

Agartha's Castaway

Book 7

In

The Trapped in the Hollow Earth Novelette Series

By

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For:

Faith and Matthew. I love you.

To:

My Father God in heaven.

To:

Jayde Scott. Thank you for reading this entire manuscript from start to finish. You're the best critting partner ever! Your advice, ideas, and suggestions were nothing short of amazing. I couldn't have done it without you!

To:
My brilliant editor, Autumn J. Conley.

Chapter 1

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Is it real?" whispered Mike.

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

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

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

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

"How?" asked Mike.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No way!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

was trapped.

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

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

"We need a weapon," said Jack.

"The kitchen," she heard Mike say.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Get away from the lodomodo!"

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

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

The lodomodo swung his head away from her and growled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Clearly, the beast didn't believe her.

Chapter 2

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

negative energy to pure love and peace.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Casey—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What're you doing?" hissed Thorn.

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

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

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

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

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

"What the heck is that?" whispered Jack.

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

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

"Let's poke it and see what happens." Mike lifted a finger when Thorn's voice cut him off.

"Surveillance! Shoot it!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Shoot it!" Casey shouted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Run!” he shouted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 3

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Let me help you.

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

Find an anchor to settle your mind.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She squinted. “No.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It dropped to the floor during the fight.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Casey—" Thorn started.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 4

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She smiled, for he knew she wasn't.

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you coming?" Thorn whispered.

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