

Agartha's Castaway

Book 9

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

How did Commander Tio discover we are in the Deep Sleep Lab? Did Thorn, Jack, and Mike manage to get to the ship without being stopped? Casey shook her head against the hundreds of thoughts and questions racing through her mind as she arched her back and kicked, struggling to free her arms from the soldier's grasp.

"Stop it," he hissed.

"Let me go," she shouted furiously. "I swear, once I'm done with you—"

"You're not going anywhere except into deep sleep," Tio interrupted. He turned to face his squad. "Line the Agarthians against the wall, single file. Shoot anyone who refuses to cooperate."

If they gave in, they'd be lost, because the commander would kill them regardless. "Don't listen to him!" Casey shouted. "Together, we have to fight back with everything we have!"

A rush of murmurs echoed through the group, then faded into silence.

Tio's menacing gaze focused back on Casey. "For some reason, they're not listening to you."

The people were like sheep being led to the slaughter. Casey couldn't understand why they wouldn't fight. She was sure if they stood together, they'd stand a chance.

The commander's voice broke through her thoughts. "Didn't you think waking up all these people would set off an alarm? I immediately forced the doors open and sent in my troops."

She ignored his harsh tone. Opening the deep sleep pods all at once without thinking there would be consequences was a mistake she wished she hadn't made. Of course, it wouldn't have mattered anyway, because she never would have left her parents behind.

Tio grabbed a fistful of hair and yanked her head back. "You're nothing but a kid playing soldier, and your silly little game will cost you your life."

She winced as a jolt of pain shot through her scalp. *Maybe I am a kid playing soldier, but I certainly didn't ask for any of this.* Fate had bestowed this wonderful honor upon her, and now it would ultimately lead to her death. Frowning, she rolled her eyes. *Thanks a lot, Fate.*

Tio bent forward, whispering in her ear, "You might not be the dark-haired Agarthian I was seeking, but there are plenty of experiments I can't wait to try out on you."

She stared at him, infusing a message into her gaze that soon he'd be defeated. The soldier's grip felt like iron around her upper arms, squeezing her muscles until they burned—and not in a

good way, like when she worked out to her *Celebrity Fit* video at home.

“Stop struggling,” said the soldier. “You’re just making it harder on yourself.”

Or on him. Maybe he’s having trouble pinning me to the spot? Granted, it was a long shot and probably based on pure wishful thinking, but being annoying was better than doing nothing. “I am?” Casey grinned and twisted, pushing her weight down like she’d learned in karate class. The sensei had said that move would get her out of any trouble, and now she could put it to the test. “You’ll pay for all of this, Tio, you sick jerk.”

Hands grabbed Casey’s shoulders from behind and shoved her down to her knees. Pain shot up through her legs. “Show respect to our leader!” the soldier said.

She peered around in mock confusion as much as her straining neck would allow. “Leader? What leader? Oh, him?” She nodded toward a frowning Commander Tio. “He isn’t *my* leader.”

“You didn’t dare.” Tio’s face turned into a cold mask, his eyes blazing with fury. Whatever Thorn had said about his hatred for humans was no exaggeration. “I feel so bad for your mother,” Tio continued, pointing. “The poor thing looks so upset, and the bad things haven’t even started happening to her yet. She’ll never make it past the first experiment like you.”

Casey turned, and her blood turned to ice. Her mom’s sobs echoed across the room. At the same moment, her father collapsed on the floor, with a grinning soldier standing behind him. She opened her mouth to call his name, her legs kicking in a frenzy as she stumbled to her feet.

“Oh no, you’re not going anywhere,” said the commander. “Did you really think you could sneak aboard my ship, steal my prisoners, foil my plans, and destroy my property?”

“Is *that* wrong?” she snapped.

The scream caught in her throat when a boot hit her in the pit of her stomach, making her fall backward, only to land with a *thud* on the floor. She swallowed down the pain.

Tio laughed as he scanned the room, his eyes lingering on her parents for a second too long. “Maybe I should shoot them where they are.”

“What’s wrong with you? Leave them alone.” Her voice sounded low and coarse, unrecognizable. She thought she tasted blood on her tongue, but it couldn’t be unless she had bitten it. “My parents didn’t do anything to you, you jerk!”

Tio narrowed his gaze. “I don’t like you, human—not one little bit.”

She lifted her head off the hard floor and forced herself up on her elbows, a smile playing on her lips. “Kind of figured that when you put me in a glass cage to be tossed into space.”

“You’re strong and feisty,” he said. “You might just live past the second experiment I have planned.”

“You’re insane.” Heart pounding, she scrambled up and lurched at the commander like a crazy woman. She spat on him as soldiers caught her midair and forced her back. “Hope you enjoy a sample of my DNA.”

Tio met her gaze and laughed. “I wouldn’t expect anything less. You’ll definitely make it past the first three experiments.”

“Monster!”

“Put her with the others,” Tio ordered.

Two soldiers grabbed her by each arm. “No way!” she shouted as she squirmed and kicked with every ounce of her strength.

In spite of her efforts, they dragged her over to the end of the line.

“Just shoot me and get it over with,” she yelled, raising her glance to catch a glimpse of her parents, regretting it instantly.

Her mom stood frozen to the spot, with her face pale and her eyes filled with unshed tears.

For a brief second, Casey thought she saw her mom's mouth contort, whispering her name, and then the expression changed to panic as her eyes started to dart around. She'd never seen her parents so scared in her entire life, and that frightened her more than any of Commander Tio's nasty threats.

"For this I'm going to—"

"You'll do nothing, little girl!" a soldier said with a sneer.

With a groan, Casey kicked again, but it was a feeble attempt. She took a deep breath and forced herself to stay calm. Giving up wasn't part of her personality, but her parents had been through enough already. Watching their only child be shot would be devastating. Besides, Casey wasn't a quitter. There was enough time to come up with an escape plan, or so she hoped.

The soldiers released their grip, hesitating for a moment before they walked further up the line. Casey struggled to her feet and rubbed her aching arms where their iron grip had stopped her blood flow. Her stomach lurched as she took one step after another, dizziness washing over her. *Where the heck are Thorn, Mike, and Jack...and that Kira chick?* Her dad leaned against the wall and closed his eyes, pearls of sweat shimmering on his pale face. Casey inched closer and hugged him and her mother tight.

An evil smile played on Tio's lips as he addressed the line of people standing against the wall, "My weapon will kill everyone on Earth!" Putting up his hood, he paused and took a slow look around, visibly enjoying the erupting gasps. "But you're to serve another purpose. You'll make excellent lab rats."

How am I going to get us out of this? At least twenty soldiers aimed guns at them. Tio met Casey's eyes as she searched for an escape route. "*Don't bother. You're mine,*" she heard his voice echoing in her head. "Keep dreaming, jerk!" she shouted. A woman let out a loud shriek, and Casey craned her neck toward the capsules to see what was happening.

Two soldiers grabbed the first person in line by her shoulders and dragged her to a capsule.

"Please don't do this," the woman begged. "Please! I have four children who need me."

"Get in," a soldier said in an irritated voice.

A tear slid down Casey's face. *How can these rebels be so heartless?* She needed to fight. They all did, before more reinforcements arrived. "Listen, everybody. Right now, there're more of us than them." Her voice thundered as she continued, "We can take them, but we have to fight. They can't shoot us all!"

"Bring her up to the front of the line," roared Commander Tio, pointing at her. "She's next. I've had enough of her mouth."

Strong fingers gripped Casey's wrists, and her mom let out a long sob. Her dad paled even more. He looked too weak to fight back as he slid down the wall to the floor. *Is this how it's going to end for me? For us? Deep sleep? Experiments?* A shiver shot through her. *No. If I'm going to die here, it's going to be on my own terms! They can just shoot me here and now, because I have no intention of being in one of those capsules ever again.*

She slammed a heel into the soldier's shin, and he loosened his grip. She ran in a burst toward her mom and hugged her. Her throat tightened, and she could barely speak. She slowly wiped her mother's tears away. "I love you, Mom." Her mom let out a ragged sob and gripped Casey's hands.

A rumble echoed through the corridor, growing louder with each passing second. Casey scanned the room as a rush of blazing hope flooded through her. *Is that Thorn and the others?* The crowd of prisoners clapped and shouted for joy.

A rebel took a few steps forward, glancing around. "What is that? Are we under attack?"

The sound of thunder shook the floor, and Casey's heart pounded. Sparks and metal flew as a spaceship crashed through the Deep Sleep Lab wall on the opposite side of them, hovering ten feet off the ground. Soldiers yelled and scattered to avoid the floating ship.

Casey grabbed her mom's shoulder and shook it. "Oh my gosh! They did it, and evaded capture too!" She knew Mike and Jack wouldn't leave without her. Grinning, she scooted along the wall to a soldier who was lying underneath the rubble and nudged him with her foot, then rolled him onto his back. He didn't move. She retrieved his gun from the floor as tiny pieces of plaster—or whatever it was—crumbled over her head from the ceiling, spraying a white cloud of dust. She covered her mouth and coughed. Pushing down the red button, she set the weapon to stun. Taking someone's life wasn't an option, even if they were slime balls.

Another shower of blue sparks rained down. The air grew thick with the smell of molten metal and plastic. Torn electrical wiring, hanging from the wall, began to smoke and crackle. Covering her head, Casey ducked as burning particles rained down on her, searing her skin. She groaned and brushed them off, wishing she had a fireman's suit.

She gazed at the ship, her way out of this nightmare. A ramp formed, the door opened, and Jack stepped down, followed by Mike, who made one of his famous, grand entrances. "Boys and girls, please don't try this at home. Smashing through walls with a spaceship is something only a trained professional should do."

Casey let out a sigh of relief. More than anything, she wanted to run and wrap her arms around them, but she had more important things on her mind, like Commander Tio, who stood less than twenty feet away. She inched closer to him like a cheetah stalking her prey.

Short-circuited computer panels blew up around Tio, and he immediately covered his head from the leaping sparks.

Casey's fingers flexed as she gripped her weapon. She came up from behind and whispered, "Not so fast, Commander." She thrust her gun to his head. A trickle of sweat rolled down her face. "Don't make me pull the trigger." She gave him a shove. "Now move!"

"Casey, wait. I'll take it from here!" Mike shouted.

She shook her head. This was her part to deal with; she owed it to her parents, but peering at the remaining soldiers and the determination on their faces, her heart squeezed tight in her chest. "Drop your weapons and get down on the ground or I'll shoot your beloved leader." She held the gun tight to his temple. When the soldiers hesitated, she realized they were in the mood for a little hardball. Her scowl deepened, and she repeated her demand in a more threatening tone. "I said to drop your weapons. Get on the ground. I swear I'll do it. I've got nothing to lose."

"The girl's unstable. Do as she says," ordered Tio.

The rebels lowered their weapons to the floor.

Their leader continued, "You'll pay for this, human."

Casey laughed. "With everything you've put me through, I already have."

Thorn, Jack, and Kira collected the weapons; many of the captives helped too.

"Stun them, Mike!" called out Thorn. "Start with the commander and then the others."

"You got it, boss." Mike aimed his gun at Tio's chest. "You should really do something about those dark circles. Here, let me help. Nighty night!"

"No!" said Tio. "You'll never get off the ship. I've changed the codes to the docking bay."

He was bluffing—he had to be—but Thorn's expression told another story.

Casey blew out a breath. *Isn't this ever going to end? I wish we could just parachute back to Earth.*

"Wait, Mike! Don't shoot." Thorn walked over to his brother, regarding him. "It's a lie. You

couldn't have changed them that fast."

Tio's lips curled into a grin. "Are you willing to take that chance, little brother?"

Thorn's mouth pressed into a thin line as he gazed from one face to the other. "Cuff him and tie him down. We can't take the risk of shooting him just yet. Start stunning the other soldiers. Once they're all out, we'll get the Agarthians on the ship. Casey can guard the commander for now." He touched Casey's shoulder. "Stand here, thirty feet away. If he makes a move, shoot him in the knee. If he moves again, shoot his other knee."

"It'll be my honor." Casey smiled as she pointed the gun at Tio. "Just get my folks on the ship."

"I will." Thorn sprinted into action.

Kira secured a brown rope tightly around the commander's shoulders, then wrapped his chest and arms over and over again. Mike cuffed his hands behind his back before rushing off.

Tio let out a moan as Kira slammed him against the wall. She snorted. "Please, by all means, have a seat."

He sank into the wall and slid down to the floor. "You should be dead with your other scientist friends."

Kira glared at him. If looks could kill, the battle would have been over right then and there. "Never underestimate the power of a woman." She turned toward Casey. "Do you have this under control?"

"Don't worry," said Casey. "I got this."

Kira nodded and bolted toward the others.

Tio struggled, battling with the ropes.

"Your left kneecap will go first," Casey warned.

He swallowed hard and straightened up, sudden realization shining in his eyes. He knew she'd shoot, and she would.

"Put down the gun." Commander Tio spoke in her head. *"I saved the most important people in your life and this is how you repay me?"* He paused. *"Why, I even saved your life."*

She shook her head. "Shut up!"

"Remember when my men were shooting at you for target practice in the forest? I called them off as soon as I received reports that you had dark hair. Your lives were spared that very second."

"Your mind games won't work on me." She rolled her eyes. "The only reason you spared me was because you thought I was a black-haired Agarthian, valuable for your research." She felt her blood boiling, anger rushing through her at the memory. "Why don't you try and get up? Go on. I dare you. I beg you. Do it."

He stared at her, hard. *"So, no thank-you note? How rude."*

"I told you to shut up!" She gripped the gun handle tightly and aimed for his head.

Tio sighed. *"I saved Jack from falling and burning in a lake of bubbling hot lava."*

She aimed the gun with steady arms, her legs in a wide stance. "Get out of my head!"

"When my soldiers found you again, I instructed them not to hurt you. I even told them to stun the dinosaurs that were about to have their next meal. I saved you and Mike from a torturous fate of gnashing teeth tearing you apart."

Roaring with fury, she took a few steps closer. He was twisting the truth to make her give in. "No. I don't believe you did it to help me. You didn't want those dinosaurs eating your valuable lab rats in one big gulp."

"I saved your mom and dad from fifty-foot waves. And let me tell you, your mom barely

made it. She called out your name with her last breath before we revived her."

She gasped. "Stop it!"

"Look at all I've done for you."

"Really?" She laughed and motioned with the gun. "So, let's see if I've got this all figured out right. If the storm hadn't rolled in, you would've abducted everyone aboard our sailboat." She stepped forward. "You stole Jack, my mom, and my dad from me—not to mention the tiny fact that you tried to kill me by throwing me in a cube to freeze while I rolled around in space. And now you want to do every unimaginable experiment on my body? Let's see, that about sums it up. Oh... wait..." She waved the gun in the air. "You activated a weapon that would destroy all life on my planet." She blew out a breath and said slowly, "Hmm. I'm thinking you really didn't do me any favors."

"Just now, when you mentioned the storm, I can see all kinds of images running through your mind. I see a scared girl stranded on what she thinks is an island, crying because she doesn't have her parents, any water, or supplies with her."

She clenched her teeth, heat rising in her cheeks. Her uniform stuck to her back from her sweaty, damp skin. She wasn't going to lose control, no matter how close he got to her. "That's enough. I'm not falling for your lies."

"Scared because she heard a roar in the jungle."

"I said that's enough!" She pressed her lips together.

"Frightened because a sloth is feeding on the very tree she's climbing, not to mention the giant flying lizard overhead."

She squeezed the trigger and fired a warning shot to the left, narrowly missing his head.

Tio flinched, but the voice inside her head didn't stop. *"Sorry, but your thoughts just keep flooding in. Trembling because a herd of duckbilled dinosaurs is running in her direction, especially when one goes rogue. And petrified as she stands up to a saber-tooth tiger and a lodomodo."*

Casey squeezed the trigger again, and a red beam whizzed past the right side of his head.

He continued to stare at her, his gaze intense. *"I felt your fear and terror. You were a pathetic wimp. And now look at you. Your fear has shifted to anger. Holding up a loaded gun to the leader of a dangerous rebellion, shooting at me, and not even blinking an eye."* He let out an evil laugh and spoke out loud, "I like that."

Her cheeks grew hot, but her gaze didn't waver. She could play hardball too. "See what you've done to me?"

"I've created a monster," he said, with a twinkle in his eye.

"No, that title belongs to you. I've grown since I washed up on that beach. But this journey, it made me tough, strong, a chick who can kick butt—including yours at the moment."

Jack helped the last person walk up the ramp as he called over his shoulder, "Hurry up, Casey! Everyone's aboard already."

"What about the commander?" she yelled. "'Cause I swear I'm a few seconds from blasting him."

Mike peeked out from the doorway. "Thorn's on his way down."

A squad of soldiers burst through the door. One peered at the ship, then down at all the scattered bodies, gasping. "Sir! I'll call for backup."

Casey opened her mouth to tell him to stop or she'd shoot, but Tio lunged for her, elbowing her in the gut. She scrambled back, her lungs devoid of air. She sucked in a painful breath and collapsed, pain shooting through her intestines like a spreading bush fire.

He grabbed for the gun, and with one big yank, pried it from her hands. “Next time, they might want to tie the rope a little tighter,” he bragged. “Not to mention, no handcuffs can hold me.”

Through the fog enveloping her brain, she saw Thorn charge the commander. Tio moved quickly, kicking Thorn in the left knee, laughing as his brother went down with a groan. Thorn probably should’ve just stunned him, but then Tio would be out for hours, and that wouldn’t be good if he had managed to change the codes to the docking bay doors; they might need to squeeze that info out of him.

“Front snap to kneecap,” said Tio. “That’s a great karate move, isn’t it, Thorn? I wonder who taught me that?”

“Get up,” Casey yelled, but Thorn just lay on the ground clutching his knee as he rolled to the side.

Tio waved his head, gesturing a soldier over. “Seize their weapons.”

Casey moaned, holding her side, and glanced up. The commander’s eyes gleamed, and his lips curled into a fake smile as he held out her gun at arm’s length, aiming for her head. “Deep sleep is too good for you. Let’s just end it here, shall we?” He looked down at the gun and smiled. “Oh, wait... it might be more effective if I took it off of stun.” He smiled. “So, you weren’t really going to kill me?”

“I’m not a cold-hearted murderer like you,” she said.

“You had me fooled. I’m impressed. Good thing you didn’t think about your weapon being set on stun. I would’ve picked up on it the second you put that gun to my temple. You wouldn’t have stood a chance.”

“Exactly why I didn’t think about it,” she retorted.

His gaze narrowed. “Any last words, little girl?”

Her heart beat like a drum in her chest. Yeah, she had a last message for him. She wanted to scream that he’d be dead when the ship blew up, but she knew she couldn’t. Pressing her elbows into the ground, she sat up as far as her aching limbs would allow. “When your weapon goes off,” she said, moistening her lips and considering her words carefully, “you’ll have the blast of your life.”

He smiled. “And that, I intend to do. We will celebrate and throw the biggest party on Earth. Too bad you won’t be there to share in the victory. Goodbye, little surface Earthling!”

Chapter 2

Commander Tio’s fingers turned white as he tightened his grasp around the gun.

There was no doubt about it: This was the end of the line. Casey squeezed her eyes shut, waiting for the weapon to fire. Her life flashed before her eyes. *No! I can’t just sit here and let someone snuff out my life like this!* She was a fighter, and she would go out in a blaze of glory. Jumping to her feet, clenching her fists, and ready for battle, a terrifying roar echoed in her ears. She spun her head, her heart pounding like a jackhammer.

A large creature sprang from the floor like a feral lion toward the commander. Its blue fur rippled and swirled, as if in slow motion. She slapped a hand over her mouth. It was the

lodomodo! Tio hit the ground with a loud *smack*. Casey jumped back. The lodomodo snarled and held up a massive paw over him, its monstrous claws less than an inch from his face.

The soldiers stood still, weapons shaking in their hands. The lodomodo turned its fierce gaze toward them. He swung his mighty tail, and with a single blow, three rebels flew through the air. Their bodies crashed into the empty capsules lining the walls. Exploding glass shattered with a *boom* in all directions. Holding their chests, the soldiers rolled and jumped to their feet, then scampered away.

The first row of Greys took aim, hesitating. Casey held her breath and peered around, unsure what to do.

“Should we kill it?” a rebel asked.

“Stand down!” yelled Tio. “He won’t hurt me.”

The rebels faltered as they shot each other glances. They weren’t convinced; they were facing a giant predator who seemed anxious to rip out a chunk off the next person crossing its path. Murmurs erupted, and a few soldiers stepped back, broken glass crunching under their boots.

This was her chance. Casey scrambled to her feet and raced over to Thorn. He stood, staring ahead, and barely paid her any notice when she grabbed his hand and pulled him up. “Let’s move!” she whispered, hoping he wasn’t too stunned to hear her. The animal was a beautiful sight, but safety came first.

“You promised the lodomodo he could come with us, didn’t you?” Thorn hissed. “That’s why he’s here.”

“You seem to really care about him.”

“I do, and I didn’t have the heart to kill him. Still, the creature’s dangerous because he’s bonded to my brother.”

“It’s not like I’m going to let him sleep at the foot of my bed.” Casey didn’t doubt the lodomodo was dangerous, but it wasn’t stupid enough to kill the driver giving him a ride out of that joint. She’d felt its pain and hope. Thorn pulled her to the top of the boarding ramp. The time to go had come, but Casey’s hands froze, clutching the metal doorframe. She’d remembered her promise to the lodomodo, and she could not break her word, especially after the fantastic animal had just saved her life. She glanced over her shoulder and whistled. “C’mon, boy.”

“Casey, no!” said Thorn. “What if my brother commands him to attack us?”

“Ain’t happening. He’s bonded to me now. I can feel it.”

The beast’s ears pricked up, and he withdrew his paw. Leaping off the commander, he pranced up the ramp like a trained dog.

Tio let out an angry yelp. “You get back here, you ungrateful beast!”

“Leave him alone!” shouted Casey, but the lodomodo didn’t seem too impressed by the commander’s threatening tone. His eyes changed from fierce green to calm ice blue. Wagging his long, bushy tail, he walked over to Casey and licked her hand. She laughed, happy to see the hope in the animal’s eyes. He was so beautiful and majestic. She couldn’t understand why anyone would ever beat him.

“All right, if that’s what you want.” Tio’s face contorted with rage. “You now have official permission to shoot the miserable creature.”

Every muscle in Casey’s body tensed as the soldiers aimed their weapons directly at her and her new friend. Her stomach lurched. “Hurry in!” she said to the lodomodo as a shower of red laser beams cut through the air, bouncing off walls inside of the ship. She pressed her back against the cold metal, breathing out. The lodomodo cowered next to her, licking her hand. She

buried her fingers in the animal's soft turquoise fur. "Don't worry. You're safe now."

"Goodbye, Sheik. Goodbye, other evil aliens. Same time tomorrow?" Mike shouted through the closing door. A beam whizzed past his left eye, missing him by inches. "Okay." He jumped to side. "I didn't think so."

"Taunting the aliens?" Casey pulled on his arm, leading him away from the door. She looked up at him, and her gaze narrowed.

"What?" he said.

"No more brain-dead stunts, okay?"

He shook his head, a looped grin on his lips. "You know me. I'd never do that."

"Just be *normal* for a while. I can't play babysitter right now." She turned her attention to the lodomodo and gave him a quick pat. "I'm going to name you Blue." When he barked, she smiled. "I need you to stay right here." She lifted her chin and surveyed the situation.

People from Agartha lined the back wall, whispering in small clusters as they held onto one another, wide-eyed. Jack stood by the controls while Thorn, Mike, and Kira slipped out of their robotic exoskeletons.

Casey scanned the gathered crowd until her gaze fell on her parents, and she drew a sharp breath. Her father's face remained ghostly white as he rested his head in her mom's lap; his chest barely moved. Her mom softly stroked his hair, her eyes closed as though she was in desperate prayer. Casey's heart leapt in her chest. She'd never seen her father so out of it. *He has to be okay. He just has to.* She rushed over to where her dad lay sprawled on the floor and dropped to her knees.

Her mom glanced up, her eyes glittering with unshed tears. She wiped one shaky hand over her nose. "He's suffering from the effects of hibernation." Her voice came thin and raspy, as though she couldn't quite control it.

"Dad, can you hear me?" Casey held her breath, waiting for a sign. She couldn't lose him—not this way. Her dad didn't move. She took his hand and squeezed it lightly. His skin was damp and cold as ice. Her heartbeat sped up, and dread suddenly overwhelmed her. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Her hands caressed his face.

"I don't know why this is happening to him," said her mom.

"Dad! Dad, wake up." Casey shook him with so much fervor that her knuckles turned white, but he showed no sign of waking up. "No, Daddy. Don't you dare die. I can't lose you after all of this. How about that fishing trip in Colorado? Who's going to wake me up in the middle of the night so we get the best fish?" She swallowed the lump in her throat. "And what about visiting colleges? Who'll be there with me to make sure I get the best room ever?" Casey peered at the Agarthians. "Somebody, anybody, please help my dad. Someone here must know what's going on!" she yelled, her voice frantic. She felt a touch on her shoulder.

A woman with porcelain skin, long golden hair, and sapphire-blue eyes leaned over her, with a soft smile on her lips. "Don't worry. It takes a while to recover. It's hard on all of us, particularly surface humans. Let him rest. He'll be fine."

"Thank you," whispered Casey. She glanced at her mom's questioning face, only then realizing she couldn't understand the Agarthian without the implant. "The woman says he'll be just fine. He needs more time."

Her mom nodded.

Casey lowered her lips to her dad's waxen skin and kissed his forehead. "I love you so much, Daddy," she whispered in his ear, then turned to say a silent prayer.

"Casey..." Her mom sniffled and wiped her nose with the back of her hand. "I'm so glad

you kids are okay.”

Casey opened her mouth, but her throat felt choked and no words came out. Burying her face into her mom’s shoulder, she gazed up at Mike and Jack, who were strapping themselves into their seats.

The ship hurtled off the ground in seconds. Powerful shudders rocked the aircraft as it backed up into the spacious corridor. They were finally moving.

Casey sank back against the wall and let a shudder run through her. With every breath, her stomach hurt where Tio had kicked her, but she bit her lip against the pain.

“Here we go.” She heard Thorn mutter as he punched the control panel, the only two sounds in the room. “Hang on tight, everyone.”

The floor shook as a mechanism roared into motion. Outside the cockpit window, sparks flew as the scout ship scraped the corridor walls. Casey cringed and held her hands over her ears, trying to block out the ear-wrenching squeal of ripping metal. The ship returned to the docking bay at a dangerous speed, landing back at the familiar gates where they had first arrived. Two giant doors were the only obstacles standing between the ship and freedom.

“Where are we going?”

Casey sat up, barely able to hear her mom’s voice through the noise. “Out.”

Her mom’s eyes darted about as though taking in the room for the first time. “How do you know all of this? Is it something you kids learn at school nowadays?”

Surely she’s not serious. Alien Escape 101? Casey could tell from the twinkle in her mom’s eyes, yet there was something else there as well: hope. Even though it was a joke, it would’ve been the easier explanation to bear. “No, Mom. I wish I had, but unfortunately it was more a gather-experience-as-you-go-along kind of excursion.”

Her mom nodded and brushed a stray strand of hair from her husband’s forehead. “You’re a survivor, honey, just like your dad.”

“So are you,” Casey whispered, even though her mom probably couldn’t hear it with all the noise.

The ship hovered over the docking bay deck as Thorn fussed with the crystals. “The doors aren’t opening! How did my brother have time to switch the password?”

Casey stood and inched closer, a hard thumping filling the left side of her head. “I thought he was bluffing.”

“Nope!” said Mike.

“For once, he was telling the truth. He obviously somehow managed to change the code,” said Thorn, pushing buttons, crystals, and levers frantically on the console.

A shudder tore through her body. *How will we ever get out now?*

Chapter 3

Casey stared out the cockpit window, her heart thumping like a jackhammer. Two giant octagonal doors kept her from freedom, and they still had no idea how Tio had found the time to change the codes in all the commotion.

“I’ll try to override the system,” said Thorn.

She clenched her teeth as a sick feeling nestled in the pit of her stomach. *This can't be happening—not now when we're minutes away from the explosion. How long will it take to override the system?* She was sure they'd never make it out on time, so sure that she wanted to bang her head on the wall.

Mike slapped his hands down on the control panel. "Just crash through the doors or the walls like we did at the Deep Sleep Lab."

"Won't work," said Thorn. "These doors are much stronger."

"Can't we shoot the doors open?" offered Jack.

Thorn huffed. "Not in a million years! The outside of the ship is reinforced with titanium, technology you can't even begin to understand. And don't forget about the force-field around the ship."

"Keep working on those codes, Thorn." Casey tried to keep her voice calm in spite of her overwhelming fear. She had complete faith in his ability to crack this alien computer system and hack in. If anybody could do it, Thorn was the one.

Thorn tapped away at the controls, frowning as he moved from one symbol to the next.

Mike waved his arm, motioning Casey over. She patted his shoulder, and he grabbed her hand, pulling her close. She looked into his eyes—his terrified, desperate eyes—and touched his shoulder. "It's okay, Mike. We're not going to die—"

A low *hum*, like that of an electric fan, echoed all around them. A giant image of Commander Tio flashed in midair in the center of the room. His silver cloak and hood glittered, and his eyes stared at Casey coldly. It was obvious he didn't take kindly to guests leaving early. "Surrender now or be taken by force," he declared.

His voice sent shivers down her spine. People gasped. Mike squirmed in his seat. Jack froze, his skin drained of color.

Casey glanced down at her radar device and cringed. There were fifteen minutes left. Trying to break out was a lost cause. There was no way they could fight against a force-field and titanium walls. They needed to think outside the box. *What's the one thing that will get us off this ship?* The answer popped in her head: *Tio's cooperation! That's it!* She pressed a gold switch on the control panel, then walked over to the hologram.

"Go away, you little pest." He stared at her intently, his eyes blazing with fury. "Get my brother. Now."

"Listen, Tio, we have one last request," said Casey.

"You're not in any position to ask for anything, human."

She shrugged. "How about my execution? Right here, right now."

He smiled. "I'm listening."

Now that she had his attention, she went on with the charade. "As much as we hate to admit it, you've won." She lowered her head in defeat as tears slipped down her face. Drama class had definitely paid off. "We're dead no matter what way you look at it, so why don't you open the doors, take down your force-field, and let us die with our own people?"

Choking sobs, shrill screams, and frightened cries rippled from all around Casey. She wished she could fill the Agarthians in on her plan, but there wasn't time. Plus, she needed the realism of their cries and tears. Tio had to think they were all going to their deaths.

Casey collapsed to her knees, tears blinding her vision. "Commander Tio, you have the ultimate power in deciding how we'll face our deaths. Please grant us this one final wish."

He tapped a finger against his chin. "Very touching indeed, Earthling. If I comply, I hope you don't think about running. You'll never make it past my force-field surrounding Earth, and I

can always shoot you if you veer off course. I'll consider your request and get back to you." The hologram faded from view.

Consider? Why can't he just do it? Casey scrambled up, but two strong arms gripped her shoulders. She spun around and found herself staring into piercing green eyes, throwing daggers.

"How could you do this?" one of the men roared at her. He seemed so different from the Agarthians. He had flaming red hair, tied back in a ponytail, and wore a robe. In fact, he resembled a Greek from ancient times. The red hair was a dead giveaway. She would have bet anything that she was standing face to face with Kira's father.

"Whoa, back off, Zeus." Craning her neck, she looked him straight in the eye, meeting his anger with her own. "I'm saving your life here, so take your caveman instincts somewhere else. I've had enough drama to last me a lifetime."

"We all know what's going on. Commander Tio told us about the weapon he developed before he put us in deep sleep." He took a step forward, towering over Casey. "Anyone in their right mind would try to stall the rebels, because if we leave this ship, we're as good as dead."

"Sit down. You don't know the facts!" yelled Thorn.

"The girl's sending us to our deaths!" The man's eyes bulged like he was some kind of nut, his hands clapping and unclapping at his side. "We can reason with the rebels, maybe strike a deal. Why would you do something that stupid and buckle under him? Either you're not right in the mind or you work with them." He turned to his companions and roared, "Brothers, let's stop this madness now!"

He wants to bargain with the aliens, the very same ones that chloroformed him like a frog and anxiously awaited to take him to biology class for dissection? How do you strike a deal with somebody like that? And he called me stupid.

A few captives started to whisper. Casey felt their apprehensive glances on her. A group of agitated men marched over. Two of them yanked Mike and Jack out of the pilot seats and threw them across the room.

"Are you crazy?" shouted Casey. "What's wrong with you?"

"Father, no!" Kira gripped the red-haired man's arm. "She's only trying to help us. Trust me, you'll be thanking her."

"When, in the next life?" Kira's dad retorted.

Casey's gaze swung to Jack and Mike as they scrambled to their feet, and she let out a sigh of relief. Luckily, they weren't hurt, but a new fear swept over her. Thinking back to all the pirate books she'd ever read, one word stuck in her head: *mutiny*. She began to think that maybe they should've left the Agarthians in deep sleep because it didn't seem like they were big fans of trust—or teamwork, for that matter. Glancing down at her radar device, she noted they had eight more minutes.

Her mom stepped in front of her like a mother bear protecting its cub. "Leave my daughter alone."

Casey gently pulled her to the side. "Mom, please. These people are dangerous."

"This girl's trying to get us all killed," one of the men shouted, throwing his arms up.

Her mom lifted a brow. "How can you understand a word they're saying, Casey?"

"I'll explain later." Perspiration dripped down Casey's forehead. She peered at the watch on her wrist and groaned inwardly. If they didn't get moving soon, they'd all be turned into roast dinner. She yanked on Thorn's sleeve. "Hey, I hate to hurry you, but you have to override those codes and open the doors... like now."

"No! That's not happening. We're not letting this ship take off!" someone shouted from the

back of the room.

Casey rolled her eyes. “Yeah? Well, if we don’t evacuate immediately, we’ll need lots of sunscreen and a fire extinguisher.” Blue let out a monstrous growl, and Casey leaned over and whispered to her new pet, “What is it, boy?”

“*Just give me the word and I’ll attack.*” Casey patted the lodomodo’s head as he showed his teeth and took off toward the back of the room, crouching like a tiger waiting to pounce.

The men jumped back, gasping.

Casey held up her hand to stop the lodomodo. “Blue, no! Don’t hurt them.”

Thorn raised his pistol and aimed at Kira’s father. “Stand down, or I’ll shoot you.”

“And so will I, Socrates.” Mike pointed his gun and widened his stance.

“You can’t shoot all of us!” Kira’s father yelled. Bulging veins throbbed on his forehead and neck, giving him the look of a madman. “We can easily overpower you...and the beast.”

Blue growled.

Casey was angry at herself for yet another mistake. *What bit me in the butt to wake up this madman?* She gritted her teeth, mentally slapping herself for her own stupidity. If she hadn’t let the caveman out of his ice pod, they’d all be slurping astronaut food on their relaxing cruise back to Agartha.

Jack cocked his gun. “I won’t tell you again. Sit back down, or I’ll take you off your feet myself, and it won’t be a pleasant fall from your height.”

“Father, please listen to them,” begged Kira. “We have three minutes left.”

They didn’t have time for the drama, and enough was enough. “We’re not your enemies!” Casey pulled out her gun and fired several times. Red beams of light bounced off the ceiling. Screams pierced the air. Some Agarthians dropped to the metal floor and froze, and others ducked, their eyes darting around the room. Finally, she had their undivided attention. “Listen to me!” yelled Casey. “Stop working against us.” She dashed to the middle of the room and peered from one face to the other as she addressed them. “We were sent here by General Ashtar, who gave us a microchip to deactivate the rebels’ fancy little weapon.”

“How do we know you’re telling the truth?” a blonde woman asked, her voice wavering.

Casey shook her head as low murmurs raced through the crowd. “You don’t, but at this point, you have no choice except to trust me.”

“If we were the bad guys, why would we rescue you?” asked Jack.

“Exactly,” said Casey. “Now, please, I need you to listen. We deactivated the weapon. Earth is safe. What greater proof do you need? I do have some bad news though.” She paused, considering her words. “We unknowingly set off the self-destruct sequence developed by Kira and the other scientists. When the weapon goes off, this ship will explode. We don’t want to be stuck here when that happens.”

Kira tugged at her father’s arm. “She’s telling the truth. Now do you see why we have to leave immediately?”

His tone softened. “It’s true?”

Mike wagged his finger at him. “If it weren’t for us, your sorry little toga party butt would be asleep in one of those capsules.”

Casey swallowed past the lump in her throat. “We have one minute and twenty seconds.”

“I’m sorry.” Kira’s father clapped Thorn’s shoulder. “What can I do to help?”

“Figure out those codes,” he said.

Staring at her radar device, Casey screamed, “We have one minute!” Thoughts flooded her mind. *How can this be the end? We’ve come so far, gone through so much, accomplished the*

impossible, and saved the human race. We even made it on the ship with all the prisoners. But now the only things holding us back are two thick doors. Casey kissed her sleeping dad on the forehead, then hugged her mom, squeezing tight. “Fifty-five seconds... fifty-four... fifty-three!” she yelled. Her legs threatened to buckle. They had come so close to escaping this nightmare, but now it looked as if it would never end—at least not the way they’d hoped. “If we don’t get off this ship...” Casey paused. She didn’t want to think about that possibility.

The familiar hooded image of Commander Tio suddenly appeared in the middle of the room.

“What the heck does he want?” asked Mike.

“Let’s find out,” said Thorn, pushing a button on the control panel.

Tio’s voice boomed through the hologram. “I’m feeling quite generous today, so I will let you die with the others just as you requested. It’s the least I can do. Thorn will crash when the other two human pilots are vaporized. I’ll be electronically monitoring your demise and shall replay it many times for posterity and amusement. Your deaths will be magnificently displayed on my fifty-foot view screen.”

Casey’s voice wavered as she looked down. “Forty-one seconds!”

“You wouldn’t do that,” Thorn hissed.

Tio laughed. “I’ll zoom in on the cockpit window and watch your final moments of life... and Thorn’s pathetic expression at his defeat. It’ll be a good training module and quite useful in convincing my enemies how futile it is to stand against me. All will see that no one is safe from my wrath, not even my little brother or a beloved hero.”

“Twenty-two seconds,” announced Casey.

“Put down your weapons and let them go to their final resting place in peace,” Tio said over his shoulder.

Jaws dropped in unison, and eyes bulged. An intense wave of relief washed over Casey, and an ironic smirk touched her lips. Mike and Jack looked into her tear-filled eyes with surprise. She squeezed her parents, hoping this was the miracle they’d been hoping for.

“Ten seconds!” yelled Casey.

“Ten...” a computerized voice echoed from her wrist band.

“Nine...”

The commander motioned behind him. “Open the hangar doors for the Earthlings.”

“Eight...”

“Yes, sir,” said a soldier.

“Seven...”

Tio laughed, raising his fists in sweet triumph. “Goodbye, brother.”

“Six...”

The two giant octagonal doors slid open, and Casey glimpsed stars shining in the blackness of the Milky Way. She pressed her palm against her chest as her heart pounded in her throat.

“What’re you waiting for? GO! Get us out of here!”

“Five...”

Casey stumbled back as the ship darted out into the black void of space.

“Four...”

A gentle humming *purr*, like that of a kitten, turned into the sound of swarming bees, and then changed into a high pitch that echoed from the walls. The lights flickered, and Casey covered her ears to block out the noise.

“Three...”

A deep, rolling thunder shook the walls and floor. Casey peered at the others; there was

terror written on their faces.

“Two...”

She looked up at the floating image in the middle of the room accompanied by an electric buzzing sound. Tio’s composure crumbled. His eyes widened and filled with fear as his image flickered in and out, like a beam from an old projector on the fritz. He let out a loud scream just as the hologram faded from view.

Blue lifted his head and let out a primordial, wild animal-like howl.

“One...”

A blinding beam spilled through the window. A second later, the shockwave hit with a thunderous blast. The ship tumbled end over end, rattling the walls and floor.

Casey, unable to keep her footing, hit the deck hard and rolled forward, crashing into the navigation console. She gripped it with shaking hands, holding on for dear life, her eyes fixing on what was going on outside the cockpit. She couldn’t help but watch as the vacuum of space enveloped the fireball that had been the alien mothership only seconds earlier.

Alarms blared. The ship computers flickered and turned black. The inside of the craft plunged into sudden darkness.

Casey drew in choked breaths and peered around her, a sense of dread settling in the pit of her stomach. “What’s happening?” she whispered.

Chapter 4

The ship rocked and shook in total darkness, like some kind of terrifying amusement park ride. Casey scanned the room for her parents, but she couldn’t see more than a few inches in front of her. With trembling hands, she hung onto the wall, patting her way forward as she took one step at a time, minding the people sitting on the floor.

A deep rumble echoed, and the ship lurched, throwing her against a metal pillar. She stumbled back, then lost her balance and tumbled to the floor with a *thud*. Groaning, she sat up and tasted salty blood on her lip where the flesh seemed to burn, but she needed to find her parents and she knew they couldn’t be far. “Mom? Dad?” she shouted. Her voice came high pitched and insecure, and she wasn’t sure her parents would hear her through all the mumbling and screaming coming from the others. She tried to stand, but another jolt made her stumble. Her knees hit the floor hard, then somebody knocked into her. For a moment, she couldn’t move, and her vision blurred.

“Casey? Is that you? Are you okay?”

She recognized Jack’s voice and stood. “Oh, Jack!” Her head ached with every single breath, but her eyes adjusted enough to make out his gorgeous face in the dim light.

“I’m right here,” he whispered, his hot breath caressing her cheek.

“Shouldn’t you be steering the ship?”

“Everything’s offline,” he said, “so the autopilot came on. Thorn said it’s temporary and won’t last long. I just wanted to make sure you’re okay.”

“You’re so sweet.” She pressed her cheek against his chest, gathering strength from the way his hand rubbed her back. “This isn’t the end. It can’t be,” she muttered, breaking their embrace.

The floor quivered under their feet; the windows rattled; the darkness seemed foreboding, surreal.

“Just hold on to me,” said Jack.

She reached for his hand. “I’ve got to find my mom and dad.”

He kissed her cheek, his lips searing her skin. “Let’s go find them.”

“This way!” With a last squeeze of his hand, she patted her way forward like a blind bat, listening to the faint moans and whispers, cries and prayers. At least people weren’t running over each other in their panic.

“Someone turn on the lights!” a male voice shouted.

Casey snorted. *What help will the lights be if we’re going to die anyway?* Memories of her trip flashed before her eyes, every detail passing by like a film. She wished she had the time to tell her parents about everything that had happened, to share the magic with them, things no human had ever seen, but fate wasn’t in her favor.

The ship took another tumble, tossing Casey forward. She sat down to wait out the turbulence, realizing that at that insane speed, she’d never find her parents. “Jack, let’s wait a minute.”

“What? I can’t hear you.”

Time slowed to a crawl as the ship continued to rattle. She peered around, barely paying attention to the shadows occupying most of the floor.

Jack inched closer and draped his arm around her. “Turn around.”

She raised her gaze at the billions of stars shining through the cockpit window like an array of tiny diamonds, bouncing and dancing their way across the Milky Way. She sucked in a deep breath and slowly let it out. “It’s beautiful. Not a bad way to die, I guess.”

“We’re not dying, Casey.” His voice was soft, but unconvincing. The whites of his eyes shined as their gazes connected.

Casey stared at the sight for a long moment. She pulled herself up and sniffled, determined not to give up. She struggled to hold on to Jack’s hand. “Do you see your star? The one I picked out especially for you? It’s the brightest one out there.”

He leaned forward and pointed. “I see it right there.”

Squeezing his hand, she listened to his raspy breaths for a while. “You’re right, we’re not going to die tonight. No way. When this is all over, and we get home, we’re going to look up in the sky and admire your twinkling star. And a year from now, we’re going to lay out a blanket on the beach and admire it some more. That’s a promise.”

Her voice trailed off into a scream as the ship lurched, yet again, and she was thrown upward in a mad spiral.

“Casey!” yelled Jack.

She bounced off the ceiling, hanging upside down, flailing against the air. Blue slammed into her, before being thrown into a series of somersaults. Casey felt herself floating in midair. *Crap!* As if things could get any worse, the artificial gravity was gone. *Why wasn’t I briefed on how to maneuver my way around the ship in such a case? Because it sure wasn’t on the astronaut entrance exam. Oh wait...that’s right. I never took one of those. They expected us to wing it after a few hours of training.*

A shadowy figure pounded into her side. “Jack! Is that you?” She turned to see the dark shapes of the others floating weightlessly around her. Blue spun in circles, his calmness invading her own thoughts. She thought maybe he could feel her fear, and he knew this was the best way to soothe her.

Her hair floated around her like a halo. Casey whirled her body around and peered at the shapes surrounding her. She'd had a hard time finding her parents on the floor, but she thought maybe the lack of gravity would help her along. Pressing her palms against the ceiling, she pushed herself forward, calling for her parents, Mike, and Jack, but no one answered. She squeezed her eyes shut, and her heart thundered in her chest. Reaching out, she clung to a vibrating metal beam; it felt like she was hanging on to a railroad track that was playing host to an oncoming train. All she needed now was a warning horn from a locomotive, but instead, the silence around her seemed oppressing. She waited, every muscle tense.

The lights finally came on. The vibrations stopped, and the instruments sprang to life, beeping loudly. Lights blinked and flashed on the control panel. The main screen burst into static, then started to reboot. Casey felt a glimmer of hope as her heart danced.

Thorn scanned the gauges and pushed several buttons. "Everyone, be prepared. I'm turning on artificial gravity!" he yelled.

Casey fell with a crashing *thud*, landing on her head and side. She sat up and rubbed her chest where it felt her air supply had just been cut off. Bodies crumpled to the floor beside her. A woozy feeling overcame her as she blinked. She winced, her head reeling.

"We're back online. All systems up!" shouted Thorn.

It was the best news ever. Relief swept through Casey as a surge of joy swelled in her chest. The room erupted in cheers and clapping. It was like being at one of Jack's football games when he scored a touchdown or when Mike caught a humongous wave at one of his competitions, flawlessly performing every surfing move and trick he knew. It was the sound she loved that meant everything was fantastic.

Casey blinked against the unnaturally bright light, her eyes slowly but surely regaining focus. Her head spun; her ears rang from the sudden pressure. She rubbed her neck hard as she made out the hazy outlines of Mike and Jack leaning over her. She felt something soft and damp against her cheek; Blue was licking her. Her lips curled into a smile. "We didn't die!"

"Heck no!" Mike's face beamed. "I knew we wouldn't because I have this awesome life all mapped out. Fate wants me to do big things like turning into a superstar."

Jack nudged her. "Or the biggest show-off ever."

Casey laughed. She inched closer and hugged him tight. "We love you for being a show-off."

"Are you hurt?" asked Jack.

"Me?" Mike shrugged. "I'm healthy as a horse. It'd take more than a bump on the head to get me down."

"Not you, buddy. Her," said Jack. "She's the one on the ground."

Casey laughed as she embraced him. "I'm fine, thanks."

Blue barked and she ran her hands through his soft fur.

"Casey!" She heard her dad's familiar voice, and her heart skipped a beat. He'd survived the side effects of deep sleep after all.

Her mom gripped her tight in a nice, warm hug. "Oh, baby, are you okay?"

A smile curled up on her lips. "Okay? I've never been better."

When her dad held out a hand, Casey gripped it and stood. "Dad, I'm so glad you're..." She swayed, a wave of dizziness washing over her.

"Save your strength, darling."

She melted into her dad's chest, inhaling the faint, lingering smell of his aftershave. "I love you so much, Daddy."

He hugged her tight and kissed her forehead. "I love you too. Everything's going to be okay."

Her mom wrapped her arms around Mike and Jack. "We love you guys too," she burst out, tears flowing again. "Don't you just love happy endings?"

Mike threw his arms around her and squeezed tight.

Jack embraced Casey's mom and whispered, "I've never been so scared as I was when you two were swept overboard."

"I thought I was going to drown," said Casey's mom. "The waves were so big, and I swallowed so much saltwater, but then a blue light engulfed me, and I started to float in midair. That was when I must've passed out."

Her dad shuddered. "I saw the strange light, too, through the storm. First I thought it was rescue, but then a blue beam shot out, and I knew something wasn't right, because it moved straight toward the wheelhouse, as though it was trying to incapacitate us. I jumped back just as it struck and cracked the GPS."

Casey glanced at Jack. "So that's why the GPS was cracked and didn't work."

Her dad nodded and continued, "The room was filled with this blue light. I ran out as fast as I could, and that was when a wave came and knocked me overboard. The next thing I knew, I was floating in the air next to your mother. I blacked out and found myself aboard a spaceship, looking up at these aliens with bald heads and big, black eyes. They said your mother and I needed rest after everything we'd been through. They told us the glass capsules were beds. I don't remember anything else. I just fell asleep and didn't wake till you came to our rescue."

They had all been through so much, and Casey couldn't wait to get home. *Home. What a word to cherish.* She had always taken it for granted, but she would never do that again. Just like Dorothy, she'd had to learn the hard way that there really is no place like home, and what she wouldn't give to be able to get there by clicking her shoes together! She decided then and there that from now on, she'd live life to the fullest and enjoy every single moment. She'd watch every sunrise and sunset, feel the wind on her skin, and walk in the wet sand along the ocean whenever she felt like it. She'd treasure life forever, because nothing was more important.

Casey's mom shook her head slightly as she looked up at her husband. "It doesn't matter. None of it matters. We're together now, and we're safe." She turned toward Casey. "I love you, baby girl."

Casey kissed her. "I love you, too, Mom."

"It's over," said Jack.

Mike pointed out the cockpit window. "Hey! Check this out."

The giant battleship had exploded into a million pieces of floating debris. It looked like the aftermath from some kind of battle seen in a *Star Wars* movie.

She threw her arms around Mike and Jack. "I didn't mean for this to happen." And then her glance fell on Thorn, and her heart sank in her chest. "I'm so sorry," she whispered.

If Thorn had heard her, he didn't reply.

She forced her attention back to the others, all cheering and rejoicing, no one paying any thought to the alien who had just lost his brother. She inched closer and placed her hand on his shoulder, hoping the gesture of understanding would help him in some way.

Thorn touched a green crystal, and the ship slowly spun around, away from the wreckage. "Okay. We're on autopilot for about fifteen more minutes while the Loslinda crystals charge after that power surge."

"Autopilot?" asked Mike. "What did you need us for then?"

Thorn's gaze narrowed. "Well, for starters, autopilot doesn't start the computer systems or the engines, and it doesn't last longer than thirty minutes. That's hardly any time."

"It's a temporary fix," said Jack.

Mike nodded. "Gotcha."

A woman's excited voice cut through the air. "Look out the window!"

Everyone gazed out the cockpit window, crowding around to see the beautiful view of the sparkling blue and white jewel...known as Earth. Words couldn't describe the awesome scene before her...it was mind-blowing. One she got back home to her painting studio, she'd create the perfect celestial oil painting on stretched canvas.

Mike pressed his hand against the window. "Dude, it looks like a huge blue and white marble."

"And you all saved it, just like you did when you were little," her mom said with a smile.

Casey gave Jack's hand a squeeze. "But you didn't wear your cape, Superman."

He grinned. "And you didn't wear your tiara, Wonder Woman."

"And I didn't wear my Spider-Man outfit," said Mike. "Guess we're not five anymore. I remember all the great times we had wearing those costumes and saving the world, but I definitely think we had more fun this time around without having to wear the spandex."

They erupted in laughter.

From the corner of her eye, Casey watched Kira walk over to Thorn, gold highlights shimmering in her flowing red hair. *A shampoo commercial would kill to have her as their spokesperson. Who wouldn't buy a bottle to get results like that?* Casey noticed Kira's smile, but she didn't seem as enthusiastic as the others.

"I'm sorry for all the grief I caused. The scientists and I shouldn't have messed with such a dangerous weapon." She handed Thorn a silver chain with a dangling ankh. "I thought you should have this."

He gaped as the necklace draped over his fingers. "How did you get this?"

Her green eyes glittered. "I swiped it from your brother when I tied him up. When I feel objects, I can see past images, like a movie being played in my head. I accidentally touched his necklace and saw your father. He specifically told your mother that only one with a pure heart deserves to wear it." She wrapped his hands around the ankh. "And Thorn, that's you. Always remember the necklace represents life—the billions of lives you saved today. And we can't ever thank you enough."

He put the necklace on and reached for her hands. "You have no idea how much this means to me." He rubbed the bridge of his nose and peered away, but Casey caught the telltale glint in his eyes.

"Wear it proudly," said Kira.

"I don't deserve it."

Kira kissed Thorn's forehead, and a deep frown set between her brows. "Don't you dare think that." Her gaze traveled to Casey's, and she cocked her head.

Casey's cheeks grew hot. She sucked at eavesdropping and pulled Jack away, leading him across the room as she whispered, "We need to talk."

"With all these people?" Jack chuckled and motioned her over behind a silver pillar.

She peered around. The pole could barely hide them from view, but it probably was the closest thing they'd find to privacy.

Jack wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her close.

She found a twinkle in his eyes that she'd never seen before. Butterflies fluttered in her

stomach, and she felt a flush cover her body. A smile crept onto her face as she hugged him tight. Being with Jack felt more natural than breathing. “I’ve never been so happy. I’m sorry it took all of this for me to figure out how much I care about you.”

“You know, I’d do it all over again just to make you figure it out,” said Jack, pushing a strand of hair out of her eyes. His touch sent an array of electricity over her.

He touched his lips to hers, soft, gentle, and sweet. Her heart jumped.

Mike’s voice boomed right behind them. “Hey, what’s going on here? I hope you just fainted and he’s trying to resuscitate you.”

Crap! Casey pulled away from Jack. “Mike, I, uh...we...” *Should I tell him? Will he understand?* She glanced at Jack for support, begging him through her eyes to sort it all out, but Jack didn’t seem concerned. He kept his arm locked around her waist, pulling her nearer.

“You two seem like you’re getting pretty cozy.” The shocked look on Mike’s face betrayed the touch of anger in his voice.

Casey glanced from Jack to Mike, then back to Jack. She was sure he’d say something, deny it and save them both a lot of drama, but the way Jack rubbed the back of his head, it didn’t seem like he was in a hurry to explain. “Jack,” she hissed, “say something.” When Jack said nothing, she turned to Mike, her cheeks burning. *How should I start? Tell the truth?* But she didn’t want to—not until she knew for sure that she wasn’t about to lose one of her closest friends. “Um, Jack and I, uh...”

Mike inched closer, as though he didn’t hear her, and pushed Jack up against the pillar. “I can’t believe you’re doing this to me. You knew I liked Casey.”

Jack snorted. “Is there a girl you *don’t* like?” He took a step forward, his eyes glaring into those of his best friend.

“You know it’s different.”

“I’ve heard that one before,” said Jack.

Casey didn’t want to deal with it, at least not yet, when there were so many people around and everyone was hungry, exhausted, and irritated. She needed time to make sense of her emotions first. “Both of you stop it!” Casey shouted, stepping in between the two of them, her hands balled into fists. “This isn’t the time or place.”

Mike’s and Jack’s eyes were locked on the other.

After a moment, Mike backed off, his face still turned toward Jack as he moved a few steps away. He opened his mouth as if to say something, then closed it again and shook his head. Finally, he spoke. “You’re right. I’m so sorry, guys. I shouldn’t have butted in on your private moment.”

Jack grabbed his arm. “No, I’m the one who needs to apologize.”

“Don’t worry about it, man. We’re cool.” Mike sounded sincere, but he threw Jack’s hand off his arm and turned his back on them. “I overreacted. It’s not a big deal.” His voice cracked slightly, like it always did when he felt uncomfortable. He wiped his sleeve over his face and walked a few more steps away.

“Mike, I—” Casey started.

“No, don’t explain. I don’t want to hear it.” He turned around, his gaze studying Casey’s face. The sudden smile across his lips looked forced and didn’t reach his eyes. “It just took me by surprise, that’s all. Is this really what I think it is? Because if it’s really what you want, then you should’ve told me the truth.”

There was no point in keeping it from him. He knew it. She could see the realization in his eyes. Casey blinked back tears. “I’m sorry.”

Mike kissed her on the forehead. "Then I'm cool with it. You're my best friend, and I want you to be happy."

"Thanks for understanding."

"That's what friends are for. Again, I'm sorry for barging in like I did. I need to work on my manners." He pivoted on his heel and walked away.

Her stomach twisted into knots as she stared after him. She didn't believe a word he said. Mike never gave up that easily on anything he really wanted. *Unless...unless he never really wanted me.* "I feel horrible," she whispered. "I can't believe we just did that to him."

"He needs time to adjust, that's all," said Jack. "He'll get used to the idea of us. Too bad we're stuck on a ship, because I bet a hot chick here and there will do the trick."

"You're probably right, but it still sucks." She watched as Mike walked further away before she said, "I don't understand how he can go around breaking hearts all the time, because doing that to someone sure feels awful."

Jack draped his arm over Casey's shoulders. "Maybe having experienced it himself will make him less likely to do it to others from now on."

"Maybe." She sighed. "The last thing I want to do is see him hurt."

"He's never had a girl turn him down before." Jack looked away from her, hesitating. "I don't think there's anything to worry about. His fan club will be waiting for him on the beach when we get back. Before we came here, he had a crush on at least three of them."

"Three? Wow. That's a lot." Casey blew out a breath. "I hope you're right." She grabbed his hand, pulling him along behind her. "C'mon. Thorn's waiting for us. Those crystals are probably charged by now. I've heard there's still a pilot seat available, and you know what? This time, I'm sitting in it."

Jack smiled. "I never knew it could be so much fun to fly a spaceship."

She laughed. "Exactly why I'm driving!"

* * *

Thorn, Mike, and Casey navigated the ship away from the pieces of wreckage. "Onward to your home planet," said Thorn.

Hundreds of dots appeared and blinked on the ship view screen.

Casey grabbed her chair, groaning. "C'mon! Battleships? You've got to be kidding me."

The others looked up.

Thorn leaned over and frowned. "We've got company."

"This can't be good!" said Jack. "Did more rebel Greys come and track us down?"

Mike ran his hands through his hair. "Most likely. We just blew up their commander!"

"If it's rebels, they'll want revenge," said Casey.

Footsteps came up behind her. She turned to see her dad, his usually gentle face hard and stern. "Ask the fellow if this ship has weapons."

"What good are weapons going to be against an entire fleet?" her mom asked.

Casey turned to translate as the horror vision unfolded before her eyes. Hundreds of spaceships, perhaps thousands, spread out like a blanket of stars in the black sky. Casey's eyes flew wide open, her mouth gaping. *Isn't this nightmare ever going to end?* Her voice wavered. "I don't want to play *Star Wars* anymore. I just want to go home. Anybody got any ruby-red slippers?"

Chapter 5

The huge objects sparkled like diamonds set against a blanket of black velvet. Casey rubbed over the goosebumps on her skin, her fingers trembling as she pointed out the cockpit window. “They’re getting closer.”

No one spoke as Thorn squinted at the computer screen and smiled. “Those aren’t enemy aircraft. It’s the Galactic Federation!”

Casey let out a long breath as relief flooded every fiber of her body.

Jack shook his head. “No idea what the Galactic Federation is, but I hope they’re friendlier than the rebel Greys.”

“For a moment, I thought we’d be ash this time,” said Mike. “But those are the good guys, right?”

Thorn nodded, still staring ahead. Casey frowned, wondering why he wasn’t laughing and jumping for joy like everyone else. Granted, he didn’t have human emotions, but still. She cocked her head in thought. *How does Thorn show happiness anyway?* She hadn’t spent enough time with him to really know.

Her dad put his arms around her mom’s shoulders. “Does this mean it’s all over?”

Thorn sighed and turned away from the screen, his gaze sweeping over Casey but not really focusing on her. Whatever was the matter with him, he didn’t seem to want to share it. He was most likely grieving for his brother. “As you humans would say, we’re out of the woods,” said Thorn.

A hologram materialized in the center of the room. “This is General Ashtar, Commander of Agarthian Forces.”

A wave of relief flooded through her. General Ashtar stood tall and resolute in a one-piece black and white uniform that clung to his muscular body. His confident stance screamed authority, but then again, it could also be his imposing height that gave Casey a sudden sense of confidence that their mission would turn out successful. “Unidentified vessel, you’ve entered restricted space,” said the general. “Power down immediately and be prepared to be boarded.”

Casey lunged forward, but Mike beat her to it. He pressed a gold switch and sauntered up to the floating image. “Hey, General Ashtar, it’s me, your lifesaver.”

“Mike,” said Casey.

He shrugged. “Yeah, I’m called that too.”

“You’re alive!” General Ashtar ran his hands through his short blond hair, and a sudden grin crossed his lips.

“Not only are we alive...” Mike threw Casey a meaningful glance. “But we also rescued the kidnapped Agarthians.” He smiled, adding under his breath, “And saved your galactic butt. How about that?”

“They made it!” the general yelled over his shoulder. “And they saved the others.” Cheers erupted in the background. General Ashtar’s stiff posture relaxed a little, his shoulders raising as though a great burden had just been lifted, but his hands remained behind his back. He cleared his throat and focused his eyes on Casey. “*Nibiru*, our largest battleship in the fleet, isn’t far behind. She changed course when her commander was informed the rebels intended to sterilize Earth.”

Casey nodded. She didn’t know what to say. She’d doubted him a lot on this mission, but his

brilliant plan saved everyone on Earth. She still had to get her head around that one. In her eyes, he was a true hero, and she'd never forget him for as long as she lived.

"Were you able to rescue your friend Jack?" asked General Ashtar.

Jack stepped forward. "That'd be me, sir."

The general nodded but didn't avert his gaze from Casey. "Excellent. A celebration's in order when you return. And Casey, you did a brilliant job. I'd be proud to have you under my command."

Casey smiled and tried not to choke up. His words meant everything to her. They were validation for every single struggle she went through. "Thank you, General. It's a tempting offer, but I think I'm done saving the world." She took a step to the side and wrapped her hands around her mom's waist. "I'd like to introduce to you my parents, Joel and Sarah Smith. They were abducted during the storm."

"I'm so sorry to hear that. No one should have had to go through that." The general bowed his head slightly. "It's good to make your acquaintances."

Casey translated the message to her parents. Her mom blushed and mumbled, "Thanks." Her dad saluted like a soldier, and Casey suppressed a giggle. Three months ago, she would have found her parents to be annoyingly old-fashioned, but now she saw how sweet they were. She was just happy to have them, and she didn't care what Mike or Jack thought any longer because she didn't need to appear cool. She'd gladly wear her dad's goofy fishing hat with all those pins and hooks. Heck, she'd even put on the vest with the hat and pose for millions of her mom's pictures.

General Ashtar's voice jerked her attention back to the room. She peered at him, wondering what she'd missed, as he continued, "The Federation received the message you sent from the mothership. They shut down the force-field, disabling Earth's communication system and ships, and they also destroyed the scout ships over Agarthia."

"I'm glad to hear that," said Thorn. "The rebels should be defeated then." His gaze remained glued on the control panel.

Casey inched nearer and put a hand on his shoulder, but he ignored her, his eyes now fixed on the general. Of course he wouldn't be over the slaughter of his people, who defected to Commander's Tio's side. Thorn shot Casey a weak smile and removed her hand from his shoulder.

"Guess they're not going to make Earth their little cozy home after all," said Mike.

Casey elbowed Mike in the side. *Why can't he just shut his insensitive mouth for a sec? He wouldn't see someone else's pain if it poked him in the ribs with a hot iron.*

"That reminds me..." General Ashtar paused and cocked an eyebrow. "What happened to their mothership?"

"When we inserted the microchip in the weapon, the self-destruct sequence activated," said Thorn.

"I'm sorry about your brother," said General Ashtar. "I wish he'd been different, that he'd seen a better way at the end."

Thorn's jaw set, the soft skin on his cheeks tightening. His eyes hardened. "My brother brought this on himself. He chose his path, as we all do."

"You know you have my deepest condolences," said General Ashtar. "You're a great warrior, my friend, and I'm going to grant you special permission to land in the middle of the city at Blossom Gardens—a special custom reserved only for honored heroes."

Casey smiled. She didn't mind where they landed, as long as she could stand on solid

ground again. All she wanted to do was throw off her boots and feel the grass and dirt beneath her feet, or maybe lift up her hands and dance, sing, shout, and cry.

General Ashtar continued, "Would you like an escort to Agartha?"

"That'd be great," said Thorn.

"Plot a course, open up a wormhole, and let's jump drive to the city. We'll be right behind you."

"General, I'm afraid that's not possible," said Thorn, fussing with the gauges. "We don't have enough fuel to power up the antimatter reactor to open the wormhole."

"Don't worry. I'll go first and open it for you, then you can follow. My fleet will be right behind you." He turned and shouted over his shoulder. "Put the coordinates through."

Casey gulped. *A wormhole?* She couldn't take another sci-fi moment. All she wanted was to fly back home. Besides, the ship could travel at the speed of light. "Okay..." She hesitated to get the others' attention. "Why not come the way we came?"

Thorn shook his head, frowning. "May I have a minute to converse with my team?"

"Acceptable. It's going to take a few minutes to plot the course anyway." General Ashtar's hologram turned and signaled to someone standing to his right, and then he leaned over and fussed with blinking crystals on some kind of control panel.

"Do you want to take a little road trip, wormhole style?" asked Thorn. "It's kind of like a subway system that travels faster than the speed of light. It'll take us straight to the city."

Casey blinked, a shiver sliding down her spine. *A cosmic shortcut?*

"Why's it called a wormhole?" asked Mike.

Jack smiled. "Have you ever seen a worm crawl on an apple trying to get to the other side?"

Mike nodded. "Yeah."

"Instead of traveling around the outside of the apple, the worm could take a shortcut *through* the apple and get to the other side much quicker. That's how a wormhole works. It's a shortcut through space rather than going all the way around."

"True," Casey said with a nod, "but I learned in school if you fell into one of those, you'd be stretched into a long piece of spaghetti for miles and miles." She pulled a face at the prospect. *Forget the sci-fi subway.*

"Your concerns are misplaced," said Thorn. "We've been using wormhole technology for thousands of years for travel. It's completely safe and won't hurt. Gravity will accelerate and do all the work, pulling the ship through the tunnel to the other side. It'll feel like you're being swept by waves at the beach."

"Whoa! Never figured you for a surfer dude," said Mike.

Thorn shook his head. "I'm not, but before I defected, my brother made us study your planet so when we took over, we'd be well equipped."

"I don't mind feeling a few waves at the beach," said Casey.

"No spaghetti then?" Jack winked at her.

She smiled. "Whatever gets us back quicker. I'll click my heels together three times if I have to."

"Take us home, Thorn," said Jack, squeezing her hand tight.

Mike's face lit up as he leaned forward. "All right, hyperspace, here we come."

Thorn's hands danced over the console as he turned back to General Ashtar. "Lead the way."

The general looked up, a smile playing on his lips. "Great! The course has been plotted. Just give me a head start."

“See you on the other side,” said Thorn.

The general disappeared, and Casey turned back to the galaxy stretching out before her.

The ship wobbled as though a minor tremor had just hit it, and the wormhole sprang to life. The stars in its path moved aside as a black hole, the size of a giant Ferris wheel, opened in the blink of an eye.

Mike laughed. “Black holes suck.” He threw Casey and Jack a glance. “Get it? They suck everything in their path like a big, hungry monster?”

“Yeah, nothing can escape, not even light,” said Jack with a chuckle.

Thorn peered from the screen back out the window, a frown of concentration perched between his brows. “Okay, General Ashtar just entered. We’re right behind. Casey, pull that silver lever on your right.”

She did so without hesitation, her heart drumming in her ears.

General Ashtar’s ship turned bright red.

Casey straightened in her seat and opened her mouth to speak, but her throat felt coarse and dry. Even though Thorn had said there was nothing to worry about, she couldn’t get the image of a bowl of spaghetti out of her mind.

Mike gasped. “Dude, the ship’s on fire!”

“On fire? I thought it was just...” Casey gulped, the hair on her neck rising. She knew it was a stupid idea to take a shortcut; that’s always a stupid idea. “Oh gosh! The ship’s going to burst into flames.”

Mike glanced over at her, a twinkle playing in his eyes. “If it is, I want you to know that I honestly love you.”

“Next time, when you find the girl of your dreams, grab her, and never let her go,” she said, peeking over Thorn.

Jack tried to change the subject. “I don’t think what you see is a fire, but more of a reflection of red light or something.”

“How do you know?” Casey asked.

“Because if it were fire, we’d be feeling the heat right now.” Jack motioned around him. “I don’t see anyone melting, do you?” He smiled.

He had a point, but still. Casey turned to Thorn, waiting for him to give the red alert.

Thorn shut down the engines and steered the nose of the craft into position. “It’s just the warping of space around the hole.”

The what? How does space warp? Casey cocked an eyebrow. “Care to elaborate?” When Thorn remained silent, she shrugged and turned back to the horizon. As long as they weren’t going to burn in the process, she didn’t really care. The sooner they got going, the sooner they’d be back home. Jack sat on the floor next to her, and she reached for his hand and held it tight.

“We’re drifting toward the event horizon,” said Thorn.

“Whoa!” Casey felt a jerk as the ship started its freefall toward the massive, spinning hole. The stars around the wormhole blinked out of existence as light was pulled into the singularity. The ship shook around them. She clenched her fists, digging her fingernails into her palms as the ship gained more speed. It was like being sucked into a giant, cosmic vacuum cleaner.

“Hold on tight, everyone,” Thorn shouted.

Casey stared straight ahead, concentrating on General Ashtar’s ship as it descended into the mouth of the tunnel. She stiffened when movement of the lead ship ceased. “Why’s he stopping?”

Mike squinted. “We’ll crash right into him! Thorn, radio him to get moving, pronto.”

Traffic accidents in space? Casey and Jack exchanged looks as Jack squeezed her hand. She swore she'd never ride in a spaceship ever again, no matter how much UFO insurance it came with.

Thorn chuckled. "It's just an illusion. That's the way space time works. He's actually halfway through."

If you say so. Casey watched until General Ashtar's ship faded into the darkness.

"We've reached a velocity of 150,000 meters per second," said Thorn. "We're almost at light speed. Hold on! Here we go!"

"Oh gosh!" Casey drew a sharp breath, bracing herself, her palms pressed into the control panel. Her heart pounded in her chest, preparing her for the moment that would prove right all her nightmares, but nothing happened. She barely dared inhale as she let her gaze wander to the left and right. Nothing happened, and then she started to feel it in the pit of her stomach: a slow, uneasy pull, growing stronger by the second. The sudden rush of nausea as the ship rattled and shook reminded her of riding a roller coaster—only a huge, cosmic one. She squeezed her eyes shut to tune out the ringing in her ears, the tug on her body intensifying, almost like a rubber band being pulled taut.

The Agarthians' yells echoed through the air. She was surprised, because surely it wasn't their first time, or maybe it was. *How many people from Earth have ever ridden in a spaceship to the moon? Only lucky astronauts.*

"Speed increasing...160,000...165,000..." Thorn's voice competed with the whine of the vibrating ship.

In spite of the sudden pressure on her eyes, she forced them open. No way was she going to miss the experience of a lifetime because of a little headache. Rings vibrated in various colors as they danced around the wall of the tunnel. Hot gas whirled around, much like water spiraling down a bathtub drain. She couldn't help but laugh at the thought.

Thorn's voice cut through her thoughts. "170,000...175,000...180,000..."

But something wasn't right. Something pressed on her arm, vibrating and squealing in a high pitch. She realized it was her radar device. The chronometer flashed, bright red and insistent. She stared at it with unbelieving eyes. The seconds on her radar screen barely passed. The more the ship accelerated toward light speed, the slower time moved.

"186,000 meters per second." Thorn's yell drifted through the cockpit over the noise of the ship. "We've reached light speed!"

Then time stood still. She called out for Mike and Jack, but her speech came out slow and garbled. The ride became more bumpy as they traveled further through the tunnel. The gravity pulling at her feet didn't hurt any longer. "We must be somewhere in the middle by now." She couldn't even understand her own words, but at least her mind was still working.

Minutes trickled by, but she had no idea how many. She tried to count, to wrap her mind around the new sense of time, but it moved past her perception and understanding. A small flutter made her stomach clench. Casey's attention moved back to the room and her friends, the expressions on their faces mirroring her thoughts. She peered ahead and saw a small, white circle in the distance. "Oh! We're coming to the end." The trembling of the ship lessened as the white circle grew larger and larger. Finally, they emerged from the wormhole, seconds ahead of the rest of General Ashtar's fleet. A glance down at her radar device now showed the passage of time once more.

Gazing out the cockpit window, she was rendered speechless. The city sparkled below. Brilliant white lights cascaded over the shimmering glass buildings, some as tall as skyscrapers.

Soaring towers sparkled, highlighted against a black sky over Agartha. The view was just as breathtaking at night as it was during the day.

“We’re here! That was so much quicker than the trip out there,” Casey said in a high, squeaky voice as she bounced up and down in her seat like a child arriving at Disneyland, barely able to contain the sudden burst of happiness inside her. She looked at her friends. Their smiles and backslaps told her they were just as excited as she was. She peered at Jack with his disheveled hair and glinting eyes, and a warm rush rose to her face.

“Woo-hoo!” Mike raised his arms high in the air. “What a shortcut, huh?”

“Wasn’t it freaky the way time and space got all scrambled up?” asked Jack.

For a moment, their eyes connected, and the room was forgotten. Jack cleared his throat, and Casey turned her gaze quickly, her hands fumbling with her uniform.

Thorn’s hands raced across the control panel as he glanced up at them. He spewed out a few facts, but Casey stopped listening. This was Thorn’s pride and joy. Of course he couldn’t stop teaching them what he knew, but she had had enough of space and technology to last her a lifetime. She smiled as she realized Jack was still looking at her.

“You promised thrills and excitement on this vacation,” said Mike to her parents. “I think you delivered, and then some. Mind-blowing! Can we come next year too?”

“Sure, but do you really think it could top all this?” Casey’s mom gestured around her, and they all broke out in laughter.

Thorn shifted in his chair as his gaze wandered toward Casey. “Are you ready to land?”

Casey grinned. She’d never wanted anything more in her entire life.

Chapter 6

The ship slowed to a halt. Any minute, her feet would touch the sweet, solid ground. Casey breathed out. They’d destroyed the rebel ship and survived the tumble through the wormhole. Soon, all this space business would be over.

The Agarthians clustered around her, their voices filled with excitement. At any moment the door would open, freeing her from her duties as a participant on this mission. Casey clung to the cold, metal wall, her heart pounding as she waited for the next step to show her mission had finally come to an end. The engines whirred for a moment longer, then died down.

“Dude, Thorn got us back to Earth in one piece,” said Mike.

With so much happening, she’d almost forgotten about him. Once they traveled back to California, she might not get another chance to set things straight with him. Casey took a deep breath to brace herself and pulled Mike aside, their backs turned to the gathered Agarthians.

“What can I do for you?” asked Mike, the hint of a smile playing on his lips. He was in a good mood, which she knew might change once realization kicked in.

She drew a sharp breath, gathering her thoughts one last time before she whispered, “I’m sorry. I know seeing me with Jack must’ve been a shock. I just hope it doesn’t change anything between us.”

“It didn’t take you long to find someone to replace me, huh?” He shook his head. “And here I’ve always thought myself to be irreplaceable.”

It was hardly fair when he kept replacing every girl with someone else a few weeks into dating, but she kept that part to herself. There was no point in alienating him further. In spite of what happened, she still valued his friendship. “I never tried to replace you, Mike.” She crossed her arms over her chest, preparing herself for the arguing ahead, but it never came.

“I know that,” whispered Mike. “As much as I hate to say it, he’s the better choice anyway. He can give you so many things I can’t.”

Like faithfulness? She snickered but let him continue.

“Nothing will change between us.”

“You sure?” She smiled shyly.

Mike grabbed her shoulders and held her at arm’s length, pulling her into a tight hug. “Yup. Besides, you could never have handled all those screamin’ girls at my competitions, and I’m not good at dealing with drama and jealousy.”

She nodded, peeling herself away from him. “You’re probably right. What’re we gonna do now?”

His smile looked a little forced as he shrugged. “Get home and enjoy things as they were.”

“I think I have something that belongs to you.” She grinned as she unfastened the shark tooth necklace. Her throat tightened at the expression on his face. “Thanks for letting me borrow it. It means a lot that you trusted me with something so special.” She fastened the black cord around Mike’s neck. “Always remember you’re a survivor.”

“And so are you,” he whispered, his hand wandering to the pendant around his neck. He smiled as they walked back to where Jack stood petting Blue.

Jack shot him a questioning look. “You guys ever going to fill me in on what happened between you two?”

Mike snorted, slapping him on the back. “What’s there to say? I leave you two alone for five minutes and you steal her away from me.” He laughed and turned toward Casey. “No, all joking aside, you got yourself a great guy, that’s for sure.”

Casey gazed up at Jack, grinning. She hoped it didn’t come across as she felt inside: guilty. “Yes I do, and I’m glad we’re cool again.”

He winked. “You can bet on it.”

The hatch opened with a *click*, and the ramp extended. Bells filled the air with their rich, deep tones. White rose petals floated and fell on her head like snow. It was as if she had stepped into a fairytale. Casey peered at the lush, green foliage stretching to her feet. *Wow*. The lawn was immaculate. One thing was for sure: These people definitely won the war against crabgrass, and her dad would be impressed. The garden stretched out as far as the eye could see, spilling over with hundreds of flowers swaying in the gentle breeze.

Life-sized statues of magnificent warriors in different battle positions dotted the beautiful plot of land. Respect and honor flooded through her. No wonder General Ashtar had said it was a place reserved for heroes. To her right, rock-trimmed waterfalls poured into blue pools. She picked a red flower off a towering bush as she took a deep breath of its strange scent; it smelled like incense. Something shiny caught Casey’s eye. She pushed the high bushes aside to reveal beautiful glass angels beneath. White light danced and shimmered on their crystal wings, trumpets, and harps.

Casey turned in time to see her mom and dad walking forward, their gaze fixed on a point over her head. She followed their line of vision to the hundreds of people in long, flowing garments, gathering as they drew closer. Everyone clapped and cheered at the top of their voices. If the people had been adorned with wings and halos, she would have sworn she was in heaven.

She wondered if they were all there to greet her and her friends. Blue buried his nose into her palm as though to give her the strength to move ahead. She smiled as he stood loyally at her side. Taking a few steps forward, she was overcome with emotion, the first pangs of tears pricking her eyes. They had left as strangers and returned to new friends who rejoiced and embraced them.

“Welcome back, young heroes,” General Ashtar said through the downpour of blossoms. “Petals are thrown as a sign of honor when a star warrior risks their life.”

Casey nodded. “Thank you.”

General Ashtar turned to face her parents. “You have a very brave daughter. I hope my own children will be like her.”

Casey’s father wrapped his arm around her. “We couldn’t be prouder.”

She felt a hot flush spreading across her cheeks. “Thanks, Dad.”

“Who’s the hero, huh?” Mike’s loud voice cut through the air as he laughed and danced from one person to the next. He definitely had a flair for the dramatic, and the people there seemed to love every minute of it, which encouraged him even more.

As soon as Thorn stepped through the door, the cheering grew louder. Over and over again, the people of Agartha yelled out his name.

“So this must be Jack in person,” said General Ashtar.

Casey looked up at Jack, her heartbeat spiking. “Yes, it’s him.”

General Ashtar shook his hand. “It’s such an honor to make your acquaintance in person. We’re forever in your debt.”

“It’s very nice to meet you, but it’s me who is in your debt. Without your help, I’d still be up there.” He wagged his finger above his head. “Thank you.”

Loud cries echoed behind Casey, and she turned to look. The freed prisoners ran off the ship to embrace their loved ones. Some were still in shock, while others laughed or wept, falling to their knees. One ran her hands back and forth across the grass and thanked God she was home.

Casey wiped her face with a trembling hand as she continued to watch the touching display ahead of her. A woman with long red hair and the same gold highlights as Kira sobbed uncontrollably. She wrapped her arms around Kira and her father, the whole family melting into each other’s embrace. Even though it was a beautiful sight to see them so happy, Casey turned away, feeling guilty for spying on such a private moment.

“I’m ready to get home and do some stargazing,” said Jack.

He looked so cute when he shot her his easygoing grin, and she wondered if he meant what she thought he meant, if he hoped to go home and find his special star. She stole a gaze toward him. He winked, his face flushed and glowing.

The general held up a hand. “No, not yet. I’m a man of my word and will let you go home, but first we must celebrate! Tomorrow, we’ll prepare a big feast for you. I’ll take you back to the surface myself.”

“And General, if you don’t mind, I’d like to join you also on the ride back to the surface,” said Thorn.

The general’s eyebrows shot up. “Of course. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Got room for one more?”

Casey spun, amazed to hear the familiar voice. He looked just like before: tall and blond, but this time, he had a friendly smile perched on his lips. She threw her arms open to hug him.

“Orthon!”

He scooped her up and spun her around, grinning. “You pulled it off!”

“Jack, this is Orthon,” said Mike. “He’s the one who rescued us after the aliens zapped you.”
“It’s so wonderful to meet you.” Jack shook his hand.

Orthon grasped it firmly, his knuckles turning white. “Likewise.”

Casey’s dad gave her a gentle poke in the side. “This story’s going to make for some lovely dinner conversation.”

She rolled her eyes. “Dad, you talk about this at a dinner party, and they’ll haul you off to the nearest loony bin.”

Her mom’s grin widened. “Do you think anyone would believe us?”

“I wouldn’t,” said Mike, snickering.

Blue stared up with big eyes, and a purring sound filled the air. The beast sounded like an idling engine, then rolled over for a tummy rub. Casey bent over and ran her fingers loosely through the lodomodo’s long, thick coat as she leaned her cheek against his soft fur. “You’re coming home with me, aren’t you?”

General Ashtar cringed. “I can’t advise that. You’ll have to leave the lodomodo here. We’ll give him a great home.”

She shook her head, surprised at how determined she was. “I’m not leaving Blue here in Agartha.” The connection and bond they shared was nothing short of amazing, and she couldn’t bear the thought of being separated from him. After what he’d been through with Commander Tio, she’d show him compassion, kindness, and love. “We own lots of land. Nobody will ever see him if that’s your concern.”

“The creature has bonded with her,” said Thorn. “You know you can’t keep him. He’ll find his way to her no matter what.”

“Thorn’s right,” said General Ashtar. “I have no choice in the matter. Just keep Blue hidden at all times. I’ll get someone to give you lessons on proper care for him.”

“Thank you. I’ll give Blue the best home ever.” She peered down at him as she continued, “He’ll never experience pain and sadness again.” She’d spoil him rotten and show him that an owner doesn’t have to be horrible.

“Do you think it’ll be hard going back home with everything we know?” said Jack. “We don’t have the privilege of disbelief anymore.”

Mike folded his arms and shook his head. “It’s not like we can talk about it. Nobody will believe us. I’ve thought about it. If I even breathe the word ‘aliens,’ the public will label me a freak. I have my entire surfing career ahead of me. I want to turn pro, and that’s what I have to focus on. Besides, I have a major competition in four weeks.”

Jack nodded. “It’ll be our secret to share.”

“I’ll fill my art studio with the most beautiful portraits ever.” Casey reached for Jack’s hand and shot him a smirk. “But don’t worry. I won’t show them to anyone but us.” She winked. “I can keep a secret.”

Mike took her other hand in his. “I can too.”

She raised both their hands in the air. “Then it’s official. Our lips are sealed.”

They all laughed.

“Let’s get our heroes something to eat,” said General Ashtar, walking over. Two teenagers dressed in white flowing robes brought over large baskets brimming with exotic fruits and vegetables.

Mike broke away and wrapped his arms around the girls’ shoulders, crooning, “Hi, ladies.”

The girls giggled.

“Typical Mike. He sees a pretty face and just can’t help himself,” said Jack.

Casey smirked. “So much for his undying love for me. I think I’ll just stick to having him as a best friend.”

“Yeah, you’ll see more of him that way.” Jack paused. “Wait a minute... if he’s your best friend, what does that make me?”

“My boyfriend.” She pulled him close. “For a smart guy, you’re kinda dumb.”

Grinning, he pressed his lips against hers.

She rose on her toes, eager to seal their kiss. Never in a million years would she have thought she’d be going home with Jack on her arm as her boyfriend. *It’s funny how things work out.*

Somewhere behind them, Mike laughed, and she relaxed into Jack’s embrace. All things considered, Mike was going to be just fine.

“They don’t have burgers. They’re vegetarians.” Mike picked up something that looked similar to a carrot, but instead of orange, it was tan, and its leafy top reminded them of parsley. He walked back over to Casey and Jack. “Is this the weirdest carrot you’ve ever seen or what?”

One of the attractive girls smirked. “It’s an arracacha.”

Mike grimaced. “Whatever that is, I’ll pass.”

Jack laughed. “Beggars can’t be choosers.”

“I had these in Hawaii.” Casey pulled a bright yellow star fruit out of the basket. “Try one. They’re delicious.”

Mike turned to Jack. He shook the arracacha in the air. “They love vegetables, Jack. Think they have chocolate? It comes from cocoa beans, and beans are vegetables. How about French fries? I mean they are potatoes, which are vegetables...”

And so Mike rambled on and on. *Some things just never change.*

Jack smiled and inched closer, draping his arm around Casey as he nodded to something Mike said. She’d traveled around the world with her parents and thought she’d seen it all. She could now add space travel and seeing the interior of Earth to her resume. Who would have thought that a trip to Fiji would have taken her so very far? But sometimes, things don’t go according to plan, and that was okay with her. Like Jack said, you can’t fight destiny.

Epilogue

One year later...

Waves softly lapped against the shore, and the sand glistened in the moonlight. A cool summer breeze swept across Casey’s face. She stared into the crackling bonfire and pondered. One year ago, to the day, Casey, Jack, and Mike had saved Earth’s population. She wondered if the Agarthians were celebrating the anniversary too. After all, they’d rewarded her beyond her wildest dreams. Her parents’ house, cars, and bills had been mysteriously paid for. Casey and Jack were offered full scholarships from every prestigious college around the country. Mike even got a major role in a movie with big-time stars. Prosperity hit them from every direction, and she couldn’t have been more thankful. Everyone raved how lucky they were, but Casey knew luck had nothing to do with it, and so did Mike and Jack. Somebody was looking out for them.

Jack wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her close. “I grabbed us a blanket from the trunk.” He looked up and pointed. “I see somebody’s star.”

A large star twinkled to the left. “It’s beautiful.” *Just like him.* She felt the telltale heat rising in her cheeks whenever he touched her—the butterfly-flying-to-the-moon-and-back sensation

she'd always expected. "And look, there's the one I picked out for you," said Casey. "Happy birthday."

In the pale light, his blue eyes shimmered as he flashed his perfect gleaming smile. "Thanks, babe."

Blue started barking as leaves rustled and twigs snapped. Hiding him for the first two months had proven to be a hard task because she always worried about being discovered. She had no idea how she would explain a wolf-like pet who happened to be blue and the size of a lion. Finally, the general provided Blue with a special collar that turned him invisible if it sensed other humans around who weren't programmed into the device. Blue stirred behind her, growling some more. Casey patted his head. "Shh, boy."

"You two lovebirds starting the party without me?" asked Mike, setting down a white cardboard box and shopping bag on the blanket. The delicious smell of pepperoni pizza drifted in the air, making her stomach rumble.

"You're late," said Casey. She tried to sound nonchalant, as though she wasn't thinking of how she'd lost count of the number of dates he had this year, but it felt strange all the same. When Mike and she had broken up before things even started properly, it took him a while to forgive and forget.

Mike laughed and ruffled her hair. "I actually had to ditch my date early so I could buy Jack's favorite chips for his birthday." He tossed him a big bag of Doritos. "Happy birthday, bro."

He grinned. "Thanks, Mike."

"No problem. This is one night that should just be the three of us, ya know? To reminisce about all our secret adventures."

Casey gestured at the Milky Way, blanketed by stars. "I still can't believe we were up there."

"It was amazing. Do you know what's even more amazing?" Jack looked at Mike and cocked an eyebrow. "That we've managed to keep it between the three of us...and, uh, Casey's parents."

Her parents' lips were sealed after General Ashtar gave them a long talk about national security and the promise to return home on one condition—that they'd never speak of Agartha.

Casey elbowed Mike. "Yeah, but you've got to quit fighting with the history teacher over what color a woolly mammoth is or how long claws are on a T-rex." She opened the chips, tossed a few in her mouth, and then set the bag down on the blanket.

"I'll try, but the books are clueless." Mike laughed, throwing each one of them a soda.

"Cheers, everyone, to saving Earth."

They lifted their arms and clanked their pop cans in a toast, "To saving Earth!"

"I second that," said a voice stepping out of the trees behind them.

Casey wrapped her arms around the towering figure with wavy blond hair and buried her face against his broad chest. The insignia on his blue one-piece uniform barely scratched her skin. "Orthon," she whispered. "I've missed you so much." She jumped away, suddenly suspicious. "What're you doing here? We didn't say anything to anybody." Glaring, she cast a questioning look toward Mike, who lifted his arms in mock confusion.

"I know," Orthon mouthed before he turned toward the others.

Mike and Jack hurried to shake his hand as Orthon smiled. "It's great to see you. I thought I'd pay you a visit on this very special day to catch up."

"Hey, how come Blue didn't bark when you came?" said Mike.

Patting Blue's head, Orthon said, "I talked to him in his mind before I even set eyes on you." Casey shook her head. The telepathy thing still freaked her out. "How's everyone?"

"After you left, everyone returned to Agartha. Our royal family can't thank you enough, and we've never been happier. We even named today Earth Day, in honor of Thorn and the three of you. We'll celebrate it from this day forward."

"Wow!" Casey's cheeks threatened to burst out in flames any minute. She certainly didn't deserve any of Orthon's praise. Blinking, she tuned back in to the conversation. "A holiday named after us? That's—"

"The least you could do for us after we saved your butts," Mike chimed in. When Casey nudged him, he shot her an amused look. "Just kidding, girly-girl. We didn't see it coming, Orthon. Thank you."

"Why not?" said Orthon. "Do you know anybody who has saved ten billion lives? I'm including your population and mine of course. You guys and Thorn made a great team."

A brisk wind swept back Jack's hair. "Speaking of Thorn, where is he?"

"He spent a few hours with us, then had to leave with General Ashtar and Commander Gallant on another mission. They send their best wishes and hope you're happy with the rewards The Galactic Federation has bestowed on you. They'll see you next anniversary, when we bring you back for a celebration. I want you to know you'll be taken care of for the rest of your lives."

Casey shook her head in disbelief. An alien benefactor? *Never thought in a million years I'd have one of those, but it is pretty awesome.* "Thank you," she whispered.

Orthon smiled. "No, it's our way of thanking you for all you've done. I have something that I believe belongs to you." He handed her an envelope.

"What is it?" She peered inside, curiosity taking over her good manners. Then she let out a gasp and poured the contents into her hand. It was the silver locket and ring she had dropped in the ocean because they feared it would attract the sharks. "Oh my gosh! I thought they'd be lost forever. How did you get them?" She peered at Orthon. "A better question would be, how did you even know about them?"

Orthon winked. "Nothing escapes us in Agartha."

Casey pulled him close in a tight hug. "That sounds a bit freaky, but thank you. My grandmother gave them to me before she passed away, and they mean the world to me. I even had our family picture put in the locket."

"Lucky we found them then," he said.

She cleared her throat, raising her gaze to his. "Orthon, how did you know where we were?"

Orthon let out a short chuckle. "A good Agarthian agent never gives up his sources. Do you mind if I sit?"

Mike handed him a slice of pizza. "Make yourself at home, buddy."

"Thank you," he said, taking a bite.

Casey watched him as he chewed slowly, his brows raising a few times. "What do you think?" she asked.

Orthon nodded enthusiastically. "It's, uh, salty and rich but... good."

She laughed as her mind came up with its own translation: "*It's, uh, good, but...not as great as our lettuce.*" She shook her head. "Agartha's one place where McDonald's would never stand a chance. They'd be closed down in a heartbeat instead of making millions."

They all chuckled.

"Where're you parked, Orthon?" Jack glanced around as he took a swig of his drink.

"Above the trees. Don't worry. She's cloaked."

Casey wiped her mouth with a napkin, grinning. “Guess you don’t have to bother looking for a parking spot. I just hope you don’t get a ticket.”

He laughed. It was nice to see his face light up when he wasn’t so serious.

“You’re one cool alien,” said Mike. “Maybe I could drive us to the moon, ya know? For old times’ sake?”

Orthon clapped his shoulder. “My ship only needs one pilot. I’m not sure I’d be happy in the passenger seat.”

“Well, if you need a pilot, just give me a call. I come with the highest recommendations,” said Mike.

“What about you, Casey?” asked Orthon. “Thorn said you were fantastic.”

She shook her head. “Thank you, but I’ll just keep my feet on the ground.”

“Wait a sec,” said Mike. “He recommended her but not me? I saved their lives a million times. I was the one who—”

“No, he mentioned you too. In fact, he spoke of you as the savior of the mission.” Orthon winked at her.

Mike beamed. “Really? I guess the dude knows what he’s talking about.”

Casey wished Thorn would come visit too. Memories of him and Agatha flooded her brain. She pondered for a moment and then giggled.

Jack spun toward her. “What?”

“Remember when Mike held that baby T-rex and it tried to bite off his hand?”

“And you, missy,” said Mike, “should’ve seen your face when you thought you had a spider on you.”

Jack slapped his forehead. “Don’t even get me started. I’ve got goods on both of you. I should write a book one day.”

Orthon chuckled.

“Jack!” Casey playfully slapped his hand.

“You’re easy to wind up today,” said Jack. “Must be the outlook of another fishing trip, but I hope your dad picks a better location this time—preferably one that doesn’t involve a hidden civilization and the local T-rex and its hungry offspring.”

“Another fishing trip sounds like fun,” said Mike. “Maybe we could ditch Jack so we get to spend some alone time together.”

“You hear that, Blue?” said Casey. “The guy still thinks everyone on Earth has to have the hots for him. Go sic ‘im.”

Blue barked and licked Mike’s hand.

Casey burst out in laughter. “No, I said sic, not lick.” She patted Blue’s enormous head. “I really need to send you to obedience school, don’t I?”

He rolled over and started purring while Casey gave him a tummy rub.

After all the things they’d seen, there was no way life could just go on as it had before. It helped to talk about it with Mike and Jack and also to paint. Hopefully, no one would ever go in her art studio and see her walls lined with a world of fantasy and science fiction—a world that she knew was actually real.

The End.