

Agartha's Castaway

Book 9

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

How did Commander Tio discover we are in the Deep Sleep Lab? Did Thorn, Jack, and Mike manage to get to the ship without being stopped? Casey shook her head against the hundreds of thoughts and questions racing through her mind as she arched her back and kicked, struggling to free her arms from the soldier's grasp.

"Stop it," he hissed.

"Let me go," she shouted furiously. "I swear, once I'm done with you—"

"You're not going anywhere except into deep sleep," Tio interrupted. He turned to face his squad. "Line the Agarthians against the wall, single file. Shoot anyone who refuses to cooperate."

If they gave in, they'd be lost, because the commander would kill them regardless. "Don't listen to him!" Casey shouted. "Together, we have to fight back with everything we have!"

A rush of murmurs echoed through the group, then faded into silence.

Tio's menacing gaze focused back on Casey. "For some reason, they're not listening to you."

The people were like sheep being led to the slaughter. Casey couldn't understand why they wouldn't fight. She was sure if they stood together, they'd stand a chance.

The commander's voice broke through her thoughts. "Didn't you think waking up all these people would set off an alarm? I immediately forced the doors open and sent in my troops."

She ignored his harsh tone. Opening the deep sleep pods all at once without thinking there would be consequences was a mistake she wished she hadn't made. Of course, it wouldn't have mattered anyway, because she never would have left her parents behind.

Tio grabbed a fistful of hair and yanked her head back. "You're nothing but a kid playing soldier, and your silly little game will cost you your life."

She winced as a jolt of pain shot through her scalp. *Maybe I am a kid playing soldier, but I certainly didn't ask for any of this.* Fate had bestowed this wonderful honor upon her, and now it would ultimately lead to her death. Frowning, she rolled her eyes. *Thanks a lot, Fate.*

Tio bent forward, whispering in her ear, "You might not be the dark-haired Agarthian I was seeking, but there are plenty of experiments I can't wait to try out on you."

She stared at him, infusing a message into her gaze that soon he'd be defeated. The soldier's grip felt like iron around her upper arms, squeezing her muscles until they burned—and not in a

good way, like when she worked out to her *Celebrity Fit* video at home.

“Stop struggling,” said the soldier. “You’re just making it harder on yourself.”

Or on him. Maybe he’s having trouble pinning me to the spot? Granted, it was a long shot and probably based on pure wishful thinking, but being annoying was better than doing nothing. “I am?” Casey grinned and twisted, pushing her weight down like she’d learned in karate class. The sensei had said that move would get her out of any trouble, and now she could put it to the test. “You’ll pay for all of this, Tio, you sick jerk.”

Hands grabbed Casey’s shoulders from behind and shoved her down to her knees. Pain shot up through her legs. “Show respect to our leader!” the soldier said.

She peered around in mock confusion as much as her straining neck would allow. “Leader? What leader? Oh, him?” She nodded toward a frowning Commander Tio. “He isn’t *my* leader.”

“You didn’t dare.” Tio’s face turned into a cold mask, his eyes blazing with fury. Whatever Thorn had said about his hatred for humans was no exaggeration. “I feel so bad for your mother,” Tio continued, pointing. “The poor thing looks so upset, and the bad things haven’t even started happening to her yet. She’ll never make it past the first experiment like you.”

Casey turned, and her blood turned to ice. Her mom’s sobs echoed across the room. At the same moment, her father collapsed on the floor, with a grinning soldier standing behind him. She opened her mouth to call his name, her legs kicking in a frenzy as she stumbled to her feet.

“Oh no, you’re not going anywhere,” said the commander. “Did you really think you could sneak aboard my ship, steal my prisoners, foil my plans, and destroy my property?”

“Is *that* wrong?” she snapped.

The scream caught in her throat when a boot hit her in the pit of her stomach, making her fall backward, only to land with a *thud* on the floor. She swallowed down the pain.

Tio laughed as he scanned the room, his eyes lingering on her parents for a second too long. “Maybe I should shoot them where they are.”

“What’s wrong with you? Leave them alone.” Her voice sounded low and coarse, unrecognizable. She thought she tasted blood on her tongue, but it couldn’t be unless she had bitten it. “My parents didn’t do anything to you, you jerk!”

Tio narrowed his gaze. “I don’t like you, human—not one little bit.”

She lifted her head off the hard floor and forced herself up on her elbows, a smile playing on her lips. “Kind of figured that when you put me in a glass cage to be tossed into space.”

“You’re strong and feisty,” he said. “You might just live past the second experiment I have planned.”

“You’re insane.” Heart pounding, she scrambled up and lurched at the commander like a crazy woman. She spat on him as soldiers caught her midair and forced her back. “Hope you enjoy a sample of my DNA.”

Tio met her gaze and laughed. “I wouldn’t expect anything less. You’ll definitely make it past the first three experiments.”

“Monster!”

“Put her with the others,” Tio ordered.

Two soldiers grabbed her by each arm. “No way!” she shouted as she squirmed and kicked with every ounce of her strength.

In spite of her efforts, they dragged her over to the end of the line.

“Just shoot me and get it over with,” she yelled, raising her glance to catch a glimpse of her parents, regretting it instantly.

Her mom stood frozen to the spot, with her face pale and her eyes filled with unshed tears.

For a brief second, Casey thought she saw her mom's mouth contort, whispering her name, and then the expression changed to panic as her eyes started to dart around. She'd never seen her parents so scared in her entire life, and that frightened her more than any of Commander Tio's nasty threats.

"For this I'm going to—"

"You'll do nothing, little girl!" a soldier said with a sneer.

With a groan, Casey kicked again, but it was a feeble attempt. She took a deep breath and forced herself to stay calm. Giving up wasn't part of her personality, but her parents had been through enough already. Watching their only child be shot would be devastating. Besides, Casey wasn't a quitter. There was enough time to come up with an escape plan, or so she hoped.

The soldiers released their grip, hesitating for a moment before they walked further up the line. Casey struggled to her feet and rubbed her aching arms where their iron grip had stopped her blood flow. Her stomach lurched as she took one step after another, dizziness washing over her. *Where the heck are Thorn, Mike, and Jack...and that Kira chick?* Her dad leaned against the wall and closed his eyes, pearls of sweat shimmering on his pale face. Casey inched closer and hugged him and her mother tight.

An evil smile played on Tio's lips as he addressed the line of people standing against the wall, "My weapon will kill everyone on Earth!" Putting up his hood, he paused and took a slow look around, visibly enjoying the erupting gasps. "But you're to serve another purpose. You'll make excellent lab rats."

How am I going to get us out of this? At least twenty soldiers aimed guns at them. Tio met Casey's eyes as she searched for an escape route. "*Don't bother. You're mine,*" she heard his voice echoing in her head. "Keep dreaming, jerk!" she shouted. A woman let out a loud shriek, and Casey craned her neck toward the capsules to see what was happening.

Two soldiers grabbed the first person in line by her shoulders and dragged her to a capsule.

"Please don't do this," the woman begged. "Please! I have four children who need me."

"Get in," a soldier said in an irritated voice.

A tear slid down Casey's face. *How can these rebels be so heartless?* She needed to fight. They all did, before more reinforcements arrived. "Listen, everybody. Right now, there're more of us than them." Her voice thundered as she continued, "We can take them, but we have to fight. They can't shoot us all!"

"Bring her up to the front of the line," roared Commander Tio, pointing at her. "She's next. I've had enough of her mouth."

Strong fingers gripped Casey's wrists, and her mom let out a long sob. Her dad paled even more. He looked too weak to fight back as he slid down the wall to the floor. *Is this how it's going to end for me? For us? Deep sleep? Experiments?* A shiver shot through her. *No. If I'm going to die here, it's going to be on my own terms! They can just shoot me here and now, because I have no intention of being in one of those capsules ever again.*

She slammed a heel into the soldier's shin, and he loosened his grip. She ran in a burst toward her mom and hugged her. Her throat tightened, and she could barely speak. She slowly wiped her mother's tears away. "I love you, Mom." Her mom let out a ragged sob and gripped Casey's hands.

A rumble echoed through the corridor, growing louder with each passing second. Casey scanned the room as a rush of blazing hope flooded through her. *Is that Thorn and the others?* The crowd of prisoners clapped and shouted for joy.

A rebel took a few steps forward, glancing around. "What is that? Are we under attack?"

The sound of thunder shook the floor, and Casey's heart pounded. Sparks and metal flew as a spaceship crashed through the Deep Sleep Lab wall on the opposite side of them, hovering ten feet off the ground. Soldiers yelled and scattered to avoid the floating ship.

Casey grabbed her mom's shoulder and shook it. "Oh my gosh! They did it, and evaded capture too!" She knew Mike and Jack wouldn't leave without her. Grinning, she scooted along the wall to a soldier who was lying underneath the rubble and nudged him with her foot, then rolled him onto his back. He didn't move. She retrieved his gun from the floor as tiny pieces of plaster—or whatever it was—crumbled over her head from the ceiling, spraying a white cloud of dust. She covered her mouth and coughed. Pushing down the red button, she set the weapon to stun. Taking someone's life wasn't an option, even if they were slime balls.

Another shower of blue sparks rained down. The air grew thick with the smell of molten metal and plastic. Torn electrical wiring, hanging from the wall, began to smoke and crackle. Covering her head, Casey ducked as burning particles rained down on her, searing her skin. She groaned and brushed them off, wishing she had a fireman's suit.

She gazed at the ship, her way out of this nightmare. A ramp formed, the door opened, and Jack stepped down, followed by Mike, who made one of his famous, grand entrances. "Boys and girls, please don't try this at home. Smashing through walls with a spaceship is something only a trained professional should do."

Casey let out a sigh of relief. More than anything, she wanted to run and wrap her arms around them, but she had more important things on her mind, like Commander Tio, who stood less than twenty feet away. She inched closer to him like a cheetah stalking her prey.

Short-circuited computer panels blew up around Tio, and he immediately covered his head from the leaping sparks.

Casey's fingers flexed as she gripped her weapon. She came up from behind and whispered, "Not so fast, Commander." She thrust her gun to his head. A trickle of sweat rolled down her face. "Don't make me pull the trigger." She gave him a shove. "Now move!"

"Casey, wait. I'll take it from here!" Mike shouted.

She shook her head. This was her part to deal with; she owed it to her parents, but peering at the remaining soldiers and the determination on their faces, her heart squeezed tight in her chest. "Drop your weapons and get down on the ground or I'll shoot your beloved leader." She held the gun tight to his temple. When the soldiers hesitated, she realized they were in the mood for a little hardball. Her scowl deepened, and she repeated her demand in a more threatening tone. "I said to drop your weapons. Get on the ground. I swear I'll do it. I've got nothing to lose."

"The girl's unstable. Do as she says," ordered Tio.

The rebels lowered their weapons to the floor.

Their leader continued, "You'll pay for this, human."

Casey laughed. "With everything you've put me through, I already have."

Thorn, Jack, and Kira collected the weapons; many of the captives helped too.

"Stun them, Mike!" called out Thorn. "Start with the commander and then the others."

"You got it, boss." Mike aimed his gun at Tio's chest. "You should really do something about those dark circles. Here, let me help. Nighty night!"

"No!" said Tio. "You'll never get off the ship. I've changed the codes to the docking bay."

He was bluffing—he had to be—but Thorn's expression told another story.

Casey blew out a breath. *Isn't this ever going to end? I wish we could just parachute back to Earth.*

"Wait, Mike! Don't shoot." Thorn walked over to his brother, regarding him. "It's a lie. You

couldn't have changed them that fast."

Tio's lips curled into a grin. "Are you willing to take that chance, little brother?"

Thorn's mouth pressed into a thin line as he gazed from one face to the other. "Cuff him and tie him down. We can't take the risk of shooting him just yet. Start stunning the other soldiers. Once they're all out, we'll get the Agarthians on the ship. Casey can guard the commander for now." He touched Casey's shoulder. "Stand here, thirty feet away. If he makes a move, shoot him in the knee. If he moves again, shoot his other knee."

"It'll be my honor." Casey smiled as she pointed the gun at Tio. "Just get my folks on the ship."

"I will." Thorn sprinted into action.

Kira secured a brown rope tightly around the commander's shoulders, then wrapped his chest and arms over and over again. Mike cuffed his hands behind his back before rushing off.

Tio let out a moan as Kira slammed him against the wall. She snorted. "Please, by all means, have a seat."

He sank into the wall and slid down to the floor. "You should be dead with your other scientist friends."

Kira glared at him. If looks could kill, the battle would have been over right then and there. "Never underestimate the power of a woman." She turned toward Casey. "Do you have this under control?"

"Don't worry," said Casey. "I got this."

Kira nodded and bolted toward the others.

Tio struggled, battling with the ropes.

"Your left kneecap will go first," Casey warned.

He swallowed hard and straightened up, sudden realization shining in his eyes. He knew she'd shoot, and she would.

"Put down the gun." Commander Tio spoke in her head. *"I saved the most important people in your life and this is how you repay me?"* He paused. *"Why, I even saved your life."*

She shook her head. "Shut up!"

"Remember when my men were shooting at you for target practice in the forest? I called them off as soon as I received reports that you had dark hair. Your lives were spared that very second."

"Your mind games won't work on me." She rolled her eyes. "The only reason you spared me was because you thought I was a black-haired Agarthian, valuable for your research." She felt her blood boiling, anger rushing through her at the memory. "Why don't you try and get up? Go on. I dare you. I beg you. Do it."

He stared at her, hard. *"So, no thank-you note? How rude."*

"I told you to shut up!" She gripped the gun handle tightly and aimed for his head.

Tio sighed. *"I saved Jack from falling and burning in a lake of bubbling hot lava."*

She aimed the gun with steady arms, her legs in a wide stance. "Get out of my head!"

"When my soldiers found you again, I instructed them not to hurt you. I even told them to stun the dinosaurs that were about to have their next meal. I saved you and Mike from a torturous fate of gnashing teeth tearing you apart."

Roaring with fury, she took a few steps closer. He was twisting the truth to make her give in. "No. I don't believe you did it to help me. You didn't want those dinosaurs eating your valuable lab rats in one big gulp."

"I saved your mom and dad from fifty-foot waves. And let me tell you, your mom barely

made it. She called out your name with her last breath before we revived her."

She gasped. "Stop it!"

"Look at all I've done for you."

"Really?" She laughed and motioned with the gun. "So, let's see if I've got this all figured out right. If the storm hadn't rolled in, you would've abducted everyone aboard our sailboat." She stepped forward. "You stole Jack, my mom, and my dad from me—not to mention the tiny fact that you tried to kill me by throwing me in a cube to freeze while I rolled around in space. And now you want to do every unimaginable experiment on my body? Let's see, that about sums it up. Oh... wait..." She waved the gun in the air. "You activated a weapon that would destroy all life on my planet." She blew out a breath and said slowly, "Hmm. I'm thinking you really didn't do me any favors."

"Just now, when you mentioned the storm, I can see all kinds of images running through your mind. I see a scared girl stranded on what she thinks is an island, crying because she doesn't have her parents, any water, or supplies with her."

She clenched her teeth, heat rising in her cheeks. Her uniform stuck to her back from her sweaty, damp skin. She wasn't going to lose control, no matter how close he got to her. "That's enough. I'm not falling for your lies."

"Scared because she heard a roar in the jungle."

"I said that's enough!" She pressed her lips together.

"Frightened because a sloth is feeding on the very tree she's climbing, not to mention the giant flying lizard overhead."

She squeezed the trigger and fired a warning shot to the left, narrowly missing his head.

Tio flinched, but the voice inside her head didn't stop. *"Sorry, but your thoughts just keep flooding in. Trembling because a herd of duckbilled dinosaurs is running in her direction, especially when one goes rogue. And petrified as she stands up to a saber-tooth tiger and a lodomodo."*

Casey squeezed the trigger again, and a red beam whizzed past the right side of his head.

He continued to stare at her, his gaze intense. *"I felt your fear and terror. You were a pathetic wimp. And now look at you. Your fear has shifted to anger. Holding up a loaded gun to the leader of a dangerous rebellion, shooting at me, and not even blinking an eye."* He let out an evil laugh and spoke out loud, "I like that."

Her cheeks grew hot, but her gaze didn't waver. She could play hardball too. "See what you've done to me?"

"I've created a monster," he said, with a twinkle in his eye.

"No, that title belongs to you. I've grown since I washed up on that beach. But this journey, it made me tough, strong, a chick who can kick butt—including yours at the moment."

Jack helped the last person walk up the ramp as he called over his shoulder, "Hurry up, Casey! Everyone's aboard already."

"What about the commander?" she yelled. "'Cause I swear I'm a few seconds from blasting him."

Mike peeked out from the doorway. "Thorn's on his way down."

A squad of soldiers burst through the door. One peered at the ship, then down at all the scattered bodies, gasping. "Sir! I'll call for backup."

Casey opened her mouth to tell him to stop or she'd shoot, but Tio lunged for her, elbowing her in the gut. She scrambled back, her lungs devoid of air. She sucked in a painful breath and collapsed, pain shooting through her intestines like a spreading bush fire.

He grabbed for the gun, and with one big yank, pried it from her hands. “Next time, they might want to tie the rope a little tighter,” he bragged. “Not to mention, no handcuffs can hold me.”

Through the fog enveloping her brain, she saw Thorn charge the commander. Tio moved quickly, kicking Thorn in the left knee, laughing as his brother went down with a groan. Thorn probably should’ve just stunned him, but then Tio would be out for hours, and that wouldn’t be good if he had managed to change the codes to the docking bay doors; they might need to squeeze that info out of him.

“Front snap to kneecap,” said Tio. “That’s a great karate move, isn’t it, Thorn? I wonder who taught me that?”

“Get up,” Casey yelled, but Thorn just lay on the ground clutching his knee as he rolled to the side.

Tio waved his head, gesturing a soldier over. “Seize their weapons.”

Casey moaned, holding her side, and glanced up. The commander’s eyes gleamed, and his lips curled into a fake smile as he held out her gun at arm’s length, aiming for her head. “Deep sleep is too good for you. Let’s just end it here, shall we?” He looked down at the gun and smiled. “Oh, wait... it might be more effective if I took it off of stun.” He smiled. “So, you weren’t really going to kill me?”

“I’m not a cold-hearted murderer like you,” she said.

“You had me fooled. I’m impressed. Good thing you didn’t think about your weapon being set on stun. I would’ve picked up on it the second you put that gun to my temple. You wouldn’t have stood a chance.”

“Exactly why I didn’t think about it,” she retorted.

His gaze narrowed. “Any last words, little girl?”

Her heart beat like a drum in her chest. Yeah, she had a last message for him. She wanted to scream that he’d be dead when the ship blew up, but she knew she couldn’t. Pressing her elbows into the ground, she sat up as far as her aching limbs would allow. “When your weapon goes off,” she said, moistening her lips and considering her words carefully, “you’ll have the blast of your life.”

He smiled. “And that, I intend to do. We will celebrate and throw the biggest party on Earth. Too bad you won’t be there to share in the victory. Goodbye, little surface Earthling!”

Chapter 2

Commander Tio’s fingers turned white as he tightened his grasp around the gun.

There was no doubt about it: This was the end of the line. Casey squeezed her eyes shut, waiting for the weapon to fire. Her life flashed before her eyes. *No! I can’t just sit here and let someone snuff out my life like this!* She was a fighter, and she would go out in a blaze of glory. Jumping to her feet, clenching her fists, and ready for battle, a terrifying roar echoed in her ears. She spun her head, her heart pounding like a jackhammer.

A large creature sprang from the floor like a feral lion toward the commander. Its blue fur rippled and swirled, as if in slow motion. She slapped a hand over her mouth. It was the

lodomodo! Tio hit the ground with a loud *smack*. Casey jumped back. The lodomodo snarled and held up a massive paw over him, its monstrous claws less than an inch from his face.

The soldiers stood still, weapons shaking in their hands. The lodomodo turned its fierce gaze toward them. He swung his mighty tail, and with a single blow, three rebels flew through the air. Their bodies crashed into the empty capsules lining the walls. Exploding glass shattered with a *boom* in all directions. Holding their chests, the soldiers rolled and jumped to their feet, then scampered away.

The first row of Greys took aim, hesitating. Casey held her breath and peered around, unsure what to do.

“Should we kill it?” a rebel asked.

“Stand down!” yelled Tio. “He won’t hurt me.”

The rebels faltered as they shot each other glances. They weren’t convinced; they were facing a giant predator who seemed anxious to rip out a chunk off the next person crossing its path. Murmurs erupted, and a few soldiers stepped back, broken glass crunching under their boots.

This was her chance. Casey scrambled to her feet and raced over to Thorn. He stood, staring ahead, and barely paid her any notice when she grabbed his hand and pulled him up. “Let’s move!” she whispered, hoping he wasn’t too stunned to hear her. The animal was a beautiful sight, but safety came first.

“You promised the lodomodo he could come with us, didn’t you?” Thorn hissed. “That’s why he’s here.”

“You seem to really care about him.”

“I do, and I didn’t have the heart to kill him. Still, the creature’s dangerous because he’s bonded to my brother.”

“It’s not like I’m going to let him sleep at the foot of my bed.” Casey didn’t doubt the lodomodo was dangerous, but it wasn’t stupid enough to kill the driver giving him a ride out of that joint. She’d felt its pain and hope. Thorn pulled her to the top of the boarding ramp. The time to go had come, but Casey’s hands froze, clutching the metal doorframe. She’d remembered her promise to the lodomodo, and she could not break her word, especially after the fantastic animal had just saved her life. She glanced over her shoulder and whistled. “C’mon, boy.”

“Casey, no!” said Thorn. “What if my brother commands him to attack us?”

“Ain’t happening. He’s bonded to me now. I can feel it.”

The beast’s ears pricked up, and he withdrew his paw. Leaping off the commander, he pranced up the ramp like a trained dog.

Tio let out an angry yelp. “You get back here, you ungrateful beast!”

“Leave him alone!” shouted Casey, but the lodomodo didn’t seem too impressed by the commander’s threatening tone. His eyes changed from fierce green to calm ice blue. Wagging his long, bushy tail, he walked over to Casey and licked her hand. She laughed, happy to see the hope in the animal’s eyes. He was so beautiful and majestic. She couldn’t understand why anyone would ever beat him.

“All right, if that’s what you want.” Tio’s face contorted with rage. “You now have official permission to shoot the miserable creature.”

Every muscle in Casey’s body tensed as the soldiers aimed their weapons directly at her and her new friend. Her stomach lurched. “Hurry in!” she said to the lodomodo as a shower of red laser beams cut through the air, bouncing off walls inside of the ship. She pressed her back against the cold metal, breathing out. The lodomodo cowered next to her, licking her hand. She

buried her fingers in the animal's soft turquoise fur. "Don't worry. You're safe now."

"Goodbye, Sheik. Goodbye, other evil aliens. Same time tomorrow?" Mike shouted through the closing door. A beam whizzed past his left eye, missing him by inches. "Okay." He jumped to side. "I didn't think so."

"Taunting the aliens?" Casey pulled on his arm, leading him away from the door. She looked up at him, and her gaze narrowed.

"What?" he said.

"No more brain-dead stunts, okay?"

He shook his head, a looped grin on his lips. "You know me. I'd never do that."

"Just be *normal* for a while. I can't play babysitter right now." She turned her attention to the lodomodo and gave him a quick pat. "I'm going to name you Blue." When he barked, she smiled. "I need you to stay right here." She lifted her chin and surveyed the situation.

People from Agartha lined the back wall, whispering in small clusters as they held onto one another, wide-eyed. Jack stood by the controls while Thorn, Mike, and Kira slipped out of their robotic exoskeletons.

Casey scanned the gathered crowd until her gaze fell on her parents, and she drew a sharp breath. Her father's face remained ghostly white as he rested his head in her mom's lap; his chest barely moved. Her mom softly stroked his hair, her eyes closed as though she was in desperate prayer. Casey's heart leapt in her chest. She'd never seen her father so out of it. *He has to be okay. He just has to.* She rushed over to where her dad lay sprawled on the floor and dropped to her knees.

Her mom glanced up, her eyes glittering with unshed tears. She wiped one shaky hand over her nose. "He's suffering from the effects of hibernation." Her voice came thin and raspy, as though she couldn't quite control it.

"Dad, can you hear me?" Casey held her breath, waiting for a sign. She couldn't lose him—not this way. Her dad didn't move. She took his hand and squeezed it lightly. His skin was damp and cold as ice. Her heartbeat sped up, and dread suddenly overwhelmed her. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Her hands caressed his face.

"I don't know why this is happening to him," said her mom.

"Dad! Dad, wake up." Casey shook him with so much fervor that her knuckles turned white, but he showed no sign of waking up. "No, Daddy. Don't you dare die. I can't lose you after all of this. How about that fishing trip in Colorado? Who's going to wake me up in the middle of the night so we get the best fish?" She swallowed the lump in her throat. "And what about visiting colleges? Who'll be there with me to make sure I get the best room ever?" Casey peered at the Agarthians. "Somebody, anybody, please help my dad. Someone here must know what's going on!" she yelled, her voice frantic. She felt a touch on her shoulder.

A woman with porcelain skin, long golden hair, and sapphire-blue eyes leaned over her, with a soft smile on her lips. "Don't worry. It takes a while to recover. It's hard on all of us, particularly surface humans. Let him rest. He'll be fine."

"Thank you," whispered Casey. She glanced at her mom's questioning face, only then realizing she couldn't understand the Agarthian without the implant. "The woman says he'll be just fine. He needs more time."

Her mom nodded.

Casey lowered her lips to her dad's waxen skin and kissed his forehead. "I love you so much, Daddy," she whispered in his ear, then turned to say a silent prayer.

"Casey..." Her mom sniffled and wiped her nose with the back of her hand. "I'm so glad

you kids are okay.”

Casey opened her mouth, but her throat felt choked and no words came out. Burying her face into her mom’s shoulder, she gazed up at Mike and Jack, who were strapping themselves into their seats.

The ship hurtled off the ground in seconds. Powerful shudders rocked the aircraft as it backed up into the spacious corridor. They were finally moving.

Casey sank back against the wall and let a shudder run through her. With every breath, her stomach hurt where Tio had kicked her, but she bit her lip against the pain.

“Here we go.” She heard Thorn mutter as he punched the control panel, the only two sounds in the room. “Hang on tight, everyone.”

The floor shook as a mechanism roared into motion. Outside the cockpit window, sparks flew as the scout ship scraped the corridor walls. Casey cringed and held her hands over her ears, trying to block out the ear-wrenching squeal of ripping metal. The ship returned to the docking bay at a dangerous speed, landing back at the familiar gates where they had first arrived. Two giant doors were the only obstacles standing between the ship and freedom.

“Where are we going?”

Casey sat up, barely able to hear her mom’s voice through the noise. “Out.”

Her mom’s eyes darted about as though taking in the room for the first time. “How do you know all of this? Is it something you kids learn at school nowadays?”

Surely she’s not serious. Alien Escape 101? Casey could tell from the twinkle in her mom’s eyes, yet there was something else there as well: hope. Even though it was a joke, it would’ve been the easier explanation to bear. “No, Mom. I wish I had, but unfortunately it was more a gather-experience-as-you-go-along kind of excursion.”

Her mom nodded and brushed a stray strand of hair from her husband’s forehead. “You’re a survivor, honey, just like your dad.”

“So are you,” Casey whispered, even though her mom probably couldn’t hear it with all the noise.

The ship hovered over the docking bay deck as Thorn fussed with the crystals. “The doors aren’t opening! How did my brother have time to switch the password?”

Casey stood and inched closer, a hard thumping filling the left side of her head. “I thought he was bluffing.”

“Nope!” said Mike.

“For once, he was telling the truth. He obviously somehow managed to change the code,” said Thorn, pushing buttons, crystals, and levers frantically on the console.

A shudder tore through her body. *How will we ever get out now?*

Chapter 3

Casey stared out the cockpit window, her heart thumping like a jackhammer. Two giant octagonal doors kept her from freedom, and they still had no idea how Tio had found the time to change the codes in all the commotion.

“I’ll try to override the system,” said Thorn.

She clenched her teeth as a sick feeling nestled in the pit of her stomach. *This can't be happening—not now when we're minutes away from the explosion. How long will it take to override the system?* She was sure they'd never make it out on time, so sure that she wanted to bang her head on the wall.

Mike slapped his hands down on the control panel. "Just crash through the doors or the walls like we did at the Deep Sleep Lab."

"Won't work," said Thorn. "These doors are much stronger."

"Can't we shoot the doors open?" offered Jack.

Thorn huffed. "Not in a million years! The outside of the ship is reinforced with titanium, technology you can't even begin to understand. And don't forget about the force-field around the ship."

"Keep working on those codes, Thorn." Casey tried to keep her voice calm in spite of her overwhelming fear. She had complete faith in his ability to crack this alien computer system and hack in. If anybody could do it, Thorn was the one.

Thorn tapped away at the controls, frowning as he moved from one symbol to the next.

Mike waved his arm, motioning Casey over. She patted his shoulder, and he grabbed her hand, pulling her close. She looked into his eyes—his terrified, desperate eyes—and touched his shoulder. "It's okay, Mike. We're not going to die—"

A low *hum*, like that of an electric fan, echoed all around them. A giant image of Commander Tio flashed in midair in the center of the room. His silver cloak and hood glittered, and his eyes stared at Casey coldly. It was obvious he didn't take kindly to guests leaving early. "Surrender now or be taken by force," he declared.

His voice sent shivers down her spine. People gasped. Mike squirmed in his seat. Jack froze, his skin drained of color.

Casey glanced down at her radar device and cringed. There were fifteen minutes left. Trying to break out was a lost cause. There was no way they could fight against a force-field and titanium walls. They needed to think outside the box. *What's the one thing that will get us off this ship?* The answer popped in her head: *Tio's cooperation! That's it!* She pressed a gold switch on the control panel, then walked over to the hologram.

"Go away, you little pest." He stared at her intently, his eyes blazing with fury. "Get my brother. Now."

"Listen, Tio, we have one last request," said Casey.

"You're not in any position to ask for anything, human."

She shrugged. "How about my execution? Right here, right now."

He smiled. "I'm listening."

Now that she had his attention, she went on with the charade. "As much as we hate to admit it, you've won." She lowered her head in defeat as tears slipped down her face. Drama class had definitely paid off. "We're dead no matter what way you look at it, so why don't you open the doors, take down your force-field, and let us die with our own people?"

Choking sobs, shrill screams, and frightened cries rippled from all around Casey. She wished she could fill the Agarthians in on her plan, but there wasn't time. Plus, she needed the realism of their cries and tears. Tio had to think they were all going to their deaths.

Casey collapsed to her knees, tears blinding her vision. "Commander Tio, you have the ultimate power in deciding how we'll face our deaths. Please grant us this one final wish."

He tapped a finger against his chin. "Very touching indeed, Earthling. If I comply, I hope you don't think about running. You'll never make it past my force-field surrounding Earth, and I

can always shoot you if you veer off course. I'll consider your request and get back to you." The hologram faded from view.

Consider? Why can't he just do it? Casey scrambled up, but two strong arms gripped her shoulders. She spun around and found herself staring into piercing green eyes, throwing daggers.

"How could you do this?" one of the men roared at her. He seemed so different from the Agarthians. He had flaming red hair, tied back in a ponytail, and wore a robe. In fact, he resembled a Greek from ancient times. The red hair was a dead giveaway. She would have bet anything that she was standing face to face with Kira's father.

"Whoa, back off, Zeus." Craning her neck, she looked him straight in the eye, meeting his anger with her own. "I'm saving your life here, so take your caveman instincts somewhere else. I've had enough drama to last me a lifetime."

"We all know what's going on. Commander Tio told us about the weapon he developed before he put us in deep sleep." He took a step forward, towering over Casey. "Anyone in their right mind would try to stall the rebels, because if we leave this ship, we're as good as dead."

"Sit down. You don't know the facts!" yelled Thorn.

"The girl's sending us to our deaths!" The man's eyes bulged like he was some kind of nut, his hands clapping and unclapping at his side. "We can reason with the rebels, maybe strike a deal. Why would you do something that stupid and buckle under him? Either you're not right in the mind or you work with them." He turned to his companions and roared, "Brothers, let's stop this madness now!"

He wants to bargain with the aliens, the very same ones that chloroformed him like a frog and anxiously awaited to take him to biology class for dissection? How do you strike a deal with somebody like that? And he called me stupid.

A few captives started to whisper. Casey felt their apprehensive glances on her. A group of agitated men marched over. Two of them yanked Mike and Jack out of the pilot seats and threw them across the room.

"Are you crazy?" shouted Casey. "What's wrong with you?"

"Father, no!" Kira gripped the red-haired man's arm. "She's only trying to help us. Trust me, you'll be thanking her."

"When, in the next life?" Kira's dad retorted.

Casey's gaze swung to Jack and Mike as they scrambled to their feet, and she let out a sigh of relief. Luckily, they weren't hurt, but a new fear swept over her. Thinking back to all the pirate books she'd ever read, one word stuck in her head: *mutiny*. She began to think that maybe they should've left the Agarthians in deep sleep because it didn't seem like they were big fans of trust—or teamwork, for that matter. Glancing down at her radar device, she noted they had eight more minutes.

Her mom stepped in front of her like a mother bear protecting its cub. "Leave my daughter alone."

Casey gently pulled her to the side. "Mom, please. These people are dangerous."

"This girl's trying to get us all killed," one of the men shouted, throwing his arms up.

Her mom lifted a brow. "How can you understand a word they're saying, Casey?"

"I'll explain later." Perspiration dripped down Casey's forehead. She peered at the watch on her wrist and groaned inwardly. If they didn't get moving soon, they'd all be turned into roast dinner. She yanked on Thorn's sleeve. "Hey, I hate to hurry you, but you have to override those codes and open the doors... like now."

"No! That's not happening. We're not letting this ship take off!" someone shouted from the

back of the room.

Casey rolled her eyes. “Yeah? Well, if we don’t evacuate immediately, we’ll need lots of sunscreen and a fire extinguisher.” Blue let out a monstrous growl, and Casey leaned over and whispered to her new pet, “What is it, boy?”

“*Just give me the word and I’ll attack.*” Casey patted the lodomodo’s head as he showed his teeth and took off toward the back of the room, crouching like a tiger waiting to pounce.

The men jumped back, gasping.

Casey held up her hand to stop the lodomodo. “Blue, no! Don’t hurt them.”

Thorn raised his pistol and aimed at Kira’s father. “Stand down, or I’ll shoot you.”

“And so will I, Socrates.” Mike pointed his gun and widened his stance.

“You can’t shoot all of us!” Kira’s father yelled. Bulging veins throbbed on his forehead and neck, giving him the look of a madman. “We can easily overpower you...and the beast.”

Blue growled.

Casey was angry at herself for yet another mistake. *What bit me in the butt to wake up this madman?* She gritted her teeth, mentally slapping herself for her own stupidity. If she hadn’t let the caveman out of his ice pod, they’d all be slurping astronaut food on their relaxing cruise back to Agartha.

Jack cocked his gun. “I won’t tell you again. Sit back down, or I’ll take you off your feet myself, and it won’t be a pleasant fall from your height.”

“Father, please listen to them,” begged Kira. “We have three minutes left.”

They didn’t have time for the drama, and enough was enough. “We’re not your enemies!” Casey pulled out her gun and fired several times. Red beams of light bounced off the ceiling. Screams pierced the air. Some Agarthians dropped to the metal floor and froze, and others ducked, their eyes darting around the room. Finally, she had their undivided attention. “Listen to me!” yelled Casey. “Stop working against us.” She dashed to the middle of the room and peered from one face to the other as she addressed them. “We were sent here by General Ashtar, who gave us a microchip to deactivate the rebels’ fancy little weapon.”

“How do we know you’re telling the truth?” a blonde woman asked, her voice wavering.

Casey shook her head as low murmurs raced through the crowd. “You don’t, but at this point, you have no choice except to trust me.”

“If we were the bad guys, why would we rescue you?” asked Jack.

“Exactly,” said Casey. “Now, please, I need you to listen. We deactivated the weapon. Earth is safe. What greater proof do you need? I do have some bad news though.” She paused, considering her words. “We unknowingly set off the self-destruct sequence developed by Kira and the other scientists. When the weapon goes off, this ship will explode. We don’t want to be stuck here when that happens.”

Kira tugged at her father’s arm. “She’s telling the truth. Now do you see why we have to leave immediately?”

His tone softened. “It’s true?”

Mike wagged his finger at him. “If it weren’t for us, your sorry little toga party butt would be asleep in one of those capsules.”

Casey swallowed past the lump in her throat. “We have one minute and twenty seconds.”

“I’m sorry.” Kira’s father clapped Thorn’s shoulder. “What can I do to help?”

“Figure out those codes,” he said.

Staring at her radar device, Casey screamed, “We have one minute!” Thoughts flooded her mind. *How can this be the end? We’ve come so far, gone through so much, accomplished the*

impossible, and saved the human race. We even made it on the ship with all the prisoners. But now the only things holding us back are two thick doors. Casey kissed her sleeping dad on the forehead, then hugged her mom, squeezing tight. “Fifty-five seconds... fifty-four... fifty-three!” she yelled. Her legs threatened to buckle. They had come so close to escaping this nightmare, but now it looked as if it would never end—at least not the way they’d hoped. “If we don’t get off this ship...” Casey paused. She didn’t want to think about that possibility.

The familiar hooded image of Commander Tio suddenly appeared in the middle of the room.

“What the heck does he want?” asked Mike.

“Let’s find out,” said Thorn, pushing a button on the control panel.

Tio’s voice boomed through the hologram. “I’m feeling quite generous today, so I will let you die with the others just as you requested. It’s the least I can do. Thorn will crash when the other two human pilots are vaporized. I’ll be electronically monitoring your demise and shall replay it many times for posterity and amusement. Your deaths will be magnificently displayed on my fifty-foot view screen.”

Casey’s voice wavered as she looked down. “Forty-one seconds!”

“You wouldn’t do that,” Thorn hissed.

Tio laughed. “I’ll zoom in on the cockpit window and watch your final moments of life... and Thorn’s pathetic expression at his defeat. It’ll be a good training module and quite useful in convincing my enemies how futile it is to stand against me. All will see that no one is safe from my wrath, not even my little brother or a beloved hero.”

“Twenty-two seconds,” announced Casey.

“Put down your weapons and let them go to their final resting place in peace,” Tio said over his shoulder.

Jaws dropped in unison, and eyes bulged. An intense wave of relief washed over Casey, and an ironic smirk touched her lips. Mike and Jack looked into her tear-filled eyes with surprise. She squeezed her parents, hoping this was the miracle they’d been hoping for.

“Ten seconds!” yelled Casey.

“Ten...” a computerized voice echoed from her wrist band.

“Nine...”

The commander motioned behind him. “Open the hangar doors for the Earthlings.”

“Eight...”

“Yes, sir,” said a soldier.

“Seven...”

Tio laughed, raising his fists in sweet triumph. “Goodbye, brother.”

“Six...”

The two giant octagonal doors slid open, and Casey glimpsed stars shining in the blackness of the Milky Way. She pressed her palm against her chest as her heart pounded in her throat.

“What’re you waiting for? GO! Get us out of here!”

“Five...”

Casey stumbled back as the ship darted out into the black void of space.

“Four...”

A gentle humming *purr*, like that of a kitten, turned into the sound of swarming bees, and then changed into a high pitch that echoed from the walls. The lights flickered, and Casey covered her ears to block out the noise.

“Three...”

A deep, rolling thunder shook the walls and floor. Casey peered at the others; there was

terror written on their faces.

“Two...”

She looked up at the floating image in the middle of the room accompanied by an electric buzzing sound. Tio’s composure crumbled. His eyes widened and filled with fear as his image flickered in and out, like a beam from an old projector on the fritz. He let out a loud scream just as the hologram faded from view.

Blue lifted his head and let out a primordial, wild animal-like howl.

“One...”

A blinding beam spilled through the window. A second later, the shockwave hit with a thunderous blast. The ship tumbled end over end, rattling the walls and floor.

Casey, unable to keep her footing, hit the deck hard and rolled forward, crashing into the navigation console. She gripped it with shaking hands, holding on for dear life, her eyes fixing on what was going on outside the cockpit. She couldn’t help but watch as the vacuum of space enveloped the fireball that had been the alien mothership only seconds earlier.

Alarms blared. The ship computers flickered and turned black. The inside of the craft plunged into sudden darkness.

Casey drew in choked breaths and peered around her, a sense of dread settling in the pit of her stomach. “What’s happening?” she whispered.

Chapter 4

The ship rocked and shook in total darkness, like some kind of terrifying amusement park ride. Casey scanned the room for her parents, but she couldn’t see more than a few inches in front of her. With trembling hands, she hung onto the wall, patting her way forward as she took one step at a time, minding the people sitting on the floor.

A deep rumble echoed, and the ship lurched, throwing her against a metal pillar. She stumbled back, then lost her balance and tumbled to the floor with a *thud*. Groaning, she sat up and tasted salty blood on her lip where the flesh seemed to burn, but she needed to find her parents and she knew they couldn’t be far. “Mom? Dad?” she shouted. Her voice came high pitched and insecure, and she wasn’t sure her parents would hear her through all the mumbling and screaming coming from the others. She tried to stand, but another jolt made her stumble. Her knees hit the floor hard, then somebody knocked into her. For a moment, she couldn’t move, and her vision blurred.

“Casey? Is that you? Are you okay?”

She recognized Jack’s voice and stood. “Oh, Jack!” Her head ached with every single breath, but her eyes adjusted enough to make out his gorgeous face in the dim light.

“I’m right here,” he whispered, his hot breath caressing her cheek.

“Shouldn’t you be steering the ship?”

“Everything’s offline,” he said, “so the autopilot came on. Thorn said it’s temporary and won’t last long. I just wanted to make sure you’re okay.”

“You’re so sweet.” She pressed her cheek against his chest, gathering strength from the way his hand rubbed her back. “This isn’t the end. It can’t be,” she muttered, breaking their embrace.

The floor quivered under their feet; the windows rattled; the darkness seemed foreboding, surreal.

“Just hold on to me,” said Jack.

She reached for his hand. “I’ve got to find my mom and dad.”

He kissed her cheek, his lips searing her skin. “Let’s go find them.”

“This way!” With a last squeeze of his hand, she patted her way forward like a blind bat, listening to the faint moans and whispers, cries and prayers. At least people weren’t running over each other in their panic.

“Someone turn on the lights!” a male voice shouted.

Casey snorted. *What help will the lights be if we’re going to die anyway?* Memories of her trip flashed before her eyes, every detail passing by like a film. She wished she had the time to tell her parents about everything that had happened, to share the magic with them, things no human had ever seen, but fate wasn’t in her favor.

The ship took another tumble, tossing Casey forward. She sat down to wait out the turbulence, realizing that at that insane speed, she’d never find her parents. “Jack, let’s wait a minute.”

“What? I can’t hear you.”

Time slowed to a crawl as the ship continued to rattle. She peered around, barely paying attention to the shadows occupying most of the floor.

Jack inched closer and draped his arm around her. “Turn around.”

She raised her gaze at the billions of stars shining through the cockpit window like an array of tiny diamonds, bouncing and dancing their way across the Milky Way. She sucked in a deep breath and slowly let it out. “It’s beautiful. Not a bad way to die, I guess.”

“We’re not dying, Casey.” His voice was soft, but unconvincing. The whites of his eyes shined as their gazes connected.

Casey stared at the sight for a long moment. She pulled herself up and sniffled, determined not to give up. She struggled to hold on to Jack’s hand. “Do you see your star? The one I picked out especially for you? It’s the brightest one out there.”

He leaned forward and pointed. “I see it right there.”

Squeezing his hand, she listened to his raspy breaths for a while. “You’re right, we’re not going to die tonight. No way. When this is all over, and we get home, we’re going to look up in the sky and admire your twinkling star. And a year from now, we’re going to lay out a blanket on the beach and admire it some more. That’s a promise.”

Her voice trailed off into a scream as the ship lurched, yet again, and she was thrown upward in a mad spiral.

“Casey!” yelled Jack.

She bounced off the ceiling, hanging upside down, flailing against the air. Blue slammed into her, before being thrown into a series of somersaults. Casey felt herself floating in midair. *Crap!* As if things could get any worse, the artificial gravity was gone. *Why wasn’t I briefed on how to maneuver my way around the ship in such a case? Because it sure wasn’t on the astronaut entrance exam. Oh wait...that’s right. I never took one of those. They expected us to wing it after a few hours of training.*

A shadowy figure pounded into her side. “Jack! Is that you?” She turned to see the dark shapes of the others floating weightlessly around her. Blue spun in circles, his calmness invading her own thoughts. She thought maybe he could feel her fear, and he knew this was the best way to soothe her.

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