

Impossible!

The black gargoyle ruler hovered in midair as the avalanche of huge, coarse boulders and jagged rocks fell silent. The collapsed canyon, once a monumental work of intricate dark red, orange, and brown narrow walls, now served only as a massive graveyard. Several hundred feet of boulders, soil, and dirt filled a once-narrow migration route for indigenous rodents and birds. Perhaps in another time and place, few would have even noticed or cared about something as insignificant as a rock slide. But minutes earlier, it had buried a young human from planet Earth. And not just any human, but one endowed with abilities few could ever dare to dream of, let alone observe. Surviving a landslide like that would be impressive indeed.

Partizan growled, its harsh voice carried on the gentle winds and echoing off nearby dust-covered canyon walls. The 20-foot-tall, black, monstrous creature remained suspended, flapping its enormous bat-like wings. Its humanoid body contrasted with its bony-plate head, pointed ears, and long horns. A long staff in its clawed hand fired at nearby fleeing bubble-shaped ships carrying small, elf-faced creatures with maniacal grins. They were to blame for blasting the canyon walls and for causing the boy to fall. The gargoyle swore to end the entire Daskel species for what they had done.

A thick layer of red-brown dust choked the air, blurring the land as if in a vain effort to disguise the youngling's downfall. The one who could not be defeated? The dark creature was puzzled. The one who cannot die? Strong doubt clawed at its reasoning as Partizan took in the devastating scene. Could its supposition have been wrong? Was it a foolish assumption after all? Did the culmination of the hopes and dreams of so many lie somewhere, dead, beneath the crushing weight of hundreds of tons of rock? Or could the human still be alive? Did Josh Anvil have extraordinary power that would escape all of this?

The dark gargoyle landed on the rock pile and waited, watching for any movement, explosion, or force that would shake the landscape. It envisioned a volatile power capable of affecting the ground for many miles, causing even the bravest warrior to pause.

But none came. A quiet wind blew through the canyon, but nothing else. More seconds ticked by, and Partizan stayed still. Minutes added up until an hour had passed.

The creature glanced up at its dark attack ships as they hovered nearby in the clear skies, like sentries on watch. A battle was looming; the leader could feel it, smell it in the air. Partizan was never wrong and realized that time was now the enemy in learning Josh's fate. Soon, the sky would light up with fire.

The world leader refocused. Lives were at risk because of what the boy had done. Challenging the vast alien empire was rash. Bold. But this child of Earth did it. In one act of defense for his planet, Earth, he claimed to produce a sky net that would consume the enemy's home world, Reodaistideu, within thirty days if his demands were not met. And if he were to die, there would be nothing to stop its devastation. There would be nothing left of the enemy world to return to. This consoled Partizan, causing it to smile for a few seconds.

As the planet's star crossed to midday, the gargoyle's clawed left foot twitched. Its mind, now filled with angst and doubt, began assimilating the possible. No, the probable. The war-hardened leader was impervious to fatalities. Partizan, the planet, was still at war, pushing back Raga's forces, while Partizan, the leader, kept itself unfazed by the mounting casualties. That was a requirement of its duties to maintain a proper perspective.

So why should Josh Anvil, this young human from an inferior world, be any different? Why would he not be another fallen warrior to forget? Partizan mulled this over with a slight growl, annoyed that Josh should mean so much. Could mean so much. After all, the leader could not afford the gamble of being tied to any other. The very idea was abhorrent. Yet the answers that shouted back were haunting, loud, and swirling in its complex mind, as powerful as the wand it held and as obvious as the huge moon that hung in the midday sky.

The gargoyle first met Josh in the empty place: a secret, high-security prison of the alien empire. Though the youngling and his friends had set out to rescue only Madanler, the planet crusher, they freed Partizan and all the other captives as well. Josh stood up to the escaped prisoners who wanted to retreat to their worlds like frightened Nikrays, those furry, large-eared animals on Partizan, kept in herds for their meat and pelts. The thought of eating Nikrays made the gargoyle's stomach rumble as it savored the memory of the sweet flesh.

Partizan refocused, remembering the boy human who convinced some of the freed soldiers to join forces and fight Raga and his people, lighting a passion none of them had felt in a long time.

The youngling was innocent, not war-hardened, not trained to take a life. When he learned of the deaths of those who fought at the Preservation Center, it affected him to the point of emotional distress. That meant Josh Anvil was not ready. The young human cared for his friends, like Brave Troy, who fought the Mother Ships. He also befriended Knirochvar, one of the nefarious Seven, something the gargoyle still could not understand. But Josh even regarded the gargoyle as a friend.

The creature shook its head in frustration. The most striking thing was the boy's age. He was little more than a child in his world and would be considered a sprout on Partizan's planet. At fourteen Earth years, he could never be prepared for the responsibilities awaiting someone with his abilities; there was not enough time. Even Partizan's race required 100 Earth years to reach adulthood.

Even so, Josh could create anything he imagined. He made a floating sky island with its waterfalls, forests, and machines that brought earthlings considerable pleasure. The child's goal was to bring his people and their enemies to peace, even though the idea was ridiculous. And it was his powers that forced the greatest threat in thousands of galaxies to pause and consider his proposal. But all that was in the past if his powers were gone. If he were dead, time would forget him.

Partizan's mind summed up the obvious outcome: Josh's sky net would destroy Reodaistideu, the alien home world. Raga and his kind would be at a disadvantage for years, since Reodaistideu and the Tiaom-end were intertwined through advanced technology. If that link were broken, their dominant forces would suffer, perhaps enough to tip the scales and lead to the alien empire's demise. Could it be that Josh Anvil might have saved them by dying?

The gargoyle scanned the adjacent canyons and cliffs before gazing back down at the collapsed mass of rocks beneath its feet. It took a great breath, held it, and exhaled.

So much would be lost if the child were gone. Yet was the human dead? Had enough time passed to warrant a scan? Should a search be made, or should more time pass before undertaking such a task? One part of the creature argued with the other: if the youngling burst out while an excavation was underway, it would seem he was perceived as weak and unable to defend himself. Yet if nothing was done and the body was left in this forsaken place without a proper remembrance, it would be a great offense. Josh Anvil had earned at least a hero's memorial.

The dark creature twitched and grumbled, turned around, and stomped, trying to resolve the dilemma. It flew into the air and circled the rockfall, yet no movement came from the rock. The gargoyle waited a little longer, listening as the winds had picked up and roared through the adjacent canyons. But there was nothing else. Not even the purple Ghael, the long-plumed screeching bird that often inhabited the solitary dark crevices in places such as this. One of them annoyed Partizan

once too often, screaming at its team and trying to drive them away. It made for a tasty snack, though far inferior to a Nikray in flavor.

The gargoyle slid its long wand into a crevice between the dark red boulders and ran its clawed fingers over the runes on the metal tip. A hologram appeared as a 5-by-5-foot cube. The creature touched a different rune, and its right hand sparked for an instant before the light died. Partizan walked a transect across the rocky heap, turning its giant hand this way and that, lowering and raising it, and moving from one side to the other. The hologram changed with each turn, though the images were dark and grainy. Perhaps Josh was not beneath this mass after all?

The creature worked faster, its hope rising, until its eyes saw it. Partizan backed up, and there it was: the silhouette of a human, face down, hundreds of feet below. With a clenched fist, the gargoyle touched its powerful wand, the floating hologram following all the while. After a few impressions, the image added foreign letters and numbers: a health meter. A harsh, blaring sound came from the gargoyle's wand, along with two lines that ran flat across the image, giving indisputable results. The numbers across the screen were identical. There was no room left for doubt. The human had no signs of life.

The gargoyle launched its wand into the air as if throwing a giant spear, lifted its head, and roared.

“Atchk monk lapt Raga!”

The ground shook, and rocks trembled beneath its feet. In a fit of rage, Partizan lifted huge boulders, tossing them this way and that in a desperate attempt to unearth the youngling. It did not matter how long it took or how much energy it would have to expend. Josh Anvil's body had to be rescued from this cursed place. And Raga would pay. The boy should not have protected Olath and Raga when they were at his mercy. But the gargoyle swore they would suffer a long while before they died.

While busying itself unearthing one giant boulder after another, two other gargoyles circled in the sunny skies, descending and landing beside a hole Partizan had formed. One creature, with a deep scar from chin to belly, held the leader's wand with a slight look of puzzlement. The other, with a missing right ear, leaned in, growling and shaking its head. It took a moment for Partizan to notice their presence. It gave them a dark, fixed stare before one of the subordinates spoke.

“Dartt demcbur rhak dosp? Lertai yiz toll Mihinmos.”

Partizan paused in thought. That humanoid, another friend of Josh Anvil, otherwise known as the mountain mover, could start paying his debts before his death. He was responsible for covering the besieged city of Wosb with rock and soil, smothering the inhabitants. Partizan remembered being captured during the battle while attempting to dig its people out.

The leader took back its wand with a nod and a grunt, then leaped out of the hole. After hovering over the rockfall for a few moments longer, the three gargoyles flew up into the cloud-filled skies and through the giant space vessel's bay doors that welcomed them. Partizan hastened through the tall corridors of dark metal and rune engravings. It outpaced its subordinates and reached the ship's dark gray control center.

A shimmering, rotating ball occupied the center of a giant room. The walls and ceiling were covered with hundreds of foot-long metallic rectangles etched with black runes. The gargoyle stepped inside the sphere of light and sat on a metal depression. A tall rectangular panel displayed alien data points, graphs, and charts. Partizan placed its wand across the panel, and it sank into the display.

The creature's mind connected to everything inside and outside the spacecraft. All the temperature readings, power outlays, the nearest ships, and their complements—allies and enemies—were laid bare. It was aware of everything for many thousands of miles. Yet the giant,

dark creature ignored this information as it activated the communications device by blinking twice. After taking a deep breath, it spoke a single harsh sentence.

“Josh Anvil kolt drylage.” Partizan’s voice wavered, something that never happened, even when Wosb was beneath a hundred feet of soil and rock. The leader hesitated, cleared its throat, and uttered a final word. “Cul.”

Dozens of metallic rectangles on the wall turned red. Scores of harsh voices erupted from hidden speakers, each loud and confused. Some were hurried, others slow. Yet the loudest rose to a deafening scream.

The remaining rectangles lit up until the walls and the air were bathed in a deep red.

