



‘My turn!’

Dad jumped to his feet, straightening out his right arm in front of him. He moved his hand from right to left, nodding his head as he did so. Pumping his arm out to the side, then up, then out, then up, he then switched to his other arm to move it slowly but steadily before him, his head still nodding.

‘*Grease!*’ I shouted.

‘Ah, but which bit?’

‘Please!’ I said, insulted. ‘The song *Greased Lightning.*’

Dad straightened up, disgruntled. He was just winding up to mime the moves to the entire song and I’d spoiled his fun by guessing so quickly. He tapped his nose, pointed at me and smiled. ‘I should’ve given you a harder one.’

‘My turn.’ I sprang to my feet as Dad sat down.

I loved playing film charades with Dad. We were the only two people on board who loved old twentieth- and twenty-first-century films. Pressing a make-believe switch to activate my imaginary lightsaber, I leaped high into the air while performing the side splits, all the while fighting off the imaginary foe who was trying to slice me in two.

‘*Star Wars!*’ Dad bounced in his chair.

‘Ah, but which one?’ I challenged.

‘Which one of the whole series?’ he exclaimed.

I nodded.

‘Really?’ Dad raised an eyebrow. ‘I’m supposed to guess which one of the *Star Wars* films you’re re-enacting?’

‘Yep! And here’s a clue: it’s not one of the animated ones.’ I continued to jump around, swirling my arm to deflect imaginary blows.

‘Number eight!’ said Dad.

My mouth fell open as I stared at him, stunned. ‘How in the world did you get that?’

‘Now if I told you that, you’d know as much as I do,’ laughed Dad. ‘My turn again. You’ll never get this one.’ He was already on his feet, his smile wide. I loved his smile. It was wide and infectious and made everyone else around him smile too, guaranteed.

‘Why are you watching that? Again.’

At the sound of Aidan’s voice I stopped the recording, swiping my hand downwards to dismiss the image playing in front of me. Dad’s laughing face vanished. I turned my face away, quickly brushing my fingertips across my cheeks to smooth my expression.

‘Vee, are you all right?’ Aidan walked over to me.

I shrugged. ‘Of course. I just like to watch recordings of Mum and Dad.’

A reminder of better times.

There were recordings of the whole family together but far fewer than I would've liked, and very little footage of just Mum and me. Her job had meant that she'd had very little free time.

Aidan frowned, his gaze intense. 'I don't understand. Watching them hurts you. So why do it?'

'They make me smile,' I replied. 'I don't do much of that any more.'

Puzzled, Aidan tilted his head as he regarded me.

'I laugh a lot. I don't smile much,' I explained.

'What's the difference?' he asked seriously.

'Not enough to worry about,' I replied at last.

Aidan reached out, one of his fingers brushing against my cheek just beneath my right eye. When he drew back his hand, a single tear lay on his index finger. He studied it for a moment.

'I don't like to see you sad.'

'Watching the recordings makes me happy too,' I said. 'That's the point.'

Aidan scrutinized me, those dark brown eyes of his not missing much, as per usual.

'Aidan, I'm OK.'

'True?'

'True.'

He stepped forward and gave me a hug. As he stepped back, I dredged up a smile which Aidan accepted at face value.

‘No more recordings?’ said Aidan.

‘No more recordings.’

For today.

Aidan smiled and nodded, relieved. ‘Now how about a nice game of chess?’

2

NATHAN

Son of a bitch! Agony detonated inside me, raw and devouring. I'd never felt anything like it. I wasn't so much crying out as screaming out in pain. My left foot and lower leg were completely crushed beneath the weight of fallen rocks and boulders. Gasping, panting, I had to make a superhuman effort to get myself together. If I gave in to the pain and panic slicing through me, I'd stand no chance at all. Grabbing hold of my left leg at the knee, I tried to pull myself free. I used my right foot to push and kick against the fallen boulders.

Nothing doing. The rocks weren't budging.

I was going nowhere.

Trapped.

The left leg of my environment suit was in shreds. Ironically the self-same boulder that had pinned my leg and ripped my suit in the first place was also the object now sealing the breach. But I'd lost a lot of oxygen from my suit in the process. When I came down into the mine thirty minutes ago, I'd had over ten hours of oxygen left in my suit. The heads-up display of my helmet now showed I had less than fifty minutes of air left. Which would see me off first? The intense cold, the carbon-

dioxide atmosphere down here in the mine, or the blood loss from my crushed foot?

Having fun yet, Nate?

The sickly yellow lights which marked our route through the mine flickered and dimmed. In a few hours they would be switched off completely – not that I'd be alive to see that if I didn't get the hell out of here.

The trouble was, Anjali was the only one who knew I'd come back down here to retrieve my tablet. That fact did me no good at all as she'd gone back to the barracks to get some rest. Knowing Anjali she was already fast asleep.

And the filling in my life's-a-vindictive-bitch sandwich?

The moment I heard the ominous creaking and cracking which signalled a cave-in I'd started to run, but had dropped my damned tablet as I stumbled and fell. The tablet was about one metre behind me, buried under the same tonne or more of rubble as my leg, and undoubtedly sharing the same fate – smashed to pieces.

'HELP!'

Stupid to call for help when I knew there was no one around to hear me. But it made me feel like I was doing something. A pathetic something, a useless something, but something nonetheless.

I needed to do more.

The next shift was due to start mining at least seven kilometres away from my current location. The seams in the vast mines which crisscrossed this area were only excavated for a few months at a time before we moved on to a new section. The

known seams were worked in a strict rotation. That's the reason I'd come down here to retrieve my tablet. I knew if I didn't get it now, I'd have to wait too many months before they opened up this section again. No way could I go that long with no lifeline to the world outside this mining colony.

But now I was trapped and alone.

If I didn't find a way to get out of here and fast, my buff and perfectly preserved but incredibly dead body would not be found for several months. I needed to figure something out. *Now.*

Forty-one minutes of air left.

'HELP! HELP ME!'

Nate, don't panic. You'll just use up your oxygen faster.

The agony in my leg made it difficult but I tried to compartmentalize the pain, fold it up and put it to one side, so that I could come up with a way out of this.

My DE torch.

I dug into the side pocket of my suit over my thigh.

Please let it still be in there.

It was, thank God! I changed the setting from light to heat. The faint, high-pitched whistle told me it had activated properly. It gave out a concentrated beam that we used in the mine for precision cutting when necessary. Where would be the best place to cut into the boulders and rocks pinning my leg? If I got this wrong, the whole tunnel would come tumbling down on top of the rest of me. It dawned on me that cutting into the rocks that held me captive wouldn't work. Displacing any of them would just bring down more. The only way I was going to get out of here was to slice through my leg, just above where it was

pinned, through skin and my shin, and muscle, blood and bone. The torch would cauterize as it cut but the pain would be excruciating.

Son of a bitch!

I was going to have to cut off my own foot.

I couldn't do it.

How could I?

But it was that or die for sure.

I switched off the DE torch, shaking my head. I simply couldn't do it.

I tried kicking against the rocks with my right foot again, heaving to pull my left leg free. All I got from that was a renewed blast of searing pain. In my panic, I was breathing too fast. I was going to use up all my remaining oxygen in double-quick time at this rate.

Thirty-seven minutes of oxygen left.

Face facts. Whatever happened, rescued by others or rescue myself, I was going to lose my foot. Damn! And I was so attached to it too.

Come on, Nathan.

Do it.

Get on with it.

You're not getting any younger.

My head was beginning to swim. Black spots were darting before my eyes.

I was going into shock. About to pass out. Wow, the good times just kept on coming. If I fainted now, these black spots would be the last things I ever saw.

Gritting my teeth, I switched on the DE torch again, adjusting the setting back to a focused beam of heat rather than light. Before I could change my mind, I directed it at my leg . . .

I woke up screaming.

‘What the hell, Nathan?’ said Mike, switching on his lamp.

I wiped my forehead, which was pouring with sweat. Pain, remembered but no less real for it, lanced through me. Damn it! I sighed as I sat up.

‘The same dream?’ Mike asked.

‘Yeah,’ I admitted.

‘Why won’t you let Doctor Liana give you something for that? Practically every other night you go through this. And when you go through it, so do the rest of us.’

‘Some of us are trying to sleep over here!’ an irate Pearl shouted from across the barracks. That was all I needed. She was a misery at the best of times. Deprived of sleep, she’d be yet another nightmare to contend with.

‘Sorry,’ I called out.

‘Nathan, shut the hell up!’ Corbyn shouted from further along the room.

I was feeling the love.

A ripple effect was happening throughout the barracks as more and more people began to stir. Time to escape before my arse got kicked. I threw back my bedcover and bent my left leg to rub halfway between my ankle and my knee. My real lower leg was back in the mine, probably still buried under a ton of rock. This bionic replacement, covered in synthetic skin, looked

and behaved the same as my real leg and was certainly better than nothing; I could still feel the indented scar right around my calf and shin where the prosthesis had been attached to my body.

Knowing that sleep and I would be strangers for a while, I sighed and got out of bed. Slipping on my boots, I made my way out of the dorm. Mike waited until I was at the door before switching off his lamp. He was a good mate that way. After a brief smile in his direction, I made my way out into the compound, taking a deep breath of the still night air. The air here smelled and tasted different to what I was used to. More . . . citrusy. Maybe something to do with the plants and trees that grew around here. God, I sounded like Mike now. Mike would much rather hang out with the trees on this planet than any of us people.

I glanced up at the sky, full of stars I didn't recognize. That didn't make them any less awesome. Good word that. Awesome. And definitely under-used. I liked old, nearly obsolete words. That was one of the things I'd missed on the mining colony – access to words, new and old, especially the written kind. God knows this place was better than life back on the mining colony but there was still something empty inside me, a void that ached to be filled. This life, this place, it wasn't enough.

But for a while at least, it would have to do.

I looked around, trying to decide where to go. A light shone from the meeting house at the centre of the compound. Frowning, I made my way towards it. Wasn't it a bit late to be holding a meeting?

As I got closer, my steps grew quieter. Whatever was going

on, it was obviously not meant for common knowledge. I crept over to an open window, ducking down beneath it to stay out of sight. I heard Darren's voice, but then that wouldn't've been hard. The guy, who was Mum's second in command, had never been shy about speaking his mind.

'Cathy, this is madness. We need to activate the distress beacon,' Darren insisted. 'It's our only chance.'

'We've been here for over three Sol months. This is our home now. Are you really in that much of a hurry to be at the mercy of the Authority again?' Mum argued.

'No, but better the devil you know at this point. Quite frankly, I'd rather take my chances with the Authority than with the Mazon.'

My heart leaped. The Mazon? What was Darren talking about? Were we in danger from the Mazon? They were an enemy very few had seen but everyone knew about. I didn't know that much about them, but the stories of what they did to their victims had travelled fast, far and wide. Their hatred for all us humans was well-known.

'If the Authority gets its hands on us, we won't be sent back to the mines; we'll be publicly executed,' Mum snapped. 'You do know that, right?'

'Catherine, I know it's a hard choice between the lesser of two evils but we can't stay here,' said another voice. Sam this time, if I wasn't mistaken. 'The Mazon have made that perfectly clear.'

A moment's silence.

I risked raising my head to peer through the open window.

Mum, Darren, Sam, Hedda, Akemi, Doctor Liana and Beck sat at the round assembly table where most, if not all, of the decisions on behalf of us settlers were made. Almost directly opposite me, Mum began to turn her head my way. I ducked out of sight again, my heart thumping.

‘I know it won’t be easy but there has to be a way to reason with the Mazon,’ Mum insisted. ‘I’ll keep sending out the transmissions. We’ve got to convince them that we’re not the enemy. Quite frankly, they’re our last hope.’

‘Then we’re in deep shit,’ said Darren. ‘Cathy, activate the beacon.’

‘No. Not yet.’ Mum dug her heels in. ‘Not until we have exhausted every other option.’

Oh my God! We were in Mazon territory? Mum and the others had kept that quiet. And she was going to try and reason with them? Seriously? Well, good luck with that.

‘The Mazon have only given us until the first sunrise to clear out,’ said Sam.

‘Cathy, we should activate the emergency distress beacon,’ Darren urged.

‘Not yet.’

‘At least put it to a vote.’

‘Darren, I didn’t ask to be leader. You voted me into the role. You all did. So let me lead,’ said Mum. ‘I’m not going to activate the distress beacon until we have no other option.’

‘By then it may be too late,’ Darren said, exasperated.

‘I refuse to believe that a race with the obvious intelligence of the Mazon can’t be reasoned with,’ said Mum.

'And if you're wrong?' asked Hedda quietly.

'We have to try,' replied Mum. 'I'm willing to take that chance.'

I raised my head again, just in time to catch the shared looks exchanged around the table.

Darren shook his head. 'Just as long as you remember you're taking a chance with all our lives, not just your own.'

3



‘Aidan, is there any chance that you might make your next move before the last syllable of recorded time?’

‘I’m thinking.’ Aidan frowned, never raising his gaze from the chessboard.

I sighed. ‘You’ve been thinking for over twenty minutes.’

Aidan’s hand hovered over his bishop, who was pursing his lips with impatience, then moved slowly to hover over his rook, which had a darkening cloud over it, then back to his tetchy bishop.

Arghhh! This was the eighth time he’d contemplated the exact same move.

‘Stop rolling your eyes,’ my brother said, without looking up at me.

‘Move then!’

‘My bishop . . .’ Aidan began ponderously, ‘takes your knight.’

He snatched my knight as it reared up, and put his bishop in its place, then raised his head to grin at me triumphantly. I immediately moved my queen to E5. She glanced around the chessboard imperiously, then smiled with slow satisfaction.

Aidan stared at the board, then raised his head to blink at me like a stunned owl.

I winked. ‘How d’you like me now?’ Ha!

His frown deepened. ‘There’s a distress signal coming through.’

I glanced down at the screen that made up the right arm of my chair.

‘Screen up,’ I ordered.

Instantly a map of our immediate vicinity was displayed directly before me. Rotating my wrists slightly to adjust the command bracelets I wore, I scrolled across the map. There was nothing out of the ordinary. No blips, no beeps, no burbs. Nothing. I dragged my hand down vertically to remove the screen, then turned to frown at my brother. ‘I can’t see anything on the monitor.’

Aidan had a faux enquiring look on his face. ‘No? I must’ve been mistaken.’

Yeah, right! Eyes narrowed, I glanced down at the chessboard. My queen now wore a thunderous expression. She wasn’t the only one who was annoyed. ‘Aidan, stop cheating!’

‘I did not.’

‘I swear if you don’t stop cheating, I’m not going to play chess with you any more.’

‘How did I cheat?’ Aidan asked with indignation.

‘My queen was on E5 and in three moves you would’ve been in check and begging for mercy – and we both know it. So why is my queen now on E6?’

The hologram of the chess set disappeared. Proof positive that Aidan had been cheating and was now going to sulk because he'd been caught.

'I'll take that as your resignation,' I said. 'That's three hundred and twenty-eight games to me and one hundred and ninety-one games to you, with thirty-four stalemates.'

I jumped up and did an impromptu victory dance. 'Go, Vee! Go, Vee! I win again. Yeah, me! Go, Vee!'

'Very mature! And I can't believe you're keeping the exact score,' sniffed Aidan.

'Getting the better of you is always an unforgettable experience.' I grinned, sitting back down. Plus, to be honest, it was getting harder and harder to win against him. In a few more months or even less I'd be lucky to win any at all.

'You need to get a life,' my brother said. 'And chess is a stupid game anyway.'

'Go wash your mouth out! Chess is a game of strategy, tactics and deeper thinking. It is a game of the soul.' I placed a hand dramatically over my heart. 'As well as the mind. And how come it's only a stupid game when you're losing?'

Aidan didn't deign to answer.

'Should I break out the cards? We can play Pairs if that's more your speed,' I teased.

'You don't hear me going on and on about it when I win,' said Aidan.

I snorted with derision. Actually snorted. ‘You are joking, right?’

If my brother won at anything, he went on about it for hours, sometimes days, sharing every thought which had accompanied each decisive or winning move.

‘Want another game of chess then?’

‘No. You only win because you’re better at cheating than I am.’ Aidan swung round in his seat to face his navigation panel, effectively turning his back on me. He was such a sore loser. I mean, really? Getting bent out of shape over a game? But that was Aidan all over. He hated to lose.

I sighed. Now what should I do?

This was how I spent my days, playing games with my brother, where the outcome tended to be a given, or looking after the plants in the hydroponics bay or learning about as many different alien cultures and their languages as I could.

But that was it.

It should’ve been a lot, but it wasn’t.

It should’ve been enough, but it came nowhere close.

It served to pass the time.

And God only knew I had more than enough of that, if nothing else. I swivelled right round in my chair, gazing out of the transparent dome that made up most of the roof of the bridge. A few distant stars and a lot of nothingness. It matched all the activities I pursued to occupy my mind and my time. Lots of nothingness to fill the empty hours. This was my life now. Each day I tried to find

something – but it tended to be the same old something – to fill the moments, the minutes, the months. Life wasn't meant to be so predictable. The bridge I currently occupied was small – it could only hold eight comfortably – but I knew every piece of machinery, every byte of software, every panel, real and virtual. Apart from my sleeping quarters, this was the place in the universe I knew best.

It wasn't much. But it was all I had.

For want of something better to do I cast a cursory glance over the command panel and saw it immediately – a pulsing cursor at the very edge of my screen which disappeared almost at once.

'Aidan, what was that?'

'What was what?'

'Aidan, don't muck about. That looked like the signal from a distress beacon. You were serious about that?'

'I thought I saw an emergency signal but it was cancelled,' Aidan replied.

'Cancelled or extinguished?'

'I don't understand the question.'

'Never mind. The signal is back,' I said.

I bent closer to the panel in the arm of my chair for a better look. The signal was incredibly faint and getting weaker.

'Where does this signal originate?'

'Barros 5, the fifth uninhabited planet in the Barros binary star system,' said Aidan.

What on earth . . . ? That planet was inside Mazon space.
'Take us there,' I said.
'Vee, I don't think that's a good idea—'
'Aidan, take us there,' I ordered. 'Maximum speed.'

Twenty minutes later we were in high orbit around the so-called uninhabited planet. The trouble was, it was far from uninhabited. I had originally thought that maybe the signal came from an unmanned probe or an exploratory robot ship in trouble on the planet's surface. Now I was closer I was getting a jumble of life readings. The added problem was that my ship wasn't the only one in orbit. Two Mazon battlecruisers were several kilometres below me and firing at one particular area on the largest land mass in the southern hemisphere.

'What exactly are the Mazon firing at?' I asked.

'The scanners indicate eighty-five Terrans on the planet surface,' Aidan replied.

Stunned, I needed a moment or two to digest that information.

People.

People from Earth were down on that planet. People like me. But not for much longer if I didn't do something – and fast. But what? There was no way my ship was a match for the fire power of the two Mazon battlecruisers. If I tried to take them on in a knockdown, drag-out firefight, I'd be blasted to smithereens.

Think.

‘Aidan, I need you to solo-transfer me directly into the engine core of both those Mazon ships,’ I said.

Aidan swung round in his chair so quickly I’m surprised he didn’t give himself whiplash. ‘The core? Are you unhinged? You’ll suffocate, then fry. Literally.’

‘Not if I wear a protection suit and you shield me in each one.’ I deliberately made my tone bright and breezy.

‘Even with a protection suit, I can only shield you for fifteen seconds max, and if my calculations are out by even 0.001 per cent, you’ll die,’ said Aidan like he was telling me something I didn’t already know.

‘Don’t miscalculate then.’ I smiled with a bravado I was far from feeling. ‘Transfer me into the core of the one closest to the planet surface, then back here. Recalibrate, then rinse and repeat. And I need you to get me into the second ship before the first ship realizes their engine has been sabotaged. OK?’

Transfer to the Mazon ship? *Piece of cake.*

Into the engine core? *Doddle.*

And not get caught? I could do that in my sleep and twice on Sunday. *Sorted.*

Ha!

Aidan stared at me as if I’d just lost my mind – which, quite frankly, was a distinct possibility. I admit, it was a pretty arseholistic idea.

‘No, it’s not OK. You’re really going to risk your life for some anonymous people down on the planet surface? That’s just plain stupid,’ said my brother. ‘And even if you

do manage to disable the Mazon ships, then what? We can't take that many people on board. Our maximum carrying capacity is seventy.'

'We'll figure that part out afterwards.'

'Vee, I know you believe in trusting your gut instincts but this is reckless – even for you,' said Aidan. 'We don't know who they are, or anything about them. I can't allow it.'

I stood up and went over to him. 'Aidan, there are *people* down there. People in trouble. I'm not going to insist on checking their credentials before deciding whether or not to help them.' I took my brother's hand in mine and looked into his dark brown eyes. 'They need help. That's all we know or need to know. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if we turned tail and ran, if we didn't at least try. So I'm ordering you to help me rescue them.'

'You'll die.'

'No I won't, because you won't let that happen.' I smiled. 'Think of this as the last scene of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*.'

Aidan's eyebrows shot up. I winced. OK, maybe that wasn't the best example I could've given. 'Scratch that. Think of this as . . . as . . .'

Nope, not *The Godfather*. Al Pacino had had one of his brothers shot. I was mentally scrambling for a film I'd watched that showed great family loyalty and a triumph over adversity. Come on! I'd watched thousands of twentieth- and twenty-first-century films over the years and had memorized every word of a number

of them. So why was I having such trouble picking just one to mention now? ‘Think of this as *Jeepers Creepers!*’

‘The film where the brother dies at the end and the weird-ass creature ends up wearing his eyeballs?’ asked Aidan drily.

Damn it! He was deliberately missing the point.

‘But the sister was there for the brother and tried to save him,’ I said. ‘So this is like that situation but in reverse, ’cept you won’t let me die ’cause you’re my little brother and you love me.’

‘I’m only your little brother by nine minutes and twenty-two seconds,’ said Aidan, replaying an argument we’d had many, many times before.

‘Whatever. Give me a couple of minutes to put on a protection suit, and then let’s do this,’ I said, already heading for my quarters, which were on the upper deck and within a stone’s throw of the bridge. ‘We don’t have much time.’

I ran to my quarters. It took me longer than it should’ve to put on my protection suit because my room was a mess, and after I found it my hands wouldn’t stop shaking. Now that I was no longer arguing with Aidan, the full import of what I was about to attempt hit me – and it hit hard.

My brother was going to transfer me into the engine core, the beating heart of each Mazon ship. Cells that gave out the same amount of energy as a small sun would surround me. I’d have around ten seconds to disable the appropriate cells in each Mazon ship’s core before the energy permeated the force field I was relying on Aidan to

wrap around me. After that, I'd have less than one second before my protection suit failed and I'd be vaporized. Aidan was going to have to divert all our ship's power, except for essential systems, to keep me alive within the force field.

If my plan failed but by some miracle Aidan managed to get me back to the ship in one whole living piece, we would be sitting ducks, with no weapons, no shields. No hope. The Mazon would know of our presence, and after one inevitable blast we'd be history. Aidan was right. This was stupid. Possibly the stupidest plan I'd ever come up with.

But there were people down on the planet.

People.

I hadn't shared a joke, a laugh, a conversation with anyone other than Aidan in over three years. That alone made it worth the risk.

A charge like electricity shot through my body. My mind was buzzing, my thoughts tripping over each other as they raced. This was the closest to instant death I'd ever been, or ever wanted to be; but for the first time in a long, long time I felt *alive*.

NATHAN

There was nowhere to run. Nowhere safe. The ground was erupting. The relentless din of screams, shouts, bomb blasts and collapsing masonry filled my ears. Debris and machinery flew through the air in all directions. Mum kept pulling me, but to where? There was nowhere to hide. Nowhere we could be safe from the bombs exploding all around us and the weapon blasts cutting straight through anything they touched. Some people were running back into nearby buildings or making for the barracks; others were trying to run out of the compound.

I saw Bertrand on his knees, crying and clutching Simone, his six-year-old daughter, to him as she screamed in wide-eyed terror. Snatching my arm from Mum's grip, I literally bent over backwards, one hand down, the back of my head almost on the ground – and only just in time, as a huge metal disc, intent on cutting me in half, sliced through the air just above me. A high, piercing whistle sounded. My heart sank. That whistling sound meant DE, or directed energy-weapons. The enemy had stepped up their attack. I knew only too well just how deadly directed energy could be. Two years ago that setting on my torch had detached a third of my leg from the rest of me. The ear-piercing whistling sound was getting closer.

Game over.

I sprang to my feet and hit the ground running. Mum grasped my hand as we raced for elusive safety. Ordinarily, I would've recoiled from holding my mum's hand. I mean, please.

But not today.

Not now.

'Get to the cavern in the mountain,' Mum shouted, though in the chaos of the destruction all around us her voice barely carried to me, never mind across the compound to the others running about trying to seek safe shelter. The bomb blasts going off around our compound effectively hemmed us in. The Mazon weren't stupid. And even if we did get to the cavern, what use would that be? The Mazon weren't going to stop until every last one of us was dead. Their merciless reputation hadn't been an exaggeration. They were the dogs of war and they'd bring down the whole mountain on our heads if they had to. As far as they were concerned, we were unwanted, unwelcome immigrants encroaching on their land.

We ran.

I tried not to focus on the bodies and severed limbs on the ground in every direction. The whole scene was of carnage. The random splashes of red soaking into the sandy soil of our compound were now so plentiful they were forming into rivulets.

And still we ran.

The undiluted screams of terror, panicked shouts and cries of others tore straight through me. And yet I didn't say a word. I couldn't. Besides, what was there to say? All I could do was run. And pray. A flash of resentment directed my focus back to Mum.

She'd been warned. The Mazon had told us not to try and settle here. They'd made it very clear that we weren't welcome. We'd been given just one day to be off their planet, but Mum had refused to deploy the emergency beacon until five Sol hours ago. The chances were slim to none that any vessel would be in the vicinity to even detect the signal, never mind come to our aid.

It didn't matter that this land was unoccupied. As far as the Mazon were concerned, it was their territory and theirs alone. We were intruders. Mum had tried to convince them that we weren't a part of the Authority and that all we wanted was to coexist in peace. I'd listened as she spoke at length about what we could bring to their table. Mum truly believed that reason could work with the Mazon. But we were the unknown, and as far as they were concerned, that meant we were to be feared and eliminated, not necessarily in that order. It would be laughable if it wasn't the exact opposite. We weren't a threat to anyone. Just a bunch of unwanted people seeking a better life.

This wasn't what any of us had had in mind.

Mum had been so sure we could win round the Mazon to her way of thinking. The bombs falling all around us were a testament to just how wrong she had been. Even though I was running for my life, a quiet sense of defeat tinged with sadness settled deep within me. I was only nineteen. There was so much I wanted to see, so much I still had to do.

No! I wasn't going to bow out like this. I needed to fight, not run. But how could I when the enemy were cowardly kilometres above us where our weapons couldn't touch them?

What we all needed now was a miracle.

5



VEE

‘Ready, Aidan?’

‘This is the worst idea in the history of bad ideas.’

‘Aidan, I don’t have time for this. Are you ready?’ I said with impatience.

‘I should be the one to go into the Mazon engine core, not you.’

‘And we both know why you can’t,’ I replied.

He wasn’t happy, but there was nothing either of us could do about that. If I went into the Mazon core, there was a minuscule chance I’d succeed. In there, Aidan stood no chance at all.

A moment’s silence. My brother looked at me, a strange expression on his face. ‘Don’t die, Olivia.’

‘Not part of my plan,’ I tried to assure him. ‘You don’t get rid of me that easily. Think of this as—’

‘Please. Not another film-reference failure,’ Aidan begged.

He turned towards the console, but not before I deciphered his expression. He was scared. Actually scared. That shook me. I went over and hugged him from behind, around his neck, which he accepted for a couple of seconds before pulling away.

‘Get off. Are you nuts? Oh wait, we’ve already established that you are!’

I smiled, though it didn’t last long. ‘Aidan, if something happens to me, do your best to rescue the people on the planet. OK?’

‘You want me to rescue the ones who’ll have brought about your death?’ he said, aghast.

‘Aidan, this is my choice. My decision. It’s the right thing to do. So promise me you’ll do what you can to save all those on the planet surface.’

‘I promise I’ll try. But that’s all I promise.’ Before I could reply, he added, ‘Vee, on my mark.’

I crouched down, my protection suit in place, the visor of my helmet down. This was insane. The chances of this working were—

‘Three. Two. One. *Mark.*’

A shrill whistle, an intense dragging sensation, and less than a second later I was on the Mazon ship. I had to close my eyes for a moment against the intense, blinding light. Even with my visor down, it felt like my retinas had been seared. I adjusted the light input of my visor to a more comfortable level. The urge to throw up was overpowering. That’s why I hated this kind of transfer, but luckily I’d done it before so I knew what to expect. Even so, my mouth filled with saliva and I had to keep rapidly swallowing or I would’ve puked in my helmet. The heat in the core was almost unbearable, even wearing my protection suit, and there wasn’t a thing I could do about that. Sweat was

already dripping from my forehead and my skin felt like I was standing inside an erupting volcano.

With no time to waste, I looked around. The engine core of this massive Mazon ship was cylindrical in shape and about four metres in diameter, covering at least four levels, each roughly three metres or a storey high. Each level contained a narrow metal gantry in the shape of a cross to get from one side to the other, with what looked like fine metal cargo nets fixed vertically to the walls at regular intervals to allow access from one level to the next. From the look of the gantry I was standing on, it hadn't been used since the ship was first built. In this core, energy was a tangible thing, stinging my skin in spite of the suit I wore.

Ten.

I scanned the huge engine core. I had two more levels above me and one below. And beneath the lowest level was the reactor. Instant death. There wasn't a protection suit in the universe that could protect me from that if I fell into it.

Nine.

There they were. The core cells I was looking for. Two levels directly above. I had no time to climb. I'd have to jump, using my suit's limited propulsion system to move me up.

Crouch down.

Eight.

Jump! I leaped, reaching out with both hands above my head. Grabbing the underside of the metalwork, I swung

myself round, crouched and jumped again, but this time I aimed not at the next horizontal gantry above me but the net next to the core cells I needed to sabotage.

Seven.

A frantic grab with both hands at the metal net. My left hand slipped, but my right hand managed to find purchase. My momentum swung me round and my back banged into the burning hot wall. I clung on for dear life – literally.

Six.

Dangling like a fish on a line, I tried to regain my equilibrium. I kicked out and swung back round to face the array of energy cells, by which time my right arm and shoulder were screaming in protest at having to take my full weight. Time was ticking by.

Five.

Looking straight up, I reached out with my left arm and grabbed hold of one of the energy cells directly above me. My visor readings told me I had one of the right kind.

Four.

Pull! Now that my feet were supported by the metal net, I could lean back slightly and lend my whole body weight to the task. I tried to pull the appropriate energy cell out of its housing. The thing wasn't budging. I wasn't going to make it.

Three.

It was moving! I held on tighter and yanked. Then grabbed hold of the one next to it and yanked that out too, allowing them to free fall around me.

Two.

I pulled the anti-energy unit off my belt and rammed it into the core, replacing the cells I'd just removed.

One.

A rush.

The dragging sensation was back.

An absence of light.

I couldn't see a thing.

'Vee, are you OK?' Aidan's voice came from directly in front of me.

Pushing up my visor, I blinked rapidly, my eyes re-adjusting to the normal light on the bridge of our ship, which was considerably more subdued than in the engine core of the Mazon ship. I took a deep breath, quickly followed by another. The cooler air on my face and in my lungs was most welcome. Now I just needed to stop feeling nauseous.

'Did it work?' asked my brother.

'We'll soon find out. Send me to the second ship. Same deal.'

'You should wait at least seven minutes to fully decontaminate,' Aidan said. 'If you go back now, you'll have even less time to sabotage the Mazon ship.'

'I can't wait. No time. I'll be fine. You'll keep me safe. Send me to the second ship.'

Aidan opened his mouth to keep arguing but the expression on my face obviously made him think better of it. I knew I was being terse with him, but if I didn't do this now, if I

stopped to think about it for even a second, I'd bottle out. I pushed my visor back down, sealing it in place.

'Good luck, sis.'

A moment later and I was in the engine core of the second ship – except Aidan hadn't managed to get me into the middle of the relay core as before. Instead my feet were on the very edge of the gantry on the lowest level and I was tipping backwards. My arms spun like fan blades as I tried to regain my balance.

Ten.

I was slipping.

Oh my God! I was going to fall.

Nine.

I lurched forward and fell to my knees.

Eight.

I looked up. I needed to be on the topmost level, three storeys higher. It would take at least six seconds just to climb up that far, even using my suit's propulsion system, leaving me no time to sabotage the ship.

Seven.

What were my choices? No way could I make it to the right cells of the energy array in time to do any good.

Maybe if I . . .

Six.

Vee, don't second guess yourself. Do something. Fast.

A rapid recce: the cells that provided energy for the navigation and targeting systems and the cargo bays were the only ones within striking distance.

Five.

I raced along the gantry to the navigation-system relay cells.

Four.

Any sabotage here would be fixed in less than forty minutes. Thirty minutes, if I was unlucky.

Three.

Then I'd better make every moment count.

'Aidan, I need a few more seconds.' I spoke into the communications unit that was part of my helmet as I removed the closest cell and let it fall into the reactor.

Two . . .

'You don't have a few more seconds . . .'

'Hold on.' I reached for the adjacent cell to the one I'd just destroyed and dished out the same treatment. I pulled the anti-energy pack off my belt, but my hand – my whole body – was on fire and my focus slipped to the pain zig-zagging inside me rather than the anti-energy pack. The display data inside my helmet was frantically flashing red. My suit was about to fail. The anti-energy pack fell from my fingers. I watched in dismay as it vanished into the energy reactor beneath me.

Searing light.

Unbearable heat.

I couldn't take much more. My protection suit wasn't going to last much longer, but I had to keep trying. I was just reaching for the next energy cell and had half pulled it free when the lights went out.

I was back on our ship, blinking as my eyes took longer than before to readjust. I fell to my knees, gasping against the intense pain ricocheting around my body. My stomach was heaving. I only just managed to unlock and pull off my helmet before vomiting with spectacular violence all over the floor. I vomited so hard and for so long that I'm sure there was a bit of cake from my first birthday party in among the smelly mess. The bridge's cleaning robot immediately emerged from its charging unit by the door to vacuum up the stuff and sanitize the area.

'Aidan! Why did you pull me out?' I asked when at last I managed to straighten up. 'I didn't have enough time—'

'One more second and you would've been vaporized,' he told me. 'You left it too long as it is. You have a number of second-degree burns and need to get to the medical bay.'

'No. The medi bay will have to wait until we've rescued the people on the planet surface,' I argued. 'You didn't put me down in the middle of the relay core like I asked. I had to improvise.'

'And I had to save your life. By the way, you're welcome,' Aidan said with attitude.

Justifiable attitude, I conceded.

I took a deep breath. 'Sorry, Aidan. I reckon we have maybe ten minutes max to evacuate all those people on the surface and it's going to take at least three minutes just to get down there.'

'You won't be able to save them all.' He was scrutinizing

the planet surface scanner. ‘They’re too scattered and the damage to the landscape is too great. Plus a number of them are already dead.’

‘Put us down where we can rescue the greatest number,’ I ordered. ‘And let’s do this quick, fast and in a hurry before the Mazon have the chance to fix their ships. Every moment counts.’

‘For heaven’s sake, Vee, why’re you doing this?’ Aidan asked.

I smiled, giving my brother an answer I knew would just aggravate him more. ‘My gut is telling me it’s the right thing to do.’

Aidan groaned. ‘I swear one day your gut is going to be the death of me.’



NATHAN

I'd prayed for a miracle. What we got was the Earth vessel which had landed outside our compound. It wasn't quite what I'd expected or wanted, but hell, I'd take my miracles any way I could get them. The explorer-class ship was hovering about four metres off the ground to the east of our compound, blotting out the landscape.

And I've never seen anything so welcome.

Or so dreaded.

The bomb drops and DE bursts seemed to have ceased, which struck me as odd, but I barely had time to think about it. Pulling my arm out of Mum's grasp, I sprinted with her for the ramp which led from the ground to the belly of the Earth ship.

Mum and I weren't the only ones with the same idea. All around us, people were racing for the ramp. On the ground, the wounded were shouting for help and those in a worse way screamed in agony. The ones who really got to me were the severely wounded who didn't scream at all. A few stopped to help others to their feet before making their way to the ship. I slowed to help one of the silent wounded just to my left. Blood and more spilled from a wound in his gut as I tried to help

him up. Mum looked at him, then at me, and shook her head. Gritting my teeth, I reluctantly released the guy as gently as I could. He lay on the ground, his eyes closed, his breathing laboured. And then, just like that, his breathing stopped. I stared.

'Come on, Nathan,' Mum urged.

With no time to even close the dead settler's eyes, we carried on running. There were so many around us who needed help, but when I slowed again, Mum turned to shout at me. 'Sort yourself out, Nathan. Then you can help the others. Keep moving!'

So for once, because it was convenient to do so, I did as I was told.

Darren, Mum's second in command, was on the ramp pressing people to hurry up. Now the bomb blasts had stopped I could hear him call out.

Then I saw her. Anjuli. About five or six metres to my right my best friend Anjuli was on her knees, blood trickling from a wound on her head. I sprinted over, pulled her to her feet and placed her arm round my shoulders and my arm round her waist as I urged her on towards the ramp.

'Ellie! ELLIE? Has anyone seen my wife? Where's my son?' Darren ran down the ramp, only to stop abruptly at the bottom. 'ELLIE? Has anyone seen my son Martyn?'

No one replied as they ran past him into the belly of the ship. Mum, who was now ahead of me, slowed her pace so that Anjuli and I could catch up with her. When we didn't do that fast enough, she ran back to us and placed Anjuli's other arm round

her shoulders. We practically dragged Anjuli up the ramp. When I knew she and Mum were safe and on the ship, I turned, ready to offer what help I could to those lagging behind.

‘Mike, come on. Move!’ I shouted to my friend, who was only just emerging from one of the few buildings in the compound that was still in one piece.

‘I’m running as fast as I can,’ he called back.

‘Not fast enough if you still have breath to argue,’ I yelled.

Firing a furious look at me, he picked up the pace. The compound was full of those who’d sought shelter wherever they could and were only just emerging now that the bomb blasts had stopped. Why they thought they’d be safer inside their dwellings than outside, where they at least stood a slim chance of seeing the bombs coming their way, was beyond me. Plus the fact that it was an Earth vessel which had come to our aid didn’t exactly help. With the Mazon on one side of us and the Earth vessel on the other, we were between the proverbial rock and hard place. Now a wave of people were charging for the ramp.

‘ELLIE?’ Darren, who stood beside me, was still yelling for his wife.

BOOOOM!

The bomb blasts started again. Not in the compound this time but on the mountain a couple of kilometres to our west. In a panic, more people raced past me, but there were far more still in the compound, only just emerging from their hiding places.

The ramp I was standing on began to slowly rise.

‘NO! WAIT!’ Darren called out.

Before us, down on the ground, the panic was getting worse. It was now every person for themselves. Those who fell were not helped back up. The shouts and screams were getting louder.

And still the ramp kept rising.

Some flung themselves at the ramp and scrambled on. Now the ship itself was beginning to rise. Liana Sheen, our commune's doctor, jumped up to the ramp and only just managed to grab hold. The ship was rising faster now. Crouching down, I reached out to catch her as her hands began to slip.

'Darren, help me,' I called out.

Blinking, as if emerging from a daze, Darren grabbed my shirt and started pulling. Liana took hold of my wrists with both hands as I heaved her aboard. She fell forward onto her stomach, only to spring up again almost immediately. The ramp was now almost horizontal and still rising. Back on the ground I saw others frantically waving their hands and begging us to come back.

The ship kept ascending.

'Let's get out of here,' I shouted.

We raced along the ramp to the cargo hold, the renewed sound of exploding bombs pounding in our ears.

7



‘Aidan, there are still people on the ground. We can’t leave yet,’ I protested.

‘If we don’t leave now, we won’t leave at all,’ my brother argued as his hands moved over the controls. ‘One Mazon ship is still out of commission but the other one is on our tail. You only caused minor damage to their targeting and navigation systems. That’s why it took them a few minutes to pinpoint our position, and why they hit the mountain instead of us, but I guarantee they’re already correcting for that. The anti-energy cell you dropped into their reactor has bought us a few more minutes at most.’

‘But what about all those people . . . ?’

‘Vee.’ Aidan swung round in his chair to face me. ‘We can try and get the twenty-two we’ve rescued to safety or we can go back for the others and all die together. That’s the choice.’

Oh my God. Only twenty-two . . .

‘No other option?’

‘No other option,’ Aidan confirmed.

Silence.

‘Get us out of here,’ I said quietly.