

Agartha's Castaway

Book 6

In

The Trapped in the Hollow Earth Novelette Series

By

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For:

Faith and Matthew. I love you.

To:

My Father God in heaven.

To:

Jayde Scott. Thank you for reading this entire manuscript from start to finish. You're the best critting partner ever! Your advice, ideas, and suggestions were nothing short of amazing. I

couldn't have done it without you!

To:

My brilliant editor, Autumn J. Conley.

Chapter 1

The ship pulled inside the docking bay of the massive mothership, as though they were tiny krill being sucked into a whale's mouth. Once that happened, those poor little shrimp-like creatures were as good as goners. Casey had to wonder if her fate would be the same. Gazing out the window, a scream froze in Casey's throat. The seconds trickled by slowly.

She gulped, and a shudder ran through her body as they glided to a stop in front of the landing platform. *Am I actually inside an alien vessel?* It all seemed so crazy, so farfetched, yet there she was. Rows and rows of shiny disks, about fifty feet in diameter and fifteen feet high, lined the giant hangar. Clearly, they could visit Earth, do recon, or defend the mothership with those.

Soldiers in black uniforms and helmets scrambled over. She bet there had to be several thousand troops aboard. She began to wonder how they could possibly carry out their mission without being discovered.

Thorn tugged at her sleeve and hissed, "Over here."

She crawled over to Mike, shut her eyes, and spoke a quick prayer. Thorn touched a button beside the hatch, and a door in the metallic floor opened without so much as a sound. *Talk about high-tech stuff!* Her stomach fluttered as they all slid out of the craft. She was extra careful not to make any sounds, especially with her boots.

Remember, no talking. Thorn's voice rolled across her mind. She didn't need to be told twice. Crouching down, they waited silently underneath the ship. Two rebels stood less than ten feet away. Casey craned her neck, but from where she hid, only their uniform-clad legs were visible. She shivered and whipped out her gun, her nerves running into overdrive.

The hard *click-clack* of footsteps moved toward her. She placed her finger on the trigger as her heart started to pound, drowning out the rest of the noise.

She still wondered how she'd ended up in such an odd predicament. The gun in her hands made her nervous. She forced her legs into action, trying to scoot back into the shadows, but her feet wouldn't budge. Shiny black boots stopped in front of them. She held her breath, hoping her racing heart wasn't going to give away her presence like that Edgar Allan Poe story she'd read in literature class.

Thorn tapped their shoulders to get their attention and then pointed to himself and toward the ramp. Casey nodded and grabbed Mike's arm just in case he didn't get Thorn's message to stay put. There was a short nod, and then Thorn crept to the other side of the ship, disappearing from sight.

Her stomach lurched. *How could Thorn just leave us like that?*

"The ship's definitely a model manufactured by our race," a soldier said, walking away.

An injection was definitely worth the tiny bit of burning she had to endure to understand their language.

"Where are the pilots?" a voice crackled over a radio.

“We’ll check it out.” A radio clicked, ending the transmission.

Thorn appeared at their side and whispered, “There’re four of them, visors up, and they’re inside the ship.”

Mike unzipped his backpack and started rummaging through it, the sound carrying through the silence. Casey shot him a doubtful look, wondering what he was up to. Knowing him, he was probably getting a snack. He squeezed his arm through to the bottom and let out a groan.

Mike anxiously pulled out a baseball-sized smoke bomb. “Got the tear gas.” It wasn’t exactly tear gas, but the general had told him it’d knock anybody out.

She quickly dug through Mike’s sack and grabbed a gas mask. “Don’t forget this.”

“Thanks.” He pulled it down over his face, resembling a giant insect. “I can’t breathe.” His eyes bulged as he clawed at his mask, frantic to get it off.

“Shhhh,” said Casey.

Thorn adjusted the straps around Mike’s mask. “Inhale through your mouth and exhale through your nose.”

Mike nodded. “Better. Thanks.”

Casey was surprised she could hear him through the mask, and he didn’t even sound like Darth Vader with a bad case of asthma. She pulled her own gas mask over her head and fastened the straps at the back. It felt snug and tight against her skin, and her breathing came low and labored like inhaling through a straw. She sucked hard, but her lungs screamed at the sudden lack of oxygen, and the right side of her head started to hammer. She took another breath and was glad she was starting to get the hang of it.

She crawled after Mike toward the open ship door.

“Now!” Thorn whispered.

Mike tossed the canister. “Special delivery!” The red ball landed inside with a *thud*. It hissed and spun, sending green smoke across the floor. The gas thickened as it rose around the guards, and they began to cough and choke, hitting the ground like heavy potato sacks.

“They’re down!” yelled Casey. “Can we go?”

Thorn grabbed her elbow. “Give it a minute to make sure.”

Hands trembling, Casey whipped out her gun and pointed at the door. They had no idea what kind of soldier might come running out. Even worse, she worried the gas might not work on all of them, especially if one of them was quick to slap down their visor.

“They’re going to be out cold,” whispered Mike.

“Don’t they say that in every bad science fiction flick? Any B movie star could tell you that,” she retorted. Taking chances was out of the question, because that was exactly what always got action heroes killed. “This is just in case they’re not.”

A chill ran up her spine as she moved a finger on the trigger and swung her backpack over her shoulder. Swiftly, she started walking up the ramp and positioned herself by the entrance. She felt like an elusive member of the SWAT team, ready to storm in and raid the place. In spite of her racing pulse, she couldn’t resist the temptation to stick out one leg Tomb Raider-style, imagining herself just as hot. Of course, that didn’t matter, since she and Mike broke up, but it didn’t hurt to look good either way. She bit her lip, still trying to sooth herself with internal laughter to stifle the fear.

Peering inside, she stared down at the four limp bodies. *Roswell, New Mexico* flashed in her head. Allegedly, scientists had found a crashed spaceship with five dead aliens. She wondered if that was what it looked like when they boarded the craft and found the bodies. Their ribcages moved up and down as though they were in deep slumber, but she knew bad guys always pretend

like that until one turns their back on them. With her heart jumping in her throat, she poked her boot into one's side, then tried another. When they didn't move, she lowered her hand and sighed with relief. She looked at Thorn, awaiting further instructions.

He motioned to both her and Mike. "Strip off their uniforms and put them on! You have to completely cover yourselves. Make sure the helmet's on with the visor down. Tuck the gloves into your uniform sleeves. They mustn't see a single patch of skin."

A soldier's finger twitched, and Casey jumped. She was sure there was no way she could go through with it. The sudden weight of a hand on her shoulder startled her. Thorn's soft voice echoed behind her, and she spun around.

"You have to do this, because your friend's life depends on it—not to mention billions of Earthlings."

"You know, it's freaky that you're always reading my thoughts." Casey waved a tiny swirl of smoke away.

Thorn motioned her over and opened his palm. Three silver square-shaped microchips lay in his hands.

She arched a brow. "What's that for?"

"There's an etched square on the bottom of each helmet visor. It's a mouthpiece and microphone for communication. I'll manipulate it with this chip, so you'll sound identical to us when you talk." Thorn stuck the microchip into the tiny control panel located in the back of the helmet, then passed it to Mike. He repeated the procedure for Casey. "The gas might still be lingering in the air. The toxic chemicals dissipate in five minutes. Just to be on the safe side, hold your breath when you take off the mask and slip on the helmet. Don't inhale before you slide the visor down."

"Got it, Mike?" She didn't want to sound like his mother, but Mike was Mike, and listening wasn't one of his talents. In fact, he was switched off more times than she could count.

Mike nodded. "I get it, Casey, but maybe you should be more worried about wearing this dark helmet. No way are we going to be able to see through it without tripping."

He was right, and Casey bit her lip at the thought. It was like wearing her sunglasses in the house; at home, she would have bumped into walls or even stepped on her most faithful companion, Socks the cat.

Thorn slid his finger across the visor in his hands. "The special glass is made out of lysectimema. Nobody can see in, but you can see out. So don't worry about stepping on fluffy gray and white cats." He slipped on his helmet.

She let out a sigh. "Okay, problem solved. And Thorn, do I need to post a *Keep Out* sign in my head?"

"Sorry to intrude," said Thorn. "Your thoughts just seem to drift over to mine."

Casey eased the gas mask off and replaced it with the helmet. It snuggled just right on her head, and all she had to do was find the button to close the visor. She let her fingers glide along the sides, but she didn't feel anything. Her lungs started to burn, running low on oxygen. Thorn had said the gas had likely dissipated, but that it was better to be safe than sorry. Her vision turned hazy, and she opened her mouth, ready to gasp for air, when she tasted something sickeningly sweet on her tongue.

With a flick of his hand, Mike pulled down her visor and smiled. As soon as it clicked in place, her vision sharpened into focus. Tiny specks of dirt on the metal floor caught her attention. She was surprised to find she could clearly see every tiny detail, just like the vampire vision she'd read about in novels. The technology was mind blowing. She inhaled greedily, then

nodded, the taste still lingering on her tongue. Everything smelled like fingernail polish, and she wondered what chemical it was.

“Acetone, mixed with femirotana,” said Thorn.

“Boundaries, Thorn. Please quit jumping into my head,” she murmured, her gaze still focused on the unconscious guy on the floor. Hesitating, Casey knelt down and touched the soldier’s arm. He didn’t move, and she inched closer, peering at the distinct, large emblem of a yellow cross, an ankh.

All right. I can do this ...for Jack. She marveled at how identical the being looked to Thorn as she tugged at the rebel’s boots. They slipped off, revealing small, stubby feet with four claw-like toes. And Mike had the nerve to make fun of *her* feet when she was barefoot at the beach. The feet before her now gave a whole new meaning to the words *ugly* and *nasty*.

Mike shot her a questioning look. She shrugged and pointed to the alien in front of him, signaling him to get to work.

“This is just crazy,” mumbled Mike.

She nodded, for once seeing his point rather than his need for drama. She imagined Jack lying on some old cot in a prison cell, and the thought of breaking him out gave her the strength she needed to carry on. She touched the creature’s green skin only long enough to get his arms out of the uniform. The skin felt unnaturally cold to the touch, almost as though she was holding her hand inside a fridge. Shivering, she pulled hard until the shiny black material slid down over the alien’s knees and past its feet.

“Well done,” said Thorn. “Now slip in.”

Still wearing her own clothes, she wriggled into the tight, one-piece uniform. She smoothed out the wrinkles, then strapped on her holster and put her gun away. Droplets like sweat slid off the aliens’ faces. Fluid seeped out of the slits that she presumed were their noses, as if they had some kind of alien flu. She hoped she wouldn’t catch some rare kind of sickness; if she somehow survived the ordeal, she was going to take a two-hour shower, scrub her skin with a scouring pad, and lather herself up with ten bottles of antibacterial soap, followed by a three-hour soak in a hot bath, and then repeat the process.

Thorn adjusted the collar of his uniform. “Remember our first objective. We need to find a door with a red triangle symbol. It’ll lead us to a computer. That’s the only way we’re going to find Jack and the weapon.”

“Okay, Thorn.” Casey jammed her feet into the small boots and winced. A day from three weeks earlier flashed in her head when she faced the painful consequences from wearing high heels all day for the first time. Her feet throbbed the same way now. She was sure the gas would’ve dissipated by now, so she flipped her visor up and down, marveling at how easy it seemed when she didn’t have to worry so much about holding her breath.

Mike tucked in Casey’s long braid. “Hey, don’t forget this.”

“Thanks.” Her voice echoed, as though her head was stuck inside a bucket.

She watched Mike try to slip on a pair of black gloves. He glanced up, his brows furrowed. “These don’t fit at all,” he said. “They’re made for three fingers, not five.”

“Shove two fingers in each hole. Then you should have a space for your thumb alone.”

He shot her a smile. “Oh, that works. Thanks. So do we pass inspection or what?”

Thorn scanned them from head to feet. “With flying colors. Let’s go.” He walked down the ramp, motioning them to follow.

Taking shorter steps in a heel-toe motion to get used to the new boots, she hurried to the other side of the docking center. Her toes felt squashed in, and she cringed several times until she

realized distributing most of the weight across the ball of her foot helped ease the discomfort.

Thorn stopped and pulled out something that looked like a laptop from his backpack. He opened it, pressed a few buttons, and then put it away.

“What cha doing?” asked Mike.

“It’ll jam the cameras for about fifteen minutes—not long, but enough for us to find a room where I can tap into their systems and fully disable security.”

“It buys us some time.” Casey pushed the door open and felt her eyes widen as she scanned the hall. The long, silver corridor was as wide as a four-lane highway. Strange, raised symbols and writing adorned the curved pristine walls. The floor appeared to be metallic, and soft light emanated from no obvious source.

Casey fought the overwhelming desire to return to the safety of the ship, where they could lock the doors and hide—or, better yet, just leave. They were in alien territory, and the realization struck her with full force. There would be no turning back. A few feet, and she’d be surrounded by aliens that wouldn’t sleep peacefully around her feet. She took a steadying breath and clenched her fists, summoning her courage from within as she focused her attention back to the room to ease her nerves.

The writing on the walls looked like the hieroglyphics Casey had seen when she’d traveled to Egypt with her parents. She remembered her tour guide saying the so-called gods came in flying boats. She had to wonder if the aliens had anything to do with the pyramids.

Mike ran a finger across the vertical and horizontal rows and columns of strange symbols. “I wonder what they say.”

Casey pointed to an ankh. “This one stands for life.”

“It’s all about death, revenge, and starting a new life,” said Thorn. “Their mumbo-jumbo’s everywhere.”

A faint noise echoed in the distance. Casey held her breath and cocked her head to listen. “Someone’s coming,” she whispered. The shuffling moved closer, reminding her of heavy footsteps and marching. She gaped at the rebel soldiers, a whole squad of them, moving in their direction. The bright yellow insignia stood out against the black material of their uniforms. She took a deep breath, cringing at how loudly it echoed in her ears. She suddenly wished Thorn had taught them how to breathe like aliens. She was sure they could hear her from a mile away. If anyone threw her so much as a stray look, she’d just pretend she had asthma, or else she’d blame it on Mike and let him deal with it. He sure owed her after he claimed she was the one who shot the ceiling back in Agartha.

“Remember their salute?” asked Thorn. “Touch both wrists together, palms facing you, and touch your chest.”

She nodded and kept her hand close to her holster. Her breath came in short, tense gasps inside her helmet. She certainly hoped they wouldn’t be noticed. The hair on the back of her neck began to rise, and she felt her body tense. The alien soldiers walked by, but to Casey’s relief, all they did was salute her as if she was one of them. She gave a salute back and smiled under her visor. Not one rebel gave them so much as a second glance; they simply passed by and were gone.

Still, it was a close call. She felt her knees shaking at the realization, and her shoulders slumped. From a corner of her eye, she noticed Thorn motioning toward an empty corridor and started after him, only then noticing the door with the triangle symbol.

Thorn took off his glove and touched the metallic door, then jerked his palm away. “No, this room won’t work. I sense activity.”

She blinked. “How?”

“I can feel the vibrations with my hands, detecting any kind of movement.”

“That’s a pretty nifty trick,” said Mike.

Thorn motioned. “Come. We must keep looking.”

More rebels scurried past them, paying them no heed. They walked down one more hall until they spotted another door with a triangle etched on it and halted.

Casey craned her neck and peered both ways. “Coast’s clear.”

Thorn stretched out his palm and placed it on the door.

“Are you feeling good vibes?” asked Mike.

Casey smiled weakly. “I hope he’s getting no vibes at all so we can get on with all of this. It’s been a blast and all, but I’d rather be among my own kind. I don’t wanna end up on one of Dr. Frankenstein’s operating tables.”

“Nobody’s in there. Let’s go.” Thorn adjusted the setting on his gun and aimed at a rectangular control panel to the left of the door. A soft *thud* rippled through the silence. Casey peered left and right, but nothing stirred.

The door slid open to reveal a gigantic white room with rounded corners; what looked like medical equipment hung from the walls and ceiling. Casey only hoped that they hadn’t stumbled into the place where they did hideous experiments on people. “If someone’s comes at us with a chainsaw, you’re totally going first ‘cause you owe me after I saved your butt from that monster snake.”

Mike snorted. “I’m a gentleman and always stick to the ladies-first rule.”

“Yeah, particularly if *your* life’s at stake.”

They entered, and the door slid shut behind them. Her heart pounded in her chest. The stress of being discovered by aliens was more than she could take.

Mike whipped off his helmet and gazed around. “No light bulbs again.”

“Agartha uses the same advanced power systems as the Greys.” Thorn rushed to a flat silver screen on the other side of the room. Underneath, a silver keyboard with strange symbols was nestled in the wall. “Now let’s find the weapon and Jack.” His six fingers moved at high speed, as if he had twenty of them.

Casey leaned against a shelf and crossed her legs. “Hey, Thorn, how do you know what to do?”

“I’m what you humans would call a secret agent,” he said, tapping his fingers at the keys.

Mike crouched on one knee, gripping his helmet. “Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine I’d be undercover with a secret agent, on a secret mission with an alien.”

“I’ve been trying to take Commander Tio down for over a year.” Thorn clicked furiously on the keyboard. “Okay. I’m tapping into the main computer.”

A sudden banging on the metal door made Casey jump. She knew one thing for sure: It wasn’t room service.

Chapter 2

Casey’s heart leapt as another knock sounded at the door.

“Dude!” Mike scrambled to his feet and threw his helmet on. “Quick! Try to blend in.”

Thorn rushed to the door and entered a code. “I jammed the lock, at least until they override it. It’ll give us a minute. Quick! Climb on the exam table. Try to look like you’re my patients.”

“Your patients?” retorted Casey.

Mike nudged her. “What kind of wacky quack is he?”

“Humans are brought here for Bingtingular-quam experiments,” said Thorn.

Her voice cracked with tension. “But we’re disguised as soldiers. Can’t we say we were just checking out a noise?”

Thorn shook his head. “This room’s restricted. No military personnel is allowed to enter without proper clearance, so it will arouse suspicion, which we can’t afford.”

“We could always say we got lost.” Mike motioned to the corridor. “Who wouldn’t with all those doors?”

His voice lowered. “They’d arrest us, and if they do that, I can assure you that bad things will happen.”

Casey fought the urge to ask what those bad things were. There was no point in feeding her overeager imagination. Pressing her mouth shut, she dashed for one of the two, long, matching stainless steel exam tables to the far right side of the room and hopped on, then yanked off her helmet and backpack. “Won’t they recognize our uniforms?”

Thorn hesitated before he replied, “I’ll cover you up.”

From the corner of her eye, she noticed Mike on the opposite table, a deep frown perched between his brows. She wondered what kind of plan Thorn was cooking up. She wished she had a few minutes to discuss it with Mike, but the aliens could be barging in any second. “You better hide our helmets and backpacks.” She strained to keep her voice from wavering. Real-life aliens—the enemy—were going to storm the room any minute. *If they discover our identity...* She didn’t want to even go there.

“Don’t worry. I’ll handle it.” Thorn rushed over to Casey and threw a sheet over her, then buckled heavy leather straps across her neck, wrists, and ankles.

She flexed her arms and strained against the iron hold, but they didn’t budge. Her heart spiked. She wasn’t aware that being tied up was part of the plan. Thorn tightened the straps, and she gasped. She thought for a second that maybe Thorn wasn’t on her side after all. She shot him a furious look. “You gonna squeeze me to death like a boa constrictor?” He pulled even harder, and she swallowed hard, having her answer.

She waited for him to smile and loosen the straps a bit, but he just walked over to Mike and repeated the procedure.

Mike twisted and turned, letting out a loud moan. “Oww! Not so tight, Thorn.”

“Sorry, but this has to look convincing.” He stuffed all of their helmets and backpacks inside a drawer on the side of the exam table. Racing over, he grabbed a long white medical lab coat from the back of the door. His jaw tightened as he slipped into it, his shoulders slumping down as though he carried the world’s weight on his shoulders.

Casey opened her mouth to tell him that she’d changed her mind and would rather hide, but her tongue felt dry like parchment, sticking to the back of her throat.

“You’re kidding, right?” mumbled Mike.

Thorn wheeled a cart toward them. “Keep silent.”

She craned her neck to catch a closer glimpse of what Mike was seeing, then wished she hadn’t. Spread out on the cart was a tray with loads of scary-looking medical instruments. Thorn picked up a device with a drill just as the aliens burst through the door. The drill spun, emitting

an ear-splitting, grinding *whir* that made it impossible for Casey or Mike to hear what was being said.

A startled gasp escaped her lips, and her heart hammered against her ribcage. Thorn was crazy, unstable. She was sure of it. He'd betrayed them, or else he wouldn't have led them to that room and tied them up. She was convinced it was all a setup. *Wait...why would the general send us up into space with a lunatic? Unless he was part of the plot, or else he just trusts Thorn way too much. Boy, will he be in for a surprise when their only hope for survival turns out to be nothing but a farce. Talk about being stabbed in the back.*

She knew she should be struggling, crying for help, doing anything other than just lying there and waiting for those things to kill her, but her body wouldn't react to her brain's commands, and her eyes remained squeezed shut. Her skin turned into goosebumps where it touched the cold metal exam table. A shadow hovered over her. Her arms flexed against the restraints; a scream remained trapped in her throat.

A voice carried over from the doorway. "I'm Sergeant Zacko. What's going on here?"

"I don't have time for these interruptions," hissed Thorn.

Casey pried one eye slightly open and looked up at him bent over her as he prodded the skin on her arm. She could only hope he knew what he was doing because that drill didn't exactly look like something one would get from Toys R' Us.

Thorn shook his head and let out a sigh, continuing, "You're not supposed to be in here. Why are you breaking protocol?"

Whoa! That was an Academy Award performance. She almost believed him.

The sergeant's gaze lingered on Thorn, darkening. "You look a lot like that Thorn character."

Casey sucked in a silent breath, not happy to hear that Thorn had a reputation, of sorts.

Thorn cocked an eyebrow, annoyed. "Thorn is dead. If you compare me with a traitor, you'll find yourself on this table next."

"I heard he was killed," said a soldier.

Thorn nodded. "Yesterday."

"We wouldn't be where we are today without him." Sergeant Zacko stiffened. "What a shame he betrayed us. I guess he deserved to die."

Casey pursed her lips slightly as her thoughts started to race. *So Thorn helped this rebel cause get to where they are today? Does the general know about this? Whose side is our copilot on anyway?* She was glad the rebels couldn't read her mind right now. Thorn had said it took years of practice and skill for a Grey to read human thoughts, and none of them had that experience, except for Commander Tio.

The sergeant took a step forward. Thorn straightened his back to stop him from peering over his shoulder, which made the sergeant frown. "A gunshot was reported. We're here to investigate every room. What are you doing here?"

"I'm Dr. Pather, and I specialize in genetic experiments. Commander Tio asked me to help him with some of his research. I brought these teenagers out of deep sleep from the Deep Sleep Lab. They got out of control before I tied them down."

Mike wailed from the other exam table. "I don't want to be probed by aliens."

Casey forced herself to keep her mouth shut, but inside she boiled, wondering what in the world he was thinking. She wished she could remind him that the world wasn't a stage. If he continued his performance, she was sure he'd have the aliens asking too many questions.

Pulling out his gun, Sergeant Zacko pointed to Mike and rolled his eyes. "I'll shut that one

up for you.”

With mounting horror, Casey yelled, “No!”

Thorn grabbed the sergeant’s arm quickly. “You’ll do no such thing. I need his body organs intact. You know there are more efficient ways.” He rummaged through the tray of medical equipment and picked up a large syringe the size of a turkey baster. “Ah, this will work.” He squeezed it so some of the green liquid squirted high up into the air.

He really did look like the alien version of a mad scientist. She winced as a drop or two landed on her face, almost expecting her skin to start bubbling and bursting where it hit her. She still couldn’t tell if Thorn was bluffing or not, which was a good thing if he was. He might’ve just saved Mike from being shot, but she still thought he could have an ulterior motive. Something told her he wasn’t one to trust, but Mike seemed to play along, so she decided to keep quiet and see what happened, at least for the time being.

“An platlism injection should do the trick.” Thorn’s lips curled into an evil smile.

“Great,” said Sergeant Zacko. “That stuff works fast.”

Casey’s jaw dropped as she stared at the long needle. The menacing tip glistened green like poison. Hopefully, Thorn wasn’t going to bring that thing anywhere near her, because there was no way she’d play along. Taking a deep breath, she screamed at Thorn in her mind. *What’s wrong with you? Get that thing away from me!*

Thorn focused his gaze on her as his words reached her mind. *It’s okay. I won’t hurt you. I promise.*

She had to wonder if he was telling the truth. She hoped so, because anything else was just morbid and wrong, particularly after he’d claimed to be their friend. Nodding slightly, she tried to regulate her breathing and relax her twitching body.

“Sorry for the interruption,” said Sergeant Zacko. “Continue your work, Dr. Pather.”

“Thank you.”

The sergeant saluted. “All clear in here. Everyone out.”

The soldiers hesitated for a brief second and then filed out, one after another.

Relief flooded Casey’s body as she whispered, “You did it. You actually got rid of them. I was so scared.” Her voice shook and broke, and her heart raced faster.

Smiling, Thorn put away the scary needle and unhooked the tight leather straps. “You thought I was going to kill you?”

She didn’t know whether to deny it or not. “Maybe a little.” She grinned. “That little performance of yours would’ve scared even your mother.” She frowned, realizing her possible blunder. “If you have one, or... uh—”

“We don’t hatch from eggs.” Thorn laughed and moved on to loosen Mike’s wide restraints. “You could’ve blown our cover.”

Mike huffed. “I was trying to keep it real.”

“Well, then I suppose you succeeded in that.” Thorn handed both of them their helmets and backpacks. He retrieved his equipment, too, then turned his back on them and focused on the computer.

With a *thud*, Mike jumped off the exam table. He walked over to Casey and whispered in her ear, “That sergeant recognized Thorn.”

“I know.” Thorn had done a brilliant cover-up job on pretending he was a doctor, but she couldn’t get Sergeant Zacko’s words out of her mind. Aliens on the enemy ship knew who Thorn was, and they specifically said he couldn’t have made it so far without him. She wondered who Thorn really was and exactly what had he done? She cast a suspicious glance at him. “Have you

worked for the rebel Greys in the past?”

Thorn’s jaw dropped as he turned slowly. “Sorry?”

“You heard me.” She jumped up from the table and marched toward him, finger raised. “How come the enemy knows you?”

Mike joined in her campaign, his lips pressed in a thin line. “Are you part of the rebel movement?”

Abruptly, Thorn stopped typing. “If I was, why would I want to disable their weapon and save your race?” He heaved a sigh. “I don’t need to prove to you where my loyalties lie.”

Whatever Thorn had done, it seemed to be a touchy subject for him. Casey thought maybe he was just ashamed and was trying to make things right. She wasn’t sure if General Ashtar knew, but if he did, she felt she had every right to know too. Truth was, though, that Thorn could’ve easily handed them over to the sergeant, but he didn’t. *Maybe Earth matters to him after all.* And then it dawned on her: Thorn’s ship didn’t just crash. Someone wanted him dead. The sergeant had called him a traitor and said he deserved to die. She shook her head slightly. Thorn might not have wanted to talk about it, but she had to know more. “Why did Commander Tio want you dead?”

“What?” asked Mike.

“His ship was shot down—not exactly an accident,” Casey continued.

“It wasn’t.” A frown crossed Thorn’s features.

Casey tried to interpret the frown. Maybe the information infuriated him and he was there to avenge his dead friends. What better way would there be to foil the enemy’s plan than by disabling their weapon? If that was the case, she had to wonder if he really cared about what happened to her and Mike, once the job was done. *Crap. I better quit thinking before Thorn reads every thought in my head.*

Silence filled the air, except for the tapping of fingers on the keyboard. Finally, Thorn had something to say. “I hacked into their database and shut down their security cameras. It’ll take them at least eight hours to fix the glitch.”

“Cool,” said Casey. “That’s going to be loads of help.”

Mike pulled her aside and whispered, “Can we *really* trust Thorn?”

“Do we have a choice?” she whispered back, looking over her shoulder. “And do you really think he can’t hear us or read our thoughts?”

“I found something.” Thorn pointed at the screen as he scrolled through the pages.

Mike spun toward him. “Lay it on us.”

Casey hurried over, and her eyes locked on the screen in front of her. She stared at a black and white diagram. “What’re we looking at?”

“Schematics.” Thorn traced a gloved finger along the line on the monitor. “These floor plans show the dimensions of every room in every corridor. See?” Casey nodded, and Thorn continued, “Jack’s just two halls away.”

Her heart hammered in her chest. “Jack’s here? You’ve found him.”

Mike appeared around her and wrapped his arm around her middle, pulling her against him. “What’re we waiting for? Let’s go get him.” She stiffened against his warm skin. The guy had obviously forgotten they had decided to remain just friends, but it wasn’t the time to argue—not when Jack was so close.

Thorn cocked his head and pointed to the left side of the screen. “See that small rectangle? He’s right there. It says here he’s scheduled to be put into deep sleep in two hours.”

Mike snorted. “He gets his beauty sleep while we save his butt?”

"I don't think he means sleep as in *sleep*. Rather as in deadly-silent-may-he-rest-in-peace-forever kind of sleep," said Casey.

"It's actually a comatose state," said Thorn. "They're kept that way until they're used for experimentation."

"The general did mention something like that." It was hard to remember everything they'd told her; she wished she'd had some sticky notes to stick to her forehead for all the stuff that had been crammed in her head in the last few hours.

"Look here." Thorn pointed to the right side of the screen. "It's the only place on the ship with this unusual power signature."

She blinked. "Is that what I think it is?"

His gaze narrowed. "Indeed. This has to be the weapon."

Casey focused, biting on her lip. The good news was, they had found it. The bad news was, it was all the way on the other side of the ship. She had hoped to get in and out in no time so they could focus on Jack.

"There's no way we'll make it to the other side of those corridors and back in time to save Jack from going to sleepy-sleep." Mike gave her hand a hard squeeze. "I say we save him and then think about everything else. What do you think, Casey? Go with me, and it's two against one. We win."

Thorn took off his white medical gown and hung it back on the door, then slid on his helmet and backpack. "General Ashtar said to chip the weapon first and then get Jack. We'll stick to the plan."

Clearly, all he cared about was getting his revenge. Casey shook her head. "No way! I don't care what your general said. We get Jack first, and then we head toward the weapon."

Thorn hesitated. "We'll talk on the way there."

She arched an eyebrow. "Wait. Shouldn't we print out a map or something?"

Thorn tapped his head with his finger. "No. I already memorized the entire floor plan."

Adjusting the holster around his waist, Mike met his gaze. "No way, man. How?"

"My brain processes three times faster than yours." Thorn pressed a tiny red dial on his radar device. "Do you remember how the general showed you to insert the microchip into the weapon?"

"Yeah," said Casey. There was no way she'd ever forget that; the general only had drilled it into her head a million times during their training.

"Good. I'm going to download the location of that weapon into yours as well." He glanced up. "Just in case anything happens."

Casey gulped. Whatever he meant, she didn't want to imagine it. "Let's hope it doesn't come to that. And there's nothing to discuss. We get Jack, and then we think about the weapon."

Thorn practically glared at her. "If the weapon's not disarmed on time, millions of people will die."

"I'm not going to let that happen, but I can't waste this opportunity either. Jack's practically next door. You have your mission, and we have ours."

Mike pulled her close again. "Sorry, buddy, but it's two against one. We win."

"You don't understand. We'll all lose," muttered Thorn, but he knew there was no point in arguing.

She wished Thorn could see her point. "What's the plan?"

He adjusted his collar, seemingly uncomfortable for a minute. "It's not a perfect plan because there's no such thing. Sometimes you have to tweak them to fit your situation."

“Tweak all you want, but let’s get Jack out of there,” said Mike.

“Jack’s so close and scheduled for deep sleep. We might not get another chance to get back here anyway.” Thorn paused, as if in thought. “There’s a guard coming on duty next shift who won’t be so easily persuaded. We’re old friends, and he’ll immediately recognize my voice. I see no risk in getting Jack out now. Besides, four out of the five guards are signed out to attend a mandatory meeting. So let’s do it.”

“That’s your plan? Persuade the guard?” asked Mike.

Thorn’s gaze narrowed. “I can be quite persuasive. May I remind you that I do this for a living?”

“Any plan’s better than none at all—unless you can come up with something better.” Casey clapped Mike’s shoulder and then looked at him. When he didn’t respond, she smiled and flipped down her visor. “Thought so. Let’s go. We don’t want to keep Jack waiting any longer. Who knows what he’s been through already?”

Chapter 3

Walking ahead of Thorn and Mike, Casey left the medical room in silence, intent on rescuing her abducted friend. The sooner they got there, the better. She didn’t want to be separated from her best friend for another minute. The bright corridor stretched for several feet and then took a bend to the right. Footsteps echoed from the walls, coming nearer. Casey’s gloved hand clasped around the weapon attached to her hip as a platoon of soldiers hurried past. Her stomach knotted. *Why are there so many of them? Why now, when we’re so close to rescuing Jack?*

A soldier bumped into Mike, sending him staggering against her. “Ow!” said Mike. “Watch where you’re going.”

She glared at him for a moment, forgetting that he couldn’t see her through the helmet.

Another soldier smacked against his shoulder and he cried out again. “Ouch!”

If Mike’s big mouth screwed this up, she’d kill him, and save the aliens the trouble. Casey muttered, “You’re such a drama queen. Stop it, unless you need medical attention. Do you?”

“Only for my heart,” he whispered.

She laughed. “That’s not your heart. It’s your ego, Mike. Anyway, what’s with all these soldiers?”

Thorn walked faster, probably hoping to get past the hot spot without drawing any attention. “The meeting I just told you about is getting ready to start.”

Casey was glad to hear it. That meant four out of the five of Jack’s guards would be out of the picture, making it the best time to put Thorn’s escape plan into action.

“You three, stop right now. I know what you’re up to,” said a guard out of the blue.

Casey froze, for a moment, confused as to whether he was talking to them.

“Huh?” Mike turned. “Oh, he means us.”

Have we been discovered? She groaned inwardly, her knees suddenly starting to shake. Not now! Not before we can get to Jack. Talk about crappy luck. What did we do to give us away? Was it Mike’s big mouth? She drew in a sharp breath and tightened the grip around her gun. Her

mind raced as she debated whether to run or play Lara Croft and fight. Fighting might get her out of the situation, but she doubted even Lara could win against a whole battalion of aliens. She peered at Thorn for direction just as his thoughts invaded her mind.

Don't run. Stay calm.

Easier said than done. She suppressed a snort. He might have felt comfortable among those people, but she preferred not to engage in small talk with them.

The second until the guard spoke again stretched to infinity. He flipped up his visor and said, "You're not getting away with it."

Huh? What's he talking about? Casey shivered as a chill ran down her spine. The guard stomped his foot, obviously waiting for some sort of reaction from her. She didn't know what to do or say. Her mouth opened, but no words came out.

"He's on to us," whispered Mike. "What's the plan?"

Casey shrugged, her heart still pounding in her chest. Her finger felt heavy on the trigger, ready to obey her brain's command, but she hesitated. It wasn't time yet, because once a shot fell, she knew bedlam would be knocking on the door within seconds. Still, though, she'd shoot if she had to.

The guard glared at them. "I'd rather take a blaster shot to the head than go to one of these meetings, but if I can't get out of it, neither can you. Get over here before I report you."

This is all about skipping a boring, useless, stupid meeting? He has to be kidding.

"Yes, sir," said Thorn.

Clenching a fist, Casey screamed in her mind, *What's wrong with you? A room full of them is the last place I want to be right now!*

Thorn patted her shoulder. *You'll be fine.*

He might have been right, but she didn't want to find out. The clock was ticking. Getting friendly with another culture didn't look quite that appealing at the outlook of Jack's imminent deep sleep if they didn't get on with their rescue mission.

"Come on," said Thorn.

Casey didn't have much of a choice. She turned slowly and forced her feet to move toward the rebels crowding into a large meeting room. Rows were arranged in a semicircle around a podium. The metal floor had a black, glossy finish sprinkled with glitter. Black fabric with tiny, glowing stars covered the walls and ceiling. She wondered how they somehow got sidetracked to the planetarium. Hoping she wouldn't faint, she sucked in one deep breath after another. There they were, hidden in plain sight, among a rebel group of aliens who wanted to destroy every human being in the world. It took the old saying, "Keep your friends close and your enemies closer" to a whole new level.

She knew she shouldn't be craning her neck around as though she hadn't seen anything like it before. As an alien, she would have been used to the view, but she couldn't help gawking at things. A spot near the back was free, so she squeezed through the gathering crowd toward it. She copied the others' cross-legged sitting position and glanced up at Thorn. *What now?*

You're doing great.

She spun and flashed Thorn a smile, even though he couldn't see it. Aliens in the row behind her started to chant, and others followed suit. It was a simple melody, primarily using two or three pitches, very similar to the ancient chanting of the monks she'd heard in Tibet. The rebel Greys seemed pretty off key, at least she would fit right in since she couldn't carry a tune herself.

The lights dimmed. A giant blue and white ball, suspended between ceiling and floor, rotated in midair, casting a glaring glow on the uniformed soldiers. Casey focused on seven large

land masses, some connected, others separated by water, only then realizing they were continents. It was Earth! An uneasy feeling settled in the pit of her stomach. Something told her the meeting didn't involve chattering about the weather and the increase in taxes. She craned her neck to get a better view over the bobbing heads sitting in front of her.

A figure stepped from the darkness into the flickering light of the hologram, his flowing cloak shimmering silver when he moved. "Good evening, everyone. Most of you know me, but for the new recruits among us, I'm Commander Tio. You may call me your leader."

Commander Tio was obviously a wee bit conceited, just like Mike. He looked like the other aliens, with large slanted eyes, oversized bald head, and slim body. She peered closer and noticed that his skin coloring seemed lighter. If there were different species or races of these aliens, she thought maybe he was of another ilk. As much as she wanted to, she dared not lift up the dark glass hiding her identity in order to get a better look. *Thorn, what's up with him?*

Only the firstborn son from a long line of royalty has blue-grey skin and midnight-blue eyes. She gasped: He wasn't just a nutcase, but a *royal* nutcase. *How fitting. Should I bow or something?*

His name is Sheik Tio. It means "ruler".

That was even worse, because that meant he was a nutcase ruler with royal power and loads of idiots following his command. She turned her gaze back on Tio. *Besides you, he's the only one who can read human minds, right?*

Yes, but he'd have to know you are human and then be totally focused on you. He's not, so don't worry.

He gives me the creeps. I think I'll just nickname him Tio. Seems a lot easier to say. Anyhow, why does he hate humans so much? This is all about that probe, isn't it?

Thorn let out a soft sigh. *On February 12, 1961, the first planetary probe was launched to Venus by the Soviet Union. Venera 1 soon disappeared and broke off contact with Russia. It somehow made it into our solar system.*

Yeah, you said it crashed on your planet, poisoning everything.

Thorn hesitated. *Yes. The probe released different strains of bacteria indigenous to Earth. We had no immunity to the alien bacteria that spread quickly through our ecosystems and atmosphere. Like I told you, millions of Greys were wiped out in a matter of days.*

Casey drew in a deep breath. *You know how sorry I am about that.*

Thorn continued. *Tio lost his beloved wife Alveena and his four children. All he can think about is revenge.*

She nodded slightly, uneasiness tightening its grip on her throat. *So sad that he lost his family.* It wasn't her fault, but for some reason, she felt as though she carried the weight of the world on her shoulders, and her burden might just prove too great to bear. She gazed over at Thorn. *I can't believe he wanted Earth after those certain strains of bacteria killed all those people."*

He was certain he could come up with a vaccination. Once the plan was established to take over Earth in 1961, the rebel scientists worked day and night looking for a formula so our race could be compatible with Earth's bacteria. In the meantime, they planned military strategies, studied your planet, and worked on a cure for our sick and dying race, crossing our DNA with yours through experimentation on humans.

They couldn't forgive us, even after all that time? asked Casey.

No, they couldn't. Fifty years later, they finally discovered the formula to keep Earth's bacteria from harming their immune systems. Like I told you before, General Ashtar got his

hands on the formula and gave me the shot so I could survive in your atmosphere.

Casey reached for his gloved hand. *It's okay. You couldn't have come to Earth without it.*

There were no flaws in the vaccination, so the attack was planned. Yet, they still had no cure for half of our dying race, so the experiments continued, I'm sad to say.

You had no control over what that nut did. Nobody blames you.

Something silver shimmered around Tio's neck. Casey focused her gaze until she recognized the same ankh sign from the corridor walls, a pendant dangling from his chain. She thought it somehow represented seeing his loved ones in another life.

"Earthlings took away everything we loved," said the commander. "They robbed us of our homes, our families, our friends, our planet. They sleep in their beds and bathe in their joy while our happiness has long been blown out like a burnt candle. I say, let the weaklings pay dearly for their sins. They've killed what was dearest to us, and now it's time to give them some of their own medicine." He pointed at the hologram of Earth. "We'll inhabit every one of their great cities."

One thing was for sure: He was one good public speaker, determined, passionate, enthusiastic, and predatory. For one moment, even Casey herself believed him and almost wanted to buy whatever he was selling. But that was merely the power of the royally screwed and fanatic. She could certainly see why the others were literally hanging on every word he said; he was very charismatic.

Tio lifted his arm in the air as his gaze swept over the room, his eyes glinting with something she couldn't quite pinpoint. "Let us pause for a moment and remember all the friends and family we lost on that fateful day. They may no longer be with us, but we'll always carry them in our hearts."

A moment of silence ensued. Casey stirred slightly, forcing her fidgeting hands to clasp in her lap. Her breath came low and heavy, like a hiss, as she peered at the bowed heads. They didn't do it to themselves; humans caused all that pain. She closed her eyes, and her heart sank in her chest. *Talk about double standards and the tides of life changing! The rebels would've never attacked had it not been for some idiot humans and their need to conquer every inch of nature's magic.*

"The humans even turned my second-in-command against me," Commander Tio said. "Sadly, my brother Thorn Tio paid for his betrayal with his life. My sources tell me his ship mysteriously crashed yesterday on the way to Agartha after he served his purpose to the Agarthians, and they no longer had any use for him. If it weren't for them spreading their poisonous words, he'd still be among us, in the arms of his loving family."

Did I just hear that right? Casey's head snapped toward Thorn before she could stop herself. The others might have noticed, but she didn't care. Thorn might have been a popular boy name in their culture, but how many Thorns would have crashed their ship on the same day? The coincidence was far too coincidental.

She sucked in a trembling breath as she shook her head. He had taken them all for a ride. Not only was Thorn the brother of Commander Sheik Tio, his very own flesh and blood, but he was second-in-command of the rebel forces. And he certainly took his job seriously because he had just destroyed every human's hope for rescue by capturing Agartha's last chance: Mike and Casey. *No wonder he wouldn't agree to destroy the mothership! His very own brother runs the darn thing. No wonder he wanted to do this in a non-violent fashion.* Now she could only hope he'd keep his word to her.

She felt a hand tighten around her wrist and peered up at Mike's visor. He shook his head,

and she assumed he was catching on too. She felt the question burning on her tongue, nagging to be let out. *Oh for goodness sake, just tell us, Thorn. He won't quit squeezing my hand until you say it.*

Thorn stiffened where he sat. *Commander Tio and I are indeed brothers. We've fought many battles and were celebrated heroes among our people and yours as well.*

Not surface humans though. You mean the people inside of the Earth.

Yes. And then everything changed in an instant after the probe hit. Our people began dying, and my brother was desperate to try and find a cure to save them, so he started abducting humans for experiments. He didn't feel one ounce of remorse because he blamed them for creating the disaster in the first place, shrugging off the torture as payback. Needless to say, our elders didn't feel the same way. Sheik was caught, stripped of his royal title, and kicked out of our kingdom. He joined a band of criminals who made him their leader. The next thing I knew, he had recruited me, and our numbers doubled every day. But this is all ancient history. I left this madness behind.

Casey let out a silent snort. *But before you left, you helped them get here. That's what the sergeant said back in that medical lab. What did you do?*

Thorn turned his head to the side. *I recruited numerous soldiers, bought weapons and ships, and created training camps. I'm ashamed to say that's only the start. He brainwashed me, like all the others, with his propaganda. I truly thought I was fighting for a worthy cause and gave it my all. Even still, I was always against the cruel experimentation.*

I can tell you have a good heart.

General Ashtar saw that too. When his soldiers captured me a year ago, I knew I was as good as dead. But instead of executing me, General Ashtar spared my life and showed me the light. I switched sides. The point is, I stopped when I realized, and I've been trying to take down the rebels ever since.

So you just met General Ashtar not too long ago? she asked.

I've worked with General Ashtar for hundreds of years on many missions before I went bad, straying off the path. I've done countless things for this galaxy, but nobody cared once I joined my brother. The general and I became sworn enemies—until I came to my senses decades later. Now, my brother is my sworn enemy.

That explained why Tio tried to kill Thorn by shooting down his ship. He was angry because his brother left their so-called “worthy cause”. Casey shook her head. *So, why destroy humans then? Doesn't he need us for his experiments?*

Humans live on different planets all throughout the Milky Way. He can get them from anywhere.

That's right! Back in Agartha, Commander Gallant had told her that every planet in the solar system was inhabited. She still had a hard time wrapping her head around that one.

A chant rose up from the aliens, “Destroy the humans! Destroy them all!”

Casey shuddered, but in order to blend in, she forced the evil words out of her mouth.

Commander Tio stepped forward. “I enlisted the talents of the most brilliant scientists in the universe and convinced them to design a weapon capable of vaporizing carbon-based beings with human DNA.”

More cheers erupted.

Thorn leaned in toward Casey. *Convinced them? More like he kidnapped and forced them to do his dirty work. They fought Commander Tio every step of the way.*

Tio raised his hand until the crowd fell silent. “I can well guess your quandaries, comrades.

Why must we wait to destroy the humans? Why didn't I order their annihilation when we first arrived in orbit?" The commander locked his hands behind his back and paced the tiny circle where he stood. "We ran into problem after problem, thanks to the scientists. I was beyond furious. In my haste, I executed them before I discovered the locking mechanism they installed on the device for transport. It took our technicians one Earth day to decipher the lock and free the weapon for use. We activated the device immediately, but nothing happened. The scientists also damaged the time control microchip. My computer technicians assure me it will fire, but not for another six hours."

The guy was a madman, plotting to kill every human on Earth and take over their planet, all because of a tragic accident. Her heart went out to the poor scientists. It seemed as if they tried everything to stop the lunatic, from jamming the lock, to tinkering around with the time control chip before they were killed. It bought Earth precious time. Had the scientists not created those problems and distractions, Commander Tio would've killed everyone the second he entered Earth's atmosphere. He would have already been moving into Earth's cities that very minute.

Now she understood why all those enemy ships hovered over Agartha. They were waiting for the weapon to fire, but everything was delayed because of the sabotage created by the scientists. She imagined the rebel Greys still hung out above the city, just biding their time until dawn. Her stomach churned at the thought.

Those dedicated scientists sacrificed their lives to help save every human being. They were true heroes. She'd always remember the people who saved her life, and somehow, she'd find a way to pay tribute to them.

Tio's voice broke through her thoughts. "Their fate's been sealed. Their destruction was delayed, but it'll occur. Their vaporization will be completed." He raised his fists again. "By tomorrow morning, the third planet in this solar system will be ours. Sweet victory shall be our revenge!"

The assembled troops jumped up and cheered. Casey grabbed hold of Mike's arm and rose to her feet, joining in as her heart thumped hard. There she was, wasting time with the enemy while Jack's last minutes were running out. She peered around exasperated, wondering when Tio would stop his tirade so she could get on with it.

Half an hour, Thorn answered in her mind.

"Let's make a beeline for the door," whispered Mike.

Casey nudged him and shook her head as Commander Tio resumed his monologue. "No one will stop us because we'll fight with all we have. What else could be more important than the survival of our own species?" He scanned the room. When no one said anything in response, he answered his own question, "Nothing! Not even our own life. Our people will finally have a place to call home. Many of you wish to acquire land to start a new life. It's a simple request, but I can give you so much more. Think of a city you'd wish to rule, then close your eyes and picture it."

A chorus of mutters and whispers rose through the room. Casey craned her neck as she stared at several dots blinking on the hologram, hovering in midair.

"Do you see the great city before you?" asked Commander Tio. "It's yours! Consider it my reward to you for saving your race, for providing a future for our kind. I'll make you rich beyond your wildest dreams. You shall never have to worry about your own existence ever again."

The aliens roared with excitement and started to clap.

Not that sick, shameless enthusiasm again. Casey groaned inwardly and joined in.

Mike jumped to his feet and let out a long whistle.

“What’re you doing?” she hissed.

“I’m blending in. What else?” he whispered and started clapping and cheering louder than the others.

So much for keeping a low profile until we can make a run for it. “Stop it!” She nudged him in the ribs.

The commander stopped, and all eyes turned to Mike. His cheering cut through the sudden silence like a knife. The commander turned slowly, glaring in Mike’s direction.

Casey swallowed hard, and her chest tightened. She decided then and there that if they made it out alive, she was going to kick Mike’s butt all the way home and then some. Jack’s life—as well as their own and everyone else’s—depended on them, and she couldn’t believe Mike would put them all at risk like that.

Mike stopped clapping, cleared his throat, and sat down, but the damage was done. She peered around, silently imploring everyone to return to their fanatic promises of destruction and whatever else they were doing, but luck wasn’t on her side.

Thorn shook his head. *Why’s your friend acting like this?*

Casey looked away. *Because he’s an idiot.*

Does he not know the meaning of undercover? asked Thorn.

The aliens’ gazes remained fixed on Mike, and Casey’s heart thumped louder as she wondered what they were waiting for.

“I don’t like anyone interrupting me.” Commander Tio broke the silence with a growl.

Casey gulped as she rested her finger on the trigger of the gun secured in her holster.

“But all of you should pay attention, for that’s the kind of soldier I want to run my fleets of ships,” said Tio. “I want every one of you to adopt this attitude.”

Some looked still hesitant, but the applause started again, growing louder than before.

Tio clapped the hardest. “More applause, my friends! Thank you, soldier, for sharing your enthusiasm with us. Our race needs people like you, and I’d like a word with you after the meeting. Today, you will be moving up in rank.”

Mike stood and bowed, and Casey let out a silent groan and closed her eyes. *Who does he think he is?*

Inching nearer, Mike’s thigh brushed hers as he whispered, “I could have a career here.”

“Yeah, if they don’t kill you first.” Still, as soon as she got her hands on him, he was dead meat. Only Mike could act like a dummy and get a promotion. She couldn’t take another minute of the meeting. They needed to get Jack, fast, before those lights came back on—or else they were screwed.

Thorn’s thoughts echoed again. *Fifteen minutes.*

The soldiers stood again and resumed their singing, this time something that sounded like a national anthem, the noise scratching against her inner ear. As she scanned the room for exits, she wished for a pair of earplugs. The one to her right was obstructed by several aliens, but the one across the room wouldn’t require moving anyone. If they could only make it through the crowd without being spotted, they’d be out in no time. *Thorn, can we make a break for it right now? Before those lights come back on?*

He nodded.

She nudged Mike and gestured for him to follow.

The crowd jumped up and down; she felt the floor vibrate under her feet as she moved slowly, creeping through the soldiers to the back of the room. The singing grew louder. It had to be the worst concert she’d ever attended, but it probably would have gotten a million hits on

YouTube.

A trickle of sweat ran down her back. A few more feet, and she stood in front of the door, then scanned the room again. Nobody so much as glanced in their direction. With a flick of her hand, she motioned Thorn and Mike to follow, then sneaked out the door.

The corridor seemed deserted. Casey peered behind her to ensure that no one was following them, then lifted her visor. Mike followed suit. Grabbing his collar, she pulled him close, whispering, “What was that all about?”

“What?” asked Mike, with mocked innocence.

“In there?” She shook her head. “I don’t believe you! You could have—”

He shrugged and cut her off. “I was just playing the part, that’s all. You know I’m into acting.”

Casey let go of his shirt. “Fine, but we’re pretty freaking far from Hollywood.”

“Playing the part?” Thorn let out a slow hiss. “You’re not the brightest star in the sky, are you? Your little performance could’ve gotten us killed! Even worse, you gambled the lives of every human being on Earth. If someone discovers us, we can’t chip the weapon, and there will be no hope for the human race. Pull a stunt like that again, and you’ll find yourself...” Thorn rubbed his temples and looked Mike square in the eye. “Keep up with your foolish pranks, and you’ll be floating back home—if there is even a home left for you!”

Casey balled her hands into fists. “If this isn’t important to you, then at least start thinking of Jack. He’s always been a friend to you.”

Mike opened his mouth to speak, but Thorn pressed his finger under Mike’s chin and said, “You’re impulsive and reckless, and you’re jeopardizing our mission.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, backing up against the wall.

“I’ll let this one slide, but shape up. Start acting like you know what’s at stake.” Thorn turned and walked away. “Are you coming?” he yelled over his shoulder.

Casey gave Mike’s hand a squeeze and pulled him along.

Thorn shot them a sideways glance. “Just remember, we can’t stun the guard until he puts in the code to let Jack out. So no shooting. If you shoot, there will be no code and no Jack. Got that?”

Casey and Mike both nodded. It sounded like a good plan to her since she wasn’t into violence anyway. Thorn knew what he was doing, so she and Mike would just follow his lead. They had no other choice if they wanted to save their friend, their world, and themselves.

Chapter 4

The corridor ended in a circle with a security station situated in the middle. Black metal doors lined the round back wall, reminding Casey of the cul-de-sac at the end of a street. She forced her gaze away from the engraved details and stared ahead. Her heart raced, and her hands sweated a river under her too-tight gloves. Jack was close; she could feel it. They couldn’t make a mistake, but Thorn’s plan was as simple as it appeared bold: a daring prison escape without proper weapons and enough manpower. She would have felt safer with a pickaxe, some ropes, and a few sticks of dynamite. And a few mixed martial arts fighters wouldn’t have been bad

either.

Thorn paced faster with Casey and Mike following in step behind him. When she looked up, she gulped.

A soldier shifted his stance. "Halt. State your business."

"I see you're great at what you do," said Thorn. "Maybe a little too eager, but one can never be too careful." He straightened and raised his voice, confidence oozing through every pore. "I'm Lieutenant Buckers, serving as the medical team coordinator with Dr. Fanthoms."

The guard shook his head. "I've never heard of any Lieutenant Buckers."

"Well, that leads me to believe you are either new or ignorant," said Thorn frostily. "Learn the names of your superiors. Others won't be as understanding as I am." He pointed behind the guard. "Now, enough of your incompetence. I'm here to transport the human prisoner."

"Commander Tio ordered a deep sleep." The guard looked at his chronometer. "It is scheduled an hour from now."

Thorn clapped his shoulder. "Change of plans, soldier. Commander Tio has instructed my top medical team to examine the prisoner now, in the med lab."

The guard stood his ground as Thorn tried to walk past. He lifted up his visor and glared. "If that is so, why didn't anyone tell me?"

"Looks like *I'm* doing it right now," said Thorn.

Casey barely dared to breathe as the guard's eyes moved from Thorn to her and then back to Thorn again. She let out an exaggerated sigh. "We need to put him on ice."

"I'm not sure I can..." The guard took a deep breath, and his shoulders slumped as his eyes moved across the hall, as though he hoped someone might miraculously appear and jump to his rescue. "Let me call someone—or, even better, wait for the others to get back from the meeting."

"We don't have that kind of time," said Mike.

Thorn grabbed the guard's shoulders and looked into his eyes. "Don't you see, friend? This human could be the answer to all of our problems. There's hope for our people who're suffering. With his special DNA, we can truly make a difference."

"It didn't work last time," whispered the guard.

Casey could not ponder how uncaring, unremorseful they were after all the people they'd killed in the name of so-called research. Her stomach clenched. If Jack died, they'd just move on to the next sample as soon as they could find one.

"He is the key to perfecting the formula," Thorn continued to lie, "and we know it'll work this time. All we need is the perfect specimen—the one you're supposed to hand over right now, before it's too late."

The guard nodded and stepped aside. "This is great news indeed. But I thought dark-haired Agarthians didn't exist anymore. The commander said he killed them all."

Casey took a step closer, putting on her best performance. "This is his last chance at getting his hands on one. We're so close to a cure. That's why Commander Tio says there's not a moment to spare."

The guard hesitated again, the different emotions crossing his face. "I understand, but I need verification first."

He was a hard nut to crack, and Casey was sure that one day, he'd be promoted, if he didn't get his butt kicked for breaking protocol. Obviously, he knew that, too, because he seemed unable to make a decision one way or the other.

"Is this identification enough?" Thorn whipped out a syringe filled with the blue liquid and microchip. "This will humanely kill him in less than five minutes. We have another team right

behind us with a gurney. By the time they get here, the human will be more *manageable*.” Thorn smirked as he said, “Step to the side please. Our scientists need this body for immediate experimentation, and neither them nor Tio will be happy to hear that you’ve made them wait due to your inability to cooperate.”

Thorn was good at his little act, leaving James Bond in the dust. If she didn’t know better she would have fallen for it herself. Casey almost laughed in spite of her fear.

The soldier held up a hand. “Lethal injection? You mean you’re killing him right here? On the spot? I wasn’t informed about that either.”

So he does have a conscience. For a moment, Casey felt bad for the poor soldier. *No one should be forced to act against their better judgment, not even for a bluff.*

“You’re stalling,” Thorn hissed, reaching into his backpack. He pulled out a thin, rectangular glass, about the size of a credit card, and handed it to the soldier. Black symbols lit up and flashed across it. He had even come prepared with a fake ID. Casey was quite impressed.

The soldier returned Thorn’s card. “You do have proper security clearance, but I still need official orders from my superior officer.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve developed a bond with this human—not after all the Earthlings have taken from us.”

The guard clenched his hands into fists. “How could you even say that? I hate everyone from Earth. Humans are cruel, selfish, and despicable. My entire family was wiped out on that fateful day. I lost my father, who was my hero, my mother, who meant the world to me, my beautiful wife, and my precious baby, who wasn’t even a year old.”

“Then you shouldn’t care what happens to the human,” Thorn said softly.

The guard stared at him, his eyes glinting coldly. “You’re right. He might not have been the one to pull the trigger, but his mere existence is proof that he’s guilty too. Euthanize the human boy immediately. I’ll accompany you.”

In the end, he fell for it, hook, line, and sinker, but Casey still felt awful. The poor soldier had lost everyone he loved. He was nothing but another victim in this horrible catastrophe. She could feel his pain and anger. *Why did that stupid probe have to enter their airspace? Why couldn’t it just have burned up and disintegrated?* She imagined the Russian scientists’ faces after their probe was swallowed by the depths of space. They were probably worried about all the data they lost, completely oblivious to the events they’d just set in motion that could ultimately lead to the extinction of every inhabitant of Earth.

The soldier opened one of the doors, then glanced over his shoulder. “Get this. We sent in a translator. The boy claims he’s not Agarthian. He says we made a mistake and that he’s from California. He’s begging to go home, even demanding a DNA test.”

Thorn nudged the guard. “Even if he is telling the truth, he’d still be scheduled for deep sleep. The commander despises humans, no matter where they’re from.”

“We know that, but he doesn’t. Trust me, he’s not telling the truth.”

“What does Commander Tio think?” asked Thorn.

“He thinks the kid’s a whack job. Commander Tio refuses to even talk with him, let alone see whether there’s any truth to his ridiculous claims. He says it’s absolutely impossible for a human from the surface to reach as far as Agartha, and I agree.” He chuckled and shook his head slightly. “What a colorful story. That kid has a knack for lying, just like all of them.”

“Yes, he does,” said Thorn in a smug tone.

“He’s in here. Let me open the door for you.” The guard entered a code into a control panel, and the doors slid open with a *click*.

Casey's heart thudded against her ribcage. A soft golden glow emanated from the walls; she could have sworn they were made of pure gold. Her gaze wandered from the walls to the shiny silver capsules, the size of tanning beds, spread out across the room in organized rows. A jolt ran through her, causing her breathing to falter. Jack was inside one of those things, and she couldn't wait to get him.

The guard led them to the far right side and pointed to a pod. "He's the one you're looking for. Inject him. I want to see him suffer, just like my family did because of his kind." Anger and hate dripped from his words.

Thorn pressed a button, and the top lid started to shift aside, giving view to Jack's pale face. For a moment, Casey's heart stopped, and she felt helpless and bound to the spot as though she'd been struck by lightning.

Jack fluttered opened his eyes. There was terror written all over his face as he struggled into a sitting position in the confined space. He covered his eyes with his hands. Of course he needed a minute to adjust to the light after being held captive in total darkness. Her heart started to beat again. He was alive and well—scared to death, but alive nonetheless. It was truly a miracle. "This is all a big mistake. Please! You've got to listen to me." Jack still wore the same ripped, dirty clothes. His nails were bright red, like those of a trapped animal, probably from trying to push the lid open and escape his prison. Before she could react, Jack jumped to his feet, lunged forward, and pinned Casey against the wall shouting, "I'm not the special person you think I am. I'm not even from the glass city!"

From the corner of her eye, she saw the syringe plunge into Jack's neck, his sudden scream piercing her heart. Jack slouched forward against her, giving view to Thorn standing behind him, Jack's blue eyes flashing with more terror. Without thinking, she placed a gloved hand on his cheek and whispered, "It's okay."

Jack's voice thundered so loudly that it drowned hers out. "Don't touch me." He threw his fist, smacking Casey's visor and flipping it open as she flew to the ground. He gasped at the same time as she did and stumbled back. "Casey? Oh my gosh! I'm so sorry. I didn't know it was you."

"Intruder!" shouted the guard.

"Crap!" said Mike.

Casey stumbled to her feet when Mike aimed at the guard's side and fired. The soldier crumpled, dropping his gun. It flung through the air and clattered across the floor. Jack abruptly stopped it with his foot. He snatched the weapon and pointed between Mike and Thorn, hands surprisingly steady for someone who'd never held a gun a day in his life. The guard lay unconsciousness. He'd be out like a light for hours.

"Let us go, or I'll shoot you." Jack's voice came low and menacing, and she had no doubt he'd make good on his threat if she didn't stop him.

Mike yanked off his helmet. "Are you crazy? It's me." A big smile grew across his lips, and he gripped the pistol barrel. "Glad to see you, bro."

Jack's jaw dropped, but he refused to put down the gun. "Mike?"

"Yep. It's me, in the flesh."

"He injected me with something," hissed Jack, leveling his weapon at Thorn.

Casey threw herself in front of Thorn, acting as a shield. "Don't!"

"How did you get here?" Jack peered between her and Mike, taking in the details of the room with huge eyes. He wanted to wrap his head around all of this, but with a logical person who preferred his explanations in black and white, it was too much to ask.

“Bet you’re surprised we’re with an alien,” said Mike. “This is Thorn, a friend. He’s helping us.”

The deep furrows between Jack’s eyebrows smoothed, and his shoulders relaxed as he drew a deep breath. “How did you befriend one of those...those things?” Jack looked from Casey to Mike, then back at Thorn.

“It’s really a super long story,” said Casey. “Now give Mike back his gun so I can give you a giant hug.”

Mike smirked. “And maybe apologize to the alien that hooked us up with a ship to rescue your butt.”

Jack shook his head as he handed Mike the weapon. He reached out to shake Thorn’s hand. “Sorry about that little mix-up, but I’m pleased to, uh, meet you... Thorn.”

Thorn nodded and gripped his hand in a firm handshake.

“Ouch.” Jack touched his neck. “So why the shot?”

“It’s a communicator chip so you can understand their language and Thorn,” said Mike.

“You’ll need it so you can blend in and get off this ship. Mike and I took the injection too. I’m just so glad you’re okay!” Casey threw her arms around him, oblivious to the dirt and grime that was caked all over him. Still, he was a beautiful sight. She cupped his face, with tears trickling down her cheeks.

He hugged her, and they stood in a tight embrace. “I couldn’t stop thinking about you, Mike...and that T-rex,” said Jack. “I thought you both might be dead. I was crazy with grief.” He took another deep breath.

Thorn motioned toward the three of them. “This is all very touching, but we really need to get going. Someone could be coming in anytime now.”

Jack nodded. “Thank you. I don’t know how you pulled it off, but, boy, am I glad you did.”

Mike pointed at the guard lying on the ground. “Put on the uniform, Jack. The key here is disguise, capisce?” He bent over, wiggled off the soldier’s helmet, and handed it to Thorn, who inserted the tiny chip with the software to make Jack sound like the aliens when he talked.

Mike shoved his weapon back in his holster, then shot Jack a frustrated look. “So what’re you waiting for? Christmas? Strip off his uniform and suit up!”

Jack gaped. “Is he dead?”

He reached down, wrapped his hands around the soldier’s boot, and tugged. “No, just stunned for a few hours.”

Casey gripped the other boot and pulled with all her might. “Hurry!”

Jack rubbed the alien’s skin and flinched. “It feels like the dolphins we touched earlier. I don’t see how any of this can get any stranger.”

“Yeah, uh...it can,” said Mike. “Hold on a sec. Here...you pull one pant leg, and I’ll pull the other.” They slid off the rebel’s uniform. “Get this,” Mike continued, “we flew here in a spaceship, we’re working with one of them, and—the best part—we have to save the world.”

“You’re kidding,” said Jack, turning to face Casey. “He is, isn’t he?”

Casey’s eyes locked with his. “We have a small problem on our hands.”

“Small?” retorted Mike. “Don’t sugarcoat this. Jack, we have a HUGE problem on our hands.”

Her lips pressed together in a grim line. “There’s a secret weapon on this ship that’ll kill everyone on Earth.”

“And don’t forget the people *inside* Earth too,” added Mike.

She handed Jack a backpack, stun gun, and a radar device to put on his wrist like a watch.

He slipped into the black uniform and boots as Thorn let him in on their briefing. He nodded a few times, confusion visible from the deep furrow between his brows. Even after seeing it all live and in 3-D, she couldn't quite accept what was happening, so she wondered how Jack could believe any of it just from hearsay.

Thorn pushed the red button on his radar device. A female voice echoed, "Six hours remaining." He headed toward the door. "We've got to get to the other side of the ship and find that weapon."

"This certainly beats being caged in a casket like Dracula." Jack swung his backpack over his shoulder. "Come on. Let's get out of here."

Voices and footsteps echoed outside the door. Casey's heartbeat spiked. She'd come too far to be stopped now.

Fear edged Mike's voice, and his eyes widened. "We're so busted. I shot the sheriff." He whipped out his gun. "It's us or them."

"Wait," said Jack. "You don't even know how many are out there."

Casey grabbed the barrel of Mike's pistol. "Hold on, there, cowboy."

There had to be a better answer than going into a full-fledged battle. Her mind sprung into action. "I've got an idea. Time to play switch-a-roo. Quick! Hide the guard. He'll be Jack. Jack, you're now the guard. Pretend like you've been shot."

"Brilliant." Thorn picked up the soldier's legs while Casey heaved his upper body into the capsule.

Casey tapped on the rebel's helmet. "Sweet dreams. Don't let the bed bugs bite." She shut the lid and whipped around to meet the gaze of the four soldiers who had just walked in. Her heart thudded fiercely. She was suddenly very thankful for her visor, or she never would have been able to keep her cool.

"I demand to know what's going on here," barked a furious voice.

Another soldier reached toward his holster and whipped out his gun. "What're you doing here? This area's restricted."

Having a real gun pointed at Casey's head made her feel uneasy. Her head started to spin, and she fumbled for an explanation, but the words wouldn't come.

"Owww," Jack moaned, leaning into Casey, almost losing his balance. "I called them," he whispered so softly that nobody would be able to make out his voice.

Mike took Jack's other arm and swung it around his shoulder. "Don't worry. We got you. Can you walk?"

"What happened?" asked a soldier.

"I opened the capsule, and..." Jack's soft voice trailed off in a dramatic performance. Obviously, he'd learned a thing or two from Mike.

The soldier leaned in and touched Jack's shoulder. "Why would you do that? Taunting the human again?"

Casey wondered if they might actually pull it off. Her blood ran cold as she boldly threw herself into character. "The boy grabbed his gun. Shot him."

"Ryanallo underestimated the kid," said a soldier. "We can't thank you soldiers enough for responding to his distress call."

Casey nodded. "We've got to get him to sick bay. We'll fill you in on all the details later."

Mike's voice rose to a crescendo as he jumped into character too. Clearly, he was aiming for the red carpet. "We stunned the Agarthian. If Commander Tio didn't need him, I'd kill him right here on the spot. The boy's back in the capsule, where he belongs. Under no circumstances

should you let him out. He's extremely dangerous."

One of the soldiers rushed over to Jack and gripped his arm. "Don't you die on me, Ryanallo!"

They cared for their own, that was for sure, but when it came to the billions of people living on—and in—Earth, they would kill without even batting an eyelash, if they even had any.

"I swear, that filthy rat is going to pay," said another soldier. "I never liked him, not from the second I laid eyes on him."

"Call a medical team!" said another.

Thorn shook his head. "They're just now getting out of that meeting, like yourselves, but there's always at least one doctor in the infirmary. Every second we spend talking is time wasted."

The guard looked up at Thorn. "Okay. We'll handle this Agarthian boy. Just hurry and get back. I want a full report in fifteen minutes."

"Yes, sir," lied Thorn.

Casey and Mike walked down the corridor, carrying Jack between them. After they turned the corner, Casey let out a tiny sigh of relief. "That was close."

Jack stood on his own two feet. "That was quick thinking."

She grinned. "I have my moments."

A sound, like that of a burglar alarm, shrilled, echoing from the bare walls, and her heart pounded.

She squeezed her eyes shut, but she could still see the flashing red lights from under her closed lids. "Oh my gosh! They know we're here," she whispered, knowing that the others wouldn't be able to hear her through the ear-splitting noise. She turned the bend, and stopped in her tracks, a chilly wave rushing over her.

A squad of soldiers rushed toward them.

Rivulets of sweat covered Casey's back. She felt her hands trembling on her weapon, glued to her hip.

The soldiers inched closer, stopping mere feet away.

Mike reached for his gun. "We don't stand a chance. There's no way we can shoot them all."

Chapter 5

Alarms wailed, echoing from the naked walls in the wide corridor. Panic flooded over Casey as the group of soldiers strode toward them. They were sadly outnumbered, but she set her jaw and raised her chin a notch, ready to kick her way out of there if need be. The enemy wasn't about to steal Jack away again—not when she'd just rescued him.

"They're coming!" Mike's voice ended in a gasp, and he whipped out his weapon.

She turned to Mike and touched his arm as she whispered through clenched teeth, "Put the gun away, Rambo. They don't know who we are yet, so for now, just play along."

Jack nodded, and Thorn gave Mike a squeeze on the shoulder.

Casey's uniform clung to her sweat-slickened skin as the soldiers approached and she saluted. She ran the tip of her tongue across her chaffed lips and clenched her hands. In spite of her reassuring words to Mike, the situation wasn't in their favor. The mission depended on

whether they could pull it off or not.

“Four guards were shot in the hangar,” said a soldier. “You’ll must accompany me to Sector 4.”

She breathed out, relieved. Their true identity remained safe, and Casey was glad to know it had nothing to do with the guard Mike had just shot—at least not yet. She wondered how long it would take them to open the capsule and see the real guard unconscious and notice that Jack was gone.

“Yes, sir,” said Thorn. “Any casualties?”

The squad leader pulled Thorn close, motioning Casey and the boys to follow. “Come on. I’ll fill you in on the details as we walk.” He moved forward, the team following behind.

Casey marched, her eyes scanning the group for any suspicious move. Going with them was the last thing she wanted, but if it helped her get out of there, she would willingly play along.

Thorn’s voice whispered inside her head. *We’re on our way to a heavily guarded security station. Blend in and make your way to the back. Slip through the double doors about thirty feet away on the right. It’s a dining hall, and it should be empty at this time of day. It’s never locked. If something happens and I’m not there in less than half an hour, continue on without me. You must complete the mission, regardless of what happens to me.*

Slowing her pace, Casey nodded as she nudged Mike and Jack. She squeezed through the crowd, her hand clasping the gun. She hoped stepping out of line wouldn’t get her noticed, because she really had no other choice. Anything had to be better than following the troop of rebels, who were capable of discovering who they really were in no time. The alarms continued to blare as they straggled behind the enemy. Less than a minute later, Casey spotted the door and waved for Mike and Jack to follow. The door was now inches away. Looking ahead, she swallowed past the lump in her throat. Soldiers marched on without so much as a glance in her direction. *This is it—the moment of truth. I just pray there isn’t anyone in there.*

Taking a deep breath, she pushed her way through the heavy steel doors, with the others following behind her. When the door clicked shut, the sirens ceased, easing the throbbing in her head, though her ears continued to hurt from the blaring noise.

Casey flipped her visor up, continuing to scan the room. Hundreds of rectangular tables lined the dimly lit cafeteria. Swallowing hard, she drew her gun and pointed ahead, even though there wasn’t anyone in sight. It almost made her feel like she was an elite member of the SWAT team. The thumping of their boots echoed through the silence of the soundproofed room. Slowly, she walked to the far end of the room.

Jack’s stance relaxed. “Room’s clear.”

“Thank God!” She took several breaths to slow her racing heart. “Thorn said to wait here.”

Jack shoved his gun back in his holster. “Yeah, I heard him. I can’t believe he can talk in my mind like that. It’s just... crazy.”

“Totally.” Casey lifted her gloved hand to touch the black, glassy wall. She noticed the ceiling and floor were exactly the same too.

Mike walked over to a computer panel that was situated at eye level on the wall and started tapping on it.

“What’re you doing?” she hissed.

He shrugged without so much as peering at her. “Nothing. I’m just wondering whether this will make the lights brighter. I can’t see a darn thing in here.”

“Don’t!” said Jack, bolting over and jerking Mike’s wrist. “For all we know, that could activate some kind of security system.”

She couldn't figure out why Mike couldn't keep his mouth shut and his hand off of things. She reached him in two long strides and shook his shoulder. "If we get caught, our fate's sealed. Do you want to get dissected on a cold slab of metal? Please don't touch anything."

He took a step back, his eyes widening. "Well, it doesn't look like any security system I've ever seen."

"And you're the expert?" asked Casey, smirking. He was right, though, because the thing was too elaborate for a single purpose of waking up the ship. There were hundreds of tiny icons on it, pictures of landscapes. She took her time, staring at each image as it slowly dawned on her. "Oh my goodness! These are pictures from Earth."

Mike shook his head. "Guess they really want to get to know their new planet."

"They'll never get the chance," said Jack.

Casey pointed to the tiny icons. "I recognize these places. See the pyramid? That's a desert in Egypt. And that one's from the Swiss Alps. Wow. There's Africa." Her eyes welled up with tears as she studied the beautiful images of her home planet. Suddenly, her desire to save Earth, to defend her home, was stronger than ever. "Look. That's Iceland, with all those glaciers and mountains."

Mike touched the square picture. "Or it could be Alaska."

They jumped as an electronic female voice echoed from the control panel. "You've chosen to run the environment simulation projector." A series of beeps followed. "Dining room program is activated. Program 6, Antarctica, Frozen Desert."

"Oh man!" Casey punched Mike's shoulder. "What the heck did you do? Why must you mess around with all this alien technology? I told you not to touch anything."

"I didn't mean to..." Mike's gaze darted around the room. "Hey, what's that noise?"

The sudden clicking sound grew in intensity. Casey swallowed as she scanned her surroundings, trying to figure out where it was coming from. "I hope we can fix whatever you screwed up." Again, she vowed to kick his butt when all of this was over. The dimmed lights went black. Casey lifted her arm to find the control panel, but she couldn't see anything in the darkness. "This can't be good."

Mike let out a huff. "You would think the aliens could afford to pay their electric bill."

"I think we're okay...this time," said Jack. "The computer said it was only a program."

Wings fluttered around Casey, and a gush of wind swept across her face. High-pitched squawks echoed in her ears, making her jump. Her heart pounded harder as her brain tried to make sense of what was going on around her, because no program she knew could turn a high-tech room into a wildlife conservatory. "Something's in here with us," she yelled, drawing her gun, but she had no idea where to point her weapon when she was blind as a bat. She blinked as light suddenly flooded her. A large seabird with a long neck, short legs, and webbed feet swooped down from a blue sky. Casey ducked, taking cover, but the bird just squawked and flew by.

Images appeared on the walls, floor, and ceiling. Casey squinted against the brightness as her eyes tried to take in the fantastic array of colors. Hundreds of sparkling blue glaciers stretched out as far as she could see while fog poured in from the right. Seals splashed around icebergs that shifted and cracked in the warmth emitted by a rising sun.

Casey let out a silent scream and nearly toppled over as a whale exploded out of the water, spun twenty feet into the air, and crashed down with a spectacular splash. She put out her hands to protect her face, but tiny droplets slipped through her fingers like a hologram. It was all pretend. "Jack, you're right! None of this is real." She sighed, then placed the gun back in her

holster. A cool breeze brushed over her skin, making her shiver. The seals quieted, and the beautiful, eerie cries of whales played in the background. Casey spun in a circle, slowly taking in detail after detail. “What *is* this place?”

Shrugging, Jack flipped his visor up, and their gazes connected. “Some sort of virtual reality environment. Never seen anything like it.”

“Do you know how close I came to shooting a hologram bird?” asked Mike.

“Me too,” Casey whispered, glancing down at the ice under her feet. The floor seemed clear and cold, like a sheet of ice. It was hard to believe that just a minute ago she had been standing on black glass. She laughed and nudged Mike. “I should’ve brought my ice skates.”

“It’d be the perfect place to practice your figure eights,” he said.

The computer voice ran through her head: *Frozen desert*. The program wasn’t kidding. If she didn’t know any better, she would have sworn somebody just dropped her off in the middle of Antarctica.

Blurs of brown swirled underneath their feet. Casey knelt down and yanked Jack’s sleeve. “Look at this.”

“It’s fish—like a school of arctic cod or something.” His eyes widened as he jumped up and down on the ice. The thin layer started to crack beneath his weight. Wincing, he put a foot forward and tapped the water.

Mike pounded his boot on the exact same spot. “See? It’s a glass floor. Did you actually think you’d fall through and become a member of the Polar Bear Club?”

“I’ve always wanted to know how those people can just plunge into the cold ocean for a swim.” Jack motioned around him. “Even though this is all just an illusion, it’s so lifelike. It seems so real.”

Casey’s teeth chattered. She wrapped her arms around her middle to stop the sudden shivers. “If this is all just virtual reality, why’s it freezing?”

“I dunno,” said Mike, rubbing his hands together. “Think warm thoughts.”

She blew out a breath. “That isn’t helping my frostbite.”

A group of penguins climbed up the ice floe and waddled past them. Jack stuck his hand back and forth through one of the penguin images, making them blur and distort around the edges. “This is crazy and cool, but we gotta shut this thing off before it attracts attention.”

Casey slid her arms up and down the smooth walls feeling for the control panel. It was as if it never existed, and she wondered how it could have possibly just disappeared. As the temperature dropped, she could see her own frosty breath. She felt around until her fingers grew numb, but it just wasn’t there. Large, fluffy snowflakes started to gently fall from the sky. She expected Mike to try and catch one with his tongue any minute, and she glanced over at him. “Some technology they got, huh?”

Mike slid off his helmet and set it on a table. “I didn’t know it could snow when the sun’s shining.”

“Yeah, if it’s cold enough,” she said. “And it is.”

His messy head of blond hair shone in the bright sun. He put his arms around her and pulled her close. “Maybe we can get warm if we snuggle together.”

Their kiss and all that magical glitter falling down on them like soft snow flashed in her mind. The moment was so beautiful...so perfect. Why wouldn’t Mike ask her to be his girlfriend? Why was he such a jerk? But really...he wasn’t a jerk, if you stayed his friend only and didn’t become romantically involved. *I deserve so much better. I should’ve never crossed the line of friendship.* She knew she could easily move away, but his body heat felt wonderful.

“Any warmer?” Mike asked.

“You’re like my very own winter blanket.”

“Just two friends trying to stay warm.”

Good. He gets it. Maybe next time he’ll know better than to throw away a good thing.

Jack let out a sarcastic chuckle as he continued his search. “Friends? Could’ve fooled me.”

Casey shrugged and rolled her eyes. There were more pressing matters to deal with, such as whether or not Thorn had been discovered. She looked at the time on her radar device, and she was sure he would have been back already. “Where the heck’s Thorn?”

“Let’s hope kid brother isn’t reminiscing over photo albums with the big screwball, himself, Commander Tio,” said Mike.

Her stomach churned. “If he is, we’re screwed.”

Mike nodded, his blue lips turning downward into a frown. “If he’s caught, he’ll play the family card to save his butt. We’ll be put to sleep, and when we wake up—”

“Surgery by aliens.” The hair rose on the back of her neck. “You’re so not helping my nerves right now.” She jumped as hundreds of nesting seabirds squawked from the right, swarming around the steep, vertical cliffs. “And neither are these birds.”

“Time for a change in subject then.” Mike gave her a gentle squeeze. “I have to say, this is fine dining at its best. It must be so cool to eat dinner in a virtual reality environment. I just hope their food is real.”

Casey grinned. “This even beats the *Star Trek* Holodeck.” She glanced at the cafeteria tables in the middle of a winter paradise. “But why couldn’t you pick Hawaii?”

Mike kissed her hand slow and tender. “Because then we couldn’t build a snowman, go sledding, or wrestle a giant polar bear.” He smirked. “But most importantly, you wouldn’t be snuggling up to me like this.”

She hoped he wasn’t getting the wrong idea. Part of her longed to wrap her arms around him in a romantic way, but she knew why she shouldn’t date the biggest player in California. She had a list a mile long in her head of every single reason. The number one reason—the words still cutting her like a knife—was that he didn’t want her as a girlfriend. Even if he changed his mind, he’d just trash their relationship. That was the nasty little habit he had when it came to girls, and if it happened, it would kill her and they would never be able to be friends again. She’d lose him forever. Keeping Mike as her best friend was the right thing to do, even if her heart did scream for him.

“You two wanna hug all night, or do you want to help me?” came Jack’s voice.

She shot Jack a look, and he smiled. His blue eyes sparkled from across the room.

“And we rescued him why?” asked Mike, between chattering teeth.

Casey gave Mike a playful punch, then blew out a few frosty puffs of breath, her eyes hunting for an exit along the walls. It had to be there somewhere. She decided to retrace her steps from the door.

“Wait! There’s something.” Mike craned his neck and squinted against the wind. “I bet it’s the kitchen. I’m so making myself a big, fat, juicy burger.”

Casey peeked through the patches of dense fog and glaring snow. A set of double doors stood in between a spectacular maze of jagged peaks and spires, overcast with a light mist. “Looks like a door. Why couldn’t the control panel glow like that?” She walked over, her gaze fixed on the ice-covered mountains glittering in the sun.

“It’s probably designed this way so the waiters can find their way back in after serving a meal.” Jack whipped out his gun and pushed open the swinging door. “I can’t see a thing.”

“Me neither,” said Mike. “We need to find a light.”

Surrounded by darkness, Casey took a few tentative steps inside, warmth immediately bathing her. “I know one thing. I’m waiting for Thorn right here where it’s nice and toasty.” She reached for her backpack and fumbled for her flashlight. With her hands, she felt for a long, thin device. Her fingers wrapped around it and turned the switch on.

Casey waved the beam around the spacious room. A silver kitchen island stretched from one side of the room to the other. The room looked like a chef’s kitchen with clean, gleaming countertops, only way more high tech, with space-age appliances, control panels, large screens, and computers nestled in the walls.

“Where’s the fridge?” asked Mike. “I could go for a soda.”

“Hard to say. When did Apple start designing kitchens?” said Casey, swinging her beam around.

Jack chuckled. “Sure this isn’t the bridge?”

They all laughed.

She shifted her light beam, and it caught a pair of blue eyes glowing eerily in the dark. Her jaw dropped. “You guys see that? Please tell me that’s just a huge space-rat.”

“Nope,” said Mike.

“Get out!” shouted Jack.

A deep, menacing rumble filled the air, causing Casey’s heartbeat to spike again.

To be continued...

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