

Agartha's Castaway

Book 3

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

It was a long night, but morning had finally arrived. Jack boiled water and they dined on ripe berries before continuing their journey toward the glass city. Not much of a breakfast, but it sure stopped her grumbling stomach.

Casey, Mike, and Jack moved fast through the thicket, still aiming for the city in the distance, but they limited their noise to the inevitable thuds of their feet. The roar of rushing water filled Casey's ears as they followed the river. Eventually, they reached a large, thick tree filled with squawking tropical birds. Casey inched closer to get a better look, crushing a few twigs under her shoes. Most of the birds had red feathers, but Casey caught glimpses of orange, green, and blue as well.

She covered her head and ducked, startled by the swooping birds. In a rainbow of color and a choir of agitated chirps and squawks, they flew past her and rose into the sky like a giant red cloud. The rush of air from their beating wings caressed her cheeks. The shock from the dinosaur attack yesterday was still vivid in her memory, but she couldn't help smiling as feathers floated down and landed on her.

Mike also ducked as the last stragglers rushed past them. "Whoa!"

"We spooked them," said Casey.

Jack shifted his weight as he glanced around. "No, I've seen this in the rainforest when a predator approaches."

Predator? She groaned and punched his shoulder. *Does he have to be so calm and scientific about it?* He should have been paralyzed with fear or breaking down in hysterics, because it was likely that predators in that place were not the typical lions-and-tigers-and-bears-oh-my! types of predators. She shuddered and let her gaze wander over the area, searching for hiding places. *Now what?*

Anxiously, Casey brushed away the ferns, leaves, and vines, stepping over fallen logs—ever alert for signs of danger—when she emerged into a large meadow with tall grass that was desperately in need of a mow. The chorus of crickets hummed all around her. Something buzzed past her ear and she flinched. Hopefully, it was only a fly or a bee. Sunflowers in full bloom, standing on dark green six-foot stalks, painted the rolling field in front of her. A sweet fragrance, like candy or sugar, blew all around her. Casey let out a gasp as she walked through the sea of giant yellow and orange blossoms.

Wow! I've got to capture this on canvas. I'll use subdued hues to bring out the rich vibrant colors of the sunflower heads. Two different tones of green will capture the leaves and stems perfect. And the golden highlights from the sunshine will be just fabulous. Casey smacked her forehead. It was time to bottle up the artist inside of her because she needed to stay on guard in this freaky place. Something scared those birds...

Jack took a few steps before abruptly stopping. “There’s no giant trees here for protection. We’ve got the stalks, but still, we’re out in the open—easy prey for a giant pterosaurs. I don’t like this one bit.”

Now he was talking her language. He was just as scared of a predator as she was. “Too bad this field doesn’t have a giant scarecrow to scare it away.”

Jack laughed as a breeze ruffled his hair. “Yeah, tell me about it.”

“You two are worried about a giant lizard bird plucking us up from the sky?” asked Mike. “I’m more worried about a pack of velociraptors attacking us in this tall grass. You saw *Jurassic Park 2*, right?” He paused. “Remember that one line? ‘Don’t go into the long grass?’”

Casey gave his arm a yank. “We have to keep following the river, so we have no choice but to cut through this overgrown meadow. The faster we walk, the faster we’ll get to the other side.”

“She’s right,” said Jack, pushing aside hairy stalks.

Mike sighed. “I’m just trying to warn you guys the same way that hunter from India tried to warn the other hunters. But no, they refused to listen, just like you two. And what happened to them? They were eaten by ferocious raptors.”

Casey tried to put on a brave smile and pretend like his words didn’t bother her one tiny bit, but movie or not, Mike brought up a good point. On this island, anything was possible, and they had to stay on their guard. “Just keep your eyes peeled, okay, Mike? We all will.” He nodded, and she briskly walked ahead, the wet grass soaking her shoes and ankles.

As if by instinct, she scanned the area, unsure of what she was even searching for. Her gaze shifted upward to something strange in the blue sky: bright, metallic, and silver. For a split second, her mind pondered the possibilities. *Some kind of bright, shimmering bird?* It was too big for that, but she didn't know what else it could be—and big was becoming the norm wherever they were. She squeezed her eyes into thin lines and lifted her palm to shield them from the burning suns.

Mike tilted his head, as if straining to listen. "What's that humming sound?"

"I have no idea, but it kind of sounds like bees," said Jack.

Craning her neck, Casey gaped at silver discs skimming the towering treetops, heading directly toward her. Was she hallucinating? "Guys!" She tugged at their sleeves. "Check it out."

Mike's gaze shot up. "Whoa! Those things are the size of a house!"

Jack took a few steps backward, stammering, "Are those—"

"UFOs?" Casey finished for him. She grabbed Mike's and Jack's hands and dragged them underneath a tangle of giant sunflower plants. Granted, it wasn't the best place to hide, but it wasn't like they had much choice. They crouched low in the high grass and peeked through the large, bristly leaves.

The first UFO passed over her head, then the second, and then the third...and they kept coming and coming. There had to be hundreds stretching out into the distance. They flew in a straight line, in perfect formation, never changing speed or altitude. On the bottom of each craft, rings of lights changed color in a slow, synchronized sequence. The spherical objects produced no clouds of exhaust or smoke of any kind.

How is this even possible? UFOs don't exist. Those people who claim to see them out on the desert highways and stuff always sound like nutcases. Wait...does that make me a nutcase too? She blinked several times.

She shaded her eyes against the glare reflected off the fleet of shiny discs drifting by, 300 feet overhead. Casey couldn't pry her gaze from them. She felt her skin prickle. "What in the world?"

"You know, after fighting off prehistoric animals, UFOs don't seem so far-fetched," said Mike breaking through her thoughts.

"Only in your world, buddy," whispered Jack.

Casey motioned upward. “You know we’re staring at a supermarket tabloid headline, right? So yeah, I’d say this is pretty far-fetched. Although, I do see your point.”

“You know, it looks like an army of Goodyear blimps,” said Mike, nudging her. “Doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, if you take a magic wand and turn them *galactic*.”

Mike shook her shoulder. “Hey, let’s flag ’em down and get their attention.”

“I don’t like that idea one bit. Let’s go,” said Casey.

“No,” said Mike. “Wait a sec.”

She thought maybe she should run, but she wasn’t about to leave Mike’s and Jack’s sides.

“What are they?” asked Jack.

Casey’s pulse drummed in her ears. “I think we’re looking at a fleet of spacecraft controlled by our government...or maybe the Russians, Japanese, or Chinese? What else could it be?”

“Aliens,” said Mike.

A shiver ran down her spine as she thought about little green men with big black eyes. She knew people lived their whole lives searching for such a unique moment. Why did she have to experience one when she had never actually joined in the alien-craze? She knew she needed to come back to her senses, and she convinced herself that all they were seeing were sophisticated military airplanes.

Mike shrugged. “I dunno, but seeing is believing, and you can’t deny the proof floating above your head. I wish I had my camera! But then again, who’d believe me? They’d just say I photoshopped it.”

Jack’s gaze didn’t leave the ships. “I wish I could explain them away as stellar bodies, weather balloons, airplanes, or clouds...but I can’t. There’s no way I can even wrap my head around this.”

If Jack—the one with explanations for everything—was stumped, Casey knew something was definitely going on. The one thing she did know was that those crafts were piloted by someone—or something—and she wondered if the pilots were friendly.

As much as she didn’t want to see the ships, she even dreaded more the possibility of meeting whoever was flying them. “It has military written all over it. I bet it’s top secret. You know what they do to people who see stuff like this? They disappear.”

Jack met her gaze. There was no need for words. His wide eyes conveyed the message perfectly.

She nodded. “Yeah, let’s keep low and get outta here. Hanging around is a dumb idea. Remember the duckbilled dinosaur incident?”

One of the discs dropped out of formation and hovered even closer above them. Brilliant red, blue, green, and yellow lights raced around its rim. A sudden wind grabbed at Casey’s clothing and whipped across her skin. Flowers shook and wobbled. Dirt swirled. Panic fluttered in her stomach. “We’ve seen way too much. And *they* know it!” She searched for an escape route and took a few steps back, her long hair flying wildly about her face.

“Into the jungle!” said Jack.

“No!” yelled Casey, sprinting. “The forest is way closer.” She cast a nervous glance over her shoulder. Jack followed right on her heels, but Mike didn’t move. He still stood beneath the UFO with his head tilted all the way back, as if he was in some kind of weird trance. “Mike, move your butt. NOW!” She stopped and turned, waiting for a reaction from him, but none came. She frowned. *What’s wrong with him? He can’t be that mesmerized...or stupid.*

A kaleidoscope of light flashed on Mike’s face as he stared up.

She whistled and shouted, “Jack, stop! Mike’s not coming. We can’t leave him.”

Jack turned and tore back through the field, annoyance marking his features. Casey ran over to Mike, yanking his arm. He stood dumbstruck, his eyes wide and his jaw hanging. If she wasn’t so scared, she would have rolled her eyes at him. *Why can’t he just run like any other sane human being?*

“Mike, let’s go, right now!” Jack jerked his other arm.

Loud clicking sounds emanated from the bottom of the ship, like a bicycle being pedaled backward. A metallic door on the bottom slid open. As much as she hoped it was the Welcome Committee with homemade cookies and milk, she was rather certain that wasn’t going to be the case. Casey clutched Mike’s hand and blinked against the churning dust that stung her face and eyes. Her heart pounded, and she had no idea what to expect. She thought she should run, but leaving Mike behind wasn’t an option. “C’mon Mike!” she chanted over and over again, pulling at him, but he didn’t move from the spot.

“Oh, man... this can’t be good,” whispered Casey.

A red beam suddenly zapped the ground just inches from their feet, as if Zeus himself was throwing his trademark lightning bolts around.

Mike snapped back into reality and screamed, "RUN!" He pulled Casey along as he raced toward the forest, and Jack grabbed her other hand.

A second beam of light whirled past Casey, and mushroom clouds of dirt flew up around her. Heat scorched her legs, and a pungent, acrid smell assaulted her nostrils.

"Step on it!" yelled Casey.

* * *

Inside the Glass City

Red alert lights flashed on and off as alarms blared inside the control room. The large screen in front of General Ashtar changed focus from the UFOs over the city to three teenagers running toward the forest. "Thorn, are you seeing this?"

Thorn shook his bald, pear-shaped head. "Indeed. Where did they come from?"

"I have no idea, but the enemy's closing in fast. Zoom in on them."

"All scans indicate that they are humans from the surface," said Thorn.

The general watched on his view screen. A grin twisted his lips. "Hmm...then I have the perfect plan for them. Save them from the rebels and get them out of that wildlife preserve before they're torn to pieces...and then bring them to me."

Thorn straightened. "I know what you're thinking, General sir, but they're only teenagers. I can't have their deaths on my hands. Besides, it'll never work."

General Ashtar pondered for a moment. Running a hand through his short blond hair, he stared down at Thorn with his piercing blue eyes. "With millions of lives at stake, Thorn, I don't think we have a choice."

A frown crept across Thorn's green face. "I don't like this one bit."

The general smoothed out a wrinkle on his black and silver one-piece uniform. "I know you're not from Earth, and I understand your reservations, but this is a race against time, and the stakes are high. We'll send Orthon to retrieve the children while we work together on my idea."

Thorn nodded. "Yes, sir."

General Ashtar touched a blue crystal on the control panel. "Orthon to the control room..."

* * *

Casey took off through the field with Jack and Mike at her heels. Granted, she was trespassing in a foreign land. But she wasn't familiar with the shoot-first-and-ask-questions-later policy they had in place. The sunflowers grew sparse as she neared the forest, clearing the way for a perfect view of the towering pines. *Why do they look so far away?*

After fifty more feet. Casey leapt forward, her gaze fixed on her target destination as she put her body into gear. *Run faster. Thirty feet? Ugh. Why does it feel like a hundred?* There was no time to look back, but she had to take a tiny peek over her shoulder to see how close they were. She turned when her foot caught on something hard, almost tripping her up. Before she toppled, she regained her equilibrium, but her ankle throbbed, slowing her down.

Twenty-five more feet...just fifteen more... Her leg hurt so much she was almost hopping, as if she was trying to skip rope on one leg, and she'd never been any good at *that*. Her lungs whizzed with the effort, and a sheen of fresh perspiration ran down her back.

A red beam crossed the air with a high-pitched whistle, landing pretty darn close to her feet. Letting out a shriek, Casey covered her head with her hands as flying clumps of earth hit her from every angle. *What lunatic tries to kill a girl anyway? Just ten more feet...five more...three more...almost there...one more foot, and...*

She darted around the huge trees as fast as the burning muscles in her legs would allow, dry leaves and twigs crunching beneath her feet. More beams whizzed by. Was there a whole army shooting at her like she was some sort of national threat? A tree burst into flames and toppled over with a *crash* in front of her, the blazing flames scorching her clothes. *That was a close one.* A few inches to the right, and she would have been toast—literally. She spun and found an alternate route, squeezing through the clustered trees in hopes that the firing squad might not see through the dense canopy above her head.

She exhaled sharply and placed her palm on her chest to calm her racing heart as she bent forward to rest against a tree trunk. Mike and Jack would catch up any second; at least the ship had quit using them for target practice. She had the nagging suspicion, though, that it wouldn't be long before they realized they were bad losers after all and wanted another try.

"It's...still...it's still...following us," huffed Mike between breaths.

Jack reached for Casey's hand. "C'mon! We're not safe yet."

Chapter 2

Casey bounded through the forest, gasping for breath, but the craft followed behind, skimming the trees. A piercing roar tortured her ears as the ground trembled beneath her.

"What the heck!?" yelled Mike.

What now? She turned slowly, following his line of vision. *A dragon?* Okay, so maybe she had read one too many fantasy books. *No. A real-life sauropod—a brontosaurus!* Casey closed her eyes and blinked before she dared another glance. It had to be at least one hundred feet long, fifteen feet tall at the shoulder. The creature wasn't green like textbooks said it should be; rather, it was reddish brown, with black stripes. It reared up onto its hind legs like a wild stallion and let out an ear-bursting shriek while swiping at the UFO with a forefoot. The disc plummeted out of view, black smoke rising from it. *At least the ship's not coming this way.*

"Look out!" said Jack.

Huh? Look out for what? Casey spun in time to see the dinosaur's massive tail swing toward them like a giant baseball bat. With a *thud*, she plunged forward, falling flat on her face as the red blur shot past her and smashed into a tree. Pieces of bark spattered across the thicket, some landing in her hair.

Mike dropped next to her, spitting out black sand. Jack lay sprawled somewhere behind him.

Casey's heart pounded. She knew they couldn't stay in one place for too long because that tail would definitely be coming back. "Get up!" Casey shouted. "Keep moving!" Not chancing another look, she jumped to her feet, hoping the others got the message.

Adrenaline pumped through her body with each step she took. Ignoring the pain in her side, she ran until nausea bubbled up inside her, forcing her to consider stopping before she broke down in a helpless heap. "There!" Casey pointed to a giant tangle of branches and moss-covered logs. She crawled through the thick foliage and undergrowth, gasping for breath. Gagging, she placed a hand over her nose and mouth. The moldy, musty odor of decomposing wood overwhelmed her. Mike and Jack squeezed in. She tried to calm her racing heart. *Is this a good enough hiding place? Will they find us? Is that dinosaur nearby?*

Casey squeezed her eyes shut as they all huddled close together. No one moved a muscle or spoke a word. It was surprising for Mike to shut up for a change, instead of being his usual reckless self. More sweat dripped down her back, biting and itching in all the wrong places.

She had no idea how much time passed. Eventually, birds started chirping again, and the forest came to life. Hearing nature's symphony orchestra was a good sign, because it meant they weren't about to be gobbled up like an afternoon snack. The singing crickets reminded her of a family camping trip to Sequoia National Park; it had rained all day, and everyone was soaked and miserable, but the beautiful sounds of nature lifted their spirits—just like now. She peered through an opening in the vegetation. “Do you think it's safe yet?”

Mike blinked. “Give it a sec. I mean, did you see the freakin' brontosaurus zapped straight out of Bedrock?”

Blowing out a breath, Jack shook his head. “Yeah, it was kind of hard to miss.”

Jack crawled back to the narrow opening and flicked the ferns to the side when Mike grabbed his arm, wide-eyed. “C'mon, bro! You can't go out there by yourself. This place's totally twisted. We've literally jumped into *Jurassic Park*.”

Casey bit her lip hard. “Twisted” didn't even begin to describe it. *Try unbelievable, vile, and deadly*. “Exactly. That's why I'm going.”

Jack pushed his brown hair out of his eyes. “Listen, you and Mike stay here. My dad taught me how to secure a perimeter. Don't worry, you two. I'll be right back.”

Why's he being like this? Casey wondered. Jack seemed as though he had something to prove, like a brave warrior heading into battle. She knew fighting with him would be useless because his mind was already made up. “Be careful, okay?” She leaned forward to give Jack's shoulder a quick squeeze.

“Everything's going to be alright.” He smiled and disappeared before she could say another word.

A throbbing pain began to radiate from behind her eyes. She needed to let off some steam fast, before she hurried after Jack to make sure nothing happened to him. She scooted closer to Mike. Flashbacks of him standing underneath the UFO infuriated her. She felt like shaking him. “Don't make me drag you away like that ever again. You could've got us killed. Why do you pull stunts like that?”

He blew out a breath. “I don't know. Maybe...well, maybe I just need to feel alive.”

Mike had a Type T personality, diagnosed by his doctor at the age of two; he never let her forget what the T stood for: thrill seeker. He tried to channel and diffuse it through surfing dangerous waves, but some of it still spilled over into his everyday life. It was part of what drew Casey to him; she was intrigued by his craving for adventure and life, but a lot of times he took it too far, and his crazy actions with the sharks, dinosaurs, and the UFOs were prime examples.

She pinched his arm.

“Ouch!” Mike rubbed the spot.

“Feel that?” She pinched him again. If something happened to her two best friends, she would never forgive herself. They meant everything to her. “See? You’re alive... even if you are an idiot.”

“I’m no different than you. You told me you need to paint to feel alive, to get that adrenaline rush.”

“Well, yeah, but last time I checked, paintbrushes and canvas don’t get anybody almost killed.”

“Sorry, I’m not perfect.” He pulled her close, smiling. “But I find perfection very boring. Don’t you?”

She pushed him away. She couldn’t believe he was joking when he’d almost been killed just moments earlier, but then again, it was Mike she was talking to. “What am I going to do with you?”

He winked. “Anything you want.”

“Stop it! Why can’t you be more serious... like Jack?”

“Like Einstein, huh? And have the personality of an iceberg?”

What? Jack wasn’t born wild and addicted to danger like Mike was, but he was far from an ice cube. Something was up between those two, and she had a sneaking feeling it had to do with the kiss between her and Mike. “What’s with all the insults and tension between you guys?”

Mike let out a huff, and then turned away. He didn’t want to talk about it, which only strengthened her suspicion. Casey decided it was not the time to push the issue, considering they were sitting in a jungle full of dinosaurs under a two-sun sky full of UFOs, trying to get to a glass city. There’d be time for talking when things got back to normal. She let out a long sigh. “You need to run faster next time.”

“I would’ve gladly ditched these sandals for a pair of tennis shoes with high-power rockets, had I known we’d be racing for our lives through some forest, dodging death ray beams. You told me we were going to spend the day out on your mom and dad’s sailboat having a great time. I thought we needed *swim gear*, not *running gear*.”

“Well, it’s not exactly what I imagined either.” Casey wished she could contact her parents, as she could picture them frantic with worry. She breathed in, blinking hard several times as she tried to push her thoughts of her parents to the back of her mind. There was no need to go there, because she couldn’t afford more worries than she was already dealing with. Casey tapped her chin. “I wonder what we saw. Is it classified military stuff or extraterrestrial? Part of me thinks it’s aliens, but another part screams it’s some kind of top secret government experiment.”

“I dunno. I’m leaning toward the other dimension theory myself. But look at the bright side. It’s you, me, and the termites all snuggled up close together.” Mike put an arm around her and brushed his warm lips across hers in a soft kiss. “Romantic, eh?”

She smiled. He had this mysterious way of making her anger melt away, no matter what kind of crazy stunts he pulled. It was impossible to stay mad at him, which is probably why he got away with so much. “We’re under a pile of rotting trees. Is this really the place to bust a move?”

He squeezed her tight. “When I’m around you, I can’t help myself.”

His words made her heart melt. “I have a confession to make. I have the same problem.” In a bold move, she cupped his face and kissed him softly, her heart spiking. He didn’t try to deepen the lingering kiss but kept it innocent and slow, and that was nice because it took the pressure off of trying to keep up with the experienced girls he usually dated. The heat from his touch surged through her body. She could have sworn that the whole crazy world stopped all around her—and she’d have been lucky if she could have remembered her own name in that moment.

Jack’s voice cut through the air, and Mike pulled away, taking a quick breath.

“One more sweep, and it’ll be safe to come out,” said Jack.

She gazed out through an opening. A plant she didn’t recognize tickled her ear as she let her gaze dart from the treetops to the forest floor. The landscape looked much like that of the prehistoric past: delicate ferns and Cycads, different species of lichen draped over the pine trees, green moss flowing over rocks and logs, and black sand sparkling as if mixed with millions of tiny pieces of glittering glass.

Mike leaned in closer and squinted through the gap. “Looks safe.” He draped an arm around her and asked, “Should we take a chance? ’Cause if you’re willing, then I am.”

Is he talking about venturing outside or being more than friends? She wiped her moist hands on her shorts, taking the bait. *He wants mysterious? Oh boy, can I give him mysterious.* “I want to—badly—but we might be crossing into dangerous territory. Part of me is just...terrified.”

His fingers traced her lips, and a tingle shot up her spine. “What’re you so afraid of?” he asked.

Lotsa stuff, to be honest. She knew he’d never stay faithful, and if he hurt her like that, they’d lose their friendship. She met his gaze. “Wild animals.”

He pushed a strand of hair away from her face. “A wild species can be tamed by the right trainer.”

“But they can never be fully domesticated,” she retorted.

He pulled her into his arms, and her heartbeat spiked...again. “Enough with the symbolism. I think we both know we’re talking about us, so why not take the risk and give me a shot?” He grabbed her hand and planted a soft and tender kiss. “I may not be perfect. I know that. But remember what we talked about earlier? Just think of me as beautifully flawed.”

“No, you’re a perfect diamond in my book.” She touched his face and noticed the hint of a smile on his lips. “Mike, can we talk about this later, when we’re safe?” *And alone.* She didn’t need Jack getting in her business.

Speaking of Jack, the leaves shuffled a second before he appeared. She dropped her palm too late; Jack’s lips tightened into a grim line, realization visible in his eyes. “It’s gone. Perimeter’s secure. And Mike, that daredevil behavior better stop. Next time, I might not come and rescue you.”

“Three’s a crowd,” said Mike.

“This is me ignoring you.” Jack turned and left.

“You know what that was, don’t you?” asked Casey. “That was Jack pissed off ’cause I was snuggled up to you and you getting mad at Jack because he interrupted us. Will you two ever grow up?” Casey started to crawl from their hiding place.

“Hey, don’t go!” Mike scurried after her. “I’m sorry. I’m a jerk. I know this isn’t the right time to talk about us, but can I help it if my best friend’s totally hot?”

She stopped and glanced over her shoulder with a smile. “I didn’t know you felt that way about Jack. Maybe you two should have a long talk.”

“Ha ha. My *other* best friend.”

Mike threw the word “hot” around quite a bit, and Casey had to wonder if their friendship meant so little to him that he’d keep flirting with the other girls. She wondered if he would even care if they lost their friendship in the process or if he really thought everything would just be cake: marriage, a house with a dog, and two-point-five kids playing behind the white picket fence. The *Cosmopolitan* articles her mom left lying around weren’t exactly based on lifelong research. Casey knew better than to believe anyone could “Turn a Guy from a Cheat into Husband Material in Just 10 Days!” but that didn’t mean she couldn’t *hope*.

With a sigh, she scampered out. The fresh smell of pine lingered in the air. She brushed the dirt off her clothing with a few quick strokes and stretched her neck to search the sky. “No hovering ships. Guess they didn’t radio their friends for backup.”

“That doesn’t mean anything,” said Jack, his voice tense. “Whatever you do, don’t let your guard down.”

Mike nudged Casey and cleared his throat. “Like I said...” He sang the next few syllables. “...iceberg.” He walked off with that cocky grin of his.

“Hey, where’re you going?” Jack called out.

“To see if we’re anywhere near the river. I’ll be right back.”

“Mike, please come back. That’s not a good idea.” Casey chased after him but he had already disappeared into the foliage. She let out a long sigh and walked back toward Jack. Mike was probably hoping to run into a dinosaur. *Darn adrenaline junkie.*

Jack pushed his shaggy hair off his forehead, showing off those pretty blue eyes. He grinned as she met his gaze.

“What?” she asked. “How can you smile when we’re lost, probably being stalked for revenge by the fleet of UFOs we saw flying above our heads? They can’t be too happy we took down one of their comrades.” Technically, it was the fault of the brontosaurus, but she was sure the ships would somehow blame her.

Jack’s perfect white teeth gleamed as he smiled wider. “When you asked me to come on vacation, I never pictured jumping into an adventure like this.”

She laughed. He was like a beacon shining through all of the gloom. No way was Jack an iceberg. “Yeah, I’m full of surprises, aren’t I? So what do you think those disks were? I say military. Maybe aliens, but I think little green men is a big stretch.”

“Definitely military,” said Jack.

She swallowed past the lump in her throat. “Mike says we’re in another dimension. What do you think?”

He smiled. “I don’t believe in aliens or other dimensions, remember?”

She smiled back. “Of course you don’t. I don’t know why I bothered asking.” He smirked as she nudged him in the ribs. “Well, I know one thing for sure...we’ve got to find some help.”

Jack shifted his stance and exhaled. “So let’s head to the city.”

Seriously? Is he crazy? A chill ran down Casey’s spine. “You can’t be for real. *They* just tried to kill us.”

He stepped toward her, looking her intensely in the eyes. “You don’t know that. Do you have proof it was them?”

“Do you have proof it wasn’t?” She crossed her arms, waiting for his evidence.

“We’re not safe out here, that’s for sure. I’m going to that city, and I hope you’ll come with me.” His voice was pleading.

Biting her lip, Casey peered around her. “Well, we’ve lost the river.”

He straightened, poised with confidence. “We’ll hike north until we find it. Are you coming?”

Casey pictured her dad’s furrowed brows and her mom’s frantic tears as they begged the Fiji Navy to keep searching. Jack was right about one thing: They had no proof those UFOs had come from the glass city. She met Jack’s gaze straight on. “All right. Maybe they can help.”

Mike walked swiftly through a patch of ferns. “River’s nowhere in sight, but I’m sure Jack can track it.”

“Are you coming with us to the city?” she asked.

“Of course I am. Why wouldn’t I?”

“Cause those ships that tried to kill us *could’ve* come from that fancy glass kingdom.”

He grinned. “We won’t know for sure until we check it out for ourselves.”

“Okay then, let’s go,” she said.

* * *

Casey was hiking through the dense forest of towering pines when a loud *crunch* jolted her out of her thoughts. Grabbing Mike's arm, she stopped to listen and craned her neck toward Jack.

"I heard it too," he said.

She stiffened and spun around. "We need to be extra careful." She swept an uneasy glance around the trees, her senses on full alert. "I have a funny feeling we're being watched."

"I don't see anything," said Mike.

Casey wrung her hands as her mind raced. "I'm not imagining things."

Jack's lips pressed into a grim line. "There *was* a noise. Someone's following us."

"Yeah, someone...or *something*," Casey retorted with a gulp. Angry pale blue eyes flashed in her head. She'd hoped her duckbilled dinosaur days were long gone, just a distant memory. She was sure there was no way that dino could have followed her, but the thing from the beach might have been trailing them. As she looked away, a shiver slid up her spine. *What if it isn't an animal at all? What if it's one of those things from inside the UFOs?* "I'm not sticking around here," Casey said, walking in the direction of the city. "Let's go."

The *snap* of a twig behind them, followed by the unmistakable *crunch* of dried leaves halted her mid step. Casey strained to listen, her hands clenched into tight fists. The *snap* of another twig drifted through the forest. She looked around the trees and high grass, calling out, "Hello! Who's there?" Her heart skipped a beat. "What do you want?"

The sound of singing crickets and chirping birds were her only reply. She jumped, startled, as a sudden flash of orange glinted to their left.

Jack pointed. "There! Did you see that in the grass? What is it?"

Casey flinched. For a split second, she saw yellow eyes in the foliage. "It's an animal of some kind, but I only caught a glimpse."

"Where?" Mike looked out into the surrounding woods.

Jack held up a hand. "Shh. Listen. The birds stopped chirping. This is exactly what happens in the jungle when a predator is following its prey."

"So...what is it?" asked Mike.

"It could be a harmless animal or maybe another so-called extinct one, possibly a predator."

The eerie silence made Casey's skin crawl. She'd never been hunted before, and the idea of it happening now, in this strange place, made her insides quake.

A loud call broke the silence. *Kuk-kuk-kuk-kuk!*

Mike, Casey, and Jack screamed in unison, their echoes carrying through the pine forest. The flutter of large wings sent another chill down Casey's spine as a crow-sized bird took off.

Casey was sure that the sweet-looking bird wasn't what was causing all the scuffle. She glanced up, her hand over her heart. "It's only a bird. Still... let's cruise on out of here."

Mike motioned them forward. "Off to Glasstropolis then."

Jack folded his arms over his chest. "Yeah, but what scared that bird?"

"Dunno," said Mike, "but I'll keep my eyes peeled."

Casey nodded as she started walking. "I will too."

A low throaty growl rumbled from the left and Casey jumped. She bit down hard on her bottom lip. The same pair of yellow eyes she had seen moments ago peered through the giant leaves of a tropical bush. Her heart lurched.

Chapter 3

A menacing growl broke the silence. Casey's heart thudded against her ribcage yet again as a shiver swept over her skin. A tangle of leaves with serrated edges covered the creature's legs and part of its orange-brown coat. Even still, she could tell it had to be roughly eight feet tall and at least six feet long. Streams of saliva oozed from the two gleaming eight-inch fangs jutting from its upper jaw. The animal turned its head, locking its fierce gaze on her, of course. From all the things on nature's buffet, it had to set its sights on Casey.

"It's a s-s-saber tooth tiger," whispered Casey, staggering back. Beads of sweat broke across her brow. Sunlight from above filtered through the high branches giving the menacing creature an eerie glow. She turned to run, but Jack's hand tightened around her arm, pulling her close. Her stomach clenched. "What're you doing? We've got to get outta here."

What's wrong with these guys? Surely, they had to have some sort of instinct telling them you stop to admire a bunny or deer frolicking in the woods, but you engage in serious cardio when a prehistoric tiger is salivating at you and showing its huge fangs.

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