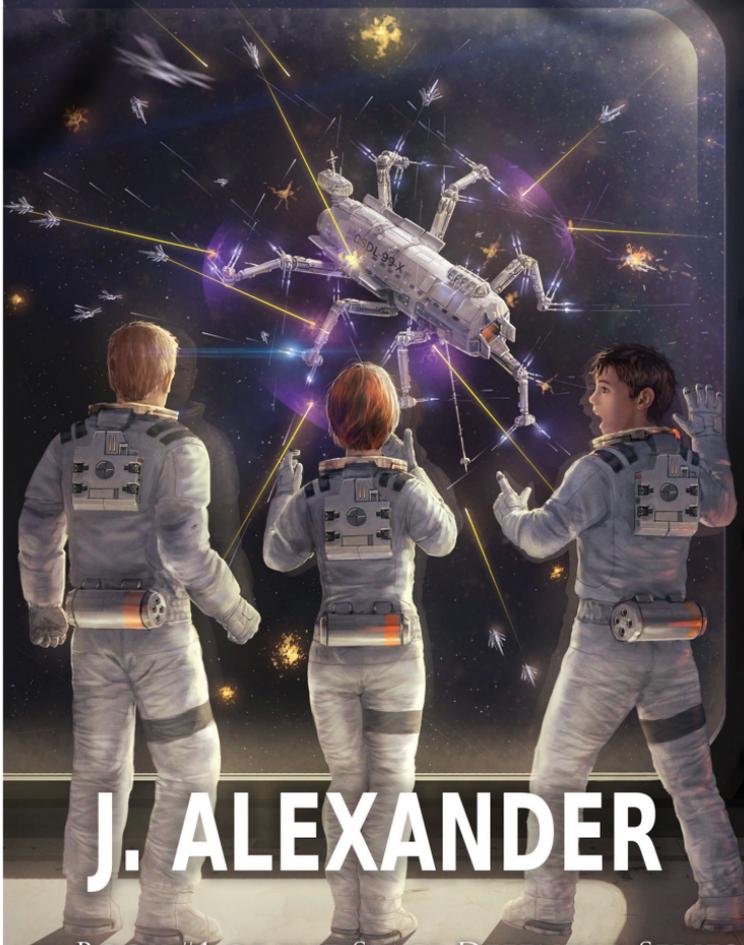


# SPACE DEFENDER

CARL ZERA AND THE ORE OF LIFE



J. ALEXANDER

BOOK #1 OF THE SPACE DEFENDER SERIES

**Carl Zera and the Ore of Life**  
**Book 1 of the Space Defender**  
**Series**

**By J. Alexander**

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Revision 3

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This book is for my son, who once said, “Dad,  
you shouldn’t let reality get in the way of your  
dreams.”

Too true, son. May you live by those words as  
well.

# Chapter 1 : Freak Show

THE ALIEN ATTACK ALARM WAS the best thing to happen to me all morning.

I was sitting on the floor of my room happily dissecting a holographic projector for a mega prank I was planning when my big-ape brother Hal came in and started accusing me of stealing his stuff.

He was about to turn my face into a pancake when the speakers blared out an ear-piercing alarm. Kids shrieked in the hallway and pounded their panicked feet on the metal floors in search of the emergency shelters.

Hal let me fall to the floor and towered over me.

“Where is it?” he said.

“Where’s what?”

“Don’t play dumb, Carl. You know exactly what I’m talking about.”

“Oh right,” I said. “You mean your brain? I haven’t seen that in a long time.”

Okay, that was pushing it. Alarm or not, there’s nothing Hal would have liked more than to tenderize my face with his fists. But he was a senior and had responsibilities during these kinds of alarms. It wasn’t every day that aliens threatened to blow you up.

So instead he glared at me like he was trying to punch me with his eyeballs.

I don’t know how in the galaxy we’re brothers; we look nothing alike. He’s got the look of a lion with thick, bushy brown hair and a wide nose. I’m more like a spider: skinny, gangly legs and arms, and I look like I could fall over at any moment. My jet-black hair is spiky, short, and unnaturally stiff. Like artificial grass.

I honestly think that one of us is adopted. I’m willing to guess it’s me.

“Bad things will happen to anyone who has anything to do with my missing soft screen.”

He turned to run out but stopped in his tracks

when he saw someone standing just inside the door. My best friend Scarlett Hera stood with her hands at her waist, blocking the way out of the room. She looked colossal even though she probably weighed only eighty pounds. Her red hair was cut short around her ears, and her emerald eyes looked unnaturally bright against her pale skin. Pound for pound, she probably had more muscle than anyone on the ship.

“Hey Carl,” she said. “Are we wrestling? Can I join?”

“Um—no,” Hal said. “We’re not wrestling. Just having a little conversation about stolen goods.” He crept his way around her towards the door. She eyed him like a hawk the whole time, but she let him pass.

“Get to your shelters,” he said. “You and your mom!”

“She’s not my mom!” I yelled, but Hal didn’t hear me. He had run into the hallway and joined the crowds headed to their hiding places.

“He’s such a punk,” Scarlett said as she sat down next to me. “Bringing up your mom like that.”

“He does it all the time.”

“Maybe he just wants to talk about it?”

“Rocks don’t have feelings. Hal is a big, ugly rock.”

I crawled over to the mess of projector parts on the floor. I grabbed a precision screwdriver and focused on turning the tiny screws that held the projector’s laser beam. I turned it slowly, taking deep breaths and forcing myself to calm down. The stupid screws wouldn’t come loose.

“But he’s your brother. It should bother him too,” she said.

“Yeah, but it doesn’t, okay?”

Scarlett crouched down beside me and took a sudden interest in electronics. “Thanks,” I said quietly.

“For what?”

“Saving my butt. Again. That’s only the what, third time, this month?”

“I guess he’s starting to like you,” Scarlett said. Yeah right.

“So, where is it anyway?” she said.

“Where’s what?”

“Carl, everyone knows that the first place to look when they’ve lost something is *your* pocket.”

I reached inside my pocket and held out a small

roll of clearish plastic. These soft-screen computers were so small they could fit just about anywhere.

“It’s not my fault they don’t give these out until you’re in fifth grade,” I told her.

“You could have borrowed mine.”

“Yeah, but you don’t look as funny when you’re mad.”

“Promise me you’ll give it back?”

“Yeah, I promise.”

She crossed her arms and then nodded slowly like she had convinced herself that I was telling the truth.

“So why do you need this thing, anyway?” she asked.

“Do you remember that time when Nick Hubble squirted milk out of his nose during lunch?”

“Hehe yeah, I remember. That was awesome.”

“Well, I’m going to hack Mr. Hardy’s projector and show a video of that when he starts talking about Projectile Motion formulas.”

Her scowl slowly turned into a broad grin. She still looked a little crazy, but at least she was crazy and on my side.

The alarm shut off, and the clamor of kids

running through the station's corridors died away.

“Going to your rendezvous point?” I asked her.

“Nope. You?”

“What do you think?”

“It might be real this time, Carl. I heard in the hallway that someone's brother in engineering said it's a Zarrdon slave harvester.”

“Or a Goozian Warship. Or a Sooka stealth fighter. Scarlett, there might be a million deadly things out there, but trust me, no one cares that we're out here. No one.”

A space station full of military trainees ought to make a good target for hostile aliens, but the truth is that our parents probably couldn't even remember where they'd dumped us.

Our little chunk of floating space junk is called CSDL-99-X, although we just call it ‘El Tin-O’ because it looks like an overweight tin can.

CSDL-99-X stands for Colonial Space Defense League Station 99, but I have no idea what the ‘X’ stands for. It could be eXtra Tiny. Or maybe eXtra Dirty. Or maybe even eXtremely Hard to Find a Good Hiding Spot.

We are about as far from Earth as you can get. Literally. We're on the opposite side of the Milky Way Galaxy. How far away is that? If you took a bus it would take you 67 trillion years to reach us. Even if you traveled at the speed of light, it would still take you one hundred thousand years and one day.

So what is El Tin-O doing all the way out here? Believe me, I ask myself that question every day.

About 400 years ago, a bunch of geniuses on Earth figured out how to fly deeper into space by “jumping” through space a thousand light years at a time. The technology has something to do with wormholes and curving space-time. I'm smart, but some of that is way over my head. The astronauts started jumping around space and going out really far. They discovered two things: space is big—I guess they already knew that—and there are lots of other people in space. Non-human people. Extraterrestrials. Aliens.

Most of the ET's they encountered were pretty nice. Like the Ribbits, who look like frogs on two legs. Once we learned how to understand their croaking, they taught us how to make even better space ships and how to form colonies on other

planets. They even told us about other aliens. The good ones and the bad ones. And it turns out there are A LOT of bad aliens out there.

That's where the Colonial Space Defense League comes in. The CSDL is kind of like an army. It's their job—mine eventually I guess—to keep all of the human space colonies safe from certain aliens that want to make cheeseburgers out of us.

After a while of fixing the projector, we heard the shuffling of feet as kids returned from their safety stations. So much for the alien invasion. I figured that it was just a matter of time before Hal would come back and continue his talk of pummeling my face.

“Hey,” I said to Scarlett. “Let's go to the Freak Show.”

Scarlett's eyes lit up. “Cool.”

We walked through the tiny, cramped hallways of El Tin-O until we came to a set of metal doors with a small oval window. Beneath the window a printed card read:

*Alien Artifacts and Non-Humanoid Library (AANL)*

Beneath the sign, someone had scribbled in some words with a bright red marker:

The Freak Show! Abandon hope all who enter!  
Myah-haha!

Dramatic, right? But the Freak Show can be a little scary. Especially for someone who has never seen an alien up close.

I pushed open the door and saw that Mrs. Grimmis was in the middle of a class. Terrified little kindergarten faces turned and stared at me. Mrs. Grimmis, who always reminded me of a beaver, was standing on a small stage in the center of the room. She had a plump body, short dark hair, and two unusually large front teeth. She gave me a look almost as scary as the giant Goozian statue that towered behind her.

“Um—sorry,” I stuttered. “I’ll just go and—“. I started to walk backward toward the doors when Scarlett moved from behind me and spoke to Mrs. Grimmis.

“Ma’am, do you mind if we stayed for a bit?” she

said, in her sweetest voice. “I know you have a class, but we’ll be quiet. I promise.”

Mrs. Grimmis’ scowl immediately turned soft as she realized that Scarlett was with me.

“Sure, dear,” she said. “Just keep *him* out of trouble and *don’t let him touch anything!*” She jabbed her fat little fingers in the air as she said this.

“Thanks!” Scarlett said. She grabbed my arm and led me to the side, behind the kindergarten class. We stood side-by-side against a wall of flat computer screens and faced Mrs. Grimmis.

The Freak Show is about the size of a basketball court. Along one of the long curved walls is a bank of touch screens and electronic posters of alien worlds. Opposite that wall is the entrance to The Archive Room, which is supposed to be some kind of vault for all of the station’s historical records. Along the other wall is a series of little niches, inside of which are some of the weirdest things you’ll ever see.

Mrs. Grimmis was explaining some of this to the terrified kindergarten kids. “To your right,” she said, as she pointed to the one of the sixteen arches, we have a Stymph, which is classified as ED-5.

Extremely dangerous, level 5.”

The Stymph statue looked like a large duck with long arms and metallic hands instead of wings. It might have looked cute except for the fact that it was holding a massive spear and giving us the snarl of death.

Mrs. Grimmis went on naming the aliens. The Shadex, VD-80, were a sickly green color and looked almost human, except they had three eyes, and their fingers looked like little shovels. The Goozian statue also looked sort of human—if he had four legs, a hard-looking shell for a torso, and a head that looked like a pterodactyl. ED-10. Mrs. Grimmis also pointed out some of the aliens that were ranked ND, for Not Dangerous, like the frog-like Ribbits and the peaceful Donesians, the friendliest of the aliens we’ve encountered.

As Mrs. Grimmis droned on, some of the kids started to run around some display cases. These held artifacts from all over the galaxy.

“Stop that right now!” Mrs. Grimmis shrieked at the kids running around.

Of course they ignored her. A chubby little dark-skinned boy that had no coordination at all tripped

over his own feet and slammed his head hard against the side of the display case right in front of me.

He started crying, and Scarlett and I instinctively ran over to him. I guess I'm a softie for little kids crying. Or maybe I just know too well what it's like to hit your head against something hard.

Blood trickled from a little cut on the side of his head. When the other kids saw the blood, the room descended into chaos. Mrs. Grimmis stepped down from the stage and gave me an annoyed look that said something like, "I don't know how, but this is clearly your fault, Carl!".

I stood over the boy while Scarlett tried to calm him down. And then something in the display case caught my eye. On the bottom shelf sat an artifact that looked like a large egg. Strange purple symbols covered its milky white surface and there was a band around the middle with a bunch of little black beads that looked like buttons.

I had spent a lot of time in The Freak Show and I had never seen this artifact before. I walked around the crying boy and kneeled down to get a closer look. The egg-looking thing sat on a little pillow with a label by its side. The label read:

*Artifact from the Goozian War in 2512.65.3.4*

*Found aboard a crashed Goozian warship after a battle near the Pylos system. Its purpose and origin are unknown. Donated to the CSDL by the Orfeo Family.*

Wow, this thing was over 300 years old. And it came from the Goozian War, which was really bloody. Without thinking I reached out to touch it. Bad move.

“Zera! Do not touch that artifact!”

I jerked my hand away from the egg and turned around to see Mrs. Grimmis sitting on the floor next to the boy, completely ignoring the sobbing boy, and giving me the kind of look that grown-ups sometimes give kids when they are convinced that you’ve done something wrong.

“Report to the principal right now!”

## Chapter 2 : Tunnels

I DECIDED THAT I WOULD take the “long” way to Mr. Derk’s office. That basically means walking around in circles until someone complains over the intercom that you’re not where you’re supposed to be.

I walked with my head down, like I usually do, thinking about the Goozian egg. And not thinking about the pack of sixth-grade boys that were coming my way. I recognized them as sixth graders. They towered over me and gave me the all-familiar pummeling look. They must have been taking lessons from Hal. They jostled me and pushed me around between them which made me feel like a hockey puck.

“Hey Carl!” said a booming voice that came from

behind us.

The older boys and I jumped and saw a big-boned blond haired guy coming our way. He had a round, kind face with very bright blue eyes. Stains covered his aged overalls. Screwdrivers, wrenches, and a couple of odd-shaped tools hung off a tool belt that clasped around his very large belly.

Seconds later, there was a scurrying of feet and elbows, and I was alone. The boys had run away like someone in the room had just farted.

“What’s up Carl?” he asked. “You okay?”

“Spot, Roy. I’m okay. Just—making friends. You know me.”

“You have a very interesting way of making friends,” he said.

“It’s not easy, but I work hard on it.”

Roy’ Insonse’s eyes lit up, and he laughed, making the tools on his belt jingle. “Where are you going?” he asked. “I’ll walk with you.”

“Okay. I’m just on the way to see—um—Mr. Derk.”

“Really?” he asked. “Again?”

“This time it wasn’t my fault.”

We walked side-by-side through the hallways for a

while without saying a word to each other. Some kids wrinkled their noses and pinned themselves up against the walls as we walked by.

“So why are you so filthy?” Sometimes the direct approach is the best.

“Been doing inspections in the mechanical crawl space,” he said. “It’s where all the plumbing and electrical cables run in between the levels.”

He stopped and pulled a small computer from one of the many pockets of his overalls. He rolled the screen open and tapped it a couple of times, revealing a three-dimensional map.

“This is a cross-sectional diagram,” he explained. “It shows what El Tin-O would look like if you sliced it down the middle like a sandwich.”

As he ran his finger through the map, different sections zoomed in, and a bunch of complex numbers popped up.

“Dimensions?” I asked, pointing at the numbers.

“Yes, for all of the rooms. Look. We’re on Deck 2. Here’s the Freak Show. And all the lower grade classrooms are here. Alien Studies, Electronics, Flight Training, Math, Sciences, and Languages are all one side of Deck 2. On the other side are the

advanced grade classes—Weapons, Self-Defense, Navigation, Alien Psychology—“

“Alien what?” I asked.

“Alien psychology. It’s the study of alien minds. How they think. How they react. Why they do the things that they do. They’re a confusing bunch. But don’t worry about that. All you need to know for now is how to tell the difference between a Ribbit and a Stymph.”

“That’s easy,” I said. “The Stymphs will be the ones throwing the knives and planning their summer picnic recipes.”

Roy laughed again and slapped me on the back, nearly knocking me over. He pointed back to his map.

“El Tin-O was designed with the help of the Ribbits,” he said. “Just like a lot of the galaxy’s technology—human and non-human.”

“Really? El Tin-O is so busted up and old. I thought the Ribbits were all high-tech.”

“That’s true, but there’s more to El Tin-O than what you can see. Take a look. The crawl space is this little tube looking thing that cuts right through the station’s guts. There’s a whole series of them that

interconnect throughout the station. You can get to just about anywhere on El Tin-O if you know where to go.”

“Anywhere?” I asked. “Really?” The idea of being able to go anywhere in the station had me drooling with excitement.

“Just about,” he said.

“What about—the engine room?” I asked, thinking that that would be the one place where no one but the technicians and full-blown CSDL officers could get into.

“You bet,” he said. He beamed at me, a twinkle in his eye.

“Wait. Are you telling me you’ve been to the engine room?”

He winked at me, looked ahead and started humming a song to himself.

“Where else have you been?” I asked. “The cargo holds? The kitchens? The bridge?”

He kept his eyes forward, but I could tell he was holding back a huge grin.

“What about the archive library?” I asked. The image of the Goozian egg popped in my mind.

He gave me a sharp look. “Yes,” he said. He

probably wondered why a kid would voluntarily ask information about a library.

“Would it have info about the Goozian War?” I asked, trying to sound casual.

“The archives have information about all of the wars. Why do you want to know?”

He asked me the question in the tone that grown-ups use when they think you’re trying to be sneaky.

“Hmm—just think the wars were interesting.”

He leaned in close. His voice became a whisper. “Wars are interesting, except if you’re one of the ones fighting them.”

He looked away, and we walked in silence for a while. I guess I hadn’t realized how far Roy and I had gone. One minute he and I had been talking about secret tunnels through El Tin-O and the other I’m staring at a towering, thick-framed man with a short grey beard and piercing black eyes that looked like they could peer directly into your soul.

Mr. Derk.

He looked right at me and curled his index finger. Because the hallways were still glowing dimly with the red emergency lights, the light from his office seemed unnaturally bright behind him. I kept my

eyes down as he turned to let me pass and enter the office, letting the door shut behind us with a heavy thud.

He was strongly built, with a wide jaw, a broad nose, and a perfectly manicured beard. His office, though, had rickety old wood furniture, piles of papers and books everywhere and was lined with beautiful, old-looking paintings of Earth. It might be a nice place to relax if Mr. Derk didn't happen to live there.

He sat down in a chair on the other side of the desk, locked his hands together, and just looked at me.

“Mr. Zera,” he said at last, in a low, deep voice.

“Sir?”

“Do you know how many times you've been in my office?”

I hadn't expected a quiz. Usually, he gives me a little speech about responsibility, maturity, and a bunch of other words I don't understand.

“Um—no I don't remember,” I said. “Probably a few times.”

“Eleven times, Mr. Zera.”

“Are you sure, sir?” I asked. “That seems like a

lot to me.”

“You have been in my office eleven times this year *alone*. Last year, when you arrived in the middle of the third grade, you were in my office eighteen times. That’s twenty-nine visits that we’ve had in the last eighteen months.”

Yikes. I guess that explains why I could tell you from memory that he had two trash bins, eight paintings on the walls, sixty-two books on the shelves, and six boxes labeled “confiscated contraband”. He had one box labeled “Carlos Zera” dedicated to things he’d taken just from me.

“Mr. Zera,” he continued. “Do you recall any of your time at your previous schools before you arrived on El Tin-O?”

“A little,” I said. I had seriously hoped he wasn’t planning on bringing this up.

“Let me refresh your memory.” He turned a flat screen on his desk to face him and tapped on the screen.

“Prior to arriving on El Tin-O you were enrolled on training station CSDL-52-B, under the care of Mr. Veezio and General Bushkill, who said in his transfer report, quote ‘Any training station that

desires to torment its instructors will gladly welcome young Zera in their midst'. You were there for a year and half. That's as long as you've been here, although I dare to admit that some of that may have been a bit of a grace period following your mother's sickness.

"You were kicked out of CSDL-112-B in the middle of your second grade year, having managed to attract the attention of the CSDL Regional Governance Board for a prank you pulled that involved—let's see here— a Stymphian nuclear battery and a giant vat of potatoes."

He gave me a searching look as if wanting an explanation.

"Their process for making French fries was inefficient," I said. "I thought I could speed things up a bit by using a little more power."

He looked back at his screen without saying a word. "And prior to that, for first grade, you were enrolled on training station CSDL-76-X, under the care of Mrs. Santino and Admiral Krick. Two weeks after your arrival your first grade homeroom instructor gave Mrs. Santino a written request for early retirement."

He turned the flat screen away and looked at me again with the same calm look he had given me before. Did he expect me to say something? What was I supposed to say? That I was a horrible person and that I would never do anything bad ever again? It's not like I was a troublemaker on purpose. It just happened.

If you put a pot of water on a hot stove, the water will boil. If you put a human in front of a Stymph, the human ends up as an afternoon snack. You put me on a space station in the middle of space; I make trouble.

It's like a basic law of the universe.

“Good behavior is a decision,” he said.

Mr. Derk obviously didn't believe in the laws of the universe.

“I guess,” I said as I slumped into the chair.

He sighed. “You don't take this seriously. Any of it.” He opened his arms wide and looked all around him. “The CSDL. The school. It's a joke to you. All of it.”

“Right,” I said. “This is a lot of fun.”

“Your parents never had this problem.”

“What do you expect? I'm ten.”

“I expect you to understand how important it is that you receive proper training.” He pounded his fist on the desk.

“Why? It’s not like I’m going to strap on a suit and go into battle!” I jumped out of the chair.

“What, do you expect the Goozians to start another war or something?”

His face tightened up and looked away suddenly. His hands shook as he ran them through his hair. Suddenly, he stood up, turned, and walked to the rear wall of his office. In between two bookshelves, there was a space of wall on which hung a huge painting of a waterfall. He touched a button on his watch, and a second later the space of wall slid up and revealed a short and narrow opening that reminded me of the caves in the Freak Show.

“Come,” Mr. Derk said, looking into the dark opening. “There’s something you need to see.”

## Chapter 3 : The Message

THE CRAWL SPACE WAS AS filthy as I had imagined. A sticky layer of grime covered the floor and the walls. I caught the faint whiff of French fries, which must be on the menu for lunch, and there was no denying the lovely aroma of a boys' bathroom. I expected to crawl, but it was more of walk-hunched-over-space than a crawl space.

We walked in near darkness for what seemed like forever. I banged my head on three pipes, tripped over two cable boxes, and my back felt like it was going to be stuck in a hunched-over position for the rest of my life.

Mr. Derk practically glided through the tunnels. He seemed to know where every pipe stuck out and

where every bend turned. He would look back in the direction towards his office every few seconds.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Quiet,” he whispered. “We’re nearly there.”

We found a ladder and climbed down. The temperature increased, and I felt heavy and slow. Sweat dripped into my eyes.

We came to a stop, and Mr. Derk put his hand on my chest. He stooped down and put his nose to the floor. He was looking down at something.

“Be careful,” he whispered as he stood up and pointed to the floor. “Don’t put too much weight on that.” In the faint lighting of the crawl space, his strong features looked skeletal.

A dim yellow light was streaming up through narrow slats in the floor of the crawl space. I bent down to get a closer look. I saw a small room that looked as cozy as a cemetery. There were a shabby desk and a few chairs. There was no one in the room, but I heard a faint grinding noise like someone was rubbing two dry stones together.

On the other side of the small room was something that looked like a big transparent box. It was as high as the ceiling and about as wide as the

room itself. There were small little holes in the wall facing the chairs.

A cage. I looked closer, and then my heart nearly stopped.

Inside the transparent cage, partially hidden underneath a pile of dirty rags, and lying on the rough, dirty floors was a real-life Goozian.

The grinding noise came and went as the Goozian's chocolate brown colored shell rose and fell. One of its four legs was covered up by the rags, which I guess were either its clothes or a blanket the guards had given it.

The Goozian statue in the Freak Show has a head that is almost triangular in shape, kind of like a pterodactyl, but this Goozian's head looked different. The triangle point that should have been at the top of its head was rounded. This Goozian's head looked more—human. The shell in the statue is more solid looking, like a lobster's shell. But this Goozian's shell had ridges with softer bits in between. It reminded me of an old accordion.

I had read in the CSLD textbooks that Goozians were very hard to tell apart from one another. They all had the same hard shell, four legs, and a triangle-

shaped head. The earliest CSLD scientists thought they were like cockroaches with nothing remarkably different about them.

I bent down so close that my nose was practically through the slats.

“Be careful,” Mr. Derk said. “Before you—“

I never heard what Mr. Derk said because a moment later there was a loud cracking noise as the panel beneath my feet broke into pieces and gave way. I had nothing to hold onto, so I fell headfirst and crashed hard against the floor.

It turns out that a real-life Goozian is a lot scarier looking than a statue of one. I had fallen just two feet from the transparent cage. At first, the Goozian seemed to show no interest in the fact that a human boy had fallen out of the ceiling. But then I realized that it had lifted its head and was staring right at me. Its yellow eyes didn't move or blink. It just looked at me like it was taking a picture of me. Suddenly, it roared a terrible growl that sounded like a cross between a gorilla and a chainsaw. I fell back on my rear and pedaled away from the snarling alien.

The Goozian threw off the blankets and banged against the transparent wall in front of me. Its

mouth was wide open, and I saw two rows of large teeth. It tried to throw itself onto the wall, but it fell over and crashed. Two of its legs were wrapped together with a thick cable. Even though the Goozian couldn't use all of its legs, the thing was still very strong. It pounded on the wall so hard that it cracked.

It was going to get out.

I didn't know what to do. I didn't have a weapon, and even if I did, I wouldn't know how to use it. I stood up shakily and looked around for a door. There was none. The walls of the room were totally smooth.

The Goozian kept pounding on the wall. It was wearing some kind of uniform over its chest and arms, but its shell was exposed. Why was it so angry? Didn't it see that I was just a kid?

A strange tingling of energy filled my body. I think they call that an adrenaline rush. I grabbed one of the chairs and raised the chair up in the air like a baseball bat. With an ear-piercing howl, the Goozian lunged his head and his arms into the cracked wall.

It came crashing down. The alien came at me, pulling itself along the floor. I froze in terror. It was

about two feet away when I remembered I had a weapon. Sort of. I aimed at its head and swung the chair as hard as I could.

I might as well have been swinging a toothpick.

The Goozian wrenched the chair out of my grip and threw it aside. My survival instinct kicked in, and I ran to its side. It lunged but, because it couldn't use its legs, it just fell over. I ran underneath the hole I had fallen through and looked up, but Mr. Derk was gone. I figured the best thing to do was just to stay out of its way until someone came along.

It only took the Goozian a couple of seconds to recover from its fall. Twice more the injured Goozian came at me, and I jumped out of its way. The third time, though, my usual clumsiness got in the way, and I tripped on the chair the Goozian had shoved aside. The angry alien grabbed my ankle with its powerful hand and squeezed. My ankle felt like it was going to shatter.

It pulled me closer and with my free leg I kicked it hard in the face. It howled but didn't let go. The look of hatred on the Goozian's face froze me. What had I ever done to it to make it so mad?

It raised its arm to deliver a deathblow, and I

closed my eyes. There was a sudden banging noise, a flash of heat just over my head, and the Goozian let go of its grip on my ankle. I opened my eyes and saw it sprawled out on the floor, clutching its chest. There was another blast of heat and a red flash of light as a beam of energy hit the Goozian again, this time in the shoulder.

“Enough!” yelled a voice behind me.

Two CSDL officers in silver and yellow uniforms ran past me. One kept his stun gun pointed at the Goozian, the other knelt down with a hand-held computer and checked the Goozian.

“It’s neutralized, sir,” he said.

I couldn’t take my eyes off the Goozian. My body shook in fear and relief. The thing had just tried to pulverize me. I’d be dead right now if they hadn’t blasted it with the stun gun. It raised its head and looked at me again through half-opened eyes. It muttered something I couldn’t understand. Its voice, when it wasn’t howling at you in rage, sounded like someone who has a really bad sore throat. I couldn’t understand what it was saying, but it kept repeating the same few sounds over and over.

“Meekot, meekot sek on, non fitak, nok nik

mordak. Nok kik mordak. Nok kik mordak.” Slowly, but undeniably, the Goozian repeated this phrase over and over.

“What’s it saying?” asked the uniformed man with the gun.

A man was standing right behind me, and I jumped a little when he spoke. “I have no clue. But I know someone who can tell us. Mr. Derk, go get the pilot.”

The sound of Mr. Derk’s name took me out of my trance. I peeled my eyes away from the Goozian and looked behind me. Mr. Derk was standing at a round opening in the wall. He looked pale and distraught. He stepped forward into the light of the room.

“That’s not necessary Commander,” he said. “I can tell you what he’s saying. I speak enough Goozian to at least do that.”

“Well, then?” Commander Azzar said.

Mr. Derk took a deep breath and let it out.

“You, you are the one. We have found you. We will destroy you. We will destroy you.”

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