

Agartha's Castaway

Book 4

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:

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To:

My brilliant editor, Autumn J. Conley.

Episode 4

I scrambled to my feet and my body stiffened as I gazed up; the creature stood as tall as a house. I thought about making a mad dash for the water, but then I realized any sudden movement might be like ringing a dinner bell for the hungry-looking monster. The T-rex's nostrils flared like that of a racehorse, and anger boiled in the hunter's red eyes.

The creature opened its mouth, and long tendrils of slime dripped from its sharp teeth, right onto my head. I'd been slimed, but that didn't matter. I had other pressing issues at hand, like living to see tomorrow and even more important—oh, gosh—saving Mike! I turned, peeking inside the hole that was filling up faster than I could say "*Boo!*"

From the corner of my eye, I noticed something blue; it was Jack's shirt swaying in the soft breeze. I heard him inhale a deep breath and let it out quietly. I had to hurry and come up with a plan because time was running out. Jack opened his mouth to speak but I cut him off. "Take a few slow steps back," I whispered. "Hide in the bushes behind the hole!"

Holding my breath, I moved like a snail into the vegetation and dropped to my stomach. Cold water soaked through my clothes as it continued to slowly pour over the bank of the river. Jack followed and flattened himself on the soaking wet ground.

I could barely get the words out of my mouth. "What're we going to do?"

"Hey, guys!" yelled Mike.

"You're not going to believe it. We've got a T-rex up here! But hold on, I'm coming," I said, adding under my breath, "as soon as I figure out a way to get rid of this thing." I looked around. Throwing a bone or a branch or anything wouldn't work, because I wasn't exactly

dealing with a golden retriever. *But what else can I do?* In movies I'd seen, people always ran—most of them in the wrong direction. In this case, though, there was nowhere to run, and we couldn't leave Mike behind to drown.

“This is no time to make jokes, Casey. A T-rex? C'mon!” Mike's voice came labored, his words spluttering out like he was swallowing more than his fair share of mud and water.

“I'll get you out,” I whispered. “That's a promise.”

In the movies, this T-rex would have already gobbled us up, but this was real life, and right now, the huge creature just appeared very curious, as if it wasn't quite sure what to make of the humans. The problem was, curious always seemed to turn out dangerous in the end. The sharks in the ocean had been curious, bumping into me and trying to figure out what I was. The spiders had been curious before they stalked me. The duckbilled dinosaur had been curious before it chased me in the woods. The croc had been curious before it launched that river attack. And now this thing with teeth longer than its arms was following in their footsteps, right on cue.

It cocked its head again and sniffed the air, this time more loudly. I hoped it wasn't just trying to savor the feast it was about to enjoy. A chill ran down my spine, and I started to sweat profusely. Maybe it couldn't see so well, but I wasn't sure how good their noses were. If it had a good sense of smell, it definitely had the upper claw in this little confrontation.

“I'll grab the vine,” whispered Jack. “We'll throw it in. Get Mike out. Then we all run as fast as we can away from that thing... zigzagging through the trees. We can head south where the jungle seems to be extra thick and overgrown, almost impenetrable. The T-rex is bound to get tangled up some, plus there's great hiding spots.”

I shot Jack a sidelong glance. “But we left the vine over by the T-rex, and the trees with more hanging vines are over there too.”

Jack let out a breath and seemed to be pondering another idea. If the river wasn't flooding the hole, this would be the perfect opportunity for us to sneak up a tree while the T-rex was distracted by Mike. I had no doubt Mike would be safe in the deep hole. We could keep a close eye on the T-rex and Mike. The predator would eventually get bored and leave. We could come back and throw Mike down a vine to get him out. But with the river flooding, this option was thrown out the window.

“What the heck's going on?” Mike called from the pit below us.

I laid flat on my stomach, wondering if I could inch forward and make eye contact with him, but moving didn't seem like such a bright idea. "Didn't you hear me say we've got a T-rex up here? I'm coming," I whispered, "but I won't be much help if I lose my arms on the way."

Mike tried to laugh, then spluttered some more. Obviously, he didn't believe me.

"Okay, fine. I'll be waiting. It's not like I'm going anywhere."

I peeked through the clusters of branches and green stems. The creature cocked its head and swung its heavy tail that must have weighed more than my dad's boat. The T-rex let out a roar; there were too many teeth to count in its gaping mouth.

"I hear something," Mike called.

"Quiet!" I warned in a hushed tone. I opened my mouth to speak when the T-rex took a step toward the hole, its tail swishing back and forth, like a cat waiting for a mouse to come out of its hole. A scream froze in my throat.

"Casey! Jack!" Mike was one of the few people in the world who could ignore the roar of a prehistoric beast and not realize the imminent danger. "You guys still there?" He spluttered a few times, his arms splashing in the water, foolishly drawing more attention to him.

As bad as I felt for not answering, I didn't dare draw the T-rex's focus to me. The thing was even closer now. Mike was a big boy, and he could take a few more minutes of silence until I found a way to get rid of the monster. I was trying to save all of our lives, and if the silent treatment accomplished that, so be it.

The T-rex let out another roar, this time louder than before. My heart started racing, and my breathing was labored, like I'd just run a marathon. I knew if I wanted to survive this mess without ending up as a dino treat, I had to do something more useful than sitting around panting like a dog. Pressing a hand against my chest, I tried to still my frantic breathing as the T-rex growled like some kind of angry Rottweiler. *Breathe in, breathe out. Gosh, that thing is so...so...so huge. Breathe in, breathe out. And hungry.* Big, giant letters blasted onto the screen in my mind: *KEEP IT TOGETHER.*

Jack whispered, "Gimme me your cell."

I shot him a disbelieving look. "We'll never get reception here." I wondered why the heck he wanted a cell phone. It wasn't like he could call 911 or Animal Control. *But boy, those nifty tranquilizer darts would come in handy right about now.*

"Casey, please!"

I shrugged and reached in my pocket to retrieve the silver phone for Jack. I slid it sideways on the ground toward him. Jack pulled the phone slowly to his side and held it up through a gap in the bushes, a deep frown planted between his brows.

There was a bright flash, and then a vertical shaft of light reflected off the smooth chrome-like surface of the phone. Jack squinted against the sunshine and adjusted the angle. The beam bounced around the creature's face until finally Jack found his mark: right in its huge eyes. Jack was like some kind of teenage MacGyver, and I was almost sure he could disarm a bomb with a bobby pin, probably even while blindfolded.

Mike often accused him of being boring, but I thought Jack was the cleverest, most resourceful, most ambitious, most down-to-Earth person I'd ever met.

Blinking wildly at the reflected sunlight, the T-rex moved back a few steps, jerking its head from side to side. It opened its mouth and released a high-pitched screech, obviously distracted and annoyed, and then closed its eyes. Jack was an absolute genius.

I sucked in a quick breath, staggering to my feet as my heart started speeding up again. "It's working!" A *splash* caught my attention. *Mike!* I ran back to the front of the hole and picked up the vine, gripping it tightly. "Hold on, Mike. I'm coming!"

I dropped to my knees and peered inside. Brown water swirled around the deep pit, but Mike was nowhere to be seen. I slapped my forehead, and my stomach lurched as I realized he must be drowning.

I trembled. "Mike? Mike! Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry." I took a deep breath, ready to dive in, and suddenly, I felt a tug, sending a wave of relief over me.

"Mike!?"

Bracing myself against a tree, I put one foot in front of the other and pulled back with every ounce of my strength. I tried to ignore the T-rex that was less than fifteen feet away. Its slashing claws could kill me with one single swipe, if it didn't smash me into a pancake first, but I had to try and save Mike. I knew he would risk as much for me if the situation were reversed.

Mike choked and sputtered. "I'm okay."

"Climb!" I yelled.

"Where's Jack?" He could barely get out the words.

I gulped. "We ran into a small glitch, and he's fixing it."

"A small glitch?" repeated Mike.

“Actually, it’s sort of a big glitch,” I said, pulling back harder. I hoped he’d stop his interrogation for once so I could focus on my task. It was so typical of Mike to keep chatting while fighting for his life—or worse, to keep chatting while *others* fought to save his butt...again.

Mike spoke between breaths. “I heard those roars. Didn’t sound like Jack. Where is he?”

I peered over at Jack, struggling to maintain the right angle with my cell phone and said, “He’s tied up at the moment. Mike, there really is a T-rex. I’m not kidding. Hurry!”

“Yeah, very funny,” Mike muttered. “Really, where is he?”

I rolled my eyes and pulled harder, my arms straining with the effort. “Jack’s busy saving our butts. Now hurry up!”

As he climbed, he called out Jack’s name.

“Jack tilted the phone at just the right angle and sent out another blinding glare. “Uh, I’m a little busy at the moment, but if you prefer, I could abandon my position and let you have your moment in the limelight once we get you out.”

“That was close.” Mike popped his head over the edge, spitting out a mouthful of water and coughing. He hurled himself over the edge and dropped down on the ground. Letting go of the vine, he rubbed his face, his breath coming in short, ragged gasps. Then he sat up and peered at me, oblivious to the huge predator lurking right behind him.

I pointed upward with a trembling finger. Words couldn’t describe what we were up against; it was something he had to see for himself.

Mike turned, his eyes bulging as he took in the view. “Oh, man! You weren’t joking. It’s...Sue.” Sue was the largest, most complete T-rex in the world on exhibit at their museum back home, at least for the next three months.

“Hurry up!” shouted Jack. “I don’t know how much longer I can hold her off.”

As much as I would have liked to wrap my arms around Mike, there was no time.

Dinnertime was near, and we were about to become the main course.

Mike jumped to his feet, holding on to me as water dripped from his body. “Let’s go,” he whispered into my ear.

As the dinosaur took a step forward, I could feel the intensity of its red-eyed stare. Raw fear gripped me, making my stomach churn. The cell phone trick wasn’t working anymore, and any

minute, the animal would pounce.

Jack was able to distract the T-rex by reflecting a blinding glare into its eyes using my silver cell phone. It gave me the precious time I needed to help Mike out of the pit, but unfortunately, the trick wasn't working anymore.

"Get the angle right!" yelled Mike.

Holding the edge of the cell in his fingers, Jack tilted it back and forth. "I'm trying! The clouds are rolling in, blocking out the suns."

According to movie logic, another prehistoric animal was supposed to jump out at the T-rex so they could battle to the death so we could escape, but no one seemed to be reading that script. I had no idea how to appease the monster. It wasn't like we could send it flowers or a box of candy, and the only young maiden around for sacrificing was me. I was also pretty sure running would do no good. In the movies, those things caught up with a speeding Jeep in a heartbeat, so I knew we had little chance on our tiny human legs and feet.

Jack slid the phone in his back pocket. "They can't swim! Let's jump into the river and hope for the best."

I turned and scanned the water. Was he crazy? Crocodiles the length of buses sunned themselves on the opposite bank like tourists sprawled across Miami Beach. "Too many crocs."

"I know! Show her the eggs," yelled Mike. "They must be hers, and maybe she's just coming to check on them. Where'd you put them?"

"There!" I pointed to a mound of vegetation between two towering trees. The predator lowered its gigantic head and sniffed at my body, its breath hot on my neck. I couldn't help but focus on the mouthful of steak knives just inches from my face. I screamed, sending flurries of goosebumps down my arms.

Mike darted over and frantically searched through the pile of giant fan-shaped leaves. He snatched up a baby T-rex and yelled Mama Sue, but she ignored him, her eyes still focused on me.

"What's the best way to call her?" came Mike's frantic voice.

Long distance—from a phone millions of miles away from here on the other side of the globe. My knees threatened to buckle. "Give the baby a poke."

“Hey, Sue! I’ve got your little monster.” Mike dropped the squirming creature in front of him on a thick patch of grass. It squawked like a wounded bird and spread out its legs, like a doe slipping on ice.

The T-rex cocked her head and let out a small whistle. The baby grew still and then screeched. Rising slowly, the tiny creature wobbled toward its mother like a newborn colt, but Sue’s attention was still focused on me—and not for being a hero and rescuing her babies, but as a trespasser. I was beginning to think the whole island operated under an eat-first-ask-questions-later kind of policy. Fortunately, I remembered to breathe as I watched Mike creep back toward us. Clearly, daredevil DNA was programmed somewhere in his genetic code.

The T-rex sniffed the air and turned its head toward the crying baby. *The plan’s working!* I glanced around for the best escape route. “C’mon guys, let’s go!”

I turned to run, but Jack grabbed my trembling hand. “Not yet. Just give her a minute to notice her baby.”

“This better work,” said Mike. “Cause we’ll never outrun her.”

I let out a long breath.

“You know, I liked Sue much better at the museum,” said Mike, revealing fear in his tone.

Jack nodded, letting out a breath. “Yeah, me too. Nothing beats a dusty skeleton.”

“Look! She’s sniffing her baby.” My stomach clenched as I realized this might be our one and only chance to escape. “Let’s make a break for it.”

The Tyrannosaurus rex opened her trap-like jaws and roared, showing off gigantic, serrated teeth. Showers of saliva splattered. Three-toed feet with sharp claws came crashing down around us. The giant mud splatter offered us the perfect opportunity for escape. I didn’t have time to think; I just acted.

When the creature lunged forward, snapping its jaws, I ducked, adrenaline pumping through my body. I took off as fast as my legs would carry me, past tree limbs that hit my tired muscles and cut into my burning skin like a whip. My body ached from the thrashing I took, but my mind stayed surprisingly clear. My panting was almost as loud as the animal’s snarls behind me and the crashing thunder shaking the ground underneath me.

A large shadow rolled over us. Jack pointed, while Mike yelled to run faster. I glanced up at the soft whirring above me. *No way!* I thought when I realized the flying disk had joined the pursuit. I grunted at the double whammy we were being faced with. My mom had once told me,

“You haven’t lived life to the fullest until you’ve ventured out of your comfort zone.” I was pretty sure being chased by a Tyrannosaurus rex and a UFO at the same time qualified as a whole different ZIP code than my comfort zone.

Jack was only a few steps in front of us, casting up swirls of mud in his wake. His whole body moved like lightning and then disappeared. I held in my breath, peering ahead. *He did see the cliff edge, didn’t he?* “Jack!” I shouted, but it was too late. Jack’s bloodcurdling scream cut through the air as he tumbled over the edge. Mike hurried after him, holding out his arm to try and grab hold of his friend; there was no way he could leave us, not like that. I slid to the edge, flinging out my hands, teetering and struggling to regain my balance.

I took a step back as the acrid stench of sulfur filled the air, assaulting my nostrils. As if in slow motion, I watched Jack plummet and fall. He spun in midair, his arms and legs outstretched like he was doing jumping jacks. Hundreds of feet below, an orange lake bubbled and boiled, jets of lava spurting upward like a giant fountain. White-tinged vapors rose from the crater, and a gush of heat hit my face. A blue ray of light from the UFO struck Jack seconds before he hit the giant roiling cauldron beneath him.

I froze to the spot, my mind devoid of any thought. *This can’t be happening—not to Jack. This was just supposed to be a...a vacation! A fun time for all of us! And now Jack is...he’s gone!* Trembling, I forced air into my lungs. I wondered if he’d been disintegrated by the flash of light, vaporized right before my eyes, but then I realized the UFO must have taken him. Again, my heart started to race. Mike stared over the cliff in a daze. I buried my face in my hands to suppress a sob as I whispered, “Oh, Jack.”

A snarl pierced the air. I swung around. The creature stood about twenty feet away, and I wondered why it refused to attack. All I could assume was that it was frightened by the UFO. “Go be with your babies!” I said. The T-rex cocked her head to let out a sophisticated range of guttural sounds as it backed away into the vegetation and disappeared. *Why was it acting like that? Was it really that scared of the ship?* I let out a sigh of relief, glad the thing was finally gone, whatever the reason.

Tears spilled down my cheeks. My heart sank and I dropped to my knees. I looked up at the cruel ship. “One minute you’re trying to kill us, and the next, you’re trying to abduct us? Why

did you take Jack? Tell me why you're doing this to us?" I screamed to the silver disk, but I got no answers other than its vile hum and a few flashes of light.

Mike stooped over, and I felt a touch on my shoulder. I stood, my stomach in knots, and took a deep breath to calm myself. Staring at the hard contours of his face, I softly cupped his cheek. He wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me under a giant sequoia-like tree. Standing out in the open wasn't such a smart idea, but I wasn't thinking straight.

"Remember Jack's words from the Army Ranger handbook?" Mike wisely asked. "Vanquish fear and panic. Value living. Remember your goal... getting out alive."

I nodded.

"Value your life, Casey! Try to remember our goal of getting the heck outta this crazy place alive and in one piece."

Another tear fell down my face. I had stayed strong up to this point, never giving up hope, but losing Jack pierced my heart like a knife. I had reached my breaking point, but thankfully, Mike's words gave me the motivation I needed to fight for my life. "You're right. We need to get to that city and find Jack. The UFOs are hovering there, so I'm pretty sure that's where they're planning on taking him."

Mike gently clasped my face with both hands and gently wiped the tears off my cheeks with his thumbs. "Let's get moving then." He pointed toward the hovering ship. "We've gotta get out of here before it comes for us—that is, if we're not eaten by Sue first. That isn't what Jack would've wanted."

He was right, but that still didn't stop the tears. Letting the UFO beam us up would get us to the city faster, but I had a feeling we'd be more in charge if we made our way on our own terms rather than as captives. I thought it best to get moving and act fast before something else stopped us, but my legs felt as heavy as lead, stubbornly ignoring my brain's commands. Mike raised his eyebrows impatiently, and I knew if I didn't get moving soon, he'd probably swing me over his shoulder like his surfboard and drag me away. I sucked in a shuddering breath and nodded.

Out of the corner of my eye, an arc of light flashed through the tall canopy of leaves. A beam of blue light swung like a pendulum toward me, stopping just inches from my foot. Eyes wide, I jumped. "They're *shooting* at us!"

Mike yanked me behind the broad tree trunk. “No! Those beams were red, remember? They switched to blue when they decided they wanted to kidnap us. They’re trying to beam us up! We’ve got to get out of here.”

A resounding *thud* shook the ground, as if thousands of wild horses were thundering toward us. As I whirled around, my knees nearly gave out. Instead of wild stallions, a pack of monstrous T-rexes stomped through the wild terrain, headed in our direction, their heavy footsteps thumping hard and fast. There had to be at least a couple dozen of them, bolting through a river of splattering mud.

My life flashed before my eyes. A UFO was stalking us, and an army was out to destroy us, dressed to kill in camouflage and armed with sharp daggers. My mouth gaped as Mike gave me a yank.

“We have to go now!” he said. “Mama brought reinforcements.”

Grabbing Mike’s hand, I sprinted, snarls echoing through the air behind us. As thundering feet grew closer, I leapt over a log, but it was too late. With a powerful thrust of a meat hook claw, a dinosaur grabbed me by the back of my shirt. My stomach lurched as my shirt collar tightened around my neck like a noose. I screamed as I was hoisted up into the air. Dangling high above Mike, I yelled out to him. “Keep running!” I swung my arms and kicked my feet about, refusing to let the thing eat me alive, but at this rate, I was going to die of suffocation first. My heart pounded like a hammer as I wriggled some more, gagging on the stench coming from the creature’s foul breath. But no amount of twisting allowed me a fresh breath; every time I even tried to inhale, I could smell and almost taste the nasty aroma, like someone hadn’t taken the garbage out for weeks.

Mike picked up a handful of rocks and hurled the largest one at the dinosaur; but it was about as effective as throwing a marble at a skyscraper. *What is he doing, playing hero? Why isn’t he running while he still has legs?* I thought. He hurled another stone, and I watched as it whizzed by and bounced off the creature’s armored skin, barely making a scratch. “Mike, find something bigger...and aim for the eyes!” I screamed.

He flung another stone, but the creature didn't even flinch. I was sure it represented a new class of tank.

A T-rex stretched its neck and let out a long roar, taking a few steps in Mike's direction. Mike scrambled backward into a group of towering ferns. At this point, the dinosaurs didn't seem bloodthirsty like the ones in all the sci-fi and horror films, but one thing I'd learned was that wildlife could be unpredictable, just like Jack said. I had seen cats playing with rodents and birds before, capturing and releasing them as part of some game, and I wondered if the T-rexes were anything like that.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a flash of silver, and my gaze darted above me. The flying disk hovered over us, and a sharp, high-pitched *hum* pierced the air. When the carnivorous lizards' attention shifted, I heaved a big sigh. *Thank God!* But really, wasn't the UFO only adding to my worries?

Letting out unearthly screams, the pack of dinosaurs shook their heads and stomped their feet. Somehow, the flying disk distracted them—or maybe it was even controlling them. Either way, I wasn't keen on sticking around to find out.

The T-rex let out an ear-splitting shriek and suddenly hurled me through the air. I landed on my back with a *thud*, right in the black sand, twisting my ankle in the process—the same one I'd gotten stuck in the hole earlier and the exact same one I'd hurt when I had ran from the UFOs the first time. It was also the same unfortunate foot that I'd broken on a hike with Mike and Jack a year earlier. Sharp and sudden pain surged through me. I tried to crawl away as I recovered the breath knocked out of my lungs. Apparently, the dino didn't like the loud buzzing noise that was coming from the flying disk and decided to ditch me. That was at least one thing to be thankful for. I could deal with a little pain, as long as it meant being released from the jaws of a Tyrant Lizard King.

Mike ran over to me. "Casey? Casey?" he repeated over and over as he gently scooped me up.

Slowly my eyes focused on his face. "Mike."

He tried to help me stand. "Are you okay?"

I nodded, but he didn't look convinced as I fell back down on my butt. "Honestly, I am."

"We gotta move or those things are gonna make a floor mat out of us," he said.

Scrambling to my feet, I held on to the most low-hanging branches as I moved toward a thick tree to seek cover. The ground shook beneath our feet; the tree trembled, raining palm-sized leaves down on us as the dinosaurs continued to stomp all around me. I wondered how the heck we managed to get stuck in the middle of the herd.

“Those pounding feet are so darn close,” said Mike. “It’d be so much easier if this UFO could just give us a ride out of here.”

I shot him a disbelieving look. “Boy, only you could get excited about little green men hatching their offspring inside your belly. I bet you’d lose those six-pack abs you’re so proud of.” *Who in their right mind would beg to be an abductee?* I could only imagine what horrors the beings had in store.

He shook his head, crestfallen. “Ain’t happenin’. Wait! You said you don’t believe in aliens. You and Jack said those pilots are probably military.”

I turned away from him and back to the flying disk. “I dunno anymore. I guess I’m undecided. Nothing here really makes sense.” Suddenly, a loud squawk jarred my train of thought. “What the heck was that?”

Mike cocked his head and pointed. “See it?”

“What?” I asked. All I saw were giant feet pounding the forest floor in a fit of rage, sending a thick cloud of leaves, dirt, and pebbles into the air.

“That thing...over there by the prickly bushes. Look at those nasty-looking claws!”

I peered through the leaves, into the foliage. Some twenty-five feet away stood what at first appeared to be a feathered bird with an elongated flat snout. As I looked closer, I realized it was not a bird at all. Instead, it was a feathered dino—a two-legged one, about as tall as the average Great Dane. It had the most stunning black and white plumage and a unique white face with a big patch of black extending over its eyes and halfway down its gray snout. Even though its mouth was closed, I could still see its protruding teeth, which reminded me of a saw blade. The creature’s neck, the back of its head, and its entire chest were dirty—white and fluffy. The thing cocked its S-shaped head, swung its stiff, thin tail, and puffed out its chest.

Its legs, while long and thin, like a turkey’s were surprisingly strong and nimble, allowing the creature to jump effortlessly to the top of a large limestone boulder. I stared at the long black arms folded against its body and three-fingered hands, shuddering at its sharp claws. My gaze drifted down to the even bigger claws on its bird-like toes. But there was something alarming

about the creature; the second toe on each of its feet had a huge sickle-shaped, five-inch claw, I assumed for slashing the throats of its unfortunate prey. A wave of terror shot up my spine at the sight of it.

“What the heck is that thing?” asked Mike.

“I dunno, but we need to get the heck outta here!”

“What do you think it eats?”

I let out a long breath. “From the looks of that claw, anything it can slash and tear apart.”

Mike’s mouth dropped open as my horrified gaze locked with his.

I hated to ask the dreaded question. “Do you think it’s a... a raptor or something?” I bet Jack would know.

His eyes bulged. “That’s what I was thinking. Pretty different from the movies, huh? I don’t remember them having feathers in the Spielberg rendition. I don’t remember them being so small either, but I *sure* do remember that killer claw on its toe.”

“Me too,” I said with a shudder as the blood drained from my face. Whatever the animal was, it was definitely a predator—a killing machine. It wasn’t as big as a T-rex or even as big as one of those *Jurassic Park* raptors, but it looked just as hungry, and I was sure it could rip through flesh just the same. *Get me out of this slasher flick already!*

“If I remember right, raptors were scary hunters,” said Mike. “I wonder if it picked up our scent somehow. Boy, it sure has guts stealing prey from a pack of T-rexes.”

“Well the name *raptor* means “thief”.”

Mike forced a smile. “No need to worry though. I think we can handle one little raptor.”

I patted him on the back. “Maybe so, but let’s get outta here. I don’t want to mess with it, especially if it might call its friends over for a dinner party.”

Mike sucked in a deep gulp of air as he gazed out across the terrain. After a moment, he took a step back, shaking my shoulder. “Oh no!”

“What?”

“You were right about that little raptor get-together. Look! There’re more of those suckers peeking out of the bushes, practically licking their lips. This isn’t good—not good at all. C’mon!”

Taking a steadying breath, I motioned in the opposite direction of the raptors. “Let’s try this way.” Just as I took a few steps forward, a dozen or so feathered freaks burst through the

vegetation, blocking my path. I gasped and jumped back as flashing jaws snapped at my feet. Barks and whistle-like sounds came from every direction. I spun in a slow circle, fear coursing through every cell in my body. “Oh my gosh! The r-raptors... They’re just...they’re everywhere!”

The raptors reminded me of a pack of hungry wolves, circling around, ready to pounce. I squeezed Mike’s hand tightly. The predators eyed me and Mike up and down, as if trying to size up their adversaries—or their lunch. I glanced down at the forest floor, my eyes searching for the biggest weapon I could find. I finally settled on a long stick. I waved it in the air, hoping to scare the vicious killers off. I desperately tried to remain calm, but my knees wobbled and threatened to give out any second. Low growls pierced my ears, and the hair on the back of my neck stood at attention. I could barely force the awful words out of my mouth. “Wh-what now? We’re... gosh, we’re just surrounded!”

Mike gripped a stick in his hands, his gaze darting around nervously. “There’s no way we can take on a pack of hungry raptors. Look at those teeth...those claws...and... Hey! Maybe the ship can beam us up—like right now!”

Even though I wasn’t sure what was floating around in those big silver disks, maybe Mike didn’t have such a bad point. As much as I feared the aliens, I had to hope they were the lesser of two evils. Being eaten alive was a frightening thought, and the little green pilots might be easier to reason with than a pack of hungry prehistoric miniature killing machines. Plus, there was always the chance—no matter how small—that the ships were piloted by humans who would take us to a government research facility, debrief us, and then send us home. If there was ever a beam-me-up-Scotty moment, this was it.

I glanced at Mike, overwhelmed by emotion. Even his strange logic was starting to make sense, and that scared me most of all. I gripped Mike’s hand and tried to keep my voice steady. “You’re gonna have to get the raptors to back up for a minute so I can get the UFO’s attention.”

“Piece of cake. I’ll hold ‘em off. Just don’t get too close to the T-rexes.”

I nodded. Without another word, Mike darted out from the safety of the tree and started charging the raptors with nothing but a long stick. As he shouted, the startled raptors hissed and drew back. Gulping, I took a few brave steps out into the open. I glanced up at one of the towering dinosaurs as it pounded its giant foot on the forest floor. I was standing way too close for comfort. The Earth shook, and vibrations shot up my legs, mud splattering against my face.

Be brave, Casey, I told myself. Forget the T-rexes. Forget the raptors. Just focus on getting that ship to beam us up. As risky as it was, it was our only chance for survival—our only shot.

I swallowed back my fear, wiped my eyes, and then started hopping up and down, shouting, whistling, and waving my arms frantically at the silver disk hovering in the sky above me. “Hey, aliens! Over here! We need your help! Beam us up with that blue beam of yours! Just get us the heck outta here!”

Mike warded off the raptors with a long stick while I continued to yell and wave my arms frantically at the UFO. I tried to shout over the high-pitched buzzing sound emitting from the aircraft to keep the T-rexes frozen in place... well, except for their pounding feet. The T-rexes continued to stomp all around us, shaking the ground like an earthquake. I hoped the occupants of the ship would hear my desperate plea and beam us up from the horrifying situation we faced.

Standing dangerously close, a raptor let out a bark-like call. I gaped at the dino’s rows of bladed teeth. The raptor lunged. Crushing jaws snapped, missing my throat by mere inches as I swerved to the right and whacked the creature on its snout with my life-saving stick. I shuddered, but I had given the thing one heck of a blow because it stumbled away like an old drunk.

Mike yanked my arm, pulling me back under the tree for cover. “Sorry! That one...it slipped past me. Are you...you okay?” he said between ragged breaths.

My chest heaved. “Yeah, I’m all right. I hope acting like a crazy yelling nut got E.T.’s attention.” I waited for the aliens to fire their blue beam once again, just like they had when they took Jack. I also kept a close eye on the circling raptors that were now squawking like a noisy flock of birds. Glancing up, I bit my lip. Seconds passed. *Okay...any minute now.* Would the occupants of the ship take me up on my offer?

I waved my arms as I yelled once again. “Hey UFO, come and get us!” *Nothing’s happening.* My gaze flew to Mike’s and I said, “Why aren’t the aliens coming for us?”

“I dunno,” he mumbled.

My heart pounded in my chest as sweat trickled down my back. “If they don’t get a move-on, we’re gonna be raptor food.”

“I don’t get it! They’ve been after us all flippin’ morning, but now it’s like they don’t wanna touch us with a ten-foot pole.”

“Maybe they decided they only want Jack,” I said.

Mike heaved a sigh. “Why? Because he knows a dictionary by heart?”

“Well, yeah. That’s primo DNA.”

“If that’s the case, then why’d they bother paralyzing the T-rexes?” he asked. “Obviously, they want us alive, too, so why aren’t they beaming us up, especially with the raptors on our heels?”

“I’m not sure,” I answered. “Maybe this is their version of reality TV or something and they’re munching on moon cheese while they watch us make complete idiots out of ourselves down here.”

The disk still hovered above, as if they were deciding whether or not to take me up on my offer. Finally, it dawned on me what was happening. “I know why they’re not zapping us up!” I said, my voice wavering.

Mike turned to face me, his eyes wide. “Why?”

“If they try to pull us up, they might get a T-rex caught in that tractor beam of theirs. That just might cramp their style, not to mention crash their ship.”

“You’re right! Let’s move a little further back from the dinosaurs and try to get Scotty’s attention again.” He took a step forward, shielded his eyes, and scanned the landscape. “We need to find the best spot—someplace where we can wave them down without getting trampled.”

A cold chill ran through my body as the raptors worked in coordination and closed the circle tighter. I bit my bottom lip hard in order to stifle a scream. “How do we back up from the T-rexes when the raptors are closing in?”

Before Mike could answer, a creature broke the perimeter of the circle and approached, just staring at me as it let out tiny barks. Waving my stick around like a modern-day gladiator swinging her mighty sword, I aggressively thrust my stick down toward the raptor’s eyes. Its gaping jaws clamped around the stick, breaking it in half with one vicious bite. “Crap!” I hissed between clenched teeth.

Mike gave the raptor one giant kick. The creature let out a loud screech and ruffled its feathers. Mike continued to poke at the snapping creature with his long stick as I backed up to search for a new weapon.

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