and others attack us?”

“I am a ship operator. I do not attack. I will not attack you.”

“And other…captives, will they attack?”

“No, we are all ship operators. We are not attackers. I am their leader now, and they will do what I say.”

“Mortog,” Ornage said, “they appear to be ship operators. He said they are not attackers and will not attack us. So I suggest we move them to a better place where Ivroc and I can talk with them and get information.”

Ornage said to the captives, “Come with us, and we talk; if you try to harm us, you die.”

Irrrm responded quickly, “Please, we must be warm, or we will die in the cold,” he continued, “If you agree, we could use our ship. It is warm for us.”

Ornage didn’t feel comfortable with that solution and said to Mortog, “They want to stay in their ship because they can’t handle the cold. Could you and your team go through the ship and make sure it’s safe?”

“Yes, Grand Leader, we will,” Mortog responded while he directed his men up the ramp.

Ornage waited with the captives while the sweep of the ship was made, then Mortog came down the ramp saying, “Grand Leader, there are no others. There is a large area you can use at the head of the ramp. I will have some defenders stay with you while you talk, and I caution you not to let them leave your sight or turn on any devices.”

”Thank you,” Ornage said, and then he spoke to the captives, “You may move up the ramp, and we will talk. But you may not touch anything or leave, or you will be killed. Do you understand?”

“Yes, dominators, we will do as you ask.”

The four Ora slowly lifted themselves off the ground as Mortog, Ornage, and Ivroc watched. Once they were on their feet, Ornage said, “You may move up the ramp slowly.” He turned to Mortog and commented, “We’ll find out what is happening, who they are, and I’ll let you know what we learn. When you’re done with the Ora dead, please return.”

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Ilana was sitting in a room with their first team of defenders trained on using the explosive powders on the Ora. Their communications had improved, and Ilana was told when the Ora entered the city and generally what path they followed. The spotters passed the locations and paths to the local group leaders who coordinated the local residents, then the Ora's general progress was passed through the region and sector leaders to Ilana at the district level. True, she heard of the movements after the fact, but as long as her local residents were warned and they were out of harm's way, she was happy.

She and her sector leaders had determined that the Ora usually followed specific paths they were familiar with when scavenging for materials. That allowed the defensive teams to pre-position themselves along the routes and be prepared to throw the explosive powder packages.

Ilana was aware that tactic would work for a while until the Ora changed routes. Then they would need to make adjustments. Once her defender team left, they would be under local control, and Ilana would hear only the results.

Molt wanted to be part of the first team. He was anxious to be with them when the first packages were thrown. He was anxious to see how well the tactic worked, and besides, he wanted to see the impacts to the invaders.

Ilana had passed their strategy to Iban, and he was implementing a similar attack method in Furtar. In addition, other nearby cities had begun communicating with Ilana, so a full-scale reaction to the attacking Ora was starting to emerge.

Communications with the ice caves had been disrupted for a couple of days while the attacks were occurring, but now they had begun again. Ilana was hoping to have her tactics coordinated with many more cities.

Molt and the team prepared to leave when Ilana spoke to Molt, "Please take care of yourself and your team. I hope these tactics will help slow them and protect more of the capital. May your soil always bear Jabom," she said with a smile.

“And yours,” Molt responded as he smiled, nodded, and left the room.

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After the battle had been won, Sonyata enjoyed walking around the ice caves. There was a sense of optimism and hope. It was much easier to talk with the defenders. She heard more stories of their families, of the battle, of their youth, all of which she loved to hear.

She was also aware of something else; a feeling of restlessness and fullness in her body. Initially, she thought it was tension over the battle, but then she was more convinced that she was with young. That pleased her, and it increased her enjoyment of the defender's stories of their families.

Sonyata wanted to tell everyone, but she wished most of all that she could tell her Mother. When a Raog female was having a baby, the first one she would tell was her mother. But her Mother, the Orb, was with the soil, and she was the Orb now. She knew that she couldn’t tell Ornage because both of them had greater responsibilities than they. They must think of the residents of Varo first and their love and lives second. Because of that, Ornage would not be told until the time was right.

Ornage left the alien craft and was excited about the information he had received from the captives. He and Mortog walked briskly up the slope to update the other leaders. As he entered the soil room, they looked happier and eager to hear what he had learned.

Enthusiastically he began speaking, “I have found out a great deal from them. So much, I’m not sure where to begin. Speaking with them, we have been able to improve our translation skills a great deal. We understand them a lot better now, and I think they also understand us better. They are the Ora, and they attacked us because they didn’t have enough food for their population. Apparently, the planet has two major continents with two types of Ora. The large continent has poor soil and is where the lesser Ora live, and those are the slaves we’ve heard about.”

Erom jumped in and asked, “Who attacked us?”

As Ivroc entered, after finishing with the captives, Ornage continued, “The attackers are from the smaller continent which has better soil, and they are called the greater Ora or the dominators. Some Erons ago, the greater Ora conquered the lessor Ora, still using them as slaves. The entire species is very hierarchical. At each level of their society, there is a leader who answers to the one above them. If they don’t do what they’re asked, they are often killed and replaced. That is why we saw them attack each other after the battle. When my tool killed two of the leaders, the Ora, loyal to the remaining leader, attacked the other Ora to defend him. The others, who lost their leaders, attacked each other because when they had no leader, they had to defend themselves.”

Erom questioned, “What are their plans?”

Ivroc responded, “May I, Grand Leader?”

“Yes,” Ornage gave the nod.

“Apparently, the head of the greater Ora is called VanMacca and is female. They already knew that Varo was here, and even if we had not sent a signal, they planned to look for us. After hearing our transmissions, their leader decided that she wanted to dominate us and use our soil to plant their food. They had no regard for us, Varo is theirs for the taking, and we’re irrelevant.”

Erom immediately yelled, “We have something to say about that!”

After the boisterous response in the room had quieted down, Ivroc asked, “May I continue?”

“Yes, absolutely,” Ornage encouraged.

“The greater Ora have different classes of Ora. The attackers, or warriors as they are called by the Ora, wear the red hats that we’ve seen. The captives we have, wear green hats, they are from a technical class, and these, in particular, are the operators of the craft they left. They weren’t involved in the attacks on us, and when the remaining Ora turned on each other, they locked themselves in their craft. When Leader Mortog discovered them, they made preparations to take a craft back to their homeworld. But, surprisingly, even if they succeed in getting back to their homeworld, they may be killed because of the failure here.”

Erom then asked, “What about the group that left, and won’t they be executed for failing?”

Ivroc responded, “I asked that also, apparently, the Ora are very loyal to their leaders, sort of a self-defense mechanism, they’ll go along with anything the leader says. Apparently, their survival instinct is stronger than honesty. The remaining leader may say, ‘the other Ora sided with us and defended the leader's honor by fighting the traitors.' Or he might say, ‘we were beaten, and he is all that is left.' Regardless, if the leader believes him, he lives; if not, he dies.”

Another thing, Ivroc added, “It also appears there is a lot of unhappiness on their planet. The lessor Ora started resisting the greater Ora after they were dominated. Also, within the greater Ora, not all of them like VanMacca and her decision to take Varo. Many think she was wrong.”

After a pause, Ivroc concluded, “That is about all we got from them in this session. They don’t have any strategic information; they are just operators. Those Ora from the lower levels are told what to do and never told why. Also, I got the impression that they don’t like the invasion of Varo, although they didn’t say it. I think they are sympathetic to us. Maybe we can use that to our advantage. Their driving instinct is survival, then loyalty to their leader, then loyalty to their species. We captured them, and in their words, ‘we now dominate them’ so their instinct is to follow their current leader, which is us.”

Ornage commented, “I’d like to work with them for a while and find out about their craft, their technology and also determine if they might help us in some way. Maybe they’ll operate those craft for us?”

Sonyata spoke up and said, “If these captives seem cooperative, I’d like to spend time with them also. So I can practice speaking their language, and I also have many questions about their lives, families, and beliefs. The more we know about them, the better off we may be.”

The next day Ornage and Sonyata spent all of their time with the Ora captives. They weren’t becoming friends, but at least, Ornage was beginning to understand their actions in the context of their structured society, and he and Sonyata were improving their language skills/

After spending the morning talking with the captives, Irrrm offered to take Ornage and Sonyata on a tour of his craft, and Ornage immediately agreed. Ornage saw the Ora's pride in machinery, demonstrated by his actions, which he also felt like an engineer. That gave them common ground, which improved their understanding of each other.

The ship was cavernous and well suited for the Ora bodies. There weren't ladders but ramps going from level to level. The ramps had ridges, which allowed the Ora to move up and down easily with their feet. It was easy for Ornage and Sonyata to move, so they could keep up with their guide.

Irrrm showed them where the crowd of red hats remained in relatively cramped quarters. Ornage noted that instead of resting pads, they had a curious low bench to insert the aft portion of their body, giving them a place to rest while the ship was moving. The area also had some straps and bars around it, likely to be used during take-off and landings and during weightless times in space. Space was very limited, and Ornage counted the positions. He had been right and determined that the ship carried 500 attackers.

"Irrrm, this ship carries a large number of attackers. So it must be very difficult during space flight?" he asked.

"The Ora don't need space; we can sit still for long periods. While we're in space, we lower the temperature of this area of the ship, and the attackers remain motionless," Irrrm added.

The next deck was food storage, preparation, and serving area. The feeding areas were small circular pedestals with round dish-shaped platforms. On the top of the platform was a small orifice on top of a small cone where a green substance was forced out. A couple of them had some food remaining. Neither Ornage nor Sonyata had any intent in trying it.

Irrrm commented, "When we travel, and it is time for them to feed, the temperature is increased, and when the attackers become active, they are allowed to this area to feed. When they are done, they are expected to return to the lower deck. The food is made for space travel and tastes bad, but it is easy to store and prepare. I don't like it, but I'll tolerate it. On our home planet, we prefer the Bior plant. It gives us fruit, leaves, and stalks that are

very tasty. However, it doesn't store well, so it is processed so it can be used as our space food."

The top of the craft had two areas. One was obviously for the Ora Leader. Irrrm hesitated then walked into a very plush area, "This area is for our leader. That larger room is used for meetings."

Ornage noticed similar resting areas to what he saw below and a center padded surface that he assumed the leader could lower herself on for resting. The pad seemed unusual to Ornage and Sonyata, but after seeing how Ora were built, that arrangement seemed to work

On the other end of the floor was the command area where Irrrm operated the craft. As Irrrm entered, he stroked some of the controls and touched a couple of the levers. That action told Ornage that he took pride in what he did and felt connected to the craft. Finally, Ornage was a little closer to understanding him.

Sonyata pointed at an Ora's seating area which was surrounded by levers and pedals. Then, she asked, "Irrrm is that where you operate the craft?"

"Yes, it is. I was brought up to operate these craft, and I'm proud of my ability," Irrrm said.

"Can you show us how you operate the craft and explain some of the controls and levers? But please don't touch anything." Ornage asked. He was confident at that point that Irrrm won't do anything to harm them, but caution was always best. Asking the creature to show how they did their job is an easy way to build a bond.

"Absolutely," Irrrm answered as he moved quickly to his resting pad in front of the controls. He continued, "When I am launching or landing, and I need to accomplish a lot, I lean forward, and I can operate everything I need to. When we aren't close to the ground or in flight, I can lean back and rest.

"When we ascend, I open that fuel lever," as he pointed to one of the controls, and "this control lights the fuel, then I regulate how much I need with these levers. I can balance the craft by adjusting how much fuel I send to each of the engines." He paused for a moment, maybe smiling in an Ora kind of way. He continued, "As you can tell, I'm pretty busy; when I operate this, it takes a lot of adjusting."

None of the controls looked too advanced to Ornage; in fact, they looked pretty archaic. The operator had to move many levers and pedals, all of which appeared cumbersome. Ornage didn't see any technologies that he wasn't familiar with; they were just applying them differently.

His mind was already awash with adjustments and improvements that he could make. "Irrrm, I think there are many improvements I can make to this ship. Would you mind if my technicians and I take a look at it? Of course, we need your help and suggestions," Ornage said.

Irrrm was shocked; no one had ever asked his opinion or asked for his help. "Yes," he blurted out, "I'd love to work with you and make improvements. However, it is now your craft, not mine."

During the meeting at the beginning of the evening, Ornage and Sonyata updated the other leaders on what they learned from the Ora captive and his craft.

"We saw the entire ship, and I'm confident that we can adapt their technologies and maybe build our own craft. They aren't doing anything I don't understand; in fact, I suggested to Irrrm that my technicians and I work with him to improve their design. He is enthusiastic about helping," Ornage said with an engineer's enthusiasm.

Erom said, "We agree, and as long as Ornage can trust the Ora, it will be a great idea to work with the craft and see what you can achieve. I do, however, want a couple of our defenders with you at all times."

Ornage nodded.

Later, as the meeting was dispersing, Sonyata spoke with Ornage, "Ornage, I've been thinking. We have accomplished a great victory here. But we are here and not in the capital. We have many defenders there suffering and confused. I need to go there and be with them. I hope I can bring them comfort and support."

Ornage didn't like that, but part of him said that it was the correct thing to do. Hesitantly he responded, "Sonyata, you are the center of my life; you are my life partner. I understand why you want to go there, and part of me agrees, but part of me will be in pain and miss you. If you think that you must go, I'll agree."

She smiled, they hugged and walked away arm in arm.

17-The Orb is Taken

Molt and his team moved into the capital. Word had spread among the residents, and as they walked to their positions, many Raog stopped them and either hugged them or patted them on their backs. They received much encouragement and shows of appreciation.

They knew the streets and the paths the Ora would take. They had identified several positions where they could cover points on multiple paths. After they had reached their starting point, they waited, and when they received word about the Ora's path, they moved a short distance and were in a position to throw explosive packages.

If they positioned themselves properly, they hoped the first package they threw would cause the Ora to reverse their path. If the defenders were lucky, other team members could throw one or two other packages at them during their retreat. If it all worked as planned, the team might be able to throw three or four packages.

They waited for a short time then Molt received word that a group of Ora were in the city and moving along one of the paths. Luckily it was a path that he could intercept quickly, he gave the other defenders directions, and they moved as fast as they could to the intercept points.

Molt reached the point in time to set his defenders at a couple of points where he hoped to find the Ora approaching, then if all went well, catch them as they pulled back. The tension was high, and the wait was short. Finally, Molt saw the invaders come around the corner and quickly move up the street. They showed no hesitation and acted as if they owned the street. The explosive packages were packed tightly to provide enough force to kill a couple of Ora outright and perhaps disorient a few others. Then they could be dealt with by physical force.

They approached, and Molt nodded to a defender across the street who threw a package off the roof of the building. While it was falling, Molt waited a moment then launched another package. Fortunately, the Ora become grouped in front of Molt, and he hoped that two packages, closely spaced, could do much more damage.

The first package exploded, and soon after, the second package exploded. The first package caught most of the invaders on that side of the street, and the second package caught the disoriented ones on Molt's side.

The results were dramatic. Molt's quick assessment showed three were down opposite him, and there were another four down on his side. That was better than planned. Unfortunately, there were four remaining that were further behind. They were disorganized and moved around the street looking for an adversary until one of them reversed his path. After another moment, two of the defenders threw additional packages, and the remaining four were killed.

Molt stood for a moment, then he cheered. The others around him cheered, and he could hear those further up the street cheering also. That had been a great victory for them, and for a moment, they enjoyed it.

After the dust had settled, Molt moved to the street to investigate the effects. All of the Ora were dead when the defenders actually saw the dead Ora up close the reality of what they had done set in. Each was remorseful yet relieved that they had won the battle. None of them thought of revenge or punishment, but they did remember the many dead Raog that the Ora had murdered.

After a few moments, Molt looked at their defensive tools. They were cumbersome, and how they worked was not obvious to him. He had all of the tools and projectiles removed in the hope that they may be usable later.

Molt directed his team to remove the Ora dead and store them in a local warehouse. They would not become part of the Varo soil.

Later after Molt returned to the lookout residence, he and Ilana rested and enjoyed some Jabom juice while he recounted the day's encounter. They were both satisfied, and because he had killed all of them, the others behind the walls wouldn't know what happened. They may be able to do the same thing a couple more times before the Ora changed their tactics.

Ilana was pensive for a moment, and Molt asked why "Killing is not easy. I know you felt the loss after dealing with the Ora. I pray that we can end this quickly and without too much loss of life on either side."

Ilana had expressed thoughts that were going through his mind. He did what he needed to do, but he agreed; any loss of life was still a loss.

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Iban had received the attack strategy plan from Ilana, and he decided to follow the same strategy in Futar. From his location, he had a little advantage. He was so far from the walled enclosure that he saw what direction the Ora were taking. By passing the word fast, he could bring more defenders into the action and attack with more resources. His defending teams were larger, and because there were only a couple of entrances to his city, it would be easier to inflict more damage.

In Furtar, the Ora also behaved differently. They were a long distance from the city, and perhaps because they felt more vulnerable, they traveled in greater numbers. Unlike the capital, where they traveled in groups of 8-12, they traveled in 15-20. Iban and one of his team leads, Ibot, had adjusted their plans, and he intended to have 20-25 defenders positioned to block them.

It was the time of the day that the scavenge teams usually departed the walled area. As he was thinking, the wall opened, and Iban saw 20 Ora form together outside the opening, and they began moving towards the city. He passed word quickly and prayed to Varo that his plans would work. The problem now was waiting. It was up to Ibot, who was leading the team of defenders in the city.

Ibot was already in position, and he had a slightly different approach. He was waiting until the middle of the Ora group had passed him, and he hoped to catch the full length of their group as the packages were thrown. The only weakness that he knew of in his plan was hoping that they would be grouped so that he could kill all of them. He hoped the confusion and destruction would catch all of them by surprise.

He waited, and soon he saw the first of the Ora. They moved quickly and with confidence up the street. Occasionally they looked to one side or another, but they generally moved forward. As the first ones passed him, he signaled his teams to wait. As the first of the Ora approached the front of

his team's positions, he noticed that the rear was not far enough forward to be caught. That was a dilemma, but he had to proceed. Getting most of them was better than none, and he gave the signal.

His leading team launched their packages from both sides of the street then the remainder of the teams launched theirs. The explosions all occurred almost simultaneously, and the concussion in the street was enormous. As the dust cleared, it was obvious that almost all of the invaders were down, but he quickly looked at the rear and saw a couple of the Ora quickly moving away towards their walled compound. He had no means to intercept them, so he had to let them go. That disappointed him, but he still felt that they had a successful encounter.

Iban heard the explosions and saw the dust cloud rise from his vantage point. He knew that he wouldn't receive news about the results for some time, and once again, he had to wait. After a few moments, he saw two Ora exit the city at their entry point, and they moved quickly to the opening in the wall. He knew that the attack wasn't totally successful; some of them had survived. Now they would know about the tactic.

He passed that information to Molt in the capital city.

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Sonyata was walking around the ice caves enjoying her last day talking with the defenders. Many of them had become her friends, and once they knew that she was going back to the capital, some of them asked her to carry messages to their families. That was an honor for her.

Ornage was still uneasy about her traveling, especially after the incident they had come to the caves. But, he reluctantly agreed with her; she needed to go to the capitol. He had spoken with Erom and Mortog, and they suggested that eight defenders, with defensive tools, travel with her for protection, which made Ornage feel better. They planned to travel during the night when it was thought that the Ora would be in their enclosures and to rest during the heat of the day. The transportation vehicles had all been arranged to move quickly, and she should reach the capital the second night after leaving the caves.

Sonyata spent time with the captives and learned that the Ora were much different from the Raog. Their families had a man and women, but they had a large number of offspring. The man and women partnered for life, but they lost contact once the young left the residence because they had so many offspring. If they met their offspring later in life, they could identify them by odor, but there wasn't a strong family connection. The bond between a man and a woman was biological and not as emotional as the Raog. If a spouse died or was killed, and the remaining spouse could still create young, they just found another mate.

They didn't have the family bonds that a Raog did. The captives explained that their first instinct was for personal survival, then allegiance to their leader, then their species. If they were threatened, they would willingly protect the group and their leader even though it might mean death. Their species was personified by the leaders to whom they each swore allegiance. Their leader would protect them from outside forces, including other leaders. If their leader was lost, it caused a great upheaval within that group. They had to search and find another allegiance.

Sonyata also learned that the lessor Ora had the same hierarchical society but were considered less worthy. VanMacca had decided that because they were smaller, they should be conquered and used to better the lives of the greater Ora. That was why she attacked them even though they were the same species and fought a long and costly war-making them slaves.

The captives were part of the technical cast within the greater Ora. The Greater and Lessor Ora had many casts that each performed specific duties within the social structures. The captives were from the greater Ora and didn't know a lot about the lesser Ora because, after all, the greater Ora had dominated them, so they were a minor concern.

Ornage escorted his life partner to the cave exit where they met Erom. He said his goodbye, "Sonyata, our Orb. All of the people of Varo pray for your safe return to the capital. Once you reach there, all of the citizens will gain comfort and support. May your soil always bear Jabom."

Sonyata acknowledged his comments with a hug and said, "I and all of Varo appreciate what you have done here and what your leadership has meant to the defenders. Let us pray that we can find similar success

elsewhere. And may your soil always bear Jabom, also." Erom then left, leaving the two of them alone.

Ornage and Sonyata didn't have a lot to say; that hadn't already been said. They just looked into each other's eyes and hugged. Sonyata wanted to tell him of their young, but she knew it was the wrong time.

As they parted, they smiled, and she was escorted to the transportation vehicle.

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Molt was looking at the captured tools from the Ora. They were clumsy and not well made. He was aware of the new design concepts the defenders in the northern ice caves were working on, and he wondered if he could apply some of them to these weapons. He assembled some of the city's technical experts and began working on the Ora weapons. They had received technical information from the ice caves regarding what they knew about the Ora tools. That helped Molt's technicians, so they were able to modify the Ora tools so a defender could put it to his shoulder, which would increase the accuracy. Also, the firing mechanism had to be modified so a defender could actuate it with his fingers, not the larger, less flexible fingers of the Ora. He was told that all of those changes could be made. It would just take some time. Knowing they could do it encouraged him, but knowing that it took time discouraged him.

The captured tools were taken to a local manufacturing facility where the Raog craftsmen could work and make them usable for the Raog defenders.

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Iban knew of Molt's efforts to modify the Ora tools, and he arranged for his captured tools to be moved to the capitol. Iban also suspected that the Ora leader outside Furtar may not have been as ruthless as the leader by the capitol, but he was still concerned about how he might react to the last

encounter. Iban rested with his key defenders trying to imagine what strategic changes his local Ora would make the next time he entered the city.

Unfortunately, Iban didn't have to wait long. Near the mid-point of the next day, he saw about 12 Ora leave the wall and move towards the city. His teams were in place, but he suspected that something new would happen. Once again, he was there and not where the conflict would occur, so he had to wait for the results.

The Ora entered the city, and the spotters sent word to the defenders, but they did something surprising, they spread out laterally at the entrance point instead of penetrating the city. By doing this, they found some local residents by surprise. They forced them back into a group and then started moving through the city with one of the hostages forced to walk in front of each Ora. The implication was obvious, and when the defender teams saw that, they made the right decision and did nothing. The Ora were successful that day, and they released the hostages as they exited the city.

Iban was angry that they had outsmarted him and he had inflicted no damage to the Ora, but he was happy that no one was injured. He made a note of what happened and sent a message to Molt.

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The capital was the largest city on Varo, and it was established on a level plain where a great deal of Jabom was produced. As Ilana and Molt watched the Ora machines expand their destruction each day, they were saddened and sickened.

Today as they watched, they heard of the tactic change in Furtar and were wondering what the local Ora would do.

They sensed, then heard, and then felt a rumble that said something was happening. Both looked up and saw another, larger Ora craft approaching out of the clouds. That was not good news, and it was very upsetting for both of them. The craft continued spewing smoke and noise as it settled near the previous craft.

This craft was larger and much more ornate. It was painted with bright colors where the other Ora craft were plain. Ilana and Molt suspected that the ship was special and had come for a purpose, and they were both worried about what that might be.

They sent a message to Iban, the surrounding cities, and the northern caves.

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When Ellig heard that the Orb was leaving the ice caves to travel to the capitol, he understood why. The capital was the center of Varo, and any resistance must be led from the center. He agreed with the Orb returning, first because she represented what the people were proud of, and second, seeing her return would give them hope. He didn't hesitate; he knew that he had to return with her.

Ellig knew that there was a risk in returning to the capital, but he was willing to accept that risk at this point in his life. He had grown beyond just a Newsource person reporting the news; he had seen much loss of life and the indignancies thrust upon the Raog. He had seen the bravery and personal loss. Now he was feeling the need to contribute to something larger than himself. So when he decided to go to the capital with Sonyata, he was proud to go with her.

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Ellig and Sonyata were resting in a small home after their first night of travel. There had been no problems, and they hoped it would remain that way until they entered the capitol. Ellig was preparing for the evening broadcast. They had figured out that the Ora were listening and had learned enough of their language to follow some of their movements. That was a definite risk, but the people needed to know what the Orb and the leaders were doing.

Ellig knew not to be too specific but needed to be honest with the residents. They had to pray to Varo that they were doing the right thing and the broadcasts would do more good than harm.

Ellig began the broadcast, “People of Varo. I am traveling with the Orb as she journeys to the capital. She knows the capitol is the center of Varo, and she needs to be there.” Ellig then handed the recording device to Sonyata.

The Orb began, “May your soil always bear Jabom. As Ellig said, we are traveling back to the capital. The capital is the heart of Varo and the Raog. We must lead this fight from the heart. As you know, we have successfully defended the northern ice caves and Jabom. I am bringing that success to the capital. We have learned much about fighting the invaders. I hope to share that knowledge with each of the cities, and together we can take this fight to them. As I move to the capital, please remember those Raog that have lost their lives. Many died in the caves, and many others died defending their cities across Varo. Please join me and pray to Varo to help us along our path to rid Varo of these invaders.”

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The mid-day heat was approaching, and Iban noticed that a large opening had occurred on one side of the craft that he was watching. Slowly a smaller craft was rolled out, and when it stopped on the Varo soil, it lit its engines and ascended into the sky. Obviously, something was happening, and Iban sent a message to the capitol and northern caves.

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Ilana and Molt talked of the small craft flying towards the capitol while they eat their mid-day Jabom, then while they ate, they saw numerous smaller craft approach from all directions and land near the recent arrival.

Molt observed, “That must be a major leader, and he has asked each of his leaders to come for a meeting. I don’t like this; they are planning

something big.” He immediately sent a message to everyone warning them.

Ilana and Molt watched and make a note of everything they saw that might be of any significance. The smaller craft stayed for the mid-day warmth and then left, presumably to fly back to their walled craft. After they had left, the area was quiet, and that bothered both of them.

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General Aarm left the meeting with VanMacca feeling that he had just missed death. She was furious that Imbata had lost his life, and she was looking for someone to take her frustration out on. Luckily for General Aarm, some of the other generals had some bad luck and either damaged their craft when they landed or were foolish enough to question her orders. They were dealt with quickly, and when General Aarm pointed out that he asked Imbata not to go because he hadn't cleared the attempted capture with VanMacca, his loss was due to stupidity and arrogance.

If VanMacca hadn't had two others to take her anger out on, he was sure that she would have had him killed on the spot. When he was finally in his quarters, he decided; VanMacca had to go; she had done nothing but cause the deaths of many Ora.

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Ornage and Ivroc spend the entire day with the captives. As long as they remained in their craft, the approaching cool of the night didn’t bother them, and it felt comfortable for Ornage and Ivroc. The captives admitted that they had been talking about their situation. Unless they could contact and join the resistance within the red hats, their lives were at risk, and they would be killed if they returned to their home planet. They admitted that returning to their planet was almost impossible because all craft needed to connect to a larger craft in orbit to replenish their supplies and refuel for any return trip. If they took off and didn’t connect to the other ship, they would either run out of fuel or be hunted for the entire return trip. Left with

few options, they agreed to teach Ornage and his technicians everything they knew about the landing craft.

Ornage was excited by that idea, but he wanted more. Learning about the craft was one thing, but he needed the craft to fly. He didn't know when that would be needed, but his instincts told that having a couple of flying spacecraft equal or better to the attacker's could be a real advantage. It was obvious that the attackers weren't too concerned with the Raog defenses. Surprising them with craft that was better than theirs could change the outcome. After much discussion, the captives agreed to this, as long as they could leave if they could contact the red-hat resistance.

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Ilana heard the last broadcast and was excited that the Orb was coming back to the capital then. In her next thought, she remembered the new craft parked on the soil in front of her. She prayed that the latter won't cause harm to the former.

Ilana didn't expect the Orb to visit her, but her sector leaders told her that she, being the district leader, was likely the first place the Orb would stop. So, after a moment of panic, she began preparing for the Orb.

Sonyata arrived at the capitol during the night. Traveling and conducting business had changed; now, most of it was done during the night. The invading Ora had forced the Raog to reverse their day and night activities.

It was easy for the Orb to travel the streets of the capitol during the night. There was little risk, and she could enjoy meeting her people. As she moved, she had a constant crowd following her. She tried to interact with as many as possible and still progress to the district leader's location. On the wide streets, she had large crowds, and they only thinned when she took narrower streets.

Molt was moving through the crowds trying to find her, and just as he got her crowd in sight, the night exploded with sound. He recognized the sound of the Ora defensive tools, and he also heard other tools being used that he didn't recognize. He ordered his Raog to charge forward to protect the Orb. As he tried to get to her, he felt like he was moving against a strong

wind because the crowd around the Orb were panicking and running away. He had to dodge fast-moving, panicked Raog.

As he reached where he thought the Orb was, the crowds were thinning, and he saw some of the defenders from the ice caves firing their defensive tools at the surrounding Ora. But there were too many attackers, and slowly the defenders were falling. Then, for a moment, he saw the Orb defending herself and bringing down one of the attackers. He and his men were charging the attackers when the last of the defenders fell, and the remaining Ora scooped up the Orb and fled down the street.

Those attackers were different. They didn't look like the ones he saw on many occasions. Instead, they looked like they were wearing different body coverings. These covering covered most of their body and only left their four legs free for movement. They also carried a pack on their backs which added to his confusion.

Molt and his men moved as fast they could, but the Ora were faster and quickly distanced themselves. Molt begrudgingly halted the chase and sent word to Ilana, the district leader, then he moved back to the scene of the kidnapping, hoping that some of the defenders were still alive.

The defenders were fortunate, and half of them were wounded, once again due to the Ora just pointing their tools, not aiming them. As he was tending to the wounded, he recognized one, not dressed as a defender, and, as he turned him over to offer aid, he realized that it was Ellig from the Newsource. He was unconscious and wounded, but it didn't look life-threatening. He directed his team to move the wounded to the nearest medical facility.

Now he wanted to examine the fallen Ora and understand why they looked different. He approached them slowly, making sure none would rise and attack. When he finally got to one, he hesitated then reached down to feel the body coverings, and he was shocked to feel the warmth. They were wearing a body covering that kept them warm in the cool of the night. That was a major and unfortunate development. He must get that word out quickly to all Varo.

He directed his men to remove the body coverings from the dead Ora and bring them back to the sector's meeting place. As he walked, he became

very discouraged and suddenly felt that they were losing, and that night the conflict had changed; that night might be the start of the end of the Raog and Varo.

We must pass this information to the ice caves.

18-The Keeper

Sonyata fought with all of her strength, and she was quickly bound and carried between two Ora. Then, as her fear slowly subsided and she realized they weren't going to kill her, she began taking notice of her captives.

She thought they did this in the night; why are they out. Won't the cool hurt them?

As she thought, she began to look closer at the Ora; they had different body coverings than others she had seen. It looked thicker, and on the brief occasions where her hands touched the coverings, she felt the warmth.

Oh, my Varo, they are heated, she thought to herself. She didn't move and was very pensive. The implications of the Ora having heated body coverings were devastating. How could we hope to survive? She thought. As she was carried through the capital, her depression deepened, and she closed her eyes, hoping to keep out the horrible images.

Sonyata's captors continued out of the city, and she kept her eyes closed.

Eventually, Sonyata sensed that they were moving up a ramp, and she was placed on a floor. She heard some metallic sounds and then darkness. Sonyata remained on her back for a while, which was very uncomfortable for her. Eventually, she opened her eyes and saw around her. She was in a dimly lit room with bars. As she became more familiar with her surroundings, she maneuvered to get onto her feet. It took a while because it was not natural for a Raog to be on their back, but eventually, she regained her feet. She could do nothing else but wait.

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A couple of Molt's defenders entered Ilana's home and told her what had happened. For the longest time, she was speechless, and finally, Molt entered.

“Ilana, you’ve been told of what happened in the capitol?” Molt questioned.

Ilana slowly responded, “Yes, I have been told. That is terrible news; I fear for the Orb’s life,” she paused to catch her breath, “and I fear for all of our lives. Tell me, Molt, what happened.”

Molt pulled a resting pad near to hers and began, “It appears that the Ora have developed some warming body coverings, which allows them to move outside of their walled areas in the night. The Ora that attacked the Orb were wearing those coverings. We must examine them and understand how they work. Maybe there is something we can do about them.”

“Perhaps there is something we can do, but for now, that changes everything. I’ve already sent word to the leaders and the other cities about these body coverings. Do we know where they have taken the Orb?” Ilana questioned.

“I don’t know specifically, but the decorated craft that landed might be the first place I’d look for her,” he observed. “If they had wanted her dead, they would have murdered her where she was attacked.”

The body coverings that Molt had removed from the Ora were brought in, and Ilana and Molt investigated them. As Molt was handling one of them, he commented, “The material is thicker, and it has wires of metal passing through. The wires all lead to these backpacks they carried on their backs. These packs must generate the heat which is passed through the fabric, and that is how they stay warm.”

They looked at the coverings and packs. Then, while Ilana was making notes to send to the ice caves, Molt asked with a frustrated voice, “Can we do anything? Can we attack and free her?”

Ilana pondered for a moment, then answered, “I doubt it. We don’t have the resources or skills to attack that ship. We would lose many and likely, not succeed. But, they took her, so let’s hope she stays alive until we can do something.”

Molt and Ilana rested, and after the morning showers, they watched the sunrise, which indicated the beginning of a new day, a day where they both felt depressed and worried. As they rested there, suddenly, the air was filled

with a large roar. They quickly moved to the window and saw the decorated craft lifting from the soil of Varo. They both know who was on board.

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Sonyata's life was torn apart, and she felt totally helpless; what would they do to her, would they kill her, she wondered? Then if things weren't bad enough, they got worse. The small room she was held in began to vibrate and moved violently. All Sonyata could do was hold onto the bars. She had never heard such a loud noise, and she thought, my end must be near.

After what seemed like an eternity, the sound and vibrations lessened, and Sonyata could feel just a constant rumble beneath her feet. She continued holding on to the bars, not knowing what else to do.

After a long wait, she heard a loud sound to her right, and she saw the door open. That frightened her more than the noise and vibration; now, they would do something to her. As she watched an Ora slowly entered the area in front of her bars. The creature walked slowly, keeping her eyes on her, and Sonyata did the same to the creature.

When the Ora reached the middle of the space, it looked more at Sonyata, and for the first chance, Sonyata had an equal opportunity to look at the Ora. After a pause, Sonyata could hear a melodic sound emanating from the creature. It took her a moment to realize that she was being spoken to.

"Please repeat."

"You speak our language?"

"Yes, but I am only a beginner." Sonyata immediately sensed that the creature was female.

"Don't worry, you are doing very well."

"Why am I here?"

"This craft has our leader, VanMacca, on board. She is the leader of all of the Ora. She came to your world to monitor what her soldiers are doing,

and she is unhappy that they are taking so long. When she gives an order, she expects it to be fulfilled immediately. If an order is not carried out, she often goes there and forces immediate action. She leads by brute force and power."

"Taking so long to do what?

"They came to your planet to plant our seed in your soil; they didn't expect you to resist so much."

"They didn't expect us to resist? This is our home," Sonyata said, then questioned, "Why did you take me?"

"You are one of their leaders; our leader saw you and heard your broadcasts. She thought that if she took you and held you captive, your residents would stop fighting."

"They will fight, our soil is sacred to us, and it provides our food. If you take our soil, we will die." She paused then asked, "Will I be killed?"

"Perhaps, I do not know. She will make a decision."

The Ora moved quickly and exited the chamber, leaving Sonyata alone and confused. She took the time and looked around and noticed that her chamber had other identical cells on both sides of her and three on the other side of the chamber. The walls and ceiling had straps and handholds about every arm length. Based on her experience during the launch, those appeared appropriate and necessary.

There were no accommodations for her to rest; there was no resting pad or other structure in her cell. However, an oddly shaped cushion was attached to the floor. She found that it could be manipulated into a form closely resembling a resting pad. Sonyata was able to lean on it and get some rest while holding on to a couple of straps.

She waited for a long time expecting something to happen. Every noise was a shock, and it made her think of the worst. She couldn't really get into a comfortable position, and what little resting she did was fitful and with very few benefits.

When Sonyata was almost resting, the door to her chamber opened violently, and three Ora entered. One of them, she recognized as being her

previous visitor, but the other two were very intimidating. Judging by their appearance and actions, Sonyata knew they must be her guards.

Immediately, one of the dominant ones spoke to her in a very loud voice. She couldn't understand most of it, but what she could understand scared her. It sounded like they were taking her to VanMacca, their leader. Apparently, she wanted to see her so she could understand why her troops hadn't taken over the planet easily.

The two dominant guards opened the door to her cell and grabbed Sonyata by her arms, dragging her out and hurting her. They moved along the straps, dragging Sonyata behind them and not giving her any chance to grab a strap and follow. Her participation or help was not needed; they were taking her to their leader if she helped or not.

As they moved through the ship, Sonyata was totally disoriented and had no idea where they were going or how to get back to her cell. Finally, they approached a large door, and the leader she recognized pressed a button on a console and announced their presence. A formal official voice on the other end of the speaker told them to enter.

The door snapped opened, and Sonya was dragged in like a bag of stones. As she entered and looked around, she saw the room was decorated and had many colored fabrics on the walls and cushioned areas. After being bumped and dragged, Sonyata was planted on a flat surface, and she saw two straps she could hold on to. She grabbed them, and when she looked up, she saw their leader, VanMacca. She was much larger than the others, and all of her body was fuller and thicker. She was laying on a large cushioned pad which allowed all of her legs to move freely.

Sonyata was only about five-arm lengths from her, and her look scared her. Her face and eyes were very penetrating and unflinching. She didn't speak, she just looked at her, and after a while, Sonyata became very uncomfortable. She felt that she stared at her for a very long time, but it was likely only a few moments. At one point, VanMacca moved one of her forward legs a little, and Sonyata was immediately yanked off the platform and hauled out of the room.

Her return trip was just as bumpy and disorienting. She finally recognized her chamber and cell. The door was opened, and she was thrown

in. The two Ora, who dragged her immediately left, and the one she recognized remained.

After she had settled down for a moment, she asked, “Where are you taking me?”

“To our orbiting base. What is your name?

“Sonyata.”

“My name is Romaa; I am the lead guard.”

“That is your leader; who wanted to see me?” She asked.

“Yes, she is upset that her troops have not taken over your planet, and she wanted to see her adversary. You’re very lucky she didn’t have you killed,” Romaa responded.

Romaa stood there for a long time and said nothing. Sonyata was wondering what was going through her mind.

Then Romaa spoke in a low whisper, “Not all of us agree with what he is doing. We have problems on our planet, and taking your planet won’t help us.” She paused then said, “I must go; we will help you stay as comfortable as possible.” Then she left quickly before Sonyata could respond.

Those last comments took Sonyata by surprise. Although she had always thought of the Ora as a mindless horde of attackers, she never thought that they had opinions, and some of them might be sympathetic to the Raog. That was a new and interesting development.

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Ornage put together a team of his technicians and had them go through the Ora craft. As he walked, he saw many possible improvements, and he directed them to implement some of his changes.

Irrrm and his fellow operators were eager to help. They didn’t have much engineering knowledge about their craft, but they had good instincts about what changes would enhance the craft and improve its performance.

Ornage was walking down a ramp descending to a lower level when he saw Erom approaching. Ornage felt encouraged, progress had been good, and when he saw the look on his friend's face. It told them that something was amiss and that he had bad news.

They slowed as they approached, and Ornage asked, “What is the matter?”

Erom came to a stop, looked Ornage in the eyes, and said slowly, “The Ora have captured Sonyata.”

“Captured here, what happened?”

“She was intercepted as she moved through the capitol. She was moving during the night, but I’ve been told the Ora have developed some type of warming body coverings that allowed them to move about in the cold. That was how she was caught; they surprised her and her defenders. Some defenders were killed and some wounded, but she was taken alive. Ellig was wounded and taken to a medical facility. They think he’ll be all right.”

Ornage just stood there with a blank stare. Then, Erom started to become worried.

“Ornage, are you well?” Ornage closed his eyes and faltered a little; Erom reached out and steadied him.

“Ornage, speak to me.”

“They captured her; what are they going to do?”

“Molt saw it happen and did everything he could. He thought that she was taken to that special craft that landed. Remember from the reports they think that a major leader was on board and had a conference with many of the other leaders. He might have brought the new warming body coverings. After Sonyata had been captured, his ship took off this morning. They think he took her as some kind of hostage.”

Ornage just stood there, and Erom put his hand on his friend’s shoulder, “Ornage, we can’t do anything now. But continue building better defensive tools and modifying those vehicles so we can use them. We might be able to turn things around and get her back. Let us have faith in Varo.”

Ornage nodded, and Erom said, “When you are able, we must broadcast to everyone on Varo. She is their Orb, and they need to know.”

Ornage nodded again, and Erom indicated to a couple of defenders walking by to take Ornage to his room. They put their arms around him and led him down the ramp.

Erom knew that he and Ornage must tell the residents of Varo about the Ora capturing their Orb. He knew that it was their burden to do. So he moved away to make the arrangements with the Newsource man who worked with Ellig.

At the start of the night, Erom, Ornage, Ivroc, and other key leaders met in the soil room and prepared for the broadcast. Only Erom and Ornage would speak, but the others were there for support.

Erom asked Ornage if he could open the broadcast, Ornage agreed, and Erom began, “People of Varo. We had a major victory here a couple of days ago, and we should rejoice in that. But like the weather, good may be followed by bad. Today we heard that while the Orb was traveling within the capitol, her group was attacked, and she was taken hostage by the Ora. I know all Raog of Varo are devastated by this news, but I know what the Orb would say, ‘we must fight, we must reclaim our soil, and we must protect Varo.'"

Erom changed the tone in his voice and said, “Now we will hear from Sonyata’s life partner. His words carry the pain of loss but also the force of determination; our Grand Leader.”

Erom handed the recording device to Ornage. “My life partner is no longer beside me; she is no longer able to provide comfort to the people of Varo. Our near-term loss must be balanced by fighting the invaders and protecting our soil. Sonyata is part of our soul, and we are part of hers. By forcing the Ora from Varo and off our soil, we will find a way to bring our Orb back to Varo. She is not lost but only separated from us for a short time.” He paused for a long time, then closed with, “May our soil always bear Jabom.”

The others in the soil room responded together with, “And may yours, Grand Leader.”

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Ellig woke in the capital medical facility. He had a projectile removed from his arm and was recovering well. He was awake when he heard the broadcast, and he felt like he had lost a family member and thought, is it my fault, could I have done something more to protect her? Maybe we said too much, but the Raog needed to hear from the Orb. He closed his eyes and rested.

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When Ornage rose the next day, he had determination and focus that couldn't be distracted. He was challenged by that Ora leader, and he was planning on defeating her. He knew that his skill with technology, the new defensive tool designs, and the captured craft would give him and the other defenders a decisive advantage.

He was satisfied with his new defensive tool design, but while he was resting, a new idea emerged. He knew that it could be done, and he took a couple of his best technicians and went to work. He wouldn't stop until he had done one last modification to the tool, and it would make all of the difference.

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Mortog saw Erom coming down the ramp to the lower level. He approached him and commented, "Leader, I thought about all of the defensive tools we collected after the battle. Of course, they aren't much when compared with our new design, but if we modify them, many of our defenders will have some type of tool in case we are attacked again."

This caught Erom by surprise, and he asked, "Do you think we will be attacked again?"

"If you were attacking Varo, what would you do?" Mortog answered.

Erom added, “Good suggestion, we have a large amount of Varo’s Jabom stored, we are building defensive tools, and we have already fought and won one battle. I agree we will be a prime target; let’s have the technicians begin immediately.”

Mortog said in a matter-of-fact tone, “Ornage is busy with an additional design change. Let’s tell him if we get a chance, but I doubt he will have any issues. We just need to make sure that when his plan is complete, we put all the resources on the new design.” He continued, “We’ve been very fortunate; many others have come to the ice caves to help us. We have as many defenders now as we did before the attack, and more are still coming.”

While Mortog and Erom were talking, Albot approached and stood waiting to be heard.

“Albot, you look like you have something to say?” Erom asked.

“Yes, Leader. We’ve thought of other defensive tools that we could make. I’ve spoken with some of your designers that built the first defensive tools, and we think we have another type of tool that could be very effective.”

Erom responded with some enthusiasm, “Absolutely. What do you have in mind?”

“If you don’t mind, it might not work. I’d like to use some of the materials and experiment a little, and if we succeed, then we will be excited to show it to you.”

Erom thought for a moment and remembered that the best way to allow creativity to happen was to leave them alone. Many times, the technical play could yield some amazing results.

“Yes, Albot. Use what you need, and please hurry. We may need anything we could put together….soon!”

Albot reacted to the urgency in Erom’s voice, nodded, and moved away quickly.

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After Romaa had left the chamber, Sonyata noticed a reduction in the vibration and noise. She then noticed something much more disturbing. Her feet lifted off the floor, and she began to float in the cell. She knew of weightlessness, yet experiencing it for the first time, without warning, was very alarming. After a few screams, she realized what the straps and handholds were used for. Once she entangled her hands and feet in the nearest straps, she felt safe for the moment.

Once safe, she thought, I didn't expect those comments from Romaa. An Ora that might have sympathy for us. I hope there is some way it can benefit us.

There was a sudden clunk as Sonyata heard the lock on the door unlock, and Romaa entered the chamber. She had something in her hand and stood quietly looking at Sonyata, then she said in a whisper, "This is a recording device. We know how you transmit to your Raog. You may record a short message and friends of mine will try to deliver it. So please be short and quick; we have only a few moments." She held a device near Sonyata and moved a lever, "Speak now," she said.

Sonyata was caught completely by surprise and didn't have anything in her mind, but she knew that she must be brief and quick. So she responded in a low voice, "I am Sonyata, I have been captured by the Ora, and I don't know where they are taking me. I am well and will contact you again, if possible."

Romaa quickly moved the lever and left the chamber, followed by the clunk as the door lock was locked.

The Ora ship was maneuvering in orbit to a rendezvous with a large orbiting structure. During docking, the leaders' ship was to be refueled and provisioned. It was also a time for a quick message to be passed into friendly hands.

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As Molt’s technicians modified the Ora tools, they become more proficient, and the process was going quicker. The modifications soon became just remove and replace as the materials became easily available and the skills improved.

After investigating the projectiles and their casings, the technologists remembered what the experts from the ice caves had told them. The single explosive powder the Ora were using had a minimal yield compared to their use of mixed powders. Using their mix instead of the Ora single powder, the projectiles would have a more reliable mixture and had more distance and penetration. The experts from the ice caves didn’t share any concerns with the poorly made barrels handling the higher explosive force. But after some experimentation, Molt's experts found the right balance and passed the information back to the caves.

Finally, the first tool was available, and the technician eagerly showed Molt, “We have modified the first of the Ora tools, and it works great. Let me demonstrate.” Molt escorted him outside the residence, and he pointed to a rock some distance away.

Molt observed, “I know from experience that rock is beyond any range their tools can be used.”

“Just wait and watch,” the technician said as he lifted the tool to his shoulder and fired it.

Molt jumped, and a moment later, he saw the rock explode.

”That is impressive,” Molt said, “how many have you been able to modify?”

“We should be able to modify 50 per day, not as fast as we like, but it is the best we can do.”

“Move as fast as possible; we might need them at any time; also, please send half of what you modify to Iban.”

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Ellig was feeling better and wanted to be released to his home. Molt was nice enough to provide two defenders who would escort him during the night.

Even though recent events made movement during nights more dangerous, it was still safer than during the day. Apparently, not all of the Ora had the warming body coverings.

Ellig and his guards moved quickly and cautiously through the streets. They looked around each corner before progressing. Now that the Ora had been so brazen and kidnapped the Orb from the capitol's streets, the residents were scared and stayed home. The night had been taken from them, and the streets were almost empty.

When they reached Ellig's home, the two defenders entered first to check it out, "Ellig, your home is clear; please relax and get better. We're confident that the Orb will be well, and we'll find a way to get her home to Varo."

"Thank you for coming with me. I know in my heart, the Orb won't be harmed, but my mind is very worried."

The two defenders nodded and left.

Ellig walked to his garden and began resting on his pad. His arm hurt, but he could deal with it. He was just closing his eyes when he heard a sound and saw movement to his right. Not expecting anything, he casually moved his eyes for a better perspective, and suddenly his heart stopped. He recognized the shape.

He didn't move, and neither did the Ora.

Slowly the Ora took a couple of tentative steps and moved to a position in front of Ellig. The move wasn't aggressive and appeared to pose no threat. Ellig watched and didn't move. Perhaps the intruder will leap upon me and kill me; I can't fight? Ellig thought.

Ellig just watched, and in the dark, he wasn't sure if the Ora knew that he was awake.

Slowly the Ora moved towards Ellig and his muscles tensed. He watched as the creature spread his two front legs, and it lowered itself and placed a small package at Ellig's feet. He rose, backed up, and moved slowly back through the opening where he entered. Ellig just rested, not knowing what else to do. Then his curiosity was piqued, and he leaned forward and retrieved the package.

Ellig looked in the direction that the Ora went to make sure that he wasn't hiding in the corner. Then, he slowly rose from his pad and moved into his home. The package was small, and after it was opened, Ellig immediately recognized it as a type of recording device. It was totally different than what they use, but its function was clear.

"Why would the Ora give me a recording?" He said to himself, then he thought of Sonyata. Can it be from her?

19-Message from the Orb

Molt and Ilana had a dilemma. They had modified Ora tools that appeared to be more effective than what the Ora had.

“Ilana, if we use these tools now, at our first opportunity, against a regular incursion, they will know of them and change their behavior. I suggest we wait until we can use them against some of their night intruders and capture more of those new body coverings.”

“I agree; I don’t think they have many of those. If they did, they would stop the day trips and just use the body coverings at night when we can’t see them as well.”

“Good, then we agree. We’ll continue to modify their tools for use at a good opportunity, and we’ll continue throwing the explosive powders during the day when we have an advantage. I’ll coordinate with Iban.”

Ilana nodded and moved towards her window. The amount of soil the Ora had scarred was growing. It was now a major part of what she could see. Then she noticed it.

“Molt come here, it appears that something is beginning to grow from our soil. If you look, where they first used their machines, you can see some green and brown.”

Molt squinted, then said with dismay, “Yes, something is growing in our soil; we must go there tonight and get a sample. We need to know what we’re dealing with.”

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At the mid-point in the night, Molt slowly moved down the slope towards the walled encampment. He took his time, and after a couple of steps, he stopped and moved his body side to side, looking for any movement. So far, there wasn’t any, and he took a couple more steps forward. He was encouraged because as he approached the walled area, he

couldn’t hear any activity. He thought that if they had warm body coverings, they would be more active, but it was quiet, so maybe they didn’t.

Molt finally got to the area where they saw something growing, and he knelt to inspect the soil and the plant. He found growth about one-half of a hand tall. It was spiny and course. He slowly reached his fingers into the soil and extracted the entire plant, and rolled it in a moistened rag that he had brought with him. Molt retraced his steps back to the observation home on top of the hill.

Ilana rested and watched Molt through the window, and she was relieved to see him turn around and move back to her location. When he entered, she exhaled a sigh of relief.

Molt placed the rolled-up plant on a table, and they unrolled the fabric. The Ora plant had typical roots which had small bumps on some of them. The roots continued to the soil level and then turned brown. The brown portion was hard and had a dry feeling. Further up the stalk, it spread into broad leaves. That was obviously, an immature plant, and they needed to monitor it throughout its life cycle.

“I guess we should plant it and see what grows,” Ilana said to Molt.

“I guess so.”

“Even at this early stage, it looks very different from Jabom,” Ilana pointed out.

“Your right and I suspect it will change more when it matures,” responded Molt.

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Ellig rushed out of his home and moved as quickly as possible to his Newsource place of work. The Ora recording device was very different from what they used, but he was confident that his technicians could figure it out.

As soon as he arrived, he grabbed two technicians, and they went into the work area. The device was about the same size as their recording device, but it had levers instead of buttons. The symbols were unknown, and he could only assume that the device had the same functions as one of their devices. That meant that it would have a delete or erase lever, and he had to be careful.

“Perhaps we could remove the recording media and hear it instead of trying to figure out the levers,” Ellig said out loud.

“Perhaps we should try to play it,” one of the technicians suggested.

“Let’s see if we can open it first,” suggested Ellig. “There appears to be a cover here.” He pushed a slide on the side, and the cover fell off. That startled everyone, and they backed up momentarily before crowding back around the device.

When a technician peered inside, he sighed and said, “It appears to have a coiled wire, I suppose that it might record the sound on a wire; it could be possible…we don’t have any means to read that, we'd have to set up some new devices, and it would take a lot of time to figure it out,” he said with a sigh.

“All right,” Ellig said, “then let’s use some logic with these levers and figure out which one to move. I expect the record lever to be prominent and that one is larger than the others. We’ll call that the record lever,” as he pointed. Then he paused and said, “These two might be the start and stop do you agree?” They both nodded their heads. “Finally, that last lever is out of the way and is smaller; I think that’s the erase button.”

They looked at each other, hoping one of them would have a better answer, but none of them did.

“I’ll move the start lever and see what happens.”

“Wait,” one of the technicians yelled. “We should turn on one of our recording devices and record anything that plays. I’d hate to hear the message and then erase it the next time we moved a lever.”

Ellig smiled and turned on a Raog device and put it right next to the Ora device, then he slowly moved what they thought was the start lever.

The room was immediately filled with the sound of Sonyata's voice, clear but obviously in a whisper, "I am Sonyata. I have been captured by the Ora, and I don't know where they are taking me. I am well and will contact you again, if possible."

Ellig moved the assumed stop lever, and it stopped.

All three of them looked at each other, and each of them smiled.

"We must broadcast that to the people of Varo," Ellig said. Then he thought and continued, "Perhaps we shouldn't; it might be wiser to get a copy to Ornage first and see what he wants to do. If the Ora hear this, she or the Ora that helped her might be in danger."

"Ellig," one of the technicians said, "the people of Varo are depressed and scared; they know their Orb has been kidnaped and may be killed at any moment. We must give them comfort and encouragement. How do we do that if we don't broadcast this?"

"I don't know; perhaps Ornage will know how. Let's tell him what happened, send him our recording, and let him know our concerns about broadcasting it. Let him decide."

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Iban received the information that Molt was doing well with modifying the Ora tools, which encouraged him. He was anxious to have a better tool than what the Ora had, and then he could do some damage to them.

He continued his campaign tracking their movement through the city, and if they had the opportunity, they threw explosive packages at them. But, the Ora had changed tactics and changed their paths regularly. They also moved in larger groups that were spread out. So, Iban's defenders couldn't risk throwing a package unless they had a clear way to escape.

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Erom was starting to worry about Ornage since he had locked himself up with his best technicians; he saw very little of him. He knew that he was working on something big, and he trusted him, but he was also curious and wanted to see what progress had been made.

While he wondered about Ornage, he heard a muffled explosion from outside the caves. He smiled, remembering that he had told Albot to use what he needed in developing his new tool, and he had stayed away; creative Raog didn't need a leader asking them questions all day.

He was resting on his pad and hoping for some progress when suddenly there was a commotion outside his room, and he got up to find the cause. As he turned a corner, one of the defenders rushed up to him and asked, "Leader, where is Ornage? We have a message from the Orb."

Erom was initially startled then excited, "He is that way; please follow me," he said as he ran.

They found Ornage's work area, and Erom barged in, and Ornage was startled and looked at the pair inquisitively.

"Ornage, this defender has a message from Sonyata," Erom said, still a little short of breath.

The defender with the recording said, "Grand Leader, Ellig was in his residence after his injury. In the middle of the night, an Ora slipped in and placed a recording device at his feet then left." He continued, "Ellig figured out the markings on the device and was able to make a copy of the recording. Here it is," he said slowly, "it is from the Orb."

Ornage rushed over to him, and he played the recording. "I am Sonyata, I have been captured by the Ora, and I don't know where they are taking me. I am well and will contact you again, if possible." Ornage smiled. As soon as Ornage heard his life partner's voice, it appeared as if the world's weight was taken off his shoulders.

After Ornage had heard the recording, the defender added, "Ellig felt that the people of Varo need to hear that the Orb was well. However, he didn't want to broadcast that message because he feared that it would put

either her or those that helped her in jeopardy.” Then he added, “Ellig needs guidance. Should we transmit something or remain quiet?”

Ornage collapsed on a resting pad, and Erom put his hand on his shoulder, “Thank Varo, it seems that she is well, and we need to decide what to say in the broadcast.”

“Yes, we must say something to the Raog. They need to know that she is ok, but we must be careful,” Ornage responded.

“Yes, we must be careful. Are you making progress with your new design?”

“I think I’ve made a change to the defensive tool that will help get her back. My friend Erom, be patient, and I will show you the new tool tomorrow; if all goes well with my changes, we can begin production.”

"Let's prepare a broadcast," he said as he went looking for the Newsource team. When he found them, they quickly set up the recording device, and Ornage prepared himself to make a positive announcement. He rested for a moment then spoke, "Raog of Varo. You are all aware that my life partner, the Orb, has been taken by the Ora. I want all of you to hear directly from me; I know she is alive and well. I am confident that she will be returned to us soon. Once again, hear me; she is alive and well; I know it. Even though she isn't here to give us our words of encouragement, you can still hear her words. We must continue our fight, do everything we can to disrupt the invaders, and eventually, we WILL...expel them from Varo. May your soil always bear Jabom."

The next day couldn’t come soon enough for Erom.

As the sun rose, Erom moved to the entrance and grabbed Mortog on the way while he said, “Ornage is going to show us what he had been working on.”

“Fantastic, I’ve been hoping to see it.”

When they arrived, Ornage was already set up, and his technicians were there with him. At first glance, there appeared to be only minor changes to the defensive tool, and Erom was a little disappointed.

Everyone said welcome. Ornage opened with, “When we use our defensive tools or the Ora’s tools, we are limited by how fast we can shoot the projectiles. Then we have to put another one in before we can shoot again. Watch this.”

Ornage lifted the tool to his shoulder and fired the projectile. Everyone relaxed for a moment expecting the pause while he loaded the next one, but to their shock, he immediately fired another projectile, then another, and finally one last one. He had fired four projectiles without reloading.

Then to their shock, he pulled out a small container, replaced one in the tool, and began firing again. By that time, all of their ears hurt, but they were smiling.

Mortog jumped in, saying, “What a fantastic improvement, one defender can do the same as many. With this, we can defend the ice caves against anyone, and we can go to the cities and force the Ora off of Varo.” They all screamed and cheered.

Ornage then said in a loud voice, "unfortunately, these are very complex, and in the time we can make eight of the current design, we can make only three of these."

Mortog thought for a moment, then added, “Still, it is an amazing tool that will change the direction of the battle where ever we use it. I don’t care how long they take to make; they are worth the wait.”

Ornage smiled as Varo put his hand on his shoulder and said, “Now we can get Sonyata back.” Then he also smiled.

They all say, almost in unison, “Let’s begin production.”

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Molt’s technicians were making excellent progress modifying the Ora defensive tools. At that point, they had 40. Molt directed them, “Move one-half to Iban, and then we’ll look for an opportunity to use them.”

Molt and Ilana discussed when to attack the Ora, and they mulled over the fact that the warming body coverings had not been seen lately.

Molt said, “If I picked a time, I’d prefer to meet a large number of the ones wearing the new body coverings; those are the ones that bother us the most.”

Ilana agreed but added, “I don’t think we should wait too long. Every day they are scarring more soil, and we are losing more Jabom. I think we should attack them quickly, and they may stop while they think of a new strategy.”

“I agree, if we attack them during the mid-day, then they may come out during the night for revenge, and we’ll be ready for them.” Then Molt added, “I suggest we also coordinate what we do to Iban because if we don’t attack the same day, then they may change their tactics and be ready for him.”

Molt renewed his orders to his team that spotted for the moving Ora, and they went to their posts waiting for the enemy to leave the walled compound.

If they followed their typical pattern, they would leave during the mid-day, Molt and his defenders were ready. Molt had gone to the likeliest entry point for the capitol, and he was right. They left the compound in a large number, more than Molt could count, and moved towards their location.

Like before, when they were throwing explosive packages, Molt positioned his defenders on either side of the street. That time he put a couple of defenders well ahead of the contact point in case the Ora charged forward to escape the attack. Likewise, he put a couple well behind them in case they tried to retreat.

He would make the call when he felt they were positioned within the target zone.

Molt watched as they moved forward, and when he was finally satisfied that they were positioned well, Molt fired his defensive tool, and immediately all of the other defenders fired theirs.

This caught the Ora totally by surprise; their losses were dramatic and fast but not complete. The entire confrontation was over in a few moments. Two of the Ora figured out what was happening and that they were losing, they decided to move down a side street, and they took a different path back

to the walled compound. They were gone and out of range before Molt could do anything.

After the action had ended, some of Molt's defenders cheered, but Molt was uncomfortable. Death was death, he thought, even if they deserved it.

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Iban was poised at his vantage point, waiting for the approaching group of Ora. He liked those new defensive tools; he only wished that Molt sent more defenders who were experienced with them. Nevertheless, the tools were impressive, and he was eager to see their effectiveness.

The Ora approached the front of Iban's hit zone, and they suddenly stopped. There was confusion and discussion among them, then they turned and went back to the walled compound.

Iban was furious; he yelled at the defender next to him, "What are they doing?"

Iban wanted revenge on these Ora for what they had done to his Raog. After he had calmed down, he commented, "Somehow they had received word about Molt's attack in the capital." He smiled then said, "Molt's attack must have been very effective."

He smiled again.

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Molt and Ilana were sitting in the observation room enjoying some Jabom juice while reflecting on the day's events.

Molt said, "We have accomplished a great victory against the Ora, but I'm afraid that they will strike back." He continued, thoughtfully, "We need to prepare for what they'll do next."

Nodding, Ilana added, "Maybe things will be quiet for a while; I'd like to spend some time with my young. They have been with neighbors and

Mortog in the ice caves; they don't have a parent to talk with. I need to explain what is happening."

Molt said in a supporting voice, "By all means, we can handle things here. Spend some time with your young; they need you. I suggest you leave during the night and take a couple of defenders to walk with you."

"I don't want to waste defenders; they are all tired and need their rest."

"No, leader, I insist. Besides, they will be honored to escort you to your home and when you chose to return, send word, and I will send them back for you."

"Thank you, Molt. I will tell all of my sector leaders that you are in charge while I'm gone."

As Ilana walked the quiet streets of the capital, she felt optimistic for the first time. Now they had defensive tools that were better in the hands of the defenders than the Ora. They could beat them with their own tools.

Suddenly shapes jumped upon them, and her escorts were brought down with some fast shots from the Ora tools. Ilana just stood there, not knowing what to do or how to fight them. Finally, one of the Ora walked in front of her and looked directly into her eyes. She took a deep breath and thought of her young and Mortog; she waited to die.

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Sonyata was waiting for something to happen. Finally, the craft stopped its violent vibrations and rapid movements. She had remained hanging in straps for a long time, and she was hoping to learn something about her captives and her environment.

The silence was broken when a large jolt passed through the ship, and Sonyata was moved in her straps; she heard the now-familiar noise of her chamber being opened. She feared that it might not be Romaa but hoped that it was her. At least she was someone Sonyata knew, although she didn't know if she could be trusted yet.

Sonyata breathed a little easier when she realized that it was Romaa.

Romaa spoke in her melodic tones, “I have brought some of your food. We don’t know how to prepare it, but we know that you need it for sustenance.” With that statement, she moved a bundle of Jabom within Sonyata’s reach.

“This is fine; we eat it raw or prepared in many dishes. Thank you.”

Romaa remained motionless as Sonyata inspected the fruit and began picking it off the stems and enjoying the taste. It had been a while since she ate, and eating reminded her a little of home and Ornage.

Romaa slowly asked, “Do you have young?”

“No,” Sonyata responded, not willing to add any information.

“I do,” Romaa stated, then added, “we have very large numbers of young. I don’t see them often because they grow fast and take care of themselves. Still, I meet some of them from time to time, and we recognize each other by scent. I feel good that I have them in the community.”

Sonyata thought for a moment, then provided some information, “Raog women usually have two young at a time, and they stay with us for 4-5 Varo rotations around our sun or Erons, we call them. At that age, they are almost full-grown and choose what they want to be in life and began their training. As they grow into adults, they take on partners of their own and find a home nearby. We maintain our family bonds, and we’ll spend time with our offspring in a social encounter.”

Sonyata was unsure how much to share, but she felt like she was building a female bond of some kind and might be beneficial.

“Many of our young were taken by our leader and forced to fight in her armies.” Romaa paused, then said, “If they are defending our planet or protecting our dwellings or our other young, I can live with it. But they have been used to attack fellow Ora and enslave them, and now to attack your planet for no other reason then, because you’re here and she thought she could dominate. That is not good for the Ora,” she said as she seemed to lower her head.

She continued as if confessing, “Our homeworld has two major continents and two populations of Ora. I am from the Hrrrm, and we live on the smaller continent. The Immm live on the larger continent. They are a

little smaller than us, and their continent has poor soil and many mouths to feed. We have rich soil and a plentiful supply of food. Our leader decided to invade our cousins and make them slaves. She could have shared the food and worked together for all of the Ora, but she decided to invade and enslave. Now she is invading your planet, to use your soil and ultimately to enslave you. None of that is good for the Ora."

Sonyata was somewhat dumbfounded by that confession. She didn't know how to respond.

"We understand your role within the Raog; you are their spiritual Mother."

"Yes, I try to comfort them and provide a moral compass."

Romaa thought for a moment, then said, "I wish the Ora had a spiritual Mother; who provided a moral compass for us. That is what we are lacking and why our leader has done what she has."

"We have decided to return you to your planet," Romaa blurted out.

Sonyata's heart almost stopped; they're going to help me get home! She thought. Her mind and heart were overwhelmed. She needed to know more, who were they, how prepared are, how could they help the Raog?

"We?" Sonyata asked hesitantly.

"We have an organization of Ora that think our leader is bad for us. We are trying to help the Ora, and by helping you, we feel we will help the Ora. We have many at all levels of our society. We just connected to a large space station, and we are strong on it too. This station has 10 ships attached, and we are confident that we can take one of them and return you to your planet. If we do this, many will lose their lives, and they might not be able to return to our home planet. I am proud to say that some of my young are on this station and will help you escape."

Sonyata realized the gravity of what she said, "Will some of your young lose their lives helping me?" she asked.

"Yes, some of them will. As I said, I have many young, some believe as I do, and some support our leader. No matter what happens, my young will

die. What we are doing is good for the Ora, and we will be better if we succeed."

This was a heavy burden for Sonyata to bear. Her dilemma was never seeing Ornage again and possibly dying or relying on Romaa, knowing that many Ora would die, and some would be Romaa's young. Touching her own birth pouch made her dilemma more personal.

Her mother and father always put the needs of the people above theirs, so she must do the same. But now, she was putting the needs of the Raog along with the needs of the Ora and trusting that doing what's best for one was best for the other.

"Romaa, I'm sorry for any loss you may have. My parents were murdered by your landing Ora. Both of us have lost, and many more will be lost before this is resolved. Nevertheless, we must do what is best and moral."

"I am sorry for losing your parents; I was not aware," Romaa said with sincerity.

"Will we go back to Varo in this craft?"

"No, VanMacca has many loyal Ora on board, and the battle would be too large. We are working to take control of another craft, move you to it, and then leave for your planet."

"Will that happen soon?"

"It might take a while. But, when it begins, it will happen quickly. We'll get you, move you to the captured craft and leave immediately."

"I will wait patiently and thank you and all of the Ora that are doing this."

Romaa nodded, then moved out of the chamber.

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Molt was on his resting pad when he heard the commotion outside of the observation residence.

One of his defenders entered the room, saying, “I’m sorry, leader, but the Ora have captured Ilana. They overpowered the defenders with her, killed them, and took her.”

He thought to himself, they must have been wearing the warming body coverings. We knew they would do something after the attack. They must know our location here and have taken her, hoping that we’ll not attack again. That depressed him; Ilana was the district leader and a friend. Molt’s shoulders sagged as he felt the weight building. Then he realized that he must get word to Mortog, Ilana’s life partner.

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Mortog, Ornage, and Erom were on their resting pads in the soil room discussing their current position.

“Production is going well; I have two teams of technicians working, one is making the basic defensive tools, and the other is making the multiple firing tool. It will be a while before we have enough, but everyone is excited because they saw how powerful these tools are,” said Mortog.

Ornage enthusiastically added, “We've been modifying their craft. We have found many opportunities to improve them. For example, all of the control mechanisms are clumsy and slow. With our modifications, the craft operators will maneuver the ships much better and use less fuel. We have also improved their fuel by mixing it better and adding some of our explosive powder mixtures. Even the Ora operators are excited about the changes we are making. They’re turning out to be good workers, and they remain hopeful that they have a future and some way to get back to their planet. However, they have admitted to me that they don’t agree with what their leader has done. Apparently, there is a subversive group trying to cause problems and remove the leader? I think it’s that group that might have gotten the message from Sonyata to us.”

Ornage paused and went deeper, “I have also found they use radios much more than we do. Each craft has radios that allow them to talk over long distances and even ship to ship in space, and some have portable radios. They have a large ship in orbit above us that is supplying the ships

and when a ship either lands or returns to space, it connects to that ship and is refueled. We are listening to their transmissions, and I'm sure it will give us a major advantage."

Mortog and Erom both understood the significance of that, and Mortog asked, "Have you heard anything interesting?"

"Their leader is in the large ship, and I think that Sonyata might be on board. There is a lot of talk that Irrrm didn't understand, he said that he was an operator, and they tell him very little."

Erom listened, then suggested, "Grand Leader, I've been thinking, and I agree with what Mortog said a couple of days ago. There was a definite risk they will attack us again. So I think we need to develop a strategy to defend these ice caves from another attack. Perhaps they will use these new-warming body coverings. If they do, then the attack can be sustained, and they won't have to go back to their craft during the cool."

Mortog thought for a moment, then added, "I agree, and I've been looking at what options they might have. The first three ships landed in the only clear area near the caves. Now that one of those ships escaped, only one can land there. The only other landing area was much further away, and they must march through a small valley to get here. I suggest we make a remote post in that valley with an escape route back to the caves. Then if they land in both positions, that post could delay them moving up the valley while we deal with the one ship here."

Ornage pointed out, "I think, the way that the ice caves are aligned, we should be able to dig a tunnel through the ice to that post. We could resupply them as needed and also give them a route back."

Mortog commented, "Yes, a route back and also another attack route for the Ora. I suggest that we plant explosive packages in the tunnel, and if the post is abandoned, we can set off the packages while moving back to the caves."

"Excellent suggestion," Erom said.

Ornage and Erom agreed, and the plan was begun.

While they continued talking, there was another muffled explosion, and the talk stopped for a moment.

Erom explained, “I forgot to tell you, Albot had some ideas about another type of defensive tool, and he asked for resources to perfect it. I haven’t had the time to see what progress he is making; I’ve just left him alone, hoping he would develop something useful. He is on top of the ice caves, and it's a long walk to get to him, and I haven’t taken the time. If any of you have the time to spare, you can see what progress he is making.”

Mortog and Ornage both laughed, “time to spare?” they asked.

Ornage thought out loud, “As long as he doesn’t do any damage, let’s leave him alone and focus on the other tasks that are pressing us.”

Erom and Mortog agreed, and they shared a glance, feeling overwhelmed with the things they needed to do.

The next day, Ornage and Mortog checked on the tool production and the tunnel being cut to the new outpost. Ornage was observing, “The tunnel diggers are doing a great job. It looks like they’ll be through to the valley by night.”

“Yes, digging in that ice goes pretty quickly when you knew where the rock ends and the ice began. We should have the post set up tonight, and then we’ll be ready for anything.”

As Mortog finished talking, one of the defenders approached him and said, “Leader, I have some bad news.”

Mortog didn’t like the sound of that and asked, “What is it?”

“Ilana has been captured in the capitol. Molt fears that she was taken to their local craft as retaliation for the attack they performed with their modified Ora weapons.”

The defender continued, “Molt thinks they will hold her as a hostage trying to keep him from attacking them again. He also felt that they won’t harm her, as long as he doesn’t attack.”

“Grand Leader, I want to go to the capitol and save my life, partner.”

Ornage wasn’t sure how to respond. Mortog had been key to defending the caves, and losing him was a risk. But he knew how strong the connection was between two Raog, who had partnered. Perhaps the caves

wouldn't be attacked again, and making Mortog remain was being over cautious.

"Mortog, you have a couple of defenders that have worked closely with you. If you think they can act in your absence, then I'll agree, and you'll be able to go to the capital.

"Yes, Grand Leader, they are good Raog, and I'm sure they'll be very effective in my absence. I want to go to the capital and save my life partner. I also want to take my team, whom I brought here. She had taken care of their families while we have been here, and I'm sure they will want to help and save her. So I would like to leave immediately. If we leave early tonight, we can be there tomorrow night."

Ornage knew that Mortog was right; he had to go home and save his partner. Ornage also knew that he would do the same if Sonyata were in a place where he could get to her. He had thought about using one of the captured craft and going into space to rescue her. He also knew that would be a suicide mission, and none of them would survive, but Mortog had a chance, and he knew that he should take it.

Ornage placed his hand on Mortog's shoulder and said, "Mortog, I would do the same. It will be hard here without you, but we can handle it. May Varo be on your side, and may your soil always bear Jabom."

Mortog smiled and said warmly, "and also may yours, my friend." Then he moved quickly down the tunnel, and Ornage went to find Erom to update him.

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Ilana slowly woke to find herself in a small room with bars. Her head hurt, and she quickly realized that they hit her on the head. It wasn't clear where she was, but she eventually surmised that she was in the alien craft within the walled compound. All she could do was wait and see what would happen. If they wanted her dead, they would have killed her. So, they must be using her as a hostage, hoping to control Molt from attacking their scavenging groups.

Now what, if Molt attacks, they will kill me. If he doesn't, they take more from the Raog, she thinks, and then she sighs, realizing the mess they were in.

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Early the next day, Ornage walked around the caves. Mortog had left, and as he said, the tunnel to the new post was completed, and defenders were already in place. Production was accelerating, and Ornage felt like a muscle that was taught, waiting to strike.

A defender approached and said, "Grand Leader Irrrm said that he has heard things on their radio and he needs to speak with you."

Ornage knew that was important and moved quickly to Irrrm's craft. He entered the craft and moved up the ramp to the control area, where Irrrm listened to his radio.

Irrrm saw him approaching and said, "Ornage, there is something significant starting to happen. I'm not sure what, but three craft operators are leaving the structure in space and talking about landing on Varo. It is unusual for three craft to leave at once unless they are all going to the same area. The orbit that they selected when they separated from the station goes over our heads. If they are planning to land somewhere, this is a likely place."

Ornage's eyes widened, and he suspected that Irrrm was correct.

"How much time do we have?

"I expect them to be here by the end of today."

"Irrrm, we have done much to your ships, and you and the others have helped us a great deal. If they land here, we think one craft might land near yours, and the others will land further down the valley. I can't defend you; I don't have enough defenders. You can come with us to the ice caves, and we'll try to keep you warm."

"Grand Leader, as you are called. My fellow operators and I have talked about what options we have, and we'll stay with our craft. If they land as

you say, we expect them to retake the craft and leave additional operators planning to fly them back. They won't understand the controls, and we'll tell them that you forced us to work for you. They understand slavery, and they don't think much of us, so we will be ignored. We can stall explaining the controls to them while we wait for the attack to be resolved. If you win, we can deal with the operators if necessary if you lose, we go with them."

Ornage hesitated a long time, "I know you are caught here by yourselves, and going back with them might be good for you. I want to thank you for working with us, and I hope we can meet again."

"I also do," Irrrm responded.

Ornage and Irrrm touched both hands and forearms, which was the normal form of greeting and departure for Ora, and Ornage left the control area and raced to the ice caves to warn Erom and the defenders.

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Molt sent out defenders to monitor the area, and he packed up the observation materials and moved to a new location. They must have known where we were when they kidnaped Ilana. While they packed, he looked at the Ora plant he and Ilana had taken, and he thought, that is going to be an ugly plant.

They were there to attack, but if they did, Ilana would be killed. He knew what Ilana thought about the Ora and their disregard for the soil. She would want me to continue, he thought. Then he continued his thought, perhaps I can harass them a little, but not enough, so they will kill their captive and lose their power over me. "That's what I'll do," he said aloud. I'll let Iban know that I will keep them uncomfortable but not hurt them too much.

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Ilana did the best she could to rest in a cell without a resting pad. She found that if she leaned against a corner in the back, she could find some

comfort. As she did her best to rest, she heard a commotion in the hallway. As the noise approached, her apprehension increased, she was wondering if they would take her away and kill her. Will she die without ever seeing her young again?

Three large Ora come into her view, and they looked very menacing. Without any hesitation, they opened her cell door, grabbed her arms, and dragged her down the hallway. The group made a couple of turns and up two ramps; Ilana was convinced that would be her end, and she thought about Mortog and her young. She closed her eyes so that she could imagine her loved ones for the last moments of her life.

Suddenly her arms were released, and she slowly opened her eyes and saw a large Ora standing in front of her. He was wearing an ornate head covering, and he was just staring at her. That went on for a few moments while he looked her over from head to foot. Then he spoke.

Ilana was shocked, he addressed her in Raog, and she could understand him.

“What your name?” he asked in broken Raog.

After a moment of trying to process everything that was happening, Ilana responded, “My name is Ilana.”

“I, General Aarm,” he responded.

“You speak my language?” Ilana questioned.

“Yes, we translate your language, and I learned it. Talk with an opponent is necessary to understand them.” He paused then continued, “You are the leader of the local Raog?”

Again Ilana hesitated. Should she acknowledge her role? Then she answered, assuming that he already knew the answer, “Yes, we are trying to protect our soil and our families,” she stated firmly.

“You have caused us difficulty,” he stated.

“I hope so, and we will continue as long as you violate our soil. Even though you have captured me, others will continue.”

“We have captured one of your leaders, the Orb you call her.”

“I know. Is she well, and where have you taken her?”

“She is not dead. She is our leader’s vessel.”

“Will you kill both of us?”

“Don’t know. VanMacca will decide.”

“Who is this VanMacca, which you talk about?”

“You saw she ship, leader of our military and planet.”

“Why have you attacked our planet?”

“Our leader wants to dominate you and use your planet for the Ora.”

Ilana thought about that for a moment, then said, “You don’t have to dominate us. We could have worked together and supported each other.”

Aarm didn’t respond to this; he just stared at her.

Ilana needed to know, “If you don’t know if we’ll be killed, why did you bring me here?”

Aarm continued to study her for a moment, then said, “Want to look in the eye of my adversary. Important to respect your opponent and know them.”

Ilana felt more determined to say, “We don’t have to be your adversary, and you don’t have to dominate us. We contacted you, and you attacked us. We might have missed an opportunity to be equals.”

“We were already aware of you before the broadcast. Our leader had already put the fleet together, and she decided to attack,” Aarm said with some finality.

Aarm just looked at Ilana, then he flicked his forward arm, and Ilana was immediately picked up and dragged from the room. As she was dragged down the hallways, she thought about what just happened. He must be a local leader, she thought. We have been efficient, and we’ve hurt them! She smiled, then thought, well, at least I’m not dying yet. They were going to attack us anyway.

20-The Final Stage

Ornage frantically raced around the ice caves getting the defenders organized. Production of the new defensive tools was going well, but he did not have enough. He would be forced to have three types of tools used.

Talking with Erom Ornage clarified their position, “We have three tools we can use. Unfortunately, we don’t have enough for all of the defenders. I’ll dispense each of the tools into as many teams of four as we can. We’ll put most of the advanced tools in the post to hold off the larger force from the valley and less by the entrance to the caves. I’ll put more of the standard tools with the cave defenders then distribute the modified Ora tools among the other groups.”

Erom listened, and all he could do was agree. He could think of no better solution.

As Ornage finished, a defender came in and said, “Grand Leader Irrrm said their craft are entering the atmosphere and should be landing in a little while.”

Erom and Ornage looked at each other and took deep breaths, then they stood, hugged, and laughed as they both said, “May your soil always bear Jabom.” Then, continuing their uneasy laughter, they ended with, “And may yours also.”

Ornage and Erom agreed that Erom would be at the outpost, and his goal was to restrict any Ora from coming up the valley to help the single craft by the caves. If the post became overrun, the defenders drew back and set off the explosive packages as they moved back to the caves.

Ornage was to remain in the ice caves and coordinate the defenders there. He would deal with the single craft if it landed by the two abandoned ones. It seemed logical that they would want to recover the craft, and landing by it would help accomplish that. Splitting their forces might not be optimum, but everyone felt confident and tried both objectives.

Ornage and Erom were in position and waiting, which was the hardest part. They had well-trained defenders by their sides, and beyond the fear of

imminent battle, they had confidence they would prevail in the end.

The silence was deafening, and the tension was high as Ornage leaned on a resting pad by one of the main entrances. Since the last attack, they had closed the personnel entrance, which was the smallest of the three, and now they had just the two main vehicle entrances to defend.

As Ornage waited, he started to hear a low rumble which continued to increase until it was a roar. Then he could see the three giant craft coming through the clouds spewing smoke and fire from the engines.

For a few moments, as he watched, the engineering part of him took over, and he noticed how the operators were adjusting the throttles on the engines to keep the craft balanced. He thought how much better his design will be, and his ships would easily fly better than those. Then he thought about the fuel and noted how smoky and inefficient it was. His fuel mixture would burn much cleaner and provide more thrust.

As they began landing, Ornage's mind came back to the reality of the situation. Those craft were attacking with the intent of killing everyone there. Now he focused on the task at hand. As they predicted, after some moving around, one of the ships landed beside the two abandoned ones, and two other craft moved down the valley and landed precisely where predicted.

"At least they are landing where we thought they would," he said to the defender next to him. "That will give us an advantage they don't know about."

Ornage, Erom, and Mortog agreed to anticipate an immediate attack and prepared for one, although they expected the Ora to take their time and build their typical walls around the craft. That would take all day and perhaps the next. If they had warming coverings, they could attack during the night.

The landing went as planned, and they began building their walls. Ornage saw some of the Ora from the closer craft move to the two abandoned craft and enter. He hoped that the ruse that Irrrm and his fellow operators were planning would work for them.

The walls were being built, and Ornage directed many of his defenders to rest because he expected a long night. Even though the main attack might not come until the next day. He feared that if the attackers had warming body coverings, some might explore the ice caves during the first night, hoping to catch the defenders off guard.

The good news was, they did what was expected; the bad news is, they did it well.

The attack was swift and violent. At the mid-point of the night, at the coldest time, the cave entrances exploded with Ora tools firing. The flashes lit the darkness, and many defenders were killed. Ornage couldn't tell where the attackers were coming from. They were hard to see, and he fired his tool at any movement in front. The enemy kept attacking, and as Ornage saw a flash from a tool, he directed his defenders to aim at the flash. The attackers continued, and they started overrunning the defenders at the cave mouth. Ornage had many defenders back in the cave, and he was able to bring them up as the front line was being overrun and push the Ora back out of the caves. The attackers stopped using their tools and moved back down the slope.

Ornage walked around the entrance to survey the damage and realized that the Ora were using white body coverings, and they must have been the warming type. The while color was something he hadn't anticipated, it would make seeing them at night against the white snow and ice much harder. He would call them white hats to indicate those Ora with white warming body coverings.

In his opinion, they wouldn't attack again until they were ready. That was just a test to see what defenses he had. He hoped that he passed the test.

Ornage received word from Erom that he wasn't attacked. Perhaps that meant that he saw all of the forces with warm coverings. The remaining Ora in the ships, down the valley, remained there because there weren't enough warm body coverings.

Ornage was slightly encouraged; they were following the plan, his plan.

After a few hours of rest for the defenders, the morning snow stopped, and the next day finally began. In the sunlight, Ornage looked over the slope leading up to the cave entrance and found there were many dead Ora

from the failed attack the previous night. He wondered what kind of civilization didn't honor its dead. In all of his encounters with the Ora, there had been no effort to care for the wounded or retrieve the dead. In a way, that dismayed him. Without respect for death, victories are worthless, he thought.

The sun continued warming the snow and ice as they got organized and prepared to battle. Ornage suspected that the main attack would be during the day. Apparently, they didn't have warming body coverings for all of them, or they would have attacked with more Ora last night. That could be good news, he thought.

Finally, the wall opened, and the Ora streamed out, taking up positions in front of their compound; Ornage was amused to note that none of the leaders came out of the compounds. They appeared to be shouting instructions to subordinates with the attackers. As the formation was coming together, the valley echoed with the sound of multiple tool firings. Erom had begun his defense further down the valley, Ornage thought. He must have intercepted the forces moving up from the other craft to join the attack, and he was stopping them.

There was a movement in front of the walled compound; it was obvious that Erom's defense down the valley was a shock to them, and decisions had to be made. Unfortunately, the hesitation was brief, and they began moving up the slope.

The defense from the post down the valley was very fortunate for Ornage and the defenders. They now had only 500 Ora instead of 1,500 from all three ships. The smaller group coming up the slope allowed Ornage's defenders to fire from both cave entrances and catch them in a crossfire.

As the Ora came up the slope, the added range and accuracy of the tools took their toll. Many of the enemy fell on the slope, but they kept coming. As they approached, Ornage heard his defenders, with the advanced tools, increase their firing rates, and the sound in the cave entrance was deafening.

The advancing Ora didn't make it to the cave entrance. As they pulled back, Ornage noticed that the warm body coverings were stripped from the

dead from the previous night's attack. Their bodies were left, but the coverings were removed.

This made it obvious, they didn't have many of the warm body coverings, and the attack coming that night would be using all of their coverings. Ornage, Erom, and the defenders must be prepared.

After the attack had ended, Ornage moved through the ice caves to Erom's outpost. When he reached the opening, he saw many wounded and dead. He found Erom leaning against the wall, resting.

"Erom, you accomplished a great deal. These Ora weren't able to meet up with the others, and we could keep them out of the caves. They sustained heavy losses, and we had little."

Erom didn't respond. He just pointed out of the opening.

When Ornage looked out, he was shocked. The entire valley was littered with the Ora dead. There were far more than he could count. If those Ora connected up with the others, the ice caves would have been lost. The two craft had landed with 1,000 attackers, and Erom held them off with about 50 defenders. A very unbalanced battle, but one that was extremely effective for the Raog.

The fighting at the post must have been horrible. He turned to Erom and was at a loss for words.

Erom smiled and said, "They came in wave after wave; we fired our tools until the barrels were too hot to touch. We used almost all of our projectiles. After the attack on the ice, caves stopped, they finally stopped coming up the valley." Erom paused, took a deep breath, then continued, "When we started firing, they came up the slope towards us a couple of times. To our benefit, the slope is pretty slippery, and they couldn't get good footing. Regardless they kept coming, and they almost overran us twice, but each time we are able to fight them off. While they climbed the slope, it was difficult for them to fire their tools, but that didn't stop them; they just kept coming."

Ornage poured Erom some Jabom tea, and he rested next to him.

"The Ora that attacked us last night wore white warming body coverings. We didn't see them until they were upon us. When they attacked

today, they retrieved the coverings. I suspect they'll use them tonight, and now that they know you are here, you can count on visitors; the white hats I call them."

"Then we must care for our wounded, bring up more projectiles and wait for the white hat visitors tonight," Erom said with a little smile.

The rest of the day, Ornage and Erom moved projectiles, had Jabom delivered, and prepared for the next attack.

Erom and Ornage both felt that the Ora would use all of the white hats that night, trying to weaken the defenders for another massive attack the following day. If they were limited in the number of warming body coverings, that was the only strategy that made sense.

During the preparations, Ornage thought of a counter to the white hats. He had a large number of containers filled with burning fluid that was used for the vehicles. He put short fuses in them, and when the attack began, his defenders would throw the containers, and they would break open, burning and lighting up behind the attackers. Ornage hoped that if it worked and the Ora had lights behind them, he could see them, and they would make better targets for the defenders.

As the night deepened, Ornage waited for the attack. He thought about what he would do if he were the Ora. If I were them and I had their job to do, how would I do it? He asked himself. If I had unlimited white hats, I would attack the outpost with enough force to overwhelm it, so my other forces were able to join, and at the same time, I'd attack the caves. If I didn't have enough white hats, I'd just attack the outpost, then after the outpost was overrun, it would allow my forces to combine then attack the caves

This thought process worried him because he didn't have enough defenders with good tools to defend the outpost and be prepared in the ice caves if he was wrong. He had to trust in Erom, and if the post did fail, he needed to use the exploding powder in the tunnels.

As Ornage finished his thoughts, his question was answered. The opposite side of the valley lit up with light bouncing off the valley wall, then the explosions of a continuous volley of tools being fired.

They had attacked the outpost.

There wasn't anything Ornage could do but wait and hope that he didn't have an attack at the caves. He wished that he could take a group of his defenders and help his friend, but he knew he had to stay there.

The attack lasted for a long time, then subsided, then began again. It went through four cycles of attack, fall back and attack. Then the noise slowed down, and Ornage waited.

The explosions in the tunnels rumbled through the ice and snow, and large chunks of snow fell in the cave openings. Finally, Ornage knew, the outpost had fallen, and now it would be up to him to save the caves.

After a while, Ornage heard a commotion behind him as Erom approached with the remainder of his defenders.

Erom moved beside Ornage and said, "Well, we held them off as long as possible. You were right, they attacked us first, and I think they used all of the white hats. Eventually, they overwhelmed the post-opening, and we had to come back through the tunnels and destroy them. Unfortunately, we had many losses. Also, those burning containers didn't work well for us. We didn't think about the slope on the side of the valley. We threw them, and they rolled down the hill. They still gave us some light behind the attackers, but it was far away. If they attack, this night or the next night, they will have many less to attack with."

Ornage and Erom just stood there looking into the night and thought about many things and putting their trust in Varo.

The defenders and cave leaders rested the best they could. Then, they waited for the sun to rise when they expected the battle to end.

Erom and Ornage were woken by the movement of defenders around them. They had their morning Jabom porridge, and Erom decided to lead the defense in one cave while Ornage led the defenders in the other.

The early day was used to encourage the defenders, ensure they were fed, and make sure they all had ample projectiles. The early day went fast, and then the walled compounds opened.

Erom and Ornage went to their respective ice cave openings to wait for the attack. They expected that the attack would be with all of the Ora available. As the Ora exited the compound in front of them, the Ora from down the valley marched up and joined with the others. Ornage did a quick count, and knowing that each craft contained 500 attackers, it appeared that the previous attacks had cost them more than half of their force. Now they had many fewer Ora to attack the caves.

The defender's strategies had matured through experience. Ornage had directed the defenders who aimed the best to fire as soon as the Ora were within range, then as they approached the defenders with the multi-fire design, would fire many times and then reload. If the attack continued up the slope, the defenders with the modified Ora tools would begin firing. Once they reached the cave entrance, all of the defenders would be using their tools, and Ornage hoped that the overlapping firing would be the most effective.

Finally, the onslaught began.

The Ora began moving up the slope. It appeared their strategy was a mass attack hoping to overwhelm the defenders.

As they moved up the slope, Ornage's best aiming defenders began firing. That slowed the Ora because the long-range tools surprised them, but they continued the attack. The losses were significant but not devastating.

They continued up the slope, and the defenders with the multiple firing tools began to fire. That surprised the attackers and lead to confusion. Many of them were falling, and they were forced back down the slope. Ornage was encouraged, they had withstood the first wave, and the enemy lost many.

Once they got reorganized, they came again; that time, they were coming up the slope as fast as possible. They hoped to get through the dangerous zones so they could engage at the cave mouths.

This tactic worked, and they sustained fewer losses, and when they approached the cave mouths, Ornage and Erom were forced to draw back. The defenders would move back about 10 arms, then form a line. The defenders with the multiple firing tools would expend all of the projectiles in one container, then fall back while reloading, then form another line and

try again. At times when the attackers were too close, and the attack occurred before the tools could be loaded, they fought hand to hand and, in many cases using farming tools.

The fighting across the main floor was intense, with many losses on both sides. Finally, they had moved all of the ways back and found themselves defending the entrances to the lower levels.

As Ornage was taking up a position near one of the ramps, he felt a series of three muffled explosions. He was surprised, as the explosive powders in the tunnels from the post had already been used. The fighting intensified, and he heard three more explosions. At that point, the Ora backed off, and he could see their leaders redirecting them. Suddenly they turned and moved out of the cave at high speed. Ornage and the other defenders were surprised, and after a moment to get reorganized, they moved forward and were able to regain the cave entrances.

When Ornage reached the cave entrance, he saw the recently arrived Ora craft burning, and the Ora were streaming down the hill to protect it. Ornage heard three more explosions, and he looked around, trying to see what was happening. Then as he looked back at the craft, he saw a large part of the craft explode, which took many Ora with it.

He turned as he heard one of his defenders running through the ice caves yelling, “It is Albot on the roof of the cave making their craft explode.”

Ornage had forgotten about Albot; what is he doing? Ornage thought as he raced to where he thought Albot was.

Ornage raced through the ice caves and up ramps until he emerged on the top, and he turned toward a group of defenders as he heard more explosions. He saw flame and smoke come out of large cylindrical containers. He moved quickly towards Albot and saw in the distance the two other craft down the valley; one of them was totally engulfed in flames, and the other was being boarded by streams of Ora. Then before Ornage spoke, he saw another explosion in the burning craft, a large explosion in the ice in front which killed many Ora, and then an explosion on the top of the remaining craft.

He saw Albot and rushed towards him, “What are you doing? What have you built?”

“Call them what you want, I worked out a way to fire large packages of explosive powders a long way, and you saw how effective it is. Watch!”

Albot’s team had finished loading a container with a package of explosive powder, then they put a much larger package on top.

Albot said, “Stand back and cover your ears.”

Ornage did as directed, and the powder in the container exploded, launching the larger package into the air. Ornage tried to follow it as it flew towards the Ora craft, but he lost it as it continued beyond his site.

Then, as Ornage watched, the last remaining craft exploded in a massive cloud of smoke. A moment later, he heard the ear-splitting sound, and he saw snow slides coming down the opposite side of the valley. Many of those Ora not killed by the explosions were buried by the sliding blankets of snow.

All on top of the mountain stood in silence for a moment, then Albot’s team broke into a cheer, and they all hugged each other.

21-Battle in the Sky

Sonyata hung by the straps in her chamber. That was all she did; that was all she could do. While she hung, she thought of Ornage and their young, she planned their lives together and who would their young take after, dying was not in her thoughts.

Suddenly explosions outside her chamber stirred her, and her eyes opened with a start. Four red hats charged in, Sonyata thought, this is it, they're going to kill me!

One of them approached the bars and unlocked them; Sonyata recognized Romaa standing by the door with a tool in her hands. She turned to Sonyata and said, "Come, we are leaving the station. Do your best and follow us. We move quickly through the straps, so you'll have to work hard to keep up."

As they left, the Chamber Sonyata saw at least 12 red hats in various positions in both directions in the corridor. Those on one end were firing their tools around a corner.

Sonyata, Romaa, and their group moved fast in the other direction, and Sonyata was unsure moving through the straps, but she quickly gained her confidence and found that she could keep up.

The team moved away from the firing and entered a larger room and were moving through the room when other red hats began firing from one of the other entries. Romaa's team fired back, and they kept moving. As they approached the exit, other red hats moved in from a side entry and began firing in support. It appeared to Sonyata that various teams supporting them were moving around the structure, and she wondered how they avoided firing upon each other.

Her thoughts were quickly refocused as her team started moving at a fast pace down another hallway. She was getting used to using the straps and was able to grab one, pull on it, and as it accelerated her further down the hall, she could reach out for another, then start the process over again. She had never done anything like that, and if it weren't for the projectiles

flying past, she might have enjoyed it. As she approached the end, additional Ora began firing on the front of their group, and they had to force their way through the fire; many of Romaa's team fell.

Just as they were passing the door, a couple of Red Hats jumped out of the shadows and grabbed Romaa and one of her team. Sonyata could only stand back and watch. The fighting was intense, and she realized that Romaa and her team were formidable. She saw Romaa maneuver in the small space then jump on her opponent. Within a few moments, she took care of the attacker. Sonyata was stunned to see a creature fight hand to hand with another of its kind and kill it.

They eventually overcame the resistance and moved on, and while moving, other supporters of Romaa joined the team.

They continued through the station, fighting at points and moving quickly past others. Soon Sonyata saw some windows, and as she passed, she saw seven craft attached to the structure on the outside and one hovering a short distance away, moving slowly towards a docking bay. She wondered which ship they were taking to Varo.

As she passed another window, the structure shook, and she saw one of the craft explode; she immediately prayed to Varo, hoping that wasn't the craft they were planning on using.

They continued down the hallway and entered a large room with hardware attached everywhere. As they entered, many tools were fired, and they had to find handholds behind boxes. The fighting intensified, and she saw many members of Romaa's team fall, but others seemed to appear from many directions.

Romaa was near Sonyata, and she yelled, "We have to get to the ship. We can't stay here any longer; follow us and move fast."

The group moved quickly, and Sonyata was hard-pressed to find handholds, but she was able to keep up with them. It seemed tools were being fired all around her, and they were slowly making progress to a large opening in the wall. The first members of the team made it through the opening and took up defensive positions to fire back, helping their other members to move through.

Eventually, Sonyata moved through the doorway, and she was pushed to the side while the firing continued, and then slowly, the door began to close. The firing continued as long as there was an opening to fire through. As the door closed with a bang, Sonyata felt her ears pop, and then many explosions occurred just outside the door; then the entire ship jumped, throwing Sonyata across the hallway.

She was forced against the wall for a couple of moments until the forces subsided and she could look around. She was near a window and looked back at the structure, it just hung there in space, and she saw some flashes of light in a couple of the windows; could the battle still be going on? She wondered.

Sonyata looked around inside the craft and saw some of Romaa's team wounded and tendered to by others. Some were dead and lay where they were killed. Sonyata wondered how many lives were lost trying to get her back to Varo.

The stress started draining from her, and she just held on to a strap with her eyes closed.

Shortly after they had separated from the large station, Sonyata felt the now familiar rumble, and she felt forces push her back against one of the walls. Romaa continued to work with her fellow red hats and cared for the wounded.

Once the wounded were tended to, Irrm moved along the wall, which was unsettling for Sonyata. She approached Sonyata and said, "We are clear of the station. They won't be able to follow us. I'm sure our leader is very angry and is taking out her anger on those that remained. I don't know what options we have. Let's move to the control area and talk to our craft operators.

Not having anything to say, Sonyata nodded her head and followed Romaa. They passed through the ship, and it took Sonyata a while to get used to it. They were accelerating, so the forces pushed her against the rear wall. To move, they used the rear wall as a floor, and they used the straps to move up the 'floor' and pass through the opening at the top of the ramps. After doing that for a while, Sonyata was able to forget which surface was

the floor, or ceiling, or wall, and she used the straps to get where she needed to go.

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Ornage and his defenders moved up and down the valley dealing with the remaining Ora. There weren't many, and they were disorganized. Ornage was surprised that none of the attackers surrendered, which would have caused a problem. He had no means to provide warmth. He wasn't sure if the craft by the other two was salvageable or not. The last that he saw it had sustained a large explosion, but perhaps it wasn't totally destroyed. The battle ended as the few remaining Ora fought to the end, and none of them surrendered.

As he moved, he assessed the results of the attack. All three of the recently arriving craft had been destroyed, and all of the attackers would soon be dealt with.

As he retraced his path to the upper portion of the valley, he approached the two craft that were abandoned on the previous attack. He didn't know if Irrrm and his fellow operators were still alive or not, so he approached the craft slowly.

He entered the walled area and saw no activity, and as he moved to the ramp, he was startled by Irrrm dragging a dead Ora down the ramp.

"Irrrm, what happened?

"Glad to see that you are victorious."

"What happened here?"

"They brought two craft operators, and one of them wanted to destroy our ships, and we couldn't let him."

"I'm sorry that it came to that, but I understand. Thank you for your support."

Ornage and Irrrm touched hands and forearms in the Ora tradition, and Ornage left him to deal with the dead Ora.

As Ornage was leaving the compound, Irrrm yelled for him to return. Ornage turned and returned to the ramp. He noticed Irrrm talking up the ramp to another Ora.

Ornage stopped at the bottom of the ramp and waited for Irrrm to finish talking. He heard words like ‘attack,' ‘stolen craft,' but they were speaking so fast in their native language it was hard for him to keep up.

Finally, Irrrm stopped talking and turned to Ornage, “Perhaps we’re on the winning side. After all, there has been an attack on our orbiting structure in space, and a ship was stolen. Our leader is furious and has killed many of her leaders. Perhaps Sonyata is on that ship.”

“Are they landing?”

“Not right now. They are still orbiting and not communicating with anyone. Speculation is they haven’t decided where to land.”

“Can they come here?”

“I don’t think so. They may not have enough fuel to change their orbit that much. When they separated from the space station, their trajectory determined their orbit, limiting their lending options. That craft left with an orbit around your equator, so their landing options are along a narrow band around your equator.”

Irrrm added, “I have operated our leader’s craft before, and I expect her to be furious. She will follow that ship to the end of the sky to kill everyone onboard. When it lands, she will follow it and attack.”

“Can we communicate with the stolen ship with your radio?”

“Yes, but only at certain points in their orbit. I will listen, and I might be able to figure out what their orbit is, their landing options and when we can communicate with them.”

“Will your leader hear our conversation?”

“She may hear their half, but not our half.”

“Great, let me work on something, and I’ll be back by the end of the day,” Ornage said as he was turning and moving towards the opening in the wall.

22-Battle on the Ground

“Erom,” Ornage said as he rushed into the caves. “I think we have an opportunity, and I think I have a plan to really hurt the Ora. It does carry a lot of risks, though.”

Erom leaned back on his resting pad and said, “What is it?”

“There has been an uprising on the Ora orbiting structure, and someone has stolen a craft. I think Sonyata is on that craft. Their leader VanMacca is furious, and Irrrm thinks that she will stop at nothing to hunt that craft down and kill everyone on board. Right now, Irrrm is working out their orbit, possible landing sites, and when we can transmit to them using his radio.”

He paused, judging Erom’s reaction, then continued, “Molt has attacked the Ora near the capitol, and they must be low on red hats. Iban is near, and both of them have many rebuilt Ora weapons and many defenders willing to use them.”

Ornage had waited before he threw in the clincher, “We have two Ora craft, operators to fly them, many advanced tools, and defenders with experience. We could contact the stolen craft, and if Sonyata is onboard, we have them land near the capital. We bring Iban and his defenders up from Furtar, and we could use the Ora craft to fly half of our defenders in to support them. They won’t expect us to arrive, we could surprise them, and we might even capture their leader, VanMacca.”

Erom thought for a while and hesitantly said, “You are the Grand Leader if you are ordering me to do this, I will. If you are asking me to do that as a friend,” he paused to look Ornage straight in the eye and said, “I will do it eagerly.” He then smiled.

As Ornage and Erom moved around the ice caves and explaining their plans, they found many volunteers. Ornage saw Albot and approached him, “Can you move those large tools you built?”

Albot thought for a moment, then said, “Yes, we should be able to; what for?

Ornage explained the idea, and Albot’s enthusiasm increased, and he said, “It will work; we’ll set them there and really surprise them.” Albot then charged off to get everything moving.

Once the momentum was built, Ornage went to the craft and spoke with Irrrm.

He rushed into the compound and up the ramps to the controller area. Irrrm was listening on the radio and saw him enter.

“Irrrm, what have you learned?” Ornage asked.

Irrrm raised his hand, indicating silence while he finished listening.

“Ornage, they are still orbiting, and our leader has directed four ships in space, that have been fueled, to land where the stolen ship lands and to take control of it. From what I’ve heard, there are six craft attached to the orbiting structure, including VanMacca’s personal craft. One just docked and must be serviced before it can be used.

"I've flown VanMacca's craft, and it is all comfort. I hated operating it.”

“What about the orbit of the stolen craft and its landing options?”

“It appears to have a standard orbit around your equator which allows it to land near most of your population centers.”

“At the capitol?”

“Yes.”

“When can we communicate with it?”

“Just as your sun is setting, it will be the closest to us in its orbit. We are not at your northern axis point of rotation, so there is a brief period where they are closer to us than the orbiting structure. That is the best time to communicate, the atmosphere and curvature of your planet should block our half of the conversations, and the orbiting structure will only hear their half.”

Ornage glanced out the window and noticed that their time to communicate was drawing near.

Ornage explained the plan to Irrrm, realizing that there was a risk, including him. But he had no choice. He had to find out how Irrrm and his operators would react.

When Ornage was finished laying out the plan, he looked at Irrrm and said, “I know that puts you in a difficult position of helping us against other

Ora?”

Irrrm quickly responded, “We are different from you. Our will to survive is the most powerful. We are very loyal to a leader as long as our survival appears likely. If an Ora sees his leader fall, he will change allegiance quickly to find the best opportunity for survival. You saw this the first time we attacked the caves.”

Irrrm paused, then said, “I don’t trust our leader, I know her, and I don’t think she is the best leader for long-term survival. I am following you because I think you are the best leader to survive for me and possibly for all of the Ora to survive. My other operators feel the same.”

Ornage looked at him, saw loyalty he could understand, and he said, and “Please try to contact the stolen craft.”

Irrrm looked at his timing device and keyed the transmitter, “Stolen Ora craft, orbiting this planet, the defenders of the northern ice caves want to speak with you. Realize that the orbiting structure can hear your side of the broadcast, but they likely can’t hear our side of the transmission,” he said in native Ora.

There was a pause, then a voice responded, “We are the craft you spoke of; what do you want?”

“If there is an important Raog on board your craft, please have her speak. If she is there, we might have a plan that will help all of us.”

After another long pause, Ornage heard the voice he wanted to hear.

Sonyata said, “I am here. Who are you?”

Ornage said, “Sonyata, it is I; we have a plan; are you well?”

She responded, “I am well. What should we do?”

Ornage quickly filled her in on their parts of the plan, and then Irrrm closed the brief communication window with, “We will plan on that to happen on your fourth orbit.”

It was done; many lives and events had been put into motion. Irrrm and Ornage both realized the importance of what they just started.

Sonyata was excited. Hearing Ornage's voice was the best she could have hoped for. After the separation from the orbiting structure, there was confusion on board and indecision. The leaders of the uprising didn't have a firm plan and just reacted.

Now they had a plan, and it was a sound one. Sonyata knew other elements of the plan weren't explained, and she understood. There were many players involved, and no one could predict what they would all do.

Now she had to wait. The fourth orbit was approaching quickly. She waited with a smile.

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Ellig felt much better and sent word to Molt, asking for an escort to the observation home. Normally he would just walk there, but after his last experience, having a couple of defenders with defensive tools with him made him feel a little better. He asked himself how many were enough. The number of defenders with him and Sonyata weren't enough. As he waited for his escort, he thought once again about Sonyata and wished that he could have done more.

Ellig walked into the observation home and introduced himself to Molt. "Molt, we've never met, but I've read most of your reports you sent to the caves. They have been a great help."

"Thank you, and I want to thank you for the broadcasts that you've made. Hearing from the Orb and Grand Leader had been key in keeping our spirits up." Molt said.

Ellig saw the warming body coverings piled in the corner and asked, "Are those what they were wearing when they kidnaped Sonyata?"

"Yes, and they used them again to kidnap our district leader Ilana," Molt explained. Then he walked over and showed them to Ellig. "They're not made very well, but that battery pack on their back keeps them warm for a while."

"Ellig, that is why they are here," Molt said as he pointed to the Ora plant growing by the window. They walked over to it, and Molt continued,

“Ilana and I pulled that out of the ground before she was kidnaped. That is what they’re planting. We’ve been growing it to see what happens. As you see, the plant is growing broad, heavy leaves, and these small flowers might develop into a fruit.”

Ellig reached for the plant and reacted quickly, “It has small pointed barbs growing on the stalks, and they hurt when touched. I’d hate to work with these plants in the field. It will be interesting to see if it does bear any kind of fruit; maybe we’ll get a chance to taste it.”

“You go ahead, I’ll save some for you,” Molt said with a grin; just then, Mortog walked into the room. Ellig was shocked to see him and asked, “Why are you here?”

Mortog said, “I’m here because my life partner Ilana was kidnaped.”

Molt said, “I’m glad you got my message, and I’m glad you’re here. We think she is in that space structure out there.” He pointed to the Jabom field with the scarred soil and the walled-in vehicle.

“I’m sorry, Mortog. I didn’t know. When did it happen?” Ellig asked.

“A little while after the Orb was taken, and while you were in the hospital,” Molt answered.

Ellig wanted to share some good news, so he updated them about the recording that he got from Sonyata and how the Ora dropped it off in his garden. “I think we can have hope that some of the Ora are on our side and might help us.”

Just then, a messenger stormed in and explained Ornage’s plans.

Mortog, Molt, and Ellig rested together as they heard the details. When they had heard it, they paused and thought. That was the final step, and many things had to work right. None of them doubted the plan. They were just stunned by its magnitude and risk.

Mortog glanced at the Ora plant growing in the observation home, and he thought, that is an ugly plant.

Molt began organizing his defenders, and Mortog thought about ways to save his life partner. He suspected that she was in the craft that he could see. He also knew that many red hats were still around, and he had to find a way

to save her. Perhaps with all of the confusion in the upcoming battle, he could sneak in. He had to trust that Ornage's plan would cause that confusion.

Ellig sensed that the upcoming conflict would be the most significant one. If the Raog were able to surprise the Ora, then the Raog would have a chance. If they failed, then Varo and the Raog were likely doomed. That scared him, but it also excited him; now it was our time to cause them pain. All he could do was arrange for a couple of Newsource technicians to help him set up a viewpoint on top of the observation home. From that vantage point, he could monitor what happened and hopefully have some good news to share with the people.

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Iban was excited. It was not a problem for him to find many defenders who wanted to fight for their soil, their Varo, and most of all, their Orb. They were packing their modified Ora defensive tools and moving quickly to the capital.

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Ornage was working closely with Irrrm because the timing was critical. He wanted VanMacca and her craft committed to their landing before his craft was noticed. That would put her on the soil of Varo when he attacked.

Irrrm pointed out, "I don't think there are many red hats on the orbiting structure; they have been deployed to the surface. The craft launching from the orbiting structure won't have much of a fighting force. Their only purpose is to subdue the stolen craft which they think has only a few surviving red hats."

Ornage looked at Irrrm and asked, "What do you think will happen if your leader is killed?"

Irrrm thought for a moment, then responded, "Good question, I suspect that each of the leaders will worry about their own survival. If VanMacca is

killed, each leader will set their own destiny and seek the path that provides survival. There might be fighting between some of them, trying to gain control, and hopefully, some of them will band together to improve the Ora life."

The time was approaching, Erom, Ornage, and the volunteer defenders from the northern ice caves were loading in the two abandoned Ora craft. They knew what their mission was, and all were aware of the risk.

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Sonyata and Romaa were in the operator portion of the craft, and it was nearing the time to fire the rockets to slow the craft and began the descent to the capital. It was a tense moment as the rockets fired because each knew that their future would be determined in a short while. The craft slowed, and it began its descent.

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Once the descent was started, VanMacca ordered four of the remaining craft on the orbiting structure to depart and follow her down. She took the remaining Red Hats so the last craft docking would be of no use and was directed to stay connected. Their orbits were closely aligned with the capital, so the time for landing was much shorter.

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Once Ornage knew that VanMacca had left the structure and fired her rockets, her landing time was fixed, and he ordered Irrrm to launch. They were to remain silent and not use the radios. Ornage wanted to approach the capital unnoticed.

The operator's area of the craft was quiet as Ornage and Irrrm contemplated their actions. They had launched into a ballistic orbit which would bring them down right on top of VanMacca and her craft.

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Sonyata and Romaa watched as their craft descended into the Varo atmosphere. For Sonyata, it felt like Varo was opening her arms and letting her back home. For Romaa, it was the next step down a one-way path. They both held the straps, and they both waited for their destiny.

Sonyata's craft was going to land. First, she knew it and expected a hard time until the others could help. When her craft landed on the soil, red hats from the craft already on the ground began moving to her craft.

Romaa directed the red hats onboard to encircle the craft and keep the red hats on the ground busy. Romaa and Sonyata stayed in the operator area, so they were close to the radio and high enough to view the evolving events below them.

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As soon as Molt saw Sonyata's craft descending through the clouds, he headed across the destroyed Jabom fields in their direction. He saw red hats from the walled compound moving towards them, and he hoped that he could get to Sonyata before they did.

Iban was poised in a different area, and when he saw Sonyata's landing, he was to get to a position between Sonyata's craft and the walled compound. That was to back up Molt's team and hopefully surround the first red hats leaving the compound for Sonyata's craft.

Mortog had a different idea. Once Molt was defending Sonyata's craft, and Iban had isolated the walled compound from the red hats engaging Molt's team, it was his opportunity to move into the walled compound and rescue Ilana. Once he saw Molt's movement and Iban's move from the side, it was his turn. He and his small team moved to the compound opening.

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Ornage monitored the radio traffic for VanMacca and her craft as they approached the capital. He assumed their leader would be focused on Sonyata's craft and wouldn't be paying attention to anything else. VanMacca was in the lead craft, and once she was on the soil of Varo, it was Ornage's turn to strike. That was what Ornage was planning on; he hoped VanMacca would land first, followed by the other craft from the orbiting structure. Once they were on the soil, Ornage and Erom could land their craft in the best place to protect Sonyata.

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VanMacca's orders were clear. Her red hats and all her craft were to attack the stolen craft and kill everyone on board. She had to teach them all a lesson. Those who didn't follow her direction would die; that was the spoken message and the understood message that the Ora were working under. They also knew that if they failed, they would die.

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Sonyata felt the rumble and looked up and saw a horrifying sight. The sky was filled with Ora craft landings. She quickly saw the colored craft in the lead began to touch the soil near her, and the other four craft were maneuvering to land in a circle around them.

Sonyata was about to panic when she saw two large groups of Raog carrying defensive tools. One was moving towards her craft, and the other was between her and the walled compound, which also put them equidistant between the compound and VanMacca's craft. She then saw a smaller group of Raog moving towards the walled compound.

As the Orb and Romaa surveyed the area around them, two additional craft had landed, and suddenly the roar and vibration increased dramatically. The two craft that hadn't landed increased their thrust and

began rising back into the sky. Then through the other viewport, she saw why two additional craft were descending over the capitol at a very high speed and using a tremendous amount of thrust to slow down.

The movements of the four craft were odd; they weren't moving together to find landing sites. They appeared to be buzzing around like bees, almost attacking each other. The craft on the ground opened doors on their roofs and then started firing at the two craft that were descending. This was curious, why would they be firing on their own craft? Sonyata thought.

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As Ornage came out of a low ballistic trajectory from the ice caves to the capitol, he hoped to see all of the craft on the ground. He was dismayed to see two were still in the air maneuvering to land. Regardless, he was there, and the plan must move forward.

When the two craft in the air saw Ornage descending, they knew the two craft weren't part of the group, and they moved into a defensive position.

Ornage wasn't surprised to see the craft on the ground firing at him, but he was encouraged because the projectiles had no effect on his craft. It was clear that the craft were impervious to their own projectiles. He put that out of his thoughts and directed Erom to land outside the circle forming on the soil so that Albot could set up his projectile launchers and his defenders would move to Sonyata's craft. Ornage then planned to stay in the air, keeping the two Ora craft from landing.

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Molt remained focused on Sonyata's craft even though the sky seemed to be filled with craft landing. He had gained ground on the red hats from the compound and was approaching Sonyata's craft when he saw red hats making a defensive position at its base. He thought for a moment, remembering that a group of red hats rescued her; these must be them, he

thought. He slowed his approach, and each group eyed each other as they moved to a position on each other's flank.

The reluctant allies turned to face the approaching red hats. Varo's tools and the attackers' tools were similar, although his defenders could aim better, and they immediately started bringing down the attackers before their co-defenders' tools were effective. As they continued approaching, the red hats to his side began firing.

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Sonyata saw the large group of Raog join the red hats below her craft, and she looked to see what other developments were occurring. There was craft maneuvering everywhere, and she couldn't tell who they were supporting. She suspected that Ornage was on one of them, and she prayed to Varo that he would be safe.

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Erom's craft landed hard, and he was the first one on the soil, followed by Albot and his technicians, then the defenders followed down the ramp. He formed them up quickly, and they began moving towards Sonyata's craft.

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Romaa was on the other side of the operators' area and saw Erom's craft land. Once she saw defenders streaming out of it, she pointed it out to Sonyata, and Sonyata smiled; maybe it didn't look so hopeless after all, she thought.

Sonyata looked up and saw three craft flying erratically; it wasn't clear if they were landing or chasing each other. She lowered her gaze and saw the Ora from the two ships that landed began moving towards her, and the

group of defenders between her and the compound was moving to intercept them.

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Ornage knew what was happening; the two Ora craft were trying to ram his craft. Irrrm was maneuvering the modified craft expertly, and Ornage was pretty confident that Irrrm could continue outmaneuvering them. As Irrrm approached the craft on the ground, one of the craft stopped mid-air in front, blocking their way. Irrrm approached, and he moved his craft slightly back and forth to each side, the blocking craft tried to do the same, but it was a little slower. At the last moment, Irrrm increased thrust and went right over the top. As they passed over, Irrrm continued with additional thrust, planning on rising and turning back to face the craft behind them. As they turned, the craft they had flown over suddenly tried to accelerate and rise to follow, and they obviously didn't see the remaining craft that was following Ornage. The collision was immense; both craft slowly merged into one, exploded, and continued burning as the mass moved to the soil. The impact dug a giant hole as the two structures continued collapsing and exploding. After a few moments, the entire mass of metal stopped moving, and the flames grew.

Ornage didn't have time to watch; he directed Irrrm to land between VanMacca's craft and Sonyata's. Irrrm added thrust and moved over the landing area, quickly cutting the throttles and re-engaging them before hitting the soil. The blast filled the air with smoke and soil, suddenly the craft was on the soil, and the ramp was out; Ornage and his defenders poured out of the craft.

Erom's defenders had most of the Raog designed tools, and Ornage's defenders had the rapid-fire tools. He planned to be in closer quarters and needed the increased firing rate, and Erom could force the enemy into Ornage's range.

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Iban was caught between two groups of red hats. His modified Ora tools were holding up well, and even though he was outnumbered, his added range kept his losses to a minimum. He knew he couldn't move in either direction until something changed.

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Mortog was hoping for a distraction so he could enter the compound; he wasn't planning on multiple armies and exploding craft. All the better, he thought as he moved around the corner of the wall approaching the opening. As he entered, he was surprised and saw no red hats. He and his team quickly moved to the ramp and started moving up. He saw some motion and realized that he was looking at a red hat at the head of the ramp. They looked at each other in surprise, and then Mortog fired his tool, and the red hat fell. He quickly moved up the remainder of the ramp and looked inside. The space was cavernous, and he saw no movement, so he continued through the space until he saw another ramp. As he approached it, a stream of red hats come pouring down the ramp firing their tools, Mortog's defenders fired back, and luckily they were a little faster and a little better aiming. The red hats quickly fell. As his team was moving up the ramp, an additional smaller group of red hats approached from the rear of the craft, and they were coming fast, using their tools. Now Mortog's defenders had the high ground, and they had a sight advantage over the charging red hats. The conflict had taken a few moments before the red hats were defeated. He finished his climb up the ramp and entered a hallway with many openings, and he moved down the hall and finally saw Ilana in the last chamber. She screamed when she saw him, and they touched through the bars. Mortog's defenders began searching the area for any tools or devices to open the bars. It took a while, but they could finally break the door, and Ilana and Mortog hugged.

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On the ground, the groups of fighting defenders and Ora were locked in a battle of position. They tried to move and combine with an ally, but they were blocked by another group. The battle raged on for a long period of noise and creatures dying on all sides.

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The picture in front of Sonyata and Romaa was too complex, and the poor visibility through all of the smoke prevented them from knowing if either side was gaining soil on the other.

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Albot wrestled the heavy containers into position then his team had to move the sensitive explosive powder from the craft. While at the ice caves, they fired the device enough times, so they had a feel of how to aim it. But here on the open fields with few visual references, they knew the first couple of launchings might not hit anything.

As soon as Albot exited the craft and looked at the battle in front of him, he had decided on his target. The large, colored craft in the middle of everything seemed like a logical thing to blow up.

The first launch landed between two groups of fighters, and from that distance, he wasn’t sure which were Raog and which were Ora. He wasn’t aiming at either group, primarily because he feared hitting some Raog, but he remained focused on his one target. He made some adjustments and launched an additional package. That time the package exploded near the colored craft, now he knew what to do, and he was confident that the next package would hit the craft.

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Ornage was busy firing his tools and watching the movement of defenders and Ora around him. He didn’t see the first package explode, and he would not have heard it over the roar of the defensive tools. He did look up and see the second explosion, and he knew what caused it. As soon as the second package exploded, the movement of the Ora changed. They stopped fighting and looked at the dust cloud near VanMacca’s craft. They hesitated for a moment, then started moving as a mass toward the leader’s craft.

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Albot couldn’t see any changes in the fighting, and he wasn’t looking for them; he was focused on the colored craft; his target. He launched the next package, and he tried to watch it fly through the air; at some point, he couldn’t see it any longer, and he dropped his eyes to the target.

The package exploded on the top of the craft with a giant cloud of material lifting into the air. He had found the range; he quickly loaded another package and launched it. Again he tried to watch its path and lost it mid-flight, then he waited, and the package landed in the same spot as the other, and this time the explosion was inside the ship. While he was loading the next package, he saw the craft starting to burn.

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Ornage saw the fourth package explode inside VanMacca’s craft, and he also saw all of the Ora moving at a frantic pace to protect their leader. They approached the burning ship, and they did something that surprised him; they went inside and crowded around it. They didn't understand the source of the attack of their leader, so they took up the only defensive position they understood. They were sacrificing themselves to protect their leader.

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Albot saw none of this; he was going to keep launching until the target was in ruins. So he launched the next package, and it hit the same area as the other two. But this time, a moment after it exploded, the entire craft disintegrated in front of him. The explosion was enormous, and he saw the noise moving across the soil, and then the ear-splitting sound hit him. He knew the target was gone.

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Sonyata and Romaa watched as giant pieces of VanMacca's craft lifted into the air and fall on the smoking pile of rubble. All of the Ora near the ship were killed instantly, and those that hadn't made it there were blown over or just stood there, watching and not knowing what to do.

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Ornage was as shocked as everyone. He didn't expect that. He saw the devastation to the Ora by the explosion, and he saw the confused Ora standing in groups. He approached the group nearest him and shouted, "Put down your tools, and we won't kill you."

As they put their tools down, the other Ora groups followed and put theirs down.

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Ellig was stunned as he witnessed the massive explosion. It was so large, it almost blew him off the roof. Now he was scrambling to record the recent events and broadcast them. He decided that he must rush to the center of the activity and find Ornage.

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Ornage moved each group away from their tools, and he linked up with Molt, Iban, and Erom. They continued getting the Ora into larger groups away from their tools, and the defenders began picking the Ora tools from the soil and moving them away.

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Sonyata and Romaa moved down the ramp and exited, not exactly sure what they would find. After walking a short distance, Sonyata saw Ornage and ran to him. They hugged for a long time.

Ellig caught up to Ornage and knew enough to keep a comfortable distance until Sonyata, and he had hugged all they needed.

Ornage knew there would be a great battle, but he hadn't thought how to handle a great victory. He was more confused now than before the attack. While he was walking around getting everything organized, he saw four Ora approach him dressed in very colorful body coverings. They were obviously leaders.

While they walked towards Ornage, he could hear them speaking in Ora and knew they were not aware that he spoke their language. Ornage thought that showing that he understood might not be the best approach, so he let them talk amongst themselves. They were talking about terms of surrender.

"Grand Leader," the Ora in front said, "my name is General Aarm, and I speak for the other leaders. May I speak?" Ornage was surprised that he spoke in Raog.

Ornage was joined by Romaa and Irrrm, and he didn't know what to expect from that leader. He said, "You speak our language," in a formal manner.

The Ora spokesman said, "Yes, I learn your language." Then, he paused and drew himself up in a formal manner and said, "Our leader, VanMacca is dead; we have no leader."

As that statement required no response, Ornage continued to listen.

“Our survival is important now our allegiance is unknown. Many of us didn’t agree with what our leader did, but we followed. We would like to return to our home planet and find a leader that is concerned with all of the Ora. We leave you in peace.”

Ornage asked, “What about the other Ora craft on Varo?”

Aarm responded, “They also have no leader, no reason to remain here. We ask permission for all Ora to leave in peace. I am the Senior General, and they will do what I tell them.”

Ornage walked around a little, thinking. Then he responded, “You may go in peace, and once you have refueled at your orbiting structure, you must leave our planet and that structure. But be warned, we now have better tools than you, and we can use them better. We also have craft that are better than yours. If you attack us again, we will win. We may remain in contact, but as equals and perhaps someday partners, but for now, we stay apart and focus on the damage to both of our planets. Go now; you could take one craft and no tools. This offer applies to all Ora craft on Varo.”

“Thank you for our lives,” said Aarm as he bent his legs into a submissive position, then rose and moved away, talking to the other leaders.

The Ora leaders began organizing the remaining Ora, and there was just enough left to fill one of the craft. As they were boarding, Sonyata, Irrrm, Romaa, and Ornage spoke. “Irrrm, we would not have been successful without your help. You may stay with us or return with the Ora; it is up to you."

Irrrm didn’t hesitate and stated, “We will return to our home planet. We all want to survive and avoid having a leader like what we had. Perhaps we can help our society achieve that.” Ornage and he had touched hands forearms before Irrrm moved away.

Sonyata turned to Romaa, saying, “Romaa you saved my life and helped start all of this. You also may stay or return.

Like Irrrm, Romaa’s response was immediate, “We will also return. There is much repair and healing to be done. VanMacca has many

supporters, and we must deal with them. I will be happy to remain in contact, and perhaps someday, we can be friends."

Sonyata shook both of her hands and said, "We are friends." She then took her birth pouch and gave it to Romaa, saying, "These are the seeds of the Jabom, which give the Raog life. I hope you will look at them and think well of the Raog. We are both, good societies and we just need to understand each other. May your soil always bear Jabom."

Romaa took the pouch, and they touched hands, and she walked to the departing Ora craft.

Ellig recorded all of what happened, and he saw a different look on Sonyata's face. It was an intimate look, and he knew to point his recording device elsewhere.

Ornage, the Grand Leader, and Sonyata, the Orb, hugged and watched. As the last of the Ora entered the craft, Sonyata whispered in her life partner's ear, "The soul of Varo can be healed. You and I will soon have new Raog born to help."

It took him a moment to grasp what she said, and they hugged until they heard the silence after the departing Ora craft.

When the natural silence of the Jabom fields returned, Sonyata and Ornage looked around at the devastation that had occurred. Even though they had won the conflict, there was much death. They had lost many fellow Raog, and the Ora dead were everywhere. For them to heal and move on, this loss must be resolved so that the soul of Varo can be complete, or at least as complete as possible.

Sonyata turned to Ellig and said, "We must broadcast to Varo. Now that this is done, we must begin our healing."

Ellig raced around and brought his technicians to the Orb, then told her, "Orb, Grand Leader, we are ready for your words."

Ornage took the recording device from Ellig and said, "Raog of Varo, we have defeated the Ora, and they have left our planet. The Raog here fought bravely, and many of them lost their lives. Each of you owes these brave Raog your gratitude, your respect, and a place in your memory. Men and women fought for you, for the future of Varo, and for the soul of Varo.

Life is precious, and it was lost by both sides. Now that the battle is complete, we must acknowledge the loss and begin to heal. Now we will hear from the Orb."

Sonyata took a deep breath and began to speak, "We have all lost loved ones. Some of them may never join the soil and become part of the soul of Varo. We were a happy people and a naïve people. We thought that we were alone, and we didn't question how we fit the larger world around Varo. Varo has taken care of us through our entire history, and now we must accept that Varo has changed. Throughout our history, we thought Raog were all part of Varo and Varo was all Raog. We thought the soil, the air, and the water was ours, and it was part of our Varo. Through our pain, we have found that we are not alone. Others have soil, water, and rain. They live on a planet very much like our own. Perhaps we have underestimated Varo. Perhaps Varo is larger than we imagine. We are still part of Varo, but perhaps Varo has more parts. We felt that Varo included our lives, but perhaps Varo includes other lives. Perhaps Varo contains many more lives than just ours. That doesn't make us smaller; it makes Varo bigger. We have our dead, who I propose will be returned to the soil here in this open space where Jabom once grew. But, there are other dead that we must recognize. Some of them may have been our enemies, but they still died. Varo is life, and any creature that dies leaves a hole in the soul of Varo that can only be filled when the creature is returned to the soil. I propose that we bury the dead Ora in their own place in this field so that Varo can have all those who lost their lives returned to the soil. I don't suggest this to honor our dead and desecrate our soil; I suggest this because all of the dead lost their lives here, and they all need to be returned to the Varo soul. I propose this to all of the Raog, and I ask you to communicate with your district leaders if you feel this is appropriate. If the Raog of Varo say not to bury all of the dead here, then we will find another solution. I now want all of us to take a moment and think of the dead here."

She ended her speech and gave the device to Ellig. Those around her were speechless. What she suggested was against everything that defined their society. No one knew how to answer her comments.

The feedback began almost immediately, and over the next couple of hours, the response increased all over Varo.

The response wasn't without disagreement, but the overwhelming majority said to bury all of the dead there in that Jabom field, in a place where they all would be remembered. The field would be held as a sacred place where all who fought would be honored.

The End

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EPILOGUE

I want to thank you for purchasing this book. I'm a new author, so anyone willing to take a chance on an independent author is appreciated.

Gemini was my first book; one day, I decided to start writing, and out it came. I did have a general outline, but the book took me where it wanted. I suspect that I'll be following this one with a sequel shortly. I can see a story where the Raog and Ora have to work together and defend themselves from some external evil.

When I get the opportunity to start on it, I'll let everyone know.

Once Again, thanks, and please check out my other books.

Ray Jay Perreault

http://www.rayjayperreault.com

About The Author

I’m a retired Aeronautical Engineer trying to bring a different style to science fiction writing. I’ve always loved science fiction, and I’m trying to write with deeper characters and create stories and situations that a reader can relate to. The be honest, I love a hero that has amazing weapons, takes on hundreds of aliens, and can survive anything, but I also want to read a situation and be able to relate to it—an extrapolation of what might really happen with a little less stretch in my imagination.

I’ve been fortunate, and I flew in the US Air Force for 10 years, during which time I flew C-130’s and visited 27 countries, then I flew T-38”s and trained the best pilots in the world, as well as the first female US Air Force pilots. I then was fortunate to spend 28 years in a major aerospace firm and worked on some of the best programs in the world, including the F-23, F-35, B-2, Global Hawk, and many I can’t tell you about...

I hope I can bring my real-life experiences into my writing so you can appreciate my work.

Ray Jay Perreault

http://www.rayjayperreault.com

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