

Agartha's Castaway

Book 7

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

With one hand, Casey's fingers instinctively closed around the metal grip on her weapon as a low, throaty growl sounded to the left. She held her breath, and the flashlight in her other hand wavered. She thought maybe it was a guard dog and immediately scolded herself for going along with the dumb idea of going inside the warm kitchen to wait for Thorn. "Where the heck is the light switch?" But she wasn't about to stick around to find it. It was time to head right back into the winter wonderland, pronto. Sprinting out of the kitchen, she felt a wave of fear wash over her. "What was that?"

Jack cringed and glanced over. "Nothing friendly." He aimed his gun toward the kitchen and peered at her from the corner of his eye.

The deep growl came louder, followed by the sound of breaking glass. Casey thrust her flashlight deep into her pocket. She focused, gun drawn, her feet frozen, anchored to the ground. Whatever was there, she'd shoot first, then ask questions later.

The kitchen door burst open, and a four-legged creature with a powerful body and bushy tail strolled forward, growling. To make matters worse, the thing was turquoise, freaking turquoise!

"Oh man!" Casey swallowed hard past the lump in her throat as she regarded the animal. With its pointed snout, long, thick, weirdly colored fur, and pointed ears, it resembled a wolf, but it was closer to the size of a lion. Goosebumps crawled up her arms. In the end, whatever it was didn't matter, because a predator would do what a predator always does: hunt, pounce, and eat.

Mike and Jack bumped into her, and she grabbed their arms tight. The wolf shook its head, shimmering fur rippling over its shoulders and body like turquoise water. It had ice-blue eyes, like a white tiger, giant paws like a bear, sharp claws like an eagle, and razor-sharp teeth like a hyena. The animal was frightening, yet it was the most beautiful creature she'd ever laid eyes on.

"Is it real?" whispered Mike.

Casey recoiled. "I think so, because last time I checked, holograms can't crash through doors." She searched the room for an exit, but all she could see were towering icebergs and large sheets of floating ice. Seals continued to bark, penguins waddled, and whales spouted water. It would have all been quite serene and relaxing, if a wild animal wasn't about to tear her apart. She shivered, but the trembling didn't come from the cold winter wind blowing across the arctic land. "No way out except where we came in."

"Walk over there...slowly." Jack inclined his head, motioning to his right.

"The door we came through is gone!" said Mike. "Where is it?"

He was about to panic, but she couldn't let him. If the animal was anything like a wolf, it would smell his fear and attack, considering him easy prey. Glancing in every direction, she spun in a slow circle, whispering, "We'll figure something out."

"How?" asked Mike.

She shrugged. "I don't know. The room's changed so much." Her gaze fell on a dark shadow on the opposite wall. It was large, almost as high as the ceiling, yet inconspicuous behind the glaring light. Her gaze wandered from the animal to the dark shadow in the distance.

“I see it—over there by the polar bears I think.”

The beast’s jaws stretched open, letting out an unearthly roar. Casey blinked, snapping from her trance. She took a deep breath, steadying her gun, and fired three times. Red beams of light bounced off the wolf-like creature’s head. There was another shot, followed by two more. The wolf flinched and yelped, but it didn’t collapse. Casey’s knees wobbled, her breath coming in ragged rasps. “Why isn’t this working?”

She took aim again and fired, striking the creature in the chest. Somewhere behind, Mike and Jack joined in. The wolf snapped its head back, a piercing howl turning into a wail. Taking slow, measured steps, it crept toward her, its claws clicking against the glass floor.

“It’s not going down!” yelled Jack. “We *have* to get to the exit!”

Casey’s knees continued to wobble, threatening to give out any minute. Her heart was beating so fast she thought she might faint. Their weapons were useless on stun, but nobody had shown them how to turn up the power. All she wanted to do was get out of that cafeteria. They’d come too far to let some overgrown wolf eat them up and ruin the mission. It wasn’t the first creature she’d faced, though, and if she could survive a T-rex, surely she could somehow outwit this thing.

As the wolf approached, it curled its upper lip and growled, flashing white. In a split second, the creature’s eyes changed to green.

Mike’s voice pierced the air. “Did you see that?”

She did, and it was beyond freaky. It reminded Casey of the color-changing water back at the beach. “Split up. Mike, you distract it. Jack, find some weapons in the kitchen. I’ll get to the door and find Thorn.”

The wolf snapped its head forward. Casey jumped back, then spun and leapt on top of a cafeteria table. Jack and Mike took off to the left and right. She sprinted for the door in the distance, running across the rectangular tabletops, her heart thumping in her chest. The adrenaline kept her moving, running as fast as she could from the wolf that was in hot pursuit of her. She dared a glimpse back and winced at the saliva dripping from the animal’s fangs. Judging from its growling, it wasn’t keen on losing its meal. She had no idea how the bizarre creature got inside the spaceship unless it was something the aliens bred with their crude experiments. Her breath caught in her throat, and she almost tripped over her own feet. Even scarier was the thought that where there was one, there could be many more.

Mike let out a long whistle and then yelled, “Hey, wolf. Over here! My, what big teeth you have. The better to eat me with, right?”

She noticed Mike waving from the corner of her eye. With a loud snarl, the wolf turned and headed toward him. “Mike, no!” she hollered.

“I’ll distract it,” he called out. “Don’t worry about me.”

“No way!”

“Keep going!” he shouted. “Finding the exit is the best shot we have.”

She didn’t know how she was supposed to stay focused with that thing going after Mike. She needed to help Mike, but first she had to find a way out. It was their only hope. From what she remembered, the exit couldn’t be far away. Casey jumped from the table and started patting the wall. “Where the heck is it?”

Across the room, Jack yelled. Casey spun around and gasped as the wolf sank its fangs into his backpack. Mike bounded over and slammed his foot into the monster’s side. Jack tried to slide out of his backpack, but the wolf lifted him off the ground with its powerful jaws and shook him like a ragdoll. Casey stiffened, her pulse spiking. She couldn’t let the thing hurt Jack or

Mike, but she didn't know what she could possibly do to save them from the attack. She had to do something—anything.

Distracting the predator so Jack and Mike could get away was the only chance for her best friends to survive. She knew the thing could kill her with one bite, but she would have rather died fighting than to watch her friends get torn up. Besides, she had a pair of nails on her that would make any predator think twice; she could claw its eyes out. Setting her jaw, she bolted toward Jack, who was still struggling to break free from the animal's deadly jaw.

Jack pulled out his gun and fired at close range. Nothing. "Get it off of stun! We'll just wound the thing."

Casey whipped out her weapon and fumbled with the control panel, frantically hitting the tiny dials as she pointed, then pulled the trigger. A weak beam emerged, barely hitting the animal's shaggy fur. "Crap!" She quickly slipped her weapon back into her holster and lunged forward, pounding on the beast with her fists where its body rippled with muscles.

The straps from Jack's backpack tightened and snapped, and he fell forward with a *thud*. "Head for the kitchen!"

Mike and Casey pulled him to his feet, then helped him jump on the tables, bolting across the room. The wolf followed a split second behind, swiping its claws at Casey like a great cat aiming to kill.

"Run faster!" she yelled. She shrieked as the animal's breath heated her neck. A claw ripped into her backpack, dragging her off the table. Screaming still, she hit the ground hard and rolled onto her side, panting. The creature stood inches from her face, its lips pulled back, exposing razor-sharp fangs. Several snarls came low and angry. She scrambled to her feet, cowering against the wall.

"It's going after Casey!" Jack shouted from somewhere to her right.

Long whiskers brushed against her face, saliva dripping from the animal's open mouth. She braced her back along the wall, her hands pressed against the cold glass. Her knees trembled, and her gaze was glued to the glowing green eyes staring at her. She knew she should look away, but she couldn't force herself to do so. Death was near, whether the animal struck now or in a minute. She knew she'd never see her parents again, and that thought made her let out a long whimper that turned into a silent prayer.

The snarling wolf stepped back and crouched, ready to pounce. This was her glimmer of hope, her last chance. With all her might, she kicked her steel-toed combat boot, striking the animal square in the chest. It felt like kicking a brick wall: Her foot connected, but nothing happened. The irritated animal swung at her with a huge paw, and she flew against the wall, landing on the floor with a grunt, the impact knocking the wind out of her. Stars danced in her vision.

Something clattered across the floor just inches from her. She lifted her head in time to see the creature turn away, lunging for Mike's throat, barely missing as he jumped back with a shriek. Only Mike would try something crazy, like throwing his helmet at the darn animal. "Don't mess with this beast," she croaked as loudly as her shallow breathing would allow. The creature spun toward her and inched closer. "Leave me alone," she screamed.

In one swift move, the animal jumped, pinning her on her back and crushing her shoulder with a powerful paw. She threw punches with her fists at its legs. Her ribs ached with every move she made, but she'd die fighting, that was for sure. *If only I could reach its eyes.* The creature growled softly, placing a second paw on her chest, making it impossible for her to draw a deep breath. Casey's heart pounded under the weight. Groaning, she struggled to rise, but she

was trapped.

Mike's and Jack's shouts echoed through the air. Mike yelled something about charging the creature, but that was a bad idea that might have gotten them torn to shreds. Not only would she lose her friends, but there'd be nobody to chip the weapon. Sure, there was Thorn, but only a human could activate the microchip. The sweet smiles of her parents flashed across her mind. Mike and Jack needed to stop trying to play hero. If they didn't go chip that weapon, her mom and dad would be dead soon—and so would everyone on Earth.

"How're we going to get anywhere near that thing?" yelled Mike.

"We need a weapon," said Jack.

"The kitchen," she heard Mike say.

"No!" Casey cried. "If you fight, it'll kill you. If you wait, the enemy will capture us all. The clock's ticking. There's nothing you can do. Quit wasting time and go take care of business!"

Mike's eyes flared wide, and she could hear the raspy sounds from his labored breaths. "I don't know what to do. I'm going to find Thorn."

She wiped a tear with the back of her hand. "Jack, go with him."

He shook his head. "No way. I'm not leaving you behind." His voice choked with emotion.

She took shallow breaths, fighting for oxygen, as she whispered, "If it wanted to hurt me, it would've already. Thorn's not coming back, so just go. You guys chip the weapon first, then come back to get me."

He lowered his voice and stared down into her eyes. "I'm not going. I'm not abandoning you."

She blinked back more tears that she refused to let him see. "Go! You're going to get yourself killed."

Tears brimmed in his eyes as he slowly said, "If I die, I die. I swear I'll fight to save your life, even if it's with my very last breath. It's my risk to take."

He was determined to fight for her, to die if he had to, like some kind of gallant knight. It was very honorable, but she couldn't bear to see anything happen to him. He meant everything to her, not to mention the fact that millions of people would perish, including her parents.

"No, it's not your risk at all." Her head felt dizzy from the lack of air. She had to get them out of there before she fainted and they decided to do something stupid, like trying to save her life. They needed to go chip that weapon and save her mom and dad and everyone on Earth. "If we all die here, there'll be no hope for anyone on our entire planet. How dare you gamble with those lives just for me!"

"Because I love you, Casey," shouted Jack, through the roaring wind.

"Get away from the lodomodo!"

She heard Thorn's voice above the screeching wind and let out a sigh of relief. She hoped he would know how to deal with this thing.

Walking swiftly toward them, Thorn pointed his gun at the lodomodo. "He has the strength of three of your Earth lions. You could never fight him. He's way too strong."

The lodomodo swung his head away from her and growled.

Thorn slowly lowered his weapon. "I have enough power to kill the creature as a last resort, but first I want Casey to try and communicate with him. These animals are telepathic. I know this one well. The lodomodo has been my brother's pet for over 100 years." Thorn took a few steps closer. "He's blocking out my thoughts because I share his owner's bloodline. Casey, his concentration is focused on you. Use your mind. Tell him we're not going to harm him."

"I don't think I can," she whispered, but she closed her eyes nonetheless. At least she now knew what the creature was called and that it was, in fact, a male. She felt his hot breath on her neck, like the breath of any dog. The panic inside threatened to choke her. She was sure the thing was going to rip her throat.

Thorn's soothing voice cut through the fog of fear enveloping her. "Relax. He'll hear you. Clear your thoughts. Think of nothing. Allow your mind to hear what he's telling you, and a link will form."

Boots shuffled across the floor, and the beast snarled. She opened her eyes with a jolt in time to catch a glimpse of the animal snapping at Thorn. Shutting her eyes tight, Casey allowed her thoughts to dissipate into nothingness. She felt a tickle at the edge of her consciousness. *Is that you? Can you hear me?* She grasped no words, but the tickle soon turned to the distinct presence of someone else at the verge of her mind. *It is you!* She felt her heart pound even harder. *Listen to me. I'm not here to hurt you, and I'm freezing. Please just let me get up.* A rush of energy exploded inside her head, spreading throughout her entire body and coursing through her veins. The startling sensation caused her to jerk.

Your thoughts are pure, and your intentions true, young one.

Emotions filled her brain, not through words, but she could feel the creature's desires. She understood the beast's thoughts and felt something raw: fear.

Take me with you off this ship and back to Earth.

Every corner of Casey's consciousness flooded with the lodomodo's grief. Images flashed before her, like watching a movie: Tio's angry face, the crack of a whip, yellow sparks, and piercing howls. Casey's back arched, and her arms shot out. Her own flesh burned under Commander Tio's lashing whip. She shuddered as a current of electricity pulsed through her, and every nerve in her body screamed out in pain and stung like a 1,000 jellyfish. She wondered if that was how it would feel to be electrocuted or struck by lightning. In an instant, the pictures receded, and the stinging disappeared. Tears slipped down her cheeks.

My master will kill me if I betray his trust by letting you leave—unless you agree to help me.

Casey flexed and contracted her numb fingers as the cold continued to bite into her. She couldn't take another minute in that place. Time was running out. She curled her fingers into the lodomodo's long fur and tugged. *All right.* Her mind yelled into the beast's thoughts. *I promise.* Surely, Thorn wouldn't have a problem. He seemed to genuinely care about his wellbeing.

A few moments passed with no reply from the lodomodo. Casey opened her eyes and peered around her. Something wasn't right. She tried to lift her arm when she realized she still couldn't move. Squeezing her eyes shut, she screamed, but no sound came out of her mouth.

Clearly, the beast didn't believe her.

Chapter 2

The seconds ticked by. Casey waited for the death blow, her insides trembling. When it never came, she opened her eyes and peered up into the beast's face, mere inches from her own. As she gazed into the depths of the lodomodo's soul, she felt no fear. The large orbs changed from evil green back to soothing ice blue. Casey's thoughts turned from a jumbled concoction of

negative energy to pure love and peace.

The beast opened his mouth, his huge tongue hanging out, and stepped down from her chest. A soft purring, like that of a cat, filled the air. The creature looked tame, but she still wondered if it was safe to get up yet? Taking a deep breath, Casey lifted her hand, as though to stroke the ragged fur, then dropped it again, thinking she better not. The lodomodo nudged her side with his large head and pushed her up into a sitting position, rubbing the side of his face on her shoulder as he continued to purr.

In spite of her better judgment, she smiled and grabbed hold of its fur. Somehow, they had connected in mind and spirit; Casey couldn't even believe it possible, but she had already witnessed so many impossible things that she had to accept it. As long as she got out of there, it didn't matter. She grinned at the animal and ruffled the fur on top of its head. The hair was fluffy, like that of a Saint Bernard, but it was a little longer and in need of a good scrub. Tio hadn't done a great job of taking care of his pet.

"It worked!" said Thorn. "Casey, you did it. You brought him out of attack mode."

She reached for Jack's hands as he ran over, peeking over his shoulder at the huge animal, but if he wasn't convinced the lodomodo wouldn't attack, he didn't say it.

He helped her up, his grip strong and reassuring. "Thank God you're okay."

She met his gaze, only then noticing the shimmer of tears in his eyes.

"Casey—"

"I wouldn't have let anything happen to you," Mike interrupted as he wrapped his arms around her.

Thorn thrust his weapon into his holster. "Come on, guys. There will be time for reunion celebrations later. May I remind you, we still have a mission to fulfill?" He made a point of looking at his watch, as though they could ever forget that the world still needed saving.

The animal let out a soft growl, bobbing its head slightly. Maybe he did understand what this was all about. Somewhere inside her head, something brushed her consciousness, like a shadow appearing in the blind spot where she couldn't see it, but she knew it was there. The lodomodo turned his head toward her, blinking. *Go, for we shall meet again soon.*

As they raced down the winding corridors, high-pitched sirens blasted in Casey's ears. She blinked, shielding her eyes from the flashing red lights beaming from the ceiling. Soldiers appeared behind them and rushed past. The passageway, a few feet ahead, split off in a fork. Casey leaned against the wall as she craned her neck to catch a glimpse of what could lay hidden beyond the long corridors. She looked at Thorn. "Left or right?"

He hesitated for a moment. "Right." She was glad he'd memorized the floor plan, because she couldn't remember a thing.

Groaning, Mike ripped off his glove, revealing red, swollen fingers.

"What're you doing?" hissed Thorn.

He winced. "It hurts... bad."

"We'll ice it later," said Casey. "Please get that glove back on!"

Mike rolled his eyes. "C'mon. There's no one around now."

"You know that can change in an instant," said Jack.

A high-pitched buzzing caught Casey's attention. "Guys, hear that?" She scanned the corridor but saw nothing out of the ordinary. Straight ahead, the weird sound grew louder. A floating fireball appeared around the corner and stopped above them, hovering in midair.

"What the heck is that?" whispered Jack.

Mike peered up at it. “A disco ball on fire?”

“Looks like a giant orb.” She’d seen everything from dinosaurs to spaceships, so it wouldn’t be all that surprising to see a ghost too.

“Let’s poke it and see what happens.” Mike lifted a finger when Thorn’s voice cut him off.

“Surveillance! Shoot it!”

The red ball flew straight up, then zigzagged until it disappeared into thin air. Footsteps echoed from behind. Casey shot an anxious look over her shoulder in time to see soldiers storming the area, leveling their weapons at the three of them. “Halt!”

Thorn motioned them to follow him behind a giant, silver pillar, whispering, “Fire back. Now!”

Breathing hard, Casey flattened herself against the pillar and peeked out. Dozens of red beams split the air as the attackers rushed forward. Crackling and whistling echoed all around her, and her heart pounded till it felt like it might explode. She took aim but froze. Even though she held the weapon with both hands, the barrel of the pistol wavered. She took a deep breath. *Focus.* The first shot missed, but she positioned the gun again and let out another blast, followed by two more. Three guards fell backward, knocking rows of aliens behind them like fallen dominos.

Another round of laser fire ripped past. She dodged and hid behind the pillar, taking a quick breath to calm her nerves. The guilt was quickly buried as she concentrated on saving not only her own life, but her friends’ lives as well. Her grip on the laser pistol tightened. She rolled back out and shot four more guards before taking cover. They returned fire, unleashing all their fury. The scene reminded her of a light show at a Mega Scream concert Mike had forced her to watch a year ago. Only here, the greatest danger she’d likely face wasn’t ear damage.

A laser beam grazed Thorn’s leg, slicing his pocket. Something silver clattered to the ground. Casey shouted above the hiss of the lasers. “Hey!”

Thorn tumbled and waved a hand at her before continuing to fire his weapon. “Not now!”

She grabbed the ring-sized box off the floor and stuffed it in her pocket. Following Thorn’s lead, she returned a rapid shower of fire. More soldiers flew backward. She hesitated for a second, marveling at how easy it seemed to take down one enemy soldier after another, even though she’d never fired a weapon in her life.

Jack and Mike threw themselves onto the ground as more beams flew overhead, missing them by mere inches. A surge of anger flooded through Casey. No longer shaking, she held her weapon tight, aimed, and fired; a shot of adrenaline pumped through her veins, empowering her. She wasn’t about to stand by and let anyone harm her or her friends.

Mike moved out of the path of a laser beam, landing flat on his back with a *thump* and aimed for his next target: the fire ball floating over him.

“Shoot it!” Casey shouted.

He fired, and the strange device shot out showers of bright sparks followed by trains of white and yellow. Mike scrambled to his feet as hot particles rained down, thankful that they were garbed with helmets. The spinning ball changed in color from brilliant red to dazzling orange to lime green, like a fireworks show on the Fourth of July.

“Watch out!” Casey ducked, her reflexes kicking in. A whistling roar echoed as the object flew past. *Bingo! Target eliminated.*

“Score!” yelled Mike. “And my mom said all those hours of videogames would never amount to anything.”

An electrical crackle filled the air, and thick, black smoke erupted as the fireball blazed

across the corridor, leaving a trail of yellow sparks behind. The squad of soldiers shouted and ran as the surveillance orb ploughed right into them.

The explosion sent Casey staggering backward, like someone had just kicked her in the gut. She fell to the floor on her side. Her visor popped up, almost blinding her. She shielded her face from the yellow flames and black smoke engulfing them, but her eyes continued to water, her lungs burning with the pressure building inside. The fumes made her nose and throat burn as heat singed her flesh. Searing pain in her hip made her groan as Jack and Mike helped her up.

Red lights flashed, casting an eerie crimson glow over the entire corridor. She was quite ready to get out of the sci-fi movie. The stench of acrid fumes lingered, and the sound of marching boots echoed somewhere in the distance. Her jaw dropped as a platoon of soldiers stretched across the hall, the scene playing out before her eyes as if in slow motion. She aimed and fired again and again, shooting soldiers and watching them fall in all directions, but like a swarm of insects, more just kept coming. She turned to Jack, her mouth gaping.

“Run!” he shouted.

Casey froze when an alien jumped in front of her, leveling his weapon on her face, mere inches away. As she stared down the silver barrel, her heart raced—maybe for the last time. She took a sudden step back into a karate stance, then kicked his knee out from under him. When he fell to his other knee, she spun and kicked the gun out of his hand, panting from the effort. The karate lessons had paid off, but she didn’t have Bruce Lee’s muscles of steel.

She aimed her gun and fired; the beam bounced off the floor, not hitting its mark. The alien whirled around, dodging left and right, then ducked and hopped. Getting a good shot was impossible. *Oh, he wants to play, does he? Game on!* Casey swung her leg in a semicircular motion, delivering an award-winning Muay Thai High Roundhouse kick, knocking him to the floor. The rebel swiped at her arm, slicing through her thin black uniform with its long nails. Sharp pain seared through her.

Grunting, the alien kicked and swept her feet out from under her. She tumbled back, crashing to the floor, still gripping her gun tight. He might’ve gained the upper hand, but it only meant she’d have to fight harder. Casey rolled aside to dodge a blow from his steel-toed boot and scrambled to her feet.

She dodged more quick jabs to the chest with her forearm and kicked a sideways blow into the alien’s side. He stumbled to the ground, scooted back, and jumped to his feet, then lurched at her. She wrapped her fingers around the trigger and squeezed. The alien’s body jerked and twitched as he crumpled to the ground. She looked down at him, grinning, even though she knew the battle was not yet won. “Hope you enjoy your nice long nap.”

Slowly, she spun in a circle, scanning the dim hall, but Mike and Jack were either gone or obscured by the leaping flames. She heard soldiers’ voices all around her as the fire crackled. The corridor lights flickered, then went out. Droplets of water pounded on her helmet, falling over her head like rain. *Great. That’s just what I need right now—fire sprinklers spurting out gallons of water.*

She ducked behind the pillar and held her gun with a death grip. Looking down at her radar tracking device, she saw three blinking red dots that remained stationary about two halls away. *They’re alive! Thank God.* Letting out a long sigh, she squinted and swallowed hard as the flames flickered and smoke continued to swirl before her. She couldn’t stay there on her own. She hoped she could catch up.

Following the slow curve of the corridor, she scanned the darkness through the water pouring down from the ceiling, stifling the remaining flames. Mike and Jack couldn’t be far

away. She raced down the long hall to catch up with them as a red blast of energy bounced off the wall, missing her head by inches.

She shrieked and cowered down, then dashed around the corner. The aliens continued to shoot blindly, the red beams crisscrossing the air, cutting through the wet curtain. Leaping forward, Casey slipped in a puddle and fell on her side. The sirens continued to blare in the distance. She needed a place to hide, and quick, before the soldiers found her. Scrambling to her feet, she spun when she saw a glowing symbol of Earth on the door. It was the only thing familiar to her on the alien ship.

In front of the door, Casey fidgeted, fearing what she might find. She closed her eyes to focus for a split second, then shot the lock, the sound reverberating from the walls, barely audible among the gushing water and guns around the corner. The door slid open. She jumped inside before it closed again and quickly raised her gun. It would have been a jump-out-of-her-seat-moment, except for the fact that she was already on her feet. She wondered if some creature, some alien would jump at her like in the movie *Alien*. She'd seen that film at least a dozen times, and she couldn't help picturing the dripping teeth inching their way toward her throat, dripping acidic saliva all over her. Her pulse pounded in her ears as she swept the room with her weapon. There were no footsteps or anything else to signify that anyone else was there. She heaved another big sigh of relief and took a look around.

One entire wall was covered with control panels. The only light came from the back of the room. Rectangular capsules with people in them extended from floor to ceiling. She stared in horror at their blond hair, high cheekbones, and fair skin. *Human hibernation pods? Are these the missing people from Agartha that Commander Gallant told us about? Is this Commander Tio's secret Frankenstein testing lab?* A lump formed at the back of her throat as she realized people really *were* abducted from their bedrooms and used for experiments. She took a step back, her entire body suddenly shaking.

The door opened, and voices made her flinch. She took cover behind a large container, her ears straining to place the hard thuds. Footsteps approaching and then retreated again, and then there came another voice. Someone was there, and she could only hope they hadn't seen her. She wiped her sweaty palms on her tight suit as her heart skipped a beat. As much as she'd have liked to investigate further, her curiosity had to wait. The thought of her brain floating around in a specimen jar freaked her out big time, so being found wasn't an option, but she didn't know where to hide.

"We'll check that room in a minute," said a voice. "First, this one over here."

"Remember, they're dressed like us," another called as the door slid closed.

Dressed like them? Not anymore. Casey had to strip the rebel's uniform off, quick. She removed her helmet, holster, and backpack and threw them on the floor. As she tore off her wet black uniform she felt a hard lump in the pocket and remembered picking up the silver box Thorn had dropped earlier during the gun battle. She pulled it out. There was no time to investigate it right then, but she'd keep it with her so it'd be safe. She stuffed it in her blue uniform pocket, then hid the gun deep inside her other pocket. Luckily, she still had on her silk blue uniform from Agartha. Getting caught in her skivvies wasn't an option.

She stuffed everything under one of the glass chambers and, careful not to make any noise, hurried over to one of the empty capsules. The glass lid stood open, so she slipped inside and closed it, leaving it open just a fraction of an inch.

The narrow space reminded her of a coffin. The air seemed stale, devoid of oxygen. She took a deep breath, trying to calm her racing heart, but she couldn't quiet the sudden panic inside

at the prospect of being trapped like a rat. She took a deep breath, chanting over and over that she wasn't stuck. The key was to stay focus and avoid panicking. She crossed her arms over her chest like the other captives and waited.

The door slid open, voices and footsteps carrying through the silence of the room.

Casey sucked in her breath as rivulets of sweat started to run down her spine. She could only hope she looked like the countless other sleeping humans. A thought raced through her mind, making her heart ache. Jack had been scheduled to be put into a coma in this very chamber. She couldn't imagine him going through what those poor people had suffered. Shivering, she hoped the aliens would leave soon.

"Look at the puddle of water," said a voice. "They've been here."

The water was a dead giveaway. *Where's a mop when you need one?* She clenched her fists, hoping they wouldn't figure out that she'd climbed into an empty pod.

"They're gone now," another female voice said. "Move to the next room and find them quickly."

Casey let out a tiny, silent breath. It was a small victory, but a good one nonetheless. She was just thankful she hadn't been discovered.

Crackling like fire echoed around her. She craned her neck, but she couldn't see beyond the vapors surrounding her. A smell that reminded her of laughing gas from the dentist's office tickled her nose and made her eyes water. Before she could stop herself, she sneezed, the voice cutting through her eardrum like a knife.

"Sir, I think this one's still awake," said a female soldier.

They'd spotted her! Her heart thrummed in her chest.

"Not for long." A gloved hand appeared and shut the lid tight, trapping her in the confined space as the voice continued, "Some idiot didn't secure the top."

"I know this girl," said the female soldier.

Busted. She felt as if her heart would explode. They'd recognized her as the dark-haired Agarthian Commander Tio was searching for. *Just my luck.*

"She's one of Dr. Pather's test subjects," the woman continued. "He said he was using humans from the Deep Sleep Lab, remember?"

"Yes. Didn't he kill the blond boy with a shot of platism?" asked a male voice.

"Affirmative. Dr. Pather must be saving the girl for another experiment," said the woman. "He must've forgotten to secure her properly."

Casey's identity was safe, for now. She let out a tiny sigh of relief, until she realized she might actually be stuck in that space-age tomb. Her eyes fluttered wide open as she lurched up, her palms hitting the thick glass as three distorted figures turned their back on her and headed for the door. Quiet returned to the room; her own heart hammered like a drum in her ears. She had no idea how to get out of the claustrophobic death trap, but she felt around the glass for a latch or something. The sides felt as smooth and cold as marble. She pounded on the glass with her fists screaming, "Get me out of here!" Nothing stirred, no one came to her rescue, and she realized that maybe no one could hear her.

The strange light coming from the capsule bathed her, and she felt a sudden flow of energy surround her. Casey's hands thumped against the glass until they throbbed. The smell of gas hung in the air. Wisps of glowing green mist floated above her. She coughed between jagged breaths and covered her nose and mouth with her stretched uniform. A strange sensation crept over her body. Her palms, feet, and lips tingled; her eyelids felt heavy. She tried to move her arms and legs, but they felt like logs. The fog now engulfed her. Her vision blurred. "I have to

fight this!” Her mind raced to find a way out, but she couldn’t think straight. Whatever happened, she knew one thing for sure: She couldn’t pass out.

Chapter 3

Locked in a glass capsule, Casey tried not to panic, but that seemed impossible with all those green fumes swirling all around her.

She coughed and wiped her burning eyes when something fell out of her pocket, clattering next to her. “What the heck?” Frowning beneath the curtain of tears on her face, she picked up the silver container and popped open the lid as a shiver slid down her spine. Inside the silk-lined box was the microchip. *No!* Her stomach dropped. *What if I pass out?* She held the key to saving everyone on the planet, and nobody knew where she was.

Casey shuddered as she closed the box and stuffed it back into her pocket. Earth was doomed. Billions of people would lose their lives—all because of her. Guilt overwhelmed her, and she pounded the glass until her fists burned and throbbed. The pain couldn’t even compare to what her heart felt at that very moment. She wondered why fate insisted on bestowing that wonderful honor on her, bringing her through all of this, only to fail.

Calm yourself. The lodomodo’s voice echoed in her head, soothing and comforting.

She smiled for a moment, happy to find she wasn’t alone and doomed after all. Then panic gripped hold of her again. She might not be alone, but she couldn’t think of any way a wolf-like creature could possibly help her open the coffin. “How can I?” she yelled, holding the collar of her uniform over her nose.

Try to quiet your mind from all other thoughts. Relax your entire body.

“You try to relax when...” She broke off, coughing. “...when you can’t breathe.” Her mind buzzed as a wave of tranquility washed over her.

Let me help you.

Casey nodded and closed her eyes again. Keeping quiet didn’t mean she was giving up, yet she couldn’t stop thinking she shouldn’t go down without a fight. Her mind eased slowly into that of the lodomodo, and she absorbed the calm with deep breaths, slowly starting to feel at peace.

Find an anchor to settle your mind.

Jack popped into her head. She pictured glitter falling on him like snow while he held a butterfly in his hands, a vision from Agatha. For a moment, he was having so much fun. She focused on his face and beautiful smile. The haze cleared a little, and her mind seemed to burn a little less.

Think clearly. The answer lies before you. I can see it, and I know you can too.

The lodomodo’s presence left her mind. She rolled her eyes inwardly. *Why can’t it just tell me the answer and leave the riddles for another time?* She pondered for a few moments.

Scratching her way out wouldn’t work; there just wasn’t enough time. She should’ve asked the lodomodo to get help like Lassie, but suddenly it seemed like he had gone.

Casey peered around her at the smooth walls when an idea struck her. *Why not shoot my way out?* She felt the stun gun in her other pocket, so she pulled it out, hoping the capsule wasn’t

bulletproof. Hopefully, she wouldn't get knocked out in the process either. General Ashtar told her the setting only worked on Grey alien DNA, but she had played with the buttons to try and save Jack from the lodomodo, so any programming had been overridden, likely not in her favor, the way fate was going.

She pointed to the left and squeezed the trigger. A bright flash of red light absorbed into the glass, running the length of the capsule like bolts of lightning. She fired three more times. It didn't seem to work, but she hoped maybe the beams would weaken the glass. She fussed with the tiny buttons, hoping to turn up the power. She fired and fired until her fingers ached and her ears throbbed from the noise.

Hissing and crackling filled the air, like the sound of ice melting on a hot bed of coal. The capsule shook, and a dozen long cracks appeared over her. Covering her face with her sleeve, she kicked with all her might. By the third attempt, the glass gave in. She climbed out hastily, nearly falling over, as a wave of dizziness swept over her. Her legs buckled under her, numb and tingling with pins and needles, but the cold floor felt good to the touch, slowly returning her to her senses. She drew a deep breath and coughed. *That was too close for comfort.*

She stood and walked over to touch the glass on a capsule. A woman was laid out with her arms crossed over her chest, her eyes closed as if she were dead. Soft white light surrounded her and shone on her face and body. She looked just like an angel with her ruby-red lips, porcelain skin, and high cheekbones. Her long, sun-kissed, blonde hair flowed in waves over her shoulders. Glistening white linen wrapped around her body. The clothing looked similar to togas of ancient Greece, only in pastel colors and pinned in various ways. The lustrous material shimmered in the dim light. Gold sandals covered her feet. There was no doubt that she was from Agartha.

Unable to leave just yet, Casey glanced up at all the pods from ceiling to floor, peering at one face after another. They looked so tranquil, almost peacefully dead, and for a moment, she wasn't sure if she was staring at corpses, until she saw their chests rising slightly and their nostrils flaring. She wasn't sure how long they would live, but for the time being, they were breathing. She knew if she didn't get going, they'd all meet again in the afterlife.

Hesitating, she retrieved her steps when her gaze fell on one of the lower capsules to the left. There, she saw familiar face of a woman with long black hair, pale skin, and pink lips. The red summer dress hung like a sheath over the slightly tanned body. Casey jumped forward, knocking her knee in the process, but she didn't feel the pain as she pressed her palms against the clear glass. Loud sobs caught in her throat, making her voice sound like a croak. "Mom!"

Her mom's face didn't change; her eyes remained closed. Letting the sobs ripple through her, Casey paused in thought. It hadn't been a helicopter spotlight on the horizon during the thunderstorm. It was the light from a UFO.

She unlatched the lid as tears flowed down her cheeks. "I'm here, Mom." Casey watched her chest rise and fall. She looked so peaceful and serene. Without another word, Casey lifted the top and kissed her mother's soft forehead. "Please wake up," she whispered, shaking her mom's comatose body until she realized there was no point. Even though she didn't want to leave, she had to get going so she could get help and come back. "I love you so much. I'm so sorry this happened to you." Her throat felt choked as she shut the glass top softly. "I'll get Thorn, Mom. He'll know what to do."

A few more steps, and she reached the next capsule. Her body froze instantly as she saw who lay inside. "Dad!" She placed a hand on the glass. There was no mistaking that it was him. Over a plaid shirt, he wore his famous khaki fishing vest with all the pockets. His trademark jet-

black hair and bushy eyebrows stood out. She couldn't help but notice the dark circles under his eyes and sunken cheeks.

Unlatching the lid, she lifted the glass and touched her dad's face with her fingertips, barely able to keep her crying to a quiet level. "I can't believe this is happening." Her voice broke in her throat. "Help's coming. I promise I'll be back as soon as I can." He didn't stir, but she hoped he could somehow hear her. She closed the lid as more huge, gasping sobs wracked her body.

She wiped the tears with her sleeve as her gaze focused directly on her mom, then her dad. Her lips trembled; for a minute, she couldn't breathe. The thought of her parents lying comatose in those pods seemed too much to bear. *Stay strong*, she told herself. After all, having an emotional breakdown right there on the alien mothership won't help them one bit. She took a few long, deep breaths to calm herself.

Casey slid on her black uniform, holster, helmet, and flung her backpack over her shoulder. It was time to deactivate the weapon and rescue her mom and dad out of those glass coffins. There was no way was she leaving without them. She'd die first.

* * *

Scurrying down the corridor, Casey turned her wrist and kept an eye on her tracking device. A map popped up and showed all the corridors with red grid lines. She touched the screen once, and it zoomed in on her position. She had to be getting closer, she was sure, even though the walls she passed looked exactly the same. Two red dots blinked, indicating that the others were only forty feet away. The third flashing dot moved ten halls to the right, in the opposite direction of the others. Casey stopped, frowning. Someone had gotten separated, but she wasn't sure who it was.

She briskly walked ahead, but a movement to her left caught her attention. Casey looked up at the two bodies hunched together behind a silver pillar. Their helmets obscured their faces as she inched closer. According to the tracking device, she was near the right dots. It was definitely her friends. She rushed over, dropping to the ground next to them, hoping she wasn't making the mistake of her life and falling for a trap. A groan echoed, unnaturally loud in the dead silence. She let out a yelp, only then noticing the gun pressed against her chest.

"Don't move!" Thorn hissed. "I swear I'll pull the trigger if you so much as breathe."

Ignoring his menacing tone, she flipped up her visor. "It's me, Casey." Thorn's eyes shimmered as though filled with tears, but she was sure that couldn't be. *Maybe they thought I was caught*, she reasoned.

Thorn sighed and shoved his gun back in his holster. "You made it." He hesitated for a second, as though he wanted to say something more but held back.

"Casey," Jack whispered, hugging her. He panted between breaths. "I'm so glad you're okay."

She slumped into him with relief; his arms had never felt so good. "Why're you breathing like that?" Casey put a hand on Jack's arm, and he let out a moan. She gasped. "Were you hit?"

He flipped up his visor. "Yeah, and knocked out for fifteen minutes."

She gripped his hands. "Oh, Jack! I'm so sorry."

"It's okay. Would've been longer if the beam had hit me directly, but it only grazed my arm. Good news is, they have their guns set on stun. They want you and me alive. I'm sure they still think we're dark-haired Agarthians."

"Good," she retorted. "Let them keep thinking that. We don't need them firing death rays at us. Are you sure you're okay?"

"I got myself a real good shock, but don't worry. I'm fine."

“Thank God you weren’t seriously hurt.” She thrust her arms around him in a tight hug. The thought of anything happening to him made her queasy stomach tighten even more.

Mike was missing, and she wondered if it was because of some crazy stunt he pulled or—worse—if he had been captured. She bit her lip, took a deep breath, and then asked the dreaded question, keeping her tone as level as she could. “Where’s Mike?”

“Thorn says he took off in the smoke, looking for you,” said Jack.

“He didn’t.” Casey closed her eyes for a moment, the blood draining from her face. Mike could be a jerk, even obnoxious at times, but the one thing she knew for sure was that he truly cared, even if he didn’t always go about things the right way. No one could ask for a better friend. “How could you let him go?” she whispered.

Jack shrugged. “Uh, I was unconsciousness, or else I would’ve been right there with him. But you know Mike. He needs to do things his way. Nothing could have held him back, the stubborn idiot.”

“If something happens…” She swallowed down the lump in her throat, unable to express her darkest fears.

“Nothing will happen,” said Jack. “Mike may be reckless, but he isn’t stupid. C’mon. Let’s hurry up and do this thing so we can find him.”

She nodded as Jack pointed straight ahead, all the way down the long hall. “See that room?”

She squinted. “No.”

“We didn’t want to get any closer, or else the guards would hear us talking.” He handed her a pair of high-tech binoculars, and his breathing relaxed. “Look again.”

Everything was crisp, clear, and in 3D. Casey felt like she could reach out and touch the steel door itself. “Wow. I can make out everything, even the guards. There are two of them.”

Jack reached for the binoculars. “That’s where the weapon’s being stored. We’ll chip it and then go get Mike.” His eyes widened in shock as he pointed to her torn uniform. “What happened? Are you okay?”

For the first time, she felt the clouds over her head retreat the tiniest bit, lightening her burden. “I kicked some butt.”

He touched her wet sleeve and winked. “Get caught in a rainstorm on the way back?”

“Yep. Any way to get a rain check for this crappy vacation?” She handed Thorn the silver box. “Here’s something you might be missing.”

Thorn grabbed it from her outstretched hand, turning it between his fingers. “I didn’t know it was gone. Where did you find it?”

“It dropped to the floor during the fight.”

“Quick thinking. Thanks,” said Thorn. “I don’t want to think about what might’ve happened if you didn’t see it.”

Tears welled in Casey’s eyes as images of her parents lying comatose in those awful pods flashed through her mind. She blinked a few times, pushing the thoughts to the back of her mind. She wanted to save them, but she needed to save Earth first.

“Don’t worry,” said Jack, hugging her again. “We’ll find Mike. I promise.”

“This isn’t just about Mike.” She glanced up, and their eyes connected. “I saw my… my parents.”

Jack’s gaze narrowed. “Here? How is that possible? Where?”

“On this ship. They were abducted and brought here.” Her voice choked with emotion. She stopped for a second to gather her breath before she continued, “There was no search and rescue.”

He gasped. "What? I don't understand."

"They're in that deep sleep the general and Thorn told us about." Casey couldn't get a nagging thought out of her head. Had the storm not come, they all might've been abducted and held hostage on that ship. Really, it was kind of ironic. They dodged the abduction, only to end up on the same mothership anyway. Maybe destiny was playing a prank on them. She felt laughter bubbling up inside her, even though she didn't see what was so funny.

"They're here?" asked Jack, a wave of confusion washing over his face. "How's that possible? We saw them pulled up by a helicopter."

"No. We saw some *lights* and assumed it was a helicopter."

Realization flickered in Jack's eyes. "So it must've been a UFO. That's why the compass got all scrambled up and we couldn't get through on the radio. Where're they keeping them?"

She scrambled to her feet. "They were in one of the rooms with a whole bunch of other people trapped in glass pod things."

"You found the Deep Sleep Lab," said Thorn. "One of the smaller ships must've picked them up on its way to Agartha. A few of the scout ships are fitted with deep sleep capsules. Maybe one veered off course to bring them back to the mothership and then rejoined the others. The more humans the rebels abduct, the more treasures Commander Tio bestows upon them. They hit the jackpot if they bring dark-haired Agarthians, because then they'll be rich for the rest of their lives."

She stared at him, for a moment unable to comprehend how anyone could—reward or not—abduct people to hand them over for the sake of conducting cruel experiments, knowing full well the victims would suffer at Commander Tio's hands. Sure, they blamed humans for their loss and misery, but this kind of revenge wasn't ethical by any means. "There's no way I'm leaving without my mom and dad," she whispered.

"Casey—" Thorn started.

"No!" She stood in a defiant stance. If she didn't get his promise that he'd rescue her parents once they were done chipping the weapon, she had to try and help them herself.

"We'll do our best to rescue them," said Thorn softly. "I give you my word, but I need you to focus on the task at hand. Do you think you can do that?"

She peered at him, hesitant to believe him just yet. "You promise?"

He nodded. "The very second the weapon's disarmed. I would never break my word."

Casey wiped her eyes with her sleeve and then cleared her throat. "I'll trust and hope you don't backstab me." Earth counted on her just like her parents, but it was difficult to focus on anything else. "I have to do this. Commander Tio won't win." She took a deep breath. "Can't we stun them and shoot the lock?"

Thorn shook his head as he whispered, "No. The room's surrounded by an invisible force-field. All we need is the code to turn it off and unlock the door."

"You mean we need a guard to tell us the code?" asked Jack, shock filling his voice. "Just how're you going to accomplish that?"

Thorn pulled a grimace. "I'm working on a plan." Hopefully, an idea would pop into his head soon, because they didn't have all the time in the world.

"Hush! Someone's coming," whispered Thorn, touching the wall with his gloved hand.

"How do you..." He must've felt the vibrations, like earlier when he touched the door. She stopped herself in time to hear thumping footsteps down the corridor, and she cringed.

Jack frowned, handing the binoculars to Casey. "Commander Tio sent more reinforcements to protect the weapon."

Thorn let out a long breath as he peered through his own pair. "You're kidding!"

Truly, it was the last thing they needed. Casey squinted into the binoculars and watched the guards flood in. At least ten rebels now stood guard outside the door, and she had no idea how they could possibly fight their way into a room with so many Greys. Things looked grim, to say the least. "We're so out of our league. There's no way we're getting in."

Chapter 4

Casey, Jack, and Thorn had made it to the room holding the weapon, but when they got there, they spotted ten rebels guarding the door. Presumably, Commander Tio had put two and two together. When one of his ships mysteriously appeared inside the landing dock with knocked-out guards inside, he knew something was up, so he did what anyone in his position would do: called in the reinforcements.

"There're ten of them. How are we supposed to get past that?" Casey asked.

"I've got an idea," said Thorn. "Follow me to the next room."

Casey exchanged a look with Jack. When he shrugged, she followed Thorn into some type of storage room, then stopped to have a look around. All she could see before the door clicked shut behind her were floor-to-ceiling metal shelves lining the wall. The room was quickly bathed in darkness again, and she could barely make out Thorn's silhouette. "What now?" she asked, as sudden light flooded her vision.

"First, a little bit of light might help." Thorn's fingers moved away from a silver control panel. "We're crawling through the ducts." Setting the pace, Thorn started climbing up the large shelves, holding on to the rods that held them together. On the smooth surface, someone had arranged large cylinders in neat piles, with tiny stickers labeling them.

"You know air vents are for *air*, right?" Casey muttered. "And aren't they designed like a labyrinth?" She wasn't exactly into climbing or crawling, particularly not in an area where she might never find her way out.

Jack nudged her with a chuckle. "Hope you're not claustrophobic."

She smiled, for he knew she wasn't.

Casey bit her lip. She might not have ever considered squeezing through some narrow space in the ceiling, but she was totally up for a little James Bond action, particularly if it'd get them past the guards outside the door.

"I'd take this over heights any day," said Jack, "as long as we don't end up in the boiler room."

Giving his hand a last squeeze, she stepped on one of the rickety bottom shelves and pulled herself up to the next horizontal surface. She placed a foot on the hard surface and held on to the metal rod, just as she'd watched Thorn do. After testing the shelf with her leg, she realized it was strong enough to support her weight, so she moved up to the next level and used the shelf as a ladder to help her reach the top. Once she was up, she glanced down.

With some kind of laser beam pen, Thorn silently cut through the grate that was covering the vent. Pressing a palm against the panel, he lifted it up and placed it on the shelf beneath him with a barely audible *thud*, then squeezed through the narrow opening.

The hole looked dark and cold. Even though she had never been scared of tiny spaces, she couldn't help but wonder if the thing could hold her weight.

"Are you coming?" Thorn whispered.

Nodding, she followed, wiggling through the square opening. Suddenly, the stench of musk and urine assaulted her nostrils. She wrote it off, deciding she could handle a few bad smells when they were so close to accomplishing their mission. The cramped space felt slippery. In the dim light, she noticed some kind of grime plastered along every surface, as if it had been untouched for millions of years. As she wiped the dust and other greasy muck from her gloved hands, she frowned. "Someone forgot to clean in here," she muttered. As if that wasn't bad enough, a current of cool air blew across her face, as if she were in the middle of a dust storm. She flipped her visor shut and continued forward, crawling on her hands and knees through the narrow aluminum airshaft. As she moved away from her point of entry, everything grew dark.

"I can't see a thing," Jack said from behind her.

She glanced over her shoulder. "Then switch on your flashlight, but keep quiet! Remember, there are aliens beneath us."

"Can't reach it. It's in my backpack. Hey, you used yours back in that dark kitchen. Did you put it away?"

"Got it right here." She dug her hand deep into her pocket and pulled out her flashlight, then flicked it on. In that instant, a piercing pain radiated across her finger, as if she'd been bitten or stung by something. When she swung the beam of light around, it landed on a pair of red, oversized, glowing eyes and a long, pointed snout. *A new rat species? Some kind of alien zombie psycho-gerbil?* Whatever it was, she had no doubt that those needle-sharp teeth could chew through glass, cinderblock, wire, aluminum, lead... and definitely skin. It would be yet another new installment in her never-ending class of Horror 101. After all, no horror film would be complete without rats, whether Indy's dad liked it or not.

She heard Jack muttering something about catching rabies right before another sharp pain sliced her ankle, then her leg. A long tail skittered past her face, and something zipped across her back, making her gasp. Loud squeaks echoed all around her. "It's rats. They're biting us!" Shivers flooded through her body. The critters were so lucky she didn't have a big old frying pan or some chunky-style peanut butter and *The Rat Zapper 2000*.

A rodent scurried across her neck, and she swiped at it, hitting her elbow in the small, confined space. She began to worry that one might weasel its way inside her pant leg or shirt, and a chill ran down her spine.

"Head back. Head back now!" Thorn ordered.

"What? We can't turn around. There isn't enough space." Jack's voice sounded frantic, as though the mere thought of being stuck in that confined space might cause him to have a panic attack of epic proportions. Casey understood because she had no doubt she was near one herself.

"These are mites," Thorn said. "Trust me, with the huge swarm of them up ahead, there's no way we'll make it through. If any of us get bitten more than ten times, we will go into anaphylactic shock."

"Did you say ten?" Casey groaned. "I think I've reached nine already." Casey peeked over Thorn and saw hundreds of red, glowing eyes. Wait... aren't rat infestations reserved for New York City sewers? I never saw any epic-sized rodent outbreaks on Ripley's ship! She fought the strong urge to scream, but she wasn't keen on meeting the bloodthirsty King of the Rats. One of the rodents jumped at her face, bearing its long, yellow, razor-sharp teeth. Her stomach lurched as she pounded the rat-hybrid with her flashlight. Racing backward, she stumbled over Jack's hands and pushed him back, unwilling to slow down. From the corner of her eye, she could have sworn the rat-like thing was giving chase, probably looking forward to a change in its usual diet. "Hurry up, Jack," she hissed.

"I'm trying." His answer came through ragged breaths.

She threw a glance over her shoulder; the opening in the ceiling came back into view. Jack slid out first, and Casey followed. She leapt out of the air vent onto the shelf with a *thud*, praying no one heard her somewhat loud crash landing. She was more than glad to be out of the rat hole either way.

With another shudder, she scrambled down, then tore off her glove and peered at her finger. The puncture looked red and swollen, quite like a spider bite. One thing was for sure: She had a serious case of the heebie-jeebies, even if that was typically reserved for bug-phobias. "The thing's lucky I didn't go all Rambo on it, but banging around in the vents would have drawn attention. And that's the last thing we need right now."

"I got bitten too," said Jack. "Are you okay?"

She nodded and looked up at him. "Geesh. Haven't these goons ever heard of *Die Hard* or *Mission Impossible*? Don't they know that vent shafts are supposed to be readily available for heroes to escape? I guess they don't think we're as worthy as Bruce Willis or Tom Cruise."

"Not this time," said Jack, "but we'll figure something else out."

She snorted and rubbed her leg, her gaze fixed on the swelling wound, which was now the size of a walnut. "Something else? Like what? You know as well as I do that that was our best chance of getting past those guards."

"I can take a few bites. I'll just crawl through them," Jack said, feigning some kind of heroic invincibility.

"Don't you dare!" said Casey. "I swear those things came straight from the pit of hell, and I'm not gonna stand by and watch you die of rat pox or some rat-bite fever." She swallowed and glanced up at Thorn, who made his way down the shelves. "We probably already caught it, didn't we?"

"Like I said before, those aren't rats. We call them miters. You're lucky. Their DNA is quite different, and you haven't sustained too many bites yet. You should be just fine." Thorn jumped down and clapped Jack's shoulder. "You're very brave to offer to go back, but you'd be dead before you hit the room. Your body can't handle any more venom." He looked away, as if pondering another solution.

"That's good to know," Casey said. "So, let's consider our options. We can die from spaced-out rat bites, being shot, or experimentation. Hmm. It's so hard to choose." Their one and only way of cleverly sneaking past the guards had been shot down, and Casey shook her head in defeat. *There has to be a way past those vermin, and if there is a way, I wish someone would share that little tidbit of info with us.*

"I've got another idea," said Thorn.

"Plan B?" Casey asked.

"Exactly. Follow me." Without elucidating further, he turned on his heel and walked out of the room. Thorn glanced around the pillar. "We're outnumbered, but we can outsmart them." He placed his backpack gently on the floor and started to rummage through it, his fingers barely making any noise as he pulled out a black, rectangular device about the size of a Nintendo DS.

Casey recognized it immediately; it was the same device Mike had pulled out of his backpack in Agatha.

"This is a new navigation tool similar to a GPS. I'm positive they've never seen one of these before." He turned the black dial a few times as he whispered, "I'm setting the coordinates for the room that holds the weapon. The closer we get, the louder and faster it beeps. We'll pretend there's a radiation leak of cosmic proportions."

A nuclear nightmare? Giant insects or rodents? She'd certainly watched her fair share of catastrophe movies on Saturday nights. Casey realized her hands were shaking, and she took a few deep breaths to calm her nerves. She hoped this crazy plan would work. After all, Thorn had to be the best, or else General Ashtar wouldn't have trusted him. "Are you sure they won't recognize you?"

"For starters, they think I'm dead. Plus, there are many new recruits. I'll disguise my voice to be on the safe side."

Jack leaned in. "What if they don't buy our story?"

"I've been doing this for hundreds of years," said Thorn. "I can be quite convincing. Just try to blend in, act the part, and follow my lead. Come on."

Will the Greys really buy this B-movie plotline? Casey shook her head, reminding herself that Thorn had successfully accomplished this a million times on missions. His ruses had worked before against countless enemies. Besides, it wasn't like she had a better plan up her sleeve. All she could do was hope his plan was better than nothing. As long as no one saw through it, they'd be okay. Otherwise, they were busted, big time. She took a deep breath and prepared herself for the most important walk-on role of her life.

Chapter 5

Casey pulled down her visor and stood, hoping Thorn's crazy plan would gain them access to the room where the weapon was stored.

Thorn tilted the device at different angles, followed a zigzagged path, then projected his voice across the room. "The radiation has to be coming from somewhere."

Casey's stomach knotted. She adjusted her uniform and hoped she'd pass inspection and that she'd be convincing enough. Taking a deep breath, she forced her legs into action, taking one step after another while listening to Thorn's continuous babbling about nuclear outbreaks and radiation.

The line of soldiers raised their weapons. "Halt!" one of them shouted. "We have orders to shoot any unauthorized personnel."

Thorn flipped his visor up and examined his instrument. The small device let out a loud sound. A series of louder beeps followed the closer he moved. "I'm Dr. Hubbard, and like you, I am a dedicated soldier on this military expedition. This is my team. I need to speak to whoever is in charge here."

A soldier stepped forward. "That'd be me, Sergeant Collard. I need to see your security clearance, Doctor."

Thorn pulled something out of the pocket of his backpack: his fake ID. When dealing with aliens, never leave Earth without it. Casey's heart pounded as he held up the rectangular glass card, about the size of her mother's credit card. Black symbols lit up and flashed across it, and the sergeant examined it carefully. She hoped Thorn's identity passed and that the sergeant would believe his crazy story about nuclear leaks spewing out all kinds of dangerous elements that'd melt their faces right off.

"All of our lives are at stake, and you're worried about security protocol?" barked out

Thorn, seemingly agitated but secretly hopeful that they'd buy it.

Sergeant Collard motioned to the other soldiers. "Stand down!"

Casey unclenched her fists and let out a breath, relieved that no one had seen through their little façade—at least not yet.

"Follow me, Sergeant," said Thorn, grabbing him by the elbow. The instrument squealed as he stepped closer to the stainless steel double doors.

She touched Thorn's arm and whispered loud enough so the sergeant could hear, "Sir, that's the room holding the weapon."

Thorn gasped. "Oh, that's bad."

The sergeant turned, frowning. "Why? What's wrong?"

Thorn shook his head. "If the weapon is the culprit, if it is leaking, that means we are all inhaling dangerous radioactive chemicals this very minute."

Jack jumped into the conversation. "You know, one single microgram of plutonium, even smaller than a speck of dust, is fatal. We have no choice. An immediate evacuation is in order if lives are to be saved aboard this vessel."

Thorn cast a downward glance. Tall, narrow, peaked waves flooded the screen. "See the radiation spike? This is definitely the source of the leak. All scans indicate it's coming from this room."

"Look at that! The readings are skyrocketing by the second." Sergeant Collard put his gun back in his holster. "My squad just arrived. Why weren't we warned earlier about this, Doctor? Surely there are warning systems in place for this sort of thing."

"I don't know why the warning systems failed, but the one thing I do know is that if we can contain the leak, we can save lives. We'd all be considered heroes in Commanders Tio's eyes, including you, sir."

"Contain the leak?" questioned a soldier. "I say we evacuate this area immediately."

Casey nodded, for those were her thoughts exactly. *Yes, please feel free to leave!*

"I knew it wasn't safe to harbor such a weapon aboard this ship, but no one would listen." Sergeant Collard shook his head. "And your instrument is 100 percent accurate?"

Thorn nodded. "Positive."

Sergeant Collard glanced at the two initial guards. "You've been here for hours. Have you noticed any effects? Are you feeling ill?"

One took a step forward. "I opened my visor a few times during my shift. I can't believe I breathed in dangerous elements. My head's spinning now, and I feel nauseous."

"We could've died!" the second panicked. "Who knows what bodily damage we've incurred by simply manning our posts."

Casey smirked under her visor. She found it funny how their minds played tricks on them, convincing them that they had, indeed, ingested the nonexistent deadly substance. She peered at the sergeant, thankful that he enjoyed his position of authority so much.

Sergeant Collard clapped a soldier's shoulder. "It's my duty to make sure no one dies while I am in charge. Take these two to sick bay STAT."

The sergeant seemed to fall for it, but Casey feared that if they didn't take it up a notch, a more intelligent, less gullible being might see through their bluff. She took a deep breath, preparing herself mentally. It was time to put on a good show for their audience and speed things along. Gathering her voice, she let out a shrill cry, hesitant at first, until it grew in intensity like a screech, only to turn into a coughing fit.

The soldiers gaped, wide-eyed, peering at one another as though either had the answer. Her

violent coughing echoed through the corridor, reverberating from the walls. She clawed at her throat as if struggling for air and let out another screech, just in case the first one wasn't convincing enough. The plan had to work because they needed to get rid of Sergeant Collard fast. She just hoped it wouldn't attract the wrong kind of attention from any nearby troops.

Jack caught Casey as her body jerked and collapsed against him. She blinked, observing the Greys from the corner of her eye. "Save...the...others. Get them...get them all out...before...it's too late." Her words came in rasps and ended in an Oscar-worthy choking gasp.

"Don't you die on me!" Jack cradled her in his arms, whispering comforting words as he rocked her, sobbing. "Oh, my beautiful wife!"

Casey grinned underneath her visor, confident the others wouldn't notice. Jack couldn't have played the part any better if they had planned it all out.

A soldier inched closer and reached out, as if to touch her, and then pulled back whispering, "Is she dead?"

"No!" Jack hissed, touching her face. "She...she can't be."

Casey groaned and opened her eyes underneath her helmet so she wouldn't miss the drama unfolding.

"Get her to sick bay," demanded Sergeant Collard. "Quickly!"

Crap! Her stomach churned as she realized she'd played the part a little too well. Getting separated wasn't part of the grand plan.

"No!" roared Jack. "The damage *is* done. There's nothing we can do to change that. Please let me spend these last few minutes with this beautiful angel in my arms."

"Not acceptable!" said the sergeant. "You can accompany her if you must, but it is my duty to send any injured and ill to sick bay."

"She'll be dead before we get there. Listen, she's my wife, and that makes this *my* decision, not yours. Nobody will hold it against you."

Going against the sergeant's authority was a bold and daring move on Jack's part, and Casey hoped it would pay off. She knew that being carted off to the medical room would reveal her identity, and it would be a one-way ticket to the Deep Sleep Lab for her.

"Please," he wailed, arms thrashing.

"It's the man's wife." Thorn touched the sergeant's shoulder. "Surely you can show some compassion, sir."

Casey bit her lip hard. If the sergeant didn't side with Jack, they were so screwed. Her breath hitched as she fought the urge to knock the alien over, stun his crew, blow the door down, and chip that weapon. *Taking on armed guards singlehandedly? Okay, so maybe that only happens in Hollywood, but I'm so fed up with this that I'm about to go all Lara Croft on these people!*

Finally, the sergeant spoke. "Fine, if that's your wish."

Casey let out a sigh of relief. Had they taken her, she would have been a goner for sure, and it would have likely foiled her friends' plans and escape as well.

"Sergeant, do you know how fast this stuff spreads?" Thorn paused, coughing into the back of his hand. "Airlock the room immediately. Our lives depend on it."

Nodding, Sergeant Collard said to his team, "Do as he says."

"We can't do it from out here!" yelled a soldier. "Somebody has to go inside and reboot the system."

A shadow crossed Sergeant Collard's face. Casey could tell by the way he was fidgeting with his hands that he was struggling with a decision. They were so close to getting what they

wanted; just one tiny word from him, and their mission would be complete. She held her breath, waiting for his reply.

“No.” Sergeant Collard shook his head. “I have orders not to allow anyone in that room for any reason, and I shall not break those direct orders under any circumstances.”

“Then open the door and stand guard here while I find the leak,” said Thorn.

The sergeant shook his head and said vehemently. “I’ll have to get clearance first.”

Thorn stared at him for a moment, his fists clenched and his eyes fierce. “Commander Tio wants to know what the heck is causing this radiation spike. I’ve found it. Now, do you want to explain why you stopped me, Dr. Hubbard, Chief Nuclear Physicist, from containing it and saving every single life aboard this ship?”

“No, Doctor, I don’t.” The sergeant nodded at the soldier standing next to him. “Reset the system and lock down the room. Make sure you activate the airtight seal.”

Thorn touched the rebel’s gloved hand to get his attention. “Be warned. There are uranium, plutonium, and other highly nuclear byproducts lurking around in the room. The combination *is* lethal. The minute you walk in, you’ll be remembered as a hero.”

“What?” The soldier stiffened. “You mean the moment I go in there I’m dead?” He shook his head, his voice rising a notch. “No way! I’m not trained for that sort of thing, and I didn’t sign up for that!”

Jack’s arms wrapped tighter around Casey’s body, pulling her closer. “Quit stalling. Look at her! Do you want the same fate to befall everyone else on this ship? Somebody has to go in there before it’s too late.”

“Well, that someone won’t be me,” said the soldier. “I’m not doing anything without a radiation suit.”

Casey let her gaze wander from one face to the other. The mutters and whispers stopped. Some of the soldiers darted away, while others seemed frozen to the spot. She smiled inwardly. In their heads, they were all heroes, but if there was even the slightest hint of a real-live danger, they couldn’t get away fast enough.

Thorn let out an exaggerated sigh. “All right. I’ll do it.”

“No, Doctor Hubbard! I can’t let you do that,” said Jack. “I’ll go. My wife’s dying. What else do I have to live for?”

Thorn gripped his hand as if they’d both die as patriots. “We’ll both go. We shall die and be honored together.”

Sergeant Collard put in the code and unlocked the door. “People will talk about your bravery for generations to come. I’d do it myself, but I’m engaged to be married next month. I just...I can’t risk exposure.”

“But every minute you stand here, you are exposed,” said Thorn. “Tasteless, odorless, invisible, radioactive elements are seeping under the doorway. Do you plan on having kids with your new bride?”

The sergeant nodded, wide-eyed.

Thorn shook his head. “Don’t.”

“What, Doctor?” the sergeant asked.

“If you stay here, you will have to consider adoption, I’m afraid.”

Sergeant Collard took a step back. “You seem to have this under control, gentlemen. I’m going to put together a hazardous waste team.” He turned on his heel and fled. Seconds later, the rest of the soldiers rushed past Casey in hot pursuit of their cowardly leader. The hall stood suddenly empty, the soldiers’ footsteps thumping down the corridor as they made a mad dash for

safety.

For a few seconds, Casey barely dared to breathe, lest they returned. When she realized they wouldn't, relief washed over her. They were gone, at least for the time being. All she had to do was get in and out of that room, and no one would ever suspect the weapon had been tampered with. At four a.m., the Greys would point the weapon at Earth, but no mass destruction of life would take place. She wished she could be there to see their faces when the darn thing let them down, but she, Jack, Mike, and her parents would be long gone by then, back on Earth. Commander Tio's troops would be arrested by The Galactic Federation of Worlds, and Thorn could go home to Zeta Reticuli while she was heading back to sunny California.

Jack held out his hand, and she pulled herself up. "Casey, that was an Academy Award performance."

"I knew drama class would pay off one day." Grinning, she followed Thorn through the door, then took off her helmet, blinking against the sudden brightness. Towering computer terminals and control panels with hundreds of flashing lights lined the walls, like something out of an eighties sci fi movie before everyone had PCs and laptops. A four-foot, shimmering, black diamond stood in the center, spinning in a glass case as the artificial light made the white symbols etched in the surface shimmer.

A chill rippled down Casey's spine, and her breath caught in her throat. She stood facing a piece of machinery designed to destroy every living thing in a matter of seconds. She ripped off her gloves and quickly stuffed them in her pocket. She dried her nervously sweaty hands on the back of her pants, suddenly dizzy at the prospect of fulfilling her mission. She really hadn't expected to make it that far, but there they were, facing the task assigned to them.

"Ready? Activate it." Thorn's voice jolted her out of her reverie. He moved past her and flung open the silver box, then handed her the microchip.

Casey nodded as she set her helmet down, joining Thorn a few feet from the device. She put her thumb on the small electronic chip and glanced at Jack.

"I'll tell you when thirty seconds are up," he said.

Thorn unsnapped the gold latch and lifted the glass lid. The weapon stopped spinning, making only the slightest *click*. He entered the code in a keypad at the base of the diamond.

Casey gripped the chip tight. She flinched as a tiny surge of electricity ran up her arm. "I feel tingling or something." It was like getting a light shock by a faulty plug.

Thorn continued to tap on the buttons. "Don't let go. It's just reading your DNA to make sure you're human. Remember, only a human can activate the microchip."

The microchip turned gold, burning her skin. She set her jaw against the searing pain, unwilling to let go. They'd come so far that she would have gladly held on to a piece of red, burning coal if she had to fulfill her mission. There was too much at stake if she didn't.

"Time's up," said Jack.

Thorn pushed a yellow button, and a panel slid open. "Quick! Put it in the slot at the bottom."

Casey knelt and inserted the chip with shaking hands. Her fingers immediately stopped burning, and no red marks or blisters were left behind. The device hummed with power. The diamond turned colors with blinding speed, glowing like a kaleidoscopic light show. Blue, green, red, and yellow colors filtered down around them. Bolts of yellow energy shot up high in the air, sizzling through the streams of blue smoke. When heat singed her brows, she covered her face and lurched back, knowing the no-eyebrows look wasn't very fashionable; fortunately, when she felt for them, she realized she still had brows. The guys would've never let her live that one

down, so that was a good thing. Twenty seconds passed before the diamond stopped glowing and turned back to its original black color. The smoke dissipated, but oddly enough, there was no smell.

Thorn's gaze remained fixed on the control panel. "The countdown has stopped."

"So is it over?" she asked.

He let out a sigh and turned slowly to face her. "Yes. We did it."

Jack pulled her into his arms.

Laughing, she squeezed him tight. Everything seemed to be falling into place. She turned, and their eyes connected. Her stomach fluttered at the sight of his blue gaze. *Must be the nerves*, she decided. *Too much adrenaline in one's body tends to do that*. "We just saved everyone on Earth," she whispered.

"No, *you* did that." Jack inched closer.

She felt his hot breath on her skin, searing almost as deeply as the microchip. Going down this path wasn't an option. She had messed up one friendship, she wouldn't tamper with another.

"As Mike would say, those rebels picked the wrong planet to set up shop," said Jack.

She laughed. "Speaking of Mike..." She stared at the device on her wrist and the signal blinking four halls away. "Let's go find him and my parents."

Jack took a step back, smiling. "Yeah, and then we're hightailing it home."

Memories of home swirled in her head. She pictured herself, Mike, Jack, and her parents sipping on fresh-squeezed lemonade while they relaxed in the backyard with those noisy birds they couldn't get rid of. She decided she would never complain about those birds again; in fact, she longed to hear them. At that moment, nothing would sound more fantastic. Annoying as they were, at least they were a piece of home.

Thorn gulped. "Wait a minute. We have a problem."

Casey noticed a small panel blinking at the bottom of the diamond. Numbers and symbols flashed and bounced around wildly. She gulped. "Why's it flashing like that, Thorn?"

"The weapon tried to override the microchip we put in, but it was unable to do so."

"And that's a problem?" asked Jack.

Thorn hesitated, and then the words slowly came out. "It activated the self-destruct sequence. Earth is now safe, but we aren't. This ship will explode at the original time it was set to destroy the humans on Earth, at four a.m."

"What?" Casey's pulse raced, and her palms grew sweaty. She breathed deeply, trying to calm herself. It was no time for panic. She glanced down at her radar device: The time read eleven thirty p.m., so they had a little over four hours. Surely, Thorn could do something; after all, he was a genius and knew absolutely everything. He could tinker with it, maybe even fix it. She peered at him, hopeful. "Why don't you just turn it off then?"

"Work your magic." Jack's face contorted into a grimace. "Disarm it!"

She held her breath, waiting for Thorn to nod and do his job, but he didn't budge from the spot. A deep frown crossed his features, and when it did, something dropped in the pit of her stomach. Realization was kicking in, and she didn't like it one little bit.

To be continued...