

# **Agartha's Castaway**

## **Book 8**

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

Casey's hands felt clammy, and a dull, painful panic tugged at her insides. "You have to stop this ship from blowing up. Hack into the system or something."

"I can't." Thorn shook his head as he studied the control panel and tapped some of the buttons.

For a moment, she watched him close his eyes, as though he was already defeated. "There has to be something you can do," she insisted.

He opened his eyes, throwing daggers, and pounded on the glass. "Look, I don't know why this is happening... or what to do! It was never my intention to impose a death sentence on my brother, myself, and everyone else aboard this ship. That was why I wouldn't agree to just drop off a bomb like General Ashtar asked me to."

"Why would anyone install a self-destruct mechanism onboard anyway?" whispered Jack.

Thorn's jaw set as he snapped the glass back in place. "I'm sure the kidnapped scientists who built this weapon had something to do with this. This is something the rebels couldn't possibly have foreseen."

Casey shook her head. They had deactivated the weapon as they were supposed to, and now they had this to deal with as a reward for their efforts. Earth was safe, but they were in grave danger. *Why now, when we're so close to escaping this nightmare?*

"We've got to tell Mike," said Jack.

A shiver slid down her spine, and she hoped he wasn't captured. She couldn't fathom rescuing one friend, only to lose another in the end. She looked down at her radar device and saw that there was still time. They could hunt for Mike, rescue her parents, make it back to the scout ship, and cruise on out of there before the entire mothership became a fireball, blazing through space. It wouldn't be easy, but it could be done.

Soldiers pounded on the door, and at the sound of their impatient knocking, Casey's heart leapt into her throat. She pulled out her gun from the holster as the rebels burst in. The soldiers aimed their weapons at her, and her skin prickled. *No! This can't be happening.* She still had to find her parents and Mike.

"Drop it!" one of the soldiers shouted.

For a moment, she hesitated, unsure as to whether or not to follow their request. Holding a gun, she might face a chance of survival, but she knew the moment she gave up her weapon, they'd be screwed. From the corner of her eye, Casey watched Thorn and Jack set down their guns. "What *are* you doing?" she hissed.

"Do as they say," instructed Thorn.

"No." She shook her head vehemently. They could give up if they wanted to, but she was going to keep on fighting, or die trying. Her parents had protected her for her entire life, and now it was her turn to protect them.

"Now's not the time to play superhero," said Jack. "In case you haven't noticed, you're not Wonder Woman."

"I don't need that gold headband, cape, and lasso." She pressed her lips together and aimed. "I got rid of that Halloween costume years ago."

"They will shoot you!" yelled Thorn. "What good will you be to the people who matter to you if you die right here in this room?"

"Oh please! No one's dying. I'm way too valuable," she whispered, barely able to hear her own voice over the drumming of her heart. Something cold pushed against her back, and she turned slowly, with dread gripping her.

"This isn't set on stun, human," a soldier said, pressing the barrel of his gun into her shoulder blade.

"You're so bluffing," said Casey.

The soldier let out an evil chuckle. "Are you willing to take that gamble?"

He had called her bluff, and she forced her lips into a shamed smile. "Uh...I get the message already. One dropped weapon coming right up." She gulped, the gun trembling in her hands as she lowered it, then laid it on the ground. Thorn was right: There would be no hope of escape if she was knocked out cold—or worse—but it was far from over, as far as she was concerned.

A soldier ripped off her backpack and yanked her hands behind her back, securing them with handcuffs. He yelled toward the door, "We've got two humans and a traitor!"

Thorn lowered his head, trying to hide his identity. Casey frowned at the gesture, wondering why he'd want to keep a low profile when being Commander Tio's brother could earn him a get-out-of-jail-free pass in a heartbeat. She couldn't understand why Thorn would possibly want to miss the party she was heading to, what with all that pain, experimentation, and torture.

"I heard someone died from the gas leak in here," said a soldier.

"It was just a bluff." Tio marched toward them, as intimidating as ever. The soldiers parted, giving him a clear pathway.

Casey shuddered at his voice. She felt her heart quickening as she took in all the tiny details: the way Tio's long, silver cloak flowed and sparkled like nothing she'd ever seen before and even how his heavy boots echoed on the metallic floor. Her eyes absorbed everything, searching for something—anything—that might come in handy later.

She faced Thorn and spoke in her mind. "*Commander Tio can read my thoughts. He'll know what we did!*"

*"He has to be totally focused on you and can only see images and thoughts that you think. Digging through your mind would be like trying to find one sentence in an encyclopedia."*

*"Okay. I won't think about chipping the weapon."*

"These humans invented the story," said Tio. "The foolish guards fell prey to it, but at least one soldier had the sense to inform me of the fake leak."

*The sense or the need to suck up?* Casey wondered.

He swept his hood back and focused his intense gaze on the weapon. "Was any harm done?"

A soldier lifted the lid and took a moment to examine it. "No. Nothing appears to be disturbed or tampered with, and the countdown is still running effectively."

Tio opened a latch and started fiddling with some buttons. The panel blinked, followed by a series of beeps.

Casey worried that he might spot the microchip they'd placed. With her heart racing, she held her breath, waiting for disaster to unfold.

The commander bent forward, scanning the tiny opening. Eventually, he ran a hand over the shimmering surface and then closed the lid tight.

"Everything all right, sir?" asked a soldier.

Tio nodded. "Perfect."

Casey peered from the retreating soldier to the commander. He was so arrogant and full of himself, yet she couldn't be more thankful to him for not knowing how to examine the sophisticated equipment put together by the most brilliant minds in the universe. *Guess the doofus should've never killed those poor scientists, and then they'd be here to examine his precious piece of equipment.*

Commander Tio's face beamed as he turned to her. His eyes were filled with something she could not discern, though it reminded her vaguely of triumph. "It seems we disrupted your little plan, whatever it was," he said.

She nodded, secretly glad he was completely off track. "You did. I was going to smash this giant jewel to smithereens with a hammer. I only needed five more minutes, but no... you had to come in and ruin everything."

"Excellent for us. And you thought you stood a chance." His attention focused from her to Jack, then back to her. He ignored Thorn completely. Then, he seemed to talk to himself again, "I can't believe two of my most treasured possessions are standing before my very eyes. We've captured the escaped prisoner and the female teenager I've been searching for all day. This is truly unbelievable."

Casey cringed at the thought of being his most treasured possession. *Wait until the dummy finds out Jack and I aren't even from Agartha and don't possess the special DNA he needs. Boy, is he in for a rude awakening.*

Frowning, the commander spun around. "Sergeant, where's the third human?"

"We're still looking for him, sir," a voice called from the back.

"Why isn't he here with the others? How did he escape?"

Casey's heart fluttered, and relief poured through her with the knowledge that Mike hadn't been captured—yet.

The sergeant shook his head. "The boy didn't escape, sir. Fact is, he wasn't here when we arrived."

"Then find him!" Tio yelled. He drew a ragged breath as he eyed Casey again. "So your rescue mission failed, little human."

She shrugged. "Looks like it."

"Hmm. You're not even a sore loser." He nodded, as though he was thoroughly impressed. "I know I would be in your situation."

"You outplayed and outwitted me, just like on *Survivor*," said Casey nonchalantly, trying to play along.

The commander's large, midnight-blue eyes stared intently at her. Up close, his blue-grey skin resembled leather, almost reptilian. Three long, claw-like fingers brushed across her face. She jerked her head sideways as she struggled against her handcuffs. He was pure evil, and the thought of him touching her made her skin crawl.

"You're right." Tio laughed. "I always win, and soon, an entire planet will be mine. Goodbye, humanity."

Anger boiled up inside her, and her cheeks flushed hot. *Screw sucking up to the idiot.* This was one verbal battle she wouldn't back off from. "You're freaking insane! Killing everyone on my planet because of an accident that happened over fifty years ago is ridiculous."

"Is it?" Tio asked. "Maybe I should paint you a vivid picture of what happened. Some of us were strong and made it through, such as Thorn and I. Our bodies combated the bacteria in our systems. But others weren't so lucky."

“We’re sorry,” said Jack. “We truly are.”

“Imagine having to leave your planet and everything you love because it was poisoned.” Commander Tio’s voice grew louder as he gazed into Casey’s eyes, trying to drive his point home. “Imagine holding your loving wife in your arms as she dies. Imagine rocking your children as they take their last breath. Imagine all your friends and family murdered right before your eyes...including your parents.”

“Sheik, that’s enough!” roared Thorn.

No, Casey couldn’t imagine that. Tears welled up in her eyes at the thought, for it was too grim of a thought to bear. *Nobody should have to go through such a horrible experience.*

Tio stepped closer, glaring while her lips quivered. “And then imagine the others, still dying a slow and painful death fifty years later.”

“That’s awful,” said Casey. It was clear that he ran the human experiments in an effort to save their lives, but it still wasn’t right to kill one person to save another. Tio was crossing a moral boundary.

“Obviously, you’ve never experienced this kind of pain and torment,” said Commander Tio.

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” whispered Casey.

Tio’s gaze narrowed. “Don’t be. I’ll be saying those words to you first thing tomorrow morning.”

“You’re heartless!” she yelled at him.

He wagged his finger at her and yelled, “No! That title belongs to humans.”

“One day, you’ll pay for everything you’ve done,” she retorted.

He scoffed. “If I could speed up this weapon and have every Earthling destroyed this very second, I would.”

“You can’t do that!” yelled Jack.

*Jack, be quiet!* she screamed in her head. Although she understood his panic because she nearly fainted at Tio’s suggestion. *Speed it up? So this ship could explode this very second into smithereens? No way!* “It seems patience is not your strength, Commander. Be sure you make that clear the next time you’re applying for a job as alien dictator,” Casey said, rolling her eyes.

“Perhaps your decision was a little too hasty, Sheik.”

At the sound of Thorn’s voice, Tio’s head snapped sharply in his direction. “Thorn.” He smiled. “How nice of you to join our little party, and here I thought you were dead.”

Brothers reunited. How touching. Casey frowned, wondering how it would all turn out. *Could Thorn convince Tio to let us live? Or will Thorn just kick us to the curb to save himself?* If she hadn’t been involved in it herself, it would have made for a really good dramatic moment.

“Yes, and had I gone along with your crazy plan, I would’ve advised you to keep the scientists alive. They could’ve told you how to manually turn it on.”

“I heard your ship crashed.” The commander blinked and whispered, “I thought you were dead.”

“Thought...or hoped?”

“True to your name, brother, you’re like a *thorn* in my flesh, but you are family.” Tio motioned to one of his men. “Get these restraints off my brother.” He lifted Thorn’s chin. “You’re in my good graces. You brought me the female teenager I was searching for—perhaps a token of peace between us, just in case you were caught messing with my weapon, hmm?”

*Thorn would never do that...would he?* Casey’s gaze locked on him as she narrowed her eyes. *How well do I really know this guy?* It had only been less than a day, and that was barely enough time to find out what he had for dinner. He wasn’t even from Earth; he was the alien

brother of the madman who wanted to destroy every breathing soul on the planet.

“You’ve got it all wrong,” said Thorn. “They’re not who you think they are.”

Tio didn’t seem to pay attention as he stepped closer to Casey, his face inches from hers. “You’re such a rare find, and I had to have you. Do you realize how precious you are to me?”

“Get away from me.” She turned her head, and her gut twisted as he stroked her cheek like a prized possession. His icy touch made her shiver.

“I thought you were all extinct, yet here you are. Your unique strands of DNA could be the key to saving my people.” Tio looked her up and down. “Black hair, light blue eyes, healthy...a perfect specimen.”

She wanted to tell the truth so badly, but she feared he might flip out and kill them right on the spot. At the moment, whatever Tio believed about them was more valuable than setting things straight. She shot a glance at Jack in time to see him open his mouth to speak. Eyeballing him, she shook her head, giving him the cue to keep quiet.

The commander moved over to Jack, holding his jaw in a firm grip before he turned Jack’s head left, then right, as though to inspect him. “Brown hair, dark blue eyes, healthy...another perfect specimen.”

“Let them go,” hissed Thorn.

“What would make you think I would do that?” Tio turned toward Thorn, his voice soft and caring. “This is a true miracle. With these specimens, we can save the rest of our race and have a place to inhabit and call *our* home. I was going to wait until the takeover of Earth to examine the male teenager. Originally, I had him scheduled for deep sleep.” He paused for effect. “But now, everything’s changed. With two live test subjects, I’m going to call my medical team and make this a top priority. Why wait when we can run a molentarectomy and have preliminary test results by tomorrow?”

Thorn threw a hand up and stared at him hard. “Over my dead body, Sheik. This is exactly why I left in the first place. Your judgment is severely skewed. Killing these humans is not necessary.”

*Wait...kill us? Oh man!* Jolting shudders traveled through Casey’s body. It was time to give up their identity and sing like a canary. Getting sliced open on some lab table within the hour wasn’t on her list of things she wanted to accomplish in life. “Jack and I aren’t even from Agartha! We’re from the surface of Earth. California to be more precise.”

“What?” He frowned. “So you’re telling me you went down to Agartha to take a stroll?” His tone dripped with sarcasm. “Please! Youth nowadays have no imagination when it comes to telling lies.”

“Search my thoughts,” she retorted, “and you’ll see.”

“Don’t mind if I do. Focus on those images, and it’ll be easier for me to see.” The commander pressed a hand against Casey’s forehead and closed his eyes. The skin felt dry and scaly. He inched closer, and she swallowed past the lump in her throat. Seconds passed, and his eyes flew open with a gasp. He pulled her chin upward, and she winced as his voice roared like thunder. “What? You’re nothing more than a pathetic human I could’ve abducted from anywhere? This is outrageous! How did a human from the surface even get down there? It’s absolutely impossible.”

She wanted to show him what an idiot he really was, so she gathered the courage to face him once more. “Why don’t you try digging a little deeper?”

The commander closed his eyes again. “Focus again.”

She concentrated hard. The last thing she needed him seeing was her disarming the weapon.

She cleared her mind the way the lodomodo had shown her earlier. First, images started to pop up before her eyes: fishing, the raging storm, *Wind Dancer* sinking, the whirlpool, the cave, swimming to land, and the beach. It all happened so fast, yet it seemed as though ages had passed.

Tio's eyes moved behind his closed lids. "Shipwrecked," he murmured. "It can't be."

Casey felt her feet leave the floor as the commander grabbed her by the collar and lifted her off the ground, choking her. She gasped, coughed, and then gasped another breath of air. *How is he this strong?* She shot a panicked look at Thorn. "Hello? Aren't you gonna help me?" Her heart hammered in her chest as she struggled to breathe. She wondered if her panicked breaths would be her last.

"Sheik." Thorn grabbed his arm, his gaze imploring Tio to stop and look at him. "Leave her alone."

"You'll pay for deceiving me, human." Tio yanked his hand away, and Casey tumbled to the floor, sucking in air. She moaned as searing waves of pain rippled across her back.

"Casey!" yelled Jack.

She could barely get the words out. "I'm...I'm okay."

The commander turned toward Jack and grabbed his throat, squeezing hard with every bit of rage within him. Jack's face turned purplish red, and his eyes bulged like they might pop out of his head. "My men told me about your ridiculous story, but I didn't believe a human from the surface could penetrate Agartha," said Commander Tio.

"Let him go!" shouted Casey. "You're killing him."

## Chapter 2

"Forget the boy." Thorn's voice rose to a furious crescendo. "You have much bigger problems to contend with."

"Keep quiet, Thorn," the commander hissed. He loosened his grip on Jack, who stumbled back and gasped in a giant breath.

Casey gasped and raced to where he fell. "Jack! Are you okay?"

He nodded, sucking in gulps of air.

"No." Thorn shook his head. "I'm warning you, letting that weapon go off at the designated time will be your downfall."

Commander Tio's gaze narrowed. "What are you saying?"

Casey motioned Thorn to keep quiet. *Yeah. What is he saying?* He better not let the cat out of the bag. There was no way he could appeal to Tio's sanity. They'd soon find Thorn was just as insane for believing he could change his psycho brother.

"Put a team together and try to disarm your weapon," said Thorn. "I don't want to see any more innocent life destroyed. You're not that cruel and vicious."

Jack snorted, and Thorn shot him an irritated look as he continued, "I know you'll make the right choice."

"You have that much faith in me, huh?" Tio nodded. "Good for you."

Scrambling up, Casey wiggled her wrists, and a searing pain shot through her. The handcuffs cut into her skin as she twisted, desperately struggling to break free, but the bindings just tightened. Giving up, she tuned back in to Thorn and his brother, hoping he knew what he was doing. Granted, playing on his brother's emotions seemed like a good plan, but it wouldn't

work so well if the other brother didn't want to play along. She hoped Tio had some shred of conscience that Thorn could tap into. She frowned. *I doubt he even has a conscience.*

Tio crossed his arms behind his back, seemingly amused. "What would I do without my little brother Thorn, the voice of reason?"

"I know deep down there's still a part of you that's good, sweet, and pure," said Thorn.

Casey rolled her eyes. Thorn needed to realize that digging one's way through an iceberg with an ice pick might be easier than reaching his brother.

"Obviously, you don't know me as well as you think," said the commander.

Thorn blinked. "What do you mean?"

"That's one messed-up family," whispered Jack.

Casey nodded. "Tell me about it."

Thorn hesitated, then spoke, "I've always loved you and always will, but you need to pay for your crimes. It's a shame we've gone down such different paths."

"Or so it seems," said Tio. "How's General Ashtar? The man who captured you and spared your life, only to brainwash you. Are you still jumping at his every command?"

Thorn snorted. "If I did, I would've dropped off a bomb that would've killed you hours ago, but I refused to go that route."

"Really?" The commander nodded. "Why? Were you afraid of spooking the kids? Or maybe you just love me." When Thorn didn't answer, he continued, "You promised to serve and protect our kingdom. It seems to me that some of these values are still knocking at the back of your mind. So, I ask you, brother, why aren't you in your rightful place by my side?"

Thorn balled his fists. "Don't you dare try to manipulate me. I made that promise before you turned into a monster."

"Monster? That's a big word. Wouldn't that describe the poor souls who betray their loved ones, hurting them to fulfill their own needs?" Tio cocked a brow. "I don't see myself doing any of that, do you? However, it doesn't seem like you're keeping true to your ancestry and who you are."

"Did you just call me a monster? I'm not the one who was on the verge of willfully killing millions of innocent bystanders!" hissed Thorn.

"Hmm. Clearly your false interpretation of my words stems from the guilt inside you." The commander paused, and silence ensued. For a moment, Casey doubted they'd resume their debate, but Tio continued, "We're brothers. How could you abandon your family?"

Casey suppressed a snort. *Boy, he's good at manipulation and playing the family card. If he ever felt a need for a change in careers, he should seriously consider being a used car salesman. He'd make millions.*

"You betrayed our kingdom when you joined the rebels and left a path of destruction in your wake," said Thorn. "I followed you blindly, but you took it one step too far when you started performing inhumane experiments and established your ridiculous plan to take over Earth. You—"

Commander Tio interrupted, "You mean, when I saw a way to save everyone on our planet by giving them a new chance to live?"

Thorn shook his head and shot Casey an exasperated look. She was obviously not the only one thinking it was a lost cause. She had yet to hear of a fanatic coming to their senses with any kind of logic.

"Disarm the weapon," demanded Thorn. "If you don't, your fate is sealed."

Casey groaned. *First Jack and now Thorn. Why can't they just keep quiet and stop tossing*

*around hints like hot potatoes?*

“This isn’t your fight.” Tio’s voice rose into a thundering crescendo as he glared at Thorn.

“Why do you help the Earthlings? You’re not even from Earth. After what they did to us, after everything they took from our people, from you and me...” He shook his fist, his eyes throwing daggers. “After all of that, they must pay. They must pay for what they’ve done to us.”

“What did they take? Not all of them deserve this fate because a few—”

Tio cut him off, his voice soft and caring. “Thorn, your name is legendary among our people. You defeated the Reptilians, the most feared warriors in the universe, yet look what your leaders have reduced you to. Your only backup are a couple of helpless teenagers! I, on the other hand, could give you fleets of ships, weapons, and thousands of soldiers who will be at your beck and call, under your command. Let’s start a new life on Earth.”

Casey rolled her eyes and met Jack’s gaze. He blew out a frustrated breath. She could see why Sheik Tio was such a respected leader: The guy didn’t shy away from anything, not even from the cheapest tricks in a *Manipulation for Dummies* handbook. Of course, after mentioning the disappointed family, the nation in need, and a bit of screaming, he’d come after Thorn with all the gold he could get. Toss in the leprechaun outfit, and Tio could have legally changed his name to Rumpelstiltskin. After all, he was just as manipulative as the fairytale freak.

“You’re offering me a place among the rebels?” asked Thorn.

His brother nodded, his eyes gleaming like those of a predator whose prey was foolishly nearing his territory.

Casey wanted to scream at Thorn to remember what they came for. They had come to stop the lunatic from following through with his sociopathic mission, but any further hints, and it would all turn into the first round of *Who Wants To Be a Millionaire*. She cleared her throat to get Thorn’s attention, eager to send him a message with her eyes, mind, or whatever part of her body might have some psychic abilities, but he ignored her, focusing all his attention on his brother.

“What is it then?” asked Tio. “Are you going to lead your nation into freedom and glory or stick with the humans who destroyed and took everything away from us?”

“Freedom and glory?” Thorn shook his head. “Why would I want that when it’s built on someone else’s blood?”

Tio cocked his head, hesitating for a moment. Clearly, rejection was definitely something he didn’t expect. Casey could almost see his mind working, spinning some other kind of wicked technique to get Thorn to do what he wanted. She couldn’t wait to see what he’d come up with next. Tio’s lips stretched into a lazy smile, the kind one would expect to see on a spider playing with a helplessly trapped fly. “I can forgive you, brother. It wasn’t your fault you were brainwashed by the enemy. I can even make you second-in-command, like good old times.”

She closed her eyes, frustrated beyond belief. *The forgiveness card! Why didn’t I see that one coming?*

Tio continued, “Come here where you belong and join me.” He unfastened his necklace from around his neck. An ankh dangled from a silver chain, catching the light as he handed it to Thorn. “Here, take this. It is my gift to you. No other deserves to wear it more than you, my brother.”

*Oh no! He’s throwing in the sentimental factor.* He was pulling out all the tricks to get his brother back on his side. Casey looked at Jack, who shook his head, struggling in his cuffs, and she let out a huff.

Thorn blinked as he examined the necklace, running his hands across the etched symbols

and tiny diamonds that lined the edges. “This was Father’s.” His voice came so low that she wasn’t sure she heard him right.

Tio shot her a triumphant look. “It’s been in our family for hundreds of generations.”

Casey blew out a breath. Something that held that much sentimental value wasn’t good for her cause. Surely, Thorn would cave.

“It’s still so...so beautiful,” whispered Thorn.

It seemed as though Commander Tio knew how to tug at his brother’s heartstrings. She had to admit, the ankh was a beautiful heirloom, the perfect gift to convert anyone, particularly someone with a conscience as big as Thorn’s.

“How ironic that it represents life,” whispered Thorn, turning it over and over in the light.

Tio nodded. “You’re right, brother—the life *we’re* going to give to our people on Planet Earth.”

Casey scoffed. *Sure, after the crazy nut kills every human on the planet first.*

“What about all the lives you’ve taken?” asked Thorn. “What are they getting out of the deal?”

“Sometimes bad things have to happen for the greater good.” Commander Tio paused for effect. “Need I remind you that I wouldn’t be standing here today had the humans not messed with our planet, slaughtering millions of people? Did we ask for that? Once we have control of Earth, we will invite the rest of our people to join us. Regardless of what you might think of me, I don’t want to be a rebel and an outcast. I’m ready to make peace with our leaders and share everything.”

Thorn took a deep breath, nodding. “You think your plan seems noble, but—”

Tio interrupted him, something he seemed to be good at. “Once we’ve settled on Earth, our leaders will come around and eventually call this planet their home too. They’ll see that my plan was ingenious and apologize for making me an enemy of the state, for labeling me a rebel. Don’t you see? I’m doing this for *our* race, brother! Let’s all join together in perfect harmony. It’s what Father would’ve wanted.”

*Gosh! That guy could give any politician out there a run for their money. Surely, Thorn won’t buy it...or will he?* Casey regarded him, taking in the sudden flush on his face and the way his eyes sparkled. There was a fight inside of him, and she could see it wasn’t an easy choice.

“Not at the cost of precious life,” said Thorn, but the way he clenched and unclenched his hands told her she couldn’t be sure about his words.

“The humans brought this on themselves.”

“I do understand your pain, and I wish Father was here to help ease it.” Thorn stared at the necklace. “I miss him just as much as you do, but he’s not here, and we have to do the right thing, even if it means leaving justice to others. That is what he would have wanted us to do—the right thing.”

Tio put an arm around Thorn’s shoulders, and a sad smile played across his lips. She knew it was fake, plastered there for the benefit of the recipient; she could tell by the way his eyes darted about, restless, eager to get the pesky dealings over and done with. He could pretend all he wanted, but it was difficult to believe he carried an ounce of compassion in his vindictive bones.

“Father loved you, and I want you to remember that. You shall have the ankh as a symbol of his love. Wear it and be proud. It’s been worn by many a great warrior and has adorned the neck of a mighty king.”

For a moment, Thorn closed his eyes, and silence ensued.

Casey blanched. She knew if he turned on them, they’d be screwed. Thorn could have his

old cozy life back, wear his precious necklace, and lead the rebels with his brother at his side. They could find another way to kill everyone on the planet, then take over without batting an eyelash. *Will Thorn even care what happens to me? To Mike? To Jack?*

“I can’t bear to see you die,” Thorn whispered.

Casey shuddered. *Oh man! He’s caving!* She glanced at Jack, who was shaking his head in disbelief. Thorn was supposed to be a professional, the very best. *How can he crumble like this? How can Commander Tio manipulate him so easily? Yeah, they’re family, but so what?* Thorn knew full well his brother was a raving lunatic in big time need of a padded cell.

“My mission was only to stop you, but everything went wrong,” said Thorn. “You need to get a team together and disable the weapon immediately. If you can’t, I beg you to abandon ship before it explodes and everyone aboard perishes. I didn’t mean for any of this to happen—not this way.”

*Great. Blabbermouth Thorn just spilled the beans.* Casey’s mouth dropped. *How could I have expected anything less? A brother would never turn against his own flesh and blood, right? Talk about conflict of interest! General Ashtar should’ve known this would happen. What if the Greys abandon ship and leave us stranded? I have no desire to become space shrapnel.*

Tio chuckled. “Pulling one of your crazy stunts? How far will you go to protect the humans?”

Jack’s eyes widened. Casey took a deep breath and let it out slowly. *Holy cow!* Thorn had pulled so many stunts over the years on missions that even his own brother didn’t believe The Grey who Cried “Wolf”.

“I’m trying to save your life here!” Thorn threw his hands up, his voice loud and strong. “I won’t be held accountable for your bloodshed.”

Tio regarded him, unimpressed. “Stop putting on one of your elaborate acts. I’ve seen it all before. You’re good at what you do, but while others—like my soldiers—might fall for it, I know you far too well. Those scare tactics won’t work on me.”

“Why won’t you listen?” he asked, emotion flickering across his face. “There isn’t much time, and you should—”

“My men examined the weapon and reported it is fine. I confirmed their reports by inspecting it myself.”

Thorn motioned over to Casey and Jack. “Read their thoughts.” He placed both hands on his brother’s shoulders. “No, wait…even better, read mine.”

“Thorn, you can’t—” Casey started.

“No!” He glared at her. “He needs to know. He must be given a chance to save his life. It’s the right thing to do.”

Casey set her jaw. *Thorn and his do-the-right-thing code.* Soon, they’d be back to square one, with Tio getting the weapon into working mode and them under a lot of pressure to come up with yet another plan. She doubted she could take on another battalion with her bare hands.

“Enough of your foolishness. I’m giving you a fantastic opportunity here, but you don’t seem to see its importance. I won’t say it again. Your place is by my side, among your people, Thorn. Take this opportunity. You will regret it if you don’t.”

Thorn’s gaze narrowed. “Are you threatening me?”

“Why would I do such a thing?” the commander asked. “I don’t want you dead. If I did, you’d wouldn’t be standing here.”

Casey inched her way over to Jack and leaned her head on his shoulder.

“It’s okay,” he whispered. “We’ll get out of this, I promise.”

“How?” she muttered, so low he couldn’t possibly have heard her.

Jack shrugged. “I don’t know, but we’ll be all right.”

“No we won’t.” She could see the love Thorn felt for his older brother. They might’ve had a falling-out, but they still cared for the other’s wellbeing. No way would Thorn abandon him or let him die. She was as good as dead. Tears of anger welled up in her eyes at the thought. Someone should’ve told them Thorn was related to the leader of the rebels. They had all thought they could save Earth and everyone else, but now, with Thorn betraying them, the people who mattered most to her were helpless. Her heart sank, and tears began to well up. She wouldn’t be able to save her parents or Mike. The only thing that gave her comfort was knowing that she was responsible for saving billions of other people’s lives on Earth.

The commander squeezed Thorn’s shoulder, his eyes glinting. “I am still waiting for your answer, brother.”

Casey’s heart pounded, and she held her breath. She was as good as a goner.

Thorn closed his eyes as if in thought, then opened them to gaze down at the necklace and shook his head. He rubbed his thumb against the smooth ank.

“Join me,” tempted Commander Tio. “It’s your last chance.”

“Never!” he shouted. “My home’s not with you and a bunch of rebels. My home is with the people you left to lead this band of criminals.” He threw the chain at his brother. “I will not wear a symbol that represents life while murdering billions of people. Father would’ve never condoned your actions. You know that.”

Slowly, Casey let out her breath. *Thank goodness he came to his senses!* However, it still didn’t mean Commander Tio wouldn’t kill them. She looked up at Jack with as much composure as she could manage.

Tio’s eyes glinted with something she couldn’t quite place: malice, distrust, or maybe even glee. Where a spark of brotherly bond had just flickered, a trace of ice took its place. He glanced over at his soldiers. “Take them to the Sky Pod.”

Casey blinked, confusion taking over. *What is the Sky Pod?* She dared a glance at Thorn, regretting it instantly. He looked terrified, and the furrow on his forehead deepened in disbelief.

Thorn’s jaw dropped as handcuffs clicked shut on his wrists. “What? But I’m your brother! What’s happened to you, Sheik?”

Tio straightened himself and laughed. “You’re no longer my brother. He died yesterday in that ship crash. I have no idea who you are.”

Casey’s mouth opened in shock as hands grabbed her from behind, shoving her forward without the slightest bit of patience. “Move it,” hissed a soldier. “We have a lovely surprise waiting for you.”

Her chest throbbed with each breath. *Why do I have the feeling this surprise won’t involve a nice visit to the local spa?* If there was a perfect time to tune in to her psychic abilities or superpowers, this was it. After a few more deep breaths, she realized it might be time to give up her childhood fantasy; it was never gonna happen.

### Chapter 3

The soldiers escorted Casey, Jack, and Thorn out of the weapon room and down the corridor. The cold barrel of a gun pressed hard against Casey’s neck. *If only I could karate chop him,* she thought, but her hands were cuffed behind her back. *Besides, what would a few karate*

*chops do against all these soldiers, my personal escorts to this so-called "lovely surprise"?* She wondered what the soldier had meant by that. Sweat ran down her back as she followed the others into a large room. She lifted her gaze, daring a look at the flashing lights and computer screens covering whitewashed walls. "Where are we? The NASA Mission Control Center?"

Jack shook his head, his eyes wide. "I've no clue."

Her uniform was glued to her back now, and wings fluttered in her stomach. As she shot Thorn a questioning look, he turned away, and that scared her the most. He was definitely hiding something.

A soldier marched to a touch-screen control panel and punched in a code. A tormenting smirk spread across his face as he turned toward them, his eyes cold as ice. "Welcome to the Sky Pod."

Sliding glass doors appeared in a burst of light. Casey watched them stretch open, revealing an oversized, dimly lit cell that she thought might be some kind of jail. But it was different than the one Jack had been held in.

A guard snapped her handcuffs open and shoved her forward, and she fell to her knees. Thorn landed next to her, and Jack skidded across the floor, slamming his head into the wall.

Ignoring the throbbing pain radiating up and down her legs, Casey crawled over. "Are you okay?"

"Not sure," Jack mumbled through clenched teeth. He pushed his body into a sitting position. "I'm seeing stars." His breath became ragged, and his hands balled into white-knuckled fists as he stared ahead.

Casey touched his shoulder. "Those idiots didn't have to be so rough. Please tell me you're okay."

Jack squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them. He turned his head toward the other side of the room. "No. I mean I'm *really* seeing stars. Look!"

Casey followed his gaze. As her eyes adjusted, she gasped. "Oh man! You're right." Thousands of twinkling lights surrounded them, perhaps even millions. Countless craters stretched out across the surface of a big yellow ball to the left. She flinched. "Is that the moon?" Casey felt jittery as she rose to her feet and took a tentative step forward, her aching body forgotten. She could see straight ahead for miles. *And what's that big blue circle swirling with white clouds below?* With trembling hands, she pushed her sweat-dampened hair out of her eyes. Her voice shook. "Is that Earth? What is this place?" It was the kind of view reserved for astronauts, so she wondered when she had signed up for Space Camp. *Oh yeah. I remember now. It was when I joined this crazy mission.*

"Another hologram?" asked Jack.

"No. This is a very real prison," said Thorn. "It's a glass cube suspended in space. We're right outside the mothership. She's suspended under a cloak, invisible to the naked eye, just like this pod."

Beads of sweat rolled down Jack's forehead. "I can't breathe. Everything's spinning."

Casey patted him on the back. "Take slow, deep breaths. Just inhale and exhale."

Closing his eyes, he nodded. "I hate this acrophobia."

"Excuse me?" asked Thorn, confused by the five-dollar word.

"Fear of heights," Casey explained, having been educated by Jack before. She wished there was more she could do for him, but there were more pressing matters to consider—like the ship blowing into smithereens. Placing her hands on the wall, she let her fingers glide across the smooth glass surface. The doors were gone, vanished into thin air. "How do we get out of here?"

This thing could break apart and crash any minute.”

“If there was any chance at escape, it wouldn’t be much of a prison. It is unbreakable though,” said Thorn. “And at least we’re protected from the freezing cosmos.”

Jack raised his eyebrows. “This can’t be for real. Why isn’t there a layer of ice or frost on the glass if it’s so cold out there?”

“The glass is made out of a special material that uses technology to prevent ice and frost from settling on the walls—at least for a while.”

“For a while?” Jack rose to his feet. “So how much longer till this cube becomes a giant ice sculpture? Or even worse, until we run out of air?”

Casey gripped Thorn’s arms. “Are you telling me we’re in a galactic freezer? I don’t want to die like this. In fact, I don’t want to die at all, now that I think about it—but especially not as a Popsicle.”

“It will be three days before we freeze or run out of air. Of course, I’m not sure we’ll have to worry about that,” said Thorn.

“Yeah, because the mothership will explode before that happens,” Jack retorted.

Casey gasped. “Don’t talk like that. My parents are still onboard, and so is Mike.” Her finger tapped the radar tracking device on her wrist. “Speaking of that, where is he? I can’t find a signal for him.”

“Hmm. Me neither,” said Jack, looking at his own device.

Thorn tapped his fingers against the tiny screen. “I’m getting no movement. Mike’s signal’s gone.”

*Not Mike too!* A chill ran down Casey’s spine as she unfastened her radar device to shake it. Something stirred, and she squealed with delight as a red, blinking light flickered. “I got him! He’s close.”

Thorn spun toward the glass wall, avoiding their gaze. “I’m sorry I warned my brother about the ship exploding. The words just rolled off my tongue. He’s my family, and I never agreed to take his life. I would’ve never let my brother hurt you. You know that, right? I hope you understand and that we have enough time left for you to forgive me.”

Casey was beyond furious at Thorn, but she had to remind herself that she wouldn’t feel the same if it was Mike or Jack or somebody she dearly loved tempting her like that. Letting out a sigh, she pondered. She would’ve done the exact same thing. *How could Thorn be expected to stand by and watch his brother die? Even if he is a big evil meanie space jerk.* “I’m ticked, but I understand,” said Casey. “The commander didn’t believe one word you said.”

“I know, and that will be my brother’s downfall.” Thorn turned to face them. “You both deserve to know the truth about Sky Pod.” As the words came slowly out of his mouth, Casey could only stare in disbelief. “This is an execution pod. We won’t have time to freeze, suffocate, or be exploded along with this vessel because they will eventually release us into space at some point.”

Casey squinted and started to open her mouth to spill out a panicked string of questions, but Thorn raised a finger, beckoning her to listen.

“We can only hope it happens before the ship explodes. That will buy us some time.”

“What if they don’t?” Jack asked.

“Then we die.”

*Die?* The room seemed smaller, the air thicker and hotter. A heavy sensation pushed down on her lungs, making it harder to breathe. “No! This isn’t fair. This wasn’t the way it was supposed to be.” Casey’s eyes filled with tears. She wished she could hold her mom and dad; she

needed their tight hugs in that desperate moment. Whatever happened to her, her parents didn't deserve to go like that.

Jack lashed out by pounding on the wall with his hands. His voice rose an octave or two, and his eyes darted left and right. "My parents will never know what happened to me. They'll think we drowned in the sea from a boating accident. This isn't how I imagined my life ending." Jack took a deep breath. "Do you remember our to-do list? Fishing—"

"I know."

"Swimming..."

Tears rolled down her cheeks, and a rush of emotions flooded through her. "I'm the one who wrote the list."

"Snorkeling..."

She touched his shoulder, and her lips trembled. "I didn't mean for it to turn out like this, Jack. I just...I didn't know."

"Inner tubes and floats." Jack spun toward her. "Your list didn't mention dinosaurs, advanced civilizations, weapons of mass destruction, or boarding motherships."

"I know that." Casey's legs wobbled, and her head spun. *Why can't we just return to the lives we led before and leave saving Earth and everything else to people who know what they're doing?*

Jack caught her as she collapsed, and they both sank to their knees.

Casey touched his face. "Why does this have to happen?"

He gently pushed aside some strands of hair that had fallen over her eyes. "I could scream and pound on the walls all night, but it won't change a thing."

She buried her head against his shoulder and breathed in his sweet scent. His hand wandered to the small of her back, rubbing ever so gently until she felt tears welling up in her eyes again.

Jack held her tight, and his voice came as soft as a whisper. "It's destiny, Casey. We can't fight it."

"Why's destiny so cruel?" She wrapped her arms around his neck. "I'm so scared, Jack. And only agreed to do all of this so I could get you off this ship and save my parents on Earth."

Jack held her tighter and stroked her back, soothing her.

"Why aren't my mom and dad on Earth where it's safe, where they're supposed to be?" She broke out into loud, uncontrollable sobs. It had to be her darkest moment—ever.

Jack wiped her tears away.

Casey took out her braid and shook her hair free. She slowly stood. Staring straight out into the darkness, she put her palm against the cool glass and breathed in sharply. Starlight gleamed down on them. Her reflection looked back at her, despair edged in every soft line on her face. "We save the world, but I can't save the people I love."

"We'll end our lives knowing we did something selfless and heroic—something that saved billions of others," said Thorn. "Our sacrifice will be honored by the Agarthians for generations and generations to come."

*So what if there's some kind of shrine built for us in some Agarthian version of the Smithsonian? What good will a life-sized statue of us do? What will that prove?* Casey lay down on the floor and gazed upward. She could feel the cold, slick surface under her back. A breathtaking vista of the night sky would be forever etched in her mind. One thing was for sure: If she somehow made it, she had the perfect inspiration for a mural on her bedroom wall and ceiling.

Minutes passed, and no one talked. She rose up on an elbow and looked at her radar device

on her wrist. “Hey, Jack. It just turned midnight. Happy seventeenth.”

“You remembered?”

She nodded. *How could I ever forget?* “I have a special birthday present for you.”

“Really?”

“I’m going to name a star after you. Hmm...which one should I pick?” She pointed to the biggest, brightest one. “There! That one over there. I’m going to name it Jack.”

He lay next to her. “It’s perfect.”

For a moment, she let her mind switch off. She let go of everything and anything around them, and denial became her friend. When she looked up at him, his gaze met hers. “Happy Birthday, Jack. I mean it. I only wish it could be happier.”

He leaned closer and put his hand in hers, his hot breath almost touching her skin. “Thanks, Casey. And I couldn’t think of anyone I’d rather spend it with.”

“The stars are so close. I feel like I could just reach out and touch one.”

“We’re only 300 miles closer to them than we were,” said Jack, getting all scientific again. “They’re still billions of miles away. We’re way closer to the moon.”

The golden moon shone brightly in the midnight sky. With Jack around, she felt calm and at peace. *Why did I ever think we could just be friends? There is so much more that I truly want from him.* She cleared her throat and turned her attention to Thorn. “What’s it like to walk around the moon in a spacesuit?”

“You’re misinformed. There’s an atmosphere with water and vegetation. The dark side of the moon is just like Earth with rivers, mountains, valleys, and even animals.”

“Wow! I guess all I’d need would be a t-shirt, a pair of jeans, and a good old pair of tennis shoes.”

“See the large globular masses over the moon?” asked Thorn, pointing at the thick, dark, shapeless cloud formations.

They both nodded.

Thorn motioned toward the moon. “Cloud formations could not exist without an atmosphere or pressure, and—”

“The atmosphere’s held around the satellite by the force of gravity,” finished Jack, obviously proud of himself.

“Exactly,” said Thorn. “Civilizations in your solar system are common knowledge to everyone except Earth. I don’t know why your government wishes to keep it from you, but regardless of their motives, we have to respect their wishes. As long as we’re cloaked, we do have permission to enter the South and North Poles to Agartha.”

A streak of light flashed across the sky. “Look! A shooting star.” Casey shook Jack’s shoulder. “Quick...make a wish!”

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Casey took in his perfect profile for a while before doing the same.

Her eyes were still closed when his voice jolted her out of her thoughts. “What did you wish for?”

*To be back home in California, running along the beach. It’d be so nice to smell the saltwater in the air, to hear the waves crash, and to feel the sun and wind on my face—especially if Jack was there with me.* “If I tell you, it won’t come true!”

He smiled, his eyes glinting.

“Maybe I should ask what you wished for,” Casey said.

“I’ll never tell,” he chuckled.

Blue, white, yellow, orange, and red shooting stars streaked across the black velvet sky, leaving long, flaming tails in their wake.

She leaned back on both elbows. “We’re in the middle of some kind of meteor shower. Isn’t it awesome?”

A celestial glow covered Jack’s face. “Yeah, it’s like being at a fireworks show with no sound.”

Thorn cleared his throat and walked to the corner of the room. He gazed out into the distance. “I only wanted to deactivate the weapon and save innocent lives. General Ashtar said nobody would get hurt.” He paused. “If you don’t mind, I’d like a few moments to myself.”

“We understand,” said Casey.

Jack’s gaze seemed focused outside the glass, into the depths of space.

Casey nudged him playfully. “You look like you’re hundreds of miles away.”

“Well, we are, aren’t we?” His eyebrows lifted.

She laughed.

“Look at the Earth. I remember when we were kids, dreaming about saving the world.”

Casey blinked, the memories coming back.

*Just five years old, dressed in Halloween costumes, playing in Mike's backyard. I had a Wonder Woman suit, Mike was Spider-Man, and Jack was Superman. We were shouting, giggling, ducking beneath the flapping, cool sheets hanging on the clothesline.*

*As heavy clouds started to roll in, the sky turned dark. The wind blew hard, making the wind chimes chime wildly. Our shouting turned into laughter.*

*Mike's mom yelled, “Hey, Casey and Jack, do you want to stay over for dinner?”*

*“Yes!” we screamed in unison.*

*“But first, we have to save the world!” I told her.*

*“Okay. You’ve got five minutes, my little superheroes.”*

*Mike sighed. “But, Mom, the evil aliens are trying to take over the Earth.”*

*“Yeah, we have to stop them!” added Jack.*

*Mike's mom laughed. “Earth’s so lucky to have you three!”*

Casey’s thoughts returned to the present. She laid her head on Jack’s shoulder. “I remember you used to run around wearing that long red cape.”

“Well, as I recall, you never took off that gold tiara of yours,” said Jack.

She let out a laugh. “Don’t forget the matching gold bracelets.” She paused in thought.

“Maybe—just maybe—we were preparing for our future, even if we had no idea.”

“Without a doubt,” he whispered.

Casey stood. “Dance with me?”

He glanced at her, his laughter dying in his throat. “What? Now? Here, in an alien death chamber, you feel like doing the tango?”

“I can’t take the pain, Jack. Please help me forget where we are, even if it is only for a moment.”

Jack grabbed her hand and twirled her around quickly, smiling as she giggled. A firestorm of shooting stars soared across the heavens, as if applauding their efforts on the makeshift dance floor. Jack’s arm wrapped around Casey’s waist, and he dipped her backward, until her long hair brushed against the floor. He pulled her out of the dip and back onto her feet. Again, he twirled her around. And so they laughed and danced—under the sparkling light of a million stars.

The meteor storm blazed; colors continued to swirl all around the cube. Stars glittered like diamonds. Finally, they danced close and slow. Casey’s heart pounded as she realized how nice

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