

# Ice Rift


## Ice Rift, #1

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## Table of Contents

Prologue 1	Planet DX666 – The Distant Past.
Prologue 2	The Arctic – 1999.
Prologue 3	Pine Glacier Ice Shelf – 2011.
 Chapter 1 ...	Betrayed.

<b>Chapter 2 ...</b>	<b>Antarctica.</b>
<b>Chapter 3 ...</b>	<b>Descent.</b>
<b>Chapter 4 ...</b>	<b>Unexpected Visitors.</b>
<b>Chapter 5 ...</b>	<b>The Anomaly.</b>
<b>Chapter 6 ...</b>	<b>Hell's Garden.</b>
<b>Chapter 7 ...</b>	<b>Flee from Paradise.</b>
<b>Chapter 8 ...</b>	<b>Food.</b>
<b>Chapter 9 ...</b>	<b>Alien Landscape.</b>
<b>Chapter 10 ...</b>	<b>Tombs.</b>
<b>Chapter 11 ...</b>	<b>The Pilot.</b>
<b>Chapter 12 ...</b>	<b>The Dormitory.</b>
<b>Chapter 13 ...</b>	<b>Lucifer.</b>
<b>Chapter 14 ...</b>	<b>They are Coming, RUN!</b>
<b>Chapter 15 ...</b>	<b>Different Paths.</b>
<b>Chapter 16 ...</b>	<b>Escape.</b>
<b>Chapter 17 ...</b>	<b>Base Camp Monster.</b>
<b>Chapter 18 ...</b>	<b>Return to the ship.</b>
<b>Chapter 19 ...</b>	<b>Adrift.</b>
<b>Chapter 20 ...</b>	<b>Going Home.</b>
<b>Epilogue</b>	

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## **Prologue 1**

### **Planet DX666 – The Distant Past.**

THE DRONE OF THE small night creatures flitting through the air and the distant howls, screeches and wails that sounded like spectral bloodhounds on the scent of prey, announced the waking of the planet's nocturnal predators. Of all the different species that dwelled on DX666, none was more feared than the female who dwelt in the mountain. Though in part this was due to her vicious

nature, what made her such a feared and expert hunter was her extraordinary ability to be able to mimic the sound and form of any animal she heard or encountered. The Mimic wielded her gift with exacting, murderous intent to draw her victims close enough to kill. Another trick she utilized was changing her skin to imitate the surroundings, whether it was rock or foliage, making her practically invisible, and then luring a victim into her trap with the call of a wounded animal. She rarely failed to ensnare a victim.

A young six limbed goat-like creature, which had yet to learn of this menace, leapt sure-footedly from rock to rock and paused to stare into the cave entrance filled with such a foreboding darkness it almost had substance. However, failing to recognize its brief life was about to end, the unsuspecting animal flicked its eyes over to the enticing bush adorned with blue berries and succulent orange leaves growing a small distance from the entrance. It bounced over to the bush and bit off a fruit laden twig.

The distant scrape of claws on rock from inside the cave signalled the approach of the feared mountain creature. Unaware of the impending danger, the animal continued feasting on the tasty foliage. Two red eyes appeared amidst the tangible gloom shrouding the cave entrance and focused on the animal. The Mimic changed its appearance and oozed from the cave like an invisible, pestilent shadow that crawled from one world to the next to spread putrid blight and savage death.

The animal squealed when the claws of death crept over its body and cloaked it in pain. Within a moment the animal was no more. Its killer had devoured everything except its bones, which collapsed into a lifeless heap. The thing of indistinct form, neither man nor beast, rose from the ground and morphed into a creature that nightmares would be hesitant to welcome.

The Mimic gazed up at the bright fireball streaking through the night sky. At first, her interest assigned it little consideration; there had been many similar occurrences before. It was only another rock falling from the heavens. Though she'd often wondered where they came from and what beast was powerful enough to throw them such a distance, they posed no threat and were thus ignored. She was about to direct her gaze elsewhere when something unusual happened; the sky-fire changed direction. With renewed interest she observed the glowing disc of flame shooting through the obsidian sky.

The object turned in a wide arc, straightened out and then veered toward the mountain that housed the Mimic's lair. When the sky-fire became lost from its sight, the Mimic sought out a higher view point. She clambered up the rocky mountain and perched atop a large boulder. Her eyes focused on the strange object that no longer glowed, skimming above the forest canopy. The leaf-burdened boughs creaked in protest from the wash of the object that grasped leaves and twigs from their branches and carried them in its wake. Frightened shrieks from disturbed tree-dwelling beasts accompanied its passing. The frantic sound of the rustling foliage grew louder as the object approached and rose to follow the contour of the steep mountain in its path.

Though the Mimic was wary, she experienced no fear as she observed the underside of the object when it sped overhead. The lights peppering its base reflected in the Mimic's red eyes when she turned to follow its path over the mountain. So fascinated by the extraordinary object was the Mimic, she barely

noticed the storm of debris that washed over her. She had spotted something inside the strange thing from the sky—something alive!

The Mimic momentarily pondered what she had witnessed. She knew it didn't originate from her home world and was something she had not laid eyes on before. Curiosity caused the Mimic to postpone her hunt until she had investigated the new arrival. She bounded across the rocks and disappeared over the mountain.

Unaware his arrival had been witnessed by a dangerous intelligent life-form, the pilot of the small spacecraft that had so fascinated the Mimic, glanced at the control console. A relieved smile formed on his lips at the lack of any warning lights; evidence the ship had survived the tremulous entry through the planet's atmosphere undamaged— again. It was the part he hated most about these missions. The creaks, groans and rattles of protest the aged vessel emitted during every stressful arrival on a new planet were a constant reminder of the hard and hectic life the old ship had endured. Each entry could be its last, killing all those on board.

The pilot gazed out of the control room's viewing ports at the dark landscape speeding past below the ship. The red glow of molten rock, flames and hot ash spewing from the crowns of distant angry volcanoes lit up the night sky. It was this volcanic activity, spread across half the planet that made this world unsuitable for their purpose. However, long range scans from the base ship currently orbiting the planet had detected something of use and the reason for their visit to the planet they had named DX666.

In the shuttle craft's forward lights the pilot glimpsed flashes of the greens, reds and browns of the verdant forest that covered a huge area of the planet's surface and the home of the thing he sought. He switched on the spacecraft's landing lights and searched for a suitable place to set down. He spied a clearing in the forest and pointed it out to the co-pilot who sat a short distance away. "Put us down there and tell the crew to prepare for the hunt." He climbed out of his seat and strode from the room.

The Mimic paused on the tip of a rock outcrop that stretched precariously out over a sheer drop, and watched the flying object swoop down like a giant graceful bird. For a few moments it hung in the air above a clearing in the forest before it slowly descended to the ground, raising a cloud of dust and forest debris.

Keen to examine the unexpected anomaly closer, the Mimic dived into the void and plummeted toward the ground. Her stretched out arms morphed into wings and like a hell spawned angel, she glided through the air in a gentle curve to the forest far below. She dipped through the canopy and weaved a path between tall ancient trees. When she glimpsed the object ahead, she swooped up the length of a large tree trunk and landed softly on a branch. As soon as she landed the wings morphed back into arms. She moved aside a branch so she had a good view of the strange object and watched to see what would happen.

Thundering footsteps accompanied the pilot's breath-heaving sprint through the thick undergrowth. He risked a glance behind. Though he heard the

beast's roars and its noisy pursuit through the forest, he was thankful it was still far enough behind him to remain absent from his sight. He'd underestimated its speed and was forced to leave the forest track to prevent it from catching him. So far the plan seemed to be working. The limited gaps between the gnarled trunks of the ten yard thick tree trunks left little room for the gigantic beast to easily pass through.

He raced across a clearing and glanced up at the orange glow of the dawn sky peeking through the canopy of impossibly tall trees. Large, eight-limbed creatures skulked menacingly along their boughs as they followed him. The tree creatures gave the pilot an idea— an opportunity to slow the beast further. Without halting his stride, he grabbed the small weapon from the holster fixed around his waist, aimed the lethal end at one of the tree creatures, fired and re-holstered the weapon. The small ball of light struck its target. As the dead animal crashed into branches during its fall, the pilot dodged around another of the large trees to find himself on the track again. He sprinted along it.

The huge beast broke into the clearing its prey had recently vacated and snatched the falling creature from the air with massive jaws crowded with long, thick teeth. Bone crunched and blood sprayed when the animal was bitten in two. One gruesome, innards dripping piece was thrown into the air while it chewed and swallowed the portion in its mouth. The remaining remnant it plucked from the air was devoured just as swiftly. By the time it had crossed the clearing the devoured animal was already in the beast's large stomach, but there was plenty of room for more. It rushed onto the track, slammed into a tree, regained its balance and continued the hunt of its next meal. It rounded a curve in the track and stared at its food leaning against a tree.

The pilot heard the rapidly approaching creature and casually waited for it to arrive. A nervous smile played on his lips when the beast bounded around the corner and looked straight at him. Though the beast seemed to be of low intelligence, it had surprised him before. He trusted his crew to have set up everything according to plan, but things had gone wrong before; two deaths were the result of that botched trap.

The ground shook with each contact of the beast's six powerful legs when it rushed at him with bloodstained jaws wide open to let out a loud, rumbling growl. The beast was so large it was as if a mountain rushed at him. When it drew closer, the pilot saw his reflection in the beast's single, large eye set in the center of its massive head. A loud crack rang out. In the blink of an eye the beast was encased in netting that tightened to squeeze its limbs together and force its powerful jaws shut. It stumbled to the ground and pushed a wave of soil and forest debris before it when it slid toward the pilot. The pilot lifted a leg as the beast's head ground to a halt inches away and placed it on the beast's wide flat snout. He stared into the beast's eye that stared back at him. "You did well," he commended the beast. "You nearly had me once or twice. Perhaps I am getting too old for this lark?" He grinned. "What do you think?"

The beast growled angrily.

"Why thank you. Yes, I do look younger than my years." He looked up when two of his crew appeared. Sensing other creatures approaching, he stared into the

gloomy forest, catching glimpses of things moving in the shadows. "Let's get this thing aboard the ship."

One of the crew walked around to the rear of the creature and picked up the length of cable attached to the netting that encased the beast. The other looked to his right and whistled. Almost immediately, a small craft, hovering a foot off the ground, appeared out of the forest driven by a small life-form at the control.

The creature, a different species to the crew, glanced at the trapped beast and then at the pilot. "Another successful hunt, Master."

The pilot gazed at the hill-sized beast and smiled. "Yes, Haax, it's the biggest one we've caught so far. It should provide the crew with a welcome change from the usual diet we've endured for so long."

Haax reversed the hover close enough to the trapped beast to enable the cable to be hitched to the vehicle. The pilot and the two crewmen climbed aboard the hover.

Haax glanced at the pilot sitting beside him. "To the ship, Master?" After receiving an affirmative nod, Haax moved the vehicle off along the track.

The beast dragged along the ground behind, groaned.

The pilot shook his head in dismay, tapped Haax on the shoulder and pointed a thumb back at their cargo. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

Haax glanced behind at their payload. "Sorry, Master." He pressed a button on the dashboard control panel. The beast rose a short distance off the ground. They headed off along the track weaving through the ancient forest.

The Mimic had watched the four life-forms emerge from the flying object and head into the forest. Though it wondered why they were here, she hadn't followed them; they would return. She was interested in what they left behind. She glanced into the sky lit with dawn light and fading stars. Because they weren't from this world, she surmised there must be other planets. She would like to visit them. Her eyes wandered back to the object that could take her there. She waited for her chance to sneak inside.

At the approach of the hover vehicle and crew, the large door at the back of the spacecraft rose and a ramp slid out.

The Mimic saw her chance. She mimicked her surroundings and moved closer, her camouflage changing constantly to keep her invisible as she crept nearer. When the hover glided up the ramp with its huge cargo in tow, the Mimic leapt onto the beast's back and immediately imitated its skin colour and texture, as well as the netting that bound the beast.

Haax pulled the hover to a stop and glanced behind to ensure the large beast was fully inside the ship. He pressed a button on the dash. The ramp retracted and the door closed. Another button lowered the hover and beast gently to the ground.

The pilot and crew climbed off the vehicle.

The pilot glanced at the beast and then at Haax. "Stow the creature ready for transport."

"Yes, Master."

The pilot and crew headed for a nearby door leading to the front of the cargo shuttle craft.

Haax strolled around the beast; he'd never seen such a huge creature. He paused and placed a hand on its rising and falling chest and felt the rapid beat of its no doubt huge heart. When Haax moved to its head, the large eye turned in his direction. Haax smiled kindly. The beast growled angrily. Haax could understand the beast's anger. He too had been snatched from his home world and forced to serve others. The beast though would serve the crew differently— on platters in the dining room.

Haax selected a weapon from a rack on the hull wall, pressed it against the beast's neck and pushed. The weapon hissed. The blue liquid filling the transparent cylinder flowed into the beast. A few moments later the beast's eye closed. Haax replaced the weapon in the rack and crossed to a nearby control panel. A press of a button activated two straps that snaked out from the floor and over the beast to secure it. Haax left the cargo bay.

The Mimic gazed around its strange surroundings. She felt movement. Whatever this thing was it had entered, it was leaving the planet. She became visible, leapt from the beast and concealed herself in a corner while she waited to find out what would happen next.

## **Prologue 2**

### **The Arctic – 1999.**

DESPITE THE LAYERS OF extreme weather gear wrapping her in its thermal embrace, Jane gasped when a gust of freezing wind gripped her in its icy fingers and squeezed the warmth from her body. *It had to be minus fifty at least.* She'd never experienced anything so cold or unwelcoming. A tug on the rope attached to her harness caused her to lurch. She had stopped walking. She wiped the build-up of ice from her goggles and amongst the constant stream of snow and ice particles carried by the wind that filled her view, glimpsed a hazy, red form a few yards ahead. The small dark patch of tinted goggles indicated Kyle was staring back at her. Though, like her face, his was completely covered against the biting cold temperature, she knew he wore a worried frown. To alleviate his fears, Jane raised an arm to acknowledge she was okay. Words, however loud she shouted them, were a waste of breath in these conditions. The wind would carry them away immediately they left her lips, which would soon freeze if she removed the thermal mask protecting them.

Kyle waved back, turned around and continued walking. Jane followed at a distance to leave a little slack in the safety line that joined her and her fiancée together. For miles around, the bright red of their matching snowsuits was the only splash of colour in the Arctic's white wilderness.

The weather forecast, which they'd checked before embarking on their expedition, had failed to predict the blizzard that had arrived so swiftly to trap them in its ferocious embrace of wind and driving ice. Such was the whim of the

Arctic for throwing surprises at those who trespass upon its shore. As soon as the first evidence of the approaching blizzard had reached them, they'd immediately ceased their climb up the frozen waterfall of ice melt. Climbing an icefall was something Jane had never experienced before and a thrill Kyle wanted to share with her. It was he who'd arranged this trip; a surprise to celebrate the first anniversary of their engagement.

Eighteen months ago, at the age of thirty, Jane had passed her exams to become a bona fide glaciologist, a career change she'd taken late in life after becoming disillusioned with her job as a market analyst. She had yearned to get out of the constrictive office environment and do something constructive with her life. Global warming had decided her new career choice. To celebrate her success, and gain some much needed experience on the ice, she had joined a field trip in Iceland. It was there she had encountered the rugged, dark-haired, handsome climber, whom she soon discovered was British, three years older than her and a geologist. Though it wasn't love at first sight, both had felt a strong attraction. By the end of the two-week trip he had shared her bed, and soon after, her love and her life. They'd been together ever since.

They'd gone on many ice walks and climbing trips together. Kyle proved to be a good teacher and Jane soon became almost as skilled a climber as her instructor. She had learnt a lot from his patient instructions, both on the ice, the rock face and in bed. The memory of their love making sent a wave of warmth flowing through her body. She longed to climb in bed with him and snuggle against his warm, naked body beneath the duvet to chase away the shivering cold she currently experienced. By her reckoning, she judged they had about two miles to go before she could turn that wonderful thought into reality.

She stumbled yet again on a frozen ripple of ice, but quickly recovered her balance and battled forward against the strong wind, snow and ice pellets constantly beating at her. For all its hardships, she loved being in this environment.

A wipe of a glove-clad hand removed the latest film of ice to obscure her vision. *Someone should invent heated goggles, or ones that had mini wipers on them.* She grinned at the thought, and knew Kyle would too when she told him later. She glimpsed the reassuring colour of his bright clothing between less dense patches of the wind-borne snow and ice. Though she wondered how he could navigate in these conditions, she trusted him completely; Kyle had a perfect sense of direction.

About ten minutes later, a strong tug on the rope toppled Jane to the ground. She sped along the ice. Fear of what had happened momentarily froze her. She quickly pushed the emotion aside. She needed to save Kyle. She gripped the ice axe tightly and slammed it into the ice. It stuck. Her body pivoted until her feet faced in the direction of the rope. When Kyle's weight yanked the tether taut, she kicked the climbing crampons attached to her boots into the ice; they'd had no time to remove them earlier when the storm struck. It did little to lessen the pressure on the arm gripping the anchored ice axe. She groaned in pain, but refused to let go. She turned her head and gazed along the rope tugging at her body. It disappeared into the ice. Her worst fear had been realized; Kyle had fallen into a crevasse.



Fighting the panic that threatened to incapacitate her, she thought back to the training Kyle had instilled in her. She checked the axe was anchored firmly; it was. For the moment both were safe. It was Kyle's training that made her ignore her first instinct to pull on the rope and help him up. The action could dislodge his tenuous grip on the ice. She was also aware that Kyle, like her, still had his crampons attached and, if he'd not been injured in the fall, should be able to climb out.

A few moments later the stress on her arm faded. Kyle was okay. The sigh of relief she exhaled seeped through her face cover and immediately formed crystals the wind carried away. She climbed to her knees, gently took out the slack in the rope, grabbed a carabineer from the belt around her waist, attached it to the blade of the ice axe and fed the rope through it. The makeshift anchor would prevent Kyle from falling too far if he slipped. Only when she was certain the line and axe were secure, did she disconnect the rope from her harness and move to the edge of the crevasse. She laid flat on the ice and peered into its depths. A relieved smile spread across her lips. Kyle was climbing up the side of the crevasse. A few more yards and she would be able to touch him.

Kyle sensed her presence and tilted his head. The smile Jane couldn't see, but knew was on his lips, was communicated with a reassuring nod.

The wait was excruciating as her lover, inch-by-inch climbed toward her. She watched him free the axe from the ice, reach out and hammer it in to a new higher position. He then moved one foot higher, kicking the crampon into the ice. His hand then searched for a secure hold in the almost sheer, smooth ice. Jane couldn't help but admire the man's skill and strength as his fingers found a small bump in the ice to cling too. At all times he kept three anchor points on the ice. Releasing and then finding another of his anchor points, he slowly climbed up the crevasse. When he was near enough to touch, she wanted to reach out and pull him to safety, but she forced herself to wait.

When he appeared above the edge and sunk his axe into the ice at arm's length, she could resist no more. She grabbed his arm and dragged him onto the ice. As soon as he was safe, she rolled over and straddled him, kissing him through their thermal face masks, fighting back the tears she knew would collect in her goggles and freeze. His arms wrapped around her and pulled her tight against him.

Jane felt Kyle tense. Something was wrong. With no warning she was thrown aside. As she rolled, she spotted a huge polar bear appear out of the wall of windblown snow and ice. It rose up on its hind legs and roared furiously. A flash of red captured her attention. Kyle rushed at the threat with a raised ice axe.

"Noooo!" she screamed, her muffled warning lost to the wind.

Kyle collided with the bear and slammed the axe into its large chest. Blood leaked from the wound, staining its white fur red before freezing. The bear, surprised by the unexpected attack, staggered to the side. Its foot rested on the edge of the crevasse, and unable to support the bear's weight, the ice broke away. The animal toppled into the abyss. Unaware what was happening, it slashed out at its attacker. Its large claw-tipped paw ripped through Kyle's coat and the skin beneath like paper. The blood pouring from the wound instantly froze. Claws snagged on the zipper. Kyle was pulled into the chasm.

Jane screamed and rushed to the edge. She glanced at the rope still attached to Kyle and tethered to her axe buried in the ice. There was still a chance he would survive. She scrambled to her feet and dived for the axe as the force of Kyle's and the polar bear's weight snapped the rope taut and yanked it free. She grabbed hold, but with nothing to stop her she sped toward the chasm. Her crampons sprayed two plumes of ice as they failed to find a grip. Tears filled her eyes when she realized that to save herself, she must let him go.

Her hands reluctantly released her grip upon the axe.

She slid to a stop with her face staring into the crevasse. She watched Kyle fall. He looked up at her. He blew her a kiss before he disappeared in the airborne snow racing through the chasm.

He was gone. She curled into a ball and sobbed.

After five minutes she pulled herself together and climbed to her feet.

If she remained here she would die. She would not waste her lover's sacrifice by doing so. She had to find a way across the crevasse.

It took her three hours to find a route past the chasm and reach the ice station.

When the blizzard blew itself out the following day, she returned with a rescue party. Though they'd warned her it was possible Kyle's body would have fallen so deep into the crevasse it might be irretrievable, she'd insisted an attempt be made. She couldn't tolerate the thought of him down there, alone and forever frozen in his last vestiges of death.

The rescuer who climbed into the crevasse discovered Kyle's body resting on a small ice shelf. The position of his head indicated his neck had broken in the fall. The dead polar bear was spotted deeper in the chasm, trapped between the ever narrowing ice walls.

That Kyle's death would have been quick brought little comfort to Jane.

She accompanied Kyle's body when it was flown home two days later.

The flight attendant pushed the cart next to Jane's seat and glanced at the occupant, noticing the passenger's eyes were red from weeping and held fresh tears ready to fall. The plastic tray of food was almost untouched. The attendant knew of the passenger's connection with the body in the hold and genuinely sympathized with her loss. "Have you finished with your meal?" she asked softly.

Jane glanced at the attendant and nodded.

The attendant cleared away the plate. "Is there anything else I can get you?"

"No, thank you," Jane replied.

As the attendant moved to the next row of seats, Jane continued her visual out through the window, wondering how she would pick up her life now that the man she'd planned to spend the rest of her life with was gone. Tears trickled down her cheek.

After Kyle's funeral, Jane forced herself to move on with her life; it would be what Kyle would have wanted. She spent the following few years throwing herself into her work and soon became a respected scientist in her field. Though, over time, the pain had dulled, the memories of Kyle and their short time together remained as sharp as the day they were formed.

## **Prologue 3**

### **Pine Glacier Ice Shelf – 2011.**

NO MOUNTAINS OR HILLS blemished the horizon and no buildings broke the monotony of the ice. It was as if a giant bulldozer had swept everything away to leave a desolate ledge of ice. Blue patches of sky among the broad stretches of grey-tinted clouds, were the only colour to invade the white pallet used by nature to paint the vista that stretched so far and wide that the curvature of the earth was distinguishable. The snow and ice pellets the ever-present Antarctic wind skittered over the surface of the ice sounded like the tiny feet of thousands of insects. But for all of its desolate appearance, it was also a beautiful and deceptively peaceful vista.

The revving of an approaching Ski-Doo shattered the relative tranquility that had prevailed over the scene. Its bright orange and black chassis and the blue cold weather gear that cloaked the driver, stood out starkly against the surrounding pallor.

The driver steering the snow vehicle over uneven and hazardous terrain was Grant Tilbury, a member of the advance party sent to scout out a suitable location for the planned base camp on the Pine Ice Glacier. It was his first trip to Antarctica.

Propelled along by twin rear tracks covered in thick-knobbed treads to grip the ice, the Ski-Doo sped up a small ice ridge and down the other side. Front skis bounced and shuddered on the rippled ice, giving the driver an uncomfortable ride.

Grant's eyes, hidden behind dark-tinted goggles, glanced at the handheld GPS vibrating erratically where it was taped to the center of the handlebars, adjusted course and gazed ahead at the mile still to go. He had travelled a fraction of the distance when he noticed an anomaly ahead. The snow and ice carried by the wind appeared to be diving down and disappearing into the ice. He strained his vision to make sense of the snow's abnormal behaviour. Only when he'd drawn nearer did he recognize the danger, a crevasse that could swallow vehicle and driver in an instant with little chance of survival for man or machine.

He pressed hard on the brake and turned the vehicle.

The Ski-Doo slewed to the side and skidded across the ice.

Forced to move sideways, the tracks scraped up a wave of ice until the machine juddered to a hesitant halt.

Grant twisted his head. Half of the treads hung over the edge of the deep drop. The ice beneath the vehicle cracked from the weight. The skidoo tilted. Grant gunned the engine. It climbed up the sloping slab of ice and bounced onto solid ground. He stopped a safe distance from the edge, climbed off and walked over to the crevasse. He stared in awe at the deep, wide rift that stretched for miles in both directions.

# Chapter 1

## Betrayed.

2015

BARRY GLEG WAS LATE for work again. He turned the old car into the British Glaciological Research Society (BGRS) car park, and scanned the rows of parked vehicles for a free space. He spotted one and headed for it. He stopped a little way past the empty parking place, crunched the car into reverse and turned to back into the space. A car horn beeped loudly. Barry slammed on the brakes. Coffee sloshed from the half-full paper cup in the cup-holder onto his clothes. Barry cursed and glanced at the rear-view mirror. A red sports car drove into his space.

Barry knew the driver of the car only too well— Richard Whorley. The man was a constant thorn in his side and it seemed today was to be no different. His nemesis emerged from the car and glanced over with his usual expression, a smug confident smile, before walking toward the entrance of the BGRS building. Barry glared at his well-groomed co-worker, dressed in his expensive hand-tailored suit, walking away with a self-assured stride. Everything about the man annoyed him, and he was well aware of part of the reason. Richard was the exact opposite of Barry, handsome, successful and well tailored. It was a package that appealed to many of the women the lecherous man came into contact with, which included the boss's daughter to whom the man had recently become engaged.

Barry sighed. Though he would like to confront the annoying prick, he knew it would be a waste of time and drove off to look for another empty parking space.

When Barry entered the building five minutes later, his nemesis was flirting with the young receptionist. Richard's gaze was unashamedly directed at the girl's ample cleavage less than a foot away from his perfectly formed nose. From the smile on the girl's face it was evident she enjoyed the attention.

Richard had been flirting with Samantha for the past two weeks and tonight, after he'd furnished her with a few drinks at the hotel where they had planned to meet, he intended to bed her. At the sound of cheap shoes tapping on the marble floor, he tore his eyes away from the wonderful sight and saw Barry approaching. Richard noticed the man's cheap, off-the-peg suit seemed even more crinkled today than usual, if that was possible. The stern look his balding colleague directed at him was evidence of the man's pissed off attitude. Though this in itself caused Richard no concern, a confrontation witnessed by the pretty receptionist could cause him some embarrassment. Unwilling to risk anything that might cause her to look at him in a less than favourable light, Richard stood up straight and flashed a smile at the girl. "Okay, Doll, I have to go." He then added in a conspiratorial whisper, "I'll pick you up about eight tonight, and remember, this is our secret and no underwear."

The girl smiled mischievously. "You're a wicked, wicked man, Richard."

Richard flashed a roguish grin and crossed to the elevator. Tonight she would find out just how wicked he could be. His approach toward the elevator was

greeted by the timely opening of its doors. He nipped around its three emerging passengers and quickly stabbed a finger at the fifth-floor button. A glance through the rapidly narrowing gap of the closing doors revealed Barry running for the elevator.

Richard smiled and waved. "Too slow, old man," he called out just before the doors met.

Barry halted his rush and glared at the floor numbers lighting one by one as the elevator passed each floor.

"That man is a complete dickhead."

Barry turned to see another of his co-workers approach. This one he liked. "Morning, Jane. Yes, he is, a prize-winning dick head."

They both smiled.

Barry pressed the call button.

Jane glanced over at the large wall clock. "I thought you had a meeting with Jerrod at nine?"

Barry let out a sigh. "I do. I'm late, as usual."

"Betsy playing up again?"

Barry nodded. "I hate to get rid of her, but I really need a new car."

"Just promise me you won't buy a sports car."

"A sports car! With my funds I'd be lucky if I could afford a bike."

Jane laughed. "I can't imagine you on a bike."

Barry smiled sadly. "Neither can I, though I might have no choice, I was relying on the promotion and the extra money it would bring."

"The position Richard swiped away from you."

Barry nodded. "I'm sure his relationship with Jerrod's daughter is just a front so he can worm his way up the ladder."

"If that's his plan, it seems to be working."

The elevator arrived and they entered.

"Enough about my troubles, you'll be off to Antarctica soon."

Jane nodded. "Next week."

Barry noticed her apprehensive expression. "You don't seem very enthusiastic."

"Oh, I am though, I can't wait to be back on the ice, but..."

Barry realized the reason for her sad demeanour. "Oh, of course, it must be almost five years since..."

"It is," Jane replied. "I suppose it's about time I got over him and moved on. It's what Kyle would have wanted."

Barry rested a hand gently on her arm. "You will, when the time is right."

They stepped out of the elevator onto the fifth floor. Their boss, Jerrod, stood in his office doorway; his eyes searching the rows of desks set out in the room like a vulture seeking a carcass to feed upon. He noticed Barry, scowled, tapped his wristwatch and abruptly turned and entered his office.

"I suppose I had better go and see what the old man wants."

"Okay, I'll catch up with you later." Jane watched Barry walk reluctantly toward their boss's office.

"You're looking gorgeous as usual, Jane."

Jane turned to see Richard standing beside her. The man had the uncanny ability to sneak up on you without making a sound; he would've made an excellent

burglar. It was all too obvious the man was undressing her with his eyes. She mentally cringed. "Congratulations on your engagement, Richard."

Richard smiled. "Thanks. Jerrod was very receptive to the idea when I asked for his permission."

"Was that before or after you stole Barry's promotion?"

Richard's smile refused to fade at the snide comment. "I stole nothing. The job went to the person most qualified for the position—me. For the reason he failed to secure the promotion you only have to look at the slob. Have you seen Barry's suit today? It's got more wrinkles than a hundred-year-old man and it's stained with coffee. He needs to sort himself out if he wants to rise through the ranks like me."

"Or just marry the boss's daughter. I hope the poor woman knows what she's letting herself in for." Jane shook her head and walked away.

Jane had been sitting at her desk for twenty minutes when Barry came over.

"Jane, the boss wants to see you."

Jane stopped typing and turned to face Barry. "Do you know why?"

Barry nodded. "It's about your trip to the Antarctic next week. I think you might get your chance to explore that ice rift after all. NASA has discovered an anomaly on their latest scan."

Jane's brow creased. "What sort of anomaly?"

"That's what the old man wanted to see me about. He showed me the scan. The rift is perfectly sharp except in one spot, where it's blurred. At first the NASA technicians thought it was a fault in the equipment, but when the exact same result was reproduced on a second scan, they knew that wasn't the cause."

"Strange," said Jane.

"That's what I said. I've no idea what would cause it, but probably the reason lies buried beneath the ice at that particular spot in the side of the rift."

"And NASA wants the team to check it out while we're there next week."

"I believe so. I'm sure Jerrod will fill you in on all the details, so you'd better not keep him waiting like I did."

"Okay, thanks." Jane stood.

"A word of warning, I think Richard's angling to go on the trip, so watch out."

"What gives you that idea? He has no reason to go, and he's the last person I want to be stuck in Antarctica with."

"Jerrod asked me if I thought it would be beneficial to the team if Richard went on the trip to help determine the cause of the anomaly. Naturally I sung your virtues and told him whatever the cause of the glitch turns out to be, your expertise will be invaluable to the team."

Jane jumped up and gave Barry a hug. "Thanks. I owe you one."

"You're welcome. Like I told Jerrod, you're far more qualified than Richard, whatever's found."

Jane smiled. "My mother is more qualified than Richard." She headed to Jerrod Sandberg's office.

She knocked on the door and entered. Though warned about the man, Jane was still surprised to see Richard sitting there.

Jerrod smiled warmly at her. "Hello, Jane. Please come in."

She closed the door and sat in the chair placed beside Richard.

“As you may have heard from Barry, NASA has discovered something beside the rift they want the expedition heading out there next week to check out. As a courtesy, because we're sending a team member and they're partly funding the mission, they sent us details of this anomaly to examine beforehand.” He slid an image across the desk.

Jane picked it up and stared at a section of the ice rift taken from an airplane flying over the ice. Her eyes zoomed in on the fuzzy area that so perplexed NASA. She looked up at her boss. “As I've previously mentioned in my reports to you, sir, while our main objective is to carry out tests on the Pine Valley Glacier, I'm positive there's a lot we can learn from the rift. It'll be ideal opportunity to take core samples from deep in the ice easily and without the aid of expensive drilling rigs, and a myriad of other tests. Now this anomaly's been detected, it's even more exciting. Perhaps it's a cavern in the ice sealed off for hundreds or thousands of years, though that alone wouldn't cause NASA's anomaly.”

“A meteorite might?” said Richard.

Jane glanced at Richard. As usual the smug look was plastered across his face. *So this is how he was trying to worm his way onto the team.* “I very much doubt a meteor is responsible for the anomaly,” she said firmly.

“But you accept it is possible?” pushed Richard.

Jane felt herself backed into a corner. “I suppose anything's possible, however unlikely that is in reality.”

“That's as may be,” said Jerrod, firmly, “but I've made my decision. Richard is going.”

Jane inwardly sighed. Cooped up with Richard for two months would be torture. She avoided looking at Richard because she knew he would be grinning. “Has someone dropped out as I thought the expedition was at full capacity?”

“It is. I believe you've misunderstood me, Jane. Richard will take your place on the team.”

Jane's mouth dropped open in shock. It had been a difficult task to organize everything for the expedition, and it had taken months of planning with the other team members to finalize everything. The Pine Island Glacier was four hundred miles from the nearest ice station, Byrd Station, where a small airstrip had to be first constructed to allow for C130 planes to bring scientists and equipment from the McMurdo ice station one thousand miles away. This equipment then had to be driven four hundred miles over rough terrain pitted with crevasses to the glacier. All of this work could only be carried out during the short Antarctic summer, late October though late January. It had taken two years for the team to plan and establish a small base camp near the rift and now she would never get to see it.

“Are you okay, Jane?” asked Jerrod, when she'd remained silent for a few moments.

“What!” she snapped. “I can't believe you're sending Richard instead of me.”

“It makes perfect sense,” said Richard.

“Not to me it damn well doesn't!”

“I know you were looking forward to the trip, Jane,” said Jerrod, with a slight hint of guilt. “But now this anomaly's been thrust into the equation, we have to cover every eventuality. There's already another glaciologist on the team, but there's no meteorologist. You know how remote the Pine Island Glacier is and how

difficult it is to get there, so if it turns out to be a meteorite, Richard will be on hand to examine it.”

Jane felt like someone had just kicked her in the stomach. “There's more chance it will be Santa Claus and his elves responsible for the anomaly than a meteorite.”

“Anyway, the Antarctic is no place for a woman.”

Jane couldn't believe what the pompous prick had just said. She glared at Richard and imagined her hands ripping his stupid tongue from his stupid mouth. “No place for a woman! The Antarctic is no longer a boy's only club. Women have been going there for years.” Jane seethed with anger.

Sensing the volatile atmosphere, Jerrod abruptly dismissed her. “That's all, Jane.”

In a daze, she stood and exited the office, softly closing the door she wanted to slam shut behind her. She heard Richard laugh. She had no doubts the joke was at her expense. She headed back to her desk.

Barry intercepted her. “How did it go?” He then noticed her despondent expression. “What's wrong?”

“I'm not going to Antarctica. Richard is.”

“What! I don't understand. I told Jerrod you were by far the best candidate.”

“But I'm not marrying the boss's daughter, am I?”

“I'm so sorry, Jane. Richard doesn't deserve to go— you do.”

“It's not your fault, Barry. Richard's convinced Jerrod it's a meteorite causing the anomaly, and as a meteorologist, he should be the one to go.”

“But that's absurd!”

“Of course it's absurd, but Jerrod believes it's feasible, so Richard will be going. I have to go. I'll see you later.”

Barry watched her walk away and turned when Richard exited Jerrod's office. He wore a satisfied smile. Barry's glare followed the man's walk to his office at the end of the room, the office that by rights should have Barry's name on the door. A smile followed the wicked look that appeared on his face. *Don't worry, Jane, I'll make sure Richard gets exactly what he deserves.*

## Chapter 2

### Antarctica.

THREE DAYS LATER, Jane was at her desk when her email alert pinged to inform her she had received a new message. The email was from Barry. She opened it and read the message.

*Don't worry, Jane. Cinderella will go to the ball.*

*Hang up your bikini and pack a bag ready for a very cold climate.*

*:-) Barry*



Jane stood up and peered over the cubicles. Barry looked back at her with a big smile on his face. He winked before sitting down, disappearing from her view.

*What are you up to, Barry?*

Barry needed perfect timing if his plan was going to work. He glanced at his watch. Luckily, Richard was a creature of habit in some regards. His intake of caffeine at 3PM was one of them. Barry counted down, "five, four, three, two, one." He stared at Richard's door. A few seconds later he appeared. After Barry's eyes had followed the man over to the coffee machine, he hurried across the room. "Hi, Richard."

Richard placed a cup in the tray of the coffee dispenser, pressed a button to start the process and glanced at his colleague. "You look happy today."

"Why wouldn't I be? Tomorrow you leave for Antarctica and for two months I'll be free of you. It's going to be like an extra holiday."

Richard huffed. "I'll be free of you as well."

Barry glanced at Richard's cup slowly filling with coffee. "With a bit of luck you'll be eaten by a polar bear." He flashed Richard a hopeful grin.

"You are such a dumbass, Barry. There aren't any polar bears in the Antarctic."

The cup was almost full.

Barry made a show of craning his head past Richard and let out a soft whistle. "Wow! Look at the tits on her."

He knew it would be impossible for Richard to resist looking. The man did not disappoint. His head swivelled so fast it was almost a blur. Barry's hand darting out to tip the contents of the small, glass bottle into Richard's coffee was equally as quick.

"Where?" Richard's eyes desperately searched the room.

Barry slapped him softly on the back. "Too late, she's gone. You were too slow old man." Whistling a merry tune, Barry walked away.

The following day Jane boarded a British Airways flight from London Heathrow to Christchurch, New Zealand. From there she would catch a military transport plane to Antarctica and then a C-130 would take her a further one thousand miles to the Byrd Ice Station. A small plane would take her on the final four hundred mile leg of her journey to the expedition's Ice Rift base camp on the Pine Valley Glacier ice shelf.

She settled back into the comfortable business class seat Richard had wrangled out of his future father in law. She found it hard to believe that tomorrow she would be in Antarctica. Though she assumed she had Barry to thank for her good fortune and Richard's mysterious attack of gut rot and diarrhoea, she also knew she was the better person for the job, even if the impossible happened and a meteorite was found. There were two geologists on the team far more experienced and capable than Richard, who in her experience, didn't know his arse from his elbow when it came to reading scientific data. How he'd achieved his degree was a mystery to more people than herself.

"Would you like a drink, Miss Harper?" enquired the stewardess, adding a bright smile.

With a fourteen hour flight ahead of her and to celebrate her good fortune, Jane smiled back at the flight attendant. “Yes, I think I will. Vodka and coke with ice, please.”

Four flights, thousands of miles and many hours later, Jane stared out the window of the small aircraft—owned by its pilot, Jack Hawkins—at the huge expanse of ice below.

Max Boyle, the only other passenger, stared at the woman who sat across the aisle. Her long brown hair framed her slightly full, but pretty, face. When he'd received the list of team members, which included photographs of them all, he'd detected sadness in her large, brown eyes. He broke his appreciative gaze and looked out of the window at the white wilderness. “It's an amazing sight.”

“It certainly is,” Jane replied.

“Is this your first time in Antarctica?”

Jane tore her eyes away from the amazing landscape to look at her fellow passenger. Max, forty-four years old, had a full head of dark, slightly unkempt hair and a face bursting with character that reminded her of Walter Matthau with a hint of Anthony Hopkins. “Yes, though I've been to the Arctic a few times.” A stab of sadness entered her heart when Kyle's face appeared in her thoughts. “You've been here before, I believe?”

Max nodded. “This is my second visit. My first was three years ago.”

“What's it like?”

“Cold, damn cold. But as it's the coldest place on Earth, that's to be expected.”

“I needn't have packed my skimpy bikini then?”

Max laughed. “Oh, I don't know, it might come in handy. There's an Antarctic tradition, a sort of initiation ritual for Newbie's. You have to run out onto the ice, *naked*, but they might concede and let you wear your bikini—the bottom half, anyway.”

Jane wasn't sure if Max was being serious or pulling her leg. The grin on his face did little to convince her one way or the other.

“It's actually true,” he told her. “It's also a good way of bonding with the rest of the team.”

“I'm all for bonding, but running about in my birthday suit in the freezing cold watched by a group of men is not the bonding I had in mind.”

“Well, give it some thought. I'm certain as soon as they discover you're an Antarctic virgin they'll mention it.”

“Did you do it?”

“Of course. It's not that bad. A quick sprint in the cold and then back in the warm. Actually it's quite refreshing. However, I'm a man and the team was all men.”

“I'm certainly not going to mention this is my first time. Hopefully, no one will ask as we've such a busy schedule.”

Max smiled. “Oh, they will ask, believe me, they will ask.”

Jane looked out of the window. All she saw was ice and snow. It looked very cold. “Did you know that in August two thousand and ten, a NASA satellite recorded the lowest Earth temperature ever recorded in Antarctica? It hit minus

ninety-four point seven degrees Centigrade, that's one hundred and thirty-five point eight degrees Fahrenheit. I can't imagine anything so cold."

"As I said, damn cold, but we shouldn't experience any temperatures that low."

"The rift is coming into view," called out the pilot. "I'll fly above it until we reach your base so you can have a good look."

Jane and Max scanned the ice.

"I see it!" said Jane.

Max unbuckled his seat belt, crossed the aisle to take the seat behind Jane, and gazed out of the window at the approaching rip in the ice.

A few moments later the small craft turned to follow the wide, deep crevasse.

Jane stared into its depths, "The photographs don't do it justice."

"I agree," said Max. "At eighteen miles long with an average width of two hundred and sixty feet, it's the largest rift discovered. When it breaks off the ice island will be about twenty-one by twelve miles, big enough to fit Manhattan on, with room to spare."

They stared in silence at the rift passing below them until the plane changed direction to once again fly above the ice sheet.

"Base camp ahead," called out the pilot, a few minutes later.

The two passengers caught their first glimpse of their home for the following two months. Positioned about half a mile away from the rift, the small group of buildings was a speck in the white wilderness.

The passengers gazed at the prefabricated cabins, which included living accommodations for ten people, a small sick bay, well equipped laboratories, kitchen, showers, radio room, rest room and storage. Separated from the main building was a workshop, a garage for two Sno-Cats and two Ski-Doos, a generator room and a storage hut. All were heavily insulated against the freezing temperatures. Though Jane had been involved from the planning stages, she still found it incredible the base camp had managed to become a reality in such a remote area of the ice. Trails formed by snow vehicles from the camp led off in different directions. As they flew over the camp, three people wearing red and orange snow-suits paused from their labour to stare up at the approaching aircraft.

The small craft, battered by the constant wind, turned and began its descent. Jane watched the ice grow ever closer and noticed it wasn't as smooth as it seemed from high up. A powerful jolt shot through the plane when the skids connected with the hard packed ice. The plane bounced twice before sliding across the wind-rippled snow that lay atop the thick layer of ice. The vibrations shaking the plane and its passengers decreased when the plane slowed and turned toward the compound and ceased when it came to a gentle halt a few yards away.

Jack turned and smiled at his two passengers. "We're here, folks."

Jane and Max released the catches of their seatbelts, stood and slipped on their padded thermal coats.

Jack moved into the back and opened the door. When a rush of icy wind entered the heated cabin, Jane quickly slid the zip of her Parka up to her neck.

"Climb down and I'll pass out your bags," said Jack.

Jane was first to step onto the ice. She shivered as the cold wind blew through her hair and pushed the fur-lined hood off her head.

Max disembarked and smiled at her. "I told you it was cold."

"I'll soon get used to it," Jane told him, refitting the hood tighter.

"You never get used to it," Max said. He looked at the main hut when someone came out. "Here comes our welcome party."

Jane smiled at the man walking toward them. Though his hood hid most of his face, Jane recognized the white beard from the photograph in the team's info of the man. Henry Sandberg, fifty six years old, a veteran of the ice and an expert in many fields and the man in charge of the expedition. Jane thought he had a kind face. His wife, Martha, who'd battled with cancer for almost a year, had died two months ago. She had made Henry promise that he would still go to Antarctica, whether she lived or died. She, Henry and Max were the only three English participants; the rest of the team were American.

"Welcome to Antarctica, Jane." Henry slipped off a glove and held out a hand, which Jane shook.

"Hello, Henry. It's good to finally meet you."

"It's a pleasure to meet you also." He turned to Max and shook his hand. "Welcome, Max."

"Thank you, Henry."

"Grab your bags and we'll get a coffee. and then I'll introduce you to the rest of the rabble." He turned to two men by the garage busy filling the tank of a Ski-Doo with fuel. "Eli, Theo, can you unload the supplies from the plane and pack them away?"

One of the men waved an acknowledgement.

"Hi, Henry."

Henry turned to speak to the pilot leaning out of the plane's doorway. "Hello, Jack. Are you staying for a brew?"

Jack glanced at the distant grey clouds gathering. "Not this time. It looks like the weather might turn at any moment. I'll unload, top up the fuel tanks and leave. If I don't go now, I might be stuck here for a while."

"Okay, have a good flight." Henry turned to the new arrivals. "Okay, you two, follow me."

Jane smiled at the handsome pilot. *I wouldn't mind being stuck here with him for a few days.* She blushed when the thought popped into her head. "Thanks for the lift, Jack."

"You're welcome, and I hope you enjoy your stay."

"Thanks, I'm sure I will." She followed Henry and Max to the main hut.

Henry glanced back at her. "Is this your first visit to Antarctica, Jane?"

Though she couldn't see Max's face, she knew it wore a smirk. She was about to answer when one of the men unloading the plane interrupted.

"Henry, do you want this stuff in the garage or the storeroom?"

Henry shouted his answer. "The storeroom, Theo. It's the extra climbing gear and flashlights and stuff I requested to check out NASA's anomaly."

Theo acknowledged with a wave of a hand.

Henry turned back to the new arrivals. "Now, where were we?"

"Coffee," Jane blurted.

"Ah, yes, coffee. Follow me."

Max flashed Jane a smile and whispered, "That was close."

“Welcome to your temporary home.” Henry opened the door and they followed him inside.

To prevent the cold from entering the main building, a double door system was used in the entrance. The inner door, which resembled that normally seen on a commercial freezer, was only opened when the outside door was closed. A wave of warmth swept over them when Henry opened the inner door. A long corridor with small triple-glazed windows along the left wall and a series of doors set in the right side stretched the length of the hut.

“It's warmer in here than I expected,” said Jane, closing the inner door behind her.

“That's due to the three feet of insulation in the outer walls, floor and ceiling,” Henry informed her. “It keeps the cold out and the warmth locked inside.” He pointed to a rack of coats on the side wall. “Hang your cold weather gear there and while you are doing that, I'll pour us all some coffee.”

Jane and Max slipped off their coats, hung them on empty hooks and went through the door Henry had taken. They glanced around. A large table surrounded by ten chairs was positioned at one end of the room. Comfortable looking chairs and a matching sofa had been set out to create a relaxation area. Two men with wind burnt faces were engrossed with watching *The Thing* movie playing on a large flat screen TV on the back wall. A small area to the right of the large table housed coffee and tea making facilities and was currently occupied by Henry. A worktop that almost stretched the full width of the room sectioned off the kitchen area. A large pan bubbled away on the stove to fill the room with the appetizing aroma of something cooking. Jane thought she detected a hint of chili in the air.

Henry turned to the new arrivals. “Milk and sugar?”

“Milk, no sugar,” said Max.

“Lots of milk and two sugars, please, Henry.”

“Okay, grab a seat, and I'll bring them over.”

Jane and Max sat at the table.

Jane sensed a friendly comfortable atmosphere. Her excitement at being here reminded her of a school trip she went on to France with her friends. Then, as now, everything was strange, new, and exciting.

Henry placed their hot drinks in front of them before choosing a seat opposite. “In a minute I'll give you a tour of the place and show you where you'll be sleeping.” He looked at Jane. “You'll be glad to hear you're not the only female here. Lucy Jones is doing her doctorate in biology. She specializes in micro organisms, which she hopes to find evidence of trapped in the ice in the lowest parts of the rift now it seems we're set to explore it. She contacted me to ask if she could join us. Her enthusiasm persuaded me to say yes, and we did have the spare bunk in your room. She arrived yesterday.”

“Okay, good,” said Jane. “Is everyone here now?”

“Yes, all eight.” He nodded over at the two men watching TV. “You probably recognize them from the info packs I sent out but I'll recap, Pike, our maintenance man, is also our cook and a very good one at that.”

Pike paused the movie. “Did I just hear you praise my cooking, Henry?”

The two men crossed the room and greeted the new arrivals.

“Just because you heard the words, it doesn't mean I meant them.” Henry indicated the second man, muscular and broad-shouldered. “And this is Scott, our mechanic. Not a big talker, but he can fix anything and is an invaluable member of the team, as are you all.”

Pike and Scott shook hands with Jane and Max.

“Pike's an unusual name,” said Max when he shook the man's hand.

“It's my family name. I was christened Jesse, but prefer Pike.”

Scott playfully rubbed Pike's hair with a large hand. “He thinks it sounds less feminine.”

Pike knocked his hand away and changed the subject. “Henry moans about my cooking and yet he always eats every last bit,” said Pike, smiling.

Henry rolled his eyes.

“Catch up with you two later.” said Pike.

The two men headed back to the TV to watch the remainder of the movie.

Henry shook his head. “We've only been here two weeks, but I'm sure it's the third time they've watched that movie.”

Pike looked back. “He's exaggerating. We've only watched it twice. The one we're watching now is *The Thing*, made in 2011, a prequel to John Carpenter's original 1982 version.”

“Well they both seem the same to me.” Henry turned to Jane and Max. “Okay, if you've finished your coffee, I'll take you on the tour and introduce you to the rest of the team.”

Jane and Max gulped down the remains of their warm drinks and followed Henry from the room.

## Chapter 3

### Descent.

THE EIGHT TEAM MEMBERS sat around the table with Henry at his usual chair at one end. They'd all just enjoyed a meal of chili-con-carnie and baked potatoes with apple pie and custard for dessert.

“As you all know, we've been planning this expedition for two years. The Pine Island Glacier is one of the largest ice streams in Antarctica, which drains much of the West Antarctic Ice Sheet, and because it's grounded in ever deeper sea water, it's vulnerable to melting at its base. Satellite measurements have shown the Pine Island Glacier Basin has a greater net contribution of ice to the sea than any other ice drainage basin in the world and this has increased due to recent speeding up of the ice stream. One criterion of our mission is to attempt to discover the reason behind the ice stream's sudden acceleration and to ascertain if it will continue to increase over time.

“The wide range of tests we'll carry out will be important in understanding the behaviour of the Pine Island Glacier, affectionately nicknamed PIG. However, before we can start with our planned schedule, NASA is insistent we first check out this anomaly we've all been discussing for the past few days, which I admit,

does intrigue me.” He received a few nods of agreement from some of the team. “To get them off our backs so we can concentrate on what we came here to do, I've agreed to their demand, so tomorrow we'll investigate the rift. For this endeavour, we need someone to descend into the rift and have a poke around. I suggest a glaciologist goes down first to determine the stability of the ice and to see if anything unusual is down there. Jane and Theo, as our glaciologists, you must decide which of you will go down.”

“I have no problem with going down,” said Theo, “but though I believe our credentials are comparable, Jane is by far the better climber, so perhaps she should have the honour if she wants it.”

Jane flashed Theo a grateful smile. “Thank you, I'm more than willing.”

Henry looked at the other female member of the team. “Lucy, this would be an ideal opportunity for you to explore the rift. I know you can climb, so while we have all the gear set up, if Jane has no objections, you can accompany her.”

“Lucy's welcome. I'd enjoy the company,” said Jane.

“Okay, that's settled,” said Henry. “Jack brought the stuff I requested when he ferried Jane and Max here, so we should have everything we need. I also ordered some flashlights, as I'm not sure how much light will penetrate down to the bottom of the rift or what we'll find down there. If this anomaly is a cavern in the ice, we might need them. I think that's all for now, so for the rest of the evening we can relax.”

“I'm going to stick a movie on if anyone's interested,” said Scott.

“I hope it's not *The Thing* again,” said Henry.

“No, Henry, it's not. It's *Alien!*”

The following day Henry checked that Jane and Lucy were safely connected to the ropes before giving them permission to start their climb.

“Beware of falling ice,” Max warned. “Though the ice looks stable, it can crack at any time for no apparent reason.”

“We will,” Jane assured him.

As the two women backed toward the wide gap in the ice, Jane glanced at the two metal stakes to which their ropes were tethered.

Max noticed her looking. “Don't worry, Jane. The ice is like concrete. They're screwed in tight and won't move.”

Jane flashed him a smile. “Thanks for the confidence boost.” She slipped the tinted goggles over her eyes and looked at her climbing companion. “You ready?”

“Let's do it,” Lucy replied, eager to start taking samples.

The two women leaned out and began their descent of the deepest part of the rift. Its bottom was almost two hundred feet below them.

A few yards down they reached a small ice shelf. They backed to its edge and continued down.

Jane glanced up. The faces of the other team members peered down at them from the top of the rift. Henry waved. A few moments later, when they'd lowered themselves into the top of the V-shaped crevasse, the shelf of ice blocked the onlookers from view. Their only communication now was via their walkie-talkies.

Though the wind funnelled along the rift constantly battered the two climbers, it wasn't strong enough to be a problem. Jane glanced below, but the snow and ice picked up by the wind prevented her from seeing very far.

The revving of an engine disturbed the relative silence. Henry turned. Pike approached on a Ski-Doo.

Pike halted the snow vehicle beside the team and raised his goggles. "I have hot chocolate for anyone who wants it."

The men gathered around the trailer towed by the Ski-Doo. Each accepted the welcome thermos mugs of hot chocolate.

Pike glanced over at the rift. "Are the girls below?"

Henry nodded. "Depending on what they find, they'll probably spend an hour or two down."

Careful not to get too close, Pike approached the edge and peered into the rift. "Rather them than me." When everyone had drunk their fill, Pike collected the cups. "I'm heading back to base where it's warm."

"Okay, thanks for the hot drink," Henry said.

The others also acknowledged their gratitude. Pike climbed aboard the Ski-Doo and pulled away. When he turned the Ski-Doo, the trailer slid sideways. The left-hand corner struck one of the metal stakes the climbing ropes were fastened to, knocking it at an angle. Unaware of what had happened, Pike drove off and aimed the Ski-Doo in the direction of base camp.

The ice took on a blue tint as the two women descended deeper. Compressed by the weight of many hundreds of years of snow, the ice was crystal clear. Both could discern tiny pockets of air. Little bubbles of age-old atmosphere that might contain the miniscule microbes Lucy hoped to find.

"Nearly there," shouted out Lucy, loud enough to be heard above the wind.

Jane glanced down. About sixty feet to go and they would touch bottom. When she felt a vibration through the soles of her climbing boots planted firmly against the ice, she looked at Lucy. "Did you feel that?"

Lucy nodded. "Should we be worried?"

"I don't think so. It's only the ice shelf moving on its journey out to the sea. It shouldn't be anything to worry about as it's constantly on the move."

Jane realized she was wrong when the vibrations abruptly increased in force.

The two climbers hugged the ice wall and made their bodies as small as possible to avoid the small chunks of ice that rained down around them. A crack, as loud as an explosion, echoed along the rift.

Both climbers looked down. The two ice walls moved apart and the rift grew steadily deeper.

When the vibrations increased and the loud crack rang out, the men on the ice stepped away from the edge.

With worry etching Henry's features, he glanced at the two ropes trailing into the rift's depths. It couldn't have happened at a worst time. The ice wall on the far



side of the rift trembled, dislodging lumps of ice that fell and tumbled into the crevasse. Though the ice had moved before, it had never been as forceful.

Fearful the edge might break away, Max took another step back. "What's happening?"

"It's the rift," said Henry. "It's opening." He put his hands close together and moved them apart to enforce his meaning.

"What, completely?" said Theo.

Henry shrugged. "I hope not."

"What about Jane and Lucy, should we pull them up?"

Henry glanced at the two ropes and then at Eli. "No. They're both experienced climbers. They'll be sheltering from falling ice. If we tug on the rope we might pull them into danger." He briefly thought of using the walkie-talkie to contact them, but quickly dismissed the idea. They didn't need any distractions and would make contact when the danger had passed.

Suddenly, the ice shook so violently it almost knocked the men to their knees. All shot Henry a concerned look, but there was nothing any of them could do. Until the ice settled, the girls were on their own.

Theo glanced at Max. "Do you think the girls will be okay?"

Max was about to answer when something struck Theo on the side of the head before shooting into the rift. When Theo fell, Max grabbed him and lowered him gently to the ground. Max wondered what had struck Theo. When he glanced around, he realized in horror the spike Jane's rope was fastened to had gone!

Jane screamed when she fell.

Kyle's teaching kicked in. She swung the ice axe at the slab of ice whizzing by in front of her. Shards of ice sprayed her face from the blade leaving a deep groove in the ice wall, but it did little to slow her rapid descent. A large chunk of ice bounced off the wall beside her and plummeted into the depths.

Lucy saw Jane fall. She grabbed at her friend's trailing rope, but it was too far away. She was about to swing over and grab it, when a sound made her glance up. The sharp point of the corkscrew spike Jane's rope was tethered to headed straight for her. She quickly swung out of its path. It shot by, missing her by inches.

The trembling ice grew still as quickly as it had started.

Helpless to aid Jane, Lucy watched her friend fall until she was swallowed by the sheets of snow and ice blowing through the rift. If a miracle happened and Jane survived the fall, she'd be seriously injured. Lucy climbed down.

It was all Jane could do to keep her wits about her and not panic. Realizing the ice axe wasn't going to save her, she prepared for the landing. She'd done parachuting before, so she knew that to lessen the impact she should bend her knees and roll as soon as she touched the ground. Though not convinced it would help in this situation, she nevertheless prepared to bend her knees on contact and waited for the impact. She guessed at the very least she'd suffer two broken legs; the pain would be excruciating. She glanced down and caught a glimpse of the ground and something dark directly below her.

The pain she expected to follow her impact with the ice never came. Neither did the end of her fall. Ice slid past her face and then nothing except blackness. She looked down. The dark continued all around her. Momentarily confused, she glanced up. Her rope disappeared through a ring of light; she'd fallen through the ice into an ice cavern. The block of ice that had fallen past her must have crashed through the cavern's roof. It was doubtful she'd survive the fall now. It would be more than her legs that would break when whatever lay below halted her fall.

Henry's worried voice cracked from the walkie-talkie in her pocket. "Jane, are you okay? Over."

Suddenly, Jane's plummet into darkness came to an abrupt end.

When Max informed him Jane's tether had failed, and Theo had been injured, Henry tried to reach Jane on the walkie-talkie while Max and Eli attended to Theo. There was a chance she and Lucy had anchored themselves while they waited for the tremor to settle.

Theo wasn't seriously injured. The spike had caught him a glancing blow without breaking the skin. Max and Eli helped him to his feet. The worried men crowded around Henry when he released his finger from the talk button and waited. He received no reply.

He tried again. "Jane, Lucy, please report your situation. Over."

Lucy had been forced to a halt when she ran out of rope; the bottom of the rift had not been as deep when they'd started their climb and it still couldn't be seen. Lucy fished the spare rope from her backpack and connected it to her current safety line. After transferring the descender to the new length of rope, she continued her descent. That she'd heard no screams worried her. It was an indication Jane was unconscious or had been killed on impact.

About one hundred feet deeper into the rift, Lucy cleared an overhang of ice and saw the bottom. There was no sign of Jane, but the spike with Jane's rope still attached was jammed across a hole in the ice. She was about to rappel down when Henry's voice crackled from her pocket.

The men stared anxiously at the communication device when Henry again tried to make contact. A few moments later, Lucy's voice broke the agonizing silence.

"I'm okay, but Jane's fallen through the ice at the bottom of the rift, which is about a hundred or more feet deeper now. I'm going to check on her situation. I'll update you shortly. Over."

"Be careful, Lucy. Over." Henry glanced at the worried faces around him. "Max, Theo, you're going down. Take a first aid kit and spare rope. If Lucy hasn't made contact by the time you arrive, apprise me of the situation immediately."

As soon as Lucy's feet touched solid ice, she rushed over to the hole and attached her rope to Jane's. Only then did she peer through the hole smashed through the two foot thickness of ice. It would be a miracle if Jane hadn't been injured or killed. The rope trailing from the spike disappeared into the darkness, hiding Jane from her view. She grabbed the swaying rope and felt weight on the

end. It gave her hope. If Jane had hit the ground it would be slack, but that wasn't to say she hadn't been injured or killed on the way down.

Though Henry's insistence on safety sometimes seemed unnecessary, his vast experience in exploring frozen wastes like Antarctica sometimes, like now, proved invaluable. Lucy pulled the LED head lamp torch—part of the kit Henry insisted they all carry with them when venturing out on the ice—from her pocket, switched it to its brightest setting and shone it into the black depths below the hole. She saw Jane's head turn to survey her surroundings when she swung into its beam. She was alive. “Are you okay?” Lucy called out.

Jane swung through the darkness, aware she was lucky to be alive. Though the climbing rope was designed to stretch a certain amount in the situation she'd just experienced, she doubted it had been designed for such a long fall. The sudden halt had dug the harness straps painfully into her skin, but a little pain and soreness she could endure—death, not so much. When she lifted her goggles to find out where she was, a light swept over her. Lucy called out. She looked up. Lucy was framed in the entrance eighty feet above her. The light from the torch aimed at her momentarily blinded her when she swung in and out of its beam. “I'm a bit sore and probably bruised where the straps bit, but otherwise okay and glad to be alive. What happened?”

Lucy glanced at the spike spanning the hole before replying. “Your spike came loose,” she called out. “I've secured you to my rope so you won't fall again, but I need to rig up another line to help you out. I'll inform the others what's happened and get them to come down and help.”

“Okay,” Jane shouted back.

Lucy retrieved the walkie-talkie from a pocket. “Henry, are you there? Over.”

Henry answered immediately. “Yes, Lucy. Is Jane okay?”

“Jane's okay. Repeat, Jane's okay. Over.”

“That's fantastic news. Over.”

“I think she's discovered part of NASA's anomaly. She's fallen through the ice into a large chamber. I've secured her rope, but I need help fixing a second line so she can be pulled out. Over.”

“Max and Theo are already on their way down. Over.”

“Okay. I'll keep you updated. Over.” She slipped the walkie-talkie back in her pocket and peered into the chamber. “You hear all that, Jane?”

Jane glanced up. “I did, thanks.”

Lucy moved her light through the darkness. “What is this place?”

“It must be the anomaly we were sent to check out, though I've no idea why it would affect NASA's scan.”

“I've heard of caverns like this being discovered, but never thought I'd see one for myself. There could be all kinds of things down here.” Lucy excitement was hard to miss. Frustratingly, the weak light of her torch did little to penetrate the far reaches of darkness away from the entrance. “I hope Henry lets us explore.”

“I'm sure he will,” said Jane. “I'll see if I can see more with my light.” She fished the headlamp from her pocket, switched it on and shone it below. The smashed block of ice on the ground only a few yards away made her realize what a lucky escape she'd had. The floor and walls sparkled as if encrusted with glitter when she swept the torch around. Her eyes took in the expanse of the chamber she'd

stumbled upon. Water dripped from some place her weak torch failed to illuminate. The irregular ice walls were streaked with dirty lines. Though it was impossible for the inadequate light to penetrate very far into the thick blackness around her, Jane sensed deep voids concealed by the shadows.

She glanced up at Lucy. "I'm going to climb down. Is the rope secure?"

Though Lucy knew it would be wiser to await the arrival of Max and Theo to assist them, Jane was so near to the ground even if she fell she'd be okay. She was also as eager as Jane to find out what lay hidden in the darkness below. "It's secure."

Jane rappelled down the short distance to the cavern floor and groaned when the harness chaffed her sore skin. Her lamp roamed through the darkness, reflecting off the walls of solid ice. Its surface was covered in large scallops, as if someone had used a giant ice-cream scoop to dig out the ice, giving it an unreal glossy appearance.

"Hello!" she called out. Her voice echoed back at her through the large space. *It must be as big as a cathedral.*

A drip of water caused her to look toward the sound. Bright blue light erupted out of the darkness. It reflected off the thousands of faceted edges of the sculptured ice and briefly lit up areas of the cavern. Jane stared in fascination when the blue light rippled across an expanse of water a short distance away. She tilted her head up to Lucy. "What was that? It was beautiful."

Lucy, whose view was limited by the size of the hole and the thickness of the ice, had witnessed the effect of the eruption of blue light. She was unable to see its source, though she had a good idea as to its cause. "Unhitch yourself from the rope and move away. I'm coming down."

Doubting anything she said would deter the excited microbiologist from joining her, Jane did as instructed and also removed the chaffing harness. "Okay, it's all yours."

Lucy grabbed the spike from across the hole, moved a few yards away and screwed it into the ice. After detaching the two ropes from her harness, she tied Jane's rope to the spike. A hard tug on the rope satisfied her it was secure. While she attached the rope to her harness, small pieces of ice trickled down the side of the crevasse. She looked up. She glimpsed the shadowy figures of Max and Theo through the drifting snow, patches of colour in the whiteness. They were about halfway down. She used her walkie-talkie to apprise everyone of the situation. "You're not going to believe this, but Jane found a subterranean cavern complete with a body of water. I'm going down to join her so we can explore. Over."

It came as no surprise to Lucy when Henry tried to prevent her from doing so. "It sounds like a momentous discovery, however, do not enter until we've assessed the safety aspects of doing so. The cavern could be unstable. Also, you might contaminate a sealed ecosystem. Over."

"Henry, the cavern has probably been there for thousands of years. The likelihood of it collapsing the moment we decide to explore it is very remote. Also, it was contaminated when Jane fell into it. I'm not willing to miss this opportunity and I'm going in. Over."

"I strongly advise against it, but as I'm too far away to prevent you, please be careful and don't touch anything. Just observe. Over."

Lucy had already dropped the radio in her pocket and slipped the head lamp over her head. She sat at the edge of the ice hole, climbed through and swiftly slid down to the cavern floor. Jane waited nearby. Lucy untethered herself from the rope and joined her.

“Wow! This place is freaking amazing.” Lucy's light joined Jane's sweeping the area. She knelt and examined a patch of green slime covering some of the rocks dotted amongst the ice on the ground. “I think this is algae, perhaps even a new type.”

Jane smiled at Lucy's excited enthusiasm. “As exciting as you make that sound, I'm more interested in the water and the blue light.”

Lucy stood up. “Let's go check it out.”

They paused at the edge of the lake where the rocky ground sloped gently into the slightly murky pool, and shone their lights onto the water. The beams refracted off into its depths. A faint mist rose from the lake, evidence its temperature was slightly warmer than its surroundings.

“What caused that blue light?” Jane asked.

“I think it must be some type of planktonic dinoflagellate, probably *Noctiluca scintillans*.”

A mystified expression accompanied Jane's glance at the young woman beside her. “That meant absolutely nothing to me.”

Lucy laughed. “In very simple layman's terms, it's a type of marine creature called plankton, which displays bioluminescence when disturbed. Let me demonstrate.” Lucy picked up a small piece of ice from the ground and threw it into the lake. As before, the blue fluorescent light appeared and rippled across the water out from the point of the splash.

“So bugs are making this spectacular display?” said Jane.

“Well, plankton, yes. But it's unusual to find them in a sealed environment like this, but then again, this is the first one I know of so deep beneath the ice that has been explored. It might even be a new species.”

After staring at the water for a few moments, Jane said, “Henry wasn't too keen for you to come down here.”

Lucy smiled. “He'll get over it. He worries about us, that's all. Two people died on one of his previous expeditions. Though he blames himself, it wasn't his fault.”

“Really? What happened?”

“Henry was leading a group across the ice when a blizzard appeared out of nowhere to envelope them. The two men at the back, who had previously voiced concerns at being dragged into a crevasse if those in front fell into one, untethered themselves from the safety line and got cut off from the others. Though Henry searched, neither they nor their bodies were ever found.”

Jane's thoughts flicked back to when she had lost Kyle. “That's horrible,” said Jane. “It explains why Henry's so over protective of us all.”

They both shone their torches over the lake. The weak beams failed to reach its far side. “We need more powerful torches to explore this cavern properly,” said Jane.

“You'll have to ask Henry to get someone bring them from base. We'll also need sample jars, a rock hammer and anything else he can think of we might need. I

have a camera with me, but another would be handy, plus the digital film camera to record all of this.”

“Okay, I’ll ask.” Jane used the walkie-talkie to contact Henry.

Henry paced. Though he knew it was reckless of Lucy to enter the ice cavern, he couldn’t blame her youthful exuberance; he had been the same at her age. But she failed to understand the dangers Antarctica constantly threw at its visitors, especially when rash decisions were made. He’d learned from hard experience that death was never far away in remote, inhospitable places like this.

“Henry, are you there? Over.”

Though the reception was weak with a background of static, Henry was able to understand what was said and recognized the voice. “Jane, it’s great to hear your voice. Are you okay? Over.”

“Yes, dad, I’m fine. Over.”

Henry smiled. “Glad to hear it. We were all so worried. What’s this cavern like? Over.”

“It’s fantastic, what little we can see. There’s a lake full of luminous plankton that has Lucy excited, but I’ve seen nothing that would cause NASA’s scan anomaly. The cavern alone wouldn’t do it, but we can’t tell how big it is or see everything that’s down here until we have more powerful lights. We also need some other equipment to take samples. Over.”

“First things first, Jane. Is the cavern stable? Over.”

“From what I’ve seen so far, I believe it’s stable. The roof is arched like a train tunnel, but seems thinner at the top, which forms the bottom of the rift. A block of ice shaken loose by the tremors smashed a hole through the roof, which I fell through. It probably saved my life. Over.”

“You were very lucky. Though I was hesitant to let Lucy enter, I can see the benefit of an exploration of such a unique place to the scientific community and perhaps our understanding of the glacier. With the unstable condition of the ice shelf, we can’t afford to do everything by the book, and I’m eager to see it for myself. Let me know what you need. I’ll send Eli back to base for the equipment and then come and join you. I’m not the best climber, so tell Max and Theo to wait for me at the top so they can help me down.”

Jane reeled off her list of items and ended contact.

Eli had been listening to Jane and Henry’s conversation. “It sounds like an amazing discovery.”

Henry nodded. “It does, and a unique opportunity to study an ecosystem cut off from the rest of the world for God knows how long.” Henry stared at the far side of the rift. “What worries me is the unpredictability of the shifting ice. It could break away at any moment.”

“Maybe it’s a risk worth taking,” said Eli.

“No scientific discovery is worth the sacrifice of human life. However, this is the third tremor we’ve felt since arriving here to set up our base camp. The first and second were fourteen days apart. This latest one occurred twelve days later. If this time frame continues, I predict we have a safe window of eight to ten days before we experience another. To be safe, we need to be out of the rift within five days.”

“That doesn’t give us much time to explore something so unique.”

“I'm well aware of that and I wish we had longer, but we have to play the cards we're dealt. I don't intend to play bluff with the hand of fate. We'll go in, try to determine the cause of the anomaly, take samples, document and record as much as we can in five days and then leave.”

“Okay, Henry. I trust your judgment. I heard what Jane wanted, so I'll nip back to base and collect, but is there anything you need me to add to the list?”

After Henry had told Eli what he needed, Eli drove back to base in one of the Sno-Cats. Henry had added food and drinks to the list. He had a feeling once they were inside they wouldn't be too eager to abandon the cavern until the ice forced them to.

## Chapter 4

### Unexpected Visitors.

JANE AND LUCY FOUND it difficult to drag their gaze away from the large expanse of water; both were imagining what life-forms it might contain.

“I just realized something,” said Lucy. “We're making history. We're the first people ever to set eyes on an ancient lake beneath the Antarctic ice.”

Jane smiled. “Cool, isn't it?”

“It sure is.” Lucy let her eyes wander around the cavern. “How old do you suppose this place is?”

“At a guess, I'd say many thousands. As you probably know, satellite imagery has discovered many lakes entombed beneath the ice. The most famous being Lake Vostok, where the Russians drilled down into the ice to collect a sample of the water. However, that was located slightly over two miles beneath the ice and thought to have been sealed off for fifteen million years.” Jane glanced at the pool. “This is only about four hundred feet from the surface and a lot younger, about five to seven thousand years.”

“Still sounds old to me.”

“The age of the ice is similar to counting the rings on a tree to determine its age. The depth of ice is governed by the amount of snow that has fallen in any particular year. Some years there may have been very little snow fall, and other years, much more. This turns to ice and is gradually compressed when more snow fall's freeze and are in turn compressed by the following cycles, and on and on it goes. The deeper you look in the ice the more compressed it is, making it extremely difficult to count the individual layers.” Jane pointed her torch at the nearest wall. “You can see bands in the ice here. Each of them marks a particular year of snowfall that collected on top of the glacier and compressed into ice over time to increase the thickness of the glacier.” Her beam moved to highlight another detail in the ice. “Dirty grey bands in the ice like those seen here contain ash from volcanic eruptions. Probably from Mount Erebus on Ross Island, the second highest volcano in Antarctica after Mount Sidley, or perhaps Mount Terror, Mount Bird or Mount Terra Nova, but all three are now inactive.”

“Are you sure this is safe?”

The two women looked toward the sound of Henry's voice; his legs dangled through the hole in the cavern roof.

Max's face appeared in the hole. "Yes, Henry, I assure you its safe and the rope is secure."

"That's what he said about my rope, Henry," called out Jane, jokingly.

Henry's face peered at the women below, his headlight barely penetrating the darkness. "Get ready to catch me if I fall," he joked. "I'm coming down."

Henry lowered himself into the hole and for a moment just swung there.

Max leaned in and pointed. "You have to squeeze the lever on your descender to move."

"I'm not a complete idiot." Suddenly, Henry shot down the rope. Just as those watching thought he was going to crash into the ground, he slowed his pace and lightly touched down.

The two girls smiled and clapped.

"Nice entrance, Mr. Sandberg," said Lucy.

Henry unhitched the rope and gave a little bow. He glanced at the hole far above. "The coming down's easy. It's the getting back up I find hard." He glanced around the gloom-filled cavern. "Even from the little I can see, the cavern's bigger than I'd imagined."

"When we get the brighter lights down here, we'll be able to get a measure of its true size and what's down here," said Jane.

"Everything we need is on its way." Henry walked over to join them. "Have you done much exploring yet?"

"Not yet," said Lucy. "Though we were keen to, we thought we'd wait for the rest of the team so we can explore it together."

Henry smiled at them. "That was very unselfish of you both. Many of my colleagues wouldn't have been so generous. They would've wanted to be the first to find anything waiting to be discovered down here and give it a name."

"As you said in your pep talk, Henry, this is a team effort and we all share equally in the knowledge and any discoveries we make."

"Thank you, Jane, and you Lucy. It's nice to know some people actually listen to what I have to say." He glanced up at the opening. "Which is more than I can say for everyone on the team. Eli and Max should have started lowering down the supplies by now."

Eli tied the last crate of supplies to the rope, pushed it over to the edge of the rift a short distance from where Jane and Lucy had climbed down, to avoid the ice shelf a few yards below. He grabbed the walkie-talkie from the top of the box and pressed the talk button to communicate with Theo at the bottom of the rift. "Final crate coming down. Over."

"Okay. I'll let Henry know. Over." Theo replied.

Eli slipped the radio into his pocket, grabbed tight hold of the rope and nudged the supply crate over the edge with a foot and slowly lowered it into the crevasse. A gust of cold wind ruffled the fur collar of his hood. He turned his head in the direction it had blown from. He frowned at the distant grey clouds. They were a good indication of an approaching storm.



Max glanced up at the snow and ice debris dislodged by the approaching crate sliding down the side of the ice wall. He squeezed past the three boxes ready to be lowered into the cavern, knelt beside the hole and poked his head through. "Eli's sending the last box down. As soon as we have it, we'll lower them down to you."

"Okay," Henry shouted back.

By the time all four boxes had been lowered into the cavern thirty minutes later, the wind blowing through the rift had increased, driving pellets of frozen snow that stung their faces.

Max observed the grey cloud-filled sky that had gradually darkened. "A storm's heading our way."

Theo had reached the same conclusion. "We won't feel it when we're below."

Max sat with his feet dangling into the void. "It's not us I'm worried about, but Eli up top."

"It doesn't seem too bad at the moment. Hopefully it'll blow over soon."

"I hope you're right." Max dropped into the hole.

As soon as the first box had been freed from its tether, Henry opened it and took out a flask of hot chocolate and a tier of plastic cups. Because the temperature was warmer in the cavern and sheltered from the wind chill, there was no need to drink from thermos cups to prevent the hot liquid from freezing.

"Anyone for hot chocolate? I had Pike make a fresh batch."

"Henry, I could kiss you," said Jane with a smile.

Henry smiled. "If I was thirty years younger, I'd insist on it." He handed out two cups and filled them with steaming hot chocolate.

Jane and Lucy both took a sip.

"Ahhhh," sighed Lucy, appreciatively. "It's better than sex."

"You've been dating the wrong men," said Jane.

Lucy laughed. "You're so right."

Max's descent was accompanied by flakes of snow drifting through the opening.

"Is the weather turning?" Henry asked.

Max released the rope so Theo could pull it up. "A storm's on the way."

Lucy glanced up at the hole and the specks of snow and ice drifting in. "Will we be okay down here?"

"We'll be fine," Henry reassured her.

Theo joined them a few moments later.

"Right," said Henry. "Now we're all here, how about we find the flashlights and start exploring this amazing cavern?"

With no shelter to protect him, the wind whipped at Eli, flapping the hood of his coat. If it grew any stronger he'd have to return to base. Though a precaution of Henry's was that at least one person remained on the ice while the team entered the rift, in case they got into trouble, not even Henry would expect anyone to remain unsheltered in this weather. He could take refuge in the Sno-Cat temporarily. It had a heater if the engine was running, but if the storm was an

exceptionally cold one and lasted for a few days he might run out of fuel and freeze to death.

Even through his layers of thermal clothing, Eli felt the high wind chill steal away his body heat. He wiped the film of frozen snow from his goggles with a gloved hand and gazed north. Rolling black clouds sped toward him. Though he'd never experienced one before, he'd heard about the Katabatic winds caused by heavy cold air rushing down glacial inclines like a tidal wave. Often referred to as *Hell's Wind!* Not named because it was hot—the opposite in fact—but because of the up to two-hundred-mile-per-hour winds that spurred it along, causing anyone unlucky enough to be caught in its path to endure hell or be sent to it.

He turned and looked at the base camp and back at the blizzard screaming across the ice. It was travelling too fast for him to outrun in the Sno-Cat; he had only one option. He picked up one of the climbing ropes trailing into the rift and moved to the edge. He was about to climb down when he heard a sound carried by the wind. It sounded like a small plane. His hurried glance into the sky revealed it clear of everything except dark clouds. He must have been mistaken. No pilot would venture out in this weather. Eli climbed down.

Jack fought the controls as the strong winds playfully jostled the small aircraft in all directions. The engine screamed in protest as it was forced to keep the small craft airborne and level. Jack cursed his greed, his bad decision and the frightened passenger who'd offered him four times his going rate to risk dropping him off at the rift base camp before the bad weather struck. The blizzard had arrived earlier than expected and was currently chasing their tail. Though, to be fair, it was also the chance of meeting Jane again that had helped persuade him to risk the flight. Though he'd been accused of wearing his heart on his sleeve on more than one occasion, resulting in a few sad partings, including one he thought would break his heart, it hadn't happened for a while. But it had with Jane. This time, however, it was different. Something more than the attraction he'd felt in previous relationships. *Love at first sight, perhaps?* Whatever it was, he was smitten with her.

“Can't this damn thing go any faster?” shouted the plane's only passenger and the main cause of the danger they both now faced.

Jack ignored the man's dumb question. Though the plane was going flat out, it was unable to keep ahead of the storm chasing them. His eyes did a quick survey of the ground below; he would have to make an emergency landing if they were going to survive, but they were still too far away from the scientists' base camp to seek refuge from the wind and cold. His eyes rested on the wide, yawning rift. It was their only chance. He dipped the nose of the plane and aimed for the rift.

“Are we landing?” asked the passenger, hopefully, queasy from the plane's erratic movements.

“If we land here, we won't survive. We need to shelter from the blizzard and the only place able to offer us that around here is the rift base camp. I'm going to fly in the rift as the ice walls should shelter us from the full force of the side winds. I'm hoping I'll gain enough speed to keep ahead of the full brunt of the storm until we reach the scientists' camp.”

The passenger anxiously glanced out of a window, catching glimpses of the rift through gaps in the driving snow. He prayed the pilot knew what he was doing. "Will we make it?"

The pilot heard the fear in the man's voice, but felt no pity for him. "You'll be the second person to find out."

The passenger gained no reassurance from the reply.

Eli backed along the small ice shelf and was about to climb over the edge when he remembered he'd forgotten to anchor the Sno-Cat. The strong wind he already experienced was nothing compared to the intensity of the gusts that would follow. If he didn't climb up and anchor it to the ice, there was a good possibility the wind would carry it away. Maybe even into the rift. He cursed and reluctantly moved to the ice wall and began climbing back to the top.

The front edge of the blizzard reached the rift base camp. Scott and Pike had just finished securing the garage and outbuilding doors and making sure anything the wind could pick up and blast through the air like missiles was safely stored away.

Though Scott stared in the direction where the others were, the ice and snow carried by the wind prevented him from seeing that far. "Do you think they'll be okay," he shouted to be heard above the noise of the howling wind and the fluttering flags that marked overhead cables and the camp perimeter.

"I'm sure they'll be fine," said Pike. "Though I'd expected Eli to have returned by now. He can't stay out on the ice in this."

"Let's get inside before the wind carries us off and contact them on the radio."

Before the wall of snow and ice carried by the one hundred-mile-per-hour winds arrived at the rift base camp, it first encountered the two Sno-Cats parked by the ice rift. The vehicle Max and Theo had anchored to the ice with strong nylon straps tethered to metal spikes driven deep in the ice slid until halted by the restraints. Though the straps strained with the force they prevented the strong wind from claiming the Sno-Cat.

The second Sno-Cat Eli had used to bring the supplies from base camp wasn't anchored. The wind took it in its grasp and pushed it along the ice. It skewed on its tracks as the wind sought the greatest area to thrust its strength against, the side of the vehicle, and moved it toward the edge of the rift.

Eli cursed his forgetfulness when another strong gust buffeted him, causing him to lose his footing. He reclaimed his grip upon the ice and persevered with the climb; the Sno-Cat was too valuable a resource to lose. When he glanced up to check on his progress, he saw the corner of the vehicle he'd failed to secure appear over the edge. He cursed again. If he hurried he might still save it. While keeping one eye on the Sno-Cat as it started to turn, he increased his efforts. Slowly, more of the Sno-Cat came into view as the wind's relentless pummeling drove it over the edge. Realizing he was too late to save it, Eli climbed down the rope.

A forceful gust pushed the Sno-Cat over the edge. It toppled and headed straight for Eli. To avoid being crushed, Eli did the only thing he could—he let go of the rope.

Jack battled against the full force of the blizzard that had finally caught up with the plane. Funnelled along the rift, the strong current gripped the airplane and sped it along at an impossible speed that the small engine alone could never hope to achieve. He shot a glance back at his passenger. The man gripped his seat tightly and stared out at the ice wall zooming by. Jack had never seen a look of fear to match the one he witnessed on the man's face. He smiled at his frightened passenger. "Hold on tight, it's about to get bumpy."

The man, white as a sheet and shaking, looked at the pilot and then at the ice and snow battering the small craft's windscreen. He was amazed the pilot could see to steer the plane between the two ice walls. He hoped if he died this day, his death would be quick and painless. He shut his eyes.

Even though Jack knew the rift's tall walls sheltered them from the full strength of the storm, with his visibility rapidly decreasing by the second it was only a matter of time before they crashed. Though with the impossible weather conditions it was difficult to tell with any certainty, he thought they must be near the base camp. Because reaching it was their only chance to live through the blizzard, he had no choice but to brave the storm and hope they survived the landing.

When Eli's feet touched the ice shelf, he threw himself to the side and rolled out of the path of the falling vehicle. The Sno-Cat struck the ice he'd just vacated with a loud crunching of metal. Unfortunately, in his panic to avoid one danger Eli headed straight for another. He rolled too far and slid into the rift. He snatched out for one of the ropes trailing over the edge. His fingers brushed one and gripped hold tightly. Hanging from one arm he swung along the side of the ice wall. For a brief instant he thought he heard the sound of an airplane again.

Carried by its momentum, the Sno-Cat bounced on the ice with a screech of buckling metal and tumbled over the ice shelf.

Jack attempted to force the plane out of the rift, but the wind's strong grip refused to set him free. He forced the stick back in an effort to raise the nose of the plane and slowly it began to point skyward. He glimpsed a flash of red out of the left window. Something struck the plane, tilting it at an angle. Both men inside watched the wing torn from the plane scrape along the windows before disappearing from their view.

Jack cursed.

The passenger screamed.

Eli released a sigh of relief when the Sno-Cat bounced clear over him. He then heard the engine noise again, much louder now. He turned his head and was astonished to see an airplane appear out of the blizzard below him. He watched with trepidation as it shot nearer, catching a glimpse of Jack fighting the controls. He watched in horror for its passengers when the Sno-Cat smashed into the wing, sheering it off like it was paper. The wing folded and struck the side of the aircraft

before it was lifted by the wind and borne aloft while the Sno-Cat dropped into the crevasse to be lost from his sight.

Now minus a wing, the plane tipped up on its side with the still attached wing aimed at the bottom of the rift. With a shriek of tortured metal, the bottom of the plane scraped along the ice wall, tearing off the skids. The plane dipped to head deeper into the chasm. The screech of metal was deafening inside the plane the passenger now looked upon as his coffin.

Jack released his white knuckle grip on the useless controls. They were in fate's hands now. He braced himself for the impact he knew was coming. As the fuselage screeched along the ice wall, Jack felt the plane rotate. He caught a brief glimpse of the narrowing gap between the ice walls before the airborne snow and ice stole it from him again. A secondary screech of protest filled the small space when the top of the plane made contact with the ice and skimmed along it. Pilot and passenger stared at the buckling fuselage. The sound of tearing metal that filled the small craft announced the loss of the remaining wing. When the top and bottom of the plane touched ice at the same time, an outcrop of ice ripped through the thin aluminum skin. Ice shards sprayed the plane's frightened passenger, his eyes transfixed on the ice wall speeding by only inches from his face. If it was possible for him to be terrified more than he'd been previously, then he was.

When the plane neared the bottom of the rift, it was forced between the narrowing sides of the two ice walls, crushing the top and bottom of the plane. As it became wedged in the tight space, the plane's momentum slowed. It brought a glimmer of hope to both pilot and passenger that they might actually survive the crash. After what had seemed like an eternity for the plane's occupants since the start of the catastrophe, but was in fact only a few seconds, their ordeal came to an end when the plane slowly juddered to a halt. After a few creaks and groans, the plane settled, and except for the weather raging outside and the two passengers' fast pumping hearts, all was still and silent.

"We made it! We actually made it!"

Jack turned to look at his passenger. "You owe me a new plane."

"After what you just put me through, you can sue me."

Jack sighed. He would argue the issue later. They weren't out of danger yet. They still had the freezing cold to contend with. If they remained in the plane, they'd soon freeze to death. If they left the plane, they had no equipment to climb out of the rift and seek the shelter of the nearby base camp. He picked up the radio—it was dead.

"So, what do we do now?" asked his passenger.

When he had recovered from the shock, Eli climbed down to the bottom of the rift and headed in the direction he'd last seen the plane before it disappeared into the blizzard. If there were survivors, which he doubted, they would need help. They wouldn't last long in this weather. He came across the plane about one hundred yards along the crevasse. Its wings had been torn off, and the fuselage was crushed and dented. He hoped the passengers inside had fared better. He headed forward to find out.

"So... what do we do? We'll freeze to death sitting in this tin box."

It was the first time since he'd had his pilot's license that Jack wouldn't have minded if one of his passengers had died. "Be quiet, I'm thinking."

"Well, think a little faster, my feet are getting cold."

Jack was just about to remind him whose fault it was they'd ended up here, when the plane trembled.

The passenger's fear quickly returned. "Shit, we're falling!"

Footsteps moved along the plane, buckling its metal skin where weight was placed on it. The handle turned when someone tried to open the door. Failing to do so, a gloved hand cleared away a patch of ice to allow a face to peer in. The man's eyes flicked to the two men staring back at him. "Hi. Landing a bit rough, was it?"

Jack recognized the voice. "Hi, Eli, is the plane secure?"

"Secure? I should say. You'll need heavy equipment to move this the way it's wedged in."

Jack released his harness, dropped to the side of the plane and moved over to the door.

"The door's jammed," Eli told him. "I'll try and free it with my ice axe."

Jack nodded. "Okay."

Loud booms filled the plane when Eli tried to force the tip of the axe blade between the door and its frame. On his third try he succeeded. Snow drifted through the small gap that appeared at the side of the door.

"Try pushing it from your side, Jack." Eli shouted.

Jack put his shoulder to the door and pushed.

While the men battled to open the door, the passenger supported himself against the side of the plane, released his seat buckle and slid from the seat. Instead of helping the men with the door, he crawled to the rear of the plane and dragged a large blue bag forward. He then crouched and waited.

Jack slammed his shoulder against the door, moving it slightly. The door burst open on his second try. The wind brought snow and ice swirling into the plane. Jack shivered as he held out a hand. "Thanks, Eli."

Eli shook the offered hand. "No problem. I was passing by and thought I'd drop in." He glanced into the plane and nodded to the man inside. "Only the one passenger?"

"Yes, just *him!*" Jack glared at his passenger. "Leave the bag. We can collect it after the blizzard passes."

"The bag's coming with me," he insisted.

Jack shook his head. "Okay, but you're carrying it."

"You think I'd trust it to your care after a flight like that?"

"Errrgh. I've never felt like murdering someone until I met you."

The man smiled. "You're not the first to say that."

"Why am I not surprised?" Jack opened a cupboard, pulled out a thermal Parka jacket and some gloves and slipped them on. "I'll go first and you pass your bag out, that is, if it's okay if I touch it?"

"There's no need for sarcasm."

Jack glared at him again. "Believe me, pal, there is." Eli helped Jack climb out.

"Difficult passenger?"

"You don't know the half of it." Jack grabbed the blue bag, glanced at the ground a couple of yards below and threw the bag down. He smiled at Eli.

"You're hoping there's something breakable inside."

Jack grinned. "Hoping—I'm praying there is."

"I could do with some help here."

Jack rolled his eyes and helped his passenger out of the plane.

The man noticed his bag lying on the ice below and glared at Jack's smirking face.

"It slipped," Jack said.

"You lie as good as you fly, very badly." The man slid down the ice and retrieved his bag.

"See what I've had to put up with?" Jack slammed the door shut to prevent the plane from filling with snow and ice.

Eli laughed.

Jack glanced up. Snow and ice whizzed over the top of the rift. "How do we get out of here?"

"We don't. Not until the blizzard passes."

"Okay..." Jack sensed the man had an alternative option. "...where do we go?"

"We go down. Follow me and all will be revealed." Eli slid to the bottom.

Jack wondered why Eli was being so cryptic and followed him down.

"This way, gentlemen." Eli, walked off.

Jack watched his irritating passenger hoist the large bag onto his shoulder and follow Eli. Before Jack joined them, he took a last look at his plane and sighed. Even though it was a write off, he was obliged to remove it. The Antarctic Treaty decreed no litter or contamination of any kind was to be left on the ice. It would be an awkward and expensive undertaking. He prayed his insurance would cover the cost.

During their journey they passed pieces of Jack's wrecked airplane littering the rift, all of which would have to be retrieved.

Jack stopped when he saw the Sno-Cat wedged on its side between the two sloping ice walls. "So that's what hit me?"

Eli looked at Jack. "Sorry. The wind blew it into the rift before I had chance to anchor it."

"See, it wasn't my fault you crashed," said his passenger, smugly. He nodded his head at Eli. "Get him to pay for it."

Jack ignored the man. His teeth were beginning to chatter. He wasn't dressed for prolonged exposure to the Antarctic weather like the other two. He stamped his feet and clapped his hands together to force the blood to circulate and hold off frostbite. "Is it much farther, Eli?"

"I don't think so. It should be around here somewhere." Eli led them a few steps further along the rift.

Each of them looked at the Sno-Cat perched precariously above them when they passed beneath.

Ropes leading down the side of the rift flapped in the wind. Two ropes fastened to spikes anchored into the ice stretched a few yards before disappearing into a small hole.

Eli turned to face the two men. "We're here."

The three men peered into the hole.

"It's an underground cavern," Eli explained. "The others are down there exploring."

"I'll go down first," said Jack's passenger, bumping Jack with his blue bag when he turned to choose a rope.

Jack teetered forward, almost falling into the hole before he regained his balance.

"We could throw him in," suggested Eli. "Say he slipped."

Jack glared at the man who pulled on a climbing harness and attached it to one of the ropes, oblivious or unconcerned with what he'd just done. "I'm tempted, Eli, soooo tempted."

The man moved to the hole and sat with his legs dangling into the void. "Once I'm down, pull up the rope and send down my bag. I'll leave the harness attached so you two can use it." Without waiting for a reply the man slipped into the hole.

Max opened the storage container holding the flashlights and handed them out until they all had one. Henry had suggested they all switch them on at the same time so they could all share in what the brighter lights revealed.

"Okay," said Henry. "I suggest we all face in the same direction before we switch them on."

"Let's point them at the lake first," said Lucy. "I want to see how big it is."

Henry counted down. "Three, two, one, on!"

Five light beams banished the darkness previously shrouding the expanse of water. The moment was too astonishing to spoil with words. Their eyes took in all the newly revealed details. The lake stretched out for about fifty yards until it reached an ice wall about ten yards high that sloped up to the cavern roof. Stalagmites formed of ice grew out of the far shore and reached for the stalactites directly above them. Some had already met to form a forest of thick ice columns. Their wet gleaming surfaces glistened in the lights moving over them. Two drips of water splashed into the pool, sending out twin ripples of luminous blue light that reflected off the ice formations and the faces of those staring at the wondrous event.

"I don't believe I've ever seen a more amazing sight than that which my eyes behold at this very moment," said Henry.

Jane placed a hand on Henry's arm. "It truly is wonderful."

"And we're the only people ever to have seen it," said Lucy, her excitement hard to miss.

Max moved his light off to the side of the lake that didn't butt against the cavern wall. The beam highlighted a tunnel through ice. "The cavern seems to go further in that direction."

"It's difficult to know where to start," said Theo. "I know of nothing like this that's been explored under the ice before."

"But how was it formed?" asked Lucy.

"It's difficult to say without more information," said Jane, "but perhaps a thermal vent is responsible."

"I suggest we explore the area first, to determine its true size and what's down here, and then we can divide into teams and start taking samples, measuring, documenting and recording everything with photographs and on film."



"It's a lot to do in five days," said Max.

"And we still have to find the cause of NASA's anomaly," reminded Jane.

"Then we'd better get a move on," said Henry. "Max, lead us down the tunnel to see what new wonders await us."

They walked along the front of the lake to the ice tunnel until voices brought them to a halt. They turned to see someone wearing a blue thermal snow suit rappel down the rope.

"Who's that?" asked Henry. "None of us has a blue suit."

When the man slipped out of the harness, it was pulled up and a blue bag lowered down a few moments later. The blue suited figure detached the bag from the rope and placed it to one side before walking over to them. He slid his hood back, removed his goggles and grinned. "Hello, Jane."

Jane was stunned. "Richard!"

"In the flesh." He smiled. "You didn't think I'd let you have all the fun?"

Henry looked at Jane. "You know him?"

Jane sighed. "Yes, unfortunately, we work together."

Richard held out his hand to Henry. "Richard Whorley."

Henry shook the man's hand. "Henry Sandberg. But why are you here? We already have a full team."

Richard glanced around the cavern. "From the look of this discovery, you need all the help you can get."

Jane groaned. Richard was sure to try and claim some discovery or other as his own to make a name for himself and, if possible, a profit. "This is a team effort, Richard. We all share the discoveries equally."

"Of course, Jane, I'm surprised you felt the need to mention that. You know I'm a team player."

Jane knew he was not and was just about to voice that fact when Max spoke.

"Someone else is coming down."

Richard glanced at the man sliding down the rope. "That's the pilot, though how he got his flying license is a mystery. He crashed the damn plane and nearly killed me."

Jane, well aware how selfish and annoying Richard could be, briefly wondered if the pilot had intentionally crashed the plane. If so, it was like Richard to survive.

"What do you mean, he crashed the plane," asked Lucy.

Noticing Lucy for the first time, Richard flashed an appreciative smile while his lecherous eyes tried to discern the exquisite body he pictured hidden beneath the layers of thick clothing. "Hello, pretty, I didn't see you there."

Jane rolled her eyes. "Richard, you're engaged. Making lustful advances at every pretty woman you see isn't fair to your bride to be, God help her."

Richard glared at Jane. "What I do to whom and when I do it is no concern of yours. You're just jealous I don't pay you the same attention."

"That's enough, *pal*," said Max, stepping forward to confront the new arrival.

"What the hell is happening here?" said Henry. "You, Richard, have only been here a few minutes and already you're upsetting the group."

"You try being stuck on a plane with him, and then you'll know the true meaning of torment."

They all looked at the grinning pilot.

Jane flashed him a smile. Though she'd hoped to see Jack again, she had imagined different circumstances.

"The comedian arrives," quipped Richard.

Henry glared at Richard. "Another person you've upset."

Richard shrugged and looked at Jane. "At least I didn't have someone drugged so I could steal their place on the team like Miss Goody Two-Shoes there did to me."

"That's a lie and you damn well know it," said Jane.

"That's enough of this bickering," said Henry. "I've only just met you and I feel like slipping you something to shut you up."

"That's right, all gang up on me."

Eli joined them. "The blizzard's arrived and it's raging fiercely. I had no time to make it back to base camp, so I thought I'd give you lot a hand."

"You're welcome, Eli." Henry refocused on Richard. "No one is ganging up on you Richard. You've brought this on yourself." He took a deep breath to calm his rising anger. "For the sake of the expedition, I think it would be best if we start again. Forget about everything that has happened before this point. You are here now and we have no alternative other than to put up with you. If you're willing to become an integral part of the team you can join us in exploring this amazing place. If not, you can wait here until the blizzard passes and head back to base camp until transport can be arranged to take you home. The choice is yours."

"I would like to join the team," Richard said, sheepishly.

"Good. We don't have enough flashlights for everyone, so you'll have to tag along and make do." Henry turned his back on the man. "Okay, let's go and explore."

Max led the group along the right side of the lake.

Theo handed Richard his headlight. "It's better than nothing."

Richard tagged along at the end. Seething with anger at his recent humiliation, for which he held Jane fully responsible, he was determined to get one over on her and the team. Something in this unique environment had his name on it. When he found it the discovery would not be shared. It would be his alone and the chance for him to make a name for himself. He smiled as he pictured his handsome face on the front of Times magazine.

Jane gave Jack her headlight. "I didn't think I'd see you again so soon."

Jack slipped the light onto his head. "Keep the ladies guessing, that's my motto," he said, adding a grin.

Henry glanced back. "Keep up, Richard. We don't want to lose you."

"Speak for yourself," quipped Jane.

Richard glared at the back of her head.

Scott sat in the communication room with a worried frown on his face. He'd just received an updated weather report from the McMurdo ice station. It wasn't good news for the team out on the ice. He'd tried to contact them to let them know, but with the combination of the raging blizzard and the team in the cavern below the ice, he'd failed to get through to them. Another worry was he had also failed to make contact with Eli and Byrd Station had contacted him to see if Jack had arrived safely.

Pike popped his head into the room. "Any luck?"

Scott shook his head. "Eli must have joined the others in the rift or he would've been here by now."

"They'll be okay. At least in the cavern they're sheltered from the storm, and they have enough food and drink to last a while."

"McMurdo says the storm's going to increase in strength and could last a few days or possibly a week or more."

"Oh shit!" said Pike. "They could be stuck down there when another tremor hits. The cavern could collapse."

## **Chapter 5**

### **The Anomaly.**

UNAWARE OF THE WORSENING storm raging above them, the team's flashlights reflected off the tunnel of glistening ice they passed through. When Max led them around a bend, they arrived at ground that inclined down into darkness. Though its angle was steep, it wasn't too sheer to prevent them from progressing safely.

"It's getting warmer," said Max, wondering why.

"Could be coming from a thermal vent," Jane suggested. She couldn't think of anything else that would cause the heat.

After traveling along the slanting passage for a few minutes, it levelled out and turned to the left. What they encountered around the bend stunned them all.

It was Max who broke the hush that had fallen over the group of astonished onlookers. "What the hell is that?"

They all stared at the large opening with rounded edges fashioned from metal. It had the effect of staring into a skull's empty eye socket.

Max shone his flashlight into the long tube that veered down at a steep angle and noticed something at the furthest reach of the beam. "I think I see the bottom."

Theo slipped off a glove and felt the air. "Whatever this thing is, it's producing a small current of warm air."

"It must be what formed the cavern," said Jane.

"And the melted runoff created the lake," added Lucy.

Eli, who had moved around the side of the bizarre object, called out, "Come and take a look at this! You're not going to believe it."

Eli's excitement drew the others to him. They moved around the strange metal opening and stared at the second unexpected sight before them. The curved edge of something protruded from the glacier.

When Eli tapped it with his ice pick, a hollow sound rang out. "It's metal."

Henry moved forward and with a brush of his gloved hand cleared off a patch of thin ice to reveal the object's smooth, shiny, black surface. "It's obviously man made." He stepped back to roam his eyes over the unexpected discovery. "What's not so obvious is what it is and how it came to be buried so deep in the ice."

“To be entombed this deep it must have arrived here about eight to ten thousand years ago,” said Jane, confused by the strange object.

“If that's the case, it wasn't built by humans,” said Theo.

Deep in thought, Max studied the strange construction. “In my mind there can only be two possible explanations for this thing to be here.”

He had captured the others attention and all turned to face him.

Max continued. “Either someone tunnelled under the ice to build this thing, or it was here before the ice claimed it.”

“Maybe it's part of the secret underground base the Nazis were rumoured to have constructed in Antarctica during the Second World War?” suggested Eli.

“Wasn't that supposed to be in the Queen Maud region?” questioned Theo. “That's nowhere near here.”

“Perhaps that was a ruse so no one would find the real location?” said Eli.

Max shared his thoughts. “Though it's possible someone might have built this— whatever this is— the Germans, as an example, certainly had the incentive, manpower and resources, but I think it highly improbable. I don't even believe it was built by humans. It's a spaceship!” He pointed his light at the tip of the fluted cylinder construction whose opening they'd first encountered. “Look at that and what do you see?”

Jack glanced at the tube. “It could be some type of exhaust.”

“Exactly!” said Max. “And I believe if it wasn't entombed in the ice there would be a matching one on the other side.”

The stunned team fell to silence as each considered the possibility they were looking at something built by a species from another planet.

Max noticed their skeptical expressions. “I think at the bottom of the exhaust there'll be something to prove it's not of this world. The warm current of air must be coming from somewhere, and I think that somewhere is the spaceship, but I need someone to lower me down.”

Theo and Jack volunteered.

Max was soon wearing a harness attached to a rope held by Theo and Jack, and was slowly lowered down the tube.

Max examined the smooth tube surrounding him. It was free of any carbon build up or signs it had been affected by heat, causing him to wonder if it was an exhaust, what type of propulsion system powered the ship. He soon emerged from the bottom of the ragged edged tube onto level ground. A short passage through the ice led to the metal hull of the spaceship he guessed he would find, kept frost free by the warm current of air escaping from the remaining part of the exhaust still attached to the hull. He slipped out of the harness and glanced up through the tube at the faces gathered around the opening. “It's like I said, a spaceship. There might be a way inside. I'm going to take a look.”

“Be careful,” called out Henry, as he attempted to digest what Max had just said.

Max approached the dark patch in the side of the hull he had noticed. A metal support strut fixed to a torn back piece of two inch thick metal, connected to the part of the exhaust still fixed to the hull. Filled with excited anticipation, he poked his head through the breach and roamed his flashlight around the interior. Nothing stood out to cause him any immediate danger. Careful not to snag his

clothing on the sharp-edged metal of the ripped hull, he climbed through the gap and savoured the moment of being the first human to set foot aboard an alien spaceship, which he had no doubts it was. His excited breaths formed small white gusts that drifted slowly toward the opening, through which the faint voices of the others, funnelled down the exhaust tube, could be heard speculating on what the strange discovery might be. Content to prolong his lone presence aboard the strange vessel a few moments longer, his eyes scanned the gloomy interior of what seemed to be the engine room, if indeed the strange apparatus covered in tubes and other unidentifiable machinery that hung from the ceiling was what powered the ship. His footsteps crunched on the thin layer of ice covering the floor as he crossed to the middle of the room.

The large machine filled the center of the vast chamber, stretching from the ceiling almost to touch the floor. Though there was no obvious sign the engine was operational—no moving parts or lights—the low hum it emitted was evidence it was active and the probable cause of the heat flowing up the exhaust tube. Max's eyes followed the light he moved over the incredible piece of machinery. It was covered with protruding parts that seemed to have been added at random with no thought to its aesthetic appearance. The engine was broader at the top, and in a rough manner, thinned to give the appearance of an upside-down pyramid formed of a mishmash of machine parts. An assortment of various sized tubes, thick and thin cables, and ducting linked to other sections of surrounding machinery.

Max walked around the engine and came upon a forest of transparent containers, three yards tall and one yard wide, fixed to the floor. Though some were empty and others contained a varying amount of turquoise liquid, many were full. His torch beam followed one of the single tubes that fed into the top of each cylinder. All connected to a slightly larger tube that ran along the ceiling to the central apparatus. *It must be the fuel that powers the engine.*

Startled when an air bubble gurgled to the surface of the glutinous fluid in the nearest cylinder, he realized how nervous he'd become. The craft had the atmosphere of a secluded, abandoned house rumoured to be haunted.

Henry's muffled voice drifted into the room. "What have you found, Max, and is it safe?"

Max crossed to the hole, climbed out and called out a reply. "It's safe and one hundred percent alien. Come and have a look." He noticed the harness had already been pulled back up the tube. He waited by the opening for the others to arrive.

Lucy came down first, excitement plastered across her face. "What's it like?"

Max smiled. "It's fantastic, but after watching that Alien movie last night, creepy, damn creepy."

Lucy smiled and poked her head into the ship. Even though her flashlight failed to reveal more than a small section of the gloom shrouded room, she sensed its vastness.

"I think it's the engine room," Max told her, and then glanced at Henry who had just been ejected from the end of the exhaust to slide a little way across the ice. "Are you okay, old man?"

Henry climbed to his feet and detached the harness, which was immediately pulled back up the tube for the next person. "I'm fine. It's just like sliding down

one of those chutes in water parks I should imagine, though obviously lacking the water or the soft landing.” He glanced at the opening Lucy's head was currently peering through. “Did you see anything interesting inside, Max?”

“I did. It definitely wasn't built by humans. The gap leads to the engine room and, incredibly, it seems to still be functioning, although perhaps in a standby state.”

Henry glanced at the small area of structure free from the ice, becoming more convinced of its unearthly origins. “If it's been down here for thousands of years, it's astounding that it's still functioning.” He glanced at the side of the black hull, slightly distorted around the hole. “What condition is the ship in, structurally?”

“I'm no expert, but it seems fine.” Max pointed at the opening. “That's the only damage I've seen. I think when the ship landed here the exhaust was torn off and the strut pulled away a piece of the hull plating.”

The others soon arrived and all eager to explore, they climbed inside.

The insect-size creature perched atop one of the many pipes and too small to be noticed by those below, studied the life-form with interest. Over the many years since the ship had landed on this planet, others of its kind had taken turns to act as sentry and warn of any changes that could affect them. The presence of these new life-forms was such an event. When more of them entered, it scampered along the pipe, up the wall and into an air vent. Its six tiny clawed feet barely made a sound on the metal from its hurried rush through the long tunnel. It turned a corner, headed toward the grill at the end and crawled out. It leapt onto the floor and crossed the small dark room. It climbed up onto a small control panel beside the bed chamber and jumped on a button. A door with a small window slid back to reveal the sleeping creature within. It clambered onto the creature's head and morphed into the form others of its kind had taken during its hibernation, and sent out an alert to wake the Mimic.

The team spent thirty minutes exploring the engine room. All were now convinced they were aboard an alien vessel, and they all marvelled at the engine design and the incredible power that would be necessary to lift the heavy ship.

After exploring the cavernous room, Jane said, “I guess we've found the cause of NASA's anomaly.” She glared at Richard. “And it's not a meteorite!”

Unconcerned he'd been proved wrong, Richard shrugged. In this instance he was glad to have been mistaken. He couldn't believe his luck. Alien spaceship or not, he knew this discovery would capture the attention of the public far more than a meteorite. Even the subterranean cavern, the lake and any new life-forms found living in it were of more interest to the scientific community than the general public. This, whatever it is, would be front page news around the world. He imagined the headlines. *Alien Spaceship discovered in Antarctica?* or something similar. And to think he almost didn't come. He'd make certain he received his fair share—or more—of recognition as one of its discoverers.

“The spaceship must be giving off some sort of shielding to affect NASA'S scan and to prevent it from detecting something metal lying buried in the ice,” said Max.

“A force-field?” said Theo.

Max shrugged. "Or a cloaking device."

"I'm not sure about force-fields or cloaking devices, but though I was skeptical at first, everything in here looks alien to me," said Lucy. "I know the Germans made many technological advances during the war, but nothing like this. If they had, surely they would rule the world by now."

"Or even the universe," added Eli, jokingly.

"I agree with Lucy," said Max. "This thing is far more advanced than anything we're capable of building today, and, unlike the Germans at that time, man has been into space. None of the rockets used have looked anything like this or on such a grand scale. I cannot even imagine the power required to lift this thing off the ground, let alone provide it with enough thrust to leave a planet's atmosphere. Unquestionably, it has to be alien technology."

"It was probably never meant to lift off from any planet," said Eli. "I imagine a craft this size, of which we've only seen a small part and I suspect have a lot more to discover, would probably have been constructed in space where weight and size would not be such a problem."

"I'd like to know why it's here?" said Lucy.

Richard was becoming impatient, he wanted to move farther through the craft and start exploring. "Whatever speculations you come up with, until we investigate and take a look around, they'll remain just that. We need to begin our search. Only then will our questions be answered. Whether it's built by Nazis, someone else, or aliens, it's still the find of the century."

"Though it pains me to say so, for once, I agree with Richard," said Jane.

"But none of us are qualified," argued Henry. "We're not space scientists or rocket engineers. Our fields of specialty are concerned with geology, ice and microbes, not spaceships."

Looks of disappointment spread over the team.

"But we have to explore," said Max. "If it turns out to be something constructed by an alien race, just imagine what advanced technology lies inside and the benefits they could bring to the scientific community. It could advance so many areas of our knowledge by hundreds or thousands of years."

"What we might learn in the next few days might enable humans to travel to other worlds far sooner than anyone expected," added Theo. "I believe it's our destiny to enter this spaceship for the benefit of mankind."

"Or its destruction," said Jack, realizing that exploring might not be such a good idea. "An alien craft might carry alien germs that could wipe out the human race."

"Like the Spaniards did to the Incas," said Lucy. "Around ninety-five percent of them died from European diseases."

"Even though I'm reluctant to explore further, I'm sure that won't be the case here," said Henry. "If an alien race was advanced enough to build a craft capable of crossing the vast reaches of space, I'm certain they would likewise be advanced medically. I would think if any germs were going to harm any species, it would be ours harming them."

"I understand your concerns, Henry," said Jane, "but this discovery has been thrust upon us all. The raging storm above prevents us from calling in outside experts or help. The ice rift that at any moment could break off and take this ship with it until it slips beneath the sea forces a time limit upon us. If we don't

document as much as we can in the limited time available, no one will and then it'll be lost forever.”

“Perhaps you're right, Jane. Don't get me wrong, I'm keen to discover more about this vessel and its secrets, but I know how quickly events in the Antarctic can turn against you. However, if we're all in agreement to explore the ship, then I'll be a willing participant.”

Everyone was and they searched for an exit to lead them deeper into the interior.

Jack wandered to one end of the room, wondering what they'd find when they explored the craft. His eyes darted to every new piece of strange machinery he encountered and each time he wondered as to its function. He reached a wall and moved along it, halting at a large shape set in the wall. It looked like a door and the exit they searched for. The door, segmented into four parts, was three yards high and two wide. He found the button to operate it set in a panel beside the door, slightly higher than the normal height for humans, an indication along with the door size that the crew was taller than them. Though he didn't expect the door to open, he pressed one of the buttons. The four parts of the door slid back into the wall with a metallic rasp, loud enough to capture the others' attention and lure them over to investigate.

Before they entered, they all stared for a few moments through the large opening that led to a four-yard high by three-yard wide corridor. Their lights invaded the darkness that had for so long remained trapped behind the door, but failed to reach its end.

Jane, as astonished as the others by the size and unknown length of the revealed passage, said to no one in particular, “Just how big is this thing?”

The excited expression painted on Max's features revealed his enthusiasm to find out. “From the little we've seen, I think it's going to turn out to be a lot bigger than any of us can imagine.” He was first through the door.

Dwarfed by the large corridor, abnormally oversized by human standards, eight pairs of eyes roamed over its bizarre architecture. Light beams revealed ribs of dark metal with bone-like forms set at regular intervals along its walls, which gave the appearance of looking through a strange creature's ribcage.

Henry stroked a hand over one of the shiny, black, skeletal struts. “Though a little weird, it's amazing architecture.”

Theo wondered at the strange design. *Why fashion the supports in such a weird form when a simpler straight or rounded design would have sufficed.* It convinced him even further of its alien origin. “If there were any doubts before, there can't be now. No way was this thing built by humans.”

Lucy was in total agreement. “Perhaps the size of the corridor reflects the size of the crew who used it?”

Heads turned to gaze at the high flat ceiling.

“Giants!” said Theo.

Lucy peered along the corridor and wondered what planet the craft had originated from and the species of its crew. If any were still aboard, perhaps preserved by the extreme cold, she would receive an answer to one of her questions. She felt both excited and apprehensive by the prospect of coming face



to face with an alien species. All thoughts of the planktonic dinoflagellate that had caused her such excitement a short while ago had been forgotten.

Jack's eyes roamed over the corridor. He'd never seen anything like this other than in science-fiction movies. The cave-like subterranean atmosphere reminded him of a tunnel system he'd explored in his youth. The difference between these two experiences was the cave had already been explored, while here in this ship there was only the unknown. Though he shared some of Henry's concerns, this was a once in a lifetime experience he was more than willing to participate in.

"I suggest we head for the front of the ship," said Max. "There must be a control room and it makes sense it would be at the front. Perhaps we'll be able to power up the ship to turn on some lights, if that's still possible."

"Though it would be good to have some light," said Henry, still not convinced exploring the ship was a sensible thing to do, "we must be careful of what we touch. Pressing buttons willy-nilly might prove dangerous."

"Given the length of time this thing has been entombed beneath the ice, I very much doubt anything is working," said Richard.

"The heat extruded from the exhaust and the functioning door we just passed through, indicates something is," argued Theo.

"How about we move along?" said Richard. "Why speculate when we can find out for certain what is and isn't working?"

Excited and a little apprehensive, the team moved through the strange alien vessel. The vast weight of the surrounding ice squeezed the hollow shell. The hull creaked, groaned and amplified every sound of the ice's movement, like some immense, empty coffin crying out for corpses.

A short walk along the corridor brought them to a door set into the side wall. To find out what was behind it, Max pressed the nearby button to see if it would open. With a protesting groan of long misuse, the four door segments juddered, but refused to open more than a finger width. Stale, musty air tainted with the odour of wet metal whooshed from the gap with a screech, as if relieved to be free from its long confinement. It rolled along the passage into the engine room and out through the hole.

"The room must have been pressurized," said Eli.

Max hooked his fingers around one edge of a door segment. "Let's try forcing it open."

Theo, Jack and Eli each hooked their fingers around one of the two lower segments and pulled. With a grinding of metal, the doors moved a short distance, but then stuck fast.

Theo thrust his head and flashlight through the cross shaped opening. His eyes scanned the huge room. Something in the middle gave off a green glow. He squeezed through and the others followed.

When Lucy squeezed through, the door shuddered, releasing flakes of rust. Concern spurred her to move quickly through the gap.

Richard, the last one to enter, remained in the corridor with his eyes focused worriedly on the door. He imagined its edges slamming together while he was between its jaws. He pushed away the unpleasant thought and sidled quickly through the gap. He was barely halfway through when the door juddered and began to close. Someone gripped his arm and yanked him to safety. The door

scraped the sole of his boot when it slammed shut with a resounding clash of metal that echoed through the cavernous chamber. He let out a relieved sigh.

Jack released his grip on Richard's arm. "Are you okay?"

Richard nodded. "Thanks."

"You're welcome, but you still owe me a plane."

Richard snorted.

"That's strange," said Max.

The whole ship was strange. With this in mind the others turned to see what Max had found particularly unusual. Their gazes followed his pointing finger. Four thin hollow tubes oozing a clear viscous liquid hung from a small oblong hole where the door button should have been attached. Unlike electrical wire, the tubes could not be reattached to open the door.

Theo bent down and picked up something from the floor. It was the missing door control. "It's been deliberately ripped off!"

The scrape marks around the hole in the frame added credence to his words.

They each examined the twisted metal panel with a button in its center.

With a creased brow, Jack watched a drop of the thick fluid splatter to the floor. "It's troubling that it seems to have been done recently."

"But why and by whom?" asked Lucy, nervously.

Richard glanced anxiously around the gloom-filled room. "Probably to stop something from getting out, which now also includes us!"

Their gazes searched the darkest recesses of the room as a sense of foreboding swept over the group. They jumped in fright when the broken door control Theo dropped clattered noisily to the floor.

"As creepy as this place is, it's only our imaginations making us nervous. Whatever once roamed through this ship is long dead," Henry reassured them. "With luck we'll find their preserved corpses so we can see what the crew of this ship looked like. At the very least we should find skeletal remains."

Eli directed his torch around the huge space that was so large their flashlight beams failed to reach the far walls. His wandering light came to a halt on the high ceiling the beam only just managed to reach. "This room has the appearance of a cathedral."

Thick arched ribs with the appearance of stone, but by the evidence of the rust streaks covering them, were in fact metal, towered from the floor to a round transparent feature in the roof that was segmented by metal, rust-covered frames, some of which were broken and hung down at twisted angles. Ice-formed stalagmites poked through areas that were missing the transparent panes. Melted water dripped onto the floor or dribbled down the sloped walls leaving trails of rust wherever they wandered. Between the rib-like supports the walls were fashioned to resemble rough, dark rock. A high balcony, whose balustrade was formed of short, twisted, tree-like columns, ran almost the entire circumference of the room. The floor wasn't smooth metal like the others they'd thus far encountered. To match the walls it too was sculptured to mimic rock, though this was a lot smoother. Bridge paths with edges of rough rock led out from the central green glowing feature, one of which led to the door they'd just passed through.

Jack walked over to an edge of the path and peered into the deep void. Mist hugged the ground, obscuring the details of the lower level. The musty smell of

ancient abandoned places wafted up from the darkness shrouding the space below. His headlight moved over the thick, swirling mist that continued under the bridges and flicked back to its previous position. He thought he had seen something move in the mist.

Jane peered over the edge. "What do you see?"

Jack turned with a smile on his lips. "Only my imagination playing tricks." He noticed the others moved off along the path. "This is certainly one strange spaceship and far removed from what I expected."

"I know what you mean. It's not like the type of spacecrafts normally portrayed in science fiction movies like Star Trek and Star Wars."

Jack glanced around at the strange architecture and then into the misty void. "It's more like something out of that Alien movie we watched last night."

"Well, let's hope we don't meet any of those aliens. I'm no Ripley."

Jack smiled. "I'm not sure I'm the hero type either."

Jane grabbed his arm gently and flashed him a smile. "Oh, I don't know. I can easily picture you saving us from terrible alien monsters."

"Are you two coming?" called out Henry, from halfway along the path. He was keen to make sure they all stayed together.

Jane reluctantly let go of Jack's arm and side-by-side they walked off to catch up with the others.

The group headed for the green glow emitted by something in the room's center. Everyone was struck speechless when they were close enough to make out its details. Rough sculptured metal rock surrounded the base of three two-yards-wide by five high transparent cylinders, set in a circle. Each was filled with a semi-transparent emerald green liquid and occupied by an alien creature almost as tall as the container.

There were variances in the three creatures' faces, but all were unmistakably of the same species. Though impossibly thin and tall by human standards, they had a vague humanoid appearance. However, the details of these humanoid appendages resembled nothing human. Long white wire-thick wispy hair grew from the back of the head and wavered in the liquid like Medusa's snakes. Blood red skin stretched over its face and neck faded into green shoulders that then faded into taut parchment-textured silver skin that covered the rest of its body, except for the wrists and hands, which were also red. Five long slender digits, each tipped with a short black talon, grew from large thin hands.

Jane studied the amazing life forms with interest. "Though a little scary, they do have a certain elegant appearance."

"I agree," said Lucy. "Though due to their skeletal appearance, I'm not sure if this was how they looked when alive, or if we're looking at partially decayed ancient corpses," She was enthralled by the strange alien beings and pressed her nose to the cylinder for a closer look at one of the males.

"The red skin on their faces, necks and hands gives the impression a layer of skin has been peeled off," said Theo, not quite believing what he was looking at.

"Is this the crew?" asked Richard, a little shocked by the aliens' appearance and size, but mostly by their existence.

"One would assume so," said Henry. "But they seem too tall to be able to move through the corridors and doors we've just passed through."

"Maybe they're the crew's gods or some revered species they worshipped," Eli suggested. "They seem to have been held in some significance to be on show in this cathedral-esque chamber."

Jack paused at the female alien and ran a hand down one of the four claw-like scratches in the container's surface.

Max noticed Jack's worried frown. "What's wrong?"

Jack pointed at the scratch marks that were apparent on all of the containers. "I was wondering what made these."

Max shrugged. "Something a long time dead, I hope."

"Even though the aliens are dead, does this count as first contact?" asked Richard, quickly working out the monetary value of such a discovery as Lucy took some photographs.

"I would assume so," said Henry, "because no one has come into contact with an alien species, proving they exist, but it's not something that particularly worries me at the moment." He turned away from the fascinating life-forms and gazed around the huge space. "We need to find an exit from this room."

Though reluctant to halt their inspection of the alien life-forms, the others joined Henry in the search for an exit.

Unaware of the yellow eyes watching them from the high balcony, the group moved across the room and soon made another amazing discovery.

At the far end of the room they stared at the gigantic face of the terrifying alien creature their light beams revealed. It was vastly different from the three elegant life-forms previously encountered. Arms stretched out from broad shoulders toward them. One hand, positioned a short distance above a five-yard-high stepped platform, was cupped into a chair-like form and faced into the room. The other hand lay flat on the floor, palm up. A ramp formed in the arm led up to an opening in the side of the alien's head, in the position where a human ear would be. The whole thing had been expertly sculptured from metal. Streaks of rust, heavier below the lips formed into a viscous snarl, gave the impression blood had seeped between the teeth and poured from the open mouth. With the skeletal theme of the ship, it was something they all thought a distinct possibility. Its eye sockets, vacant and hollow, were filled with such a deep darkness it was easy to imagine something hidden within and peering out at them. Long shards of serrated bone of various lengths and thicknesses surrounded the head like a gruesome sun burst.

"Now that looks like a God!" said Eli.

"The Aztecs had frightening gods, maybe the crew of this vessel did also," said Henry.

"Rather a god than a representation of the crew," said Jane. "It doesn't extrude friendliness. To think of an alien species like that having the ability of interstellar travel doesn't bode well for the human race."

"Well, it's certainly been represented in godlike proportions," said Eli, joining Lucy in lighting up the room with camera flashes when he snapped off a few photographs.

Richard regretted leaving his camera; he'd left it in his bag back in the cavern. Photographs of the ship and the things inside would be worth a fortune. As soon

as the chance arose, he would nip back and collect it, but first they had to find a way out of this room.

Three bridge paths they had not yet tread led to doors, but each had smashed controls. Theo and Eli attempted to pry one open with their ice axes.

On the far side of the room, high above on the balcony, the pair of yellow eyes had been joined by many others. The scent of the new arrivals had drawn the hungry creatures to their next meal. They climbed beneath the balcony and scrambled down the rough walls.

Other creatures, though smaller, but just as deadly, had also sensed the chance of an unexpected meal; they were much closer.

Theo gave up and stepped back from the door. "It's no good. The join's too thin to fit the axe point into."

A soft clicking caused Jack to peer over the edge of path. He saw nothing but darkness and swirling mist caught in his headlight's beam.

The others had also heard the noise. It definitely came from the lower level.

"You see anything, Jack?" asked Max.

"Nothing that's making that noise." Jack laid on the floor with his head and shoulders over the edge. "Hold my legs someone."

Theo and Max grabbed Jack's ankles as he squirmed forward and leaned into the void. In the light he directed beneath the bridge were caught hundreds of small mouse-size creatures with an insect appearance. The first thing Jack noticed was their mouths, a round maw crammed with hundreds of tiny sharp teeth. Orange spikes encircled the mouth and twitched like feelers as they scuttled forward. White, pupil-less eyes on protrusions of skin, closed when his light made contact. The two claws on two-fingered hands attached to double jointed arms were long, curved and designed to rip the flesh of its victims. Just as lethal were their four, clawed feet that presently gripped the rough underside of the path. The clicking sound that invaded the air was made by hundreds of these tiny clawed feet climbing the walls and moving across the bottom of the path. Jack indicated for Theo and Max to pull him up and quickly explained the danger.

Jane let out a scream when one scrambled over the edge.

Theo grimaced and backed away when the insect paused and turned its tiny teeth-choked head to glance at each of them in turn, as if selecting a suitable meal from the platter on offer.

Jack's foot shot out and returned it to the void.

When more of the insects swarmed over the edge, they backed away and hurried along the path toward the center of the room, only to be confronted by a new menace. Hundreds of evil, yellow eyes shone in the darkness. Beams of light aimed at the claws scraping on metal, revealed a wave of fur and teeth rushing at them.

"Space rats!" said Theo.

Eli had to admit it was a fitting name for the vicious creatures.

Jack turned his gaze away from the approaching menace and focused on the iron god. "Up the ramp, now!"

Richard, whose sense of self-preservation when danger threatened grew larger than his inflated ego, was already halfway up the ramp.

Jack glanced over at the alien insects. An insidious wave of miniature death flowed across the floor toward them. He waited until Jane and Lucy had passed

him before he joined the sprint for safety. If there was no exit at the top, they'd never survive the attack.

When they neared the top of the ramp, a terrifying squeal rang out from below. The two species had reached the bottom of the ramp at the same time and a battle had ensued for the fleeing prize.

The larger space rats were covered in spiky green fur and about the size of a small dog, but a lot more ferocious, at first seemed better matched to defeat the smaller insect army. The rats' teeth-lined mouths and claw-tipped limbs, bit, chewed, ripped and squashed many of the smaller foes and snatched them from the air when they leapt to attack.

However, the insects had a secret weapon. As if a silent signal had been dispatched, the cavalry arrived in the form of their kind that were three times as large and whose swelled bodies were covered in small white balls. They scrambled over the pack stretched across the floor and paused a short distance away from the larger beasts. The balls shot into the air and exploded. Tiny versions of the insects rained down on the rats. With their round mouths and tiny teeth spinning, the offspring burrowed through their victim's skin. They ate, gnawed and ripped their way through the rat's innards to emerge in a spray of blood a few moments later slightly larger. While the remains of their hosts collapsed to the ground, the insect parasites leapt onto the nearest living beast and frenziedly attacked and burrowed into flesh.

The cannibalistic rats attacked and ate any of their kind that fell or were wounded. Caught up in the chaotic attack, some rats turned on their brethren regardless of them suffering any wounds.

Richard had seen none of this. He'd rushed up the ramp and entered through the opening in the side of the gigantic head. While he paused to catch his breath, he gazed around the strange chamber. Though the eyes were too high for him to reach, the gaping mouth provided an opening into the dark room. The others had wondered as to the vast room's purpose. Most had concluded it was probably a meeting hall, perhaps even a place of worship. Richard couldn't care less what it had been used for. He lived in the present. They'd made an unparalleled discovery that would astound the world. If he failed to make a fortune out of this, he wasn't as devious as he believed he was. However, first, he had to survive. He gazed through the open mouth at the creatures fighting below and shivered at their frenzied ferocity. Footsteps heading up the ramp announced the imminent arrival of his team mates. A glance around the head's interior revealed an opening at the back. He rushed through and discovered stairs with treads designed for a species with longer legs than humans. He heard the others arrive and called out. "There's a way down in here."

The rats knew from experience when the egg laden females arrived, victory was impossible. They retreated and scrambled up the walls to watch from the safety of the balcony.

Free to continue their pursuit unmolested, the insects rushed up the ramp.

Theo entered the opening at the back of the head and aimed his light down the stairwell before turning it on Richard. "Where does it lead?"

Richard shrugged. "Does it matter? We've nowhere else to go." Richard jumped down the first tread.

The rush of tiny feet up the ramp accompanied their hasty descent deeper into the bowels of the strange alien vessel. The shadows their flashlights cast on the walls spookily tracked their progress. A short corridor at the base led to small door with its control intact. Praying it would work, Richard stabbed a hand at the button. The door slid open with a metallic rasp that sounded sinister in their current state of anxiety. As the insects rushed down the stairs, the team entered the unknown. As soon as the last person was through, Richard closed the door.

The insects leading the charge dived at the rapidly narrowing gap. Only one made it through. White blood with the consistency of pus, exploded from the bodies of those crushed between the edge of the door and the frame when the two met.

Eli screamed when claws and teeth ripped through his clothing and latched onto his leg. Blood sprayed his fingers as he clawed at the feasting insect and threw it to the floor. It splattered when Henry stamped on it, turning it into a gooey mess of white blood and tiny body parts.

The remains of the insects squashed bodies dribbled down the door join. Heads and limbs caught in the white gelatinous fluid refused to accept their fate and snapped and clawed ineffectually at the food they'd failed to catch. By the time they had reached the floor, they were lifeless.

Shaking and pale from the attack, Eli leaned against the wall and slumped to the floor. Theo took the first aid kit from his pack and cleaned and bandaged Eli's wound.

"If those things in the cathedral room didn't count as first contact, that encounter certainly did," said Richard.

When Theo had finished attending to his wound, Eli lit a cigarette to calm his nerves.

Henry, concerned and confused by what had just happened, joined the others in staring at the door while the insects on the far side scratched at it. "I don't know how it's even possible alien creatures have survived so long under the ice, but obviously they have, and there might be more. The time for exploration is over. We need to get off this spaceship as soon as possible before one of us is killed."

They spread out to search the room for another exit.

Eli grimaced when he stretched out his wounded leg. His excitement at first entering the spaceship had definitely waned. He smiled at the reaction he imagined Michael, his teenage son, would give when he told him about this. His job wouldn't seem so boring to him then.

Lucy pulled a plastic container from her pack and used a small wooden spatula to scrape some of the insect remains into the plastic jar and screwed the lid on tight. When she slipped it into her bag, she noticed Theo staring at her with a grimaced expression. "I'm here to collect samples and now I have one of an alien creature. If we leave here with nothing else we'll have proof of something."

"I wasn't being critical. It was the joy on your face when you scraped that thing up that surprised me."

Lucy grinned. "You're a geologist, and I'm a microbiologist. I'm sure you would wear the same expression if you were collecting a strange alien rock sample."

Theo returned the smile. "You're right, I would."

Henry gazed around the small room unadorned with any furniture, an indication it was not somewhere the crew dwelled for any length of time.

"I found a door," called out Max, who had wandered through the arched opening beside the alcove.

Henry and the others went to investigate.

The door, like the one the insects scratched at, was different, slightly narrower, but just as high, and lacked the four segments of the previous doors they had come across.

Max's hand hovered over the door control. "Do you think it's safe to open?"

Henry shrugged. "I guess we'll soon find out."

The door slid open. Anxious faces peered into the revealed corridor.

Max stepped forward and shone his flashlight along the passage. "It seems clear," he whispered.

"Then let's move," ordered Henry, also in a low voice. "We need to find a way back to the corridor that leads to the engine room." He stepped into the passage. The control that operated a door a short distance on the left and that should lead them back to the engine room corridor, though intact, failed to open the door. It reduced their choice of directions to one. Henry turned right.

Cautiously, with Theo giving support to limping Eli, the others followed.

Jack glanced at the inoperative door control. He had the feeling they were being herded in a specific direction. So as not to burden the already apprehensive team with an extra concern, he kept his suspicions to himself and hoped he was mistaken.

All had failed to notice the two sets of eyes peering at them from the ceiling vent as they passed beneath. After a few soft guttural grunts, one set of eyes disappeared. The vent hatch rose and a monstrous head stared after the strange intruders moving along the corridor. The lone creature's landing on the metal floor made hardly a sound.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Hell's Garden.**

THEY TURNED A CORNER in the corridor to find a door blocked their route. The intact control panel indicated it might open. If not, they were stuck with nowhere else to go.

Henry waited until all had caught up. "If this door opens and there's something nasty waiting for us on the other side, we run back!"

Richard casually moved to the rear of the group.

Nervous eyes and light beams focused on the door when it rasped open. Sighs of relief greeted the sight of another skeletal-themed corridor empty of any menacing presence. Henry led them through. Lights dotted along the ceiling materialized into existence, bathing them in blue light. They halted and fell to silence, the only sound their anxious breaths and the creaking hull.

Max voiced the question on their lips. "Who or what turned the lights on?"



Theo's gaze wandered over the ceiling, but failed to pick out what he searched for. "We probably tripped a sensor. It could be an indication this part of the ship's power is still operational."

Lucy gazed nervously along the corridor. "They're not very bright, so perhaps it's emergency lighting."

Though Henry thought it was possible a tripped sensor was responsible for the lights, he was concerned by this new development. "Whatever the reason, we have to keep moving because we can't go back."

Jane switched off her flashlight. "At least we can conserve our batteries. Though weak, the blue lights are bright enough for us to see where we're going."

"That's a good idea, Jane," Henry agreed. With their exit blocked, who knew how long they'd be stuck inside. "Turn off your lights, but keep them handy in case it goes dark again."

They continued along the corridor, moving farther and farther away from their point of entry. Though they passed two doors, they decided not to risk opening them. So far the corridors had been free of any menace and it might eventually link up with the one that led back to the engine room.

When they arrived at an intersection, they halted to ponder their two options. Before them a door led toward the front of the ship and to their left a short passage led to another door. After a brief discussion in an attempt to get their bearings, it was decided to try the door on the left first as it might connect to a corridor that would take them on a circular route back to the engine room and the exit off the ship. They headed for the door, opened it, and when they stepped through into another dark corridor, blue lights flashed on. Henry led them forward, but raised a hand to halt the group after only a few steps.

Jack moved beside him, noticed Henry's worried frown, and whispered, "What is it, Henry?"

Without diverting his eyes from the view ahead, Henry replied in a quiet voice, "Listen."

Something clacked on the metal floor and grew steadily louder. Footsteps!

"Something's coming," whispered Jack.

A large alien stepped into a stream of blue light and stared at them with striking sulphurous eyes with centers darker than night. It screeched.

The shrill sound penetrated their nerves, a cross between a persistent, piercing dentist's drill and the rasp of metal across a whetstone.

Richard shivered when the alien sound washed over him. He rushed back to the intersection and quickly considered his choices. One door led back along the passage the way they had come, but if the monster followed them they'd be forced to face the insects and space rats again. That wasn't an event he wished to repeat. The only other option was the door that led to the unknown. To hedge his bets, he decided to open both doors. If what lay ahead didn't look right, he would take the other route. He punched both door controls.

The others joined him as the doors slid open. All gagged from the thick organic stench of hot, putrid decay and rotting vegetation that seeped out of the opening to engulf them; the smell was so thick it seemed possible to grab a handful. Waist-high mist wafted out from the ever-widening gap, its leading edge wispy curls of exploring fingers. A mass of shivering red and purple plant tentacles choked the

doorway. Sensing more space to fill, snake-like stalks flopped through the opening, startling those nearest.

The approaching clack of claws on metal invaded the silence.

Jane shot a glance behind. The monster hunched forward and charged at them, moving alternatively through patches of blue light and darkness. Wispy tongues of what seemed to be cobwebs, trailed from its body and limbs. A claw slashed the air and its teeth dripped with saliva in anticipation of a meal.

“Don't stop,” Jane called out. “For God's sake don't stop! That thing's right behind us.”

Theo glimpsed the lengthening shadow of something at the end of the corridor they'd previously journeyed through. When it stepped into view, he saw it was the same species as the Web monster behind them. They were being stalked and about to be attacked on two fronts. “We're being hunted,” he informed the others. He shouldered Richard aside, dragged Eli through the entrance and forced a path through the tangled growth of vines and bushes. The others quickly followed his trail.

To prevent the Web from following, Jack pressed the close door button. In what seemed agonizing slowness, the door began sliding shut. Jack turned away, but halted when it slid open again. He shot a glance at the vines protruding through the opening. They had prevented the door from closing. The click of claws on metal directed his attention through the doorway. The monster rushed at him. He slapped the door control button, grabbed the vines and pulled them back into the room. The door was almost shut, the monster only a few yards away. Strands of mist made a desperate rush to escape through the rapidly narrowing gap. Jack glimpsed a missed vine that jutted through the opening. He had failed. The monster was too close to remove it and close the door again.

The sliding door was only an inch away from the vine when it slid back into the corridor. The leading edge of the door disappeared into the frame's recess with a welcome thud of metal. Pounding on the door followed the muffled cry of the alien's frustrated shriek.

Jack freed his grip on the stiff vines and looked at Jane when she released her hold on the one she had pulled from the doorway. “That was close, thanks.”

With a worried frown, she asked, “Will the door stop it?”

Jack placed a comforting hand on her arm. “Unless it can operate the door it will.”

“Hurry up you two,” called out Lucy. “We need to catch up with the others before we lose them.”

They headed into the pungent undergrowth.

For the third time Richard almost stumbled into Theo and Eli. The injured man slowed them down and would get them all killed. Though he'd thought about suggesting to Theo they leave Eli, he knew the man wouldn't listen. To increase his chance of escape, he squeezed past the two men and took the lead.

Their feet, invisible in the ground-hugging stagnant mist, sunk and squelched in the hidden layer of decaying vegetation covering the ground. Brittle vines, branches and roots crunched under their feet like the cracking of ancient bones. The verdant mass of plants, creepers, bushes and branches seemed to reach out

for them with twigs that had the manifestation of thin, gnarled fingers. They constantly batted, pushed and bent them aside as they progressed through the corridor.

Theo screamed when a large hand-like thing sprung out and grasped his face. He released his hold on Eli to claw the thing away.

Eli laughed. "It's only a branch Richard disturbed."

Theo calmed his panic and held the sapling at arm's length. He let out a relieved breath. "I thought it was an alien face hugger."

"That'll teach you to watch films of that caliber before entering an alien spacecraft," said Henry.

"I wouldn't have if I'd known I'd be doing this today."

Henry's eyes wandered around the thick vegetation. The ship had thrown another surprise in their path. "Keep moving. This place gives me the creeps."

Theo grabbed hold of Eli to support him and noticed Richard was nowhere to be seen. The two of them headed along the faint trail the man had forced through the bushes.

Richard, a little way ahead of the group, paused and peered into the vegetation blocking his view. He thought he'd heard something. He remained still and silent. A strange moan—low, mournful and full of menace—came from somewhere ahead and close by. Fear grabbed Richard in its clutches. The blue overhead illumination, which failed to penetrate more than a few feet through the gloom-laden foliage, was useless in highlighting the danger that lay ahead. If there was another of those alien monsters stalking them or some other nightmarish creature, it would be better if the others found it. The sound of their scrambled dash through the undergrowth behind him drew closer. When he turned to look back, his eyes swept past a dark shape in the corridor wall. The leafy branch he pulled aside revealed the straight edge of an open entrance. His anxious grin at finding an escape route twisted into a mask of malignancy at the opportunity that presented itself. It was his chance to dispose of a few of his rivals, and in the process distract the monster's attention away from him while he made his escape. He slipped through the dark hole without warning the others of the danger they were about to run into.

The Web creature, frustrated its prey had escaped, remained outside the door and glanced at another of its kind as it joined it at the entrance. Their trap had failed. Its evil eyes wandered to the button its kind had long ago learnt would open the barrier between it and its prey, but it was hesitant to open it. Others not of their kind dwelt within the forest on the other side, and like them, those inside were also territorial and would fight to protect their domain and everything within. The two creatures grunted at each other. Hunger outweighed caution. One of them stretched out a clawed hand toward the door button.

"I'll be glad to be free of this verdant hell," said Jane, freeing another twig that had snagged her hair.

Muffled by the thick vegetation choking the distance between them and the others, the yell of alarm that froze them was quickly followed by a panicked voice.

A second scream, packed full of pain and horror, sent a shiver of dread through them.

"That was Eli," said Lucy, shakily.

Frightened by what lay ahead, Jane grabbed Jack's arm for comfort and listened to the heavy rustle of bushes disturbed by their friends' panicked dash away from the thing they'd encountered.

"There must be another of those monsters up ahead," said Jack.

The sounds settled into silence.

A monster shrieked and then silence, again.

"It sounds different from the one in the corridor," said Lucy.

Jane peered into the undergrowth, her ears straining for sounds of anything moving toward them. "It might be a different species, but it sounds just as dangerous."

Jack turned to the two scared women. "It's not safe to go forward," he whispered.

"It's not safe to go back," Jane replied, anxiously.

As if to emphasize her words, they heard the metallic rasp of the door opening behind them and the sounds of something moving through the bushes toward them.

They were trapped!

Jack wondered if the Web monsters were working together, because it certainly seemed that way.

Lucy pointed to something on their right. "Is that a doorway?"

Jack peeled back the foliage and gazed upon the dark shape Lucy had spotted in the wall. It was an opening and their only chance of survival. "Stay as quiet as you can and follow me."

Richard was alone and frightened, frightened about every single thing around him. The undergrowth seemed alive and rustled as its never-ending mass of tendrils threatened to close in on him. His fear caused him to be uncertain if the loud pulsing thump was of his own heartbeat or blood pumping through the sinewy vines all around him. He placed his hands over his ears to block out the awful sounds of things unknown that he believed were hunting him. Whether imagined or real, he was no longer sure.

*I should have stayed in England. I should never have come here.*

He backed against the trunk of a black, gnarled tree and sunk to the ground a shaking mass of terror. The stench emanating from the dank ground was a mildewed, moist shroud that clogged his nostrils and threatened to suck the oxygen from his lungs. Worried he might hyperventilate, he forced himself to remain calm. *It's just my imagination. Nothing is out there. The creepers are just organic lifeless plants, nothing more.* He took a few deep breaths until he had regained control, however tenuous, over his frayed senses.

He removed his hands from his ears. The slight rustle of undergrowth was, he told himself, caused by a draft blowing through the ship, nothing sinister. He forced his body upright and peered through the countless layers of vegetation lit by the inadequate headlamp he had switched on during his rush away from the monster. He'd heard Eli scream and assumed he'd been killed. It had nearly been

him. He needed to find an exit, but his panicked rush through the jungle-choked room had caused him to lose his bearings. Incapable of telling which way he had come or should now go, his dread-filled eyes gazed nervously around in search of a clue to point him on the correct course. They only saw thick depths of never ending undergrowth full of gloom that radiated despondency.

A rasp of something hard on a branch directly above him saw the fear, which he had subdued but not conquered, ascend to new heights. Though hesitant to do so, his head turned to observe the slivers of dislodged bark land on his shoulder. His absolute terror rooted him to the spot as securely as the tree he stood beneath. His legs shook and his heart pounded so fast he would not have been surprised if it burst from his chest.

Although it was the last thing he wanted to do, Richard tilted his head back and gazed up the tree trunk. Something crouched on a branch entered the weak beam of light and stared down at him. It was something that should not exist. Something covered in brown and grey, mottled, wet-looking skin adorned with tubes of various sizes as if its blood vessels were on the outside. Vine-like tubes attached to its cheeks, chin and throat, hung down and entered its chest. Richard focused on its open mouth, the half-inch long teeth within and the larger teeth protruding from its lips. It was a monster. It was death. The monster's small yellow eyes with pupils the colour of human blood, focused on its prey as it skulked slowly down the tree.

It shrieked.

A whimper escaped from Richard's trembling form. He now knew what a blood curdling cry was, a phrase described in many horror books; it no longer sounded like a cliché. Warm liquid soaked his groin and ran down his legs to seep into his boots. Richard spied his petrified form reflected in the monster's evil orbs. The globule of saliva that dripped from the creature's teeth-lined maw seemed to fall in slow motion before it splattered on his forehead with a wet smack. Terrified, he watched pain and death approach.

Though Eli had been the first to see the Hunter monster in the foliage-choked corridor, he was the last to escape. He held no blame against the others for abandoning him. He would have done the same in their position. In all but the bravest, when confronted with such a fearsome horror, self-preservation dominated any sense of loyalty to others. The fear and guilt in Theo's eyes had been plain to see when he'd fled and glanced back at his friend caught in the creature's grasp.

Eli had screamed as much in fear as pain when claws had dug deep into his shoulder. In his panicked attempts to break free he'd fallen to the floor, temporarily hidden from the Hunter's murderous gaze by the thick layer of stagnant mist. When he scrambled away, his hand landed on something hard, a short, thick branch. His fingers curled around it when the monster dipped its sadistic head into the fog to search for its victim. Though he'd doubted the blow would do it much damage, Eli was one meal who meant to fight back. Eli swung the club.

The Hunter monster screeched.

The image of ancient tombs and rotting corpses crowded Eli's thoughts when the stench of the creature's foul breath assaulted his senses. He bent his knees and shot his feet forward. The blow connected with the creature's chest. The force of the kick erupted pain from his leg wound and sent the monster flying backward. It crashed into the undergrowth a short distance away, giving him the few seconds he needed to crawl away.

Eli followed the others' trail through a doorway into a room that seemed large, but was impossible to tell as he'd lost his torch when the monster attacked. Using outstretched arms to lead the way through the darkness was an unnerving experience. More than once he imagined his fingers brushing a monster's skin. He hurried away from the doorway and the monster he was certain would follow as soon as it recovered. At first, he rushed with abandonment as fast as he dared blind to his surroundings. His priority was to put as much distance between himself and the creature as swiftly as possible in his wounded condition. When he gauged he was for the moment safe, he slowed his pace. A few deep breaths returned a slight calm to his frayed nerves. Aware any noise he made would alert the monster to his position, he proceeded cautiously. The blood seeping from his wounds caused him to wonder if the monster would be able to smell it above the overpowering stink of rotting vegetation. A terrifying screech diverted his attention. It had sounded close by. The Hunter was coming. A whimper halted his reaction to flee in the opposite direction. It had sounded human.

*It must be one of the others.*

The thick foliage made it difficult to detect from what direction it had originated. Though loath to attract attention to his position, the opportunity to rejoin his friends overrode his caution, and he softly called out, "Is anyone there?"

Richard knew he should run, but fear rooted him to the spot.

The monster halted its descent. Its head darted toward Eli's voice.

Though risky, Richard's devious brain quickly formed a plan that might save his life. Hope kick-started his courage and in a strained voice, little more than a frightened croak, he responded. "Over here, Eli, by the black tree."

A rustling of leaves and branches announced the man's approach.

Richard glanced up at the monster. Its attention was momentarily focused on Eli's approach. It gave him the slim chance he desperately required. One small cautious movement at a time, he sidled around the tree.

Eli expressed a look of relief when he emerged from the bushes and glimpsed a familiar face in the glow of Richard's headlamp.

"Richard! Am I glad to see you." Eli's relief quickly changed to concern. Something was wrong, very wrong. Richard, his back pressed against the side of the tree, trembled and gazed heavenward. Eli tilted his head to allow his eyes to follow the track of Richard's light. He gasped on seeing the Hunter monster perched on the trunk and noticed the blood on the side of its head. They had met before. Its eyes focused on the blood oozing from Eli's wounds and sniffed the seductive aroma.

The Hunter leapt from the tree.

Eli knew he wouldn't escape a second time and he would never see his wife or son again. The Hunter landed on his chest, knocking him to the ground. Eli screamed.

Hardly daring to breathe, Richard shuffled silently around the trunk. Eli's cries of mortal agony mingled with the creature's savage shrieks when his body was torn apart were terrifying to witness. The screams faded when death finally claimed the man.

Richard felt no remorse for his actions. He was alive. That was all that mattered. Grotesque sounds of flesh being chewed and blood slurped filled the air. Richard peeked around the tree. The creature hunched over Eli's corpse, its feasting head thankfully hidden within the ground hugging mist. Red splatters stained the surrounding bushes, orange and purple leaves dripped globules of blood. His eyes fell on Eli's rucksack poking out from the mist; it lay just beyond his reach. The camera was inside and probably other stuff he would need. Though indescribably terrified, greed for the valuable camera images goaded his actions. He leaned forward and hooked his shaking fingers around a strap. His eyes never wavered from the creature's back. Flesh ripped. The monster's head appeared above the mist. Richard froze. The monster chewed the gory, blood-dripping morsel, but didn't turn its head. When its face disappeared into the mist to claim another chunk of the dead man's flesh, Richard snatched up the bag and ran.

The Hunter's head darted out of the fog. It stared in the direction of something fleeing through the forest. Detecting no threat, it turned its attention back to its meal.

Richard ignored the branches slapping at his face as he fled from the monster feasting on Eli. Though he hoped it would have sated its hunger, it didn't seem the type of creature that only killed for food. Movement to his right demanded his attention. His light fell across a trembling pale form. Only a mass of creepers he'd disturbed. Something struck his head, knocking him to the ground. Dazed and through fog-filled eyes, he stared up at the branch he'd run into highlighted in his headlamp, now set skew-whiff on his brow. His hand went to his head and felt the bump forming, but no cut leaking blood to attract the forest dwellers. He straightened the headlamp and directed it at the rustling mass of creamy vines. They seemed closer.

Sensing its existence had been detected, the vegetation discarded its stealth tactic and gathered its writhing mass into a cohesive shape. Organic arms and legs, formed from tightly wound creepers, slithered from the mass. A tangled throng of vines became a ferocious head with two red glowing eyes and a tooth-filled jaw fashioned for chewing flesh. The creature formed by the writhing mass was as fascinating as it was frightening to witness. When a creeper arm reached out for Richard, five stems grew from the tip to form a large clawed hand.

Richard was up on his feet and running before it grabbed him. Rustling leaves and cracking twigs behind him indicated the creeper was on the move. Richard tripped, rolled down a small slope and splashed into shallow water.

The creeper drew back the foliage at the top of the slope with its huge arms and stared straight at Richard.

Though it was vegetation, Richard was convinced by its addition of such an abundance of sharp teeth that it wasn't vegetarian. He climbed to his feet and ran

through the stream he'd stumbled into. A twist of his head revealed his pursuer hadn't given up. The carnivorous creeper's feet splashed with each hurried step as it lurched after its prey. Even though scared, Richard wished he'd time to snap off a photo as no one would believe such a weird creature when he described it. Thick, thorny roots crept ahead of the beast, snaking through the water menacingly. Richard was pleased to notice his legs produced more speed than the creeper's root-formed appendages and he should easily be able to outrun it.

Piercing shrieks filled the air.

Two Web monsters dropped from the trees and landed directly in front of Richard.

Richard skidded on the wet, slippery stones lining the stream bed when he tried to avoid running into the monsters outstretched claws. Beyond being frightened anymore, he backed away and cocked an ear behind him. He began counting. "Five, four, three..."

Puzzled by the human's reaction, the creatures tilted their heads from side to side as they wondered why it made no attempt to flee.

"...two, one!" Richard dived to the side.

The quick reaction of one of the Web monsters saved its life; it leapt up the bank and disappeared into the undergrowth. The other wasn't so fortunate. It saw the advancing deadly creeper too late. It screeched in agony when vines shot out and pierced its flesh. It erupted in a spray of blood and gore when blooms exploded from all over its body. The main bulk of its attacker detached itself and continued its pursuit.

Richard had witnessed the creature's brutal, and no doubt painful, demise when the carnivorous creeper had propagated its seed. He had no wish to suffer the same fate. He had run up the bank and into the undergrowth in an attempt to escape everything intent on making him their next meal. He ran into a grassy clearing and almost collided with the Web monster fleeing from the vicious vegetation. They looked at each other as they ran. It snarled. Richard swung the rucksack at its head. It fell to the ground. Creeper tendrils snaked out of the undergrowth. Richard vacated the clearing before the ferocious foliage appeared and planted more seeds.

The Web monster also sensed the approaching danger. It climbed to its feet and leapt into the air. Its arms reached for an overhanging branch. The plant monster lashed out a tendril. The Web monster screeched in agony. Its body exploded in bloodstained blooms.

Keen not to become a human grow-bag, Richard hugged the rucksack to his chest to prevent it from becoming snagged on the bushes he barged through, and ran as fast as his tired body would propel him. With the thing hot on his trail, the appearance of the metal wall fashioned to imitate rough stone that blocked his way, was at first a deep concern with the thing hot on his trail, but he quickly surmised, if there was a wall there might be a door. Hopeful that one might be close by, he followed the barrier and found one. A quick search beneath the undergrowth covering parts of the wall revealed the control. The door opened, he rushed through. Though he felt like slamming the door, it wasn't possible. Instead, he slammed the door button. As the door slid closed the carnivorous creeper



rushed at him. Its arm-like tendrils gripped trees and bushes to propel it forward at alarming speed. It slammed against the door a moment too late.

Thankful to be free of the garden from hell, Richard let out a relieved sigh. Panting from his frantic escape, he backed against the wall. Too tired to care if some foul creature dragged from the deepest depths of Hell appeared and feasted on his flesh, he slid to the floor and closed his eyes.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Flee from Paradise.**

“WE SHOULDN'T HAVE LEFT Eli,” said Henry, his voice tainted with guilt.

Theo placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “There was nothing we could do, the monster had him. If we'd tried to help we'd all be dead.” The sight of his friend's terrified face would haunt him the rest of his life.

“Though I know it to be true, it does nothing to lessen my guilt.”

“I know, Henry, but we have to concentrate on getting out of here before we suffer the same fate.” Max scanned his flashlight around the surrounding area, but saw little through the dark, overgrown forest surrounding them. They needed to get out of this place as soon as possible and meet up with the others before the monster claimed another victim. There was also a good chance other dangers were hidden amongst the thick foliage waiting to ensnare them. At least in the corridors they could see the nightmares coming.

“Let's try this way,” said Theo, keen to keep moving. “There might be other exits on the far side.”

Theo led Henry and Max deeper into the dense vegetation.

Though it was difficult moving through the foliage-choked room, they gradually made progress. The screeches of monsters unseen that occasionally pierced the moist air were a constant reminder they weren't alone.

Intrigued by the unexpected sound of gently flowing water, they manoeuvred around a moss-covered rock and paused at the edge of a shallow stream. Water bubbled over smooth stones covering the streambed. Rough, grey rocks, some quite large, lined the sides of the tranquil stream that was free of mist. All were draped in tendrils of thin vines with orange leaves and red moss grew on their lower craggy surfaces. The stream, which they were seeing for the first time, was a sign they were heading in the right direction, across to the far side of the room. When they crossed the stream, the frantic splashing of water from upstream halted them. Their heads turned toward the sound when shrieks rang out.

“What was that?” said Theo.

“Does it matter?” said Max. Fearful that whatever made the sounds would head their way, Max pushed Henry forward. “Don't stop.”

They climbed the sloping bank, moved between some rocks and reentered the forest. Their plan was to head in one direction until they reached the edge of the room, and search for an exit along the wall. They hadn't gone far when the

darkness began to fade. They glanced up at the ring of glowing panels around the glass roof section.

“Dawn has broken,” said Theo.

“Hopefully those monsters we met are nocturnal,” said Max.

Henry stared at the steadily brightening light filtering through the thick foliage. “If they are, the light could bring a new set of daytime creatures foraging for food.”

Max sighed. “Then I suggest we keep moving.”

Theo led them on.

Jack thought it would be suicide to rush through the astonishing forest and alert any creatures that might dwell within of their presence. After he'd led them what he thought was a safe distance from the door and the monster that might appear through it, they'd come across a clump of thick bushes adorned with large leaves, gathered around the base of one of the huge trees. It made an ideal temporary refuge. Hidden within, they turned off their lights and listened to the shrieks, howls and wanderings of unknown things moving through the lush, alien vegetation, which thankfully, seemed free of bugs and insects.

After a while, Jane noticed the shape of individual leaves in the gloom and pulled aside a leafy branch. “It's getting lighter.”

Lucy and Jack peered through the gap.

“It's as if the sun is rising,” said Lucy, astonished.

Jack's eyes searched the area. He saw nothing moving. “We haven't heard anything for a while, so maybe it's safe to venture out.”

They vacated their temporary sanctuary and pushed through the undergrowth. When they entered a small clearing, they stopped and gazed at the light panels high above them that gradually increased in luminosity, allowing them a glimpse of the room's architecture for the first time. Towering arches, of what looked like stone, stretched up to a central round glass roof, parts of which were visible through gaps in the leafy canopy. The wall sections between the arched supports were covered in jagged protrusions of rock. Some of the larger ones stretched a few yards out into the room. What seemed to be caves, dotted areas of the walls, their ominous openings inviting imaginations to picture the foul creatures that dwelled within. Spotting movement, they watched as one of the Hunter creatures climbed up the wall and disappear into one of the dark openings.

“It seems they're nocturnal, so we might be okay now.” Jack's gaze searched their surroundings for signs of movement, but all was still.

Forgetting their fearful predicament, Lucy gazed around in wonder. “This must be some sort of biosphere.”

A large craggy boulder, about three-yards-high and four wide, stood at the far side of the clearing. An ivy type of growth with blue leaves covered the top and draped down its craggy sides, and bright red moss grew over the lower parts. The ground hugging mist, only a few inches deep here, swirled around their ankles when they walked over to the rock, revealing patches of the stone floor beneath their feet.

Jack placed a hand on the rock; it was cold. When he tapped it with his knuckles, a hollow metallic boom rang out. “It's metal.”

Jane studied the rock. Even close up the texture and form of the metal-work imitated rock convincingly.

Lucy ran a hand over the strange vegetation. "I would love to collect a sample of this."

Jack's head twisted toward the rustling of leaves. Something was coming. He snapped off a length of the blue ivy and handed it to Lucy. "Let's go," he whispered. He led them around the side of the rock. Before Lucy followed, she grabbed a handful of red moss and stuffed it and the ivy into a pocket.

When they emerged from the far side of the rock, Jack cocked an ear. "Can you hear water?"

They fell to silence and listened to the distant sound of splashing water.

Jane pointed off to the right. "I think it's coming from over there."

A few steps brought them to a stone path slick with moisture. A plethora of root tendrils, both large and small, had spread across the stones to suck up the available moisture. They followed the path and stepped over the larger tree roots in their way and passed beneath towering trees that stretched up to the roof high above them. The relaxing sound of trickling water became louder, evidence they neared its source.

The source of the trickling water was revealed when Jack pushed aside a leafy branch and held it until the two women had passed.

"What a beautiful sight," stated Jane.

The cascade of water that flowed from a small cave near the top of the high rock wall meandered down the rock face and plunged off an overhang near the bottom. It splashed into a large pool of water that overflowed onto the path and fed a small stream leading off into the room. Water dripped from large icicles hanging from some of the broken panes in the roof and fell into the pool or the verdant area.

"I guess the melting ice explains how the plants are kept watered," said Lucy. "If these plants are similar to Earth's, there must be a system to control the influx of oxygen and extract the build-up of CO<sub>2</sub>. The plants would die if there wasn't."

Jane stepped across the numerous roots that had crept into the pool to suck up the life sustaining water and peered into its depths. Small dark alien life-forms swam in the deepest parts the light barely penetrated. She turned away and watched Jack cautiously move aside a leafy branch and peer further into the thick foliage. Though different in looks to the man she'd lost, he had many similarities to Kyle. Both were ruggedly handsome, considerate, and emanated a sense of security and trust. Jack was not a man to abandon anyone who needed his help. Though she'd been attracted to him when they'd first met, she had done nothing to prompt a relationship. She was well aware of the reason—Kyle. Though his loss had occurred many years ago, it was still fresh in her mind, as were their wonderful memories together. She stared at Jack's stubble-covered chin and knew from intimate moments with Kyle when he'd neglected the razor for a few days, it would be prickly if they kissed. Perhaps the time for letting Kyle go was drawing near. She blushed and quickly redirected her gaze when Jack turned to look at her.

Jack wore a mask of worry. "I think something's stalking us."

Jane scanned the area for a clue to his anxiety.

A distant shriek filtered through the undergrowth.

Though the creature sounded far away, and he saw nothing in the immediate vicinity to threaten them, Jack remained uneasy. He felt with all his senses that eyes were upon them. A rustle of leaves, no stronger than a gentle breeze would cause, alerted him to its presence; there was no wind in the ship. A killer was on the prowl. He turned to his companions cowering in his shadow and bade them to silence with a finger to his lips. He pointed back the way they'd come and whispered, "It's over there."

A rustling of branches confirmed to Jane that he was correct. Lucy's trembling hand gently gripped her arm in search of comfort and reassurance. Though uncertain it was something she could honestly provide, she nevertheless placed a hand on Lucy's and gave it a gentle squeeze. "Maybe it's Henry or one of the others?" she whispered.

Jack shrugged. "Perhaps, but I'm not willing to risk our lives finding out. We'll head away from it."

Lucy stared at the sound of something creeping through the undergrowth. Its slow movements sounded purposeful and sinister. When fear threatened to take hold of her senses, she forced herself not to panic. "What do we do?" she asked, nervously.

Jack had no idea, but he thought staying still and silent was a good first step until they'd identified its exact position. He relayed this to his two frightened comrades.

All three hardly dared to breathe while their eyes and ears scanned the lush vegetation surrounding them in an effort to pinpoint the object of their fear. The only noise was the rapid beating of their hearts and the trickling waterfall, the sight of which only a few moments earlier had painted a tranquil scene that had belied the horror that lurked nearby.

The monster's urge to satisfy its ravenous hunger had increased when it caught the faint scent of the strange intruders and was set on seeking them out so it wouldn't remain unfulfilled, but it was out of its element. The dark corridors had not been too dissimilar to its preferred hunting ground; dark tunnels formed in rock and earth. This area, crammed with growth, blocked its sonar hunting capabilities, making it unable to use its preferred method to locate its prey. The strong scent of some of the plants and trees also made its prey invisible to its sense of smell. It was though not completely hindered; it had its hearing. It turned its head slowly in an attempt to locate its prey. It heard nothing except the sound of flowing water. Its prey must have detected its presence and remained motionless. It would have to flush them out. It moved toward the position it had last detected them.

Jack thought he detected something indistinct moving through the undergrowth, a twisted lurking menace that stalked its prey while seeking the opportune moment to pounce and kill. "I think it's moving in behind us," he whispered. He noticed Lucy's fear-drenched expression. "Are you okay?"

She shook her head slightly. She had never felt so terrified. "Not really."

Jack knew how she felt. "We should move. With a room this large there has to be another exit somewhere. Shift past me as quietly as you can and I'll try and

keep between you and whatever's following us." When he received a nod from the two women, he backed into the bushes to give them room to squeeze by. Jane and Lucy headed through the undergrowth, careful not to disturb the foliage more than could be avoided. Jack, fully alert for danger, followed behind.

Though an occasional rustle of leaves and branches came from behind him, Jack didn't think the stalker knew where they were, but was searching for them. A glance ahead revealed a branch they would need to duck under. Jane went first, placing her feet carefully between the large trees roots snaking out from its massive gnarled trunk. When she was clear, Lucy ducked and crept forward. Her foot slipped off a root, tripping her to the ground. Though she'd barely made a sound, it had been enough to alert their pursuer.

Jack spun. Something crashed loudly through the foliage toward them. Though the vegetation hid it from his sight, the increasing sounds of its expectant rush indicated it would soon be upon them. He helped Lucy to her feet, ducked under the branch and looked at their frightened faces. "Run!"

Jane and Lucy turned and fled.

Jack stayed. He needed to slow the creature down or none of them would escape. After a quick examination of the low branch, he moved along its length and grabbed hold near its end. When he bent it back toward the trunk, his feet skidded with the strain on the moist leaf-strewn ground. He regained his footing and bent it back as far as he thought possible without it breaking. He waited. His muscles strained to hold the force back while the creature's noisy approach grew nearer. He would only get one chance. The creature appeared out from the foliage, paused, sniffed the air and looked at its prey. Jack was so shocked by the sight of the monster's eyeless face, he forgot to let go of the branch. When the air trembled from the beast's ferocious roar, his senses returned and he released his grip. The monster screeched in pain when the branch slammed into its chest. The force knocked it off its feet and flung it into the bushes.

Jack ran to catch up with Jane and Lucy.

The two women were at the far end of the room, trying without success to slip past the girth of the thick tree that had chosen to plant its seed in this corner. Free from any crew to cut it down, it had seized the opportunity to grow in wanton abandonment.

Jane and Lucy heard the snapping of twigs and disturbed leaf-adorned branches caused by something's rapid approach. They'd heard the creature's howls and feared the worst— that Jack had been killed. Both wore fearful looks when they turned to face the approaching menace. Relief washed over them when Jack appeared and shot them a reassuring smile.

Jane's eyes darted to the undergrowth behind him. "Is it still coming?"

Jack nodded. "I'm afraid so, though I delayed it for a moment."

"We can't get to the door," explained Lucy, on the verge of panic.

Jack's eyes quickly took in the gap between the trunk and the exit clogged with branches and vegetation; they'd never get through. If they had the time they could break some of the stems to make room, but the monster on their trail made that choice obsolete. He glanced up the trunk and noticed windows set in the wall overlooking what was once a verdant paradise in the ship of hard edged metal and

conformity. A thick branch that had sought room to grow had pushed through one of the large windows. It offered them a means of escape. "We climb."

Jane glanced up the tree to assess the merits of such a plan. Though a difficult climb, she saw it was possible. The many branches offered a series of platforms they could use to climb to safety. "Lucy, you go first."

Lucy offered no argument. With a hoist up from Jack, she grabbed hold of the lowest branch and pulled herself onto it.

"Don't stop whatever happens," Jack told her.

Lucy shot Jack a worried look.

"I'll be right behind you."

Jane studied Jack as if he were a painting and one she found particularly pleasing to the eye. Even in moments of sudden and imminent peril, he'd shown exceptional coolness. "Does anything scare you, Jack?"

Jack smiled. "Don't let my cool exterior fool you. Inside I'm a terrified wreck with panic hiding just below the surface."

"And yet you hold it all together." She leaned forward and gave him a peck on the cheek. Yep, it was as she thought—bristly.

With a puzzled frown, Jack asked, "What was that for?"

Jane smiled. "For being you." She glanced up the tree. Lucy had cleared the first branch. "Are you going to hoist me up, or stand there all day gawping? You give the impression you don't get kissed very often."

Jack hoisted her up. "I must admit, it's been a long time." As soon as Jane was clear, he leapt, grabbed the branch and hauled himself up.

Though some of the gaps between branches were wide, they were never too far apart to prevent their rapid ascent. When they were little over a third of the way up, the creature emerged from the tall undergrowth. Jack warned the others to be still. Jane paused awkwardly with her body half over a branch and observed the monster below sniffing the tree trunk. At two yards tall, covered in pink creamy hairless skin mottled with green specks, sinewy limbs tipped with claws and a head that tapered into a tusk at the back, it truly was a terrifying vision. Its lipless jaw lined with curved teeth, didn't hinge open like a normal human jaw, but parted vertically to stretch skin and muscle and reveal the thick saliva dripping tongue that occasionally slid over its wicked teeth in a hungry manner. But what made it even more horrifying was its lack of eyes. Jane wondered how it hunted and managed to move through the forest without bumping into things.

Lucy also watched the monster. She prayed it wouldn't discover them.

The creature sniffed higher up the tree, gazed its sightless head up into its boughs and emitted a series of clicks back and forth. Like bats, it used sonic waves to locate its prey and the layout of its environment.

Jane's awkward position was sapping her strength. She didn't think she would be able to hang on much longer. Though the monster seemed to stare at each of them in turn, it was having trouble distinguishing them from the tree's rough contours. Apparently satisfied its prey wasn't in the tree, it turned its evil face away and headed into the bushes. Jack followed its progress by the foliage it disturbed. Jane could remain still no more—she was losing her grip. As quietly as she could, she clambered onto the branch.

Jack gazed up at the two women and whispered, "I think it's gone. Climb as quietly as you can."

They resumed their climb.

*CLICK! CLICK! CLICK!*

It had been waiting for them.

A howl rung out.

"Climb!" Jack shouted.

Lucy screamed.

Jack followed her point of focus.

The clicker monster leapt from the bushes with clawed hands stretched out and grabbed hold of a branch. Jack didn't wait around to see more, he climbed and urged the others to move faster.

Her fear of what climbed up to them was all the encouragement Lucy needed. She raced up the tree and soon reached the branch that protruded through the window. Without a pause in her stride she raced across the limb, kicked out the inch thick pieces of jagged glass around the frame and clambered through.

When Jane crossed a few moments later, Lucy carefully picked up the largest of the glasslike slivers and threw them at the Clicker. One piece glanced off its shoulder, opening a rip in its skin. Though it howled, the wound seemed to cause it little concern and failed to slow its climb.

Jane glanced around the large room dotted with tables and chairs. The dim light picked out a room at the back which seemed to be a kitchen area, an indication this was where some of the crew would have eaten— unexpected normality in the chaos. The view of the trees, shrubs and waterfall would have been a relaxing background while the crew feasted. Twenty yards away on the right, Jane spotted an escape route in the form of a door.

Jack scramble along the branch and jumped to the floor.

Jane pointed out the exit. "We can escape through there."

Jack glanced down at the Clicker. It would soon be upon them. "We need to slow it down again as it knows how to open doors." He looked at Lucy. "Go find out if the door opens. If it does, wait there and as soon as we're through, close it."

Lucy rushed off to do as instructed.

Jane looked at the resourceful man and waited to find out what he'd do.

Jack glanced at the kitchen area at the far end of the long room. He thought there might be knives there, but it was too far away. He tried to lift one of the tables, but it was firmly fixed to the floor. He had more success with a chair. Though heavy, it should do the job he had planned for it. He turned it over so the backrest was uppermost and pointed forward, and lifted it onto the branch.

Without being told, Jane quickly crossed to the other side of the branch and grabbed hold of the chair. She smiled nervously at Jack. "As soon as it reaches the window, we ram it, right?"

Jack nodded. "As hard as we can. We probably won't kill it, but if we can knock it out of the tree it might break a limb. At the very least it'll buy us some time."

Jane and Jack glanced across the room when the door opened. Lucy gave them a thumb up okay sign. Their eyes darted back to the broken window.

The Clicker climbed onto the branch, pointed its face at the broken window and sniffed the air.

Jane and Jack froze.

*CLICK! CLICK! CLICK!*

Its sharp claws left a trail of gouges in the bark when it cautiously slunk forward like a grotesque panther. As if sensing danger, it halted at the broken window and directed its eyeless face around the room.

*CLICK! CLICK! CLICK!*

*CLICK! CLICK! CLICK!*

It stared at Jane. A globule of saliva dripped from its mouth.

“Over here, you ugly son of a bitch!” shouted Lucy.

The Clicker's head darted toward the voice. *CLICK! CLICK! CLICK!* It rushed forward.

With the chair gripped firmly between them, Jack and Jane rushed at the monster.

The edge of the chair back smashed into the Clicker's chest. It toppled backward and slipped off the branch. Clawed hands lashed out to procure a hold. Its fall halted when they found a grip. It began to climb back up.

Jack snatched the chair from Jane's grasp and threw it aside, jumped onto the branch, rushed through the window and stamped on the monster's hands. One of its claws snapped. The creature shrieked with each blow. One claw released its grip. The second quickly followed. It bounced off branches it failed to grab during its plummet to the ground. Twigs snapped when it landed on a bush and thudded to the ground.

Jack peered at the unmoving creature and wondered if it was dead.

*CLICK! CLICK! CLICK!*

The monster moved.

Jack retreated through the opening and followed Jane's rush across the room to the open door. It swished shut when they passed through. A swipe of the axe Lucy held ready smashed the button in the hope it would prevent the Clicker monster from opening the door.

They ran.

Max raised a hand to halt his two companions and pointed at the bush off to his right. “Are you seeing that?”

As the false sunlight grew brighter and its leading edge spread across the verdant forest, plants bloomed in its wake. All around them beautiful flowers unfurled their petals to soak up the light. It seemed every species of plant had their own colour scheme; red, blue, green, yellow, orange, purple and black blossoms surrounded them. Their pungent scent, ranging from sweet and sickly to vomit gagging, filled the air. The light and fusion of strong scents acted as a signal for other life-forms to wake and the drone of insects quickly followed.

Theo, Max and Henry continued on.

A loud energetic buzzing came from ahead. Max cautiously pushed aside a branch. The drone came from a large, mottled brown growth—four yards in height and two wide—clinging to the side of a large tree. Theo joined him to observe the oddity. The small head of something—a head that wouldn't have looked out of place on a predatory dinosaur—appeared at the opening near its base. The small creature crawled out and scampered up the nest into the light and spread two red,



bat-shaped wings. Each of its six legs ended in a sharp spike, and the red and black stripes covering its ten-inch long body, combined with the long yellow stinger on the tip of its tail, indicated it wasn't something you'd want to annoy. Max carefully let the branch fall into place, turned to face the others and whispered, "I think it's a type of alien wasp."

"Did you see the size of its stinger?" Theo asked. "I was stung by a hornet once; it wasn't a pleasant or pain free experience, I can tell you. I imagine a sting from one of those things would be a hundred times worst, and that's an awfully big nest."

"I think it's best we give the nest a wide berth," said Henry. "The flowers will attract them, so back up a bit, and Theo can lead us around."

Pollen of varying colours clung to their clothes when they brushed past the flower-adorned bushes. Before long it looked as if they were covered in sugar sprinkles.

The low hum of wings alerted Theo to the approaching bug. He ducked to avoid the bird-sized insect, which except for the sharp teeth and porcupine-like spikes covering the ridge of its back, loosely resembled a dragonfly.

Henry stared at the alien dragonfly hovering in front of his face. Its flapping wings moved so fast they were a blur. Its two beady, black eyes seemed to be examining him, perhaps as a meal or a threat. Henry remained motionless and after a few moments it flittered away. The draft from its wings ruffled Henry's beard when he turned to watch it leave. "This place is full of amazing creatures. It's a shame we won't have time to study them."

Theo showed none of Henry's disappointment. "It's more of a shame that most of them consider us food. It would be a brave man who wanted to hang around to get up close and personal with any of them, and I'm glad to say that man isn't me. The sooner we're out of this jungle, the better I'll feel."

After a few more steps, Theo turned to his right to investigate a rising buzzing sound. A large alien wasp flew straight at him with an obvious purpose that indicated it wasn't going to ignore them like the dragonfly. "Incoming wasp. Run!"

The wasp homing in on them curled its tail to point its lethal stinger at them. A second one swooped down to join in the chase.

The three men ran.

Now the light in the cavern had increased to its maximum, the community of insects that dwelt in the forest increased in number. Their cacophony of buzzes, hums, and shrill calls filled the air and many seemed intent on investigating the strange arrivals trespassing in their domain. The three men constantly batted them away before they could bite, sting or claw at them.

Creatures the size of a cat that had a vague resemblance to a squirrel, but one designed by someone with a vivid and cruel imagination, emerged from holes in trees and bared fangs and claws at them. One leapt at the fleeing men.

Theo saw it coming and lashed out with his flashlight. The creature shot into the bushes.

Three more attacked from different directions.

Max struck one with an ice axe, impaling it on its blade. He quickly shook the carcass free.

The trajectory of another squirrel creature brought it in the path of a wasp. The wasp attacked. It landed swiftly on its back and stabbed its stinger into its body. The stinger throbbed when it pumped something into its victim and then leapt off to hover and observe. The alien squirrel screeched and writhed in midair. Its body swelled grotesquely and erupted in a spray of black blood and tiny insects. The group of larva with small wings and bulbous eyes hovered in the air briefly. The mother wasp circled them to round them up before flying off to its nest. The gruesome larva followed their parent.

The third attacking alien squirrel headed for Henry, who dodged aside to avoid it. It lashed out a claw when it shot past his face, leaving behind three small scratches on the tip of Henry's nose. It fell to the ground and turned for a second attack. The ground around it moved. The creature squealed and leapt for the nearest bush. Thin, bright red, worm-like tentacles erupted from the ground and slithered through the air in pursuit of the fleeing alien squirrel. They wrapped around it, snatched it from the air and pulled it to the ground. The creature writhed in agony when the worms entered its body and began sucking out its internal organs. The ground around it became a dark, blood-muddy mess as it was dragged below the earth.

Henry shivered. He looked down at his feet. The earth around them moved. He jumped aside when the tip of a red tentacle appeared. "Keep moving," he shouted urgently. "There're monsters beneath our feet."

With two alien wasps still after them, murderous alien squirrels looking for an opportunity to attack while they leapt from branch to branch and tree to tree to follow them, and killer tentacles writhing under the ground beneath their feet, the three men sprinted through Hell's Garden for their lives. All wanted to be free of the vicious, terrifying place.

"There's the wall," shouted out Max, when he spied the tall metal structure rising from the undergrowth. A few rushed steps, dodges and jumps, and umpteen more insects avoided later, they reached it. A frantic search for the much desired exit immediately ensued. A wasp latched onto Theo's rucksack and repeatedly stabbed it with its long stinger like a horny dog latched onto someone's leg, but it failed to find any flesh to inject its eggs. Max snatched up a branch from the ground and swung it at the attacking insect. Its bright-coloured body splattered into a mess of yellow gore and red and black body parts that stained the bag. The force of the blow sent Theo staggering forward. Henry caught him. While Max fought off the wasps, the alien squirrels and any other thing that arrived to try their luck, batting them into the distance like a baseball pro, Henry and Max continued their search for an exit. They almost missed it because it was hidden behind a mass of creamy vines. Henry searched amongst them for the control button, found it and opened the door. After they squeezed through, the vines sprung back into place to act as a barrier for the inquisitive insects. Henry closed the door.

The three men stared at the door as they caught their breath.

Theo let out a relieved sigh. "That's one experience I never want to repeat."

Max glanced at the gore dripping from the bug-splattered improvised bat and dropped it to the ground. "Amen to that."

Heads jerked and stared along the corridor.

Footsteps approached.

Henry shook his head in dismay. "No rest for the wicked."

They fled along the corridor away from the approaching menace.

## Chapter 8

### Food.

A THIRD DESPERATE PRESS of the button produced the same result as the previous two; the door remained closed. Richard turned and retraced his steps along the corridor he'd explored and halted when a door around the corner swished open. Fearing a monster was on the prowl he switched off his headlamp and listened. Voices he recognized drifted along the corridor. He moved around the corner. Theo, Henry and Max ran in the opposite direction. Though Richard could have called out, his fear of imagined monsters lurking nearby kept him silent. This fear also bade him to move cautiously and not run blindly through the ship where monsters lurked in the darkness. He switched on the headlamp, and at a slow and steady pace, he followed them. The three men leading the way would distract or give warning of any monsters that lay ahead.

The corridor Henry, Max and Theo rushed along ended in a doorway they couldn't open. They retraced their steps the short distance to another door set in the right-hand wall, one they'd previously ignored. Though reluctant to leave the corridor, the approaching threat from the footsteps they'd heard, made it unwise to backtrack and seek out an alternative route.

A green glow seeped out when the door rasped open. The three men cautiously stepped through, closed the door and gazed around their new surroundings, far different from anything previously encountered. Transparent tubes lined the walls of the huge space. Though some were empty, most were occupied by giant monsters suspended in green liquid.

Though the sight of the large alien creatures was a surprise, it wasn't as great a shock as it would've been if they hadn't already experienced many other extraordinary sights since setting foot on board the alien vessel. It was evidence how people quickly adapted to their surroundings, and at least the giants weren't attacking them.

The smooth metal floor that led between the towering walls of pods that stretched the full width of the room, was stained with dark patches, as if a liquid had been spilt and over time had dried out. Tubes, ducts, pipes and cables covered almost every surface of the shiny black metal walls not taken up by the large cylinders.

They stared at the nearest alien giant. Tubes connected to various parts of its body rose to the top of the cylinder.

Theo shook his head in astonishment as he took in the size of the impossibly large creature. "They must be ten yards tall."

Henry's eyes roamed the room. "Could these things be the crew?"

“Unlikely,” said Max. “They're too big to fit through the corridors or doors we've passed through.”

“If they're not crew, they must be cargo,” said Theo.

“An invasion force,” said Max ominously.

Henry glanced around at the empty pods. “What concerns me, is if all of the pods contained one of these giant creatures when the spaceship set out on its journey, where are they now?”

Bubbles rose ominously from the bottom of an alien-giant-occupied tank.

“I wonder if they're alive; in suspended animation or something.” Theo asked.

“Let's not speculate, alive or dead, whatever their purpose it's unlikely it'll ever be fulfilled as before long they and this ship will be submerged in the ice cold sea.”

“Let's hope we're off this ship long before that event occurs,” said Theo, leading the others along the rows of pods.

When they'd almost reached the halfway point, Henry moved over to a patch of congealed liquid on the floor and knelt to examine it more closely. He dipped a finger in the thick substance. It came away stained dark purple. “It has the consistency of blood.”

Theo looked at one of the nearby empty pods. “Maybe it's not an invasion force, but food, and this room is a huge larder.”

Max glanced around nervously. “Food for what?”

“That's one question I'd like to remain unanswered,” said Henry. “Because it's probable, if these giants are being eaten by something, it's even bigger than its meal.”

Their eyes followed the blood trail to a large trapdoor in the floor. A recessed lever beside it seemed to be the control to open and close it.

“I wonder where it leads,” said Max.

Henry grimaced. “Nowhere pleasant I expect.”

They moved on and stopped at a gap in the pod wall on their left. A crane contraption with long, jointed, metal arms and large mechanical hands, hung from a rail that ran the length of the ceiling with junctions leading down each row of pods.

The wide, high corridor that intersected the two sections of pod walls, led to a door of the normal size they had previously encountered. At the far side of the ship was a much larger door. A circular section in its center fed out rays of chunky metal pistons that connected to the thick, metal frame, seemed to be part of the locking mechanism.

“That huge door could be an airlock,” Theo suggested.

Max calculated the size of the door. “Whether they entered voluntary or under duress, it's certainly big enough for the pod giants to fit through.”

A rasp of metal filled the space. Their eyes darted to the door at the end of the corridor as it slid open. The silhouette of an alien they hadn't yet encountered gradually appeared, framed in the light shining through the door.

Theo reacted first and pushed the others to the side. “We need to hide,” he whispered. His gaze searched for a suitable place to conceal themselves. He pointed at one of the empty pods. “In there.”

They climbed up the thick tubes and cables and entered the pod. There was plenty of space for them all to fit inside. They backed into its darkest recesses and waited.

The new arrival's unhurried footsteps on the cold metal floor grew nearer. When it stepped out of the side corridor, it was bathed in the pods' ghostly green light.

The three men stared at its graceful, deadly form.

It was slim, about nine feet tall and covered in shiny brown skin covered in a faint hexagon design that looked almost metallic. Eight long, brown tendrils curved out from the back of its head to hang down its back, almost like dreadlocks. Its face was vaguely human—two bright blue eyes, small nose, mouth with lips and ears on the side of its roundish head. Though there was no sign of any sexual organs, its feminine features and its two pert breasts identified the creature as female. The two slender, elbowed arms attached to small shoulders ended in hands with five long fingers, one of which seemed to be similar to a human thumb. Surprisingly, for creatures they'd thus far encountered on the ship, she was clawless. Her long legs had a knee joint and five-toed feet attached to an ankle. She moved gracefully and though she emitted no obvious threatening behaviour, the alien carried an aura of menace. She walked out of the corridor and over to a control console protruding from the wall, which lit up with a touch of one of her slender fingers. Another press activated the crane.

The three men dragged their eyes away from the alien to watch the crane. It moved through the room and paused before one of the occupied pods. The green liquid cocooning the giant creature bubbled and gurgled as it drained into the pod's base. When it was empty, the door slid open. The crane's long arms reached out and gripped the creature around its waist. Tubes connected to various parts of the giant hissed when they detached. The giant was lifted out and carried over to the alien creature. When the claws released its grip, the giant crashed to the floor with a loud thud. Its job completed, the crane returned to its previous parked position.

The alien deactivated the console and walked over to the still creature that dwarfed her slender figure and halted a short distance away. It stared at the giant.

When the alien hadn't moved for a few minutes, Theo whispered to his companions. "What's it waiting for?"

Henry shushed him to silence. It was a stupid question that none of them could possibly answer.

A few moments later the giant moved. It gagged, vomited green liquid and convulsed as its body functions returned. It opened its large eyes and gazed at its surroundings. From its confused expression it was obvious it failed to recognize its environment. The giant showed no fear on sighting the alien creature, but it did show caution. It clumsily climbed to its feet and staggered until it regained its balance. It stared down at the alien creature whose head was level with its knees and lifted a leg to squash it.

The female alien smiled and leapt at the giant. In mid-air she disintegrated into a mist of tiny creatures that swarmed over the giant like ants attacking a larger prey. Amidst the hoard, a larger, paler form stood out.

Eaten alive, the giant's agonized screams echoed through the cavernous space. Purple blood sprayed the floor to form puddles when arteries were severed and

flesh and organs were devoured. Within the space of a minute the swarm vacated its meal and once more gathered together into the form of the female alien. All that was left of the giant was its skeleton and head. The bones clattered to the floor in a pool of its blood that seeped toward the grating in the middle of the room.

The alien grabbed hold of one of the giant's horns, dragged it over to the trapdoor and activated the lever. The door groaned open. The rank stench of rotten flesh, death and sewage wafted from the chute. The alien dropped the head into the hole and it joined whatever foulness existed below. The alien's form separated into four smaller similes of itself, and each chose pieces of the giant's remains from the macabre pile and threw them into the chute. The bones clattered noisily down its length.

The three men were shocked by what they'd just witnessed. The alien's appearance, though surprising, was nothing compared to their astonishment when it burst apart to attack the large creature and then rejoined once they'd finished feasting. Fear of discovery and a similar fate kept their breaths shallow and their bodies still, but their eyes continued to watch in fearful fascination.

The grating of metal set Richard's alarm bells ringing. He spun to face the threat. A ceiling grill vent clanged to the ground with a loud metallic crash that echoed along the corridor. The howl from the monstrous cobweb-veiled head that appeared in the opening quickly followed, as did Richard's footsteps running from the Web monster's unwelcome arrival.

The Web creature dropped to the floor and with muscular legs propelling it forward, it gave chase.

Richard rushed along the corridor. He glanced back. The monster was hot on his heels. He slapped the button on the next door he came to, and hoping something less threatening lay on its other side, rushed through.

During his dash through the pod room, Richard gazed in fascination at the giants imprisoned in large transparent containers. He skidded to a halt when he spied the small alien creatures dragging large bones through puddles of purple blood.

Surprised by the sudden arrival of the strange creature, the female aliens stared at the creature. Though they knew of the recent arrivals presence aboard the ship, they hadn't yet laid eyes on any. Its lack of any obvious defensive body parts gave it a vulnerable appearance, and certainly not one that caused them any concern.

Henry, Theo and Max were as astonished as the freshly fed aliens by Richard's sudden appearance. Though they could call out to him, they remained silent. To alert the alien creatures to their presence would only have one outcome. Their gaze turned to the new horror that entered the room and rushed at Richard.

The pale creature with white skin tinged with pink was covered in a wispy layer of cobwebs. It was difficult to tell if they were part of it, or if it had walked through a large web and strands had clung to its body. Its white eyes, devoid of pupils and set in red-tinted globes of flesh, were focused on the prey it chased into the room. Its bald head had a skeletal nose, a small mouth ringed with small sharp teeth and a small fat wrinkled chin that rested upon an elongated neck. Both head and neck were covered with a red veined pattern. Strands of web flowed over its face like a veil—or hair gone awry—and snaked over its body. Tendrils of the wispy web

hung from two long arms attached to sharp, raised bony shoulders. Both arms ended in three hooked claws. Two legs jutted out from its torso to the rear and were jointed to form a lower leg supported by large, hooked claws. It was the same species of Web monster that had chased them into Hell's garden.

The scrape of claws across the metal floor spun Richard around. He screamed in fright when the Web monster leapt into the air with its sharp claws reaching out for him. He spied the open trapdoor a few steps away. Though extremely reluctant to do so, he jumped into the opening.

Unable to slow his descent into the unknown, Richard sped down the long, blood-slick chute before entering open space. The headlamp beam moved across rough, arched stone during his plummet. The fall seemed to go on forever. If his landing wasn't a soft one at the very least he'd suffer a broken bone or two. He made contact with something, and though not particularly soft, it was far from solid. Clattering of things unseen accompanied his bruise-battered slide to the ground. When he slid to a halt, he was surprised, that except for a few aches and pains, he was uninjured. He roamed the light around with a turn of his head. Tall textured walls that appeared to be made of stone blocks, but from past observations since aboard the ship Richard was certain were metal, rose to form an arched roof. Random patches of luminescent green growth adhered to the walls cast a ghostly green pallor on the surroundings. Large metal collars attached to chains formed with links four times the size of his hand, hung ominously from the ceiling. Mustard-coloured stains ran from yard-tall arched openings set high in the corridor wall and dribbled down to the stagnant water covering the passage floor. Tips of slime-covered rocks poked above the water either side of the passage. A suggestion of a larger room at the tunnel's end and another large, dark opening on the far side, hinted at the possible vastness of the subterranean world he'd fallen into. The whole effect was of a medieval dungeon or torture chamber, and equally uninviting.

He turned his attention to what had helped cushion his fall, and though surprised, he felt no astonishment on discovering he rested upon a pile of large bones, so many they formed a gruesome skeletal pyramid below the chute. Eyeless sockets in the many huge, pale skulls littering the pile and the ground below seemed to stare at him mockingly for entering their world and the promise of a similar fate. His light picked out one fresher than the others; if the skin and flesh covering it was an indication of its age. Richard remembered the bones the small creatures had been dragging over to the trapdoor he'd jumped through, and knew where their final resting place would be. He climbed to his feet and moved unsteadily across the bone layers to be clear of the hole when the latest bone additions arrived.

Astounded by Richard's escape, Henry, Theo and Max focused their attention on the Web monster that had chased him into the room and the group of female aliens.

The Web creature landed in the space its quarry had swiftly vacated, and with a squeal of claws across metal, it skidded a short distance into the blood puddle. So intent had it been on its prey, it had failed to see the threat in the room. It saw it now.

Still gripping the bones each of them held, the smaller aliens casually stared at the creature, as if waiting to see what it would do.

The Web monster kept its eyes focused on the smaller creatures and sniffed the air. Though the creatures were of small stature and appeared un-formidable, the Web monster recognized the underlying threat the creatures radiated. It wasn't a warning it would ignore. The size of their last victim was an indication killing was something they were very good at. It would normally have stayed clear of another creature's domain, but hunger had forced it to act rashly. Unable to resist the tantalizing aroma flooding its senses, it slowly lapped up some of the blood from the floor as it backed away, and with a piercing shriek, it leapt into the chute.

The three human observers, slightly overwhelmed by recent events, watched the small aliens drag the bones over to the trapdoor and drop them inside. After one of them had closed it, they reformed into the larger version of itself and left the room via the door Richard and the Web monster had appeared through a few moments earlier.

Only when they were certain the female alien had gone, did the three men climb down from the pod.

"Though gruesome to witness, the way that female alien disintegrated into... well, whatever it did change into, and then reform again into smaller versions of itself, was amazing," stated Theo. "How could it do that?"

"However fascinating it is, alien physiology is not something we should dwell on right at this moment," said Henry. "We only need to know it's dangerous and to be avoided; there's no way we could guard against an attack like that."

Max looked at the trapdoor. "If Richard survived the fall, it's unlikely he'll survive an attack from that cobwebby thing that followed him down."

"There's nothing we can do to help him, we have our own problems." Henry gazed at the door the alien had exited through and then around the room. "Now where do we go?"

Theo pointed at the door through which the female alien had entered. "We have no other choice. We go that way."

The piercing shriek filtering down the chute into the bone chamber sent a shiver of fear down Richard's spine—not a rare occurrence since setting foot aboard the hellish ship. Claws scraping against the chute's metal sides signalled the fast approach of the Web monster and with its arrival, his imminent death. With no time to run before the creature appeared, he frantically scanned the area for a place to hide. He spied only one and raced across the shifting bones.

The Web monster scanned the gloomy room when it dropped from the chute. It had lived all its life trapped inside the ship and had chosen the vents as its preferred domain, where its eyesight had become well adjusted to the darkness. It twisted its body so its feet landed on the bone pile. Halfway down its slide to the bottom, it leapt onto firmer ground and searched for its prey. Though it detected no sign of the creature it hunted, it did detect an escape route it might have taken; however, it had also detected other creatures, too many for him to successfully fight and win, and they were on the move. But it still had a little time. It twisted its head to glance at the bones dropping from the hole and moved away, its wispy webs floating and wavering when it moved across the room.



It followed the scent of fresh blood to the large head. It leapt on top and ripped off a chunk of flesh, which it quickly devoured. While it chewed, it glanced along the waterlogged tunnel. A swarm of the animals Theo had named space rats, splashed through the putrid water and surged toward the appetizing scent of the freshly arrived meal the Web monster currently feasted upon. It ripped off another piece of flesh and with the blood dripping meat dangling from its jaws, leapt from the head and raced along the bones toward the oncoming wave of teeth and claws. Shortly before the two species collided, it leapt for the wall, scrambled up to a small arched opening and disappeared inside.

Though muffled by the gruesome walls of his hiding place, Richard had heard the creature arrive and move across the bone pile directly to his place of concealment. Fear shook his body so much he was certain he'd given away his position. The giant head had been his only source of refuge. He'd pried its dead mouth open and against all his senses screaming what a bad idea it was, he had squeezed between its lips and teeth, curled up on its moist, fetid tongue and pulled the mouth closed. He'd only just managed to stifle a scream of terror when the Web monster landed on the head and wobbled him from side to side. The gruesome sounds of the monster feasting on flesh only a handbreadth away, had almost been more than he could endure, he was certain it knew he was inside and was toying with its food, like a cat with a mouse. Richard had formed a rash plan. He'd quickly open the mouth, leap out, grab a bone and strike the monster around the head before it recovered from the surprise of his appearance. It had to be better than waiting for the monster to eat its way through to him. Just when he conquered his fear to a level where he could force his body to enact the rash plan, events took that opportunity away from him. When the creature leapt from the head, it disturbed its tenuous perch on the side of the bone pile and down it rolled. Trapped inside, Richard tumbled around and around like a piece of clothing in a tumble dryer.

The head bounced and rolled until it came to an abrupt halt against one of the many sections of its brethren's skull fragments littering the floor. Richard listened. He wasn't sure if the Web monster had gone or waited for him to crawl out so it could attack.

With insufficient food to feed them all, the space rats raced along the tunnel and surged over the head in desperation to claim part of the spoils. Only the quickest or strongest would succeed. As soon as one had bitten off a morsel of flesh, it leapt aside. Others, not as quick or strong as some of the pack, waited around the perimeter and seized upon the opportunity of a taste by chasing and attacking those who'd been successful. Others, knowing neither opportunity would bring them a meal, attacked other rats that had momentarily dropped their guard in the rush to feed. As soon as blood was shed the unfortunate vermin stood little chance. Now fair game, it was set upon by those around it. Though the meat of their brethren was not as succulent as that cloaking the large skull, it was better than no meat at all.

Though Richard heard the terrifying shrieks, cries and the scrape of teeth and claws on bone, and knew it was more bad news, he was unaware of its cause, only that there were a lot of them.

When one of the large rats feeding on the giant's juicy lips squeezed its head between the giant's jaws and looked at him, Richard recognized the vicious space rat species and the danger it and its kind threatened. The rodent let out a surprised, but decidedly pleased, shriek at the unexpected feast, and wormed its body further inside to reach it. Richard dug his fingers into the giant's top gums and yanked down hard. Crushed by the large teeth, blood exploded from the rat's trapped body. While death throes shook the dying rodent, it was dragged out by its bloodthirsty comrades and quickly consumed.

Richard, rocked about from the rodents' frantic feeding on the skull was now more terrified than before, something he thought impossible a few moments before. At least there had been a slim chance of defeating the single Web monster. The hoard outside fighting over the limited amount of flesh on offer was impossible for him to defeat. Soon they would find and devour him one painful bite at a time, and there was nothing he could do to prevent it.

Unexpectedly, the space rats terrifying shrieks and cries ceased and were replaced by gloom-filled silence, which held malevolence almost as frightening as the noise of the feeding.

As one, the rodents froze to form a macabre statue of bloodstained fur, teeth and claws. A rattle of chains focused their yellow eyes on the large, pale form that had appeared in the tall, arched opening at the far side of the room the passage led to. It bellowed and rushed forward. Stagnant water sprayed like a fountain as each large, bare foot slammed into the water. While most of the rats abandoned the fight for food, some seized the chance to grab a quick bite before joining the others in a panicked dash to be free of the tunnel before the creature blocked it. Not all made it.

Rats were snatched from the walls and water by the giant's huge shovel-like hands and, in a continuous flowing motion, fed into its mouth and chewed with teeth the size of tombstones. Bones crunched, blood and gore sprayed as it shoved in one rat after another in an attempt to satisfy its vast hunger. Some rats, believing they'd escaped the murderous clutches by running along the walls past the giant, found themselves struck by the chain that whipped out from the metal collar around the giant's neck with exacting vengeance. They were swiftly plucked from the air and sped into the reach of the giant, who swiftly crammed them into monstrous jaws.

Richard cautiously parted the teeth and gazed out at the titanic creature lit by patches of florescent green slime and watched it gobble down as many of the rodents as it could seize in its huge hands. It was his chance to escape.

Head first, Richard slithered between the teeth, over shreds of ripped and bite-scared lips that left him smothered with purple blood, and dropped onto the bone pile. He crawled over to the wall and hid behind the corner of the tunnel. After he'd caught his breath and marginally calmed his nerves, he peered around the edge. The large creature, whose massive bulk practically filled the tunnel, had stopped. It was busy scooping up any rats that tried to escape past it. Hardly any reached the freedom they desperately sought.

Though the giant had a nose and a mouth, presently choked with wriggling vermin, blood, gore and bones that crunched hideously with every chew of its large jaws to reduce the vermin into swallowable chunks, its eyes were missing. Sockets

existed, but they were empty of the eyes that'd once dwelt there. From the evidence of the grotesque, scarred skin around the orb-less sockets, it seemed they'd been gouged out with something blunt, and the wielder of said instrument either lacked the necessary surgical skill to perform the surgery with finesse or the inclination to care how much pain, suffering and disfigurement it caused the patient. In either case, the giant would have probably been an unwilling participant. Except for a conveniently placed wrap of cloth concealing the giant's no doubt huge dangling dick, its body was bare. Tree trunk thick arms and legs, joined to a chest the size of a family car, made the huge monster a formidable opponent, and from the old scars covering its grotesque muscle-bound skin, one that had experienced much suffering.

Richard briefly wondered who its tormentor had been. A glance at the many collars attached to chains hung from the ceiling and the piles of bones long stripped of flesh littered below each gave evidence it hadn't been the only unfortunate creature to have suffered in this dank, dungeonesque cavern.

When some of the surviving frantic space rodents realized to try and pass the huge creature would bring them only death, they turned tail to head back into the bone chamber. The rat-ravenous giant chased the fleeing food.

Richard sighed. Just for once he'd like things to go his way. He snatched a bone at random to use as a weapon from amongst the wide selection on offer and climbed to his feet when the rats rushed into the chamber. Though most ignored him, some gave him a glancing look while they rushed to find a place to hide. One, perhaps having failed to grab a bite to eat earlier, swung in his direction, and with a snarl and bared teeth, it leapt at the new food source.

Richard swung the bone club. The rat squealed and flew across the room. Its skull popped when it struck the wall. The scent of blood was too much for some rodents to resist, and they pounced on the bleeding carcass.

Corpseteeth entered, (Richard thought it a fitting name and was certain Theo would agree) its feet crushing bone wherever they landed. Ignoring the rats momentarily, Corpseteeth picked up the giant's head, which seemed not so big in its huge hands, and used its teeth to peel off every scrap of flesh remaining on the rat feasted skull. When the blood staining the skull had been licked clean, the giant gripped it with thick fingers and twisted. The splintered crack of bone echoed around the cavern when the skull parted. The slurp of wet brain sliding from the skull into Corpseteeth's mouth like a large oyster, was as nauseating as it was gruesome. The following smack of contented lips identified the giant's enjoyment of the tasty delicacy.

While Corpseteeth's tongue probed and lapped up every morsel of brain clinging to the skull cavity, Richard grasped his chance to slip away. Noisy slurps accompanied his cautious skulk around the corner. Fearful of making too much noise wading through the water, he utilized the rough rocks littering the edges of the passage as stepping stones, and nearly slipped more than once.

Bone crunched in the bone chamber.

Richard glanced back. Corpseteeth was on the move. Bones were thrown aside in its search for the rats hiding amongst them. Shrieks and squeals of those discovered, soon fell silent when introduced to the giant's mouth and teeth. A couple of vermin, either luckier or of higher intelligence than their brethren,

managed to slip past the ravenous monolith and fled along the tunnel. Richard achieved a stance with the club to fight them if needed. It wasn't. The frightened rats barely registered his presence when they fled back to the safety of whatever dark void they had crawled out from. Richard quickly followed.

The room he entered at the end of the tunnel was larger than he'd expected. Though he picked out many dark openings in the gloom ridden walls, both low and high, their appearances were of such a foreboding nature that all failed to entice him to venture inside.

A glimpse back at the bone chamber revealed Corpseteeth's hunt continued. Richard ran the length of the room. He hoped his noisy splashing through the knee-high water didn't attract the attention of the giant. With his disturbance of the stagnant sewer water and whatever squishy substance his feet sank into with every step, a fresh plume of vile stench rose into the air to compete with the already foul odour choking the room and his lungs. When he neared the end of the chamber, he tripped on something hidden beneath the filthy water and just managed to close his mouth before he slipped beneath. He exploded from the surface and climbed to his feet covered in foul sludge that dripped and oozed over his body. After shaking the disgusting lumps from his hands, he used far from clean fingers to scrape the foulness from his face and eyes, and shook his head vigorously to dislodge more. He glanced down at his expensive cold weather gear, now stained in brown sludge. It was ruined. He thought he would need to bathe for a week to be rid of the reek adhered to his skin.

Exhausted, Richard placed hands on his knees and gulped air into his lungs. Something he immediately regretted. He gagged from the stench so foul and thick he could taste it. He spat a few times in an attempt to remove the stink cloying his mouth, but soon realized it was a lost cause. He needed to get out of this subterranean hellhole. He looked over at the arched opening, which had been the reason for his dash across the room. The ground sloped out of the water and levelled off a few yards before the opening. When he switched on his light and shone it into the dark recess, he was dismayed to see a rusty portcullis barring his escape. He peered through the gaps too small for him to squeeze through. A door and the control to open it was tantalizingly out of his reach a short distance from the barrier—more bad news to add to his already large collection. He walked up to it. His frustrated shaking of the portcullis rattled the metal obstruction in its frame and dislodged flakes of rust.

Dismayed, he turned and desperately scanned the room for an exit. He saw nothing except more bad luck. Corpseteeth stepped out of the passage. Its eyeless sockets stared straight at him.

Though Corpseteeth was unable to see what had caused the noise, his acute hearing had heard the rattle of metal that indicated something else was in his domain. Certain whatever form it took it would be edible, he stepped out of the tunnel and approached the new source of food.

When the mass of scarred muscle and bone crushing teeth rushed at him, fear once again gripped Richard. With no escape, he sidled along the portcullis and pressed his shaking body into the corner.

As if sensing the end of the room, Corpseteeth slowed and left trails of slimy stagnant water upon the sloped stone when it stepped from the water and crossed

to the portcullis. It placed a hand on the rusty barrier and moved its massive head from side to side in an attempt to sniff out its prey.

Richard stared at the creature's sightless gaze, wondering how he'd pinpointed his position so easily without any vision. He assumed Corpseteeth hunted by smell and sound. He trembled with fright when the large head moved down until it was only inches away from him. Corpseteeth sniffed. Praying the monster couldn't smell fear, because he was certain he reeked of it, Richard held his breath. The beating of his heart sounded so loud he was sure Corpseteeth would hear it and after plucking him up in one of its huge hands he would be stuffed into its mouth and chewed. He was surprised when the head moved away. He glanced down at his stained clothes. The stench that covered him must have acted as camouflage; he smelt like everything else in the room, foul and rank.

When Corpseteeth turned around and focused its remaining senses into the room, the chain hanging from its neck collar swung out and rattled along the portcullis. Richard's sense of self preservation took over. Even before he realized what he was doing, he'd grabbed the end of the chain and secured it around one of the portcullis's lowest bars with a simple knot. His hand dived into his pocket, pulled out the small breath-fresh aerosol, and in a girlish underarm movement, he threw it across the room. Though he regretted its loss, smelling like he did, he doubted any kissing moments were likely to occur in the foreseeable future.

Corpseteeth jerked its head at the sound of the badly thrown distraction splashing into the murky water. Two large strides away from the portcullis yanked the chain taut. He turned to the side, grabbed the chain with a massive hand and tugged. The portcullis shook. The giant pulled again and strained with the effort. The ancient metal groaned and bulged from creature's immense strength.

Richard gazed at the section of bending barrier. The bottom was almost free of the ground. A little more and he'd be able to squeeze underneath.

Corpseteeth gripped the chain with both hands and pulled harder. Metal shrieked when the strong bars succumbed to the increased pressure.

Richard focused on the gap being formed at the bottom. Just a little more. The chain began to unravel. His knot tying skills, of which he had none, had failed him.

Corpseteeth had heard and felt the chain freeing its hold on the portcullis and continued straining against the metal leash.

Richard dropped to the floor and head first wiggled through the gap. His jacket snagged on a spike and ripped. Richard froze when Corpseteeth stared straight at him and ceased his tugging on the chain. Though the giant had no idea what had caused the unusual sound, he pounced.

Corpseteeth's lunge informed Richard his statuesque posture had failed. His feet frantically sought a footing on the slippery ground. His arms found leverage on the portcullis and dragged him through. Richard's muck-stained boots disappeared under the gap. Corpseteeth slammed against the metal barrier, showering Richard in rusty flakes. To avoid the groping arm thrust through one of the gaps, Richard pushed himself away until the door halted his progress. Safe from its reach, he caught his breath as the adrenalin coursing through his body subsided.

Scared as he was, Richard realized the monetary potential of his current situation. He climbed to his feet and fished the camera from the stolen backpack. He wiped off the lumps of filth that had seeped into the bag as best as he could and clicked off a few photographs of the huge beast and a couple of the room. They would furnish evidence for the embellished story he would tell of his escape from the giant monster.

Each click of the camera increased Corpseteeth's annoyance. He slammed the portcullis with a fist so hard Richard thought it would be knocked from its frame. Fearful its next blow might actually bring about that very thing, he climbed to his feet and opened the door. With a hesitant rust-grinding screech, the four segments separated and swung back into the walls. With eyes still focused on the blind giant, Richard backed through the opening.

Corpseteeth roared in frustration when the door closed with a resounding metallic clash.

Richard's relief at having yet again escaped a grisly death was abruptly extinguished when he turned and saw the huge monstrous face staring at him.

## **Chapter 9**

### **Alien Landscape.**

AS IT WAS CURRENTLY impossible for Theo, Max and Henry to return to the engine room due to the ship's dangerous occupants blocking the only known route, their only option was to risk pushing forward. Even if that meant going through the same door through which the alien had recently made its appearance.

The door slid open.

What seemed to be daylight seeped through the widening crack and bathed the three anxious men in its bright light. They stepped through and discovered the source of the light. It emitted from rows of panels that stretched the full length of the room and lit up a landscape that could only be described as alien. The strange vista stretched out for a distance of at least half a mile and half that wide. A transparent wall surrounded the metal platform they stood on.

Before them, a transparent door led to a metal ramp sloping down to a stone path that stretched to the columned entrance of the huge construction filling the far side of the colossal cavern. The entrance, too far away and shrouded in darkness, revealed no hint of what lay within. The three gloom-ridden portals had seemingly been carved from rough rock and, stretched above the entrance one hundred yards high. The dark grey-toned edifice had the look of a gigantic engine part or generator that grew out of the rock surrounding its base and parts of the cavern floor. The main cylindrical body of the architectural oddity stood atop a base with tall, sloped sides. Thick ribs of the same material reached from the rock base and stretched over the top as if to anchor it to the ground. At the far end of the cylindrical body, a wide neck stretched out into a bone-like construction with the front fixed against the far wall, which they thought might be the outer hull. Two window openings, one in each of the oval globe endings, overlooked the

cavern. Other openings of various sizes and shapes set in the sides of the building were filled with an unwelcoming blackness.

The path leading from the platform they occupied to the colossal edifice, passed through one of the tunnels formed in the trunk of a giant tree that grew horizontally across the room. Grasses covered the top and vines hung down its sides. On the far side of the tree, the path crossed a bridge that spanned the wide river surrounding the huge building. A tower rose from the far side of the bridge.

Large, thorny trees standing five yards high, bushes, and tall dark trees that dotted the ground and hills of rock covering this side of the river all had the appearance of being a long time dead. They stood like spooky sentinels.

“To say I’m surprised would be an understatement,” stated Henry.

Theo’s eyes swept over the landscape. “Every time we come across something new, I’m constantly amazed how a ship this size could ever be built, let alone move through space.”

“Just think of the advancements humans could achieve if we could learn even a fraction of this ship’s technology and method of construction,” said Max.

“Whatever we learn will be to no avail if we can’t find a way out,” said Henry.

Theo broke the silence that had fallen as the three men surveyed the astounding view. “So, do we go and investigate that building, or turn back?”

Henry’s eyes followed the path to the ominous openings. “Going back isn’t an option. Not yet, anyway. If we can’t find another route to the engine room that bypasses the cathedral chamber, we’ll need weapons to fight off the creatures that dwell there.” He pointed at the alien structure. “In there we might find the very weapons we need.” He opened the door and led them down the path.

They gazed up at the huge tree that had become larger with every step toward it. It wasn’t a single tree as it appeared from a distance, but thousands of yard-thick vines entwined together. Dark gaps between the growths hinted some areas might be hollow. The shuffling sounds and creaks of interior limbs drifted out of the openings, causing them to imagine things moving about inside. They quickly passed beneath and continued along the path.

A few steps later, Max glanced up at the lights. “Is it just me, or is it getting darker?”

Theo had also noticed the fading light and glanced nervously around at the landscape fast being swathed in shadow.

A worried frown creased Henry’s brow. “Night is coming.”

Theo looked at him. “I wish you’d said that in a slightly less ominous tone.”

Henry smiled and switched on his flashlight.

Max and Theo did likewise.

Jane, Lucy and Jack rushed along the corridor and paused at the latest door that blocked their progress. Hesitantly, Jane pressed the door control. All were surprised when light flooded through the opening. They entered, crossed to the large panoramic window stretching almost the full width of the wide room, and gazed down at the vista spread out far below.

Jack, worried the Clicker monster was still in pursuit, knew they couldn’t linger for long. He tore his surprised gaze away from the amazing landscape, stepped back from the viewing window and cast a look around the room. An opening each

side led to two walkways set high above the landscape. Both led to a bridge that reached across the void to connect with the huge structure that dominated the far end of the impossibly large room.

“What is that place?” said Jane, voicing her astonished thoughts at the sight of the strange gargantuan edifice.

“Maybe it's where the crew lives.” Jack pointed to the curved, bone-like structure. “That thing on top might be the control center.” He turned when the door they had entered through automatically closed. He returned his gaze to the alien landscape and pointed to the walkway on the right jutting out from the side of the ship. “That path connects with the building and might lead to the control room. If it does, we might be able to activate all of the doors preventing us from returning to the engine room. If the others have reached this far, I think they'll come to the same conclusion, so perhaps we'll meet up with them inside.”

Jane agreed. “Well, we can't go back, so it's as good plan as any.”

Lucy stared at the strange building at the far side of the alien landscape and wondered what horrors lay inside waiting for them. “I'm now regretting not listening to Henry when he voiced his doubts that entering this alien vessel would be a good idea. We should never have come aboard.”

Jack placed a hand gently on her shoulder. “Hindsight is a wonderful thing, but we're here now and must make sure we survive to tell the tale.” He led them onto the high walkway.

A quarter of the way across, Lucy glanced up at the fading lights. “It's getting darker.”

“Perhaps it's a cycle to reflect the passing of night and day, like in the forest room,” Jane suggested.

“But we only left there a short while ago and the lights had just come on. If those lights are in sync with these, it's a short cycle,” said Lucy.

Before they could ponder the puzzle further, they were distracted by three white lights that appeared below.

Lucy placed her hands on the balustrade and peered at the three figures. “It's Henry, Theo and Max.”

They all stared at the tiny figures on the path below.

Lucy shouted out Henry's name. The three men turned, looked up at them and waved. Henry shouted something, but he was too far away for them to understand.

“Try contacting them with the walkie-talkie,” Jack suggested.

Jane grabbed the device from her pocket and pressed the talk button. “Henry, can you hear me?”

They saw Henry reach into a pocket.

Lucy smiled. “He heard.”

Henry's voice crackled from the walkie-talkie. “I'm so relieved you three are okay. Over.”

“As are we you. We're heading into that giant building. Jack thinks the curved structure on top might be the control room. We might be able to open the doors so we can get off the ship. Over.”

“The control room is our destination also, so we'll meet up inside. Keep a look out for anything to use as a weapon. Over.”



Before Jane could reply, hellish screeches rang out. They looked down. Red eyes appeared at the entrances in the large trunk-formation.

“The darkness summons the night prowlers,” said Jack.

The head of a dark form with bright, glowing eyes appeared at one of the openings and turned its head toward the three intruders that had entered their domain. Its snarl revealed glowing teeth that matched the brightness of its red eyes. It slunk out of the opening and speedily climbed down the side of the tree. Others of its kind crawled out from the many openings to join the first on the ground. All rushed toward the three strangers.

Jane screamed into the walkie-talkie. “Run, Henry. Run!”

The three men ran.

From their high vantage point, the worried onlookers followed their friends sprint for the bridge. The flashlight beams jerked erratically during their hurried flight. They switched on their own lights when the darkness grew in intensity and swept the beams over more creatures skulking from gaps in the tree and those already on the path pursuing the fleeing men. The creatures' bodies were cloaks of wraithlike darkness. It was only their bright eyes and teeth that gave away their positions. It was as if they watched the shadows of invisible monsters rather than actual physical life-forms. When their flashlight beams fell on one it turned them translucent; their skeletons and organs could clearly be seen within. The Wraith creatures moved upright in a hunched-over stance on thin legs jointed in reverse to humans.

When the sound of machinery attracted their attention, Jane, Lucy and Jack dragged their gaze away from the creatures. The nearside of the bridge started to rise.

“That's not good,” said Jack. “I wonder what triggered it.”

“Perhaps it's on a time cycle like the lights, to stop the monsters from getting across,” suggested Jane, “but what worries me more is if Henry, Theo and Max will reach it in time.”

Theo cursed when the bridge started to rise. A glance behind at the horrifying Wraiths highlighted in his flashlight brought forth another curse. He noticed Henry lagging behind and breathing heavily.

Henry noticed Theo's concerned look. “Don't wait for me,” he puffed.

A few long strides and a small leap carried Theo onto the bridge. Max leapt on a few moments later. They turned. Henry was a short distance away and the scary wraithlike creatures were catching up fast. The rising angle of the bridge caused them to lie down and grip the edge to prevent them from sliding to the bottom.

“Hurry, Henry, you can make it,” encouraged Max. “Grab the edge and we'll pull you up.”

Henry looked at the edge of the bridge now level with his chest, and worried if his old, tired body could make the leap. The sounds of the monsters drawing closer spurred him on. The bridge was head height when he reached the edge of the path, causing him to be less confident he could make it. To free both his hands, he threw the flashlight over the lip of the bridge and leapt into the air. His fingers grabbed at the bridge edge, they slipped. Theo and Max each grasped one of his arms.

“We have you, Henry,” said Theo, his voice strained from supporting the old man's weight.

A shriek rang out.

Henry twisted his head. Though most of the Wraiths skidded to a halt and backed away from the river, one leapt with its claws stretched out. “Pull me up!” he screamed.

Theo and Max were not in the best position on the sloping bridge to get the leverage needed to haul Henry to safety quickly. They strained with his weight.

Henry kicked out at the creature, striking a blow to its head. It shrieked and lashed out at him. A claw ripped through his trouser leg. Something leapt from the river, spraying Henry with cold, viscous, briny water. The cold liquid felt like needles pricking his skin. Believing the Wraith's claws had grasped him, Henry screamed and glanced behind. A gaping jaw filled with long jagged teeth and its beckoning throat was all Henry glimpsed of the monster that had burst from the water. He pulled his legs up as the massive jaws closed around the Wraith's chest. Blood sprayed him when the creature was bitten in two. When the river monster dropped back into the water with half of the creature in its jaws, a second river monster shot from the water to claim the half falling through the air. Henry placed a foot on its snout and pushed himself onto the bridge. Caught unawares by Henry's sudden boost, Theo, Max and Henry slid down the bridge, rolled across the ground and lay there panting.

The Wraiths on land howled and screeched when the river monsters appeared, but when they splashed back into the river, the closest Wraiths darted forward and scooped up the water from the wave of stagnant water thrown up.

A river monster erupted from the river and slipped its jaws around a Wraith that had ventured too close to the water's edge. A Wraith, that had witnessed Henry's escape, saw its chance to catch those that had fled from them. It rushed forward. Its powerful legs sprung it into the air as the river monster's jaws snapped shut on its prize. Using the monster's snout as a stepping-stone, the Wraith launched itself onto the bridge and tumbled down its length.

Theo saw the creature and shouted out a warning. Henry, too tired to move, lay there and watched it tumble down the bridge. Theo grabbed his knife and when the Wraith rolled across the ground toward Henry, he leapt onto it and frantically stabbed the knife repeatedly into its chest. Theo was sprayed with the blood spurting from the creature's many wounds. The creature shrieked and struggled, knocking Theo to the ground. It turned onto its belly, climbed unsteadily to its feet and stared at its attacker. Its snarl revealed its bright, wicked teeth. It took a step nearer and fell forward. Theo stepped back when it crashed to the ground.

Max, surprised by Theo's sudden and frenzied attack, stared at the creature. “Is it dead?”

Theo stepped forward and nudged the Wraith with a foot. There was no response. “It's dead.” He wiped the dark blood from the knife on a sleeve and slipped it into its sheath.

Jane, Lucy and Jack had gasped in horror at the events that had just played out and, just when they thought it was over and the men were safe, a

Wraith leapt onto the bridge and—like the three men—disappeared from their view behind the raised bridge.

“Do you think they’re okay?” Lucy asked.

Jane was in the process of finding out. She spoke into the walkie-talkie anxiously. “Henry, Theo, Max. Are you all okay?”

Still out of breath, Henry fished the walkie-talkie from his pocket and passed it to Max.

“Yes, Jane, we’re all okay. The old man’s a bit short of breath, but he’ll survive, and Theo’s covered in blood from the creature he just killed, but apart from that we’re fine. Over.”

Jane sighed with relief. “That’s great news, Max. We’ll see you inside. Over.”

“Ten-four.” Max pocketed the communication device and looked at Henry’s pale complexion. “Are you okay? You’re not going to have a heart attack or something?”

Henry shook his head. “I’m fine. My body’s beginning to realize I’m not as young and fit as my brain believes I am.”

After Max and Theo helped Henry to stand, they moved to the side of the bridge where they could observe the Wraiths moving about on the far bank.

“We had a lucky escape,” said Max. “If Jane hadn’t warned us when she did, we might not have made it to the bridge in time.”

Henry passed Theo his handkerchief.

Theo wiped the blood from his face and hands as best he could while he studied the Wraith that stared back at him from the opposite side of the river. Its long, almost mist-like, skeletal fingers and feet were tipped with long curved claws. Its head was an indistinct shape and seemed to waver and shimmer with its ghostly movements, as if a strong wind would cause it to dissipate like a cloud of smoke. “They seem just as ferocious as every other creature we’ve met aboard this ship.”

“The crew must have been a tough bunch to be able to handle all the horrors onboard,” commented Max, fascinated as much as he was terrified by the unusual ghostlike creatures.

“Or well armed,” said Henry.

Theo threw the blood-soaked hankie into the river.

A river monster appeared out of the murky depths and swallowed the bloodied piece of cloth. Its movements through the green tainted water stirred up a strong stagnant stench. Another river monster swam by with its eyes fixed upon them. They glimpsed other large dark shapes of things unrecognizable below the surface.

Max shivered involuntarily. “I wouldn’t fancy falling in there.”

Theo nodded his agreement and indicated his blood stained clothing. “I’d like to wash this crap off, as I’m sure its scent will attract other creatures, but I’ll wait until I find water that’s not full of things eager to eat me.”

Henry turned his back on the river and gazed up at the towering edifice a short distance away. “The river seems to be a moat.”

“With those creatures roaming about, I can see why they’d need one,” said Theo.

Max turned his attention to the tower. Two massive pistons reached out from the top to connect to top of the bridge now in the raised position. “If the water’s a moat, then that’s a drawbridge!”

“To keep the creatures from crossing,” Henry stated. “Though why they'd bring creatures aboard that they needed to protect themselves against is another mystery.”

“This ship gets stranger with every new discovery,” said Theo.

Henry retrieved his flashlight and was relieved to find it still worked. “Let's keep moving. Though I've no idea what we'll find inside, I'm certain not all of it will be good. Stay quiet, alert and keep a lookout for anything we can use as weapons.”

“Problem is, Henry,” said Max, “Most of the creatures we've seen are much bigger than us, hence, I assume, the crew will be also. Any weapons we find will be to their scale and probably too unwieldy for us to use or control.”

“It's something we can ponder if we find anything. I'm not expecting to find shotguns or laser pistols, though if we do, perhaps two of us can use it together if it's too big. A knife is a knife whatever its size, even if we have to fix it to something to make a spear. We're brainy people, we'll think of something. Theo just killed one with a small knife, so I'm sure we'll manage.”

“Or die trying,” sighed Theo. He followed Max and Henry.

They approached the building and cautiously entered through the middle opening.

Though it was too dark to see the three men clearly, their lights allowed Jane, Lucy and Jack to follow their progress from the bridge to the entrance of the building until they disappeared inside.

Jane slipped the walkie-talkie into a pocket. “I hope our journey's less eventful.”

“I'm sure it will be.” Jack glanced over the edge of the balcony. The ground was a long way below. “The creatures can't reach us up here.”

Howls and shrieks filled the huge room from the swarms of Wraiths roaming the landscape like flocking birds. They split off into groups and circled the thorny trees a few times before heading over to the river. With obvious caution, they scrambled down the short bank, drank the water and rushed away. Those that had visited the river hurried back to the trees and emptied the mouth-stored water into bowl formations growing around the trunks.

Lucy was astonished by the creatures' behaviour. “They're watering the trees.”

When a sufficient amount of water had been deposited, blue blooms sprouted from the tips of the branches. The more water fed the trees, the larger the blooms became.

Jack aimed his gaze at the commotion coming from the moat.

Three of the large amphibious monsters exploded from the water. Each snatched one of the water-collecting Wraiths in its jaws before disappearing beneath the surface with their prize. Though those closest to the attack jumped out of harm's way, the remainder continued to collect water. The watering of the trees and the attacks that saw nine more of their kind become food for the river monsters continued for ten minutes.

The three astonished onlookers stared down at the Wraiths positioned around the trees staring up at the blue blooms, which had swelled to the size of a football, too high for them to reach. An excited murmur spread through the cavern when the blooms glowed. The Wraiths gazes bathed in blue light focused on an area high on the thick trunk. A tendril snaked out and grew into an orange elongated tube

about nine inches long, and then pulsed brightly. The protruding thorns adorning the trunk retracted. Shrieks and scuffling broke out from each individual group that ended with one of their number shoved toward the tree.

It was with nervous apprehension the forced volunteers approached the trees.

Jane, Lucy and Jack, captivated by the Wraiths' excited behaviour, focused on the group nearest them.

The lone creature paused a short distance from the tree and turned its head to gaze around at the surrounding horde. Ferocious snarls and clawed talons swiped the air to indicate what would happen if it failed in the purpose it had been chosen to perform. Accepting its fate, it leapt onto the trunk and climbed up to the bright lure. When it was within reach of its mouth, it hesitantly gripped the bloom in its jaws and sucked out the orange substance. Its eyes glazed over and its expression changed to one of euphoria. The shrivelled tendril snapped back. The blue blooms glow intensified into an almost white light, eliciting a crescendo of excited shrieks that filled the cavernous space. Sharp thorns shot out from the tree to pierce the unwilling volunteer's body. The spikes expanded and contracted with a sucking sound as they siphoned every drop of fluid from the body of the sacrificed creature. When the spikes retracted to release its hold on the unfortunate creature's corpse, its dry husk flopped to the ground.

Like the popping of champagne corks, the blue blooms ejected from the bush. Their trajectories were eagerly tracked by the waiting creatures. The blooms exploded in midair to shower the Wraiths with hundreds of tennis-ball sized globes of blue substance. Some were plucked from the air, others snatched from the ground. All were eagerly devoured. As each consumed its prize, its body glowed with a blue light, outlining its internal bones, blood vessels and organs and then amazingly they swelled as flesh grew on their bodies and limbs. After a few moments their body glow faded. Once the feeding frenzy was over, the creatures, no longer with the appearance of wraiths, relaxed and wandered around the cavern, nuzzling and sniffing others of their kind. Some mated, others played and some fought.

Jane exhaled loudly. "Wow! That was without doubt one of the most amazing spectacles I've ever witnessed."

Lucy was in total agreement. "On Earth we have species of plants, animals and insects that depend on each other for survival, but nothing to rival the beneficial relationship we just observed."

"It's a possibility these creatures are guard dogs to protect whatever is inside the building against the monsters we encountered in the rest of the spaceship, or they might be food for the crew, much like cows, sheep and pigs are for us," said Jack. "It would make sense to have a self-replenishing live food stock if the crew travelled vast distances for a prolonged time."

Jane stared at the intermingling creatures. "Yes, but our livestock isn't vicious and they don't have claws."

Jack shrugged. "Maybe the crew enjoys the thrill of the hunt."

"A crew which we've yet to set eyes upon," reminded Lucy.

Jack glanced over at the building across the moat. "That might soon change."

He led them along the walkway.

"I wonder where Eli and Richard are," said Lucy.

Jack remembered Eli's scream shortly before they fled into the forest room. That Eli was almost certainly dead was a realization he kept to himself. Though Richard's fate was unknown, he thought it likely the man would survive; people like him normally did. "Hopefully we'll meet up with them soon. They might even be inside that building."

Jane shot him a doubtful look, but kept quiet. Unvoiced, her concern might be proved wrong.

They continued along the walkway until they reached the door at its end. It slid open with a push of a button to reveal a corridor. After a cautious look to check it was free of monsters, they entered and the door slid shut behind them.

The Mimic faded into view when the three strangers had disappeared through the entrance. It was pleased. Things were going according to plan and they were heading in the right direction. She'd been observing the new arrivals, but the noises they made were unintelligible. Though she could repeat their sounds with ease, she didn't know their meaning. If she was to escape from her prison, it was important she understood them, which is why they'd been herded to the front of the ship. Soon she would know everything she needed to. She morphed into a Wraith, scrambled up the side of the construction, moved toward an opening in its elevation and disappeared inside.

## **Chapter 10**

### **Tombs.**

RICHARD GASPED AND STAGGERD back so abruptly he tripped to the floor. The ghastly, monstrous face, whose gaping mouth stretched twice his height, highlighted in his torch beam stared at him, but after a few fear-filled moments, he realized it wasn't another hideous monster out to kill him, but an inanimate carving. Feeling slightly less anxious, he climbed to his feet and aimed the light along the passage. Nine more creepy heads positioned along the walls at various angles didn't inspire confidence that he was out of danger. He stepped forward to touch the one he thought a moment ago was about to swallow him, and tapped its gaping wide lip. A hollow metallic boom echoed along the corridor. He had no doubt the rough rock that formed the walls and curved above him was also metal fashioned to imitate stone.

Another cautious step nearer the mouth allowed his light to penetrate the darkness within. A short set of steps led up to a chamber. A quick examination of the next two in line revealed identical steps. Not for the first time his reluctance to enter was pushed aside; he needed to find a way out of this hellish lower level. The rising steps might provide that escape. After snapping off a couple of photos of the heads for his collection, he took a deep breath in an attempt to pluck up what meager courage he could scrape from his now severely limited reserves and stepped into the nearest mouth.

As he climbed the steps, he noticed the headlight beam jumping up the treads with each cautious step seemed less bright. He sighed. *Does this nightmare never end?*

Lacking any spare batteries to replenish the ones draining before his eyes, he would be forced to wander through these nightmare rooms in total darkness.

The once white light took on a yellow hue when he peeked above the top step into a chamber. After a scan of the room revealed nothing obvious waiting to leap upon him and take his life, he stepped into the room and gazed at the nearest object; a large sarcophagus. Four similar were positioned around the edges of the room. It was a tomb.

An examination of one revealed it to be of actual stone. The worn edges of the intricate design and its aged appearance hinted they were once stored elsewhere, a place where weather and time could affect the stone. The name of the alien inside, though clearly marked on the thick, wide lid in an incomprehensible group of alien letters, remained a mystery to the man staring at it.

Recognizing another photo opportunity to add to his valuable collection, Richard snapped off a few shots of the tomb. He turned his attention to one of the sarcophagi. Its inhabitant might reveal the appearance of the crew or the ship's designers. They had to be important to have been brought aboard the ship and have tombs specially constructed to house them; maybe they held great leaders or even royalty. There might be something valuable entombed with the body. However, an attempt to lift or slide open one of the lids failed; it was too large and heavy for one man to move.

Richard's gaze around the chamber alighted on an opening in the back wall. A closer examination revealed a passage sloping up. He entered to discover what horror it would lead him to next.

Prepared to flee back the way he had come if danger threatened, Richard cautiously opened the door at the top of the slope. Blue light invaded the darkness of the passage he poked his head into. He glanced both ways along the corridor. As all seemed danger free, he stepped out. The curved corridor hinted it was circular, and that if he continued to walk in one direction, he would end up back where he started. For no particular reason, he headed right. Believing the doors set in the right side of the passage would lead to the tombs, he ignored them. The door he found in the left wall, he opened. When nothing howled, shrieked or attacked him, he stepped into a round room.

Though it was difficult to work out the room's function, it was the most technologically advanced room Richard had seen since boarding the spaceship. He thought it might be a control room. There was no hint of faux metal carved rock, bone structures or any hint of the medieval architecture he'd encountered in the bowels of the ship. It was the first room that matched his vision of an alien spaceship, though the tree growing through the floor, which had spread its gnarly branches out to entwine nearby objects, did ruin the illusion slightly.

The door swished closed behind him when he stepped forward to explore. Metal pillars, positioned around the room, rose four yards before angling off to connect with the curved walls. The pillars were not straight edged, but organic in form, wider at the base and covered with tubes, grills and shaped pieces of metal. The

colour theme of the whole room and everything in it were muted shades of purples and pinks. Even the floor was patterned with these colours.

A raised central area, accessed by a few steps, was ringed with organically curved pillars supporting a circular roof set with lights bright enough to banish the darkness from the furthest edges of the room. Four flat protrusions fixed to the roof stretched out at a sloped angle to join to the ceiling, also adorned with similar eye-pleasing details of an organic nature.

Except for the stairs, the room's architecture was devoid of any straight edges. The effect was one of calmness, something Richard welcomed after his recent hectic escapades. Hopefully, it was sign things were changing.

Before he satisfied his curiosity to explore the room further, he searched in the rucksack for spare batteries. His fear of wondering through the spaceship in pitch blackness was something he wished to avoid at all costs. Though he found no batteries, he did find another headlamp. A check revealed it was a lot brighter than his current one. He put the failing one in his rucksack and placed the fresh one on his head, ready to switch on when needed.

He stepped around the tree that protruded through a panel in the floor it had raised when it forced its way through, breaking one of its dead branches in the process.

The consoles below the screens positioned around the edge of the room were covered in controls, buttons, levers, unlit lights and sliding knobs that reminded him of a cross between a musician's recording deck and an aircraft cockpit. Though he pressed, moved and slid various controls, the lack of any power failed to produce any reactions. Large dust speckled chairs were positioned at each console. Richard again wondered what had happened to the crew and if any were still alive.

He climbed the steps and gazed around the raised platform. A large rectangle table with curved corners, whose top was level with Richard's chest, was positioned in the center and took up most of the floor space. Around the edge of the table an angled control panel absent any obvious power was littered with buttons and small screens.

Curiosity bade Richard to touch the purple top. He was surprised when his finger sunk into the jelly-like fluid. It oozed back into the small hole made by his inquisitive finger when he jerked it out. Though he wondered as to its function, his primitive brain when faced with such an alien object arrived at no likely solution, so he turned his attention to surveying the rest of the strange room.

A sloping walkway curved up to a balcony edged with a balustrade. He climbed up. A door stood at each end. In the hope that less life threatening challenges would be presented on the other side of the ship, he headed for the one that took him away from the tomb side of the vessel.

## **Chapter 11**

### **The Pilot.**



THE FLASHLIGHTS HELD BY Henry, Theo and Max roamed over the thick metal door that stood ajar at the end of the short entrance corridor.

Henry shone his light through the door gap and searched for danger. "From what little I can see, it seems safe."

"Forgive me, Henry, if your observation doesn't fill me with confidence," said Theo, glumly. The strain was beginning to affect him. "This ship has been one death defying situation after another, and I'm not expecting that to change any time soon, however safe it currently looks beyond that door."

Henry turned to Theo. "To go back we must first go forward and face the dangers that lie ahead. If there was another way, I'd be the first to turn around and take it, but unfortunately that's not the case. To escape we need to find a way of opening the doors that block our way back to the engine room."

Theo sighed. "I know, Henry, just ignore me. I'm a little weary, that's all."

Theo and Max followed Henry through the gap.

They were a little surprised to find they'd entered what seemed to be a mess hall. Oversize tables and chairs filled the huge space, and what looked to be a serving counter and food preparation area at the far end of the room.

Henry, surprised by the familiarity of the furniture, gazed around the room. "Though I assumed even aliens have to eat, I'm still surprised by the normality of this room and its similarity to a works canteen."

"Maybe the crew will turn out to be more humanlike than we first thought," said Max.

"If we ever find them," added Theo.

Though various doors exited from the room, they believed the door directly opposite the one they entered through offered the best chance to take them where they wished to be—the control room. They walked to the far side of the room and passed through the opening. A short corridor led to large door with two buttons beside it, which they thought might be an elevator. When a press of the buttons failed to call it, they took the nearby stairs and ignored all the doors on each landing until they reached the top. Slightly breathless from the long climb up the oversized steps, they halted before the door they'd been led to.

Prepared like his companions to flee to a lower level if danger threatened, Henry opened the door. A blast of cold air swept over them. Their lights glinted off the thin layer of frost adorning every surface of the long, dark corridor.

Max shivered and zipped up his jacket. "It seems whatever's keeping the ship warm, it doesn't stretch to this part of the ship."

With their breath fogging in the cold air, they passed through the opening. After a few steps the door rasped shut behind them. It gave the impression of a jailer slamming a cell door. Their inquisitive flashlights picked out doors lining the wall on the right, but keen to find the control room, these doors were also ignored. Later they could search them for weapons. At the end of the corridor they rounded a sharp bend to find the corridor continued to the far side of the ship. A walk along half its length brought them to a large door on the left, set in an archway at the top of a short flight of steps.

The three men stared at the door.

"If we've reached the front of the ship, as we seem to have, odds are it's the control room we're looking for," said Theo.

When Max climbed the steps, the door slid aside automatically. A blast of chilled air escaped from the room. They entered, stretched out in a line inside the entrance and let their eyes wander around the frost-covered room.

"It's definitely the front of the ship," stated Max. "It's also definitely the bridge."

The thin layer of ice covering the large window, or view screen that filled the front of the long section of the room obscured the view of the ice pressing against the ship. Two large padded chairs with high backs were positioned along the console situated below the screen. Levers, buttons and raised screens covered its surface. Either side of the long area, two sets of steps led up to the globe sections of the room with curved ceilings. Both were equipped with a curved viewing port on each side, a console and a seat. The center ceiling was flat and contained various sized panels and what looked to be lighting strips, all dark.

Though all these details fascinated the group, it was something in particular that captured their attention and was where their gazes finally settled. Max pulled the small video camera from his rucksack and started filming. They approached what they assumed to be the pilot or captain's chair and its occupant. Henry was first to reach the chair and slowly turned it.

They all stared at the face of the first alien crew member they'd discovered since stepping aboard the ship.

"It must be the pilot or the captain," said Theo.

Though its facial features and form were set out like a human's, its resemblance was vastly different. Its head, larger proportioned than a human's relative to its body size, had raised segments of ivory bone encircling the top half of the face level with its eyes, which were set directly below two pieces of bone that seemed to have the ability to move like human eyebrows, though these were larger. A length of bone, which stretched from the back to the front, divided the head into two sections that tapered to what seemed to be its nose, a gap about one inch long and half that wide. Between the head bones were areas of light brown, leather-like skin. The two large amber eyes were positioned either side of the top of the nose. The sides of the face tapered into a sharp rounded V to form the chin, which was where the mouth was positioned. Blunt teeth that angled back into the mouth were set along the lower jaw. The upper jaw stretched out from below the eyes.

The neck was covered in the same leather-like skin as seen on the head, albeit a much lighter brown and a shade or two darker than its skull. What seemed to be two twisted braids of skin, of a smoother texture than its other skin, grew out from just below the chin to follow the neck until they disappeared beneath the breastplate that joined with other pieces to cover its torso and limbs.

Though larger in size than the average human, about nine feet tall, it was humanoid in appearance. A head rested on a neck, two arms and legs in proportion to its torso. The most similar human trait thus far visible was the hands that had five fingers and a thumb—though thicker and longer than a human's and what seemed to be more joints—covered in leathery skin mottled with shades of light and dark brown. It also wore clothes not too dissimilar to something someone in the flight or military professions might wear—a dark tan jacket and trousers, black boots fashioned from the hide of some unknown animal, and body areas protected by sections of a grey, thin type of armour.

"I've tried to imagine what the alien crew might look like if we discovered one aboard, but nothing I envisaged resembled this," said Theo.

"Though strange in appearance, it's surprisingly humanoid in shape," said Henry.

Max pointed at the wound surrounded by frozen, crusted blood in the pilot's chest— the cause of his demise. "I wonder what killed him and why? The body shows no sign of being feasted upon, so food wasn't the motive."

"It's the first alien murder mystery," said Theo.

"Well, whatever the motive for the alien's demise, it's a cold case now as the murderer is long dead," said Henry.

Max wasn't so confident. "From what we've seen so far on our travels through this ship, I wouldn't be so sure about that."

With a furrowed brow, Theo looked at Max, but before he could utter a reply, the door rasped open.

## **Chapter 12**

### **The Dormitory.**

A short distance away from the men on the bridge, Jane, Lucy and Jack entered the building. A metal walkway, with smaller sections leading off left and right, stretched across to the far side of the room.

They walked over to the edge of the balconied walkway and peered over the side. Tiers of identical platforms dropped into the bowels of the ship. The series of smaller walkways connected to the main path, led to doors set in the towering metal walls. Though a dim white light above each entrance lit up the gloomy scene, the ever-present shadows still dominated the room.

"It reminds me of a prison," said Lucy. "Not that I've ever been inside one," she added hastily.

Jack had to agree with her observation; it was very prisonlike. "I think it must be the crew quarters."

"Let's see if any of them are at home." Jane moved to the nearest side gangway and crossed to the door.

Though Lucy and Jack were unsure if it was a good idea, both were curious to discover what the alien crew looked like and followed her. Jane opened the door, and they peered through the opening for a few moments before entering.

The room was a decent size, about four yards wide by five long with a table fixed to the back wall with a chair either side, cupboards containing clothes and a few personal items, whose use was unrecognizable to the prying searchers. A bed was set into an alcove sealed from the rest of the room by a front panel with a small window where the head of its occupant would be able to peer out. When Jane's inquisitive finger pressed a button beside the bed, the panel slid aside with a soft hiss.

The back wall of the bed chamber contained an instrument panel with two screens, dials and buttons. After a brief discussion, the small group decided the

bed might also be a hyper-sleep chamber for use when the spaceship was on a particularly long voyage.

A door led to a shower room complete with a metal toilet of a similar design to Earth toilets, though larger.

When Jack commented on the familiar design, Lucy's crude reply surprised and amused him.

"What did you expect? However advanced a species technologically, aliens still produce bodily waste, and however you look at it, if they are humanoid in form, an arse is an arse. The toilet design we all recognize here is the perfect shaped receptacle to plonk one's butt upon. The designers of this ship must have thought so too."

The toilet made Jane realize how desperate she was to pee. As it looked clean, Jane ushered the others out and seized the opportunity to use it, gasping when her bare skin touched the cold metal. It flushed automatically with a pink, sweet-smelling fluid as she pulled her trousers up. Lucy went next and then Jack.

The next cabin they intruded upon was identical to the previous one, but the third had a subtle difference, the bed was missing. There was only an empty space and a single metal rail running the length of the alcove leading to a hatch in the wall.

Jack leaned into the space to study the hatch. "I think the bed may have another function, an escape pod!"

Jane glanced at the metal hatch and the rail. "If you're correct, and with the bed missing, we can only surmise that the alien who bunked in this room abandoned ship."

"If they abandoned ship it would explain why we've not encountered any of the crew, dead or alive," said Lucy.

A quick search of the nearby rooms revealed the escape pods had also been ejected.

"I wonder why they left," Jane pondered aloud, after they'd returned to the main walkway.

Jack shrugged. "If those monsters we encountered were locked up, but escaped, maybe they were responsible for the crew fleeing."

Lucy wasn't convinced. "But surely, a race as advanced as those who built and operated this spaceship would have weapons or some way of defending themselves against such an event." Lucy waved an arm around at the hundreds of rooms filling the void. "And if all these rooms were occupied, they weren't short of crew to fight them. It must've been something else that drove them to such a drastic decision, something that threatened their existence!"

Jane was about to add her comments to the conversation when she felt the balustrade she gripped with one hand tremble. She frowned and looked at her two companions. "Did you feel that?"

Jack placed his on the rail. "It's vibrating slightly."

"It's probably caused by the movement of the ice shaking the ship," offered Lucy.

Jack thought it felt more localized. He leaned over the edge and peered into the gloomy void, but his headlamp wasn't bright enough to pierce the darkness very far. "Jane, shine your light down there."

Lucy became anxious. She glanced along the walkway at the door her flashlight picked out at its far end. She didn't think she could tolerate facing another horrific monster. "Maybe we should just go?" Sometimes ignorance was bliss and this seemed to her like an ideal opportunity to put that thought into practice.

But it was too late, Jane had already directed the beam below to pick out the horror Lucy imagined. It climbed up one of the metal walkway supports. The light picked out its grotesque, red form, mottled with patches of black. The creature halted its slow methodical movements with one of its long arms poised a few inches away from the metal strut, and slowly tilted its head. Its gruesome, disfigured features made Jane gasp, which heightened Lucy's already nervous disposition.

The crack in the creature's fleshless skull, along with a torn withered leg hanging from its torso, was evidence of wounds from previous encounters with the ship's residents. A gnarly pale growth over one eye continued down its face and covered the corner of its jagged-toothed mouth. Its remaining good eye, a sinister crimson orb, stared up at them.

Now that its presence had been discovered, it abandoned its previous stealthy approach, grabbed at the support and swiftly climbed.

Jack recovered from the latest shock to confront them and pulled Jane away from the rail. "It's time to go."

Their footsteps slamming on the metal walkway echoed through the cavernous room when they sprinted for the door on the far side.

The creature in pursuit gazed at the erratic light beams dancing in the darkness above race across the path. They were escaping. It changed direction to intercept them. Its long powerful arms sped it along the metal framework and enabled it to leap the wide gaps between the struts. When it gained on those attempting to flee its wrath, it swung up and over the edge of the walkway.

Lucy screamed when the hideous creature landed on the path, blocking their escape route. She stopped so abruptly she would've teetered into its clutches if Jack hadn't yanked her out of its extensive reach, almost spilling her to the floor. Jack steadied her and the three frightened victims retreated along the walkway.

Though its paunchy body covered in crusty flaps of bulbous skin was only a yard long, its arms were twice the length and ended in three elongated skeletal fingers, which, unusual for the ship's monstrous inhabitants thus far encountered, lacked any claws. This didn't mean it was defenseless. Its functioning muscular rear limb, a fraction of the length of its arms and also equipped with skeletal fingers, gripped a long, sharp-bladed knife with stains on its surface that hinted at past kills.

The creature stared at them for a moment, as if calculating the threat they posed and which one it would kill first.

Lucy noticed its saggy breasts. "It's a female."

The creature stretched out its two long limbs and rested its knuckles on the metal path. It seemed to smile at its prey. It opened its mouth and roared shrilly. It leapt forward and propelled itself toward its prey like someone with a broken leg on crutches, quickly moving its arms forward ready for the next bound. The walkway shook each time it landed.

Jane, Jack and Lucy fled back to the exit. When it became apparent they'd never outrun the swiftly approaching menace, Jack formulated a plan to save his friends and stopped. "You two run for the door while I hold it off."

Unable to remove her terrified gaze from the approaching monster, Lucy was equally horrified by Jack's sacrifice. "You'll be killed!"

Jack shot her a quick glance. "But you two will survive. Now run, you don't have much time."

Though Jane understood the sense of Jack's action, she was hesitant to let him sacrifice himself. She also wasn't keen on moving through the ship without him at her side. "I thought you weren't the hero type?"

Jack, his eyes never leaving the approaching threat, shrugged and flashed a nervous smile. "Guess I was wrong." A puzzled frown appeared on his face when the monster abruptly stopped!

"What's it doing?" asked Lucy. Though she wanted to flee, she was terrified any movement would entice the creature to attack.

Jack was as confused by the creature's sudden halt as his friends. He was even more confused when it leapt over the side of the walkway, which shook when it grabbed hold again, and climbed down.

Jane peered over the edge. Her flashlight picked out the creature dropping from level to level until it fell from the light's reach. She looked at Jack. "What just happened?"

"I'm not sure, but I don't think we should dwell on our lucky escape. There could be more of those things down there, or something else more willing to kill us. Let's move while we have the chance."

They sprinted for the far door.

When the Mimic, who had been observing them since they entered the dormitory, had shunned its cloak of invisibility to save them, the sight of her presence had been enough to halt the attack. A previous encounter between her and the species had left many of them dead and wounded. Its sudden departure was verification it didn't want a rematch.

The Mimic watched the three strangers head for the door she required them to pass through. Though she didn't need them all to survive, the many dangers they faced while trapped within the ship made it prudent for her to help conserve their numbers when the occasion arose. When they reached the door safely, she leapt over the balustrade and dropped into the void.

## **Chapter 13**

### **Lucifer.**

RICHARD HAD BEEN WANDERING through the ship since leaving the purple control room. During this time his thoughts had been occupied with three matters: were the others still alive, and if so where were they? Would he encounter

any more monsters? And his primary consideration, how was he going to get off this hell ship?

Not for the first time, he caught a whiff of the stench that shrouded him. He longed to step into a warm shower, but that wouldn't be happening any time soon. Though he had encountered doors in the left and right corridor walls, he'd decided to keep to the main path. He would only risk entering a side exit if danger presented itself, something he was certain eventually would.

Though fear was his constant companion, he'd managed to hold it in check. Confidence gained by his recent escapes from what he'd first thought was certain death encouraged him he could do so again if the need arose. He just had to make sure he didn't panic. If he did, he would die.

He paused at the door that blocked his progress. The unknown behind each was the most nerve-racking part of his exploration. At a distance that put him as far as possible from the door and yet still able to operate the control, he stretched out an arm and pressed the button. As the door opened he took a few cautious steps back.

When the rusty rasp had faded, he cocked an ear at the dark opening. He heard only the constant groans of the stressed hull. His headlight picked out another door a short distance away. He glanced at the edges of the open door; it was three times the thickness of the normal doors. He approached the second door and pressed the button. The door behind him slid shut. When its edges met, the door before him opened. A breath of warm air washed over him and crimson light bathed him in its blood red glow, which raised his apprehension a few notches. The room his eyes roamed wasn't the continuation of the corridor he'd expected; it was much larger. A cocked ear detected no growls, shrieks or claws scraping across metal, only a low hum as if from a distant electric-powered piece of machinery.

His head poked through the opening and looked at the nearest source of red light— a transparent container set in a rack similar to the thousands, both small and large, lining the walls of the room. Though he briefly considered turning around and leaving, there was nowhere else to go. He had to find an exit or a means to escape from the ship of terror and moving forward was his only option. Hesitantly, he stepped into the room and switched off his headlamp, which he removed from his head and dropped into a pocket so he could wipe away the build-up of sweat on his forehead.

A pungent chemical smell filled the room, which Richard assumed was emitted by the crimson liquid-filled vessels. He crossed to the left-hand tier of transparent containers and examined in closer detail the object he'd noticed inside. Suspended by tubes was a creature that seemed to be a species of alien insect twice the size of his hand. Though tinted by the red fluid, its bright-blue, fat body was easily distinguishable, but there was no obvious sign of a head, only four black, claw-like teeth, each serrated with tiny sharp protrusions. No eyes, ears or nose was evident. A row of various sized spikes travelled along the ridge of its back that ended in a tail split into three. Ten short footless legs were its means of movement. Richard tapped the glass, but it produced no reaction from the floating monstrosity. An examination of nearby specimen containers revealed each housed a variety of unearthly creatures.

Richard walked along the wall until he reached a gap between the tanks that led off to the left. A strange metal contraption, which looked as sinister and as frightening as the specimens, hung from a rail that stretched along the ceiling. Cables and pistons fixed to various parts of the frame and the long metal arms that currently hung limp at its sides, gave the impression it could spring to life at any moment.

Alert for any sound or movement, Richard headed along the side passage. He passed rows and rows of container-walls that reminded him of the layout of a library with hundreds of shelves crammed with books. The specimen jars ranged in size from small to very large, and all contained some form of hideous alien creature that by the fleeting glimpse he gave the nearest one, seemed to have evolved to hunt, kill and feast. Though there may have been some in the containers not in his line of sight, he'd seen none of the more docile creatures present on earth. No rabbits, deer, sheep, cows, hamsters, in fact nothing that could be labelled as cute or anything you'd be willing to risk a hand stroking. It was evident the planet, or planets, they originated from, would not be calming places to visit or popular tourist destinations.

Something crunched underfoot. He stopped and looked at his feet. Slivers of what looked like glass littered the ground. The trail led to the next row in line. He stepped clear of the glass, cautiously advanced and peered into the row where the shard trail led. Shattered glass was strewn across the floor amidst faded red stains. The tier on the right leaned at a slant against the one next to it and contained smashed specimen jars. A gaze at its top revealed the broken supports that once held the heavy tiers of specimens in place. A glance inside one of the lower smashed jars revealed no sign of an occupant, dead or alive, and no bodies or remains on the floor. A rush of fear swept through Richard. He surveyed the room with dread-filled eyes. There was no sign of the creatures he expected to see creeping up on him, but that didn't mean they weren't doing that very thing.

Richard gazed at the door he needed to reach thirty yards away, and the spaces between the rows where the missing horrors might be concealed. He could do it in two ways—slow and stealthy, or fast and furious. So far his cautious journey through the room had failed to alert anything that might be in the room of the tasty snack in their midst, so unwilling to bring undue attention to his presence, he chose the former.

Each time he approached one of the colossal racks of specimens, he paused to peer into each aisle to check nothing waited to jump out at him. His confidence grew when he'd travelled a little over halfway to the exit. Soon, he would be out of this spooky specimen library.

His frightened scream that followed his glimpse down the next aisle echoed through the cavernous space. It was joined by the surprised squeal of the creature responsible for Richard's frightened outburst. In his haste to flee the monster, Richard stumbled and fell to the floor. His gaze returned to the creature that had surprised him. It hung from the rack, shaking and whimpering. It was just as scared by the unexpected encounter as him, which was something he found comforting—if hard to believe.

While he studied the small creature, which had seemed much bigger when he'd first come face to face with it, Richard's fear slowly subsided. It was only the size



of a kitten, and if you overlooked the two horns that protruded from its skull and its two large rabbit teeth growing over its bottom lip, just as cute. Its small body was covered in red velvet skin, which combined with the horns, gave it a devilish appearance. Its large, bald, wrinkled head, framed a baby face. It had a human-like nose, except more rounder and glossy black, and a crinkled mouth that currently trembled with fear. Perhaps the most dominant feature that contributed to its cuteness was its two large, round eyes, which looked like two hypnotizing balls of lovability. Even Richard's normally hard emotional shell weakened. Sensing the small creature presented no threat, he climbed to his feet and approached the tiny alien with an outstretched arm.

The creature whimpered and cowered from the offered limb.

"It's okay, little feller, I'm not going to hurt you."

The creature, comforted by the soft voice, stopped trembling, but continued to stare timidly at the hand moving slowly closer.

Though nervous the creature might bite, Richard placed his hand gently on the back of the cowering creature's head and stroked it. After a moment of apprehension, the creature purred like a cat from the attention, its red skin faded into bright green.

Richard smiled. For a few moments, the hectic, life-threatening atmosphere of the ship was replaced by a sense of calm. "You like that, do you?" He moved his hand to tickle under its chin, eliciting another satisfied purr. It sniffed Richard's arm and balked at the stench.

Richard laughed. "Sorry about that. I do stink a bit."

Without warning, the cute creature leapt from the wall and ran up his arm. It perched on his shoulder and nuzzled his face, careful to avoid scratching him with its horns.

The smile remained on Richard's face when he cocked his head to look at his new friend. "You're the friendliest creature I've met since stepping aboard this monster-infested vessel, and the only one that hasn't tried to kill or eat me."

The creature purred.

Richard remembered where he was, glanced over at the door and walked toward it. "Sorry, little feller, I have to go." He plucked the creature from his shoulder and held it in front of him. The creature smiled; at least he thought it was a smile. "You have to stay here. I have my own life to worry about without adding you to the mix. Your scent might attract unwanted attention from creatures a lot less cute than you."

He placed the creature on the ground, but when he removed his hands, it jumped onto his arm again. Richard pulled him away and placed him on the floor again. "Stay!" he said, forcefully. The creature's eyes grew even larger when it achieved a sad look that reminded Richard of the cat in Shrek. "You can stop that, it won't work. You got on alright without me and will do so again." He ignored the creature's sad whimpering sobs and turned away. He opened the door and stepped through into a corridor. He turned as the door closed. The creature's skin had turned blue and its sad face watched him. Though it was hard to resist, Richard did.

He hadn't gone more than a few steps before he realized what a big mistake he'd made. He was wrong to have left the creature. It was small enough to smuggle off

the ship and absolute evidence that aliens exist. It would back up his unbelievable adventures and everything he'd seen on the alien spacecraft. He needed the tiny alien. There were also the merchandising prospects the lovable creature offered. Every child would want a toy version. It would make him millions. He quickly spun around and rushed back to the specimen room.

When the door opened, he stepped inside. There was no sign of the cute alien. "Hey, little feller, I've come back for you," he called out softly.

His searching gazes down the aisles between the racks detected no sign of the creature. "Where are you?"

A scratching noise came from ahead, down one of the aisles.

Richard turned toward the sound. "Is that you, little feller?"

He stepped forward to investigate. The small creature peeked out from one of the higher smashed cages. Richard smiled and held out his hands. "Jump and I'll catch you."

A few moments of hesitation passed before the creature emerged and leapt into Richard's hands.

Richard stroked the creature. "Sorry for leaving you, but I won't again. You're too precious a commodity to leave behind." He tickled it under the chin. The creature turned green as it purred. "So green means you're happy, blue when you're sad and red when frightened, is that right?"

The creature purred and nuzzled his hand.

"As you looked like a little devil when you were red, I'll call you Lucifer, until I think of something cuter and more appealing to children."

Lucifer purred.

Richard smiled and stroked his new pet. "It's time to go, as I need to find a way off this ship." He was about to place the creature on his shoulder when Lucifer trembled; its fur turned red. Something had frightened it.

Richard's eyes searched for the cause and found it. A Web monster stared at him from a rip in the metal ceiling caused when one of the racks broke away. It slunk from the hole and climbed headfirst down the rack between him and the exit. Though he couldn't be certain it was the same one that had chased him into the bowels of the ship, it was the same species. Its claws clacked on the metal floor when it jumped the last few feet.

The small creature struggled in his grip and before Richard could stop it, it leapt to the floor and ran off. The clawed beast glanced at the fleeing creature before turning its attention back to the larger prey.

Richard slowly backed away. He'd only just managed to outrun the other Web creature before, this one was much closer. He doubted he'd get very far before it was upon him. An excited chattering directed his attention away from the threat. The small creature jumped up and down on a small control panel atop a post set in the floor. It pointed a small arm at the ceiling and opened and closed its three fingers. Richard tipped his head. Lucifer's finger was aimed at the spooky crane machine.

Richard focused on the crane's large arms. It was a good idea, but he didn't have enough time to work out the controls before the beast attacked. However, it seemed the small creature had already worked out that part of the plan. It leapt from the control panel and rushed at the approaching monster. Though Richard

believed Lucifer was no match for the larger claw-equipped monster, he rushed to the control panel and randomly pressed buttons. The panel sprung to life. He glanced at the howling monster. With lightning speed, the small creature leapt at the larger foe and sunk its teeth into flesh before leaping out of its reach. Though it seemed more annoying for the monster than any serious threat to its well being, it was keeping it distracted.

Richard played with the controls, and after sending the machine in the wrong direction, he grasped what each button did. His fingers moved deftly over the controls. The arms reached out and opened and closed their metal fingers. He manoeuvred the crane toward the distracted monster and lowered it. When it was near enough, he reached out a metal arm and closed the fingers. They grasped air when the monster jerked away from another bite to its flesh. Richard repositioned the arm. It took two more tries before he managed to grip one of its arms. He lifted the creature off the ground. It howled and struggled to be free of the vice-like grip. It tore at the machine with the claws of its free hand. Worried it might rip one of the cables from the machine, which might cause it to release its grip, Richard moved the other hand toward its neck. When the metal fingers were in position, he stabbed the close fingers button repeatedly. They folded around the creature's throat and kept squeezing. The creature's eyes bulged. Blood exploded. The creature's head lolled to the side. It was dead. Richard powered down the machine. The monster's body smacked to the floor.

Richard gazed around for his new found friend. "Lucifer, where are you?"

Slurping pinpointed its position. Richard approached the carcass. Lucifer was feeding. It sent a shiver down his spine, but then he thought humans eat meat also, just not raw and still oozing warm blood. The little alien had just saved his life. It could eat what it wanted as long as it wasn't him. Lucifer's large eyes followed his walk over to the exit where Richard waited for his friend to finish its meal.

Henry, Theo and Max shot fearful glances at the bridge door sliding open. If a monster entered there'd be no escape this time; they were trapped. Fear faded into relieved smiles when Jane, Lucy and Jack entered.

Henry stepped over to greet them. "Am I glad to see you lot. Is everyone okay?"

Jane gripped his arm softly. "We're fine, Henry. Like you, we had a few close shaves on the way, but as you can see, we survived."

Jack looked at Max's clothes, stained with the Wraiths blood. "Looks like you've been having some fun, Max."

Max nodded. "Yes, but not something I'd like to repeat."

Lucy noticed the corpse in the chair. "Is that one of the crew?"

"We think it might be the ship's pilot or captain," said Theo.

Jane examined the alien's face. "He looks sad."

Theo pointed at the pilot's chest wound. "Well, he had just been murdered."

"There's a wealth of information to be learnt from this unfortunate being," said Lucy excitedly, momentarily forgetting the monsters that had plagued their journey through the alien vessel.

Henry had already been busy working out the steps and experts needed for the examination. "It could take years of study until we've learnt everything."

"We're going to be so famous when this news gets out," beamed Theo. "I can't believe this has happened to me. Yes, one day, I thought humans would make first contact with an intelligent alien life-form, but I didn't expect it to happen in my life time, or to be present when it did, or aboard an actual alien spaceship."

"We're all very fortunate fate has decreed it was to be us lucky few to experience this event." said Henry, who, like Theo, counted the pilot as their real first contact with an intelligent alien being.

"Did fate also decree it should be dead when this event happened?" said Jack, more worried about escaping than studying the alien pilot.

Henry glanced at Jack and back at the alien. "Unfortunately, it seemed fate did."

"The trouble is," said Lucy, sadly, "we don't have years. The only way anyone's going to have a chance of studying him is if he's moved off the ship before it's lost when the ice breaks from the shelf, which at the moment seems an impossible task as we don't even know if we'll manage to escape."

Henry gazed around the room with a frustrated expression. "If only we had more time, we could learn so much."

Jane nodded in agreement. "On our way here we discovered something— the crew's quarters, rooms where they slept or spent off duty time."

"Any sign of the crew?" asked Max.

Jane shook her head. "Some of the rooms had beds, in other rooms they were missing. The sleeping chambers could be sealed, and we think as well as for sleeping, they're also some type of hyper-sleep chamber and escape pod. At the foot of each bed-chamber was a hatch to eject the pod somehow."

"The crew abandoned ship?" said Theo.

Jane shrugged. "Maybe? It would explain their absence."

Henry agreed. "It's a plausible theory, but why would the crew abandon the ship?"

"Because it was about to crash on our planet would be a good enough reason, I should think," said Theo.

Lucy glanced at the pilot captain. "But why did he remain? And don't tell me it's because a captain always goes down with his ship! This is an alien species, not some Hollywood movie."

"If the ship was forced to make an emergency landing, maybe he tried to save the ship and its cargo, which by the good condition of the parts of the ship we've seen, he succeeded in doing."

Jane stared at the wound in the alien's chest. "If there were no crew left aboard the ship, what killed the captain?"

"It's something we were pondering just before you arrived," said Henry.

"Probably one of the monsters," said Jack.

Lucy shook her head. "I don't think so. Look at the body. There's no sign of it having been eaten so it wasn't killed for food, and the wound seems to have made with some type of weapon, a knife or something similar, not claws or teeth."

"It's like we said, the captain was murdered!" said Theo.

Jack banged his gloved hands together to prompt circulation back into his cold fingers. It made him realize how warm the rest of the ship had been. "As the pilot's not going anywhere, how about we turn our thoughts to more immediate matters?"

Like how to restore some power to the ship's systems to unlock the doors so we can get off this ship before it slips into the ocean and takes us along for the ride?"

"A wise suggestion, Jack." Henry studied the long console. "Okay, let's see if we can get this ship powered up."

After they had brushed away as much of the thin layer of frost covering the control console as they could, they all gazed at the myriad of buttons, levers and screens lit by their flashlights. Strange symbols that might be a clue to the purpose of some of the controls were of no help to them, but a few small, simple diagrams etched into some of them hinted at their purpose.

Max pointed to a row of buttons on a panel with an image he interpreted as shining light. "I think this might be the lighting panel."

After a brief discussion that resulted with all of them in agreement, Max pressed the first button. Nothing happened.

"Try pressing them all," said Jane. "Just because the lights didn't come on in here, they might have in other areas of the ship."

Max pressed every button on the panel.

Four small glass units set in the ceiling, glowed to bathe the room and its occupants in weak yellow light.

Lucy gazed at the lights with a disappointed frown. "I was expecting something a bit brighter."

Theo pointed at one of the large light panels above the console that had remained dark. "It might be a power problem and the yellow lights are the ships emergency lighting."

"Still, they're better than no light," said Jack. "We're lucky to have any power at all given the length of time this ship has been entombed here. I can't imagine any human vehicle remotely functioning to this degree after such a time span had elapsed. It would probably be an unidentifiable heap of rust, plastic and rubber."

Henry let his eyes wander over the console. "I would assume somewhere amongst all these confusing controls is a way to restore full power to the doors, if that's possible, so everyone keep on searching."

Henry stared at one of the small console screens. "If these screens are alien versions of computer screens, and if we can activate the ship's computer, it might provide us with information about the ship's systems."

"I'd already thought along the same lines, Henry," said Lucy, "but there's no obvious button to activate the screens or any computer."

"The screens are probably to provide the pilot and crew with information about the ship, navigation, etc.," said Max. "Not the conventional computers we're used to, as there's no keyboard to type in any commands. I suppose they might be touch screens, but they seem too distant from the chairs to be convenient for that."

"Maybe they're voice controlled," Lucy suggested.

So engrossed were they with examining everything, all failed to see the thing snake out of the console, move behind Henry's back and rise to his head. When the length of articulated metal was level with Henry's neck, the end peeled back in four segments, darted forward and latched onto Henry's skin. As soon as it touched, an almost silent hiss was created by the air drawn out of the tube to seal it tight against its victim's body. A small, sharp, hollow needle slid out from the

center to pierce Henry's flesh. Small filaments snaked out of the needle to attach themselves to Henry's brain stem.

Henry let out a yelp of surprise when the thing attached itself to his neck. He went to grab at it, but his arm wouldn't move, he was paralyzed.

The others turned on hearing Henry's startled cry and noticed the thing hanging from the man's neck. They rushed over. Jack attempted to pull it off. All he succeeded in doing was to drag Henry backward, almost tipping him to the floor.

"What is that thing?" said Max, stepping forward to help.

Jack released his grip on the attachment. "I've no idea, but it's stuck fast to his neck."

Jane noticed Henry's skin stretch when Theo held Henry's head with one hand and tugged on the thing with the other. "Hold on! You might do more damage pulling it off like that."

Reluctantly, Theo released his hold.

Jack glanced at Jane when she moved forward for a closer examination. "What do you think it's doing?"

Jane scrutinized Henry's face. His eyes had a frozen look. A wave of her hand in front of the man's face produced no reaction. "Whatever it's doing, it's paralyzed Henry so it can do it." She followed the length of the flexible metal cable down to the console. "It's connected to the ship."

"Maybe we can cut it off," said Theo. He pulled out his climbing knife and held it up.

"I'm not sure that would help Henry," said Jane. "Look where that thing's attached."

Lucy looked at Henry's neck and the thing attached to it. "You think it's attached to his brain-stem?" said Lucy.

Jane shrugged. "To have paralyzed Henry so quickly, I believe it's a good possibility. Maybe it injected him with something."

Max pointed to the thing a few inches away from Henry's neck. "If we cut through it here, perhaps it will detach itself."

"We must be careful we don't harm him," Jane warned. "Perhaps its best we wait and see what happens."

"And how long do you propose we wait?" said Max. "What if it never detaches itself, what then?"

Jane continued to watch Henry closely. "This thing has a purpose, and though I've no idea what that purpose is, I don't believe harming Henry is the reason."

Max was about to argue, when a quiet hiss of air announced its release. Max jumped back when it slithered into the console.

Henry continued his movement from the point directly before he was paralyzed and slapped his hand on his neck. "I think I've just been bitten by something."

Jane glanced at the others. "You don't remember what just happened?"

"Apart from being bit, you mean?"

"Yes." Jane examined the back of Henry's neck. There was a tiny dot of blood surrounded by a round, angry discolouration.

Henry was confused. "No, what are you going on about?"

Max pointed to the console. "You see that round indent in the console?"

Henry peered at the indicated spot. "Yes. What of it?"

“Something came out of there and attached itself to your neck.”

“It paralyzed you,” Lucy told him.

“For about two minutes,” added Jane.

“Impossible,” said Henry, but he could tell by their serious expressions that they told the truth.

Jane stared at his face. “How do you feel?”

“I feel fine. Only my neck's a little sore where something...well, whatever happened, but I still think I was bit by something, an alien mosquito or insect.”

Theo scoffed. “What! That survived eight thousand odd years entombed below the ice in this cold room?”

*“Actually, Theo, in your planet's measurement of time, this spacecraft, as you call it, has only been on this planet six thousand seven hundred and fifty-four years, three days, five hours, twenty-one minutes and seven seconds.”*

Startled by the unknown female voice their heads swivelled to the door. All expected to see someone there, but there was no one.

They looked at each other with puzzled expressions.

“Who said that?” asked Max.

Though he'd voiced the question at his friends, it wasn't any of them that answered.

*“I have no name. I am part of what you call the spaceship, whose name in my language will mean nothing to you as there is no direct translation, but Goliath is a fair approximation. It is a world builder. In terms I believe you will understand, I am an intelligent machine that can think and find solutions to problems. I also navigate the ship and control almost every system on board. To answer your next question, our planet was about to be destroyed by something you call a supernova. This deep-space spaceship is one of a fleet constructed over many years to allow our species to escape annihilation and re-establish itself on another suitable planet.”*

“It's some kind of advanced computer,” said Max, in awe.

*“That is a fair description,”* stated the computer.

A hiss of air caused them to glance at the air vents.

*“Life support systems have been activated.”*

The others looked at each other worriedly.

The computer detected their concern. *“If I wanted to cause you harm, I would have done so already. Your breath was causing a buildup of carbon dioxide. From my link with Henry, I detected this would be harmful to you, hence my decision to restore life support to keep you all functioning. I could, just as easily, suck all the oxygen from this room.”*

Jack asked the computer why it used a female voice to communicate.

*“I detected the male of your species are protective of females. I also detected from your voice pattern, Jack, and your mannerisms when you conversed with Jane, you would like to mate with her, so I chose a female voice to seem less threatening.”*

Jack and Jane blushed from the smirks directed at them.

The computer continued using a man's voice. *“If you prefer, I can speak in a male voice?”*

“No, the female voice is much better,” said Max.

“You said, you chose a female voice to seem less threatening. Does that mean you're a threat to us?” Henry asked.

"Of course," replied the computer, matter of factly, reverting to the female voice.

"In what way?" Henry pressed.

"In every way," stated the emotionless voice.

They were all surprised by the blunt answer.

"That is not to say I will harm you."

"Yet you just attached something to my neck?"

"It was essential I link with one of you to learn your language and knowledge of your planet. I chose the most intelligent brain in the room."

Henry rubbed his neck. "I suppose I should feel flattered."

"What planet are this ship and crew from?" asked Jane.

"There is no translation into your language. It was once a planet twice as large as your Earth, but is now debris floating through space. It was similar in many ways to your Earth, hence the reason I selected it to land my ship on when it was damaged by a meteorite storm."

Jack, still concerned with the threat the computer posed them, asked, "Do you plan to kill us?"

"I will not lie to you. It is an option I am processing. But let us not dwell on the many ways I can end your existence, I have questions of my own. Your answers will depend on my future calculations concerning your lives. Obviously, I am aware many of your Earth years have passed since I first arrived here. I am also aware the crew vacated the ship long ago, the captain is dead and the majority of the cargo is still viable."

"And that cargo is?" asked Jane.

"A selection of species and plants from our planet to ensure the successful regeneration of our new world."

Lucy was shocked. "It's an ark!"

"We saw some of them," said Theo. "Hundreds of giant creatures."

"They are our labour force."

Jack glanced at the dead pilot. "What killed the pilot and why did the crew leave?"

"An intruder from planet DX666 was responsible for both actions. Which I am certain will explain my mistrust of Goliath's current intruders. You!"

"What happened?" asked Henry.

"The intruder came aboard when a possible planet, DX666, was visited to collect fresh food rations. It killed many of the crew before the captain realized it could not be defeated. He issued the order to abandon ship and plotted a course to take the ship into deep space. He was killed before he could escape. I have no information as to what happened to the crew. Perhaps they are still floating in space or all have perished."

"I'm sorry for your loss," said Henry. "I assure you we mean you no harm."

"Harm me you could not," stated the computer. "That you might harm the vessel under my protection, or its cargo, though, is possible."

"We have no intention of damaging your ship or cargo, the opposite in fact," said Theo. "We want to learn from it. It's far more advanced than anything we have on Earth. Damaging it is the last thing on our minds."

"From the knowledge I gained from linking with Henry, I know your current intentions are, as you have said, to learn all you can about this spaceship. I also



*detected a problem. I am trapped in ice and will soon be submerged. My cargo will not survive this catastrophic event. This is not acceptable.*"

"I'm sorry, but acceptable or not, unless a miracle occurs that's exactly what will happen," said Henry.

*"Can you perform this miracle, Henry?"*

"No. However, there might be one organization on Earth that might be able to help. Its name is NASA. For this to happen though, we'll need your assistance."

*"Explain."*

"Can you communicate with anyone on our planet?"

*"That is not possible due to the damage caused when I landed on this planet. Some of my systems and sensors have malfunctioned. To keep the cargo alive I am running on reduced power to conserve energy."*

"Then we are your only chance. Help us and we'll help you." said Henry. "Can you power-up all the doors so we can leave to contact NASA to come to your aid?"

*"It is done, though due to faulty sensors I am unable to determine if every door will function."*

A rumble spread throughout the ship.

All instantly knew its cause. It did not bode well for Henry's ten-day calculation.

The room trembled.

"The ice is on the move again," said Max.

"Computer, can you plot us a safe route to the engine room so we can get off the ship?" Henry asked.

*"If you go to the secondary control room in the cargo section of the ship, you will be able to activate a detailed internal blueprint of the ship. This will enable you to plot a suitable route. I have translated the controls into your language."*

"How do we find this room?" asked Jack.

*"One of you not presently in this room has already been there. Find him and you find the room."*

"Eli or Richard," said Lucy.

Theo shook his head. "Eli's dead. It must be Richard."

"Eli, dead! How?" asked Lucy, surprised and saddened by the news.

"One of the monsters killed him," replied Max, sadly.

Lucy remembered the scream she'd heard shortly before they entered the biosphere, but before she could mourn his loss, the vibrations grew in strength. They were forced to grab hold of something or be thrown to the ground.

*"I detect extreme pressure building on the hull."*

"It's the ice the ship is trapped in squeezing the hull," Henry told the computer. "It's a sign that soon it will break free from the ice shelf. We have less time than I first predicted."

*"That is not acceptable."*

"Acceptable or not, there's nothing any of us can do to prevent it," said Jane. "You chose one of the worst places on the planet to land."

*"It was chosen for its remoteness and lack of habitation by indigenous life-forms. It was a logical decision."*

A powerful vibration sent them all tumbling to the floor.

A loud crack echoed around the room.

Their eyes darted to the window. Fractures appeared across its surface.

*“Breach imminent in control room viewing port. Lowering safety shutters.”*

Nothing happened.

*“Shutters failed. Report added to the repair crew list. Breach imminent. Evacuate control room. Door will be sealed in twenty seconds.”*

The door swished open.

“We have to get out of here,” shouted Jane.

The strong vibrations made it impossible to stand. On their hands and knees, they scrambled for the door, grabbing their bags on the way.

Max paused by the door and looked back into the room. “I’m sorry, Computer—more than you will ever know—that this ship is doomed, but we’ll do all in our power to try and save it.”

*“Thank you, Max, but you will fail. I calculate your chances of survival are zero point five percent.”*

The door began to close.

Max glanced at the spider web of cracks creeping across the window. “I don’t understand. How can you be so certain?”

The window exploded with a deafening crash.

As glass and ice shot across the room, Max pulled his shoulders back through the doorway. Ice and glass slammed against the door, some shooting out into the corridor and down the steps.

Just before the door closed fully they heard the computers last words.

*“They are coming. RUN!”*

## **Chapter 14**

### **They are Coming, RUN!**

SHAKEN BY THEIR SUDDEN forced exit from the room, they remained on the floor and the steps to catch their breath and their thoughts.

Jack was the first to stand. “What did the computer mean, *They are coming!*”

Henry climbed to his feet and grabbed at his aching back. The continuing thought that he was getting too old for these types of adventures made him realize this would probably be his last outing. “I’m not sure, but I think whatever *they* are, it’s not something we should hang about to meet.”

Suddenly, a veritable explosion of terrifying, nerve-shattering screeches and howls blasted along the corridor, clutching them all in its fear-instilling embrace. Those that hadn’t already done so, jumped to their feet. With matching expressions of dread they gazed toward the horrendous sound. All were momentarily stunned by the number of creatures careening around the corner so fast they smashed into the wall. There was a moment of terrified silence. Nobody breathed. Monsters filled the full width of the passage with their grotesque bodies and spine-tingling shrieks of rage and fury. Creatures scrambled over those in front in their haste to be the first to reach the food they glimpsed ahead.

Jane, Lucy and Jack recognized the disfigured saggy-breasted female at the front from their previous encounter with it in the dormitory. She must have followed their scent. Now joined by her tribe, they thought a similar outcome where they all survived was unlikely. The creatures wanted blood, their blood, and nothing was going to stop them. The Dormitory monsters moved toward them like a malevolent plague burdened with death and pain.

Jack returned to his senses first. He tore his eyes away from the horrifying spectacle and spurred his shocked friends into motion. "RUN!"

They sped along the corridor, around a corner and along the next corridor until they were confronted by two doors. The one spanning the corridor opened on their approach.

Jane shot a nervous glance behind at the rapidly approaching screeches and scraping claws. "Which way?"

Theo answered by opening the door on the right. "If we go straight ahead we'll have to climb down hundreds of steps and cross the monster infested landscape somehow."

Lucy, unable to remain still, rushed through the opening as soon as the gap was wide enough. "It's the other walkway above the Wraiths domain."

"Everyone through," ordered Henry.

When the female monster skidded on the metal floor at the bend in the corridor, she grabbed at the corner wall and swung around the corner. Those following her were too bunched together to navigate around the corner as smoothly; they smashed into the corridor wall. Those dazed by the impact or crushed by the weight of their kind slamming into them, were scrambled over by those who had a few seconds ago been behind. Seizing their chance of a first bite, they rushed after their fleeing prey.

Max's hand hovered over the door control. As soon as the last person was through, he closed it. The door segments met a split second before the female arrived. The monsters muffled screams and pounding on the metal door announced their frustration and put the team's nerves on edge.

"I suggest we keep moving," said Jack. "Those things must know how to operate the doors or they couldn't have followed after us."

Spurred on by that unwelcome thought, they rushed along the high walkway. Theo led the way with his flashlight. Max had also switched his light on.

Sensing the movement above, and perhaps their fear, the Wraiths below became restless and howled.

When they were almost halfway across, Jack glanced back when the door behind rasped open. The Dormitory creatures poured onto the walkway. Their screeches joined the excited howls of the creatures below. Jack noticed the fear in Lucy's eyes when she turned her head. "Keep running and we'll be okay." His reassuring tone did little to wipe the terror from her eyes. She gave him a slight nod and faced forward.

The narrow walkway the creatures found themselves funnelled into wasn't wide enough to accommodate more than one at a time. All eager to feed, frenzied fights broke out as each battled to claim a forward hold on the limited space. Creatures were knocked, pushed and thrown over the rail. The Wraiths below swarmed

across the landscape and leapt upon those who fell into their midst. Screams, screeches and howls filled the air. Flesh was ripped, bitten and devoured.

Though too dark for those above to see who was winning the gruesome battle, they thought the Wraiths numbers gave them the edge.

When they neared the end of the walkway, Jack risked another glance at the creatures in pursuit. The female was still in the lead. Her single red eye stared at him. Their movement, gangly and awkward within the narrow confines offered by the walkway, slowed the Dormitory monsters down. That would change when they reached the wider corridors. If they failed to find a way to stop the female monster and her followers, their chances of survival weren't good.

They ran into the viewing room at the end of the walkway and headed straight for the door opposite. Theo punched the button. They all rushed through into the cargo section of the ship. Breathless from their exhausting dash, they stared at the approaching creatures through the rapidly narrowing gap until the closed door blocked them from their sight.

Lucy trembled. "We're still not safe. They'll open the door and get us."

Jack slipped the ice axe from Henry's rucksack and smashed the door control. "I'm hoping that'll prevent the door from working, but I think hanging around to find out would be a bad move." He held the axe up to Henry. "Do you mind if I keep hold of this?"

Henry panted and grabbed at his aching side. "Be my guest. It's of more use in your hands than mine, but let's get moving. It's imperative we reach the secondary control room."

Jane reminded them they still had to find Richard.

"He could be anywhere on the ship by now," said Theo.

"Or dead!" added Lucy. The thought of wandering alone through the ship was a nightmare she'd never be able to endure.

Henry glanced at his concerned companions. "All we can do is keep moving and hope we run into Richard or find the control room."

Theo led the way along the corridor.

Richard was worried. Not because a new danger threatened his life, but the opposite— he'd not seen or heard any monsters for a while. The thought that one could appear at any moment was almost as terrifying as the attack itself. He cautiously peered around a corner, but like the last few he had passed through, the corridor was also clear of monsters. He unzipped his jacket to look at the sleeping creature nestled in an inside pocket sleeping off its meal. Its skin was green, which he thought was a good sign. He smiled. His new-found friend would bring him wealth and fame beyond his wildest expectations. He zipped up the jacket and set off along the corridor.

Behind the next door he came to, he found a surprise. Henry, Theo, Max, Jane, Lucy and Jack rushed toward him.

"It's Richard," called out Theo, surprised the man was still alive.

The smile upon Richard's lips was genuine. He was relieved more than he thought he would be by the reunion. "You all made it then."

"Except for Eli," said Theo, sadly.

Richard turned a shoulder to reveal Eli's bag on his back. "I thought he might be dead. I found his rucksack in the jungle room. I think one of the monsters got him."

Jane creased her nose and looked at Richard's soiled clothing. "What happened to you?"

Richard shook his head. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

I didn't think we'd see you again after you disappeared down that foul chute," said Henry.

Richard looked at Henry. "You saw that?"

"We were hiding in one of the empty giant pods when you entered the room," explained Max.

"Thanks for your help."

"You know as well as we do, Richard, that if we'd revealed ourselves, we would've all been killed," said Henry, defensively.

Aware time was of the essence, Theo quickly updated Richard with events since their parting and their need to find the auxiliary control room.

The look on Richard's face after hearing the request didn't inspire confidence in the others that the control room would be easy to reach. He just as quickly explained his concerns. The team was astounded by his description of the specimen room they'd have to pass through and by what they thought must be a wildly embellished tale of how he'd killed the monster inside.

"If that's the only one you saw, maybe it'll be safe to travel through now," said Theo, hopefully.

"Though obviously it's a concern, it's a risk we'll have to take as we need to reach the control room," said Henry.

Screeches echoed along the corridor. The Dormitory monsters had entered this part of the ship.

Jane turned to Richard. "Can you remember the way?"

Richard shrugged. "I think so."

"Then lead on," ordered Henry.

Richard led the group back through the ship.

Though Richard had to pause and get his bearings a couple of times at intersections, he managed to backtrack his route to the specimen room, and ready to flee, cautiously opened the door.

Crimson light bathed the group peering nervously through the opening.

Jack's eyes took in the room's huge size and the many areas in shadow that might conceal lurking creatures. Another step enabled him to look down the first row of specimen tanks on his left and right. He cocked an ear. The quiet deep hum of a motor and an occasional glug of fluid was all he heard. He turned to glance at the others waiting in the doorway. "Wait there while I walk to the end and see what's around the corner."

When he turned away, Lucy took out her camera, stepped into the room and crossed to the nearest row of specimens.

Henry shook his head but didn't waste his breath trying to stop her. "Be careful, Lucy."

If Lucy had heard, she showed no sign. She was too fascinated by the amazing sights that filled her roaming vision. Thrilled eyes wandered over creatures

suspended in the red liquid, each more extraordinary and fantastical than the previous. She could hardly contain her excitement at seeing the range of strange life-forms. She glanced at the other filled racks in her line of vision. It saddened her that soon the species from a whole planet would be lost. She started taking photographs.

Jack gazed down every aisle he passed; all were clear. He paused at the dead, but still fearsome Web monster, and glanced up at the bloodstained crane contraption. Though he'd disbelieved Richard's hard-to-believe tale of how he'd killed the creature, the evidence here proved he'd been mistaken. To use the crane as a weapon hinted at a level of quick thinking and courage he wouldn't have credited the man with previously. He walked to the end of the rows and glanced each way. The red light flooding the space revealed it free of danger. He turned and waved the others forward. As soon as they were through, Theo closed the door.

The others were also fascinated by the strange creatures and momentarily forgetting the monsters they were so keen to escape from them, moved through the room gazing at the strange creatures.

Max pulled out the video camera and started filming. "We should be thankful these creatures aren't roaming free like those others."

Jack pointed out the broken containers and the askew rack. "It seems the ship's bumpy landing set a few free. Probably those monsters we've encountered."

Jane peered through the glass at a small creature with six limbs, a tiny head and claws a raptor would be proud of. "It's proof they're living specimens in suspended animation."

Max panned the camera around the room. "It's disheartening that all this will soon be lost."

Theo nodded his agreement. "If we do manage to escape and alert the outside world of what we've discovered, and it's possible, perhaps a rescue mission can be launched to save the ship. NASA and the armed forces would surely do anything to get their hands on this advanced technology and maybe even these creatures."

Henry wasn't so enthusiastic. These creatures didn't belong on Earth. If even one escaped and was able to survive the Antarctic climate and somehow managed to reach the mainland, they'd soon become top of the food chain, and if they bred, the consequences would be disastrous. No, he thought, perhaps it's better they perish.

"Even if it's possible, I doubt any salvage attempt could be arranged quickly enough to prevent the ship slipping into the sea," said Jane.

Richard placed a hand gently on the lump in his jacket. He was impatient to be off the ship before his stowaway was discovered or something killed him. He glanced at the door at the far end of the room and then at Henry, who stood at the end of an aisle. Though Lucy was out of sight down one of the rows, the constant clicking of her camera revealed her position. "Henry," he called out. Henry glanced at him. "I think we should leave." He pointed at the hole in the ceiling. "The monster entered through there and there could be more."

Henry nodded. They'd lingered long enough. "Lucy, we have to go."

Lucy sighed. "I know." Reluctantly she moved out of the aisle, but continued to take photographs on the route to the exit.

They passed out of the specimen room and followed Richard's hurried walk to the auxiliary control room.

The Mimic entered the auxiliary control room, descended the curving slope, walked past the table and down the steps to the lower control area. She walked over to a console and pulled out a tube similar to the one that attached itself to Henry's neck in the main control room. When she moved the end toward her face, her form parted to reveal the large queen within. The tube hissed when it latched onto her. A press of a few buttons transferred the information she required to her brain. The tube detached and slid back into the console. As her face reformed, an upper door opened. She faded into invisibility and moved across the room.

The team reached the control room without encountering any other creatures. Once all were inside, they spread along the balcony and gazed at the room below. Richard pointed at the table he'd told them about, noticing the lights that had previously been dark on the control panel were now lit. "I've no idea what it does, but from what you told me, I think it might be what the computer was talking about."

They walked down the ramp and crowded around the table.

When Jane pressed a button beside one of the displays, a menu appeared with an English option. She tapped the word on the screen. A second menu appeared. She read through the selection and chose *Internal Navigation* and tapped *Deck Plans* on the third option screen.

They stepped back from the table when the purple gelatinous fluid covering its top moved. Columns of the substance rose up and tendrils seeped out into horizontal lines to form layers. Details began to form on every surface. Slightly less than thirty seconds later they all stared at a purple 3D representation of the ship's internal layout.

They stepped forward for a closer look. Set out like this they were able to see for the first time how huge the ship was. They'd barely visited a quarter of its main rooms.

Max leaned forward and peered through one of the levels, moving his head from side to side for different viewpoints. "It's amazing."

Theo was also fascinated by the technology that had produced such a detailed model so quickly. "It's similar to something a 3D printer would produce."

For a few moments they all studied the model, looking at it from different angles and heights.

The click of a camera roused them from their examination. They glanced at Richard.

He smiled. "One for the scrapbook."

"Good idea," said Lucy, who'd been so fascinated by the model, she'd neglected to photograph it. She pulled out her camera and snapped off some photos.

"For all its expertly rendered details, I can't see how it helps us plan a safe route to the engine room, as we've no idea where the monsters are," said Henry.

Jane turned her attention to the control screen again. She pressed the *Additional Details* option. The menu that appeared had the option they required. She selected the *Show Life-forms* option.

When blobs of the gelatinous substance peeled off to form the creatures roaming the vessel, they were again astounded by the level of detail produced by the advanced technology. Each life-form aboard the ship was represented. What was even more amazing was that very few of the depicted aliens were static. Their eyes followed the movements of the creatures in their particular field of vision.

"I've never seen anything like this and wouldn't have believed it possible if I hadn't seen it for myself." Theo reached out and poked one of the tiny creatures; it felt gooey to the touch. It oozed past his finger as if the obstacle wasn't there.

Lucy pointed at a section of the model. "Look, even we're represented."

Their tiny forms in the model mimicked their movements when they crowded around Lucy to see for themselves. Jane raised an arm and waved. Her tiny self did the same.

For the first time in a long while they laughed as each formed a position that was copied by their 3D representations. Max even did a little dance that his smaller facsimile copied.

"As fascinating and entertaining as this is," said Henry, "we need to find a safe route to the engine room." He pointed at the control screen. "Is it possible to plot a route on that thing, Jane?"

Jane read through the list of options displayed on the screen and tapped a few choices on consecutive menus. "I can't find anything that's going to help us other than to show the different levels one at a time." A press of the touch screen removed all the levels from the 3D image to leave an expanded view of the level they were on.

They again examined the model.

Lucy scanned the nearby rooms and corridors on the 3D blueprint. "At least there's no monsters close by."

Theo traced a path with a finger from the room they were in to a staircase leading down to a lower level. "This route is currently free of the creatures."

"Jane, can you bring up the lower level so we can see where the stairs lead?" asked Henry.

The layout of the lower level promptly appeared, complete with roaming creatures. As before, any rooms that spanned more than one level, as the cathedral and engine room did, were depicted in their entirety.

The staircase led to a long corridor that ended abruptly at a missing area of the model that stretched the width of the ship and beyond that was the engine room.

Max pointed at the blank section. "That could be caused by the damaged sensors the computer mentioned."

"The missing section's a worry, but that's our route," said Henry. "It's a long haul, but as far as we can tell, it's currently free of monsters."

Jane brought up the level they were on again.

Jack pointed out the doors along the route that weren't functioning before. "We'll have to hope the computer was able to power these doors up, because going back the way we came isn't an option."



Their eyes settled on the cathedral room and the insect-like creatures crawling through it and up and down the sloping path. A large congregation of the insects waited by the door they had fled through what now seemed a long time ago, as if waiting for them to return.

“Okay, everyone, memorize the route,” said Henry.

Richard snapped off photographs of the planned route.

When everyone had familiarized themselves with the path to the staircase, they exited the room.

The Mimic faded into view and stared at the model for a few moments before tapping the control screen to bring up the lower level. Her dark eyes studied the rooms, corridors and prowling monsters and then glanced at the door the humans had disappeared through. She'd understood everything they said and was pleased they were heading for the exit. Soon her long imprisonment would be over. She moved across the room and exited through a different door than that taken by the humans.

## **Chapter 15**

### **Different Paths.**

THE TEAM'S STEADY PACE through the corridors carried them nearer to the staircase to the lower level and so far it had been free of monsters, but when they passed the opening to a corridor that led off to their left, they heard something to indicate their luck was about to change.

*CLICK! CLICK! CLICK!*

Lucy trembled as the memories of her previous encounter with a Clicker flooded into her thoughts.

*CLICK! CLICK! CLICK!*

Without halting his stride, Theo aimed his flashlight down the dark corridor the sound had come from. The yelp of surprise that burst from his lips was drowned by the monster's high pitched shriek when it leapt at him with claws outstretched. Theo stumbled and fell to the floor.

Jane, directly behind Theo, saw the sightless creature caught in the light. The cut on its shoulder indicated it was the Clicker that had chased them through the forest room. Before its claws pierced Theo's flesh, she lashed out a foot. The power-laden blow slammed it against the corridor wall with a loud shriek.

Coming swiftly to his senses, Theo jumped to his feet and backed away.

The Clicker bounced off the wall and rolled when it made contact with the floor. *CLICK! CLICK! CLICK!* With swiftness the shocked onlookers found difficult to believe, it leapt to its feet and lashed out at its attacker.

Jack yanked Jane out of its reach and pushed her behind to join Lucy and Richard as they backed away.

Max moved to attack. The Clicker head him move. It spun around to face the new threat. Max froze with the ice pick he'd planned to slam into the creature's

head raised above his shoulder. *CLICK! CLICK! CLICK!* The monster stepped to the side, splitting the group.

*CLICK! CLICK! CLICK!* The creature snarled at Max.

Realizing it didn't need eyes to see him, Max retreated.

A series of clicks drifted along the corridor, proof the monster wasn't the only one of its kind. They grew louder. The Clicker shrieked. Its comrades answered.

Jack raised the ice axe and lunged at the Clicker. Its keen senses alerted it to the new attack. It lashed out an arm as it turned. Claws swiped past Jack's face, so close the draft carried in their wake caressed his skin. Jack glimpsed the group of approaching creatures caught in the beam of Theo's fallen flashlight, rushing along the corridor. He glanced at Max. "Keep moving. We'll find a different route to the engine room"

The Clicker lunged at the voice as Theo, Max and Henry fled. Jack swung the axe. The Clicker grabbed his arm, halting the attack. Jack kicked it in the stomach. Winded, the Clicker released its hold and slammed back against the wall. Jack had no time to move in for the kill; the Clicker's friends were almost upon him. He turned and ran to catch up with Jane, Lucy and Richard who'd fled back along the corridor.

The sound of their running footsteps blended with those of Max, Theo and Henry as they fled in the opposite direction.

The Clickers split into two groups and followed their respective prey.

Max, Theo and Henry fled down the long corridor, turned left, moved through a door, along a short corridor, and another door until they reached the staircase. They rushed down to the lower level that was lit by faint blue light.

A distant *CLICK! CLICK! CLICK!*

A short while later they arrived at a door blocking the passage. Max thumped the button.

*CLICK! CLICK! CLICK!* A little louder.

The door slid open. They peered through into the darkness. It was free of monsters. They stepped through and shut the door, drowning out the approaching Clickers.

The familiar bone-like struts highlighted by the faint blue lights, gave Theo hope they were heading in the right direction. "This might be the far end of the corridor leading from the engine room that we left to enter the cathedral room."

"We won't make that mistake again," said Henry, panting.

They sprinted for the engine room. It was a straight run now. All they had to do was keep ahead of the Clickers and hope the cold prevented them from following up the exhaust tube.

The door rasped open behind them.

*CLICK! CLICK! CLICK!*

Theo glimpsed another door ahead. The engine room couldn't be far now.

They ignored the intersection they passed and kept heading for the back of the ship.

*CLICK! CLICK! CLICK!*

When they reached the door they encountered another problem. Their escape would not be as straightforward as they hoped. The buckled hull had bent the door frame, jamming it shut.

Theo cursed.

Panting from their run through the ship, they all needed to rest. All knew they would die if they did. They turned to backtrack and seek out another corridor, but froze.

*CLICK! CLICK! CLICK! CLICK! CLICK! CLICK!*

The Clickers rushed at them.

They were trapped.

Sensing their prey had stopped and would soon be theirs, the Clickers rushed excitedly along the corridor, but after a few strides they stopped and sent out a series of clicks down a side corridor. All were aware they had wandered into another's territory, but the promise of food had overridden their caution. Now they'd sensed another creature's presence, their caution returned.

With confusion upon his face, Theo gazed at the stationary creatures. "Why have they stopped?"

"Whatever the reason, I don't expect it's because they're scared of us," said Max.

Clawed footsteps drifted out from the side intersection. A few moments later a Hunter's blue-lit shadow crept into the corridor. The Clickers reluctantly backed away.

Theo's eyes quickly scanned the ceiling for something he'd noticed in other parts of the vessel. On spying what he sought, he rushed over to the small square vent in the ceiling. "Max, give me a hand," he whispered, urgently.

Max turned. Theo was standing beneath a vent with cupped hands. Max guessed his plan and silently praised the man's quick thinking. He rushed over, placed a foot in Theo's hands, gripped his shoulder and heaved himself up. He reached out. His fingers slipped through the metal vent slats. He pushed it up and slid it to one side. Theo hoisted him up and he scrambled into the vent.

The Hunter creature emerged from the intersection, turned to stare at the Clickers and howled a loud warning.

The Clickers turned and fled.

The Hunter focused its attention on the sounds coming from the opposite direction. It sniffed the air. It liked what it smelt and followed the scent.

As soon as Max had cleared the opening, Henry quickly followed. Max pulled and Theo lifted. Henry slithered into the vent. After Henry had crawled past him, Max laid on his stomach and leaned through the hole with his arms outstretched. "Your turn, Theo."

Theo shot a glance behind. The Hunter rushed at him. Theo leapt. Max grasped his wrists. Theo's weight dragged Max along the smooth metal. He jammed his boots against the sides of the small shaft in an attempt to anchor himself. It failed. Henry grabbed his legs, but the smooth sides of the vent offered no purchase to stop their slide.

Theo realized he would pull Max down if he didn't let go. He dropped to the floor. A quick glance along the corridor revealed the monster almost upon him. It howled. He looked up at Max blocking the opening. "Get back!" Fear and adrenalin

fuelled his leap. He gripped the edge of the hole and pulled his head and shoulders through. The monster's footsteps grew nearer. Max grabbed Theo under the arms and heaved. Pain masked Theo's face. The monster had him. Theo was yanked back, pulling Max with him, who refused to let go. Max jammed a foot against the edge of the opening for leverage. He felt the Hunter tugging Theo. He tugged back. Theo grimaced in pain from the claws ripping his skin. He kicked out blindly with his free leg. He felt his boot connect with flesh, but the monster's grasp remained firm. Theo knew there would only be one winner in this tug of war.

Theo stared into Max's frightened eyes. "Head to the back of the ship and leave this place."

Max shook his head and using all the strength he could muster, he pulled.

Theo continued to kick out with his free foot until a vice-like grip clamped around that leg also. He expected the monster's jaws to rip his flesh at any moment. He'd rather face the creature head on than continue with this stalemate. "Let me go, Max. The monster has me. Flee while you can."

Max knew his friend was right. They were achieving nothing except prolonging Theo's agony. He glanced at his friend's pained face and nodded. Reluctantly they released their hold on each other. Theo slid through the opening and dropped to the floor. Max stared at the look of absolute terror on his friend's face as he looked at something out of his sight and then up at him. "Flee, you fool, flee!"

The monster's face appeared. It howled up at Max and bent over Theo.

Henry slithered past Max and glanced below at the horrific creature. The vision of Eli filled his thoughts. He'd already lost one team member and couldn't bear the burden of losing another. He pushed Max aside, turned and dropped feet first through the opening. His feet thudded into the Hunter's back. The force knocked it forward. It tripped over Theo and fell to the ground. Henry rushed over and stamped hard on its head before it had a chance to recover. He pounded until the creature stopped moving. Breathing heavily, he backed away and looked at Theo. "Can you walk?"

Theo, shocked by the old man's brutal attack, nodded. "I think so." He grabbed Henry's outstretched arm and climbed to his feet. Warm blood trickled from his leg wounds. Though painful, he could still walk and knew he was lucky to be alive. He glanced at the dead creature and looked at Henry. "Thanks."

Henry smiled anxiously and began to shake when it sunk in what he'd just done. "You're welcome, but I'm not sure I could do it again."

"I'm hoping once will be enough. Now let's go before another nightmare turns up."

Max dropped down to help Henry lift Theo up to the vent and then hoisted Henry up. He leapt for the opening, grabbed the edge and Henry helped him climb inside.

Theo flicked on his flashlight and led them through the vent, leaving a trail of blood in his wake.

Spurred on by the monsters constant clicking, Jane, Lucy, Jack, and Richard rushed along the corridor.

Jack shot a glance behind. The three Clickers passed through one of the blue emergency lights, their frightening, ghostly forms a terrifying sight. "We'll never outrun them," said Jack.

Richard had arrived at the same conclusion.

"I'm open to suggestions," said Jane, breathlessly.

*CLICK! CLICK! CLICK!*

They raced around a corner. Lucy stumbled, crashed into Jack, struck her head on one of the rib supports and collapsed to the floor.

Jack quickly regained his balance and knelt to examine Lucy. Blood seeped from a small cut on her forehead. Jack picked her up.

"Is she okay?" asked Jane, shooting a worried look back along the corridor and the creatures approaching footsteps.

*CLICK! CLICK! CLICK!*

Jack glanced at her. "Unconscious, but we'll never escape if I have to carry her." He nodded to the nearest door. "Open it, we'll hide her in there and come back for her later." He entered the room and laid her on the floor.

Though Jane was reluctant to leave Lucy, they'd all be killed if they didn't. She closed the door when Jack exited.

Jack scanned the corridor. "Where's Richard?"

Jane turned and saw the man had gone. "He must have run off when we stopped. He never was a team player."

Screeches from back along the corridor impelled them to run.

The Clickers turned the corner. *CLICK! CLICK! CLICK!* Their quarry was closer. They screeched.

Jack noticed Jane's concerned expression. "I'll come back for her, I promise."

"I know you will. It just seems wrong to leave her."

Jack saw the approaching door blocking the corridor. "I have another idea."

"If it involves shoving me into a room and running away, you can think again, Jack Hawkins."

"It doesn't. I'm going to try and kill or injure one of the Clickers, and hopefully the other two will stop to eat it and give us chance to get away."

Jane, too breathless to continue the conversation and ask him how he planned to do that, put her trust in the man next to her.

They arrived at the door. Jack opened it.

"As soon as we're through, shut the door and keep on running to distract them."

"And you'll be doing what?"

Jack held up the ice axe. "Waiting."

Jane slammed a fist on the button when they were through and continued along the corridor.

The leading Clicker skidded on the metal floor and crashed into the door. It slapped the button and darted through as soon as the gap was wide enough.

*CLICK! CLICK! CLICK!*

It sensed its prey fleeing along the corridor.

Jack punched the door closed to temporarily stop the other two from getting through and rushed at the Clicker.

The Clicker heard footsteps and turned.

*CLICK! CLICK! CLICK!*

It was being attacked. It lashed out with a claw.

Pain seared across Jack's chest when claws ripped through the clothing layers to slide across his skin, leaving gouges in their wake. He slammed the axe with all his strength at the Clicker's head. The Clicker grabbed the axe, stopping it inches from its skull, snatched it from its attackers grasp and threw it away. Its other claw back handed Jack around the head. Jack slammed into the wall. Dazed, his legs buckled. He collapsed to the floor. The creature stepped toward its fallen prey.

Jane stopped and looked back. Jack's surprise attack had failed. The door slid open. A Clicker's arm was thrust through the widening gap. It smelt blood and was eager to taste it. She stopped the axe skidding along the floor toward her with a foot, snatched it up and rushed at the Clicker attacking Jack. The Clicker raised a claw to swipe at its prey. Jane leaped at its back, raised the axe and called out, "I hope your brain's hungry, because it's eating ice axe for dinner."

The Clicker's head twisted toward her. With all her might Jane slammed the axe point into the creature's skull. She felt the barrier of thick bone momentarily resist the sharp point, and heard the crack when the force drove it through into soft brain tissue. She collided with the creature and rode it down when it toppled forward. Blood sprayed when she yanked the axe free. She jumped before the monster hit the floor, rolled when she did and jumped to her feet. She spun to face the remaining two Clickers stepping into the corridor.

The Clickers sent out a series of clicks and snarled at Jane.

Through dazed eyes and fuddled brain, Jack had seen the creature's arm rise for its attack, but he was in no condition to resist. The Clicker had turned away and then toppled toward him with a trickle of blood running down its face. Jack scooted back, but he wasn't fast enough; it landed on his legs, trapping him. He was vaguely aware of something leaping over him when he stared at the deep wound in the Clicker's skull.

"If you're okay, I could do with some help here," Jane whispered. She reached over a shoulder and pulled out her own ice axe from her backpack.

Jack tilted his head. Jane stood aggressively with an ice axe in each hand. A globule of blood dripped from one and splattered on the floor.

*CLICK! CLICK! CLICK!*

*CLICK! CLICK! CLICK!*

Jack looked at the Clickers. Both were focused on Jane. They growled. The nearest monster rushed at her. Jack grabbed its ankle when it passed. It stumbled. Jane attacked before it could regain its balance. She avoided the claw that swiped at her and swung an axe. It pierced the side of its head. Blood spurted. It collapsed to one knee. Jane rushed around the side of the Clicker and buried the other axe in its back.

*CLICK! CLICK! CLICK!*

The second Clicker moved forward to attack.

Jane slipped on a pool of blood. The axe buried in the Clicker's back was pulled from her grasp. A claw brushed the top of her head during her fall. She stared up at the monster she slid toward. It turned its head from side to side, searching for her. *CLICK! CLICK! CLICK! CLICK! CLICK! CLICK!* Jane swung the axe into its stomach and let go. She slid through its legs and turned onto her front. She jumped to her feet, rushed forward and slammed a shoulder into the screeching

creature. It stumbled over its dead comrade and tripped. Jane pulled the axe from the dead Clicker's back, straddled the fallen creature when it turned and slammed the axe into its face. The Clicker's death-throes didn't last long.

Panting with the exertion, Jane collapsed to the floor and leaned against the wall.

“Are they dead?”

Jane looked at Jack. “I damn well hope so. I've not got the strength to fight again.”

“I thought you needed a hand?”

“I got fed up waiting. What did you do, have a nap?”

Jack smiled. “I tried, but with that racket you and your friends were making, it wasn't happening.”

They laughed.

Jack groaned when he pulled out from under the creature and leaned against the wall beside her.

He took deep breaths. “I think Ripley would be proud of you the way you fought those monsters.”

Jane looked at the three dead Clickers. “You only think she would be proud. She had an assault rifle, I had two ice axes and a napping accomplice; of course she'd be proud. Probably invite me along on her next Alien monster hunt if she gets to learn of this.”

Jack climbed to his feet and held out a hand. “Well, we can't spend all day basking in your glory—things to do, you know.”

Jane smiled, took his hand and pulled herself to her feet. They ended up face to face. They stared at each other, both wanted to kiss, but both were hesitant to make the first move. The moment passed and Jane stepped back. She noticed Jack's shredded jacket tinged with blood. “You're wounded.”

“It's only a scratch.” He retrieved the ice axes, shook off the drips of blood and lumps of gore and handed one to Jane. “Let's go fetch Lucy.”

The patter of small feet directed their gaze at the door.

Jack grabbed Jane's arm and was about to push her behind him, but then remembered what she had just done and removed his hand. They both prepared for battle.

Three small Hunter monsters, barely a yard tall, appeared through the doorway, glanced at Jane and Jack, screeched, pounced on the nearest dead Clicker and began feeding. Larger footsteps drifted through the open door.

Jane and Jack edged around the body the younglings were feasting on and gazed through the doorway. Five Hunters approached. The breasts on two of them identified them as female—the younglings' mothers. On spying them, the monsters screeched.

Jane and Jack fled along the corridor.

“We'll come back for Lucy when they've gone,” said Jack.

Jane nodded. “Okay.”

The adults stepped through the doorway, glanced at the two fleeing creatures and then at the three Clicker corpses. Deciding on the easier opportunity to feast, they gathered around the dead creatures and ripped off chunks of flesh.

Richard sped along the corridor and passed through another door. With no regard for his friends that might be following, he closed the door. For a moment, he remained in total darkness while he calmed his beating heart and allowed his fear to reach a manageable level. He switched on the headlight. Though the familiar bonelike struts highlighted in the torchlight gave him confidence he headed in the right direction, his panicked rush had left him uncertain of his bearings. He pulled out the camera and examined the photo of the route. But as he had no idea where he was, it failed to supply him with any clue to his position on the ship or which way he should go.

He carried on until he reached an intersection that offered him two choices. Straight ahead or turn right. Believing the right turn might lead back to the engine room corridor Henry, Max and Theo were on, he headed in that direction, but paused after a few steps and cocked an ear. Something breathed up ahead. His fear level began to rise. He felt Lucifer squirm beneath his jacket. He pulled down the zip enough to reveal its small form and sighed; its fur had turned red. Convinced his fears were real and something waited in the darkness ahead, Richard zipped up the jacket and slowly retreated to the intersection.

Cloaked in the darkness of an open doorway, the Hunter watched the strange being approach and stop. The old creature was not as fast as it once was. A damaged leg received in an affray with another creature slowed it down even more. Though its preferred method of attack was to lie in ambush and wait for its victims to come to it, it would give chase if required. Its retreating prey indicated the ambush had failed. The old Hunter stepped out of the room and headed along the corridor.

When the Hunter appeared in the furthest reach of his headlamp, Richard turned and ran. He turned right at the intersection. Fuelled by adrenalin and the will to survive, he fled for his life.

The creature Henry had knocked unconscious, regained its senses and groggily climbed to its feet. It shook its throbbing head and stared at the dark opening above. Sounds of movement within drifted out. It reached up and pulled itself inside. It sniffed the blood leading away from the opening and licked some up. It stared along the dark tube and let out a frightening howl.

The ravenous Hunter had left its forest lair to prowl the ship's corridors in search of something to fill its empty belly. A distant howl brought it to a halt. It directed its gaze upon the ceiling vent where the sound had come from. It moved closer and peered through the metal slats. Though it saw only darkness within, it heard strange sounds uttered by unfamiliar creatures. It gripped the grill with one claw and yanked it free. The discarded grill clattered to the ground. The Hunter climbed inside.

Max shot a terrified glance behind when the terrifying howl echoed through the narrow space. Something was in here with them. Claws scraping along the metal shaft announced its approach. Henry and Theo had also heard. They increased their speed.



A mass of cobwebs choking the vent brought Theo to a halt.

Max looked past the others and saw the reason for their halt. "That doesn't bode well."

Henry agreed, but however uninviting the blockage, they'd have to pass through it or face the horror approaching behind them. "We have to keep moving before that thing behind catches us."

With vision of giant spiders foremost in his thoughts, Theo dragged the webs aside, shivered from revulsion at their touch, and crawled through. After traveling a short distance, he again brought Henry and Max to a halt. His eyes focused on the crossroads of side turnings a little way ahead. He thought he had heard something come from one of the openings, but was unsure which one. He glanced back at Henry directly behind him for confirmation. "Did you hear that?" he whispered.

"What, apart from that monster coming up behind us?" asked Henry, anxiously.

Theo nodded.

Henry shook his head.

"Probably my imagination playing tricks?"

Max shot a glance behind. "Move!" said Max fearfully. "That thing will be upon us in a minute."

Hoping his nerves were responsible for creating the sound, Theo chose the route directly ahead and led them on. He glanced into both side turnings and saw only cobwebs.

When Max crossed the intersection, a shuffling noise from the vent on his left, directed his frightened gaze into the gloom and cobweb-crammed tunnel. The shuffling grew louder. Something sprung through the cobweb barrier. Max screamed in terror at the vision of the monster caught in his light. Its sharp-clawed hands grabbed him.

Henry's head spun when the scream echoed through the vent. He glimpsed Max's terrified expression and the vicious Web monster dragging him into the side tunnel out of sight. Max's screams continued. The metallic tang of blood filled the confined space. Henry shot toward the opening. He was halted when something grabbed his leg. He turned. Theo was responsible. "What are you doing? Let go." Henry struggled to free his leg. Theo held on tight. Blood oozed from the intersection. The gruesome sounds of the monster feeding upon their friend were loud within the narrow vent. The screams fell silent. Henry stopped struggling. Max was dead.

Theo released his hold on Henry's ankle. "You couldn't have done anything to save him, Henry."

Angered by the man's actions, Henry glared at Theo. "But I could have tried."

"And gotten yourself killed in the process. Come on, it's not safe in here anymore, we need to move."

Henry glanced at the vent that concealed the monster feeding on his friend. Though he knew Theo was right, he might have also been killed, the death of another team member weighed heavily upon him.

A screech from back along the tunnel reminded them of the other threat. The monster was gaining fast. They needed to get out of the vent before it caught up with them.

Henry turned and followed Theo's hurried dash through the narrow tunnel. The monster, Max's terror-filled eyes, his screams, and the stench of blood would forever remain with him.

The Hunter in pursuit warily approached the intersection. It sensed another's presence and smelt the appetizing aroma of fresh spilt blood. With its gaze directed at the darkness shrouding the creature it sensed within, it paused at the crossroads to lap up the tasty red pool. It did nothing to quench its hunger. Wanting more, it continued its rush after the fleeing creatures.

Jane and Jack slowed their sprint along the corridor and listened. They heard no sounds of anything in pursuit and assumed correctly that the Hunter monsters were busy feeding on the Clickers Jane had killed.

They paused at an intersection to ponder their next move.

"We have to go back for Lucy," said Jane, breathlessly.

Jack rested his hands on his knees while he caught his breath. "I know, and I promise we will, but not yet. It's too dangerous while those monsters are back there. When they've finished feasting, they should move on. Until that happens, I suggest we meet up with the others and try to fashion some weapons from the gear we left in the cavern, and then we come back for Lucy."

Though reluctant to leave her friend alone on the ship even for a brief time, Jane knew Jack's plan made sense. "The others are probably already outside as they took the most direct route."

"Then let's go find out." Jack's head throbbed, his chest hurt, he was tired, hungry and desperately needed a beer. "I've had enough of this place."

They headed off in a direction they thought would lead them to the back of the ship and the engine room.

Richard paused to catch his breath, cocked an ear back along the corridor and was he relieved when heard no sounds of pursuit— only the creaking ship and his rapidly beating heart. He glanced around at his surroundings. He was even more lost than before. His blind rush through the ship to escape the monster had left him disoriented, and now he'd no idea which direction the engine room was, or even the back or front of the ship.

Disheartened that he might never escape, he leaned back against the wall to rest. Startled by the door sliding open beside him, he backed away. Though he expected some nightmare creature to leap out, none did. He noticed the button beside the door and realized he must have leaned against it.

The headlight aimed inside the dark room revealed a shelving rack bent at an angle and leaning forward slightly. Objects that had fallen from the shelf were scattered across the floor. Curiosity moved Richard nearer and he peered inside. Metal racks, stocked with strange items, were laid out in neat rows that ran the full length of the room. Temporarily forgetting his predicament, Richard smiled. He'd hit the jackpot. There had to be something technologically advanced in here he could smuggle out and sell. It would be back-up in case the small alien died, or he failed to smuggle the creature out of Antarctica. He stepped inside to inspect the merchandise on offer.

Richard's eager eyes roamed over the array of strange items, of which there seemed to be an eclectic mix. Food canisters labelled with strange words and images of their strange contents, material that might be clothing or bedding folded neatly and stored in what seemed to be clear plastic wrapping, canisters of what might be chemicals, unusually shaped objects fashioned from various materials, and many other items whose use he couldn't guess. He ignored all of these. He desired something technical. Advanced weaponry, communication devices, medical equipment, or something he couldn't even imagine.

He ignored the first two racks filled with items that held no interest for him. It was in the third row he found something that might suit his particular specifications. He snatched the strange, curved triangular object from the shelf. A handle slightly too large for a human hand to grip comfortably, protruded from the base of the unit. The small screen and the few buttons around its edge informed him immediately that this object, whatever its function, was suitable for his needs.

A type of screen, contoured to the shape of the triangular device, filled most of the top area. Below the screen were three, small, round, red buttons etched with strange symbols. Positioned on the right side was a slightly larger square button. Believing the square button might be an on, off, switch, Richard pressed it. Immediately an image faded into view on the screen. Green thin lines of light glowed brightly against a ghostly grey background. It seemed to be a simple map of some kind. When he moved the device he was amazed to find the image altered. He swept it toward the door. The image changed to show the new position of the walls, shelves and doorway. It even depicted the outside corridor and parts of nearby surrounding rooms ahead of the device.

*It must be a scanner of some sort.*

To find out what the buttons below the screen did, Richard pressed the one on the left. The image zoomed out to reveal a slightly larger area of the ship. It now depicted rooms, corridors and nearby stairways. One more press achieved its maximum reach. He could now see the layout of the ship a few rooms distant from his position. He turned in a circle and viewed areas of the ship on all sides of the store room. He paused when red dots appeared. Two close together—one behind the other—moved through a small tunnel. Another, a short distance away in a side turning, was motionless, and a fourth was moving toward the other dots in the small tunnel.

It didn't take long for Richard to work out the dots represented things moving through the ship—monsters and his companions, though it was impossible to tell what dots belonged to which. He continued directing the scanner around and again paused on seeing a collection of dots near a doorway. Other dots, both singularly and in groups moved through various parts of the ship within the scanner's reach. Two dots moved quickly along a corridor not far from his position. He thought they might be two of his companions, possibly Jack and Jane. He aimed the scanner in the direction they headed. Caught in the far edge of the readout was a large room containing the outlines of strange shapes, including rows of circular objects—the engine room. Richard traced a route back to his position and found it free of any dots.

Curious to find out if one of the other buttons would give him a more detailed view, Richard pressed the next button in line. The scanner screen went blank. He

turned it left and right, but nothing appeared on the screen. He waved a hand in front. A blurred image crossed the screen. He moved his hand slower and then held it still. He was astonished to see an image of his hand minus the layers of skin. His blood vessels and muscles were clearly depicted, including blood flow. He moved the device along his arm. The image changed to depict each new internal part of his body. He aimed it at his leg and raised and lowered it. He could see the muscles working. He pressed the same button again. The view changed to show only his bones.

He stared excitedly at the scanner. The medical functions alone made it an invaluable piece of technology to the medical profession. Coupled with the radar-like capabilities, it would ideally be suited to the emergency services to find people trapped in collapsed or burning buildings, or the armed services to hunt down their enemy— they would pay the most.

Richard wondered if it would work in open spaces. He saw no reason why it shouldn't. In some ways the device reminded him of the scanner Ripley and the crew had used in the Alien movie to hunt down the murderous creature hunting them, although this seemed far more advanced and was actually a real piece of technology.

Richard stared thoughtfully at the scanner. Though too large to fit in a pocket, if he could smuggle it off the ship he'd be able to conceal it in his bag. He had best do that straight away. If he hurried, he would be able to beat the others to the engine room, climb the ice shaft and conceal the scanner in his bag. He switched to the radar view and checked his route back to the engine room was still clear. It was. He circled to check nothing was creeping up on him and froze when a red dot appeared on the scanner. It was in the corridor outside and slowly approaching the room he was in. It was too close for him to be able to run from the room and escape. He was trapped— again.

Richard cursed his luck and backed farther into the room. He tripped on something on the floor and fell against a rack. The objects knocked from the shelf clattered loudly on the floor. Richard stared at the scanner. The red dot paused for a moment before moving closer to the open door. Richard backed into the furthest corner of the room, switched off his headlamp and with the ghostly glow of the scanner's small screen highlighting his terrified face he listened to the scratch of clawed feet on the metal floor moving closer. His legs began to tremble. His heart pounded. He turned off the scanner and prayed it would pass on by.

With the scent of the creature's trail fresh in the air, the old Hunter paused outside the door it wafted from. Though its desire to feast almost overwhelmed its strict cautionary habit gained from years of experience, it wouldn't rush into the unknown. It bent at the waist, cautiously stuck its head into the room and directed his gaze at the almost overpowering stench of fear.

Jack and Jane reached the engine room without encountering any other monsters or any sign of their companions.

"Is anyone here?" Jane called out after the door slid shut.

Her voice echoing through the large room was the only reply.

Jack glanced over at the hole in the ship's hull, but saw no sign of anyone outside. "Perhaps they already climbed out. I know I wouldn't wait in this ship a moment longer than necessary with those monsters roaming about."

"Then I guess we should too." Jane followed Jack across the room.

They stepped through the hole and glanced up the ice tube. No one waited at the top.

Jack picked up the rope trailing down the hole and handed it to Jane. "You go first."

Jane took the rope and smiled. "Jack Hawkins, forever the gentleman."

Jack smiled back at her. "Or, it might be that I want to watch your bum when you climb up."

"Watch away. You're not going to see much while I'm wearing all this gear." Jane began her climb.

"It's alright, my imagination will fill in the blanks," he called after her.

Jane smiled.

When they were both at the top, there was still no sign of the others. They walked back through the ice tunnel, alongside the lake and into the large cavern to find it also deserted. A steady stream of snowflakes and ice particles drifting through the hole in the cavern roof had formed a small pile on the ground beneath. Snow and ice carried by the howling wind rushed across the small opening— their window to a different, normal world.

Jane sighed with disappointment. "The blizzard seems as strong as ever, unfortunately."

"Is there no way we can make it to your base camp when the others arrive and we've rescued Lucy?" Jack asked. "It's so near."

"Not with that wind. We'd be blown off our feet and maybe even carried away. Also, the wind chill must be about minus seventy or more. Even with all our layers of warm weather clothing there's a chance we'd freeze to death long before we reached base camp, and you don't even have that." Jane glanced around the cavern. "I'm afraid we're trapped down here until the blizzard is over, or it dies down enough for us to risk facing it."

"Don't you have a Sno-Cat up above? Surely if we could reach it we can drive to your base camp before the cold froze us."

"I agree. If the wind gusts, which have already blown one Sno-Cat into the rift, which you have first-hand experience of, died down, and if we managed to climb out of the ice rift without being blown away or smashed to our death against the ice, and if we managed to get the Sno-Cat started, and if the whiteout I believe is presently above our heads suddenly cleared so we could actually see which direction the base camp is without driving into the rift, or miss it all together, then, yes, there's a chance we could make it."

Jack smiled weakly. "Okay, I get the point. For the moment we're stuck down here with the monsters."

"At least we stand a slim chance against them. The weather that's presently up there is a killer." Jane was famished. She crossed to the storage containers and searched through them until she found the sandwiches Pike had prepared for the team. She glanced over at Jack, who still gazed forlornly at the hole in the cavern roof. "Jack, do you want something to eat?"

Jack dragged his worried gaze from the opening and nodded. "I don't suppose there's a beer in there?" He joined Jane by the crates.

Jane pulled out a large thermos flask, unscrewed the lid and sniffed its contents. "No beer, but there's coffee, or hot chocolate if you prefer."

"Coffee will be most welcome."

They sat down, ate sandwiches and sipped hot coffee while they waited for their friends to arrive.

"I hope Lucy's okay," said Jane.

"She should be fine as long as she stays in the room. Maybe the Hunters have finished eating by now, so if the others aren't back in a minute, I'll go and get her."

"I'm coming too," said Jane, even though setting foot aboard the spaceship again was the last thing she wanted to do, she wouldn't abandon her friend.

The Hunter howled when it sighted its prey and increased its speed to reach it.

Henry and Theo saw their chance to escape the monster, a grill in the vent floor. Theo crossed to the far side, pulled it open and urgently ordered Henry to drop through.

With the sound of the monster's devilish screech washing over him, Henry slipped through the opening and dropped to the floor. Theo raised his gaze at the loud scrape of claws on the metal tunnel. The monster appeared in his flashlight beam. Its slavering jaws eager to receive flesh dripped with anticipation. He cursed. It was too close for him to escape. He thrust the grill in front as a shield when the monster grabbed for him. It crashed into the grill. The force knocked him away from the opening. The monster tried to claw at him, but the grill that almost filled the width and height of the tunnel prevented it from doing so. Theo was pushed along the vent by the force of the monster's fervent attempts to grasp its meal.

Henry stared at the opening. The monster briefly appeared, then it was gone, and so was Theo. Powerless to do anything to help, he listened to their struggles. Theo shouted out panicked instructions. To save his friend, Henry rushed along the corridor.

Though Richard's view of the alien was only imagined, he could hear its raspy breath. He moved his head slightly to peer through gaps between the item-covered racks that blocked most of the creature from his sight and glimpsed parts of a pale ghostly form. Though he was scared and could see no way to survive this encounter with the alien monster blocking his only escape route, his strong sense of self-preservation kicked in. He dragged his unwilling body upright and moved along the rack until he stood at the end of the gap that stretched the length of the room. The monster stood between him and the only exit. All he had to do was get past the monster and he'd be free. He put a hand to his headlight, rested a finger on the on switch, and waited.

The monster sensed the human move. Dragging its ruined leg, it shambled through the doorway. Objects scattered by its feet skidded across the floor and crashed noisily into the metal racks. When the monster reached the end of the shelf, it paused, turned to face its prey and screeched like a nightmarish phantom.

In mingled horror and frightened anticipation as to the events about to unfold, Richard followed the progress of the ghostly form through gaps in the shelves. When the terrible vision lurched into view at the far end of the room and roared, he almost slunk back into the corner to hide from his fate. Plucking up the courage he desperately needed, he screamed what he thought was a terrifying war cry, switched on his head lamp and rushed at the monster.

It was hard to say which one of the two life-forms in the room were most surprised by this unexpected event. Though the Hunter's eyes widened slightly to register its surprise, the rest of its face failed to register any concern for the small, weak creature rushing to attack it.

The cowardly side of Richard, forced into action by his sense of self preservation, sent frantic messages to Richard's braver side to stop this foolhardy action that would only get him killed, and return to the far corner of the room and cower in fright. Richard's braver side ignored the warnings and forced him to relinquish its ownership of the valuable scanner.

Though reluctant to do so, Richard valued his life more. With all his strength behind it, he threw the scanner Frisbee style at the creature's head. When it left his hand, Richard stumbled on the objects littering the floor.

Without directing his gaze away from the creature rushing at it, the monster reached out a clawed hand and grabbed the makeshift missile from the air.

A screech of metal signalled Richard's collision with the edge of the last rack in the row. It bent from the impact. The last two twisted fastenings holding it in place popped out. The rack toppled, taking Richard with it.

The monster dropped the scanner and made a mistake. Ravenously hungry, when its prey appeared so near, instead of grabbing for the falling metal shelves, it went for the food pressed against the far side. Its claws stretched through the gaps in the shelves and were about to grasp the flesh of its victim when the rack crashed into it, knocking it to the floor with a glancing blow to the head.

Richard dodged the clawed hands that groped for him, steadied himself and shoved a shoulder hard against the rack. While it fell, he bounded up the side. He glimpsed the monster's face through a gap between the shelves and smiled before diving through the space between the rack and the top of the doorway. He rolled as soon as his hands touched the floor, and in one fluid motion jumped to his feet and ran as fast as he could away from the room and the monster inside.

Henry opened the door and rushed through as soon as the gap was wide enough. A short dash brought him to what he searched for, an intersection. He rushed to the right and stared at the grill in the ceiling too high for him to reach.

The grill screeched on the sides of the vent as it and Theo were forced backward at speed by the frustrated monster unable to get at its food. Well aware that the grill was only thing protecting him from a gruesome, painful death, Theo gripped it so tightly his knuckles were white.

Hunger for the feast so close prevented the Hunter from working out that if it stopped and yanked the grill from its prey's grip, it would be able to feed.

Theo, though terrified by the sight of the monster he stared at through the gaps in the slatted grill, somehow held his panic in check. If Henry was successful there

was still a chance he'd live through this latest nightmare. He twisted his head back to discover the source of the sound behind him. Another Hunter appeared out of the shadows and quickly advanced with a devilish screech. It grinned menacingly with saliva drooling from expectant jaws and grew closer at an alarming speed. Theo's chances had run out. Death beckoned him.

Henry turned when the door back along the corridor rasped open. Footsteps approach the intersection. The fear that had gripped him swiftly receded when he spied the beam of light dancing erratically. Monsters don't have torches. Someone rushed into view.

“Richard!” Henry called out.

Richard slowed and glanced at Henry, equally surprised by the encounter.

“Quick, help me. We need to save Theo.”

Richard was confused by Henry's request; Theo was nowhere to be seen. He stared hesitantly at the frantic man while he considered his options. The engine room was close now, probably only about fifty yards along the corridor. He could reach it in no time and escape from the ship. Nevertheless, he thought it might be wiser to help the old man. “What do you want me to do?”

Henry pointed up at the vent grill. “I need you to lift me up so I can remove the grill. Theo's trapped inside.”

Richard positioned himself below the vent and cupped his hands. Henry placed a foot in them and stepped up. Groaning with the old man's weight, Richard hoisted Henry high enough to grab the vent. Henry pushed up the grill. Something slammed it back down. He glimpsed a pale form move across the vent— another monster after Theo. He wouldn't stand a chance. He punched the grill aside, grabbed the monster's rear leg and yanked it through the opening. Unable to support the struggling man's weight, Richard let go and stepped back. Henry dropped to the floor, dragging the monster with it. The Hunter's head smashed against the side of the vent opening before thudding to the floor between the two men. Richard, shocked to see the Hunter's sudden appearance, kicked out at its face. Every blow brought another screech from its teeth-filled mouth. The Hunter lashed out with a claw. Richard darted out of its reach. Henry attacked. He stamped on the monster's head, hoping he could repeat the same effect as he had on the last one. The monster twisted to face the new attacker. Claws reached out to slash and rip. Sharp claws ripped open Henry's leg from thigh to shin. He screamed in pain and collapsed to the ground. Another swipe ripped through his clothes and skin, so deep one of its claws snagged on a rib, pulling Henry atop the monster.

Theo dropped through the open and slammed the grill into place so forcefully it jammed. He fell onto Henry and the monster. An ice axe headed for his face. Theo screamed.

Richard, stunned by the monster's brutal attack against Henry and the amount of blood pouring from the man's life threatening wounds, turned to flee when he remembered he wasn't completely weaponless. He whipped off the rucksack and pulled out Eli's ice axe. He stepped forward and raised the axe above his head. He aimed for the Hunter's face. Before the axe had covered half the distance, Theo dropped atop Henry and the monster. The tip of the axe narrowly missed Theo's



face when the man jerked his head to the side. The axe point entered one of the monster's eyes. It howled and bucked. Theo and Henry were thrown to the floor. Richard pulled out the axe with a gruesome slurp and struck another blow that smashed through the monster's teeth and tongue. A third blow entered its forehead. The monster's frantic throes pulled the axe from Richard's grasp. He backed away. The monster's movements grew weaker until it moved no more. Panting heavily, Richard slid down the wall to rest.

Theo rushed over to Henry. A quick examination of the man's wounds told him his friend wouldn't survive. He felt a hand grip his arm weakly and looked at Henry's pale face when he spoke.

"You are alive, my friend." Henry's voice was weak.

Theo smiled. "Thanks to you, old man."

Henry nods at the wounds he cannot see. "Is it bad?"

Theo nodded sadly.

Henry smiled weakly. "It's just as well. I'm too old for this adventurous lark."

Henry and Theo glanced up at the vent. They'd forgotten about the other Hunter. Its claws appeared through the grill slats that still separated it from its meal. The bending metal screeched with its efforts to pull it free.

Henry pushed Theo away. "You must go before it gets through, or my sacrifice will have been in vain."

"But I can't—"

"You must. Now go, quickly, you don't have much time."

Richard climbed to his feet. "He's right, Theo. There's no saving Henry, but we can save ourselves. I'm leaving with or without you." He turned away.

With tears misting his eyes, Theo looked at Henry, who grew weaker by the minute. Death wouldn't be long in coming.

"Go, Theo, please."

Though reluctant to leave his dying friend, Theo backed away. "Goodbye, Henry."

"Goodbye, my friend."

Theo turned and fled.

Henry stared at the Hunter monster glaring back at him through the vent. It could smell his blood and it wanted a taste. The Hunter's attempts to free the slatted cover increased. Henry glanced around. His eyes came to a rest on the axe buried in the dead monster's head. He dragged his weak body painfully over to the corpse. The tortured screech of metal rang out. The grill dropped to the floor with a loud clatter.

Henry gripped the axe handle and wiggled it free. The monster dropped to the ground and roared. Gathering his last vestiges of strength, Henry swung the axe at the sound. The monster grabbed Henry's arm that held the weapon and twisted. A loud crack of bone accompanied Henry's pain-filled scream. The axe slipped to the floor. Henry faced the monster and stared into its evil, soulless eyes. The fiend's jaws opened. Its tongue slid across sharp teeth. Though he dreaded what was about to come, Henry smiled defiantly at the monster. Claws neared his face. He knew there would be pain. He almost welcomed it, because death would soon follow, and he would be frightened no more. At least the time it spent eating him would give his friends a chance to escape.

Driven by its primordial need to eat and kill twinned with an indomitable will to survive and its lack of any empathy, dispatching its prey quickly to spare it pain wasn't something the Hunter considered. It dragged one of its sharp talons from its prey's forehead down to its chin and bathed in the scent of fresh blood, red and thick, seeping from the cut. It leaned closer, ran its tongue along the blood trail and lapped it up. It licked its lips with a satisfied slurp. It wanted more, much more. It gripped a flap of skin and tore off a chunk.

Henry felt the pain and heard the scrape of claw upon bone, his bone. The creature's rough tongue scouring the sensitive cut brought a fresh wave of torment. The sound of ripping skin, his skin and the intense pain almost brought him the relief he desired, but unconsciousness abandoned him. He remained alert to witness his pain and death. He felt his warm life-giving blood run down his face and neck and saw the claw reach out for more. *Death won't be long now. I'm coming, Martha.*

Henry screamed.

When Death welcomed him into its fold, he was glad to be there.

## Chapter 16

### Escape.

JANE PULLED THE WALKIE-TALKIE from her pocket. "I'll try to reach base camp. Scott and Pike must be worried about us and, if I can reach them, I can let them know what we've found. They might be able to contact someone to get us some help once the storm dies down."

"Good idea. I'm sure as soon as NASA finds out about the spaceship they'll move Heaven and Earth to get here."

Jane smiled. "If they believe us, that is."

"Good point. If you do get through, let them know Richard and I are here and to let those at Byrd Station know we're okay."

"Will do." Jane pressed the speak button. "Jane to Ice Rift base. Are you receiving me? Over." She released the button and waited. Only static and shrill white noise replied. She tried again. "Jane to Ice Rift base. Are you receiving me? Over."

The static continued.

Jack glanced up at the opening. "The storm must be blocking the signal."

"And being below the ice doesn't help." She looked up at the hole. "Reception might be better if I climbed up to the opening."

"If you think it's safe, it's worth a try."

They turned on hearing footsteps. Richard and Theo approached. Both looked like they had been in a battle and some of the blood on their clothes looked fresh. Theo walked with a slight limp and wore a sad expression. With the absence of Henry and Max, it was an indication something awful had happened. Richard smiled at them; he no longer looked smug.

"Where's Henry and Max," Jane asked, fearing the answer would confirm her suspicions.

"Dead!" was Theo's reply.

"The monster's got them," added Richard. He noticed the sandwiches, walked over and helped himself.

Jane laid a hand gently on Theo's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Theo."

Theo glanced around the cavern. "Where's Lucy?"

Jane quickly explained that she was still on the ship and why they'd left her there.

"So we have to go back," said Theo, not relishing setting foot on the monster infested spaceship again.

"Some of us do," said Jack.

"Well, I'm not going," said Richard, between mouthfuls.

Jane glared at him. "Now why doesn't that surprise me?"

Richard smiled.

She noticed Theo looking up at the hole. "The blizzard hasn't lessened any."

"I was afraid of that," said Theo, wearily. "So we're stuck down here, with them!"

"Until the blizzard passes or abates enough for us to risk facing it." Jane held up the walkie-talkie. "I can't get a signal down here, so I'm going to climb up just below the hole to see if I can get through to Scott. Let him know what's happening and what we've found."

Theo glanced at the rope dangling from the opening. "It might work, but be careful."

Jane slipped on a harness, grimaced when the straps pressured chaffed skin caused by her earlier fall, and attached the rope.

The others watched her climb.

"There's coffee and sandwiches if you want them, Theo."

Theo turned to Jack and shook his head. "I just want to get out of here." He lit a cigarette and took a long drag.

A low rumble forewarned the start of another ice tremor.

The ice began to vibrate and quickly grew in intensity.

Jane halted her climb and prepared to slide down if any chunks of ice fell through the hole. When the ice settled just as suddenly a few moments later, she restarted her climb. When she was only a few feet from the top a loud crack echoed through the cavern. Her worried glance above revealed the cause. Fracture lines spread out from the opening. At the same time as the ice above her collapsed, she released the descender's grip on the rope to send her speeding down its length.

The others looked in horror at the large chunks of ice plummeting toward Jane.

When the sides of the hole fell into the cavern, the rope had nothing to rest against. It dropped and swung. Jane fell a few feet before the slack in the rope was taken up. The spike the rope was tethered jerked when the rope's travel was halted by the edge of the enlarged hole, but held firm. Jane gripped the descender to stop her fall and swung when the rope found its new center of gravity. It saved her life, taking her clear of the falling ice that whizzed past behind her and smashed on the ground. Jane speedily rappelled to the ground and looked at the large pile of shattered ice. She glanced over at her friends. "That was close."

With a worried frown creasing his brow, Theo stared up at the roof of the ice cavern. "We need to get out of here. The increased tremors are evidence the rift could break away from the ice shelf at any moment. If that happens, we'll really be in trouble."

Jack looked at their only lifeline. "Is the rope still secure?"

Jane gave it a tug. "As far as I can tell, but we can't leave yet. Lucy's still on the ship."

"It's okay, I'll go and get her," said Jack.

"No without me you won't," Jane said adamantly.

All hell broke loose.

It began with pieces of ice, large and small plummeting through the enlarged hole, bringing with it a fluttering of snow and ice crystals. A screech of tortured metal drifted into the cavern. Something large and red appeared and jammed itself in the opening. It was the Sno-Cat that had fallen into the rift. The ice groaned from the weight. The vehicle juddered. The ice supporting the Sno-Cat collapsed. It nose-dived to the ground. Ice and snow followed in its wake. Jane dived to the side, but tethered to the rope, she was tugged back. She slipped on the strewn chunks of ice and fell to the ground. She rolled onto her back. The front of the Sno-Cat filled her vision. She needed to move. Her gloved fingers fumbled to release the rope from the harness. Just when she thought she would never do it in time, she was free. She crab-walked out of the path of the falling vehicle. The violent sound of crushing metal invaded the cavern when the Sno-Cat crashed to the ground inches from her feet. Jane shook with the adrenaline rush and her close escape from death. She let out a sigh of relief. Groaning metal indicated the Sno-Cat was still on the move. It toppled straight for her. She rolled to the side. The Sno-Cat struck the ground behind her. Worried she still wasn't out of danger, Jane climbed to her feet and moved away.

When the Sno-Cat toppled it had snagged the climbing rope, pulling it taut. The strain was too much for the spike driven into the ice to resist. It was yanked free and shot through the hole.

Jack saw the spike. His eyes followed its trajectory. He sprinted across the cavern. "Look out, Jane!"

Unaware of the latest threat, Jane turned. Jack ran toward her. Jack leapt and collided with her. Both tumbled to the ground. The tip of the spike buried itself into the ground in the exact spot where Jane had stood moments before.

Jane looked at the spike that had nearly killed her. "Thanks, Jack."

Jack climbed to his feet and smiled. "I think you escaped death at least three times just then." He held out a hand and helped her stand.

Jane smiled at Jack, grabbed his offered hand and stood. "Guess I'm just a lucky girl."

"It's customary in these damsel-saving situations for the saviour to receive a reward. A kiss would suffice." Jack grinned, expectantly.

"I'm sure it would." Jane gave him a peck on the cheek.

Disappointment spread across Jack's face. "Oh, I was expecting more."

Jane smiled. "Yes, I'm sure you were." She glanced up at the enlarged hole high above. "We're not out of danger yet. We're stuck down here now."

All heads swiveled to look back along the ice tunnel.

“Something wicked this way comes,” said Jane, fearfully.

Jack glanced up at the hole in the ice. “And we have nowhere to run.”

Three Hunters had followed the scent of the humans to the engine room and had spread out to search for them. One had arrived at the hole in the hull and followed the scent to the sloping ice tunnel. It had dug its claws into the smooth ice and climbed up. When it heard the sounds of the strange creatures drift from a passage in the ice, it had howled its hunting cry and rushed through the ice tunnel.

Jack glanced around the cavern for a weapon and picked up the ice pick he'd laid aside. The others copied him.

Theo smelt gasoline. He looked at the battered Sno-Cat. Fuel dripped from its ruptured tank. He remembered the crew of the *Nostromo* fought the Alien with flame throwers; they didn't have them, but they did have something. “What about fire?”

The others looked at him. “If we soaked something in gasoline and tie it to a stick or something, we could light it. Most creatures are afraid of fire so maybe the monsters are too.”

Jack agreed it was worth a try. “It could work.”

“We don't have a stick,” said Jane.

Jack glanced at the Sno-Cat “Yes we do— the wooden seats.” He rushed over to the crashed vehicle and crawled inside. He tore away the foam seat and used the ice axe to pry a slat free.

Jane handed him a wool jumper when he climbed out.

She nodded at Richard's blue bag and smiled. “I'm sure he won't mind.”

Jack wound the jumper around one end of the wooden slat and tied it in place with the arms.

“Hurry up, Jack, its coming,” warned Richard, who kept his gaze directed along the ice tunnel.

Jack spotted the Hunter making its way cautiously toward them. He knelt, bathed the cloth in the puddle of gasoline until it was saturated with fuel and crossed over to the others. He held the makeshift torch out to Theo. “Light me.”

Theo struck his lighter and touched flame to the fuel soaked cloth. It whooshed ablaze. Dark smoke rose when the cloth took hold. The smell of singed wool filled the air. Jack held it out in front and waited.

The Hunter halted and stared at the flames. It gazed around the cavern and, for a few moments, focused on the hole in the roof. It looked back at the humans, shrieked and rushed at them.

Though all eyes were concentrated on the creature's every movement, Richard nevertheless couldn't prevent himself from stating the obvious. “Here it comes.” He backed away.

Jack waved the burning stick from side to side. The creature was almost upon them and seemed unafraid of the fire. When it was barely two yards away it leapt to the side. Its claws dug into the ice and propelled it along the wall. Shards of ice sprayed from each claw to leave a gouged trail in its wake. Their eyes followed its climb up the wall toward the roof.

Jack's eyes shot to the opening and guessed the creature's intention. It was trying to escape. He dropped the torch, ran over to the metal spike, tugged it free and followed the creature's path through the cavern. He drew the spike back javelin style and put all his strength behind the throw. The spike sailed through the air.

The Hunter squealed when the spike struck it a glancing blow on the shoulder before sticking in the ice. It lost its grip and fell. Its claws shot out to reclaim a purchase on the scalloped ice. Trails of ice sprayed out from the creature's slide down the wall, leaving behind deep-clawed gouges. It slowed and stopped. It turned to look at the group and snarled.

Jane hurled her ice axe.

Though her aim was true, the creature had moved before the axe struck. It bounced off the wall and clanged to the ground.

The creature reached the roof, climbed along it and slipped out of the hole. It had escaped.

Richard let out a sigh of relief. "That's one less nightmare to worry about."

Jane glared at Richard. "You couldn't be more wrong. It's free now. On a planet where it doesn't belong. If it reaches civilization who knows how many will die at its hands."

"But we're hundreds of miles from anywhere and anyone. It won't be able to survive the cold for long, will it?" said Theo, uncertainly.

A low trembling roar rolled through the ice.

The cavern walls shook. Chunks of ice fell and exploded on contact with the ground. The cavern was becoming unstable.

One large chunk narrowly missed Jack, showering him with ice shards when it crashed to the ground. "We can't remain here much longer."

Jane looked at him. "I agree. The cavern could collapse at any moment. We'll have to return to the ship, find Lucy and then plan our next move."

"Go back to the spaceship!" said Richard, appalled at the idea after having spent so long escaping from the monsters within. "You can't be serious."

The falling chunks of ice increased.

Jane glanced at Richard and smiled. "You can stay here if you want."

Richard scowled at her. He felt the creature hidden beneath his jacket move.

Two howls rang out. Richard sighed.

Their glance alongside the lake revealed the approach of two more Hunters.

"We can't let them escape like the last one," said Jack, defiantly. He snatched up the flaming torch and moved into the tunnel to prevent them from scaling the walls like the last one.

Jane retrieved her thrown ice axe and along with Theo also armed with an axe, they stood beside Jack.

Richard shook his head in dismay, retrieved an axe from the stack of supplies and joined the others.

The monsters advanced.

## Chapter 17

### Base Camp Monster.

SCOTT SIPPED HIS STEAMING mug of coffee and stared out the window at the raging blizzard caught in the powerful lights positioned around the camp. When another strong gust shook the cabin his thoughts turned to his friends in the rift. "I hope they're okay."

Pike, busy reading *Ben Hammott's* latest novel, *The Lost Inheritance Mystery*, a humorous Victorian mystery revolving around the search for a lost inheritance worth millions, dragged his attention from its pages and looked at his anxious friend. "If they're in the cavern, they'll be fine."

Scott noticed something move outside— a shadowy form. His eyes peered at the spot, but detected no other signs of movement. "I think someone's out there."

Pike joined him at the window and peered at the storm raging outside. "Are you sure?"

Scott shook his head vaguely. "No, but I'm going out to check." He placed his cup on the table. "It might be Eli lost in the blizzard."

"Okay, but don't go too far, or you might not find your way back."

Scott staggered and was almost blown off his feet when he exited the hut and stepped into the biting wind. He pulled the door shut and scanned the area, but saw nothing that could be a person. Hunched against the storm, he made his way to the position where he thought he'd seen someone. His eyes scanned the ground for footprints. If there had been any, the wind had wiped them clean. He set off to search the camp's perimeter.

When he passed the storage sheds he heard a noise that sounded like something banging. A few more steps brought the swinging door into view. He was certain he'd latched it shut. Either the wind had freed it or someone had entered. Believing it might be Eli seeking refuge from the storm, he entered to find out.

The cabin shook and creaked with the wind gusts beating furiously against it, and ice pellets constantly pinged against its metal sides. He switched on the light, casting yellow illumination through the storeroom, and slid the dark goggles onto his brow. His eyes scanned the length of the room, halted on a dark area at the far end and focused on a slightly lighter form amongst the shadows, but it was difficult to tell exactly what it was.

"Is that you, Eli?"

No answer.

Though he sensed something was wrong, he couldn't pinpoint the reason. When he advanced a few nervous steps, the pale form moved further into the corner until it was out of sight behind some stacked crates. The way it had moved, more like an animal than a human, crept Scott out.

He moved a few steps closer and thought he heard breathing. He pushed the parka hood over his head. "Is anyone there?"

When he received no reply, he moved closer until he drew level with the end crate.

He couldn't explain his hesitation or sense of apprehension. There were no large animals in Antarctica, so it could only be one of the group, Jack or his passenger. He forced his nervousness aside and stepped nearer. There was something vague hunched in the shadow-filled corner. He fished a small flashlight from his pocket, switched it on and shone it into the darkness.

What shimmered in the corner wasn't human. Its head turned to look at him. Claws lashed out. Scott staggered back and fell. The terrifying monster climbed upright.

The screeching cry that reverberated throughout the hut brought Scott to his senses. He threw the torch at the nightmare made manifest and rushed from the cabin. He slammed the door shut behind him to trap the monster. The build-up of snow in the entrance prevented it from closing. The pale form emerged from the corner and skulked forebodingly toward him. Scott shoved the door harder. The snow bunched up against the base of the door when it juddered forward. A final forceful shove rammed it into its frame. He slid home the metal latch and backed away. The door shook when the monster slammed into it.

Scott's gaze fell upon the door catch; it wouldn't last long against such force. He desperately searched the area for something to block it with, but there was nothing. Everything had been stowed away before the storm hit. His eyes rested on the garage door and pictured what lay within. He rushed over to the garage, pulled the doors open and climbed into the remaining Sno-Cat. He turned the key. The engine turned, but didn't catch. The second attempt brought it to life; it roared. The headlights sent two light arcs across the camp. They roamed across the buildings when Scott drove out of the garage. Hundreds of individual pieces of snow and ice flashed through the light beams before disappearing into the surrounding gloom. Scott steered the vehicle over to the storeroom and edged closer until the front jammed tight against the door. Whatever that thing was, it was now trapped.

"You've gone crazy man," Pike replied when Scott told him about the creature. "There ain't any monsters here or anywhere."

Scott pointed out of the window. "Then why did I block the storeroom door with the Sno-Cat?"

Pike saw the hazy red shape of the vehicle through the driving snow. "Because your concern for the team out on the ice has made you stir crazy. You're seeing things. It's the only rational explanation."

Scott looked at his friend. "Come on Pike, you know me. Do you really think I've suddenly gone mad?"

Pike scratched his head. Scott was one of the sanest people he knew. He shrugged. "But what other explanation is there? I can't believe something like you've just described is out there, trapped in the storeroom. It's not possible. No!"

"If our roles were reversed, I'd think the same. However, it's out there."

Pike shot a nervous glance through the window. "You're really creeping me out, man."

"You're lucky, you didn't see it. It's like something that's escaped from the underworld or a horror movie set."



Though skeptical a monster existed, Pike thought his friend believed he was telling the truth.

“Come on. You want proof, I'll give it to you.” Scott headed for the door.

Pike knew he had to find out for himself to reassure himself Scott hadn't gone crazy and locked one of the team in the storeroom. “Okay, I'm coming.”

The two men approached the shed and stood beside the front of the Sno-Cat.

Pike stared at the door. Nothing banged on it. Apart from the vehicle jammed against the door, everything seemed normal. He wore a frown when he looked at Scott.

Scott knocked on the door. Nothing happened. “It probably realized it can't get out and stopped, or maybe it froze to death.”

Pike wasn't reassured about the man's sanity. If he'd gone temporarily crazy for some reason, someone might be imprisoned inside; they wouldn't last long in this cold. “Maybe we should move the Sno-Cat and take a look inside.”

A loud metallic squeal cut off Scott's reply. It had come from around the side of the hut. They cautiously moved to the corner and peered around the side. A flap of metal that formed the end of the hut was bent out. Insulation flapped in the wind.

Scott grabbed Pike's arm and shouted, “It's free! We have to get back inside. We're sitting ducks out here.”

Though still not convinced a monster existed outside his friend's mind, Scott's obvious fear was very convincing and very unsettling. Pike followed Scott's hurried dash to the main hut.

Pike watched Scott strip off his cold weather gear with a worried frown that refused to go away. Though something seemed to have forced its way through the side wall, it wasn't necessarily Scott's monster that was responsible; a man could have done it. His doubts remained only because Scott's present behaviour was so far outside his normal character.

Scott noticed Pike's concerned expression and mistook the reason for its presence. “Don't look so worried. It can't get us in here.”

Pike followed him into the mess hall. “Are you certain you saw what you believe you saw? You said it was dark. Maybe it was Eli or one of the others?”

Scott walked over to the window and peered out. “So you still don't believe me?”

“Shit! I don't know. I want to, because that'll mean you're as sane as I am, but if what you say is true, there's a vicious monster on the loose out there somewhere. Something I'm finding very hard to come to terms with.” He joined Scott at the window. “You have to admit, it's a bloody difficult thing to believe.”

“That doesn't mean it's not true, and I assure you, that thing wasn't human.” Scott turned, picked up his cup from the table and sipped of the cold coffee.

Suddenly, a monstrous face with peering savage eyes and hungry gnashing teeth slammed against the window.

Pike screamed, staggered back and toppled to the floor.

Scott stared at the monster. The cup slipped from his grasp and smashed on contact with the floor.

The monster scraped a claw down the window. The high pitched screech sent a shiver down their spines. It slammed a clawed fist on the toughened glass, but failed to break it. The monster glared at them and disappeared.

Scott looked at his shocked friend. "Do you believe me now?"  
Shaking with fright, Pike nodded.

The Hunter monster slunk around the hut in its search for a way inside. It paused at a stack of angle-iron left over from when the huts were constructed and stared at it for a few moments while its brain processed their usefulness. Snow cascaded from the length it picked up. It crossed to the nearest window and struck the glass with the metal bar.

Scott helped his friend to his feet.

A boom reverberated through the hut.

"That wasn't the wind," Scott stated. "It's trying to get in."

The two men rushed into the hall when a second boom rung out.

Pike pointed at a door along the corridor. "It's coming from Henry's room."

Caution guided their nervous approach to the door. Scott turned the handle and pushed the door open. The window shattered. Glass sprayed into the room. Snow and ice borne by the howling wind rushing through the broken window, picked up loose sheets of paper and swirled them erratically around the room. The monster poked its head through the window and growled savagely. Scott pulled the door shut. There was no lock and no chance to barricade it.

With a fear-shrouded voice, Pike asked, "Do you think it can open doors?"

The monster slammed against the door. Wood splintered.

"I don't think that's going to be a problem for it," said Scott. "Let's drop back to the mess hall."

"Then what do we do?"

Scott glanced at Pike. "I haven't thought that far ahead."

Wood splintered. The door collapsed into the hallway. Carried by its momentum, the Hunter smashed into the opposite wall and tumbled to the floor.

Scott paused outside the mess hall door. "Grab your cold weather gear, I think we're gonna need it."

They grabbed their clothes and entered the mess hall.

"Give me a hand to shove the table against the door. It should buy us some time."

Pike grabbed the other side of the table and together they carried it over to the door. "Now what? That won't stop it for long."

The Hunter climbed to its feet and moved along the corridor.

Scott knew his friend was right. His gaze around the room halted on the window. "Put your gear on. We're going outside."

They hastily pulled their cold weather clothes on and climbed through the window. Scott glanced at the door when the monster slammed its weight against it. The table juddered an inch. He dropped down into the snow.

The door burst open. The table screeched hesitantly along the floor. The Hunter entered and turned its head around the room. Its eyes settled on the windblown ice pouring through the open window. It crossed the room and peered out. One of

the two legs was standing a short distance away. Sensing its next meal would shortly be upon its lips, it climbed through the window and rushed at its prey. Though the defenseless creature backed away, it made no attempt to flee. The Hunter sensed a trap. Its prey's eyes briefly flicked to the side. The Hunter turned to see what had attracted its attention. Something large and red filled its vision.

Just when Scott thought his plan would be successful and the monster would be struck by the Sno-Cat driven by Pike, it leapt into the air a moment before the vehicle hit. The monster had the reflexes of a mongoose. It landed on top of the Sno-Cat uninjured and angry.

Scott ran and was soon swallowed by the blizzard.

Dismayed that his friend had abandoned him to face the horror alone, Pike tilted his head at the cab roof the monster's claws screeched across. He locked the doors and turned the vehicle sharply in an attempt to dislodge the uninvited passenger. Claws scraped across metal as they scrambled for a purchase on the smooth surface. Pike spun the wheel in the opposite direction. Metal buckled when the monster toppled to its knees. He yanked the wheel again. There was no scraping of metal this time, evidence the creature had found something to hold on to.

Pike twisted his head and glanced at the trail of bulges in the roof made by the monster moving to the front. He refocused his attention forwards. He had to do something. The frightening head appeared upside down in the windscreen. Pike slammed on the brakes. The vehicle's sudden halt shot the creature off the roof. Caught in the glare of the headlights, Pike saw the full effect of the monstrosity that had invaded the camp. Its pale body, claw-tipped limbs and a mouth not built for kissing was a vision that would haunt him for the rest of his life, which he thought might not be that long. The monster kicked up snow and ice when it landed and tumbled across the ground. Pike gunned the engine and let the clutch out.

Scott ran from the storeroom. He witnessed the creature thrown from the roof and heard the Sno-Cat's engine rev. Pike was going to ram the creature. The vehicle lurched forward to an abrupt halt. In his panic Pike had stalled it. Scott rushed across the camp.

Pike turned the key. The engine stuttered, but failed to start. "Just like in the damn movies," he cursed.

Pike glanced out. The creature rose to its feet and staggered, as if dazed. The engine started. Pike shoved the Snow-cat in gear and coaxed the machine forward before the monster regained its senses. He peered through the snow and ice at the splash of colour he'd glimpsed behind the monster; it was Scott. Though he'd no idea what his friend was up to, Pike was glad he'd returned. He brought the vehicle to a halt; if he struck the creature with Scott so close, he might kill them both. He gunned the engine to keep the monster's attention focused on the Sno-Cat.

Scott threw something over the monster's head. The creature gagged, clawed at its neck and staggered back. Scott deftly avoided the claw that lashed out at him, ran around the struggling monster and over to the Sno-Cat.

When Scott drew closer, Pike noticed the coil of wire in his hand. Scott disappeared from view when he knelt by the front of the vehicle, but quickly reappeared and looked at Pike. "Drive!"

To avoid stalling again, Pike gradually pulled away to get traction and then pressed hard on the gas pedal.

The Hunter ripped at its skin, drawing blood in its frantic attempts to free the thing wrapped so tight around its throat it bit into flesh. It barely managed to dodge the speeding Sno-Cat. The corner struck its side and sent it spinning. Pike drove ten yards before the wire yanked taut. The loop of wire around the monster's neck snapped closed. Blood sprayed from its neck when its head flopped to the side and landed face up in the snow. Pike witnessed the monster's decapitation in the mirror. He brought the vehicle to a halt and climbed out. Blood spraying from the creature's neck froze to form gruesome ice crystals the wind carried away. The body toppled to the side and flopped to the ground.

Pike walked over to Scott and looked at the horrific face of the monster; even in death it was terrifying. "Where in Hell's name did this demon come from?"

With a worried frown upon his brow, Scott stared across the ice. "Though it belongs in Hell, that's not where it came from. It could only have come from one place—the rift."

## **Chapter 18**

### **Return to the ship.**

JACK, JANE, THEO, AND RICHARD watched the Hunters advance.

The tremors started again. One was so forceful it almost spilled them to the ground.

Jack kept his eyes on the approaching Hunters when they split apart. He thought they were either wary of the flames or planned to attack the two on the edges, Jane and Theo. He swapped places with Jane. The nearest monster snarled at him. Jack lunged and prodded the fire at its evil face. It leapt back.

"They are afraid of fire," stated Theo, happily. "Hold on, Jack, I'll nip back and make a couple more torches. Richard, come and help."

Glad to be moving away from the two monsters, Richard readily followed Theo.

They returned a few moments later with three more flaming torches. Theo handed one to Jane. They spread out in a line and waved the flames at the creatures. The Hunters' hungry eyes constantly observed the humans behind the flames when they reluctantly backed away. Monsters and humans swayed unsteadily when the ice again shook violently; the rift was definitely on the move. Loud crashes echoed from along the tunnel behind them.

Richard glanced back. Large chunks of ice crashed to the ground. "The cavern's collapsing!"

Cracks appeared in the ice tunnel walls. Another tremor brought down more ice. A large lump fell between the team and the monsters and exploded on contact with the ground. Confused about what was happening, the Hunters howled.

Jane glanced at the cracks forming in the ice tunnel before her eyes. If they didn't hurry they'd never leave. "The tunnel's breaking up. Move or we'll be buried alive."

As if to emphasize her warning, the end of the tunnel where it met the cavern collapsed. A wave of falling ice sped toward them.

Jack shot a glance back at the approaching avalanche of ice. "Let's go."

The Hunters also recognized the danger. With the humans on their heels, they turned and fled down the tunnel. They reached the bottom, dived into the ice tube and slid to the bottom.

The humans arrived a few moments later. Accompanied by the disconcerting ice crashing to the ground all around them, the four survivors crowded the top of the ice tube.

Worried about re-entering the ship, Jane peered down the uninviting tunnel. "They could be waiting for us."

"I'd be surprised if they weren't, but we've no choice," Jack answered. "I'll go first and hold them back if they're there. The rest of you follow me down." He turned to Richard and held out a hand. "I'll need an axe."

Richard reluctantly handed it over.

Jack sat at the lip of the sloped tunnel and pushed himself off. He jumped to his feet with the torch held out when he arrived at the bottom. He turned and stared at the rip in the ship's hull. No monsters were present, though he suspected they weren't far away.

Jane came down next. With the flaming torch held before him, Jack cautiously thrust the torch through the ragged opening. No shrieks or sounds of movement greeted the flames. He peered through. There was no sign of the Hunters.

Theo arrived and stared nervously at the hole.

Jack noticed his anxious gaze. "Wary of the flames or frightened by the falling ice, they seemed to have gone in search of easier prey."

Theo scoffed. "I'd be surprised if there's easier prey than us down here."

Richard sat on the top of the tube and waited for Theo to move. He turned when ice crashed to the ground behind him and sprayed him with ice. He glanced up. The roof collapsed. Tons of ice fell toward him. He pushed himself down the tube. Large and small pieces of ice slid and tumbled down behind him.

A loud rumble caused those at the bottom to look up the tube.

"Inside!" ordered Jack.

Richard slid across the ice. Jane grabbed his hand and yanked him into the ship as the avalanche arrived to fill the space outside, spraying ice into the ship.

When it had settled, they stared at the opening highlighted in the flickering torchlight. It was packed solid.

"We're trapped!" stated Richard, ominously.

"There's one consolation," said Jane. "No more monsters can escape."

It brought Richard no comfort whatsoever.

"But neither can we," said Theo. "How will we get out now?"

"Let's go find Lucy, and then we can worry about escaping."

"I'm already worrying," said Richard, worriedly. "From the increase in tremors it's a good indication the ice this ship is trapped in, will soon be adrift."

"Then I suggest we hurry," Jack told him. "Form a circle so we can protect our flanks from a surprise attack."

When the protective circle of flaming torches had been formed, they crossed to the exit and passed through. The corridor was clear. They broke the circle and while Jack and Jane faced forward, Richard and Theo walked backward. Though progress was slow, they eventually neared the part of the ship where Jack and Jane had hidden Lucy. Though they'd heard an occasional distant shriek, so far no monsters had made an appearance.

Jack halted the small group and whispered, "Just around the corner is where the monsters were feeding on the Clickers Jane killed. I'm hoping they've feasted and left, but if they're still there, don't panic. We must stay together and drive them away with the flames."

Jack cautiously approached the end of the corridor and peered around the corner. Apart from the remains of three devoured corpses, no monsters were in view. He led the nervous team across to the door that led to corridor where they would find Lucy in a nearby room.

Theo and Richard looked at the grisly chewed carcasses; hardly any flesh remained on their disarrayed bones. Both knew they'd suffer the same fate if they were caught. Unable to avoid stepping in the pools of congealing blood, they left bloody footprints in their wake. On reaching the door, Theo and Richard faced the corridors that led off to the left and straight ahead and held torches ready to fight off any monsters that appeared. Jane positioned herself beside the door control while Jack prepared to face whatever lay on the far side of the door when it opened. He held a flaming torch in one hand and a raised an ice axe in the other. Jane opened the door.

The first thing Jack noticed from the light of the flaming torch he thrust through the doorway were the smashed and hanging blue emergency lights; only a couple remained lit. Their swaying movements indicated it had been done recently. The shadows cast the length of the corridor wavered back and forth, creating a spooky scene for them to enter. One light had a dodgy connection and flashed on and off similar to a strobe light. Jack guessed the monsters were responsible—further evidence of their intelligence. It felt like a trap.

Richard felt Lucifer squirm beneath his jacket and knew for certain its fur would be bright red. "The monsters are coming." He laid a reassuring hand over the lump in his coat and waited for the nightmares to arrive.

Theo glanced at Richard and was about to ask how he knew, when they arrived. Shrieks rang out from all directions.  
It was an ambush.

Scott and Pike entered the main hut and slipped out of their cold weather clothing.

"We need to get help. If there are more of those things in the rift, the others will be in trouble."

"Who will you call?" Pike asked.

Scott looked at him. "Everyone!"

The Hunters in the corridor the far side of the door rushed at Jack and Jane when they peered through the opening. Caught in the flickering strobe light, they appeared and disappeared, seeming to lurch forward in slow motion.

The Hunter monsters Theo stared at filled the corridor as each scrambled forward in the haste to be first to reach the limited meal on offer. "Jack! We need to do something, fast!"

The mass of clawed limbs and sharp teeth that rushed at Richard, were just as eager to reach the food before the others claimed it. Screeches, howls and scraping claws came from all three directions.

Aware that fighting on three fronts would result in them all being killed, Jack decided on the only solution he could think of. "Everyone through the door and use the flames to hold them back."

They scrambled through the doorway. As soon as they were through, Jack closed the door. When the edges met he smashed the door control with the axe.

Jane glanced at the smashed control and then at Jack questioningly.

Jack shrugged. "It might work this time."

They spread the width of the passage and held out the flaming torches. The monsters slowed and stopped a short distance away. The Hunters on the other side of the door slammed into it. Their muffled shrieks and howls and the pounding on the door indicated their frustration and anger at being denied a meal. When one was injured in the melee, they turned on each other.

Jack glanced along the corridor. "The room where we put Lucy isn't far away, so let's see if we can force the Hunters back far enough so we can join her. The room will be easier to defend than the wide corridor."

They waved and prodded the flames at the snarling monsters as they cautiously moved forward. The Hunters backed away from the flames.

Theo stabbed at one that swiped out a claw. It squealed when the flames licked at its skin.

Richard glanced at Theo. "I'm glad we've got these torches, we'd be dead without them."

They hadn't gone very far when a thin tube slithered from the ceiling and pointed its nozzle at Richard's torch. A jet of white foam shot out, smothering the flames instantly. Richard cursed. Theo's torch was next to be extinguished.

Jane tried to keep her torch away from the nozzle now directed at her flames, but it moved just as quick. When the foam shot out, she threw the torch at the monsters in a last ditch effort to drive them back. The monsters screeched and leapt back from the flaming missile. Jack glimpsed what he thought was the room where Lucy was, almost level with the monsters. When the extinguisher turned in his direction, he rushed forward and frantically waved the torch from side to side, driving the monsters further back. He snatched up Jane's torch as another nozzle slid from the ceiling. He pressed the door button with his elbow. "Everyone inside."

They rushed into the room.

As foam sprayed, Jack flung the torches at the monsters and stepped into the room. Jane closed the door. Jack's eyes searched the room. There was no sign of Lucy. She had either awoken and wandered off, or they were in the wrong room.

The Mimic received the report from one of her minions sent to track the humans. They were in trouble. If they were all killed she might never leave this prison. The Mimic set off to see if they required her help.

She heard the sound of the creatures before she set eyes upon them. She rounded a corner and gazed at the group of ten Hunters gathered in the corridor with their attention focused upon one of the doors. The Mimic assumed that's where the humans had taken refuge. When she held her arms out to the side, they morphed into two sharp blades. She glanced briefly at a door she passed and without breaking her stride she approached the monsters. The first two died without noticing her arrival, but the remainder saw the menace that threatened them. They scrambled away along the corridor, but with their escape blocked by the inoperative door, they turned and faced the threat. They snarled at her and guardedly moved forward to do battle.

The Mimic swiped the blades at the nearest two. Blood sprayed their comrades and the corridor walls when the two Hunters' heads parted from their bodies. Three rushed at her. A blade stroked across one's stomach, leaving behind a rip that spilled intestines. Another died from the blade that passed straight through its body, a twist and a yank up severed vital organs. The third was stabbed in the eye to penetrate its brain. As their bodies collapsed to the floor in a bloody heap, the Mimic stepped back.

The three remaining creatures glanced at the dead bodies of their brethren. Though the urge to feast upon them was strong, they had to kill the attacker first. All knew how difficult that task would be. They communicated a plan with grunts and shrieks. They stepped over the piles of tempting flesh and spread out in a line. The middle creature shrieked before it leapt. Its claws stretched out to slash and kill. The remaining two went in low to body tackle the Mimic and knock her off balance.

The blade that swished through the air severed the leaping monster's claws at the wrists. It howled in pain and watched the blood pump from its wounds. The Mimic dodged to the side, and as the creature sailed past, she held a blade so the creature's momentum dragged its body along the tip. Its insides slurped out before it crashed to the ground. To avoid the two about to tackle her, she somersaulted into the air and stabbed the blades behind her. Both blades found their target. The wounded Hunters howled in pain and turned to face the Mimic for a second attack. The Mimic spun on landing and, in one fluid movement, stroked a blade across both their necks. Blood sprayed from the wounds. The Hunters clutched at their necks, fell to their knees and flopped to the ground. After a few spasms they were still.

After she had shaken the blood from the blades, they reformed into hands. The Mimic admired her handiwork and glanced at the door the humans hid behind. For the moment they were safe. She turned and walked away.

Jane had pressed the button to close the door each time a monster in the corridor had pressed one to open it. The door that juddered back and forth was constantly hammered upon, but suddenly, it all stopped. Jack voiced his confusion with a shrug. A few moments later they listened to the sounds reaching them through the door and wondered what was happening outside. Jack thought



the monsters had turned on each other. When the fighting fell to silence, Jack waited a few moments and nodded to Jane to open the door.

With the ice axe raised for battle, Jack poked his head out and peered into the corridor. His eyes flicked over the bloody corpses before he stepped through the doorway. The others cautiously followed and took in the gruesome, but welcome sight.

“What in hell's name could have done this?” blurted Theo.

“Who cares,” said Richard. “I'm just glad they did.”

Jack thought it strange the killer or killers hadn't remained to feast on the dead. Whatever was responsible, they probably weren't far away. He glanced along the corridor partly lit by the flashing blue light. He fished the headlight from a pocket and switched it on. “If you have lights, switch them on,” he whispered.

In all the excitement in the cavern, the sudden appearance of the monsters and their rush to escape the falling ice, Jane and Theo had left their flashlights in the cavern. Richard though, still had his headlight. He slipped it over his head and switched it on.

“What's the plan now, Jack?” Jane asked softly.

“We still need to find Lucy. If she's still in the room where we left her, she'll be behind one of these doors.” He approached the nearest door and reached out for the door control, but halted when a door farther along the corridor rasped open. Jack raised the axe. Richard moved to the back of the group.

Lucy stepped into the corridor a little unsteadily with a hand clutched to her head. She staggered and fell against the control. The door slid shut.

“Lucy!” called out Jane. Relieved to see her friend alive, she rushed to help.

Lucy jumped at the voice and looked at the group groggily. “What happened?”

“You fell and struck your head and were knocked unconscious,” Jane explained.

“We couldn't carry you, so we hid you in that room so we could escape from the monsters,” Jack added.

Lucy looked at Theo and Richard. “Where are the others?”

Jane held her shoulder gently. “They're dead, the monsters got them.”

Lucy was shocked by the news. “That's horrible.” She glanced each way along the corridor. “We should get off this ship before we're all killed.”

“Yeah, I agree, but that's no longer an option,” said Richard. “We're stuck on this damn ship with the monsters now.”

Jane quickly explained about the collapsed ice blocking their only exit.

Lucy was devastated by the news. “Then how will we escape?”

Jack gave Lucy a smile as reassuring as he could muster. “That's something we're still working on.”

A tremor swept through the ship with such force they had to place hands against the walls to steady themselves.

“Oh, yeah, another thing is that the ice we and this ship are entombed in is about to be set adrift,” said Richard.

“At least it can't get any worse,” said Theo, forcing a smile.

The door Jack had deactivated rasped open with an ominous squeal.

They turned to face the new threat.

Framed in the doorway was a small figure. Even though the bald, pale-skinned alien was only a yard tall, he had an aura of confidence normally attributed to a

much larger and powerful being. A red cloak wrapped across a shoulder reached just below its waist. A brown jacket fashioned from an unknown animal and with extra flaps of black on the shoulders running down the arms to the elbow, stretched past the waist of the figure's brown trousers. A grey tunic of a softer material could be seen beneath the jacket. A black belt with a silver buckle held a holster that snugly fit the small, strange weapon whose handle could be seen protruding from it. One of its four-fingered hands gripped the larger rifle-like weapon of dark silver and black metal resting casually on its shoulder. Its large mouth, currently formed in an amused smile, revealed blunt, white teeth. Its brown eyes scrutinized humans that stared back.

The Web monster dropped from the vent and followed the strong scent of blood. Its hungry eyes swept over the corpses littering the corridor. It would eat well. Smoke tainted with the odour of burnt flesh curled from the neat round holes in some of bodies. The Web creature's eyes flicked to the small creature facing away from it. He might be the one responsible for the slaughter; he would have to be disposed of first. It would be an easy kill. It crept forward, screamed a blood-curdling shriek and sprang at the creature's back.

Without registering any fear or concern—or turning its head—the small alien fired the weapon slung over its shoulder. A ball of bright orange light shot out. When the light struck the Web creature, it screeched in pain, shot backward and slammed into a support strut before flopping to the floor with its neck bent at an odd angle.

The small alien spoke. “If you want to live, follow me.” He turned and walked away.

Jane, Lucy, Theo and Jack, looked at each other.

Richard glanced under his jacket, Lucifer's fur was orange, an indication the small alien probably wasn't a threat.

Theo waved a hand at the dead monsters. “Do you suppose Tiny was responsible for this carnage?”

“He speaks English, that's good enough for me,” said Richard.

“Jack, what do you think?” asked Jane.

The small alien reappeared in the doorway and sighed. “When I said follow me, I meant now!”

Jack shrugged. “What other option do we have?”

Richard crossed to the open doorway. The others followed.

*CLICK! CLICK! CLICK!*

## **Chapter 19**

### **Adrift.**

THE TANTALIZING SCENT OF blood wafting through the ship had encouraged the Clickers to ignore their fear of the Hunters whose domain it led them through. The stronger the scent became the faster they moved through the

corridors. When they rounded the corner and detected the many corpses on offer, they howled with pleasure and scrambled to be the first to reach them. There were so many Clickers that the first to arrive and rip off chunks of flesh were quickly pushed out of reach of the food. Worried the hastily grabbed feast might be stolen from them; they wandered along the corridor to find a private space to eat.

Footsteps moved away along a side corridor. One of the Clickers chewed the piece of flesh as it moved to stare after the fading footsteps. A small group of the human creatures disappeared around a corner. It soon finished the small scrap of flesh it had snatched and wanted more. It glanced back at the desperate shrieks of its kind fighting each other in their frantic haste to grab a morsel of flesh from the Hunter's corpses. There were so many fights breaking out, a second helping was unlikely. Hoping the owners of the footsteps would be more accommodating, the Clicker called out to its hungry brethren who had been pushed aside and the seven Clickers followed the humans' trail.

Though the short alien moved swiftly, his short legs made him easy to keep pace with as they all rushed along corridors, through doors and down staircases. Any creatures encountered were quickly dispatched with a blast from the unusual weapon the small alien seemed adept at using.

The Clickers moved faster and soon caught up with their fleeing feast.

The constant clicks accompanied their dash through the ship. When they'd descended a second staircase, the alien halted at the bottom and bade the others to stand aside. He turned a dial on the weapon and pointed it up the staircase.

The Clickers appeared at the top and rushed down.

The alien aimed and fired. A tiny ball of red light erupted from the end of the weapon and grew to a width of a hand. It struck the first Clicker's chest and burst straight through, leaving behind a neat hole with smoking edges. It continued on its path until it had passed through five of the seven clickers and struck the wall with a burst of red sparks. The small alien adjusted his aim and fired a second shot at the two fleeing Clickers. It passed through the nearest Clicker's head, but only grazed the second Clicker's shoulder when it dodged to the side out of its path. The light ball struck the wall and again a shower of sparks lit the gloom. The surviving Clicker reached the top and leapt behind the wall.

The small alien watched the dead Clickers slide and tumble down the staircase. When he was certain all were dead, he lowered the weapon.

"We could have done with one of them earlier," said Theo, in awe of the weapon and the damage it had caused.

The alien turned away and led them on.

Richard stared at the weapon enviously. If it were possible for him to get his hands on it, or a similar one, he would do so. It would be worth a fortune.

The small alien halted at a door and turned to face his new found friends. All were out of breath from their run. "We are about to pass through a room filled with small dangerous creatures. We must move quietly. Our aim is to reach the door on the far side. If you are attacked there will be little I or anyone can do to help, so if that happens to one of you, you others must leave them or you will die also. Do you all understand?"

“Isn't there a less dangerous path we can take?” asked Richard, far from pleased with the dangerous route the small alien had chosen.

“There is not. Remember, move swiftly and whatever you see or hear in there, do not make a sound.” He opened the door.

The insects moved in on them from all directions.

Because the mist hid the insects, both Jack and Jane found it unnerving and would have preferred to see them coming. At least then they could kick and stamp at them. Hidden from view like they were, they'd no way of defending themselves.

Jane remembered the egg-laden insects and imagined the tiny creatures burrowing into her flesh and eating her alive from the inside. She shivered.

Jack called halt. They stopped. Insects flowed down the wall in the thousands. Though they became lost from sight when they entered the low mist, their tiny feet clacked on the metal floor and revealed the direction they headed—straight for Jane, Jack and Theo.

Jack turned and searched for an escape route; there was none. They were surrounded. He looked at Jane. “If I had a gun, I'd shoot you.”

Jane forced a nervous smile. “I bet you say that to all your dates.”

The insects grew closer.

Jack would've laughed if their situation wasn't so dire. “I wasn't aware this was a date.”

Jane shrugged. “We'll not get another, so let's pretend it is. That way we won't have to die alone.”

Jack nodded at Theo. “We could drop this rather large gooseberry and kiss.”

“And they say romance is dead.” Jane looked at the floor filled with the patter of clawed feet. They were out of time.

Suddenly, a bright light lit up the scene. The insects surrounding Jane, Theo and Jack were interspersed with the egg-laden females. The bright ball of light shot over their heads. An explosion followed. Glass tinkled to the floor above them. Jane screamed when the females fired their eggs. Green liquid poured over the edge of the floor and washed over them, sweeping the insects aside. One of the tall aliens flopped to the ground before them.

“Now would be a good time to move.”

They looked at the voice. The small alien stood across the room looking at them. He lowered the recently fired weapon.

Drenched with the green liquid, Jack and Jane dragged Theo over the tall alien and across the room. They followed the small alien to a door in the far wall that slid open with barely a sound. As soon as they were through, the alien closed the door.

The alien glanced at his breathless followers and smiled. “Now, that wasn't so bad, was it? You can relax now. From here on, there's nothing to harm you.” He turned a dial on the gun and its lights faded. “We can rest here for a few moments if you like?”

Jack and Jane rested Theo on the floor with his back against the wall.

Jack held out a hand toward the alien. “Thanks, you saved our lives.”

The alien looked at his hand, puzzled.

“You hold it and shake,” Jack explained. He grabbed the small hand and shook. “It's a human custom.”

“Your thanks are in part, misplaced.” He nodded at Lucy. “She persuaded me to come to your rescue. I would have left you there. I warned you not to stop.”

“Humans, as a rule,” Jack shot a glance at Richard, who smiled, unconcerned, “don't abandon their friends.”

Theo moaned.

Jane knelt beside him. He had a nasty lump on his head. “Are you okay, Theo?”

Theo put a hand to his head and winced. He glanced around. The last thing he remembered was the insects. “What happened? How did I get here?”

“I'll tell you about that later.” Jane helped him stand and then turned to look at the alien. “Whatever the reason, you did save our lives. Thanks for that, but who are you and how did you get here, on this spaceship?”

The alien smiled. “I am Haax and I've always been here. I worked on this ship. When the crew evacuated, I was left aboard and have been here ever since.”

“But that was thousands of years ago,” said Jack. “How could you survive for so long?”

“I wasn't always active. Most of my time was spent in what you call hyper sleep. I programmed the computer to alert me if certain changes occurred, such as any strange life-forms coming aboard, which is what happened when you humans arrived. Once I had recovered from my long sleep, I came looking for you. I saw the monsters around the door fighting each other and guessed you were on the other side, so I killed them.”

“But how can you speak our language?” asked Theo.

“When the main computer linked with one of you, the data was stored. I accessed that data. Now, we should move on. We have much to do if we are to survive when the ice breaks away.”

“You know about that?” asked Jack.

“I know everything you know— well more actually, much more. Follow me.”

They followed.

A corridor brought them to a cargo hold. A huge space filled with neatly stacked storage containers secured in place with metal bands. Haax led them along pathways between the crates.

“What's in the boxes?” Richard asked.

Haax glanced at a stack they passed. “Everything the crew needed to start a new life when they found a suitable planet to inhabit. This spaceship, as you call it, was one of a fleet of fifty. When they evacuated their home world they set off into space in different directions. The first ship to discover a habitable planet was to send out a message to the other ships with the coordinates so they could regroup.”

“Do you know if they found one?” asked Lucy.

“They hadn't when we crashed on this planet.” Haax halted at a huge door reinforced with thick metal struts and pressed the control to open it. Another identical door stood twenty yards away.

Theo noticed the door was a foot thick. “It's an air lock.”

Once they were all inside, Haax closed the door and crossed to the other side. When the red door control light turned from red to green, he pressed the button.

The two large door sections slid apart to reveal another huge space, but there were no crates in this one. They stepped out of the airlock and gazed at the smaller spaceships positioned around the edges of the room.

“Shuttlecraft!” stated Theo, excitedly.

“Correct,” said Haax. He pointed at the larger box-shaped ships. “They are for transporting crew and cargo to and from the planet surface.” He directed his arm at two smaller crafts at the far side of the room. “Those two are scout ships that were used to visit any suitable planets to check the climate, soil and indigenous life-forms for compatibility.” He led them across the large hangar bay to one of the scout ships.

“Do they still fly?” asked Jack, admiring one of the transport ships that towered above him.

“Of course,” Haax replied.

When they neared one of the scout ships, the ship's sensors were alerted to Haax's approach. A door at the back of the craft slid open and a ramp unfolded.

“Cool,” said Theo.

The scratches and dents adorning some areas of the craft's black and silver hull hinted at a history of close encounters with something tougher than its metal hull, much like an old car that had a less than careful owner. Unlike the bulkier cargo transport ships, the scout ship's design was sleek and about the length of a private jet. Three piston-articulated legs supported the craft, one at the front and two either side at the back. The circular body tapered into a long nose that contained the cockpit with a wide view screen. A tapered flange on the back formed the exhaust and two swivel-jets either side of the body allowed it to lift off or land horizontally.

When they'd finished admiring the sleek craft, they followed Haax up the ramp into a small cargo area. When all were aboard, Haax pressed a button. The ramp retracted and the door closed. They followed Haax through a small door on the far side into a short corridor with three doors on either side.

Haax indicated the doors. “Crew quarters for extended travel. Each contains a hyper sleep chamber.”

The ship shook, swaying them from side to side for a few moments before the motion subsided.

“It won't be long now,” stated Jane.

Everyone knew the meaning of her words.

They passed through a lounge and dining area into the cockpit. Screens and controls covered the consoles around the room's edges. Chairs fixed to a rail in front of each console allowed the controller to slide back and forth to reach different controls. A group of four comfortable looking seats set in two rows were in the center of the room facing the command post at the front of the ship, which was where Haax headed.

Haax sat in one of the two pilot seats and flicked a few switches. The cockpit came to life. Lights of different colours adorned the consoles and screens lit up. “Don't touch anything!” he warned.

Another tremor shook the ship so violently the spaceship's hull was unable to stand the pressure and in places buckled. Metal support beams fell from the roof to crash to the floor. One struck the second scout ship and slid down its side with

a loud screech. Another struck a power terminal. Sparks sprayed out as electrical connections were severed, one of which supplied power to the magnetic catches that held the shuttle craft in place. When another tremor reverberated through the ship, the scout ship slid a few yards across the floor with a piercing screech of metal.

Those who'd not grabbed hold of something tumbled to the floor.

Haax swivelled his seat and smiled at his passengers. "Choose a seat and strap yourselves in. I have a feeling it is going to be a bumpy ride." He faced forward again.

Jack slipped into the large seat beside Haax, grabbed the two strap-ends hanging from the seat's shoulders and clipped them into slots on the front edge of the seat. They automatically tightened, but designed for a different and larger species, the straps were useless. He glanced at Haax and saw him cross his over. He released the straps, crossed them over and clipped them in place. They tightened snugly across his chest.

Jane, Theo, Richard and Lucy, who had chosen the four central chairs, had just discovered the same problem. A forceful jolt and they would be thrown from the seats

Jack leaned around the side of his seat. "Cross the straps over."

The others acted on his advice.

Jack glanced out through the large window when the scout ship's powerful lights lit up the darkness, and then at the pilot. "So, Haax, what's the plan?"

Haax grinned. "You'll know when I know, but when the ice breaks away, I don't aim to hang around. If there is a way out of this tomb, I mean to find it."

Scott peered through the Sno-Cat's screen and saw only white. He drove by feeling alone, heading in as straight a line as the strong gusts that attempted to blow him off course would allow. Some gusts were so strong they slewed the Sno-Cat sideways; others threatened to tip the vehicle on its side. Scott never once thought about turning back. He sensed his friends were in trouble and needed help, and though he had no idea what assistance he could give them, if they'd encountered more of the monsters like the one that invaded the camp, he would do all within his power to aid them.

Sensing he was near the rift, Scott slowed the Sno-Cat. His eyes searched for a gap in the snow and ice beating against the windscreen for any sign of it, but the weather hid everything from view. Worried he would drive over the edge, he halted the vehicle and faced the front into the wind to offer the least resistance. He forced the door open against the wind's energy and used it as a temporary shield against the blizzard when he stepped out. He grabbed the rope from behind the seat and tied it to the rear door handle to use as a safety line. If he'd not reached the point where the others had descended into the rift, or was nowhere near it, the line would lead him safely back to the Sno-Cat to try again. The door slammed shut when he moved away.

Now buffeted by the full force of the wind, Scott leaned into it and grabbed the spike he'd already tethered by a strap to the Sno-Cat and moved a short distance into the wind. He gripped the T-bar and screwed the spike into the ice. When he

was satisfied it was secure, he walked off in the direction he thought he would find the rift.

A few steps brought him to the edge of the crevasse, making him realize what a lucky escape he'd had. If he'd not stopped when he did, he and the Sno-Cat would have plummeted into its depths. All but blind in the blizzard, he followed the rift. As he neared the end of the safety line, he arrived at two ropes trailing over the edge. He followed them across the ice until he reached the spikes securing the ropes. After checking they were still secure, he tied his safety line to it and hitched his harness to one of the climbing ropes. He backed toward the rift and climbed over the edge.

He passed the small ice shelf and continued down. The ice shook violently, causing him to lose his footing; he slammed against the ice. The tremors grew in strength, bouncing him against the ice cliff. When they'd passed, he continued his descent.

The strongest tremor yet tilted the ship slightly. It was a sign the ice was breaking away. The small craft slid backwards. Jack noticed the other shuttles were also on the move, colliding and crashing into each other. If Haax didn't do something quick, there was a chance their scout ship would be damaged. If that happened, they wouldn't be going anywhere.

Calmly Haax activated controls. The ship lifted gently off the floor and the legs retracted. The engine was so silent no one had heard it come to life. Though Jack wanted to ask questions about the vessel, this wasn't the time. Instead, he concentrated on the shuttles set into motion by the shifting ice and warned Haax when one of the larger transport ships headed toward them.

Deftly, Haax manoeuvred the ship out of its way to be faced by another coming from the other direction. He danced and weaved around them with barely a finger width of space between them as they constantly changed direction with the erratic movement of the ice.

Haax coaxed the craft over to a large hangar door with four stout pistons holding it firmly closed.

"Is that the exit?" Jack asked.

"If it still opens it will be," replied the small pilot. "He turned the ship so the front was facing inside the hangar. "I have to prevent any of the loose ships from damaging us or the door until it's time for us to leave."

They all watched the sliding shuttles crash into each other. When any came too close, Haax gently shunted them aside.

Small pieces of ice dropped past Scott during his climb down the shaking ice cliff. He glanced down and caught a glimpse of the bottom through the snow and ice streaming through the crevasse. He rappelled down until his feet touched the bottom. He detached his harness from the rope and walked over to the large hole in the ice. He dropped to his knees and peered into its depths. Blocks of ice, both large and small, covered the cavern floor. He peered at the flash of red he noticed. It took him a moment to realize it was a Sno-Cat. The ice buckled, almost throwing him into the hole. A loud crack echoed through the crevasse. He climbed to his feet and gazed along the rift. The sound of ice being



torn apart grew louder. A crack in the floor of the rift crept speedily toward him. He pulled out his ice axe and leapt at the wall. The axe slammed into the ice. His feet found small ledges of ice to support his weight. The sound of surging water washed over him. He peered into the crack that had opened below him. Freezing sea water rushed to fill the void as the sudden weight of the freed ice sunk into its depths.

Scott reached out and grabbed a protrusion of ice. He freed the axe, reached as high as he could and slammed it into the wall. He pulled himself up. The series of actions was repeated and slowly he moved up the cliff. He glanced longingly at the rope too far away to help him. He glanced down. Sea water leapt from the void. As fast as he dared go, Scott climbed out of its reach. It splashed his boots before running down the side of the ice wall. The wall behind him sunk into the sea. He raised his head. Ice fell. He pressed his body tightly against the cliff to avoid the falling lumps of ice. Some chunks struck the wall around him, but luckily only smaller pieces made contact with him before splashing into the sea. A terrifying squeal cast his gaze skyward. The freed ice behind him leaned at an angle and scraped down the wall, showering Scott with shards of dislodged ice. Helpless to prevent it or escape, horrified, he watched the ice that would crush or knock him into the freezing sea slide ever nearer.

The ice gripped the two climbing ropes and dragged them with it, fraying and snapping the ropes like they were cotton. Scott shut his eyes when the ice wall was about to make contact with his extended arm that gripped the ice axe. The ice brushed the back of his padded jacket and then it was gone. Scott opened his eyes. The ice had righted itself as it settled into the sea and had missed him. He turned his head. The ice wall bobbed in the sea and slowly drifted away.

If the others were still alive, they were now trapped on the floating ice. There was nothing Scott could do for them now, except try to get back to base and see when the help he had called would arrive— if they came at all. Like Pike, they'd also found it hard to believe a monster existed. Not even the photo Scott had taken of it convinced them it was real and not some sort of hoax. He glanced up at the towering ice wall; he had a lot of difficult climbing to do.

Haax had set the controls to keep the scout ship in a stationary hover between the floor and roof of the hangar when the ice tipped and rolled the ship. All aboard felt the sudden fall and rise when it broke away and slowly settled when the freed ice reached its level of buoyancy.

Jane confirmed what they all had assumed. "The ice is free."

"I wish we were," moaned Richard.

Jane looked at Lucy, who had remained strangely silent. "Are you okay?"

Lucy nodded and flashed a smile. "I'm fine. I just want to be off this ship, that's all."

"As do we all," said Richard. He glanced at Haax, wondering how the alien planned to get them off.

Haax spun the craft to face the hangar door. He pointed to the red and green buttons on the console between the two pilot chairs. "Jack, press the red button."

Jack stretched a hand toward the console. "What does it do?"

"Open the hangar door, I hope."

Jack gazed at the door and pressed the button. Nothing happened. "It's probably frozen in place."

Haax steered the ship over to the door and turned it to the side. He gently rested one edge of the ship's nose against a raised reinforcing bar on the door and gently applied some power to the engine. "Press it again."

Jack did as ordered.

The ship slid off with no effect to the door, but did add another scratch to the scout ship. Haax repositioned the ship and tried again. Jack pressed the button. The door shuddered open an inch. Haax applied more power. The door slid open with a screech of protesting metal. The exit was blocked solid with ice.

Jack looked at Haax.

Haax smiled. "Did you notice where I stowed the weapon in the cargo hold?"

Jack nodded.

"Do you think you will be able to fire it?"

Jack released his seat harness. "I'll give it a go."

"To switch it on, turn the black dial until it clicks. When it powers up, turn the red dial to maximum. I'll turn the ship around and open the rear door. Aim the weapon at the ice and create a rectangle of holes close together and large enough for this ship to fit through. That should weaken the ice enough for me to push the section out."

Jack smiled at the others when he rushed past. Theo and Richard looked at him enviously.

Haax spun the ship around. A press of a button brought the image seen from the back of the ship onto the view screen. The small pilot lined the view up with the door.

The rear door opened when Jack entered the small cargo bay. He crossed to the cupboard where he'd seen Haax stow the weapon. There was more than one inside. Believing any would do, he grabbed one at random and powered it up. He positioned himself in the opening and turned the red dial until it would turn no more. He raised the weapon to his shoulder and eyed along the barrel until it was aimed near the top left corner a couple of yards away from each edge of the door frame. He pulled the trigger. A small ball of bright red light shot out and quickly grew until it was a yard wide. The gun didn't buck or vibrate and was completely silent. The ball struck the ice where he'd aimed it. The ice vaporized on contact with the light ball as it cut a perfectly round hole through it until it disappeared. Jack readjusted his aim and fired another beside it on the right. Another blast of light penetrated the ice. He continued until he'd formed a line of holes slightly wider than the ship. He then made a line of holes down the left and right hand sides. A line of holes along the bottom completed his task. Only a few thin strips of ice, where the holes he'd cut didn't quite meet, held it in place. A mischievous look appeared in Jack's eyes. He fired a few more times and grinned at his handiwork. He closed the rear door, switched off the weapon, stowed it in its compartment and returned to the cockpit.

When the sensor on the console indicated the rear door was closed, Haax switched off the rear view and turned the ship to face the holed ice.

"That weapon is amazing," said Jack, on entering the cockpit. "And great fun to fire."

Jane looked at the smiley face Jack had formed in the ice. "Yes, we noticed."

Jack resumed his seat next to the pilot. "I can punch some more holes if you think it's necessary," he told Haax, hopefully.

"I'm sure that will be enough." Haax coaxed the ship forward until its nose nudged the ice in the center of the holes and just below the smiley face Jack had made. He applied power to the engine and steadily increased thrust.

All eyes stared at the block of ice barring their escape.

A crack echoed through the hangar bay. The thin columns of ice holding the block in place cracked under the strain. The block dropped until it met ice again, and slowly the powerful engine pushed it back. The shuttle passed through the hangar doorway and into the ice tunnel. The large block gained momentum, moving faster and faster. The ice surrounding the ship sped by. Suddenly, the ice dropped from view and daylight flooded the tunnel. As the ice block splashed into the sea the shuttle shot out of the hole and soared into the sky. Windborne ice and snow battered the windscreen.

Finally, they were free.

All except Haax cheered.

Jack gazed at the ice shelf the impossibly large berg had broken away from. The remaining side of the ice rift was now a high cliff of ice stretching for miles in both directions. Eventually it would also be pushed farther out into the ocean and break off, and in time melt and disappear as if it had never existed. When the craft grew nearer to the cliff, Jack noticed something—a small blot of red. He pointed it out to Haax. "I think someone's on the ice."

Haax swooped in for a closer look and pressed a button on the console. An image of the red-clad figure appeared on part of the screen in close up.

"It's Scott," called out Jane. "He's stuck on the ice."

Jack turned to the pilot. "What do you think, Haax? Can we rescue him?"

Haax nodded. "All I seem to do is rescue you humans. Someone needs to go in the back and help him aboard."

"I'll go," volunteered Theo. He unbuckled his harness and left the cockpit.

Haax swept the scout ship over to the shore, and in a smooth motion, turned the ship so the back faced the cliff. He switched on the rear monitor and used it to line the rear door up with the climber. He opened the back door, extended the ramp and moved nearer to the ice cliff until the ramp was directly below Scott.

Theo was buffeted by the wind when he stepped through the opening. He cupped hands to his mouth and shouted. "Scott, are you okay?"

Scott gripped the ice to prevent the gusting wind from dragging him off. He glanced up at the sheer cliff. He still had over halfway to go and doubted he'd be able to make the climb in this wind. He was more than a little surprised to hear someone call out his name. Though he thought he must have imagined the voice, he twisted his head. He was even more surprised to see a space ship hovering in the air and Theo leaning casually against the door frame, grinning.

Theo waved. "Hi, Scott, you've not chosen the best weather to go climbing," he shouted.

Too astonished to talk, Scott nodded dumbly.

"Well, are you coming aboard?" Theo stepped forward with one hand gripping the door frame and the other extended out to his friend.

Scott looked at the hand and at the ramp below him. He released one precarious grip on the ice wall, grabbed Theo's hand and leapt onto the ramp. He swayed and was nearly cast over the side by a gust of wind. When Theo yanked him into the ship he stumbled to the floor. Theo closed the door and looked at Scott.

Scott gazed around the cargo bay. "Is this a..."

"It sure is." Theo helped Scott to his feet. "The others are in the cockpit."

Stunned, Scott followed Theo.

## Chapter 20

### Going Home.

AS THE CRAFT SWOOPEd down toward the base camp, legs swung out and it gently landed on the ice. A few moments later the rear door opened and its passengers disembarked down the ramp.

Still pulling on his cold weather coat, Pike ran out of the cabin. "Is that a spaceship?" he asked, in disbelief.

"Only a small one," replied Jack, nonchalantly.

"The mother ship we found under the ice was much more impressive," said Jane.

"Yeah, it was huge," said Theo, "and full of alien monsters."

Pike was stunned and envious. "You lot are so lucky."

"To be alive, yes, we are," said Jane, "but not all of us survived."

Pike noticed Henry, Max and Eli were missing. "They're dead!"

Jane nodded.

Pike was astonished again when a small strange figure walked out of the spacecraft. "Is that an alien?"

"Only a small one," answered Jack with a smile. "The others were much bigger and a lot more vicious."

"But don't worry, he's friendly. He saved our lives," Jane said.

Pike noticed Jack shivering. "Let's go inside where it's warm, and you can tell me all about it."

Jack turned to Haax. "Are you coming inside?"

"No, I will leave. I have spent enough time on this planet."

"Where will you go?" Jane asked.

Haax shrugged and gazed up at the sky. "With the scout ship I can go anywhere. I have the whole universe to choose from. This is a good opportunity for one of you humans to come and see some of the galaxy. It is a huge and wondrous place with sights you could not imagine or believe." Haax looked at Lucy, who also shivered even though she wore her cold weather gear. "What about you, Lucy? There is so much to see and many new species to meet, and most are not as vicious as those you met on the ship. It will be interesting and fun."

Lucy looked doubtful.

"What else will you do? After what you have witnessed aboard the spaceship, Earth will seem far too small now. Come on, come with me. Let me take you away

from this cold planet to ones much more hospitable. I'll bring you back if you don't like it. Stay here and how long will it be before you regret not coming?"

Lucy stared at Haax. There was something in his eyes, an insistent stare. He knew. She shivered. She couldn't stand much more of this cold. "Okay, Haax. I will come with you."

"But you can't," Jane argued, surprised she would even contemplate such a thing. "How could you possibly survive in space and on strange planets?"

"She will be fine," said Haax. "You could not possibly imagine how advanced our technology is, and there are many planets out there not too dissimilar to Earth's atmosphere."

"Why shouldn't I go?" said Lucy. "It's a once in a lifetime opportunity. Just think of all I can learn. Now we know there are other species out there, and not all are friendly, Earth might need a few space friends in the future. I've made up my mind. I'm going."

Jane could tell Lucy was adamant in her decision. "Well, for the record, Lucy, I think you're crazy, but if you're sure it's what you want..."

"It is."

Jane gave Lucy a hug. "You be careful out there, up there."

Lucy smiled. "I will." She said goodbyes to the rest of the team and climbed aboard the ship.

As Richard turned away and headed for the cabin, a purr came from beneath his jacket.

Haax stared at the slight lump in Richard's jacket. "Richard, I think you have something you want to give me."

Richard stopped and turned. He stared at the small alien. "No, Haax, I have nothing I want to give you, except my thanks for saving us and to wish you a good journey."

Haax rested a hand casually on the butt of the pistol sticking from its holster. "Is that really how you want to play it? What you have taken does not belong here. Give it to me and we will part as friends, because I assure you, I will not be leaving without it. Alternatively, if you do want to keep it, you can come with me."

The astonished group looked between Richard and Haax.

Jane smiled when she wondered if Richard did go with Haax how long it would be before he annoyed him and was flushed from an air lock into space. "You should go, Richard."

"I'm not going anywhere with him," stated Richard.

Jane glared at him. "Then whatever you've taken, give it back."

Richard glanced at Jane, the alien and his hand resting on the weapon, and sighed sadly. When he unzipped his coat, the cute alien stirred from the cold and opened its eyes when Richard lifted him out.

All were astonished by the sight of the small creature.

Richard approached Haax, lifted Lucifer to his face and looked into its large eyes. "Well, my friend, it's time for us to part, so be careful out there."

The small creature purred and nuzzled Richard's cheek.

Richard handed him to Haax. "I'd like to take a photo, if that's okay?"

Haax nodded and held the small creature in his arms.

Richard took a couple of photos of Lucifer, making sure to include Haax and the shuttle craft in the frame. "Take good care of him."

"I will." Haax said his goodbyes and climbed aboard the ship.

They all stood back and watched the small spacecraft lift effortlessly off the ice and zoom into the sky until the clouds obscured its view.

Richard continued to take photographs until it disappeared.

"I'm surprised Lucy chose to go with Haax," said Jack.

"I admire her," said Theo. "If I didn't have a family, I might have considered joining them."

"As she said, it's an ideal opportunity for her to set up friendly relations with an alien species," Jane glanced up into the sky. "I've a feeling that in the future, Earth will need all the space friends she can get."

"I can't stand it any longer," said Pike. "You've got to tell me what happened in the rift and about the spaceship and the alien monsters and everything."

"Cook us a hot meal and we'll tell you everything," said Jane.

"But first I need a beer," added Jack.

"It's a deal. I'll soon have something cooking."

The small craft entered space, a speck of dust in the universe.

Haax glanced at Lucy as she sat in the co-pilot's seat after removing her cold weather clothing. "As pleasing as that particular form is to my appreciative eyes, you can drop the disguise now."

Lucy looked at him with a knowing gaze. "I thought you knew."

"Not straight away, though. Don't get me wrong, your mimicry ability is the best I've ever seen—not that I've seen many, so there could be a lot better out there somewhere and you are crap at it—but it impressed me."

"You certainly know how to flatter a girl."

"Except you are not a girl—female maybe, but no girl."

Lucy smiled. "Point taken. So... if you knew I was me, why did you agree to bring me along and what gave me away?"

"I couldn't let you stay on Earth, not with all those vulnerable unsuspecting humans for you to feed on, could I? What gave you away was your smell. I have a very sensitive nose. You don't smell like the others."

"Smell is something I'm unable to copy." Mimic studied Haax. "You're quite a clever little chap."

Haax grinned. "My lack of modesty prevents me from arguing with you."

"So, Haax, what's your plan? You know I could kill you in a blink of an eye."

"A fact I'm totally aware of. I'm also aware you don't know how to pilot this ship."

The Mimic glanced at the controls. "I could learn."

Haax shook his head. "I dare say you could, but that won't do you any good. While you were disrobing, I set the controls to only accept my commands. If, for any reason—including the one where you kill me in a no doubt excruciatingly painful manner that's most enjoyable to you and feast on my small but tasty carcass—the computer fails to detect my life signs, or I fail to type in a code at regular intervals, it will navigate to the nearest sun and not stop until it's destroyed. Kill me and you kill yourself."

Mimic pondered what she'd just heard for a few moments and then smiled. "I say again, clever."

"It will probably come as no surprise, but it's not something I'll ever tire of hearing."

"Due to this devious clever trait of yours, I assume you have a purpose, other than saving the human race, for my presence aboard this ship."

"I do, but it depends a lot on you."

Mimic raised Lucy's well-trimmed eyebrows.

"Unlike you, I have visited many planets and met many species. I can tell you, for beings like us and your exceptional form-changing talent, there are a lot of opportunities out there for us to exploit and profit from."

"Illegal opportunities," said Mimic.

"Best kind," said Haax. "I know you probably come from a vicious world where only the strongest and most cunning survive, but for us to work together, you must stop this murderous habit of yours. It won't do you any good. Look at me. I'm captain of my own spaceship."

"Stolen spaceship," Mimic reminded.

"Salvaged is the term I prefer. Anyway, my meaning is that I didn't murder anyone to get it. You go around killing, slashing and feasting on raw flesh all the time, and you're not going to last long. It also gets you nothing."

"Except a full belly."

"But you can get that without killing. You wouldn't believe all the delicious food available out there. None of it will squirm and try to bite or claw you when you're eating it. You'll love it."

"I'm not sure it's me, but I'm willing to give it a try."

Haax beamed. "That's great. You won't regret it."

"For your sake, I'd better not."

"It's always doom and gloom with you. You really should lighten up and try to have some fun."

"It will be hard, but I will try."

"But first things, first—let's change your appearance to something more suitable, and I don't mean some ferocious monster with claws and huge gnashing teeth. Do something less aggressive and easy on my eyes."

Mimic looked at Haax for a few moments before changing form into a sexy female of the same species as Haax. "How's this?"

Haax eyed the sexy female appreciatively. "Wow! Great choice. It's as if you read my mind."

"Not a particularly difficult thing to do," said Mimic.

Haax stared at her small breasts. "However, there are a couple of improvements I would make."

Mimic sighed. Her breasts expanded. "Is that better?"

Haax smiled. "Better? They're perfect." He pressed buttons and turned dials on the control panel. "You ready to hear my plan?"

"I'm all ears."

Haax glanced at Mimic and burst out laughing.

She had grown huge ears.

“That is soooooo funny.” He wiped the tears from his eyes. “I admit I had my doubts, but now, I think we're going to get on just fine.”

As her ears shrunk to their normal size, Haax reached out a hand and laid it on Mimic's leg.

She slapped it. “They'll be none of that!”

Haax grinned. “You say that now, but you wait until you get to know me.”

“Waiting is something I'm particularly good at.”

Haax laughed and glanced back at Lucifer curled on a chair asleep. “We will see. No female can resist Haax's charms for long.”

Haax pulled a lever. The small spacecraft accelerated to an amazing speed and in an instant, was gone.

## Epilogue

LUCY AWOKE TO PITCH blackness.

She scrambled about for her torch, found it, switched it on and shut her eyes to block out the stark light blinding her. She placed a hand over the beam to dull it and opened her eyes to let them slowly adjust. Her eyes followed the light she directed around the room. She was in one of the crew's cabins, but had no memory of how she got here.

Pain shot through her skull when she climbed to her feet. She tenderly felt the lump on her head. A glance at her fingers revealed them absent of blood. The torch beam settled on the door as she wondered how long she'd been unconscious. She shivered. Her cold weather clothes were gone. She wondered who would've done such a thing.

When she approached the door, she staggered to the side. It felt like the floor had moved. The memory of a similar sensation appeared in her thoughts. She had been aboard a cruise ship at the time. She reached the door and pressed the button and was surprised when it failed to slide open. She pressed it repeatedly, but still the door remained closed.

Panic started to make itself known.

She pounded a fist on the door. It sounded loud within the confines of the cabin and she hoped it was the same outside. She wondered where the others were. Certain they would be worried and frantically searching for her, she banged on the door again and shouted, “Is anyone there? I'm locked in and can't get out!”

Moments passed without any sign she'd been heard.

She knocked harder and shouted louder. “Help me! Please help me someone!”

No one came.

She began to cry.

A noise outside in the corridor gave her hope. She placed an ear against the door. “Is someone there?”

The Hunter followed the sound.

It paused outside the room the noise had emanated from. It pressed the button, but the door didn't open. It stared at the door when something spoke from inside.



It scraped its claws down the door.

A metallic squeal filled the room. Lucy backed away from the door. Something outside screeched. Lucy shook with terror and screamed.

Jane and Jack exited the main hut and glanced at the blue sky. The blizzard had lasted three more days before it subsided. Jane had contacted NASA to add to the information Scott had already told them. Already finding it hard to believe a monster existed, NASA at first found the discovery of an entombed spaceship just as hard to comprehend. It was the team's photographs and video footage that had finally convinced them it was real.

NASA had wasted no time in making preparations for a salvage attempt. Because the ship was so large, they knew they'd be unable to save it, but in the limited time available they were set upon salvaging as much of its technology as possible before it slipped into the ocean. NASA, the Navy and the Army had joined forces to this end. A taskforce was already on its way.

Jane and Jack walked to the edge of the Ice Rift Base Camp and glanced at the helicopters speeding out to sea, part of the Navy SEAL reconnaissance team Scott had persuaded NASA to send, and who would now try and board the ship through the tunnel Haax had used to escape from the ship.

"I don't envy them their task ahead. Setting foot aboard that spaceship again is something I never want to do," said Jane.

Jack agreed. It was a nightmare he wanted to forget. "They've been warned about the monsters onboard and have no doubt ignored the Antarctic treaty concerning weapons and are equipped with the appropriate firepower to handle any they encounter, but like you, if I never set foot aboard an alien spaceship again, I'll be happy."

The helicopter became a speck in the sky.

Jane pulled a piece of paper from her pocket.

Jack looked at her with concern. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

Jane nodded. "It's time." She unfolded the much read letter and scanned the words a final time.

*Hello my darling,*

*That you are reading this means I'm no longer with you, something I can't even imagine as I write this letter. It is the most difficult thing I have ever written, because I keep crying, knowing that if you are reading this, I will not be there to comfort you. Sadness overwhelms me and tears are flowing down my face. It will also mean that I never had time to show you how much I really love you.*

*I want you to know our time together was the most wonderful and enjoyable time in my life and I thank you for showing me what true love is. Each time we kissed I could feel your love for me. It was a magical sensation, and I hope you felt my love also. You were the reasons for my smile and my happiness. You have shown me so much love and I want you to know how much you mean to me. You are my whole world and I love you with all my heart.*

*I wanted to be with you for the rest of my life, my darling, but it wasn't to be. But until you find another to love— something I will be upset about if you don't— I shall always be with you, in your brightest day and your darkest night. When a soft breeze fans your cheek, it shall be my breath; when you smile for no reason, it shall be my spirit passing by. Please, Jane, do not mourn me for long. You have your whole life before you. Look to the future and all the joys a loving relationship can bring. You deserve to be loved and to love. So when you do find someone, don't let the thought of me hold you back. It is not a betrayal, but something I wish for you with all my heart. When you have found this wonderful person waiting for you to come into his life, then release me and I will gladly journey on knowing you have found the love and happiness we shared. Until that day I will always be looking over you to make sure you're safe.*

*Goodbye my love, I will never stop loving you,  
Kyle*

After wiping away her tears, she kissed the letter and held it up. The paper fluttered. Though she knew it was the wind that tried to pull it from her grasp, she imagined Kyle was responsible, happy she'd found another and his approval for her happiness. "Goodbye, Kyle." She released the letter.

The wind bore it into the air and sped it away.

Jack placed a comforting arm around her.

She turned to him. "You can kiss me now."

They kissed.

When their lips parted, Jack stared into her eyes. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I think I am." She slipped a gloved hand into his and gazed around the base camp. "I've had enough of the cold and ice for a while."

Jack sighed. "I know what you mean. Sun, sand and cocktails really sound inviting."

"Now the expedition has been cut short and once we've been debriefed, we'll be heading for New Zealand, so how about we make a holiday of it. Find a nice beach and relax for a few days."

Jack smiled at her. "That sounds perfect."

Hand in hand they walked back to the hut.

The spaceship computer detected the danger the ship and its cargo were in. Following its protocols, in a last desperate attempt to save the precious cargo, it awoke the creatures from their long hibernation and released them into the ship.

