

# **Agartha's Castaway**

**Book 5**

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.

## **Chapter 1**

The glass floor allowed a view of the chiseled rocks a few hundred feet beneath her. Grabbing hold of the rail, Casey wavered. Any minute now, they'd be taking a ride on the glass sidewalk into the city of Agartha. Staring ahead at the cavern walls, she couldn't help but be suspicious of Orthon, but she and Mike had to take a chance with the weird guy they'd met only hours earlier. It was worth the risk though. They had no idea where they were, and they'd learned the hard way that wandering around in such a strange place could get them killed. *Finally, I'll be able to get my hands on a telephone, and tell my parents I didn't die in that storm at sea*, she thought, knowing they'd be so proud of her survival skills.

She wondered, though, if they would believe the tale she had to tell—that she was shipwrecked on an island in a prehistoric wildlife preserve and was rescued by a towering man with blond hair whom they presumed to be some kind of alien. She wondered what they would think of her if she told them Jack had been abducted by a UFO. She let out a sigh. It all sounded so crazy.

“How much longer until we take off?” Mike muttered in her ear.

She pressed her mouth tight as bats shrieked in the distance. Of course she wanted out of the cave, but joining Mike's complaint campaign wasn't going to help them one bit.

He stared down at the glass sidewalk and shook his head. “This alien technology is pretty cool...but are you sure it's safe?”

While plummeting to their death was a possibility, Jack's torture was a certainty according to Orthon. She glanced up at the unnaturally tall figure swaying forward in fluent motions, as if he didn't

really weigh at least twice her weight.

“Get ready and hold on tight,” said Orthon.

Inhaling, Casey grasped the glass railing tighter and took a step forward.

“I wonder if this moving sidewalk can go faster than the one at the airport,” said Mike behind her.

Casey slapped her forehead. “I don’t care, as long it gets us to our destination in one piece. But, yeah, since it’s called a *high-speed* skywalk, that should tell you something.” She didn’t mean to snap at him, but his constant questions and complaining didn’t work, at least not at that moment. Nausea rose up from the pit of her stomach. *What if those UFOs, hovering over the city, really belong to Orthon’s people? Can we trust this weird man we just met when he says those are enemy ships? Maybe Jack is better off up there than we are down here...*

Mike held up his hands in surrender. “Whoa! I can understand your frustration here. You’re dying for another one of my mind-blowing kisses, aren’t you? But there’s no need to be like that, babe. I’ll make sure there’s more of that to come in the future.”

“How reassuring, sweetie pie.” She blinked her eyelashes at him in a playful manner. “I’ll just forget about the alien taking us to his lair and focus on all those kisses coming my way.”

He laughed.

She opened her mouth to speak, when the glass conveyor belt thingy started to roll slowly, gradually increasing in speed.

A gust of wind hit her face as the ground rushed beneath her feet, moving at high speeds for miles underground. It reminded her of a New York subway—except it smelled better and seemed to be free of charge. Grasping the railing for dear life, she glanced around. The cavernous walls became a blur, except for a tiny dot of light approaching in the distance, growing larger by the second. As they neared the end of the tunnel, she gazed out and saw...*Daylight? Is that good or bad?* All Casey could think of at the moment was that people always see lights at the end of a tunnel during those near-death experiences she’d read and seen movies about. She knew she needed to get a grip because they weren’t dead—not yet anyway.

Still gliding through the air, Casey blinked at the sudden brightness flooding her vision. They were heading outside on a moving conveyor belt like the kind at airports. It took a minute for her eyes to adjust to the natural light. She brushed her hair behind her ears, but the wind blew it around again and again. The breeze carried the scent of desert herbs, sand, and sweet, dusty earth. She glanced up at the dazzling blue sky and felt sunshine on her face. Holding out her arms, she marveled at the speed and

cried, “We’re flying!”

Her heart raced as she peered down at the rock-strewn, desert landscape below. It was as if they’d landed on Mars, the red planet itself. Crimson-colored sandstone gorges and thousands of jutting spires ranging from sugar-white to deep orange shimmered in the glaring brightness. Little whirlwinds of dust, sand, and gritty dirt danced below. Fantastic rock formations, swirled with bands of colors, seemed to stretch out into endless depths like the Grand Canyon. She let out a giggle as she remembered her dad riding down the narrow path to the bottom. He had bounced up and down, hanging on for dear life, as his mule teetered precariously near the edge. He had sworn time and time again that he was going to fall straight over, thousands of feet.

The skywalk climbed even higher. Mike placed a hand on her shoulder, soothing the fear coursing through her. In a brazen moment, she gazed back at him. Yes, he was childish and spewed a never-ending fountain of lame jokes, and he was beyond obnoxious at times, but he was always there for her when she needed him. What more could a girl want?

“We are speeding midair on nothing but two inches of glass,” Orthon felt the need to inform them.

Two inches was as thin as Mike’s surfboard, and she wasn’t so thrilled to know that was all that separated them from those sharp rocks on the canyon floor, like giant teeth waiting to chew them up. She sucked in a deep breath and decided to get off at the next stop.

“What’s holding it up?” asked Mike.

*Yeah, good question.*

“We use magnetic technology,” said Orthon through the whipping wind.

“Magnets?” she asked.

“Don’t worry,” said Orthon. “There’s also an invisible force field around us for our safety.”

She spun, scanning the air for a glow or reflection—anything—because “invisible” anything didn’t exactly make her feel safe. “How do you know this thing’s working if it’s *invisible*?”

Orthon turned and shot them a mischievous glance, his eyes glinting as they whizzed along. From the look on his face, it didn’t seem like he was going to give Casey the answer she wanted to hear. “We do not know if it works, but we *hope*.”

Casey gulped.

“Just kidding!” he called back. “Of course it works. We do safety checks on a regular basis.”

Orthon was joking? Maybe he wasn’t uptight as she had previously thought. Breathing out, Casey relaxed a little. She’d no clue what sort of technology it was, because it was as alien as everything else

they'd seen in that place. Jack would probably have understood it a lot better than she would, but she couldn't understand why they'd make it transparent when they had to know that was going to terrify everyone. Black would've been much more soothing. "You're sure we won't fall out?" she asked.

Orthon nodded, his gaze already focused ahead.

Mike's hand settled on her shoulder, making her jump, and her hands grasped the rails even tighter. "Don't worry," Mike whispered in her ear. "I've got you."

Two strong arms wrapped around her waist, and for a moment, she felt safe and secure in Mike's embrace. She let go of the rails and threw her hands up. The cool wind felt good against her face, whipping against her skin like on her favorite rollercoaster. "I feel like a bird—like a soaring eagle!" she shouted.

"Whoa! Easy there. Don't take off without me."

She laughed; Mike had the best sense of humor. Her smile faded, though, as a rumble of thunder rolled across the sky. Startled, she blinked, fearing that a storm was blowing in. When Mike's jaw dropped and his carefree expression changed, she whirled around to follow his gaze.

"Uh, Casey . . . are you seeing what I'm seeing?" He pointed out over the colorful canyon, his eyes widening. "We got a flying reptile missile barreling straight toward us!"

She stiffened. The "missile" moved its pelican-shaped head from side to side, swinging its wings forward and backward in a vertical motion, like a giant vulture. Frowning, she gulped. There was no way it was any kind of normal vulture with that big, horn-like protrusion jutting from its head. Its piercing red eyes glowed while the creature glided on the air between flaps. She suddenly wondered if those sporty cars called Thunderbird got their name from that weird, menacing-looking creature. "Oh my gosh! It's the freaking pterodactyl thingy that flew over us earlier. It's making a jailbreak!"

"Hey, Orthon," yelled Mike, "are you aware the critters are breakin' out of your zoo?"

"Yes. The enemy shut down everything, including the electric shield to the prehistoric animal sanctuary. How do you think you and Casey were able to crawl out through the hole in the wall without being electrocuted?"

A shiver slid down Casey's spine. "So if we got through, that means other things are getting out—like anything that can fly over the wall or crawl through the hole? Although, we did jam a rock pretty good into that hole."

Orthon nodded. "With the shields down, it was bound to happen." Squinting, he peered into the distance. "Wave your hands! We need the creature to see us."

Mike shook his head. “What? So it can chomp us up in one single gulp? Are you freakin’ crazy?”

“It’s not after prey,” said Orthon. “It is only in flight, and if it sees us in time, it will fly above us to avoid a collision.”

Assuming Orthon knew more about the place and the wildlife there, Casey joined Mike and Orthon in waving her hands and shouting. It brought back memories of fending off the saber-tooth tiger. The living, breathing airplane flew closer, and Casey suddenly missed her shiny silver phone since it might have reflected enough light to get the flying lizard’s attention, but Jack had put it in his back pocket during the T-rex fiasco. *Darn my luck!* she thought, nowhere near the first or last time for the day.

Her mouth dropped. The steady rhythm of flapping wings echoed in her ears as it approached, letting out a shrill *Eeeeeeeeeeeee!* sound. She flailed wildly, but it refused to veer off course. “It’s going to run right into us!”

The creature’s eyes bulged as it met Casey’s terrified stare. Its long, robust beak opened, and she could see its pink tongue and rows of jagged, razor-sharp teeth that looked like they could take off an entire limb with just a nibble. The pterodactyl abruptly turned to the right, but it was too late. A sudden jolt shook her entire body as she clung to the railing. The monstrous flying lizard bounced off the force field and tumbled downward in a spiral motion.

Vibrations shot up Casey’s legs as the glass floor buckled, whirred, and shook beneath her feet. She staggered backward, almost losing her balance when Mike’s terrified scream rang out next to her. Glancing over to her side, she gasped. Mike was gone! Terrified that he’d fallen out, she spun around and gripped the railing, her heart thundering in her ears. She frantically yelled his name, but even though he didn’t answer, she was relieved to catch a glimpse of his bulging eyes. She’d never seen him so scared. He clung onto the bottom of the rail for dear life, his usually strong body flapping helplessly in the wind. She spun to face Orthon. “Do something!”

He knelt down and pushed a few buttons on the control panel by his feet. The high-speed skywalk slowly came to a halt, and they hovered in the air, like some kind of amusement park ride frozen in motion. Tiny flashes of light, followed by a flurry of sparks, made her jump. Finally, she could see the shield. She realized it would keep Mike safe from falling to his death, but at the same time, the crackling energy could electrocute him.

“Help!” Mike’s voice carried from below, sounding more helpless than Casey had ever heard him. “I don’t . . . I don’t want to die.”

“Mike!” yelled Casey. Her heart threatened to explode out of her chest. She peered over the edge,

but Orthon yanked her back.

“Don’t,” said Orthon.

“I’ve got to help him!” she shouted.

Orthon leaned over and grabbed Mike’s arm. He pulled up inch by inch until Mike’s blond head popped up.

“Casey, if I’m dying, I want you to find someone else,” wailed Mike. “Don’t wait until we meet in the afterlife. Just make sure the new guy’s not hotter than me. Otherwise, you might end up with a poltergeist.”

Sweat beaded her forehead as she knelt next to Orthon, trying to help. Mike let out a few more groans while Orthon grabbed Mike’s one arm and Casey clasped the other so they could heave him over the edge. Gasping for air, Mike lay on the floor, with his biggest fan cradling his head in her lap.

He looked up, relief washing over his features. “Thank you...both of you.”

“I’d never let anything happen to you,” she said. “Are you okay?”

“I just saw my life flashing before my eyes, and then I realized I’m not ready to settle down yet. There’s so much more for a guy to do, like travel the world and turn pro in surfing.”

He had almost died, in some strange, alien place, and all he could think about was fortune and glory. She set her jaw, glaring at him. It wasn’t like she’d demanded a diamond ring from him already; all she wanted was more info about where they stood and whether they’d continue dating once they got home. She jumped up, knocking into his arm by accident.

“Ouch,” he muttered.

“Stand up. There’s still Jack to save.”

He stood, but he didn’t look too eager to move. “Honestly, after what I just went through, I think you should be reassuring me to make sure I don’t leave here scarred and with the shock of my life. So, where’s all my hugs and kisses?”

Boy, he was a drama queen, complete with emotions all over the place. One minute, it seemed as if he blamed her for possibly making him settle down, and the next, he was begging for hugs and kisses.

“Move it, Mike. I bet Jack isn’t so lucky to have someone like Orthon around to save him.”

“You got a point there.” Standing, he leaned forward and placed a peck on her cheek.

“Ready?” asked Orthon.

Mike nodded and glanced over the rail. “Wow! It’s like being stuck at the top of the Ferris wheel, only three times as high.”

The high-speed skywalk resumed, and Mike held his hands tightly around her waist from behind. Thoughts pounded her brain. *Is Jack being treated okay? Is he even alive? Will we be able to rescue him?* Tears welled up in her eyes as she pondered all the what-ifs, and she felt the pain deep down inside of her. She'd never give up on Jack—not ever—just as she knew Jack nor Mike would ever give up on her.

Straight ahead, a dark mountain loomed in the distance, and Casey's stomach fluttered at the sight of it. She hoped they wouldn't crash into it, though the glass sidewalk wasn't swerving to the left or right. She took a deep breath and peered around Orthon's large frame. When the sunlight glittered off a gold archway that was carved into the granite rock, like half of a giant, fancy McDonald's sign, she blew out a sigh of relief. It had to be an entrance into the city.

Holding in her breath, Casey felt her pulse speed up. It was the moment of truth, the moment they'd been waiting for. She hoped it would lead to a way to find Jack, but the way things were going, it could very well be some kind of disaster or trap.

A yell of excitement burst from Mike's mouth as they descended into the mouth of the cave. Daylight disappeared, and everything grew dim. The sidewalk seemed to slow down as they traveled through a winding tunnel of rock and finally emerged into a large white room with no windows.

"This is the control room underneath the city, where we monitor everything," explained Orthon like some kind of cosmic tour guide. When the glass sidewalk came to a sudden halt, Orthon unlatched the gate.

Jumping off, Casey scanned the humongous room. Bright light flooded the large space. As she glanced up at the ceiling, she saw no florescent fixtures and not even one light bulb, and she had to wonder if they were somehow witnessing the future of electricity. The walls and ceiling glistened like millions of crushed diamonds. Beyond two high pillars stretched the Command Center Orthon had mentioned, bustling with personnel, blinking panels, consoles, maps, and charts. In the middle, a contingent of people watched a giant screen—big as a billboard—on the far left wall. It changed images continually, displaying positions of the space ships above the city. As soon as someone pointed toward the visitors, the murmur died and heads started to turn.

Turning, she noticed the blonde woman to her right smiling hesitantly. The soldiers standing behind her, dressed in blue, military-style uniforms, didn't seem quite as welcoming. One said something in a language Casey didn't recognize, and the others nodded, a frown forming between their brows. It wasn't at all the warm greeting she expected. Taking several breaths to calm her racing heart,

she fixed her gaze on Orthon, who signaled one of the soldiers over.

“This has to be the mother of all control rooms,” said Mike, his voice filled with awe.

“Did you happen to notice something other than the gadgets and other cool stuff?” she whispered.

“Yeah. The people here are almost as cute as I am...but not quite,” he whispered back.

A tall man walked toward them. “*Wing su ti te ellmo ekdour,*” he said and held up a long syringe filled with a blue liquid. He tapped it a few times.

“Oh man. What’s Dr. Evil planning to do with that?” She grabbed Mike’s arm. Many scenarios had played out in her head, but she hadn’t even considered this one. She had come face to face with the stuff of nightmares and lived to tell the tale. She had even taken on a T-rex and its wild pack, only to be experimented on by an evil mad scientist with crazy white hair in a secret lab. Every old Frankenstein movie she’d ever seen flashed across her mind, and she wondered if she was going to find herself strapped down to a table, with batteries plugged into her head.

A shiver ran down her spine, and she shot Mike a glance. His eyes grew wide as he stared at the huge needle that he probably thought resembled a tranquilizer for the average elephant. Casey could tell by the look on his face that if she expected any support from him, she was badly mistaken. More than likely, he’d be the one needing a cuddle and someone holding his hand.

“What’s going on?” Mike demanded.

Casey’s mind raced as she stared at the syringe. “That needle’s big enough to put a horse to sleep.”

Orthon quirked an eyebrow at the approaching soldier. “*Henter so do aly tu si almot?*”

“*Te si umghe tumre sodo las tie que,*” said the man.

She wanted to tell them to speak English so she at least knew what she was in for and what that awful needle was for. Casey desperately tugged on Orthon’s sleeve, her fear mounting. “Orthon, don’t let him hurt us!”

Orthon reached for the needle and spun toward her. His face was expressionless, his manner calm. Gripping her shoulder, he said, “These orders come straight from General Ashtar. I’m sorry, but this might hurt a little.”

A horrified gasp broke from Mike. “Get away from us, or you’ll regret it.”

Confusion and shock overwhelmed Casey. She did not expect Orthon, who had gotten them out of danger so many times and led them there, to betray them in the end. “You’re just a backstabber!” She flung his arm off and took a long step backward, her voice trembling. “No frigging way are you sticking me with *that* thing.” Every cell in her body screamed for her to run, but she didn’t know where

she could run to. Her eyes darted all over the room, searching for an exit or some way to escape, but it seemed as if they were trapped.

“I thought you wanted us on your side!” yelled Mike, balling his hands into fists. “We never should’ve trusted you.”

If he decided to strike that needle out of Orthon’s hands, Casey wasn’t about to be in the way. In fact, she’d help him in any way she could. Her palms grew clammy, and her heart raced faster.

Orthon took another step forward, and he had backup in the form of five brawny-looking soldiers standing behind him.

## Chapter 2

A yelp escaped Casey’s mouth; there was no way that long needle was going to pierce her skin without a fight. Somewhere behind her, Mike muttered something under his breath and grabbed her shoulders. She dared a peek before she returned her focus back to the syringe.

“You will feel only a small pinch,” said Orthon. “I promise.”

Casey knew all too well that anyone with a needle pointed at you always says that, whether it is a nurse, a doctor, or some mad scientist. She just couldn’t believe the man they’d trusted and followed all that time turned out to be one of them. “You first,” she said, meeting Orthon’s gaze head on. “Or, even better, why don’t you go wave that thing in someone else’s face . . . preferably far away!”

The soldiers behind Orthon scowled at her, and Orthon took another step forward. She thought if she got close enough, maybe she could kick it out of his hand with a Muay Thai kick, like the one she’d been teaching Mike earlier in the week. She wasn’t Bruce Lee and couldn’t take on an entire roomful of probably-aliens with her bare hands and a hairpin, but she thought she might be able to distract them for a second or two.

Shrugging, Orthon lowered the syringe, and she had to wonder if she had developed some kind of mental telepathy. If they really could read the thoughts of what she wanted to do to them, they’d be cowering on the ground in no time, fear bathing them in sweat.

“It is nothing but a communicator chip.” Orthon shifted his stance, the needle securely in his hands. “You will be able to understand any language from any world, and they will be able to understand you.”

Casey shook her head vehemently. *A communicator chip? To understand their language? Yeah, right. What a lame excuse.* She'd seen the movies and read the books. She knew they probably had some weird medical procedures in store, like taking out her brain and storing it in a large glass jar.

"Nah, I'm good," said Mike. "I'd rather get a cute girl to translate while I pretend I have to stare at her glossy lips to understand her weird pronunciation."

He didn't know when to keep his mouth shut. Dating or not, Mike sucked when it came to making Casey feel like she was the only girl in his life. "I guess, what our skirt-chasing friend here is trying to say, is that we don't trust you—not a single word that comes out of your mouth."

The lines in Orthon's face softened, and compassion flickered in his blue eyes. "You will have to trust me."

*How naïve does he think we are?* "No way! Just hand us a phone, post pigeons, or whatever you use for communicating with the outside world, and we'll be on our merry way."

"Not possible. You know I would help you if I could, but all of our communications have been shut down." His voice remained calm and reassuring, as though he was trying to regain their trust.

"Even the post pigeons?" Mike huffed. "Boy, that sucks."

Orthon knew Casey wanted to make a phone call, and he'd lured them to Agartha on false pretenses. Even though he hadn't promised them a phone, per se, he had failed to mention there was none. Casey realized it was her fault for not making a connection, so to speak, when he told her their communication was down, but he could have at least told her everything was down. Yet again, she felt betrayed.

Orthon took a step closer when she held up a hand to stall him. "Who says you call all the shots? I want to speak to this general of yours . . . and where do you plan on sticking that needle anyway?" She covered her buttock with her hands.

He rolled his eyes, and a tiny smirk formed on his lips. "Not where you are thinking. The procedure's simple. I inject the chip into your carotid artery, and it will feel no worse than a bee sting. I assure you it is completely safe."

Her mouth dropped. "Are you serious?"

Orthon's gaze narrowed. "Time is running out, for both us and your kidnapped friend."

She glared at him, angry. Of all the cards in his stacked deck, he didn't have to play the Jack. "Stay back! I'm warning you." Casey prepared herself mentally for whatever might come next. Her jaw clenched as her eyes focused on the syringe. Again, every karate move she'd ever learned whirled in

her mind. Orthon had heard them refuse, but he would not listen. She didn't really care to understand their language anyway, since she planned to be gone within a few hours. There was no need to endure a vampire bite from that nasty-looking needle. Besides, for all Casey knew, he could have been tricking them again. She shifted her stance and glared at the traitor. "You know English. Why can't you be our translator? It's not like we'll be staying here for long."

"That's what I'm screamin'," agreed Mike.

Orthon waved an impatient hand about, and two of the soldiers behind him stepped closer. He reached forward as if he was going to touch her arm, but he hesitated when he saw the grim look on her face. Holding out his palm he said, "It is okay to be scared, but our general has a plan to get Jack back, and you are part of it. A translator coming along is out of the question. You are doing this for Jack . . . to save his life."

"What? This is for Jack?" She peered at him intently, trying to catch in any hesitation or gesture that might give away his lie. When he just nodded and nothing stirred, she felt a wave of relief flooding through her. She wondered, though, why he just hadn't told them that in the first place. As much as she wanted to consider the communication chip, she couldn't switch off the nagging voice at the back of her head telling her to be more careful and less trusting. "I don't know. I still don't see the point."

Orthon waved the syringe in his hand. "Without this chip, you will never get close to Jack. Just how bad do you want to see him?"

Boy, he knew what strings to pull. A memory of Jack flashed through her mind, the sudden guilt choking her. Once, on a hike, Casey had broken her ankle. Jack had carried her back home for three long miles without a single complaint, like a true friend. She averted her gaze and remembered Jack's blue eyes and gleaming smile before her, his soft fingers brushing over her arm, his sweet voice comforting her through the pain.

Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes, then opened them, more determined than ever before. She'd do anything to see him again. The silver needle glimmered in the glaring brightness, seeming just as scary as before. Pulling her hair back, she pointed to her neck. "Do it." Somewhere inside her mind, a voice screamed, asking her if she was crazy. Maybe the heat had gone to her brain, but she couldn't chicken out; Jack never had on her.

Mike gripped her arms and pulled her close. "No way! Why would you pull a crazy stunt like this?"

She glared. "Like you have room to talk. I'm doing it for Jack, which should be your priority too."

He let out a breath. “Do you have any idea what could be in that thing? We can’t trust these guys. You said so yourself.”

“I don’t care!” she shouted. “Listen to yourself, Mike. Your best friend needs help, and all you can do is stand there thinking of yourself.” She turned to Orthon. “Please do it before I change my mind.”

Orthon flicked the syringe with his forefinger and stepped forward, a frown perched between his brows. She held her breath as the needle connected with her skin, piercing the thin flesh on her neck. Her heart beat faster, prepared for the oncoming pain. It felt like she’d been injected with a stream of ice water: too cold, too unnatural. She grimaced, trying to not scream as she forced her legs to stay in place. A burning sensation crept through her body.

“You are done,” said Orthon handing the needle to a nearby soldier. “Mike?”

Casey had to wonder if she’d just made a huge mistake. She inhaled deeply, hoping there was no poison coursing through her veins. In the blink of an eye, the burning sensation dissipated, and she raised her palm to touch the puncture.

Orthon smiled.

“I’m alive.” Casey let out a sigh of relief, then laughed, peering over her shoulder at Mike’s pale face. She bet if she egged him on, he’d do it. “Maybe Orthon could offer you some Novocain? Perhaps some general anesthesia?”

“What? Have you forgotten who you’re talking to? I’m tough as nails.” He tilted his head to one side. “I just pray to God, Casey, that you know what you’re doing.”

“I’ve no idea what I just did, but I hope it was the right choice.”

Mike shook his head. “You know that’s the wrong answer, right?”

She gently touched his hand. “Admit it, Mr. Big Stuff. You’re just scared.”

“No way!” His voice went up a notch. “I’m just trying to stay sane here. There’s no point in both of us being reckless. Hey, wait . . . shouldn’t I be the one taking the shot and you lecturing me? Oh no. I think I’ve turned into Jack.”

He was so bluffing, and she could smell it from a mile. Deep inside, she knew Mike felt the same way but just needed a bit of a nudge in the right direction. Even though she didn’t know whether she’d be suffering any side effects, she didn’t regret her choice. If something happened to Jack—she took the biggest breath ever—she couldn’t live with herself.

A soldier brought over a second needle and handed it to Orthon. Orthon stepped toward Mike, slowly pushing down on the plunger as he pierced Mike’s skin. From where she stood, Casey noticed

the tiny silver microchip floating in the blue liquid before it disappeared through the needle.

The same soldier quickly grabbed the used syringe from Orthon and walked away.

Mike staggered, holding his neck. “It feels like ice . . . wait . . . no, fire! Holy crap, this stuff burns!”

“Don’t be such a wus!” said Casey. “Besides, it stops hurting pretty quick.”

“If you say so. Haven’t they ever heard of common hospitality around here? Most people greet their guests with pies and cookies or maybe something to drink, not needles.”

A tall woman with a long blonde braid dangling over one shoulder motioned them to follow. Casey wanted more than anything to know where she was and what their intentions were. “Let’s go get some answers,” she said.

Taking the lead—as he was so good at doing—Mike marched forward, smiling like he was riding on a float in a parade. Casey was sure he’d start waving any minute.

The woman motioned to a white pillar. “Please wait here.” She touched their shoulders. “I know . . . tiny bit . . . English. Welcome to city.” She turned and walked away.

Agarthians from across the control room began to glance in their direction, with curious looks on their faces. Of course, Mike had to address them. “Hello, hello!” he called out. “My name’s Mike, and this is my friend Casey. Thank you for allowing us into your fabulous city.” He talked to them like five-year-olds or as if they were deaf; and they were neither.

She nudged him in the ribs. “They can hear you, you know. They just don’t speak our language.” She shook her head and pushed him forward, noticing how quiet the room suddenly seemed. She could’ve heard a hair dropping to the floor.

Mike had everyone’s attention, whether he wanted it or not. A room full of people stared at them like they were some three-headed cow at a carnival show. She swallowed hard, glancing from one open mouth to the other. “They’re gawking at me,” Casey whispered, “I stick out like a sore thumb. Everybody here is melanin challenged.”

“What?”

“They’re blond, Mike—all of them. And they’re gorgeous. I’m as rare as a two-horned unicorn. Heck, they’d probably be less shocked if I was one of those.”

“Maybe they’re staring because they recognize me from TV. I better get out my pen, because it’s going to be a madhouse once word gets out that I’m here. Remember what happened on the beach in Fiji?”

She remembered all right: tons of screaming girls, mostly American tourists, all over him like he was some big-time rock star. Heck, she couldn't even escape the fan club in Fiji. "I doubt they're staring because they want your autograph," she said. Only Mike could think a highly developed civilization with such high-tech equipment would halt in their busy observations because of his semi-famous name. He wasn't a household name yet, but ask any teenager who happened to watch MTV or any surfing fan and Mike's name earned instant recognition. As far as Casey could tell, there were no surf shops or beaches around, and everyone seemed to have more important things on their minds. Mike might have been keen on the attention, but she preferred to remain anonymous, to blend in. Lowering her gaze, she grasped Mike's hand, giving it a nervous squeeze.

"They're probably going to jump out and pour a bucket of bleach over your head," said Mike. "Don't worry. I'm blond, so I can safely say you won't automatically lose 100 IQ points."

A soft chatter resumed. Even though Casey couldn't understand a word, the warm smiles spoke for themselves: The people there weren't going to hurt them. She wondered, though, when the communicator chip was going to kick in—unless it wasn't really a chip for communication. She swallowed. *Oh crap! What did I get myself into? But if they are really so evil, why are they smiling?*

A military official with gold-braided epaulets on his shoulders stepped forward and called out. The three overlapping circles on his chest were gold, much larger than the others. On top of that, the three gold stripes on his left sleeve made her believe he was in charge.

Orthon approached him and started to talk in that strange guttural language of his. The other guy kept running a hand through his blond hair that fell in waves past the collar of his uniform, shaking his head every now and then. Orthon paused, throwing Casey a meaningful look, then continued in a softer tone.

Mike leaned in, whispering in her ear, "What're they talking about?"

She shushed him and inched closer to listen for any words that might sound familiar, but they were talking too fast.

"Did you hear that? I swear the guy just said the word 'food'," said Mike. "A big fat burger and fries? Maybe onion rings?"

She peered at his hopeful face. There they were, basically relying on an unknown civilization to save them, and all Mike could think about was finding a pen to sign autographs and devouring a big bag of fast food. "I've no idea, Mike. You're the one with the imagination. They could've said anything from 'food' to 'dude'. I just hope it wasn't 'shoot'."

Something clicked inside her temple, making her gasp. A sudden burst of heat rushed through her ears. When it stopped, she peered around, hesitant, wondering if the others felt it too. Tuning back in to the conversation, she noticed Orthon and the other guy speaking perfect English with a hint of a Swedish accent. “What the—?” Her fingers wandered to her neck. Orthon had been telling the truth: He really had injected them with a communicator chip.

“Preparations will begin immediately,” said the man in charge.

Casey could hardly contain her excitement. She tugged on Mike’s arm and laughed. “It works! It really works!”

His eyes sparkled as a grin spread across his face. “Yeah, mine just kicked in too. I understand them now.” He paused briefly and then continued, “You were right. It really was a communicator chip.”

Her grin widened. “Maybe you should listen to me more often.”

“Please inform General Ashtar that our guests have arrived,” said the man in charge. “I’ll keep them company until he gets here.”

Orthon nodded, then glanced at Casey and Jack. “See? I told you I would not hurt you.”

She shot him a weak smile, heat stinging her cheeks. “Sorry we were as nervous as scared, shaking Chihuahuas.”

“Yeah, but at least we didn’t leave a big puddle on the floor,” said Mike.

“Not a problem. While your fear was unfounded, I understand the issues involved with such a practice where you are from.” Orthon turned and pointed to the other guy. “This is Commander Gallant. He will be taking over for now.” And with that, he bowed slightly and turned on his heels to leave.

Casey’s fingers shook as she pointed to the screen. “Those ships took our friend Jack.” She shuddered as her mind replayed the awful moment when Jack vanished right before her eyes. Her tearful gaze met Commander Gallant’s. “We trusted you and took that awful shot. Now, can you please tell us about the plan to get Jack back?”

A shadow crossed Commander Gallant’s face. “I’m sorry to hear about your friend. Our general will be here shortly to explain how we’ll proceed.” He leaned in and touched her shoulder. “You have my promise that we will try to rescue him.”

“That’s great news!” Mike smiled and squeezed Casey’s hand.

The beautiful words gave Casey hope. A tear streamed down her cheek as her voice choked with emotion. “Thank you, sir. We can’t thank you enough.”

“A scout ship abducted your friend,” said Commander Gallant. “He’s probably on the mothership by now, along with all the other prisoners.”

Casey jerked her gaze up. “Wait . . . there’re more captives? On a huge mothership?”

The commander pointed upward. “Yes. It is currently hovering above Earth.”

She squeezed her eyes shut, wondering if things could possibly get any crazier. Jack was in *space prison. He must be scared to death.* She blew out a breath and scanned the room, her heart pounding. No one seemed to be in any sort of hurry. *Where the heck is the general? Sipping coffee with his feet propped up on a desk in some office?* She was anxious to hear their plan for rescuing Jack. Minutes felt like hours. She blinked her eyes open as Mike’s voice pierced through her thoughts, asking the question she’d been dying to find out since the moment she was shipwrecked.

“Where are we, exactly?”

The curiosity was slowly chewing her up from the inside out. She couldn’t go another moment without knowing. “Please just tell us.”

The commander shook his head. “I have no idea how you got here. Do you know what’s interesting? We named our city Agarthia because it means *inaccessible* or *unreachable*.”

“Maybe you should fire the guy who told you that,” said Casey.

“A few people seem to slip in anyway.” The commander’s stance stiffened as he paused. “It’s rare for surface-dwellers to find their way down here and even rarer for them to find their way through the prehistoric wildlife preserve . . . and survive.”

“Surface-dwellers?” *Are we in some kind of high-tech alien lair on our planet? Underground?*

“What does that mean?”

He stretched out his arm. “It means you have somehow managed to find your way to the center of Earth, to the ancient city of Agarthia. We’re a huge colony that broke off from Venus, the second planet from the sun.”

“Venus?” Casey bit her lip. How could anybody live on the hottest planet in the solar system? Her thoughts shifted. *Hmm . . . so they were a colony at one time? A colony broke off from England and settled in America, and this was apparently the same concept—only without *The Mayflower*. So how did these pilgrims ever get underground? She began to wonder who they had their first Thanksgiving with. *Prairie Dogs? Moles? Rabbits? Foxes?**

“We’ve lived here for centuries. This place is our home now,” said Commander Gallant.

Mike laughed.

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