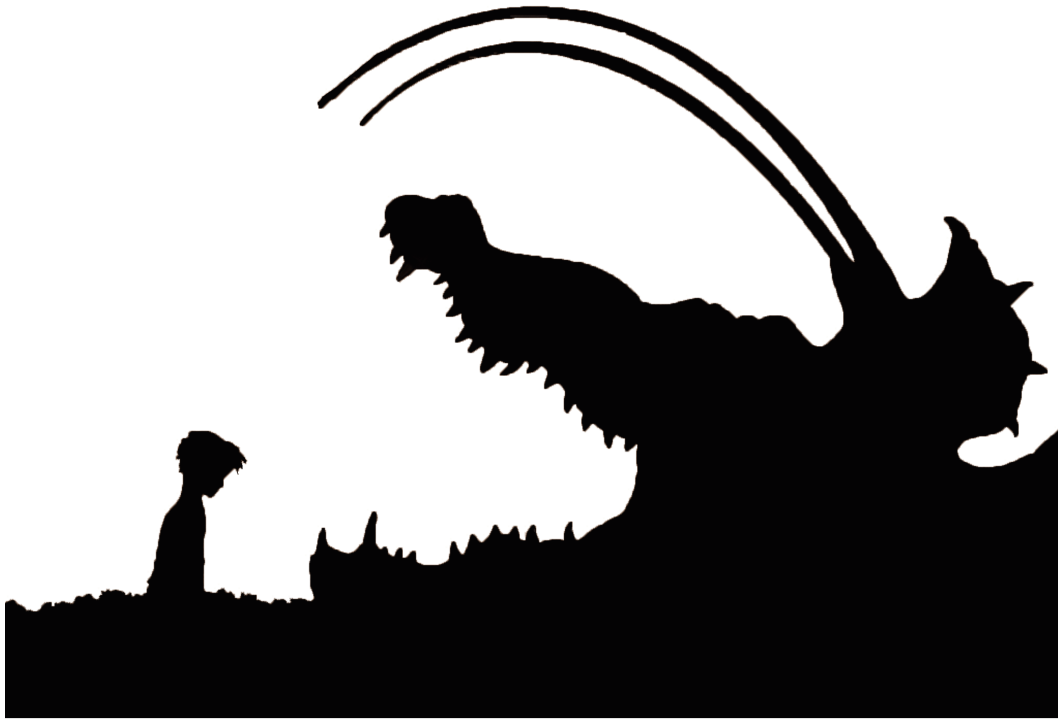




METALLOIDS

THE SERIES SUMMARY

Created by

Kyle Burns

77 Hwy 8. Dundas, ON L9H 4V1
289.441.1892

SEASON ONE: "THE BEASTS OF THE BLACKLANDS"

Earth Date 2093

AstraTerra, a space company that has developed human habitation systems for the moon and local planets in our solar system, launches its most ambitious mission to date. For the first time in history, humans venture outside our solar system to another Earth-like planet, Proxima Centauri d, one of three planets surveyed by an earlier robotic mission to the star PROXIMA CENTAURI.

Showing signs of abundant plant life and varying climate regions, the planet was aptly named, "VARIIAN", loosely based on a French name for "variable". On Earth date September 24, 2093, 360 adventurous human beings, consisting mostly of small families, travel on board three state-of-the-art space vessels, named Sol 1, Sol 2 and Sol 3, on a five-year journey to this new world.

Using a new thruster engine technology that runs continuously by means of a matter-antimatter propulsion system, what would take a rocket today 6,300 years to make the 4.2 light-year journey to the Centauri system, takes just over 5 years in these new ships.

The constant thrust allows the ship to accelerate at just less than 1G for half the journey, then turn around and decelerate for the other half. Not only does this method bring the ships to near light-speed, it provides inertial gravity - and a sense of normalcy - to its occupants for the long trip.

As the "wagon train to the stars" ventures past the outer planets of our solar system, the ships' communication systems must adapt to the delayed responses between them and the Earth. The effects of General Relativity become more apparent with each passing day. Due to the increasing distance, a response to a sent message takes the better part of a day to receive back. Then, the frequency band must be compressed as the ships' velocity stretches the carrier waves, just as the Doppler Effect changes the sound of a siren as an emergency vehicle passes, making the messages slower like slowing down a record player.

At each information panel inside the ships, there are three different chronometers and calendars, each tracking the date and time at each location: Earth date and time, Ship's date and time, and Variian Date and time.

As the ships accelerate closer to the speed of light, the Earth time chronometer gradually speeds up as the occupants on board the moving ships experience time differently than those on Earth.

At the mid-point of the trip, when the ships are travelling their fastest, the Earth time chronometer is running at more than twice the normal speed.

At the start of the trip, the Variian chronometer was set to the total trip time but shown as a negative number of years, days, hours and minutes, which began at -5 years : 24 days : 21 hours : 15 minutes and began counting down from there, so that when they arrived at Variian, the Variian date chronometer would show all zeros. This would be the beginning of human time on the planet, at year zero. This chronometer would also speed up as the ships accelerated toward the speed of light.

The Ship's chronometer is the only timekeeper of the three that runs at a normal, consistent rate, counting the seconds, minutes, days and years elapsed on the trip. There's a strange benefit that comes with General Relativity for the occupants of the ships: They will experience the entire trip in only 2 years and 8 months, where those on Earth will see 5.1 years pass.

The long delays in communication with Earth eventually help the occupants emotionally detach from their home and focus on life inside the three ships. Water is filtered, crops are grown, people work, play and socialize as usual. Twenty-one babies are born along the way and become the first humans to be born in interstellar space. Their birthplace is registered as the respective ship's name, but with the name of the birth planet/moon left blank.

On Earth Date October 18, 2098, after decelerating for the previous two-and-a-half Earth years, the Variian Date Chronometer counts down to zero as the space vessels arrive at Proxima Centauri d and the planet Variian. Everyone gathers around the small windows facing the planet to get a good look. Great oceans, lakes and rivers crisscross its surface, cutting through massive mountains and multi-colored patches of vegetation ranging from green to a deep purple.

The Ops Crew deploys a string of communication and weather satellites in orbit before the three great starships de-orbit and land vertically on the surface. After completing an extensive list of shut down procedures, the Construction Technicians suit up and begin unloading the construction equipment and materials and begin assembling the various components, buildings and interconnecting walkway tubes while the others continue to live inside the ships.

They will serve as the living residences for the settlers, much like apartment buildings on Earth.

The technicians quickly build the basic structures in a well-rehearsed, finely orchestrated construction project. One by one, inflatable modules, clear geodesic domes and connecting walkways are put in place and their lighting and ventilation systems are connected and brought online. On day 7, the settlers are given clearance to venture out of the starship residences and into the initial, small makeshift city.

The first human settlement on an extrasolar planet springs to life. They name the city "SOL MOU", which means "Soft Earth" in French.

Variian is a lush, tropical paradise, characterized by its mauve-colored foliage and flooded mangrove swamps. Three suns hang in the sky, which never fully set, and cover the planet in an amber glow during the night cycle of its 42-hour day.

Because it takes only 5.1 Earth days to complete one orbit around its sun, a year on Variian is technically only 5.1 days long. This was too difficult for the settlers to get used to so they decided to call each revolution around the star a "cycle" rather than a year, and just measured the date by day number.

Aside from the many differences compared to Earth, Variian has a striking beauty of its own. Unfortunately, this beauty comes with a price. Variian's atmosphere contains a similar mix of gases as Earth, but with high levels of Carbon Monoxide, which is deadly to humans. Environmental suits carrying breathable air and a radio communication system must be worn when they venture out of the settlement's structure.

The planet, upon first glance, is devoid of any recognizable signs of existing or pre-existing intelligent life but it does boast a bustling ecosystem of dinosaur-like creatures and mega-sized arthropods. Despite some obvious differences, Variian could very well pass as a window into Earth's prehistoric past.

The settlement's population, all of whom are highly-skilled professionals in their respective fields, fall in love with the raw, untouched beauty of Variian. Many of them consider the planet to be "a Prehistoric Paradise". They are all proud to have been a part of this historic mission and continue to build onto their small, self contained, city.

Variian Day 33

Hopeful optimism for their future in this new world is abruptly cut short as the 9-year-old son of AstraTerra's co-founder, NIGEL VAN ALLEN, was savagely attacked by a 25-foot-long, INDIGENOUS REPTILE while operating an off-road "LOAD LIFTER", an advanced version of today's forklifts, one kilometer from the city.

It is assumed that Nigel's son, MATREK VAN ALLEN, took the load lifter, without authorization, out to explore the surroundings and accidentally trampled the creature's nesting area, which provoked the hostile response.

While he tried to escape, the animal tipped the LOAD LIFTER pinning Matrek to the ground, injuring his spine and leaving him paralyzed from the waist down.

When Nigel's best friend and fellow co-founder of AstraTerra, KAVIN RAM, heard the attack on his friend's son over the radio, he jumped into action. However, as Kavin ran to try to dig Matrek out from under the load lifter, he too was attacked by the creature.

Kavin, unfortunately, sustained a traumatic brain injury from the attack and failed to regain consciousness after being admitted to the hospital. The medical personnel were able to resuscitate him but the help came too late and he fell into a deep coma.

During the attack, the security team was unable to repel the creature, even while applying deadly force. This incident frightened many settlers and instilled a deep, primal fear of this planet.

A growing number of residents no longer saw this place as the "prehistoric paradise" they had originally thought it was and some had made the decision to leave Variian and return home to Earth.

This decision was met with resistance from the department commanders, but a vote was taken and 26 settlers choose to return to Earth in ESCAPE POD #42 and say goodbye to their colleagues before lifting off from the Variian surface.

Variian Day 52

It's launch day, and just as the Escape Pod is about to reach the edge of the planet's stratosphere, a strange BEAM OF LIGHT strikes the side of the ship.

In a single flash, Escape Pod #42 vanishes without a trace. All radio contact between ground control and the occupants on board ceases.

An immediate investigation into the missing Escape Pod is launched. Numerous unmanned drones are sent into the air to scan the forest for any signs of wreckage but they too are hit by the same strange beam of light, never to be recovered.

The settlers attempt to make distress calls back to Earth but communication to their orbiting satellites has also been lost. Assuming that their satellites have met the same fate as Pod 42 and the drones, all flights are grounded.

Deep feelings of paranoia and fear are felt in the hearts of every human in the small settlement on Proxima Centauri d. As they begin to fear that they may be trapped on this dangerous world forever...

...and that someone, or something else, is there watching them...

Variian Day 188

Six months have passed since the loss of Escape Pod #42 and its occupants and no new information has been gathered. The residents have tried to carry on normally, growing food, conducting scientific studies, all with an underlying feeling of uneasiness.

The arrival date for the first supply ship to Variian came and went. The settlers become increasingly anxious.

Food shortages and availability issues of basic amenities for the settlement's citizens are an everyday reality. Crops are slow to grow under the dim Centauri suns.

The human settlers on Variian are struggling to survive. The strange beams of light in the sky are something that can not be assessed or defended against and appear to be part of something blocking any attempts at communication and travel to and from this world.

To improve the chances of survivability for the Variian residents, new rules are instated by the Board of Advisors within the Settlement.

Civilian access to the bayou and woodlands surrounding their living structure has been limited to only a select few research teams. Even a simple walk in the woods requires armed escort and pre-authorization from numerous department heads within the settlement.

This stringent legislation does nothing but only worsen the level of fear that the settlers have of another deadly encounter with the hostile wildlife in the area.

Children are forbidden from entering the wilderness. No exceptions.

Matrek, who is now 11 years old, spends most of his time in his room. Alone. He's a precocious boy who has a deep fascination with technology and machinery. He has even built himself a bionic suit which operates under the control of a worn wireless headband that amplifies his brainwaves, which are then picked up by the suit. After much calibration and training, the suit grants him the ability to walk upright again without the need for his wheelchair.

He struggles with the accident from his past and feels immense guilt for his part in not only injuring his best friend's dad (KAVIN) but for indirectly causing the disappearance of the hundreds of people who tried to flee Variian after the attack.

His depression consumes him and he is hesitant to show his face in public. He wants to come up with a solution to all of the problems that his society is facing. He wants redemption.

To this day, his former best friend AAJAY RAM, Kavin's son, has still not spoken with him since the accident.

Matrek's parents, NIGEL and MAYA, try to get Matrek to move on with his life but still he remains trapped in the past. Obsessing over his greatest mistake and longing for the opportunity to set things right.

Matrek also stands firmly against the Settlement's rules to keep both the children, and most adults, inside the structure and restrict them from exploring the area surrounding their Settlement for their "own protection":

"The answers to how we're gonna get off this planet are OUT THERE, not in here!" - Matrek

Luckily for him, his shot at redemption comes in a strange form.

Nigel and Maya decide to set up a "play date" (lame right?) for Matrek with the adopted son of the couple who runs the agricultural dome. His name is JAXTON AZZOPARDI (11).

Much like Matrek, Jaxton is also a bit of an outcast with low self-esteem.

He's also obsessed with earth-moving equipment and heavy machinery - a common interest between the boys. Their parents arrange a meeting in the hopes that this mutual interest could be something the boys could bond over to break them out of their shells.

When the boys hang out, Matrek helps Jaxton repair the autonomous sensor system on one of the settlement's AMPHIBIOUS TRUCKS and Jaxton suggests they take it on a joy-ride... outside of the agricultural dome.

Jaxton tells Matrek that he has something to show him if he can keep a secret; something that might give them some answers as to what they are really dealing with on this planet.

Although a simple "joy-ride" is what led Matrek to his current predicament, the temptation of learning more about what is containing them on Variian overpowers his better judgment.

They take the truck through the dark forest far outside the boundary of the settlement, which is shrouded from the sunlight by a thick cypress canopy, where they come upon a shocking discovery.

A GRAVEYARD OF ALIEN SPACECRAFT.

Astonished by the sight before him, Matrek joins Jaxton in their environmental suits and investigates the otherworldly machines. The forest has consumed these craft with an overgrowth of twisting roots and murky water. These flying vehicles have been here for a very long time.

Looking inside the cockpits of some of the craft, they are shocked to see strange, humanoid skeletons curled into gaunt positions, wearing rotting spacesuits made of an exotic material. Some have been here a very long time.

It's a morbid discovery that dashes the preconceived notions they had of humanity being the first intelligent beings to visit this planet.

Just then, they are startled by a young human girl in an AstraTerra environmental suit crawling out of a large blast hole in the side of a rusted freighter.

XARIA GHASSEMI (11) is of Persian decent and has long, dark hair and striking gold-colored irises. She claims that she has been investigating this crash site for weeks in secret... until now.

Xaria is an aspiring archaeologist and linguist who has been trying to learn about the beings in these ships and what happened to them so many years ago. She, too, has been sneaking out of the settlement on her own without the adults knowing.

She takes the boys inside the freighter and shows them a variety of strange "artifacts" that she had collected from the soft mud surrounding the ships.

The artifacts look to be broken pieces of one of the ship's hulls. However, these particular pieces are adorned with mysterious hieroglyphics that are not present on the hulls of the other vehicles that lie around them.

The boys are intrigued. Then, she shows them the "craziest part" of these artifacts. She holds one of the broken pieces inside a beam of sunlight that's penetrating through the treetops and it begins to emit smoke.

She quickly pulls it out of the light before it dissolves entirely.

Matrek and Jaxton feel as if this is some sort of trick but she insists it's not. Due to the fragility of these pieces, she's been keeping a digital record of them before they are eventually destroyed by the elements.

Xaria has been trying to translate the language, which is oddly reminiscent of ancient Sumerian cuneiforms, and has even found some success in her attempts to decipher it, becoming Variian's very first "Xenolinguistics" (alien language) Specialist.

Xaria explains to Matrek and Jaxton that, if they're going to continue to come here, they have to follow some basic ground rules to not alert "The Blackland Beast"... the creature that had attacked Matrek years before.

She continues, "I have seen the creature numerous times in the area and know more about it than anybody else."

Similar to Matrek, her thirst for knowledge about the mystery of this planet outweighs the fear she should be feeling of its innumerable dangers.

The creature doesn't appear to be hunting humans or other game. However, it is extremely territorial and sensitive to noise or any disturbance in the environment around it."

She suggests that the best way to avoid trouble from the Blackland Beast is to stay quiet and avoid it.

Just as she says this, the vehicle that they had arrived in begins to drive on its own. Smashing into the tree in front of it.

"I thought we fixed the sensor system?" - Jaxton

As Jaxton and Matrek point fingers at each other, they hear a **terrifying roar** in the distance.

The sounds of **heavy, bipedal footsteps** and the **cracking of branches and trees** get closer and closer until they can make out a visual of a terrifying, TYRANNOSAURUS-LIKE reptile that is quickly stomping towards them.

Xaria is quick to realize that this creature is not the Blackland Beast but, rather, another animal entirely.

The terrifying creature flips the heavy-duty vehicle with a dazzling display of force and rips the massive off-road tires to pieces with its powerful jaws.

While the giant reptile tears their vehicle to shreds, Xaria and Jaxton run for cover beneath a derelict ship. Matrek tries to keep up with them but he can only move so fast in his bionic suit. The creature locks its eyes on him and unleashes another **deafening roar** that knocks him off his feet.

Matrek falls to the ground and is unable to get up in the deep muck. He is left helpless as the beast advances towards him.

His friends helplessly watch as the creature raises its mighty taloned foot above Matrek. Matrek cries out in terror and curls up into a fetal position, expecting the worst to happen.

But then, inexplicably, the creature freezes. Everything goes silent.

The massive reptile falls to the ground, curling itself up into the fetal position beside Matrek, with its arms on both sides of its head, just like Matrek.

Matrek, trembling, slowly opens his eyes and looks around. He sees the creature on the ground beside him. He slowly lifts his head. The creature lifts its head. Frightened, Matrek drops his head back down. The creature drops its head back down in the same instant.

His friends whisper to him loudly from their hiding place to get up and run while he can.

Matrek exclaims, "I can't.

Too scared." Matrek raises his right arm to point and, although the creature isn't facing him and can't see him, it raises its right arm at the same time. Matrek, perplexed, makes a waving motion. The creature does the same. Matrek goes through a series of hand motion to which the creature duplicates instantly. He then raises two fingers into a "peace" sign. The creature does the same.

Matrek laughs out loud. "HA! I'm actually controlling this thing! I don't know how but I'm actually controlling this thing!. I don't know how but it must be picking up commands from my headband! Guys! The less I move, the less this thing will move! You have to drag me out of here while I lay still!"

Xaria and Jaxton slowly walk over to Matrek and drag him away and place him in Xaria's excursion vehicle. They carefully exit the area and drive back to the settlement while looking back at the creature, still lying on its side. The kids are baffled. Jaxton whispers, "What just happened there?"

That night, Matrek falls asleep while repairing his damaged mobility suit and has a strange dream: he sees the tyrannosaurus-like beast from earlier approaching him. It gets down on its stomach and its jaws open before him. Revealing a bright, artificial light coming from its mouth.

A **young, female voice**, with a thick, unknown accent whispers to him:

"Matrek... Do not be afraid. We are not here to hurt you..."

He wakes up at his desk, sweating. Wondering what this dream could mean.

The next day, the three kids meet up in the settlement and sneak out together to travel to the spaceship graveyard. This time, they bring another piece of farming machinery out as a "sacrifice" to the creature they saw yesterday: an AMPHIBIOUS ATV from deep in their reserve storage.

Xaria, Jaxton, and Matrek attempt to lure the creature out again by driving the ATV into the same tree their vehicle had slammed into the day before. After doing this, they quickly hide behind the foliage while breathing heavily, trembling in fear and anticipation.

As expected, the creature reveals itself again, ripping through the foliage, **roaring** and **stomping** towards the vehicle but Matrek nervously steps out from behind his cover and stands between the machine and the creature.

The creature slows down as it approaches Matrek, eventually stopping and inquisitively looking at him. Matrek remembers what he heard in his dream and recites it aloud to himself:

"I am not afraid. You are not here to hurt me..."

Upon hearing this, the creature lowers itself to the ground and its jaws open. Just like in his dream.

Xaria and Jaxton walk out from behind their vehicle and stand beside Matrek, their faces alight in a flickering artificial light.

Instead of having a tongue, rotting gums, or anything else you'd expect to see in the mouth of a giant reptile, they see strange controls, blinking lights, a smooth chair, and the same hieroglyphics that were featured on the artifacts that Xaria had shown them the day before.

This isn't really a creature at all. This is a machine of some sort that, from the outside, looks indistinguishable from the rest of the natural lifeforms in its surroundings.

What they are looking at right now is an advanced control cockpit, which was not built by human hands.

Matrek's unquenchable curiosity overcomes his better judgement and he climbs inside the jaws of the beast to get a better look. His 11 year old body fits perfectly in the small cockpit's seat.

Whoever created these vehicles must've been no taller than the height of a pre-teen.

Xaria and Jaxton approach the vehicle apprehensively and they each take a look inside. There are no levers, joysticks, or conventional controls. Xaria recognizes some of the symbols in the cockpit and explains what she believes is their meaning.

She sees one symbol in particular that translates to PILOT. As soon as Matrek thinks of himself as the pilot of the machine, its jaws begin to close. His friends jump back to avoid getting injured, and the vehicle rises to its intimidating, 20-foot-tall, stature.

The techno-organic interior begins to mold around Matrek's body, securing him in the cockpit snugly. "Let's see if I can control this thing." In his mind, he pictures himself walking forward and it immediately stomps ahead through the deep mud.

Whatever he imagines himself doing, the machine does. "I'm driving this thing!", Matrek squeals into his environmental suit's communication radio. He stomps around the woods, gleefully piloting the Tyrannosaurus-like monster while his friends watch in bemusement.

After having a little fun, Matrek asks Xaria what symbol was for exiting the vehicle. Xaria tells him to look for a specific symbol inside the craft that meant "the way out of the current place or a door". He finds the symbol and focuses on it and the machine lowers itself down to its stomach and opens its jaws.

Matrek exits the cockpit, still exuberant from the experience. Xaria and Jaxton take turns climbing inside to try to get the vehicle to work but it doesn't. It's not until Matrek sits down and lends them his headband that the machine follows their thought commands.

The kids realize that the only way a human can pilot the machines is if they are wearing a "*Brainwave Amplification Head Unit*" like the one Matrek uses to control his mobility suit.

That night, Matrek digs through his boxes of electrical components, turns on his fabrication printer, and begins to construct two more headbands exactly like his, so Jaxton and Xaria can capture and pilot vehicles of their own...assuming there are more out there.

The three friends spend the next few days wandering the lush swamps, looking for other machines, with Xaria and Jaxton driving an amphibious truck following Matrek piloting the tyrannosaurus-like machine.

While inside this alien machine, Matrek learned that there are other machines like this one and they were shown on the inside display panels, differentiating them from the actual biological creatures indigenous to the planet. This made it easier for the kids to locate and gain control of two other machines for Jaxton and Xaria.

Matrek chooses to stick with the tyrannosaurus-like machine that had nearly stomped him into the ground only days before. It's an athletic machine that can sprint at lightning speeds through the thick, Variian wilderness. It also features a "folded leg" beneath its tail that when deployed, can launch the vehicle hundreds of feet through the air, accomplishing incredible leaps forward. Being a kid, Matrek nicknames his machine: The THUNDER TOAD.

Jaxton captures a six-legged creature, which features a unique, hand-like limb on the front end of its body.

This hand-like limb is actually an array that can generate a powerful energy field that allows it to lift and rotate heavy objects without physically touching them through some form of quantum entanglement. It also comes equipped with a tentacle-like device in its trunk which features a laser that can cut through any material. He nicknames his machine: The QUANTUM SQUID.

Xaria captures a large, cat-like vehicle that is covered in extremely durable, bony armor. It's powerful, well-protected, and capable of pinning down both Matrek and Jaxton's machines with relative ease and agility. She nicknames her machine: The BEAST LION.

Little do they know that during their recent secret excursions into the woods, someone has been watching them. As they return to the settlement late one night, they are approached by a familiar face: AAJAY RAM (11), Kevin's son and Matrek's former best friend.

Nobody is more aware of Matrek's reckless behavior than Aajay, so he wants to know why they're leaving the settlement and what they're doing. The kids are apprehensive to tell him until Aajay threatens to tip off the security team about their activities. The kids fold and tell Aajay the truth about what they've discovered. Aajay is fascinated and excited by this revelation and promises to keep their secret only if they allow him to join them and hunt down the thing that put his father in a coma.

The kids agree and, that night, Matrek constructs another headband for Aajay.

For the next few weeks, the kids continue to train with their machines in secret. They try to find multiple machines for Aajay but he rejects all of them until he finds a daunting, praying mantis-like hexapod in a cave. This vehicle has the capability of generating millions of volts of electricity through its raptorial arms, unleashing it on whatever unfortunate target it clamps onto.

Aajay climbs inside the vehicle and begins to use some of his martial arts training that he accumulated over the years to take command of the most dextrous... and potentially most dangerous... vehicle in their fleet, which he nicknamed: The TERROR MANTIS.

Back at the Van Allen's residence, Matrek's parents don't ask many questions about his frequent absence. They're just happy that he's made some friends who are keeping him out of his room all day.

Once the kids feel confident enough in their ability to pilot the machines, they decide to let the rest of their society in on their secret with a grand unveiling: they will go to the settlement, in their machines, and exit from their jaws in front of everyone, showing their community what these "creatures" really are.

The day arrives and Matrek, Xaria, Jaxton, and Aajay approach the settlement in their machines, which alerts a response from the security team. Using his environmental suit's communication system, Matrek contacts the security team. "Do not fire. I repeat. Do not fire on these approaching creatures. I am Matrek Van Allen and we are under full control of these creatures." Matrek then requests that all of their parents be summoned to the MAIN ARBORETUM, which is completely surrounded by glass.

The security team, the kids' parents and many civilians gather inside the Arboretum and watch in terror through the glass as not one but four huge beasts approach the outside of the Arboretum, then stop, lower to the ground, and open their jaws to reveal the kids inside.

The four friends exit the cockpits and give a collective "Ta-da!" The crowd stare in disbelief. There is a lot for them to unpack in this moment. Matrek asks security to broadcast his comm signal to the crowd. The head of security switches his radio to broadcast mode. Matrek's voice echoes through the Arboretum. "These aren't animals. They're machines. Alien machines. We don't know who built them or why they are here but they are controlled by thought. And we humans can do it with these brainwave amplifiers that I made for my mobility suit."

Not thinking, Matrek takes a seat on a log and removes his headband to show the crowd.

In an instant, his machine rises to its feet, under its own control, and begins to stomp around snapping at the kids in their machines. The onlookers are terrified as Xaria, Jaxton, and Aajay try to control the wily Thunder Toad while Matrek is underfoot.

Matrek, thinking fast, quickly puts the headband back on his head and commands the Thunder Toad to lower itself and switch into its PILOT mode. The beast obliges.

This commotion doesn't come without its consequences, as an old foe returns from the woods to strike the settlement again: The Blackland Beast.

The wild creature begins to attack the four great machines instantly, which triggers a response from the security team.

Security fires upon it, which lures the dangerous beast towards the settlement. However, their gunfire inflicts no damage.

It appears on the kids' internal displays as another alien machine and not a living creature. They know at that moment that if they aren't able to stop it with their machines, nothing else will.

The kids proceed to fight a mucky, clumsy battle against the Blackland Beast. In minutes, they subdue the creature but all of their machines are damaged to some degree.

Aajay gets permission from the others to "finish" it off by grappling it and electrocuting it with over 25 million volts of electricity, blowing off its arms, tail, and head and turning it into a smoldering pile of scrap.

The kids power down and exit their machines as a suited security team exits the egress hatch near the Arboretum. They cautiously approach the remains of the Blackland Beast and open up the burnt hatch to find no occupant inside. It was either remote-controlled from a distant location or operated by some sort of artificial intelligence.

In the wake of this dramatic confrontation, the kids are subsequently taken into custody by the security team.

They are kept in a makeshift holding cell where the head of the security team, JAKOB MOMBASA (53), interrogates the kids and threatens to put them all under house arrest for not only disobeying the rules that forbid children from entering the marshlands but also for recklessly putting the entire settlement in danger.

In their defense, the kids remind the security officer of the magnitude of their discovery. These alien vehicles could be a key to the mystery of what is keeping the humans trapped on this planet. Maybe there is another component that is attacking their escape pods. They need to keep studying this alien technology to see if will lead them to what attacked their ships and eventually allow them to go home.

Jakob, understanding the gravity of this discovery, comes up with a new plan for their "punishment". Instead of putting the kids on house arrest, he's going to put them to work with the engineering team.

Their mission is to figure out what these machines are and if they can be used to improve their community's living situation around the settlement, and if they have anything to do with the missing escape pod and resupply ship.

The kids are excited but Jakob reminds them that this is not a reward. These attacking "creatures" that he now knows are machines, have been keeping him up at night as they had nothing in their arsenal to repel them. Until now.

In the lab, the Blackland Beast is in a variety of scorched pieces, undergoing scientific analysis. The engineering team learns that these vehicles are 100% electrically powered and draw their energy from a matter/anti-matter reactor, similar to the one that the humans used to propel their settlement ship from Earth to Variian.

As far as the user interfaces go, the headbands somehow connect to the central control system which is incredibly efficient. There are fluidic light display panels surrounding the pilot with a system of hieroglyphic symbols that Xaria has begun to loosely translate. They appear to be the same symbols as the ones in the hieroglyphics found on the damaged artifacts that she had been excavating.

The internal components feature no wires and appear to transmit electricity through fibrous circuits in the "skin" which covers the machine's metal "skeleton" and synthetic muscles. The skin routes the electrical pulses to stimulators located within the synthetic muscle fiber packs. This "synthetic musculature system" is very much like a biological animal and provides these machines with explosive reflex time and natural movements that would be impossible to perform with a traditional, motor or fluid drive system. If a part of the skin is cut or damaged, the current is immediately rerouted making these machines very hard to disable.

There are also a considerable number of sensory devices and an advanced communication system at its core, most likely to survey and sample its surroundings then transmit them to something or someone. They conclude that it appears to be a surveillance robot, purpose built to blend in with the indigenous life to be inconspicuous. But inconspicuous from whom?

The research team begins to refer to these vehicles the "Variian Autonomous Surveillance Units" or VASUs for short. However, the kids try to come up with a better name. Jaxton thinks they should go with something along the lines of "humanoids".

"I've got it! They're made of metal alloys so let's call them 'Metaloids'". Analyses find a mix of extremely porous and lightweight forms of 100% pure tungsten, magnesium and silicon used in their hulking frames.

"Metaloids just rolls off the tongue better than Variian Autonomous Surveillance Units!" - Jaxton

Although this technology is comprehensible by the settlement's scientists, they can't tell if these machines have been stomping around Variian for 10 years or 50,000 years, dating back to when human beings were still in hunter-gatherer tribes on Earth.

This is a sobering realization when they realize that the creators of these machines are potentially tens of thousands of years more technologically advanced than humanity.

Although much was learned about the Metaloids during their examination by the engineering team, it became clear that they were handling something they didn't fully understand.

During the analysis process of the destroyed vehicle, strange things began to occur in and around the settlement. The CORE INTELLIGENCE CONTROL UNITS, a universal computerized control device about the size of an adult fist that uses AI to autonomously control every device, vehicle, and piece of equipment in the settlement, started shutting down and rebooting spontaneously. This is highly unusual as these devices have been in use on Earth for decades and have been 100% reliable during their entire stay on Variian.

At the same time, a squat, 40-foot-long crocodilian-like creature had been caught on security cameras trying to claw its way through the bay doors of the research wing, where the destroyed Blackland Beast was being stored and examined.

This alarming phenomenon was enough to convince the research team that holding these "artifacts" within the base was proving to be a bit of a liability. So instead of storing the pieces within the vulnerable living structure, a mobile lab was set up outside which would then house the artifacts so that the engineering team could continue their research without affecting the CICUs.

Not long after constructing the mobile lab and transferring the destroyed Blackland Beast over, the tenacious crocodilian intruder breached the secure structure and dragged the battered hull and pieces into the bayou, never to be seen again.

The next day, the Metaloids were returned to the kids. Jakob resumed training Matrek and the others on how to carefully pilot their Metaloids alongside his security team without injuring anyone. Jakob, who was a former tank commander in the US Army, sees some combat potential in the Metaloids and their pilots and hopes that they can assist the security team in a variety of unusual tasks that they cannot currently accomplish.

Once he publicly announced that he would be starting a new division within the security team, specifically for the Metaloids, Jakob became overwhelmed with requests from every department asking for help.

This help included tasks like recovering stranded high-value equipment in the woods and, with the loss of their communication satellites, setting up radio towers in the bayou to improve the range of communication outside of the settlement.

Metaloids Battalion One, a newly appointed title, was in serious demand, although they haven't yet proven themselves in a single mission.

At the end of weeks of intense training, Jakob was ultimately successful in synchronizing his security team's operating procedures and tactics in tandem with the kids piloting the Metaloids.

Any doubt that the adult security members had with the kids' abilities to work alongside them was dashed after running several "mock missions" flawlessly.

Now that Jakob feels confident in their abilities, he authorizes their first actual mission which addresses the worrying food shortage issues at their settlement:

The Xenobiology division, which is led by a hot-shot, Australian scientist named JAINA WALLACE (27), has discovered a breed of indigenous, Mangrove tree, which they have named the "HOBBA TREE".

This particular plant is of interest to the Xenobiology department because it produces a highly nutritious, sweet, sap that can be consumed by humans and can be used as a nutritional supplement in a variety of foods.

The plan is to set up a variety of taps and barrels on the trees and then transport the liquid back to the settlement for refinement.

Metaloids Battalion One is being requested to work alongside Jakob's personnel to escort the Xenobiology team in TAMURA WOLVERINES, a class of screw-propelled amphibious trucks, to the mangrove swamps to place their equipment.

MB1's (Metaloids Battalion One) main duty is security detail, as they are expecting a hostile confrontation from the "wild Metaloids". The kids know from experience that these machines tend to be provoked when their territory is damaged in any way.

However, this time, they feel more confident in their "Metaloid Dispatching Abilities" than they did before. Their training with the security team and the lessons they learned from destroying the "Blackland Beast" give them the self-assuredness they need to face whatever foes they may encounter in the Variian bogs.

Shortly after they arrive at the first HOBBA tree site, Jakob's team begins drilling into the first few trees and, within ten minutes right on queue, the convoy is attacked by three hostile, "Wild Metaloids". Although the kids' machines are slightly scarred from their last encounter, they are able to use their Metaloids defensively against the autonomously-controlled Metaloids.

The combat between them is intense. MB1 uses their claws, jaws, talons, and tails to melee their equally-equipped opponents. As they begin to render each of the attacking machines inoperative, Matrek's mind drifts and he begins to have a flashback to the day of the accident, and how he wished he had never taken the LOAD LIFTER out for that joy-ride.

His mind is jarred back to reality when his Metaloid stops responding, lowers down and powers off its controls. The last of the three attacking Metaloids pounces on Matrek's Thunder Toad and begins tearing into its body. By the time the team could reach it, the attacker inflicted considerable damage. Luckily, Matrek remained safe in the cockpit.

The kids subdue the last of the attackers and radio over to Matrek to make sure he is okay. He replies with a forced, "Yessss".

The mission is immediately changed from tapping the HOBBA trees to a recovery mission as there may be more attacking Metaloids on their way after hearing all of the commotion. The team now has a member down and vulnerable to attack.

Matrek is angry at himself for letting this happen. He now knows that it was his thoughts that made his Metaloid shut down and jeopardized the whole mission. Even more important, his mistake could have severely injured his friends and colleagues...or worse.

Matrek tried but could not reactivate his Metaloid so he remained inside as his friends hauled it back to the base to see if it could be repaired.

They radio ahead and the settlement's top technicians and mechanics rush to SERVICE GARAGE 2 to meet the Metaloids crew, watching with concern through the observation room windows as Matrek's ravaged Thunder Toad is dragged inside.

The garage closes and re-pressurizes and the crew immediately exits the observation lounge and descends on the wreckage. Matrek angrily exits the machine and joins his friends in the observation room. The technicians use LOAD LIFTERS to move limbs around to look inside as they assess the damage and take notes.

After a short period of time, the technical crew gather together, have a brief discussion while nodding frequently, then walk over to the kids who are waiting in the observation room. They deliver the bad news: Matrek's Metaloid is non-repairable because the settlement doesn't carry any viable replacement parts. Matrek will have to find a new machine. He is devastated.

If Matrek is unable to find another Thunder Toad in the wild, he will have to settle on a completely new machine where he will need to re-learn how to control it all over again.

Matrek is hit hard by the news. It dredges up the feelings from the accident that he caused years before that left his best friend's father in a coma and him paralyzed from the waist down.

But this incident...this failure...was very public. The entire settlement was depending on this mission, watching it closely and they relied on Matrek for help. He questions whether he should be a part of this team, or whether he can ever trust *himself* again.

People from the settlement gathered around the Garage looking through the glass at the wrecked Metaloid as it is dragged outside by a load lifter and left in a heap outside the door. Jaxton, visibly upset, asks Matrek what happened out there. Why did he shut his machine down in the middle of a fight?

Matrek stares at his Metaloid in silence, then his eyes widen in shock, "What is THAT?"

The same crocodilian-like creature that they had seen once before emerges from the bayou, and approaches Matrek's destroyed Thunder Toad. It deploys a long, tentacle-like tongue that grabs onto the Thunder Toad's tail and hauls it onto its back. Jaxton's security team runs to the inside of the garage door, fumbling to put on their environmental suits, weapons drawn, preparing for another attack.

But instead, the crocodile begins to slink away slowly into the bayou with Matrek's machine. Security stands down. Xaria whispers to her friends, "Follow me, guys. I have an idea." They plan to sneak out and follow the crocodile and see where it's going.

Matrek and the kids quietly slip out of Garage 2 and run down the corridor to VEHICLE BAY 6. They hop in a Tamura Wolverine and quickly set out to follow the creature, who seems unfazed by their presence.

After what seemed like an hour, the crocodile leads them to the top of an 80-foot-wide, perfectly symmetrical stone platform in the ground, then stops. The kids stop behind it. The platform starts to descend deep into the ground. The four kids' eyes widen as a MASSIVE subterranean facility is revealed.

The facility is as long as a football field and features an ceiling with egg-shaped alcoves that stretch to the end of the facility. There are Metaloids and parts stored everywhere; on the floors, in the sides of the walls, and even hanging off of the ceiling on metal pads which feature glowing, red hieroglyphs. The Crocodile-like machine continues its way up an aisle toward a raised pad in the center of the complex.

It slides the Thunder Toad down onto the pad and slinks away. A large circular device with flexible tentacles and arms drops down from one of the ceiling alcoves and begins to open up the Metaloid with incredible speed. The skin is first removed exposing the mechanical inner structure. Multiple beams of light sweep over the wreckage as components begin to appear through circular platforms in the floor, elevating through openings, like a camera's iris.

One of the legs is quickly removed and replaced while the damaged leg is placed on one of the flat sections by another arm, and quickly descends while opening closes behind it. The kids were in awe.

While the kids are witnessing this marvel of technology, Xaria turns her attention to some of the hieroglyphics displayed on the platforms on which the other Metaloids are positioned: She pointed to each and said out loud, "Heal. Rest. I believe 'heal' means 'repair' and 'rest' means to 'store' it."

"This must be some kind of automated maintenance building for the Metaloids, and that the crocodilian machine that hauled Matrek's Thunder Toad and Blackland Beast away is part of this autonomous maintenance process that keeps the machines functioning", Xaria exclaimed.

While the official name of facilities like this is "DUMBs". (Deep Underground Military Bases), the kids nickname this facility "The Bat-Cave" as the Metaloids hanging upside-down from the ceiling remind them of bats hanging upside-down in caves.

A metallic clank and whirring sound draws the kids' attention back to the tentacled machine which had retracted back into the ceiling. It had repaired and replaced the skin on Matrek's Thunder Toad making it appear completely normal again! Through its open mouth, the inner cockpit of the Metaloid lights up and the great mechanical beast slowly rises to its feet and walks toward Matrek. Matrek smiles as if seeing an old friend. He thinks about sitting in the cockpit and the machine complies and drops its head to the ground. Matrek climbs inside and they walk with the Thunder Toad back to the main elevator platform on which they rode down to The Bat Cave. The platform rises back to the surface and the four friends rush back to the base with quite a story to tell.

The next day, the MBI team meets with Jakob's security team and the base's technicians and engineers who can't believe their eyes when they see Matrek's repaired Metaloid. They realize at that point that these machines could keep going indefinitely, and this could be a problem. So, Jakob organizes and dispatches several research teams to the DUMB FACILITY to learn more about it and see if it could be shut down in any way. At least one of the kids had to accompany each team in their Metaloid in order to activate the elevator platform down to the Bat Cave.

After many days and repeated trips, the teams were unable to find any mechanisms inside of the alien structure that could disable its operation. The technology was far too advanced to decipher. They were left with one option; brute force. So, the demolition team was called in to blow the elevator platform and shaft up completely and cut off their ability to enter or exit the underground.

After loading an enormous amount of charges on the platform, the team set off a massive explosion but the elevator shaft remained undamaged. Disappointed and distracted by the unmarked platform, the humans overlooked the fact that their act provoked an incredibly hostile reaction from the local Metaloids that were on patrol around the facility. The teams hastily retreat to the base and outrun the attacking Metaloids who break off their pursuit.

Over the following days, the research teams pool their readings and conclude that the exterior of the DUMB FACILITY elevator is made of an unknown and extremely durable material that cannot be destroyed by any conventional human means, making this facility an unfortunate "fact of life" for the people of this Settlement, who feel as if they are living next to a "lion's den" supplying a never-ending stream of super-predators to flood the forests surrounding their home.

Despite this daunting reality, the success of Metaloid Battalion One's first mission spreads throughout the community like wildfire. Although there is a malevolent, unseen force that is keeping humanity on this planet, they no longer feel helpless in fighting against it.

More resources and personnel are put into studying and storing the Metaloids. Even though keeping the machines near the settlement is coming with bizarre consequences which are similar, if not worse, than they were while housing the wreckage of the Blackland Beast only a few weeks before.

Random Core Intelligence Units are still crashing repeatedly on random equipment causing system and vehicle malfunctions around the base.

The crocodile-like, recovery vehicles, were officially named "Recovery Dragons" and are now appearing in droves, causing serious damage to the outside of VEHICLE BAY 6 in which the kids' Metaloids are being stored.

To add to the strangeness, the Metaloids themselves are often **heard speaking with each other at night in an incoherent language**. This disturbs the night staff so much that many of the security team members have begged for shift changes and even re-assignment into another department.

Even more outrageous is that some exterior patrol teams have reported seeing a vague, "insect-like" humanoid figure darting around the perimeter of the base. Spying on them.

Jakob is not sure if he should take these claims seriously. He suspects that his crew is "just seeing things" from the additional workload these strange machines have put them under. However, to air on the side of caution, he does make a report each time there is a sighting of this strange being.

Although the kids' captured Metaloids are humanity's best chance at defending themselves and learning more about the force that is keeping them trapped on Variian, they are still quite eerie, unpredictable vehicles, seemingly with a mind of their own, appearing and behaving more like wild animals than actual machines.

The stress that the Metaloids are putting on Jakob and his team makes him question whether they should even be using them at all. That is until Jaina Wallace, from the Xeno-Biology team, offers to resign from her current assignment to work full-time with Jakob and Metaloids Battalion One.

After witnessing the success of the subsequent Hobba Tree sap extraction missions, she firmly believes that the Metaloids, although burdensome, will lead the settlers to the future they have all been dreaming of.

Jakob accepts her offer.

The first order of business between Jakob and Jaina is to work with the infrastructure department to build a "housing solution" for the Metaloids that is separate from the rest of the Settlement.

The Recovery Dragons, although short and slow, are doing serious damage to the outside of the equipment storage wing in which the kids' Metaloids are stored. There is a growing concern that the Dragons will eventually breach the walls and get inside.

Unfortunately due to the limited construction supplies available, building another large, secure storage structure is not an option. Unless they have the kids working around the clock purely to protect the equipment storage wing, the Dragons will eventually force their way in. The plan is shelved.

As the morning sun breaks through the glass dome of the Arboretum, a group of botanists are tending to the plants that were brought from Earth, carefully measuring water levels, nutrients, and soil acidity.

Something catches the eye of one of the botanists as a boom is heard above. He gasps as a CIGAR-SHAPED VESSEL, the size of a football field, tumbles from the sky above the Settlement and breaks into two pieces before crashing only a half mile away, shaking the settlement's structures.

Both sections of the crashed ship attract the attention of a few roaming Metaloids who attempt to disassemble the craft as if they were part of a clean-up crew.

Jakob fears that these might be piloted craft and there may be survivors inside who are in danger. He quickly debriefs a research team, the kids' Metaloid Battalion One team, and a security team to surround both sections of the ship and protect it from the wild Metaloids as a research team assesses the alien ship.

A nervous excitement abounds as they arrive at the first section of the alien craft. As the kids and security team successfully stop the wild Metaloids from disassembling the ship, the research team enters each end of the structures on foot through doors that are smaller than human-sized doors.

They quickly conclude that this was one ship that broke apart into two sections for an unknown reason. The first segment contains an open, multi-level cargo section with strange equipment and provisions. In the second segment, there are thousands of what appear to be cryogenic pods housing amphibian-like humanoids kept in suspended animation.

Surprisingly, all of the occupants appear to have survived the crash and there is still power being supplied to both sections of the ship through multiple independent power supplies.

As they venture deeper into the first segment of the ship, they come upon a relatively large blast hole in the side of what looks to be the "engine room" of the vessel.

They begin to wonder if the same intelligence that shot down Escape Pod #442 could also be responsible for shooting down this vessel.

Outside, Matrik radios the security team. "I think we may have a bigger problem." He points out the fact that the Metaloids that they just disabled will soon be picked up by Recovery Dragons who will haul them off to The Bat Cave.

"This crash site is now known to them and, once these machines are repaired, they will return to this site to continue disassembling the crashed ship, endangering the lives of these life forms in stasis."

Just leaving the destroyed Metaloids here is not an option and neither is bringing them back to the Settlement, but after looking at the section of the craft that the machines were trying to disassemble, they were surprised at how little damage was done to it.

Still, though, even with the protection of this ultra-durable material, the relentless wild Metaloids would eventually find a way inside and expose the helpless survivors within to the elements.

It's a difficult situation but Jakob takes the kids inside the massive, vacant section of the ship and asks them a question:

"When you followed that recovery dragon into the DUMB FACILITY, how many Metaloids did you think were stored in there?"

Xaria answers, *"Over a hundred. Maybe a hundred and fifty."*

Jakob returns to the outside of the ship with the kids where the rest of the security team awaits his next instructions.

He tells them all that something has been keeping him awake for days about this situation with the Metaloids; no matter how many times you destroy these machines, there is an infrastructure in place that will repair and redeploy them for an assumedly infinite amount of times. This guarantees that the human settlers will never be safe in the forests surrounding their new home.

However, there was something interesting that he noticed about the recovery dragons: When the kids destroyed the Blackland Beast and his security team stored it within their settlement, the recovery dragon, who had come for it, had no interest in attacking the humans like the other machines.

Instead, it only appeared to be focused on one thing and one thing only, and that was to bring the damaged Metaloid back to its repair facility.

Even when the kids and his team followed the Recovery Dragon to the DUMB FACILITY, it didn't even acknowledge them. In fact, it seemed almost oblivious that they were even there.

Best of all, Recovery Dragons are also extremely slow-moving, show no signs of aggression, and do not appear to have any offensive capabilities to defend themselves whatsoever.

Jakob presents to the group his theory that the aliens who built these machines might have a logistical system on Variian that is similar to the one he was a part of while serving in the 1st armored division back on Earth.

Some people in the security team begin to look at him cockeyed.

"Just bear with me here, people." He continues.

"In the early part of this century, aside from the main battle tanks that civilians are familiar with which sport massive cannons and machine guns, our Army also employed a variety of other armored vehicles that have no offensive capabilities but were used purely to keep the war machine running wherever they are.

Some of these vehicles are used to lay bridges, deliver fuel, and carry troops, and when a main battle tank broke down on the battlefields of Earth, they wouldn't send in another main battle tank to rescue it, they would instead deploy an M88AX HERCULES, which was essentially a tank crossed with a tow truck, to perform a heavy recovery."

He continues to explain that the Hercules had virtually no offensive capabilities but it was equipped with a 70-ton crane that would allow it to haul damaged vehicles, across enemy lines, to the nearest barracks so that they could be repaired and then re-deployed in as little time as possible.

Jakob believes the Metaloids they are both piloting and fighting against, the "dangerous kind", are like the "main battle tanks" of this alien military, which were built purely to attack the outsiders who threaten the animal life on this planet.

And the Recovery Dragons are like the "M88AX HERCULES" of this planet, and their only function is to bring Metaloids, which have been destroyed, to a facility where they can be repaired and redeployed to their combat area.

This meant that the only threat the Recovery Dragons pose to humans is by assisting in the repair of the dangerous machines.

It is also his supposition that since there is such a significant effort put forward by these aliens into recovering these downed "combat-oriented" Metaloids, it implies that there might only be a limited supply of units in this area.

If he is correct on this, this would mean that the DUMB FACILITY, into which the kids followed the Recovery Dragon, might be the only source of where **all** of these Metaloids are coming from.

"And even though we lack the destructive capability to destroy the elevator shaft which leads to the DUMB FACILITY, we do have the ability to drain the facility of its vehicles." Jakob pauses, expecting everyone to follow what he is proposing.

A security team member slowly raises his hand. "Are you proposing that we..."

Jakob interrupts, "YES. If we were to round up and disable all of the "combat-oriented" Metaloids in the area, we could then drag them off into the vacant section of the alien ship to contain them in one spot."

"Then, all we would have to worry about is the recovery dragons, which should be an easy lunch for the kids and their trained Metaloids at their current skill level."

One of the team members expressed concern that the Recovery Dragons could hurt the Amphibian alien survivors in the other half of the downed craft, but Jakob asserts that these Dragons are purpose built for recovery of Metaloids only, and they will leave the aliens alone, just as the humans were left alone by them while they were storing the Blackland Beast in their base.

Others express concerns over the ethics of commandeering the ship belonging to these defenseless aliens without their permission, but Jakob asserts that this is the most effective and safest plan they've got to defend against the Metaloid attack vehicles.

"If this plan is successful, we will no longer have to face off against the equally equipped, dangerous, "combat-oriented" Metaloids ever again."

"Once we burn through the 150-unit reserve in the DUMB FACILITY and take out the recovery dragons who come for them, we'll be able to secure the forest surrounding the settlement. This means that we won't have to live in fear of these things anymore."

To give them all additional peace of mind about the welfare of the Amphibian beings, Jakob orders the security team to set up a couple of trail cameras around the area with 24/7 live feed to the settlement. The second the recovery dragons try to get into the vacant section of the ship, he will be able to dispatch the kids in Metaloid Battalion One to intercept them.

It's a bold and risky plan but the security and research teams agree to go forward with it.

That weekend, the teams converge in the area surrounding the crashed alien ship and create as much noise and commotion that they possibly can. And, as planned, the combat Metaloids burst through the foliage and attack the nearest team member's vehicle. The kids in their trained Metaloids quickly respond with a co-ordinated attack. Matrek's Thunder Toad leaps 80 feet and lands on top of the attacker, pinning it to the ground where Aajay's Terror Mantis sends a massive electric charge through its body.

One-by-one, the kids disable each attacker, almost in a choreographed dance, while members of the security and research teams drag the lifeless machines away to the empty craft.

Since the man-doors are too small to pull the carcasses of the destroyed Metaloids through, they use the blast hole on the side of the ship as their point of access to bring the machines inside.

Luckily for them, whatever weapon was used to shoot the ship out of the sky was powerful enough to not only cut through the exterior of the vehicle but also cut through the "engine room" and into the vacant storage area that they need to access.

The noisy battle seems to go on for an hour as the commotion draws a steady stream of attacking Metaloids, all of which are effectively disabled and dragged off to the inside of the large alien ship. Once no more show up, Jaxton uses the quantum entanglement array and laser on his Quantum Squid to electrically weld shut the blast hole with some of the debris from the crash.

Metaloid Battalion One aptly names this section of the ship "THE VAULT" due to its new role in their society as a bank safe for their valuable and dangerous asset: The Metaloids.

Right on queue, the Recovery Dragons slowly plod through the surrounding foliage and converge on THE VAULT but are unable to gain access, bumping up against the makeshift door repeatedly, as if confused.

Everyone cheers. It looks like Jakob's plan is a success!

That night, Matrek is in bed staring at his ceiling, pondering what has happened over the last few weeks. All of these changes around the settlement have taken Matrek's life in a completely different direction.

In this time, he has gone from being the reason why people felt hopeless on Variian, to the reason why they felt hopeful. A social outcast, to a local hero.

Everything was looking up for Matrek and his friends, yet he remains troubled. He is still kept awake night after night, wondering who built these machines and why they're keeping the humans from leaving. He revisits that fateful night in the Load Lifter that led to Kavin Ram's injury and coma. Surging guilt floods his mind like the tides back on Earth. Almost in a panic, he immediately fights these thoughts off because they almost caused their first mission to fail.

Matrek's internal struggle is becoming apparent to his friends and it is beginning to raise doubt in their minds about his future with the Metaloids team. Even Jakob begins to take notice. They are all concerned that Matrek's internal struggle and negative thoughts could once again get in the way of him piloting the Thunder Toad during a critical mission.

What Matrek fails to realize is that his weakness is a strength. Every time he fails at something, it just makes him more determined to improve his abilities, making it less likely that he will make that mistake again.

With this determination, Matrek works all day and night, sometimes foregoing sleep and food, to study the cockpit controls of the Metaloids with Xaria, accessing systems and information that are projected onto the insides of the viewports.

But, even with all of these efforts, they keep reaching dead ends. There's only so much that the alien hardware and language can tell them about the mysterious history of their creators. Why were these things built? What is their true purpose? Is someone watching us through these machines?

Matrek becomes obsessed with these thoughts that haunt him through his waking hours.

He frequently falls asleep at his desk, in his bedroom, or at the workstation he set up in the Vault. He begins to let go of his last hope of making any more progress. Then, one night, he falls asleep with his headband on, and the strange dreams begin...

Like holographic images, he is shown technical details of the Metaloids inner design. He is guided by a presence in his dream through the machinery components. Then, he is shrunk down to a micro scale and can see how individual electrons move through modules containing a network of crisscrossing grids of micron-sized filaments that direct these electrons to one of three switch-like paths.

One path is true, the second is false, and the third is uncertain. He is told that this is how the Metaloids "think". Like a brain, its thinking is based on physical connections, like neurons, but more complex. It is a highly advanced and efficient form of Artificial Intelligence.

He is then transported in his dream out of the Metaloid and into other DUMB FACILITIES that are located around the planet. He sees hundreds of other Metaloids hanging in storage. There's a flash and he is teleported into the planet's past, seeing frightening glimpses of the Metaloids and a race of strange, human-looking aliens embroiled in a war for control of a crystalline city. In the dream, Matrek is strapped in and piloting a Metaloid, running from multiple alien craft, closing in from above, firing energy beams at his vehicle. One strikes his Metaloid directly and it begins to ignite. Matrek feels the intense heat penetrating the hull and screams as the cockpit vaporizes around him...

Matrek yells out loud and suddenly awakens from his disturbing dream. Shaking, he quickly sits up and turns his light on. Breathing heavily, he whispers, "What was THAT?" He has never experienced a dream that vivid and real.

Matrek thought, "This did NOT feel like a dream. It felt like I was there. Wait. WAS this a dream? How do I know SO much about the technology now? And those filaments carrying electrons!"

He makes a revelation, "I know how these Metaloids work!" Somehow, the answers to the questions that Matrek so desperately sought seem to have been downloaded into his brain through this dream. He reaches for his portable communicator on his side table and begins to frantically record the information from this dream before he forgets. It takes hours to record what he has learned.

In the ensuing weeks, Matrek continues to wear his headband to bed and the dreams continue to occur, but they get more complex. He can hardly keep up with this new information, but he continues to record everything after waking, and then applies this newly acquired knowledge to his work with Xaria on the Metaloids. She is amazed and perplexed by Matrek's newfound insight. "How can you know so much about this technology all of a sudden, Matrek? I don't get it."

Matrek just shrugs and quips, "I think about this stuff 24-7. Or...should I say 42-7", referring to Variian's 42 hour day.

His joking can only hide so much. Word begins to spread about their new discoveries with the Metaloid technology and Matrek is pulled aside and questioned by Jakob and the leaders of the science and technician teams. He reluctantly divulges the source of his newfound insight.

They conclude that Matrek must be communicating with his personal Metaloid and obtaining this information from the vehicle's memory banks through his headband. And, if this is the case, his Metaloid must've been involved in a brutal, ancient, alien war.

They decide to assign the settlement's best scientists and technicians to work with Matrek and Xaria as Matrek continues to relay the downloaded information as fast as he receives it. The teams can barely keep up with the flow of highly complex information that is being relayed by this 11-year-old boy. Everyone's understanding of the Metaloids and their operation improves exponentially.

With each passing night, the dreams intensify, becoming more transparent. Matrek begins to hear a voice speaking to him in the dreams. It sounds female, soothing. It offers explanations of what he is seeing in his dream.

Tonight, like every other night, Matrek donned his headband and went to bed. This time, there were no dreams. He sleeps deeply for hours until he wakes up in the middle of the night.

With his eyes only partially open, he glances around his room and begins to slowly close his eyes. The jarring sight of a silhouetted figure of a young girl standing on the other side of his room makes him pop his head up. Matrek blinks hard, thinking he is just seeing things. But, as his eyes adjust, a jolt of fear runs through his body, making his scalp tingle. This figure is REAL. It appears to be a young "girl" and, as she steps forward, he realizes that she isn't human!

The being looks to be around Matrek's age, if she were human. Her skin is pale and smooth. She has long, shimmering, silver-blond hair. Her facial features are small, with the exception of two large, cat-like eyes with stunning amber-colored irises.

Matrek recoils in fear, covering his head with his blanket, too afraid to call out to his parents. The being speaks to him in a soothing voice, *"Please no fear... You are safe..."*.

Matrek wasn't sure of what he just heard. He holds his breath to listen.

The being speaks again, *"Please no fear... You are safe..."*

A wave of calm washes over him. He slowly pulls the covers down and looks straight at the being, "Are you real? Who...who are you? How did you get in here?"

"My name is ASHNAA" (11) <Pronounced ahzsh-NAAH>. "Please no fear. You are safe."

Matrek is not sure if he is dreaming. He rubs his eyes hard and squints, intently staring at her.

The alien female speaks in broken English with a slight accent.

"I mean you no harm. I am here to help you. Are you understanding my speaking? This is not communication way for us."

Then, she stops speaking out loud. Matrek can "hear" her speaking in his head. She has switched to a telepathic form of communication and begins "speaking" in perfect English in Matrek's head.

Ashnaa explains that she is the reason for the "dreams" he's been having. And that they are actually telepathic communications that her species has been broadcasting to him from their home city, located a short distance from their settlement.

She continues, "I am not here in this place with you. You see picture of me in your mind."

Ashnaa explains that her people have been on Variian for a very long time and have information to share with the humans about the machines they are piloting and who their creators are.

"Our people are called ORCHINAX and, like your people, we are trapped on this world by the same people who stopped your...craft... from leaving this planet."

"Escape Pod #42.", Matrek sighs sadly.

Ashnaa looks sad for a moment, "Yes. You and your people are in much danger and need to use our information wisely to survive here." She repeats, "I am here to help you."

Ashnaa explains that if her species, THE ORCHINAX, and the Humans worked together, they might be able to overcome this unseen repressive force which is keeping both species trapped on Variian.

"I must go from here now. I will return." In an instant, Ashnaa fades and disappears. Not only does Matrek see her disappear, but he *feels* her disappear because of the deep neural connection that was established.

For the next 12 nights, Matrek wears his headband to bed and Ashnaa returns. She provides even more technical details about the Metaloids - some things that Matrek doesn't understand - but he makes notes and delivers this information to the technical teams.

However, Matriek tells no one that he is now being visited by an alien hologram, with whom he is communicating and obtaining this valuable information.

One of the most critical pieces of information provided was how to access the Metaloid's core operating system and put the machines into a "Storage Mode", which is how they are kept in the DUMB FACILITIES. This discovery allows the settlers to house their fully functional Metaloids safely within the Settlement's walls without the need to disassemble them or chain them to the floor.

This also gives the settlers the potential to store additional Metaloids inside the Vault. Eventually, they will be able to expand their Metaloid program beyond just a few pilots with a few machines.

A new week begins and Phase 1 of Jakob's new plan gets underway. The construction department is working with MB1 to install heavily fortified "elephant doors" on the side of the Vault which will allow the Metaloids to move freely in and out of the structure.

As an added safety precaution, the elephant doors operate off of a "purely mechanical" opening and closing system that is free of any automation or unknown control. This was in response to the frequent hacking attempts made by the recovery dragons into the UIU system.

Although this gives the settlers the peace of mind they need to ensure that the doors won't spontaneously open on their own, it becomes the only facility within the Settlement that does not have one of the humans' "smart system" modules running it.

This means that the elephant doors cannot be controlled remotely from the security team's office in the Settlement. The only way those doors can be opened is if someone is outside, suited up, physically at the Vault to open them.

After the success of Phase 1, Phase 2 begins. A few of the disabled Metaloids will be pulled into the base to be repaired and used by additional settlers to join the Metaloid Battalion Team.

To achieve this, the security crew arrives at The Vault and opens the fortified doors allowing only two of the recovery dragon retrieval units to enter and haul two disabled Metaloids back to the nearby DUMB FACILITY. They quickly lock the elephant doors behind them.

Phase 3 begins the next day and the kids navigate their Metaloids to the mangrove and stomp around to make noise.

And, right on queue, the two newly repaired Metaloids appear and attack. The kids quickly pin them to the ground and, with their newfound knowledge, switch them into "Storage Mode" completely shutting them down without damaging them. The security team loads the machines onto Amphibious trucks and hauls them back to the Settlement.

These "non-lethal captures" continue with the other wild Metaloids eventually providing the Settlement with a full fleet of functional machines in reserve to be used whenever they are needed.

More importantly, they've removed the threat of these wild machines from the surrounding forest.

Ashnaa continues to visit Matrek nightly in her mentally projected form. In addition to technical information about the Metaloids, Ashnaa begins teaching Matrek about the history of the conflict between her people, the Orchinax, and the aliens who built the machines, whose name loosely translates to "THE NEIGHBORHOOD" and the "SURFACE WAR" which was waged between them.

"The Neighborhood is a multi-planetary, military order of extremists who believe that they are on a 'divine mission' to educate other civilizations on how to evolve spiritually."

She continues, "Although the Neighborhood insists that their intentions are well-meaning, they do not give outsiders a choice in whether or not they want to participate in this "spiritual evolution". Instead, the Neighborhood installs covert military systems, like sentries...the Metaloids, on desirable worlds, such as this one. They try to monitor and scare "emerging space civilizations", like humanity and the Orchinax, and control them until they comply."

To give Matrek a familiar frame of reference, she compares the Neighborhood to a spider.

"Your Earth spiders can only capture and consume their prey because the prey did not see the trap it fell into."

This information disturbs Matrek, but Ashnaa insists that they must keep going forward with their work together if either species wants to have any hope of an escape from Variian.

Matrek is suddenly startled by the sound of the Settlement's main alarm system blaring and the flashing red emergency light on the control panel beside his door. Ashnaa's eyes widen as her image fades and disappears. Matrek scrambles to strap into his mobility suit to see what is going on.

A freak accident has occurred in the settlement's freshwater-distillation facility, where a technician was mauled in a holding tank by a 20 foot long, semi-aquatic amphibian resembling a Salamander, known as a "Hellbender".

This creature and three others, have somehow bypassed all of the filtration systems leading to the distillation facility and have now become trapped inside the tanks, posing a serious risk of cutting off the freshwater supply to the entire settlement if they reproduce.

It's too dangerous to use conventional machinery or poison to remove them from the tanks, so the Security Team recruits Metaloids Battalion One to extract the aggressive creatures with their machines.

The kids jump into their Metaloids and, one by one, they carefully remove the Hellbenders from the holding tanks and relocate them to a distant pond away from the settlement's main water supply lake named "Ruby Lake", due to its deep red color.

With the threat removed, an investigation is launched by the Xenobiology team. They conclude that these Hellbenders hatched from eggs that had made their way inside the tanks. But how? There is heavy filtration and treatment systems that are continually monitored and controlled by a Core Intelligence Unit (CIU).

The Engineering team is brought into the investigation and they pour through the CIU control logs. To their dismay, they discover that someone manually entered a command a month ago to temporarily bypass the filtration systems, allowing the Hellbender's eggs to be sucked into the tanks.

Until now, people believed that the cause of the electronic malfunctions in the base was the work of the wild Metaloids. But, with the discovery of this manual input command made while the wild Metaloids were still disabled and locked inside the Vault, the engineers conclude that the Metaloids were not responsible for these spontaneous crashes and reboots of their CIU systems. It appears that there is a saboteur in their midst.

Variian Day 299

With the wild Metaloids captured and stored, Jakob struggles to stay on top of the growing list of requests from the various departments who need the help of Metaloids Battalion One. The kids are having to work long hours and are beginning to burn out. The mental focus needed to operate these machines is exhausting for a human.

The parents see the excessive strain on their kids, as well as the time away from home and education programs so they collectively approach the settlement's leadership and give an ultimatum; either they give their kids a break, or they will pull them out of the MB1 program. Leadership reluctantly capitulates and orders the head of security, Jakob, to either recruit more help or scale back the MB1 program. Jakob opts to recruit more help because the Metaloid program is far too valuable to scale back. He puts the word out to the settlement that they are recruiting new young pilots for a second team of human-operated Metaloids.

The official announcement is made and 34 kids, with their parents' permission, apply to be Metaloids pilots. Even Jakob's daughter, ROCHELLE (8), shows an interest. Although she is too young and small right now, a "Metaloids Mentorship" program is set up where she and a select few promising future pilots learn about how to pilot the machines in simulators.

Six weeks pass as the applicants are rigorously tested and screened. After a final scoring of knowledge and actual testing in a real Metaloid, the top 4 students are selected for Metaloids Battalion 2, while the others remain in training.

Metaloids Battalion One scales back on their efforts. While Jaxton and Aajay train the new batch of Metaloids pilots, Xaria and Matrek continue their research on the machines. Matrek's deep, seemingly innate, knowledge of the machines begins to trouble Xaria.

"How do you know so much about these machines, Matrek? You know things that our engineers don't even know." - Xaria.

Matrek is guarded, fearing that telling Xaria the truth about his and Ashnaa's secret conversations will make her think that he's losing his mind.

He responds, "I don't know how but...I just know. Maybe it's because I have more experience with these headsets than anyone else and I'm able to tap into these machines a little deeper."

Xaria nods and seems content with his answer. Matrek is relieved.

Variian Day 320

The investigation into the sabotage of the filtration system remains ongoing. Nobody in the settlement is claiming responsibility, whether it be intentional or accidental, and none of the logs can be traced to an individual.

Late one night, LUCY DELOITTE (23), a junior member of the security team is scrubbing through the weeks of surveillance camera footage prior to the incident. She is beginning to doze off when something startles her. Lucy grabs her communicator and calls Jakob, waking him up.

"You need to come to the security office right away, sir. I found something on the footage. You need to see this!"
"Be right there.", Jakob replied unemotionally.

Jakob arrives and pulls up a chair in front of the monitor so he can look more closely at the screen.

"I almost missed it, but look at this thing. This was taken during the night of the UIU incident." Lucy plays the video.

Jakob squints and moves closer to the screen. His eyes widen and he snaps back from the screen as a frightening, insect-like humanoid enters the frame, skulking around the perimeter of the base. The creature matched the description of the one reported by his exterior patrol teams. As it moves toward the camera, it begins to pixelate and distort.

"Ahh...a bad camera. Figures. Switch to the other camera outside the equipment hangar so we can get a closer look."
Lucy switches to the other camera.

The strange creature approaches that camera and it, too, begins to pixelate and distort, as if it's being subjected to interference.

"This is not a camera failure. That thing is interfering with our cameras! It's trying to hide its presence. And why would it do that? It's either trying to spy on us or it's up to no good."
He looks at Lucy. "I think we found our filtration system saboteur."

Jakob briefs his security team and they decide to keep it quiet, for now, to avoid panic amongst the rest of the civilian population. Instead, they quietly upgrade their "night-shift" security measures to keep this creature out.

Variian Day 322

Matrek, once again, is visited Ashnaa. She warns Matrek that the Neighborhood is very angry at the humans for hijacking elements of their weapon system, the Metaloids, and fears what they might do. She is concerned that Matrek, specifically, will become a target for the Neighborhood.

"The only way we will be able to stop this threat from the Neighborhood is to work together. Humans and Orchinax." Matrek now has no other option but to disclose his big secret to his community.

Matrek is not sure what concerns him more - the reaction he will receive when he tells his friends and it upsets them that he kept this secret from them or the reaction from the base's leadership. "Will they think I've lost my mind and take my personal Metaloid away from me? Or, if they believe me, will they punish me for a breach of security by speaking with an unknown alien?"

Plus, his "less-than-stellar" performance in Metaloid operation has already put him in a "high risk" category and telling Jakob that he talks every night with an alien girl who speaks to him through his mind might be the final straw that gets him kicked out of Metaloid program for good.

Matrek can't risk spoiling the best thing that has ever happened to him until he knows the time is right.

Variian Day 233

The next morning, sitting with his parents, he slowly begins to tell his parents about his encounters with the alien, Ashnaa. Both parents sit, motionless, staring at Matrek in disbelief, hanging on every word. He finishes telling his story and his parents sit in silence, trying to process what they were just told. Nigel is the first to speak.

"Why didn't you tell us, son?"

"I was afraid that you and mom would stop me from speaking with her. This was way too important to stop. I had to keep learning. She taught me so much about the Metaloids...and about the threat from the Neighbourhood aliens". Matrek paused.

"Threat? Neighbourhood aliens?", Maya exclaimed. "Matrek, this is extremely important! Not something that you keep to yourself. We need to set up a meeting with your security team leader right now and explain all of this to him. All of our lives could be at risk here!"

Matrek and his parents meet with Jakob and Matrek recounts the details of his secret. Jakob is noticeably upset as he learns of the multiple security issues that this has generated. The conversation turns quickly into an interrogation of Matrek, and Jakob grills him intensely and chastises him for not reporting this - especially when he is part of the base's primary defense unit, Metaloid Battalion One.

Seeing that Jakob's harsh interrogation is making Matrek extremely distressed, Nigel cuts Jakob off mid-sentence, "Wait. Aren't we overlooking a very important point here? My son was able to gain information that we NEVER would've obtained on our own, and he did this in a few weeks. Matrek gathered INTEL for us!"

Jakob paused and reflected. "That is true. But he still should've come to me to report this so I could oversee this new development!" He turns to look at Matrek, "I was about to discharge you from MB1 permanently but, in light of the intel that you gathered, and the fact that you did report it...albeit, LATE, I will keep you on the team under ONE condition. You MUST report every detail of your interactions with this alien back to me. DAILY! Understood?"

"Yes, sir.", Matrek quickly replied.

"We have some work to do! If we are going to be interacting with an alien species, and fighting against another, we need protocols and safety measures set up. Now." Jakob turns to Matrek.

"Son, you have just given us two years of work that we have to finish in about two weeks. We are going to need the entire settlement's help on this one. Report back to me tomorrow at 36:00 hours."

That night, Matrek is awoken by a call coming in on his personal communicator device from the Security team. It was Jaina.

"Matrek, report to Security ASAP. We lost the signal to the cameras that are monitoring the Vault. When they came back online, the elephant doors were open and all of the Metaloids were escaping into the woods. And, it looks like your Metaloids have also escaped from the Storage Bay. We are assembling MB1 to investigate."

The kids hop into two Tamura Wolverine screw trucks and arrive on the scene and it's a mess. The elephant doors are wide open and every machine has escaped from confinement. Both sections of the crashed ship are slowly being swarmed by wild Metaloids which are continuing to disassemble both halves of the ship.

The kids, overwhelmed and unarmed without their personal Metaloids, begin to speculate how this could've happened. Matrek theorizes that the captured Metaloids might have overloaded their main control system due to the unusual condition of their forced confinement.

Hypothetically, this could cause the programming to reset and enter a "safe mode". Which would instruct the machines to return to their original ZOO (Zone Of Operation) in the Variian wilderness.

This could also mean that one of their personal Metaloids which were stored in the Settlement might have ventured all the way down to the Vault and opened the doors to allow the other machines to escape.

They turn their attention to the bolts that hold the doors closed to discover that they have been cleanly cut by some kind of laser.

Matrek radios the others, "This looks like the work of the Quantum Squid. It was probably able to cut through the walls in the Storage Bay and then it beelined straight here!"

"How do you know this? And on that subject, how do you always know so much about these Metaloids? The engineers can barely understand them.", Aajay radios back. Everyone but Xaria chimes in.

"Yes. How can you be so sure of this, Matrek? Where are you getting all of this detailed information from?"

Matrek reluctantly decides to come clean and begins to explain to the others about Ashnaa, and how she had been teaching him about this technology.

Jaxton pipes up, "What the heck, Matrek! You made contact with an actual ALIEN and you didn't say anything? Did you tell anyone about this? Or did you just keep this massive, world-shattering secret all to yourself?"

Before Matrek could answer, Xaria jumps in to deflect some of the anger away from her friend, "He told ME, okay? He had to. We were working closely together on the Metaloids and there was a point where he had to tell ME. He had no choice. But I couldn't say anything either without risking the secret getting out and losing this connection with the alien Ashnaa. This was way too important."

Ajay, angered by Xaria's response, "Hey! Aren't we supposed to be a TEAM, here? The FOUR of us! We are risking our lives together every day. We can't have secrets, especially about something as big as this!" He pauses and his tone changes. "I thought we were a team."

Jaxton mutters, "I thought we were friends."

Matrek immediately responds, "YES! We ARE a team! And, YES, we ARE friends! I was interacting with this alien to help us. ALL of us. The whole settlement. And we had to keep it a secret to keep this vital information flowing because we were afraid word would get out and someone would put a stop to it. From now on, I PROMISE, no more secrets! I will share everything with all of you. We are Metaloids Battalion One. And my friends. Okay?"

The team responds, "Okay."

"Great. Now let's take care of this little problem we have in front of us."

Later that day, and with no equipment at their disposal except Tamura Wolverine screw trucks, Jakob, Jaina and Metaloids Battalion One come up with a plan to re-capture their personal Metaloid machines, which have returned to the wild.

They only need to secure one machine, which is capable of overpowering and capturing all of the other Metaloids: Xaria's BEAST LION.

Jaina and the kids hop into a Tamura Wolverine while Jakob prepares the other Metaloids pilots who will be shuttled to their respective machines once Xaria has captured them and manually forced them into PILOT MODE.

Jaina and the kids arrive at the location where they first captured the Beast Lion and, sure enough, it is there, patrolling the land autonomously as it had been doing for possibly a thousand years before.

They launch Jakob's plan to use the Tamura Wolverine's winch system to set up a "deadfall trap". It works! The Beast Lion is pinned to the ground long enough for Xaria to approach it with her headband and manually put it into PILOT MODE.

Once inside her machine, Xaria gets to work. She targets the wild Metaloids that are disassembling the broken section of the ship where the amphibian beings are in stasis.

One by one, she overpowers and deactivates all of the machines around both sections of the ship before they are able to get inside. Her friends watch in amazement as she runs to every zone of operation in the Blacklands and, one by one, captures and subdues each of her teammates' runaway Metaloids as Jaina radios Jakob to send over its respective pilot.

At the beginning, Xaria was forced to hide the months of research she had collected about the original inhabitants of this planet out of fear that she would be punished for sneaking out of the settlement. But now, she is using that very research to skillfully command her Beast Lion and wrangle the wild Metaloids to keep her entire settlement safe.

Capturing every vehicle by herself is a major personal victory not to mention a victory for the entire MBI team. Xaria successfully recaptures all but one of the lost Metaloids: Jaxton's Quantum Squid.

After an exhaustive search, Xaria and Jaina are forced to return to base. After parking their vehicles, they are approached by Jakob.

"Got some good news and bad news for ya'. The good news is that we know where Jaxtons' Quantum Squid is. The bad news is that it stole the settlement's main power core which supplies the entire base with electricity.

The engineers estimate that the settlement can only last a day without the power core before the reserve batteries run out of energy. After that, our oxygen de-contamination machines will stop working and our population will succumb to the deadly bacteria in the air."

Jakob looks uncomfortable as he continues, "There is, however, an...unpleasant...alternative that could save the settlement if the power core is not recovered.

The research team who has been studying the "Vault" wreckage has learned that the beings on the ship are being kept alive by a very similar power core as the one we use. So similar, in fact, that they could re-route the power from the Vault to the Settlement to keep our power systems running.

In doing this, though, the settlement's electrical draw is so heavy, that it would divert most of the power away from the Vault's life support system, which would most likely kill all of the Amphibian-like beings that are being kept alive by the said reactor."

The kids are appalled by this plan.

With time being critical, and despite the indefinite potential casualties of these alien beings, the Settlement's leadership begrudgingly authorizes the decision to tap into the Vault's power system.

The kids collectively reject this idea. Especially Matrek, who feels that his initial pursuit of the Metaloids research was responsible for this current situation and that the deaths of these creatures would forever be on his conscience.

So, Jaina and the kids decide to hunt down the thief; Jaxton's Quantum Squid. They start out by following the tracks of the assailant into the woods.

Jaina uses her advanced tracking experience to close in on the machine until they reach the flooded wetlands and lose track of it in the mud. The kids are heartbroken. They can't let those creatures in the Vault just die.

In this moment of desperation, Ashnaa appears in Matrek's field of view, floating above the wetlands. Matrek doesn't know if he's dreaming or not but she signals for him to follow her.

"Team! I think it went this way!"

Without questioning, the team follows Matrek as he leads them through the flooded wetlands towards an open mud-bog. And, right there in the middle, buried up to its pelvis, is the Quantum Squid, thrashing in the mud... in the exact region where the Hellbenders were relocated.

Jaina and the kids speculate that the Metaloids' central control system was probably responsible for this random theft of a critical component. But why? As they circle around the stuck Metaloid, they see that the hatch of the vehicle is open. Someone must've been inside it, piloting it manually.

"Are you all seeing this?", Matrek radios the group.

They are elated to see the power core in the mud beside the Quantum Squid. Jaxton exits his vehicle and opens one of the compartments. He pulls out a spool of heavy cable and throws a loop of cable around the stuck Quantum Squid. He attaches the other end to the Thunder Toad and instructs Matrek to walk backward and pull the stuck machine out of the muck. Beyond a whole lot of mud, the Quantum Squid is in perfect condition.

Jaxton jumps inside his Quantum Squid and directs its entanglement device to levitate the core out of the mud and into Jaina's vehicle.

The team sets off to the base with the power core, hoping to return in time before the plan to tap into the alien ship and destroy its inhabitants is carried out.

They arrive at the settlement just in time and the power core is reinstalled into the central control system. The engineers close the circuit to the settlement, restoring full power. The emergency lighting and systems shut off, replaced by normal full lighting and the hum of a working ventilation system. The kids exit their machines and are surrounded by dozens of engineers and residents, cheering and congratulating them. The kids are jubilant but not because of the hero's welcome. It's because they saved a ship full of living beings.

No one notices that Matrek can barely stand. Something is not right within him as he wobbles back and forth before collapsing face-first into the mud, unconscious.

Variian Day 237

Matrek regains consciousness. He's in a hospital bed and his parents and Jakob are present in the room. He is confused.

"What...what happened?", Matrek whispers.

Maya leans over and hugs him. "You've been unconscious for three days, honey. We were so worried about you. You wouldn't wake up. You just kept mumbling to the hospital staff about Ashnaa, and things about this planet. They said that you kept repeating 'Our time is running out'".

Matrek explains that even though he doesn't remember saying this, what he said in his sleep was true.

"I didn't tell you about that part of my conversations with Ashnaa because I didn't want to scare you and I didn't want the most amazing thing to ever happen to me in my life to be taken from me."

Just then, the Doctor walks into the room. "Ah, I see our patient is finally awake. How are you feeling, Matrek?"

"Very weak. A little out of it.", Matrek replies.

The Doctor nods, "Well I'm not surprised at all. We've been running some neurological tests on you while you were unconscious. Brainwave pattern analyses, mostly. Aside from you being severely exhausted and dehydrated, you are suffering from a series of micro-concussions, something we call Post-Concussive Syndrome which, we believe, was caused by the operation of your Metaloid. Particularly from the excessive stresses that are put upon your brain while landing from a long jump. We typically see injuries like this from certain athletes, like contact sports players, who receive repeated blows to the head."

The Doctor turns to look at Matrek's parents. "If he continues to operate this Metaloid machine of his, it will continue to inflict more micro-concussions on his brain, which could cumulate into long-term brain damage."

Nigel and Maya have a look of deep despair.

The Doctor takes Matrek's parents aside, out of earshot of Matrek. "There's something else. I'm aware that your son has been speaking of an alien that he has been in contact with...telepathically. A female named Ashnaa and she has been providing information to him for the last few months. Well, this appears to be the early stages of a more serious problem; a traumatic brain injury.

I'm afraid that these are nothing but hallucinations and, if he continues to receive these injuries, his condition will worsen where he will slip deeper into a state of psychosis and completely lose his grasp on reality. Matrek needs time to heal. He needs time away from that machine. It's just too hard on his brain."

Matrek's parents, in agreement with Jakob and Jaina, immediately bar Matrek from active duty with Metaloid Battalion One.

He is put on immediate medical leave for the foreseeable future and he is forbidden from piloting his machine. Jakob makes it clear to Matrek that, if he is caught violating this order, he will never be allowed to pilot a Metaloid ever again.

Matrek is heartbroken by this news as it is exactly what he had feared would happen if he told them the truth.

Variian Day 241

Matrek has spent three days in his room. He begins to wonder if he actually WAS hallucinating and if Ashnaa and everything she told him really was nothing more than the effects of an injured brain.

He starts to wear his headband to bed and, as anticipated, he sees Ashnaa again. She appears worried. She asks where he had been the past few days. Matrek explains that he's been in the hospital, unconscious, and that his doctor told him that she isn't real.

"I did what you wanted me to do. I told them all about you and your message to the humans, about the Neighbourhood threat. They placed me on medical leave because of this. Now no one believes anything I've said about you."

Ashnaa assures Matrek that there IS something he can do to prove to them all that he's not insane. And that this relationship they have already built between their two peoples is real; that she and the Orchinax are real.

Ashnaa closes her eyes and begins sending a mental download to Matrek. He sees the two of them walking down a path that leads to an Orchinax structure. It's built into the side of a canyon and is hidden behind a tall waterfall. His head begins to ache when she does this but he knows he has to keep going.

Ashnaa's voice is in Matrek's head, "If you bring your friends to this place, it will prove that I am real, and the messages I have given you are real.

Seeing this structure in person will give your species everything they need to know about who is oppressing them on this planet. If they don't learn this truth soon, both of our species will be doomed. You must show them."

Ashnaa fades and disappears. Matrek is now faced with a difficult decision: Follow his superior's orders and potentially doom his species. Or, disobey direct orders and sneak off to the structure to show his people the truth of their situation at the risk of being barred from Metaloid use for life.

Matrek comes to the conclusion that his personal wishes are worth sacrificing for the greater good of his people. He grabs his communicator and calls his friends to ask them to meet him the next morning at 0700 outside the Vault for something extremely important.

Variian Day 242, morning.

The sleepy friends meet outside the Vault. Matrek explains that he is still secretly communicating with Ashnaa. The kids look at each other and roll their eyes slightly. From Jakob, they know about his ban from piloting his Metaloid and they know why. They believe that Matrek is still hallucinating from his brain injury.

"I need you to trust me. Trust Ashnaa. She is the source of all of the information I've received about the Metaloids and this new threat that we will all face. She told me about a structure at a secret location that I need to show you, but you have to promise me that you won't report me to security. Otherwise, I'll be barred from ever piloting a Metaloid again."

Xaria is the first to jump in and stand behind Matrek.

"He did provide a massive amount of technical information that no human could know. It had to come from somewhere." She pauses. "I believe him. I'm going."

One by one, the kids follow Xaria's lead and agree to go.

Matrek clasps his hands together in front of his face and smiles.

"Yes! I KNEW I could count on you all! I know that rumors are floating around about me being a little crazy. I assure you, I'm not. My brain has been banged around but my communication with this alien is REAL, and when you see this structure that I was shown, you will know this is true, once and for all.

And, most important, we will finally find some answers to who or what has been keeping us trapped here on Variian for almost one Earth year now."

The kids have a look of concern and worry. Aajay walks toward Matrek.

"You know, Matrek, this little hike isn't just a risk to you. All of us have been warned by the Leadership, if we assist you in any way to get anywhere near your Thunder Toad, our Metaloids pilot access will also be revoked. Permanently." He turns to face the others. "But, hey, if we didn't break the adults' rules before, we never would've captured and piloted these Metaloids in the first place. Let's pack some supplies and go find this structure!"

The kids jump into their vehicles and return to the Settlement to prepare for their day trip. Along the way, they discuss a "loophole" in the rules in case they are caught. Instead of letting Matrek pilot his Thunder Toad, they will "smuggle" him in a storage compartment on board the Quantum Squid.

Aajay, Jaxton, and Xaria pack their machines for a day trip and add some pillows to the inside of Jaxton's Quantum Squid's storage compartment and Matrek climbs in. They set out for the uncharted, arid region of "New Colorado".

On the way out of the hangar, Jakob stops them. "Where are you going? I don't see a mission plan for today!"

Jaxton replies, "We had nothing planned today and thought that we could use our spare time to look for some of the escaped Metaloids."

Jakob looks at them suspiciously. "Okay. But don't engage them without another member from MB2."

"We wont!" Xaria replied and moved past Jakob toward the hangar doors. The others followed. Jakob opens the hangar doors.

Variian Day 232 - Afternoon

It takes nearly 6 hours to reach the New Colorado region, which is rockier and dryer than anywhere else they've ever been. There is a beautiful waterfall cutting through a sharp cliff ahead, just as Matrek described from his mental download from Ashnaa. Strangely, the area is seemingly devoid of any lifeforms whatsoever; a new phenomenon for them on a planet that is teeming with life.

As they approach the waterfall, in the thick mist at the base of the falls, something lights up inside the mist and they are greeted by a SOPHISTICATED HOLOGRAM OF AN ORCHINAX BEING.

"That's it!" Matrek yells excitedly. "That's what I saw in my download! We need to get out on foot!"

The Holographic Being does not speak to them and instead uses physical gestures and body language to get the kids to follow it. The kids are hesitant to follow the Orchinax hologram but Matrek assures them that this is of the same species that visited him telepathically, and it can be trusted. Matrek pushes through the kids and leads the way.

The hologram leads them along the base of the cliff and around a sharp corner at the end of the cliff, bringing them to the base of a very old structure; the one from Matrek's download. They follow the hologram into the structure as it leads them through multiple chambers. Xaria takes notice that the architecture of this structure is vastly different than the other structures they've visited on the planet.

There are no hieroglyphs or written language featured anywhere and each circular chamber of the structure looks like black, volcanic glass. Almost as if the chambers themselves were burned or "melted" into the mountainside by some kind of extremely hot tool.

Some of the side chambers appear to be either caved in or on the verge of collapse, with groundwater leaking through the walls and between the cracks in the ceilings.

They enter a large, rectangular room with the same rounded, black, shiny walls and ceiling.

The Holographic Being disappears into thin air and the kids look down to see that the source of its projection was coming from a small, hovering, HOLOGRAPHIC DISK.

Behind the kids, the door closes quietly and the room goes completely black. Suddenly, a vivid environment appears around them.

They are standing in a lush clearing, with purple foliage surrounding them.

Xaria nervously yells, "It's a projection room! Like a theatre!"

A vivid, vibrant world surrounds them. It looks so real, they feel like they have been transported to another place. Only there's more. They can *feel* emotion being fed to them along with what they are seeing. Their senses are being loaded to their limit.

The four kids are shown a summarized version of the Orchinax's history on Variian, which begins at the point at which they first landed on the planet.

Xaria begins to record the events unfolding around her with her portable camera as it skips ahead in time, showing the Orchinax establishing futuristic, crystalline cities, villages, and outposts around their settlement and beyond.

Their operation was far grander in scope than the humans' humble settlement. However, their rapid expansion, and disruption of indigenous life on the planet provoked the attention of the Metaloids.

The kids are shown brutal scenes of battles as the Orchinax fought valiantly against the Metaloids. Although many of the machines were destroyed, these battles came at the cost of many Orchinax lives. Deep sorrow floods through their minds and they begin crying.

The Orchinax were eventually met by an "emissary" like figure from the operators of the Metaloids. In English, they referred to themselves as the "Neighborhood". The emissary looks exactly like the "insect-humanoid" which has been seen on security cameras patrolling around the human settlement.

There are scenes of diplomatic attempts, in which the Orchinax tried to reason with the emissary, but it appeared that these attempts were in vain, and a full-on war ensued between the Orchinax and the Neighborhood.

The kids are shown massive battles in the sky, in space, and on the ground. The Orchinax threw everything they could against their foes but, despite how hard they fought, their cities and towns were obliterated to rubble. The Orchinax had no choice but to construct a subterranean city that they named "ENTEENEL" and seek refuge there. An overpowering sense of fear floods through the kids minds.

Fearing that they all might be completely wiped out, the Orchinax dedicated some of their resources to building "Holographic Libraries" such as this one, to ensure that their history would not be forgotten by newcomers to this world.

The next scene shows the Orchinax working with another alien species who landed on Variian and began building their own settlement on the surface. The Orchinax work with the newcomers, sharing their advanced technology and, together, they begin destroying the Metaloids and the structures that support this draconian control system.

The final scene of the simulation displays a final victory against the Neighbourhood and their Metaloid sentries. There is a celebration between the Orchinax and the newcomers as their ships are free to leave the planet again.

The kids feel joy and realize that this is merely a representation of what the Orchinax are proposing, and not and actual, real event.

Suddenly, they are subjected to an immediate, painful, mental download. A detailed map from the location of this Holographic Library to the Orchinax City of Enteenel now exists in their brains.

The simulation ends and the doors open. They stand there, trembling from this experience, then make their way to the exit as quickly as they can. They each struggle with the weight of the information they had just learned.

Like it or not, they are now caught in the midst of an ancient, alien conflict and, if they are to ever leave this planet, they need to meet with the Orchinax.

The kids are shaken to the core by the experience, and apologize to Matrek for ever doubting him.

They are too upset to eat, so they quickly load up and begin the journey back to the settlement. They all agree, even if they get their Metaloids taken away from them, the public needs to know the truth about the Orchinax, The Neighbourhood and what happened on Variian in the past, and what they need to do to return to Earth in the future.

The kids arrive at the Settlement and go straight to their beds to get a lot of sleep. They are in for a trying day tomorrow.

Variian Day 233 - Morning

The kids call an emergency meeting and bring their parents with them to meet with Jakob, the security team, and members of the settlement's leadership.

Xaria begins the meeting by connecting her camera device to the main display in the security department. "Before you pass judgement on us, you need to watch this to the very end."

She explains how Matrek approached them with information about an alien structure that contained information that would help the humans, and that this information was given to him by his alien "visitor". Some of the adults scowled, some crossed their arms in disapproval.

"We HAD to disobey orders! We HAD to learn about why we are trapped here, and how we will be able to leave one day. And, MOST IMPORTANTLY, if it wasn't for Matrek, and his ability to communicate with this friendly alien species, we would be doomed here. FOREVER." Xaria plays the video.

Everyone in the room is transfixed on what they are seeing, wide-eyed. Some shaking their heads at the loss and destruction they were seeing.

The video ends. The group of adults turns to look at Matrek.

He smiles slightly and nods. He was telling the truth.

As hours pass in the meeting, everyone is quite somber as they discuss the seriousness of this situation: There is more than one intelligent *alien* species with a presence on this world and one of them is very unfriendly. However, the other species, who are more advanced than the humans, appear to be friendly and are trying to help.

It's a bittersweet day as the group realizes their best option going forward is to launch an expedition of representatives to Enteenel, where the humans and Orchinax will have a diplomatic meeting and join forces to develop a plan to escape this planet. Together.

The Settlement's leadership praises Matrek and the kids for bringing this life-saving truth back to their settlement. They have done more for this human society than any other. However, Jakob isn't happy.

He admits to the kids that he has seen the Insect Being with his own eyes and believes the Orchinax's story, but the kids disobeyed a direct order from their superior. They broke his trust. They were all given specific orders to not aid Matrek in any way and they ignored him.

Worse than that, rather than the leadership reprimanding the kids for disobeying this order, they are being praised.

Feeling that his authority has been undermined by leadership, Jakob decides to exclude himself from this expedition to Enteenel.

He will, instead, remain at the base and maintain his position as head of security and work towards training the next generation of Metaloid pilots, leaving just Jaina in charge of Matrek, Jaxton, Xaria, and Aajay for the duration of the expedition.

In preparation for the expedition to Enteenel, the settlement begins to put together an EXPEDITION TEAM of some of the best Metaloids pilots and adult survivalists, training them for weeks in wilderness survival, camping, and navigation.

The journey to Enteenel will lead the kids across a variety of never-before-seen environments that will push their personnel and equipment to their limits.

Their end goal will be their first diplomatic meeting with an alien species, the Orchinax, in their home city of Enteenel, where they will form an alliance and combine their efforts to disable the Neighborhood's oppressive military system, forever freeing both of their species from this prison planet.

Once and for all.
