

Chapter One

The Creature

Filip Faix was a stranger in a strange land.

Space journeys were odd—and sometimes dangerous—even for a god like him. There were pockets hidden within the vastness waiting to pull unsuspecting travelers into vortexes, turn them around, and send them back to where they came from. Even worse, they could suck someone into an Endless Vertigo, forcing them to re-experience the same events over and over again.

Then there was the cold. Space cold that made everything hurt. Not that Filip Faix needed to breathe, but he did miss taking in the sweet oxygen that space couldn't provide. Traveling so far into space also made him feel ill, but he soldiered on, keeping himself occupied by focusing on the majesty of the sights surrounding him.

For many who were grounded to their planets, space was nothing but a hollow, lifeless void. People once believed Earth was the center of the universe. Time eventually revealed the truth for those willing to accept it. Space, despite its name, was anything but empty. It constantly moved with herds of shooting stars, exploding supernovas, black holes consuming anything in their path, circulating asteroid fields, and even the occasional flying machine.

Then there was the endless amount of stardust clumping together and slowly forming potential moons, worlds, and stars. Life always began and eventually ended in the dark regions of space, scattering living energies around to start anew somewhere else. Filip Faix would one day cease to exist and become someone or something new.

He only hoped it wasn't another tree.

Outer space, as people called it where he was from, was an interconnecting highway, linking every living being to another. Thus, life and death would never end so long as the universes survived.

Truly, space was a graveyard as well as a birthplace.

Filip Faix's destination was drawing near. He hadn't been to this planet before. It had taken him some time to find it.

This place, which once was home to trillions of organisms, was now rebuilding itself after an asteroid hit it a few millennia ago. There was destruction as well as reconstruction. It stood as a testament to how change is inevitable. The planet was rather fortunate. A single world could go through many cycles depending on its lifespan and where it was located in its galaxy. The toxic comet that hit it had killed its inhabitants, but not the planet itself. What didn't die in the initial impact, the deadly fumes of the aftermath had finished off. Even with the species' technologies, every air-breathing individual had succumbed to the impact, either by fumes or by starvation, assuming they had somehow escaped into the underground.

It had taken years after the impact, but plants, small rodents, and reptiles were once again coming to life, springing from the waters where most organisms evolved. The whole globe had become the wild, purely organic place it had started out as. The gas of the comet had subsided, allowing new life to adapt to what remained of its toxicity.

The jungle humidity made him hotter than Filip Faix ever remembered being before. The dense, clawing foliage and skin-eating insects made his journey slow going. Finally, he came to the edge of a pit, wider than St. Peter's dome in the Vatican. The pool inside the pit—it reeked as bad as a billion rotting corpses—was barely visible. The waterline started deep down within the quarry. When he dove in, he discovered the space between the edge of the pit and the water was greater than any building back home. He splashed into it and swam downwards for many leagues, which proved a bit of a challenge, for the liquid was as thick as jelly.

He cut through the clear slime and managed to reach the mouth of a tunnel. He was certain this was the one. There were dozens of tunnels that pocketed the cavern wall, but the clue on the list suggested a burrow shaped like an oval, and none of the other passageways was that shape.

He swam into it, letting the darkness swallow him whole. It mattered little to him since his eyesight adapted quickly to the dark. After clawing through the gooey liquid, an opening broke above him. Filip Faix raised his head out of the water and to his surprise, found he had swum into an open chamber. It was completely airless, but a dry area nonetheless. The Trickster climbed out, wiping the goo from his eyes. He scouted out the grotto. It appeared similar to every other cave he'd ever been in—rocky, with twisted formations hanging from the ceiling or rising up from the ground.

The only difference was the thousands of skeletons. Hardly a space on the floor was free of the bones and belongings that the departed once treasured enough to bring down to the caves with them while they escaped the comet gas. Filip Faix stepped through the endless piles of remains, kicking skulls and other things about. These lifeforms stood taller than Earth people by a few feet, their bones were wider and denser, and they were shaped differently than the humans. The sound of the clanking bones echoed eerily in the hollow cavity. Goopy liquid dripped off speleothems, which ranged about three-quarters of a mile high. Regardless of all these strange and foreign wonders surrounding him, he had only come for one item.

Most of the skulls were still encased in the gas masks that were meant to protect them. Filip Faix snorted as he thought about the next civilized populace finding the remains of these past planet dwellers and believing them to be some primitive colony or alien lifeforms—or, perhaps, even ancient gods. Filip Faix had witnessed it happen before.

The gas mask helmets were mostly generic models, mass-produced during some war that may have taken place at some point. What he needed to find was a helmet belonging to a high-ranking officer. After moving deeper into the cave tunnel, he found just what he was searching for. At his feet was the skeleton of an unknown soldier, perhaps a general or lieutenant, wearing the gas mask engraved with an army insignia. The symbol was

written on the list the Erinye had created.

A so-called admirer of Filip Faix's—a small forest imp who had challenged him to a treasure hunt—had recently visited him. Filip Faix had accepted, mainly because of the prize that awaited the winner. The Sudarshana Chakra! The golden disk was a powerful weapon crafted by Vishnu himself. Filip Faix had tried stealing the weapon ages ago, but the Hindu god had caught him. As punishment for his crime, Vishnu turned the Trickster into a tree. After his tree form died, Vishnu offered to return Filip Faix to his normal self on the condition that he never again try to obtain the Chakra. Filip Faix agreed—and he had kept his word until the imp appeared with it. The Trickster didn't consider this challenge as breaking his promise. After all, it wasn't he who'd stolen the Chakra, right?

Lying beside the dead soldier was another skeleton without a gas mask. Tiny footprints surrounded the bones.

The imp, he thought grimly.

The little bitch had beat him here. He'd have to hurry if he was going to win this race.

Filip Faix grabbed hold of the helmet and cracked the skull off its vertebrae. He lifted both mask and skull, shaking it a few times before the cranium dropped out. Drawing his knife, Filip Faix was ready to cut the part he needed from it when a rustle sounded nearby. He turned his sights to a pile of skeletons rising up before tumbling off the body of a large beast.

"Shit," he cursed as the creature cocked its head from side to side.

The thing had no eyes and no nose. Filip Faix suspected the creature could neither see nor breathe. The fact that it breathed no air was likely the reason its ancestors had survived the asteroid. Or, perhaps it was a new kind of animal evolving on the planet.

The creature was twice the size of a horse, with the muscle mass of a gorilla. Its jaws were little more than bone with many hooked, shaped teeth lining it, some of which were broken. It had no hair anywhere on its pale, veiny body, only whiskers sticking out of its misshapen cranium. What Filip Faix first believed were hollowed-out horns curving like those of a ram all the way down past its callused knees were actually ears. It was how the monster had discovered him. The curious manner in which it swiveled its head indicated it didn't know exactly where Filip Faix was, only that he was somewhere in the cave. The Trickster suspected it had heightened sensitivity that enabled it to feel the vibrations of a bird hopping along the ground ten miles off. As long as Filip Faix stayed perfectly still, the beast wouldn't be able to home in on his location. However, time was not on his side. He couldn't afford to wait for the creature to lose interest. Besides, it already had a good idea of his whereabouts, thanks to the ruckus he had created.

As the creature was tuning in on its prey's whereabouts, the Trickster put on the gas mask helmet. It wobbled on him, for it was much larger than his own head. At least he could see just fine through the single bigger glass eyehole. He slowly brought out his knife and bolted through the chamber. The creature laid chase. It ran faster than Filip Faix expected, charging like a rhino, crushing bones into dust under its sheer weight. Before he knew it, the beast was at his heels.

He dropped to the ground and rolled onto his back. Using his razor-sharp blade, the Trickster sliced deeply into it, slitting its belly open as the thing raced over him. It kept going for a little while before stopping. Filip Faix gripped the knife tightly.

“Come on, you bastard,” he dared.

Adrenaline rushed through him, making him blood-thirsty. It had been ages since he fought like this.

The creature seemed about to charge once again. It took a step and then halted, letting out an agonizing wail just before its innards bottomed out from under it. Apparently, the cut across the stomach was deeper than Filip Faix first believed. The creature stumbled around a bit before falling sideways, moaning painfully.

“Damn,” Filip Faix said, approaching it.

The creature was dead before he reached it, yet the excitement was hardly at an end. There was movement within the belly, amidst the pile of intestines and the liver. Something was pushing against the lining of the beast’s stomach and stretching it like raw dough. Something the underground monster had recently eaten was trying to free itself. The thick lining kept the victim from clawing out. If the Trickster weren’t so curious, he’d have ignored it altogether. After all, there could be anything in that belly, such as another creature wanting to eat him. Whatever it was, he was confident he could handle it.

He slit the lining and a screech echoed loudly as the creature leaped from the stomach. When Filip Faix recovered from his shock, he tilted his chin up to the imp hanging from a stalactite. Stomach acid and other nasty stuff dripped off her. More goo was stuck in the moss and twigs of her body.

“You got yourself *eaten*?” he asked.

The imp vomited and wiped stomach acid from her eyes.

“Swallowed me whole, it did!” she said and then spat.

He pulled off the helmet and shook his head, tutting. “I wish I had known it was you. I would have left you in that beast.”

“You’re a real fucking prince,” she spat angrily, scanning the cave a moment.

She eyed something, leaped off the stalactite, and raced toward it.

“Why didn’t you just vanish?” he asked her when she had landed.

“I’m weak from traveling through space.”

He couldn’t argue with that. His own might had dwindled from the deep space journey. Coming to this place soon after passing through The Gate had greatly contributed to the decline of his strength.

She lifted a gas mask and used her long nails to claw a ball out from inside it.

“Got it! See ya!” she said, dropping the helmet and dashing over to the water.

“Hey!” he yelled, chasing after her.

He reached the water’s edge, put the gas mask on, and dove into the jelly liquid after her. He swam toward the surface and when he got there, he saw her scaling the wall of the pit. Filip Faix wished he had enough strength simply to fly up, but he was still very weak. Then it occurred to him that once the imp had climbed up out of the pit, she would need

time to recover before returning to Earth.

After hours of climbing, he pulled himself over the edge and rested a while. Instead of fretting about the imp, who had darted off into the forest somewhere, he took off the gas mask and studied it. It was constructed of black metal. Age had eaten away the long vacuum hoses made from some sort of animal skin, leaving it in tatters. The glass eyepieces were red-tinted, a large one on the bottom and a smaller one directly above it, aligning it with the eyes of these extinct lifeforms. Above the second eyepiece was a marble-sized metal ball with a military symbol engraved on it.

He pulled his knife again and chiseled at the mask until the ball popped out. Filip Faix caught it in midair.

He had it! The last item on the list! And the moment he had regained his strength, he would head home and claim his prize.