

STATIC OVER SPACE

BOOK ONE
GRAVITY & LIES

C.G. Volars

STATIC OVER SPACE: GRAVITY AND LIES

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— CHAPTER ONE —

Izo

One more month—that’s how long until the most popular celebrity golf tournament in television was coming straight to Izo’s backyard. As long as Izo Lopez could keep his nineteen-year old, homeless, Latino ass from getting fired or arrested until then, he would be set. The second those cameras arrived and went live at the golf course, everything in Izo’s life was going to change.

Izo smiled the way only excited hope could afford. Shielding his eyes from the sun, he sat up and climbed out of his ancient Volkswagen Golf. All five fingers glowed caramel brown in the early morning rays. Beyond his remote camping ground, a rolling sprawl of blue-green mountains careened in every direction. Dotted along the staggering landscape were mountain cliffs sheered in ascending diagonal stripes, like craggy waves. Boulders as big as vans sat in the foreground, precariously balanced in impossible stacks. Two healthy waterfalls sparkled in the far distance. Fifty feet below, Lake Tahoe shimmered up at him in all its massive, alpine glory.

Izo sucked a long, grateful breath and stretched. Then he cringed.

Shit!

A twinge of pain lit up the right side of his neck; it felt like an electric pterodactyl had caught him by one talon. Izo hissed and grabbed the tender spot above his shoulder. He was way too young for this kind of crap; this was what forty-year-olds felt like in the morning, not newly minted adults.

Izo turned to glare at the backseat of his car. Littered with peanuts shells, dollar menu wrappers, and his trusty Oaskys sleeping bag, the backseat stared back with perfect innocence. It was pretending it hadn't tricked him with its inviting cushions only to besiege him with its diabolically small space that never failed to make him regret trusting it. Of course, he'd fallen for it again. *Fucker*, he grumbled to himself. He flipped off the seat before kicking the back door shut.

Oh well. He wasn't going to let it ruin his mood. Going into the front, he snatched his pocketknife and glanced at the time on his middle console. It was 7:30—two hours before he needed to be at work; an hour before he needed to be at his bus stop. Plenty of time for a shower.

Even better, when he checked the garbage bag of water on his hood, it was warm! Lugging the hefty bag to a nearby tree, he tossed the rope tied around its top over a tall branch before hoisting the bag above his head and securing the end on a strong root jutting out of the ground.

The shower bag gently twisted in the air as Izo hurried to pull off his t-shirt and shorts. He left his underwear on, though. Hikers and other campers did occasionally venture this far into the park. No reason to go cheeks-to-wind and risk someone siccing la juda on him.

One quick poke of his pocketknife and he was in business. Warm, sparkling river water poured out of the bag to dribble down his bronze, sun-kissed torso—though sun-striped might have been a more accurate term. Even as an olive-skinned Latino, his summer job as a caddie made it a constant struggle to keep his tan even.

The water continued pouring, and Izo dialed back his thoughts to enjoy the present for a moment. Ambient forest noises filled the quiet of his mind...the rising rustle of wind-swept leaves...the playful bubbling of water tumbling over rocks...a melody of bright birdsong, varied and irregular, a veritable jazzy-nature festival of free-wheeling chirps and clicks, including the otherworldly undulation of the Warbling Vireo, a sound he'd recently been taught to recognize at UC Davis's free Tahoe Science Center (donations welcome!).

Izo sighed, filled with easy gratitude. Plucking his pine tar soap out of a nearby plastic bag, he started to scrub down. The pine bar made quick work, washing away any sticky residue-sweat from sleeping in his car while moisturizing his skin and leaving him fresh and clean with an alluring woodsy scent. Not bad for four bucks at the local co-op. It was normally more than Izo would spend on a toiletry, but this was worth it. If there was anything he'd learned in life, it was this: just because you lived in your car didn't mean you were allowed to smell like it. Especially at his job.

Speaking of...he was pretty much done. Izo glanced around to double check he was alone. Then—snapping to his car—he grabbed the duct tape out of his passenger's seat and—snapping back—he sealed the bag with three quick strips of tape. The water stopped. He poked the shower bag curiously. It still had about half its water. Nice—he wouldn't have to hit the river after work. Grinning, he secured the whole thing flatly around the tree trunk with a long strip of tape across its middle.

Izo walked back to his car to check the time on his console. 7:50. He needed to get a move on. Izo dropped the tape back into his car and hurried to get dressed in a pair of blue, water-slicking shorts and his official monogrammed white polo. Both name-brand, they were some of the most expensive clothes he'd ever bought. But it was worth it: at two bags a loop and two loops a day, most days he came home with \$300 in tax-free cash. Not bad for a summer job. Sure, there'd been a little hazing from the other caddies at the beginning. But the hours were good, the views at the gold course

were amazing and, best of all, it was going to launch him as the world's first Mexican-American superhero.

Izo grabbed his skateboard, sunglasses, hat, keys, and wallet before locking his car. He paused before leaving, though. He was forgetting something. He patted himself down. What was it?

Phone!

Izo unlocked his car and hurried to grab and unplug his precious iPhone. It was the first phone he'd ever owned, and he still wasn't used to having it on him. This was a bad habit, too, since aside from the car and clothes, it was his single most valuable possession on Earth. Three models down from the current one and bought with every cent of the graduation money from his various foster parents, it was a bonafide iPhone that, assuming you had the right case—which he did—was completely indistinguishable from the newest hardware. He was pretty sure it was the main reason he'd tricked his current employer into hiring him. More importantly, it had his only photo of Hanako on it.

Izo tucked the phone carefully away into a hidden zipper pocket on his shorts. Then, locking his car, he hopped on his skateboard and flew down the street.

Izo stood on the board and sighed with easy boredom. Underneath him, the wheels bounced and twirled on the rough dirt road. He wasn't worried, though. He'd rewrapped the board with electrical tape only three days before—the top still had plenty of stick to stay adhered to the bottom of his Walmart shoes.

"Do a kickflip!" cried a pre-teen camping with his family near the front. Izo just smiled and lifted a hand in greeting before soaring uphill and onto the main highway.

Kickflip? he chuckled to himself. *I don't even know how to push off.*



Izo hissed and looked at the time on his phone. His bus was late again. Running the math in his head, he calculated that even if it arrived in the next five minutes, there was still a chance he'd miss his first tee time. This was golf in June at Lake Tahoe—one of the

most lucrative businesses in town during the middle of its busiest season. Five minutes wasn't a risk he was willing to take.

He lowered the brim of his hat and stood to move away from the bus stop. The morning traffic was thick on the sidewalk as locals and visitors wound around each other. Izo zig-zagged through the crowd, looking for a quiet building with no visible security. He avoided the jewelry shops and sporting good sellers like the plague. Soon enough, he stumbled upon a small pizza joint next to a souvenir shop with a private alley. With no parking or cameras around the side and only low-morning-traffic in the front, it was perfect.

Izo looked around before slipping into the alley. The walls were made of red brick and stood three stories tall, with a metal fire escape clinging to the second floor. He approached the ladder curiously. But there was no luck—it was held in the up position by a thick padlock, impossible to lower at all, much less from his position on the ground.

Izo glanced both directions down the alleyway. No one was watching. Reaching one hand up, he rose vertically and hopped over the metal rail. Loping up the metal stairs three and four at a time, he quickly made it to the roof. The teen silently played his eyes over the shuffling heads and cars below. After a moment he was reassured; no one was looking up at him. Truth was, no one ever looked up.

Izo grinned and turned his gaze to the skies above. It was a wonderfully overcast day, with pillowy clouds stacked like magnificent fluffy kingdoms in the sky. Edgewood Golf Resort was due south, almost a straight line past Sand Harbor and Glenbrook following Lake Tahoe's eastern shore. Once there, he'd be able to find a spot to land in the forested ruffage surrounding the resort. For now, he just needed to worry about picking the path with the most cover. After making a few quick calculations based on wind direction, he reached down for the ground.

Izo breathed out and flattened his chest. Deep inside himself, he could feel the concentrated hook at his center, the strongest

point of attraction between himself and his target. He turned his eyes to his chosen cloud. The connection linked instantly; he could already feel himself leaning forward at the pull, as if a giant invisible rubber band had been lassoed around his rib cage. He pulled on his end harder, building the tension until it felt less like a single stretchy band and more like a thousand screaming bungee cords begging to snap him forward. Adjusting his footing on the loose roofing material, he squared his shoulders, lowered his chin, and finally released. *WHOOSH!* He sailed into the air like a baseball heading for a grand slam.

He was soon flying at a fever pitch, zooming and darting through the clouds with an ease he'd long since stopped questioning. Within thirty seconds he was halfway there and gaining speed. Izo shook his head and slowed. The velocity liked to do this with him, building and growing without reason, always snapping for that next gear, of which he'd discovered hundreds over the years, many of them midway over the Pacific. But much as he'd love to accidentally stumble onto Hawaii again (or had it been Japan?), he couldn't do that today. He had somewhere to be.

Still, he supposed he could take a second to enjoy his inexplicable powers. Slowing to hide fully inside an especially thick cumulus (another thing he'd learned from the UC Davis center), he paused to let it drift across him. Izo breathed out slowly and basked in the perfect tensile catch—neither so light he drifted away nor so heavy he sunk, a perfect hovering balance between floating and falling that all clouds were born knowing how to perform.

The air was cooler up here too, soft condensation prickling his skin as the light dispersed in a cottony glow. In a minute he'd poke his head out and figure out where to land. But for now, he was satisfied to close his eyes, stretch out his fingers, and let the cool air play between them.

The wind shifted and grew, blowing first his bangs and then his cap suddenly free from his scalp. Izo gasped and dove to catch it, but he was too slow. It was lost in the murky whiteness. Dropping out of the bottom of the cloud, he could hear the cap hit the lake

below. *Mierda*, he cursed, kicking his legs in frustration. He'd have to buy a new one now. Not that he couldn't afford it, but at \$40 a pop it would definitely set back his money-saving goal for the week.

Izo groaned and crossed his arms. There was a chance he could get down to the water and back without anyone seeing. But was it worth it? Probably not. Then again...he was in the middle of the lake. And it was morning. Neither the boaters that regularly sailed the lake nor the hang gliders that drifted above tended to be "early bird" types. And there was a chance the people on the beach might not be able to see him, assuming he moved fast enough. Maybe if he could just figure out where his hat was and whether there was anyone nearby? It was a white cap after all...it wouldn't be hard to spot floating on the water.

By the time Izo heard the low thrumming behind him, he'd already been shot.



Three Months Later

Izo turned to the sound of the padlock outside his door beeping. The door was thick, round, and made of browning metal, heavily rusted and pocked from years of casual misuse. Behind it, the sounds of its exterior keypad beeped. Someone was coming in to speak with him. Looking around, he realized gravity had kicked back in too. *Ah*. They must have arrived.

He stood up from his narrow bed and brushed himself off, grateful for the chance to stretch as much as he could in his ten-by-ten cell. It wasn't an exaggeration to call it a cell, either; besides a bed, a sink, and a highly unintuitive gravity toilet that'd nearly left him chasing down space poops like Pan after Tinkerbell, there was nothing in the room.

The lock disengaged with a heavy click. A second later, the door popped open, revealing Izo's least favorite alien abductor. Seven feet tall, green, and covered in scales, Glongkyle scratched at his

neck with two pointed claws, each nail wider and longer than Izo's fingers.

"We're here," said the reptile.

Izo nodded. Deep down, the fact that he could understand the reptilian's hissing noises as speech still unnerved him, particularly since his ears still ached every time he slept on the side of his face. He supposed it was a small price to pay for the omnilingual implants now permanently drilled into both sides of his head. Not that he'd been given much choice.

"Great. So how does this work?" asked Izo. "Do we hoof it from here? Or is spaceship parking more of a valet situation? More importantly, are spaceport personnel up to date on their shots? I'm a little worried about innocent workers forced to handle this intergalactic bucket of bacteria." Izo glanced around in disgust. "Seriously, when's the last time you cleaned this thing, Glongkyle?"

"Two or three Avarians ago," the reptile replied cruelly. "Don't worry. Unlike you, everyone here's been inoculated against major disease—another reason for you to keep close and do as you're told."

Izo saluted with sarcastic enthusiasm. "Yes, sir, Mr. Lizard Captain, sir!"

Glongkyle blinked slowly. "This isn't a vacation," he continued after a moment. "We are here for one reason—the job. Until it's done, you will not wander off. You will not make new friends. You will stay at my or Yula's side every second we're in public, unless told to do otherwise. Whatever we say, you will agree with. Whatever we do, you will do likewise."

"Whatever you haphazardly make up on the spot, I will confirm with blind and unflinching sincerity. I get it. We had assholes on Earth, too." Izo moved forward to leave. "Are Yula and Tearn ready to go?"

But Glongkyle wasn't budging out of the doorway just yet. Izo stopped short. Their chests were now nearly touching. He looked up at the reptile. "Is there something else, Chief?"

Glongkyle didn't immediately reply. He was carefully considering the human creature standing at approximately three quarters his size. "You understand I'm choosing to give you this chance to prove your worth. I don't have to do this."

"Don't see how you have much choice." Izo waved around the room. "Can't make money from in here, can I?"

Glongkyle's creepy, double-lidded eyes stared with unnerving, unhurried focus, an expression Izo had recently realized sentient reptiles could pull off especially well. "I'm sure I could come up with a couple of ideas."

Izo dropped back a step and laughed, hiding how his throat filled with bile. The reality was he'd been trapped in the *Atrox Killboard*, Glongkyle's piece of shit spaceship, for three months. With nowhere to go, nothing to eat except space gruel, and no attractive men or women anywhere in sight, he'd spent most of his time wondering how much farther he was from Earth than the day before. It'd been maddening. He'd never wanted to leave a place so badly in his life.

Just be cool.

The Earthling slapped on a goofy grin and put both hands up, high enough that he knew the cultural sign of surrender would translate. "You win. I give up. I solemnly swear no matter what happens I, Izaac Lopez, will be good."

Glongkyle's lipless face stared. He continued to scrutinize Izo with an unending, unknowable gaze. Izo had little choice but to stand and wait.

"All right," Glongkyle said, finally stepping aside. "But don't forget what I said about Earth."