

This is the updated ‘sneak peek’ version of *Outlanders* available exclusively on Mel’s author blog. The complete novel is scheduled for publication by early 2015.

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If I could, then I would,
I'll go wherever you will go –
Way up high or down low,
I'll go wherever you will go

The Calling

Chapter 1

The grass was soft beneath my fingers, as I combed them through the pretty green blades. I was letting my eyes wander aimlessly over the pages of the book I held in my other hand, not really seeing the words printed on the slightly stiff, yellowed pages. As soon as I read a word it was forgotten – not recognised, not understood. At the edge of my consciousness, a thought nudged at me. I'm sure it had something to do with the book, something to do with crisp pages I stroked my fingers over...but I couldn't quite grasp what it was. All I knew was that I was more interested in the book as an object, rather than what was written inside.

Something wasn't quite right. I looked around and took in the familiar green bushes and tidy flowerbeds of Park 17. No one else was here and everything was quiet. I turned my attention back to the book. Stroking the paper I realised that although I was touching it, I couldn't actually feel anything.

Perhaps reading the book would help...

I re-focused on the sentences. With some effort, the blurred black-on-white letters straightened out from one another and I began to see the actual words. It was a poem, with no title.

*We will go home, we will go home
We will find home over the water.*

*That spot whereof we spoke I found
And I entered that garden green.
By my foot there was a curving mound
But you could not be seen.*

*I searched the sky for stars at night
And didn't see but one.
By my side there stood a man
But not you, for you had gone.*

*I found our home, but you still hide
In darkness beyond my sight.
Why are you not by my side
To show me what is right?*

*The answer came to me tonight
I know why you left my side.
Not because you wanted to,
You left because I lied.*

The words unsettled something deep inside me. For no reason I could explain, I just knew that this was *my* story. Or, at least it would be. It was me who feared what would happen if I told the truth.

The truth. The truth about what...?

As soon as I thought the question, I knew the answer: I was lying about what I was. I was lying to Balik, and every day that I continued would only make him hate me even more when he found out the truth.

The truth.

I needed to tell Balik the truth; I needed to tell him now. I looked around the park, as if he might magically appear because I was thinking about him. He didn't.

I *will* tell Balik the truth. Soon.

Even as I made this vow to myself, I sensed that I'd made the same promise before. I couldn't quite remember when exactly, but I had definitely made it – and broken it – before. This time it would be different. It had to be.

Balik needed to understand the whole story about what had happened on the *SS Hope* and what I had learned about myself. I simply needed a little more time to sort through the details in my head, so that it didn't seem like I'd been lying to him...just omitting a detail or two.

“It's too late, Cassie. I know what you've been hiding from me.”

The angry sounding voice shattered the silence of the quiet park. Recognising it immediately, I turned, searching for him. It was Balik.

The book slipped from my fingers, forgotten as soon as I saw him. Balik was stalking towards me, following one of the wooden paths that ran through the park.

Wrong.

Everything about him was wrong: the expression of pure hatred on his face; the way he moved – fluid, almost feline – not his usual walk. Panic fluttered in my chest.

Does he know about me?

The anger that blackened his eyes was focused entirely on me and I felt something heavy twist in my stomach.

He knows.

“You should have told me.” Balik’s words were a snarl.

“I’m so- ”

My lips had barely parted around the apology that automatically sprang up, when Balik lunged forwards. His body slammed into mine, knocking me down to the floor. My words became a small cry of shock, then I tried to shout out, but his weight was pressing down on my chest. Frozen with surprise, I barely moved as he clambered on top of me, forcing my wrists down to my sides.

“What’s wrong with you?” I managed to gasp. Waiting for an answer I tried to wriggle free, but nothing helped and I remained pinned beneath him. “Balik – you’re hurting me – STOP!”

Balik didn’t say anything: he just leaned in closer to me, the unfamiliar mask of hatred distorting his features from the ones I knew. When I found his eyes, there was nothing behind them: no warmth, no love – just darkness and disgust.

“Balik, please.”

There was no answer – then Balik’s face disappeared.

I felt his breath on my neck, his mouth close to my ear – so terrifying and so different to how it normally felt to be near Balik. “This is wrong, it’s not you.” I whispered, shaking my head, trying to get away.

“I’m going to end this.”

The words slid into my ear, hissing with anger, but it wasn’t Balik’s familiar warm-toned voice this time. This voice belonged to someone else entirely: my heart contracted with fear as I realised who.

The man sat up, leaning back on his heels to glare down at me. He was still crushing my chest with his weight, reducing my breathing to a shallow rasp. It was a struggle to focus on his face, although I didn’t need to see it now to know that he wasn’t Balik. It was the Commander from *Hope*.

How is that possible?

Trying to answer my own question, I tipped my head away from his gloating sneer and found that the park had disappeared too. The grassy green colours were gone, replaced by cold, gray walls that pressed in on me from all sides. The hard surface beneath me wasn’t the wooden pathway of Park 17, but some kind of grey resin.

Was it possible we were still on Hope and hadn’t really escaped?

I searched my surroundings for another clue, but saw nothing beyond my attacker. This could be another trick – trying to make me think that Balik would hurt me – the way things were shifting around me certainly didn’t feel very *real*.

“Where’s Balik?”

No response.

I thrashed more violently, trying to throw the Commander off, but it makes no difference: I'm trapped. "What do you want?!" I asked through clenched teeth.

There was still no answer. Then the Commander's hands sprang to my neck, choking away any more words I might have had, along with my breath.

NO! I screamed, but no sound came out. Within seconds I was gasping for air, desperately trying to fill my already empty lungs. The Commander didn't let go, he just wrapped his hands tighter around my throat.

"I am going to kill you," he whispered.

His unspoken promise fills my head and I realised that he knows I can hear him. He knows what I am.

At the edge of my consciousness something shifts. I trying to work out what had changed, when a piercing scream sliced through my chest.

Balik.

I recognised his voice – heard *his* pain – and that's when I realise that this is not my body or my nightmare. Not this time at least. I finally understand: I'm dreaming.

Around me everything suddenly grew dark and I felt afraid. I'm scared of what waits for me in the shadows, but even more scared of letting *them* see that I am frightened. They fear my strength.

Not my strength: Balik's strength.

As soon as I thought of him again, my perspective changed. A few more disoriented moments and I began to take conscious control. It may have been my dream at the beginning, but it isn't *mine* anymore: I've fallen into one of Balik's nightmares, just as I have countless times before. I needed to wake up.

Pushing hard at my subconscious I fought to gain control. The dream continued to swell around me and it was difficult not to be distracted by my own – or Balik’s – gasping sobs. Every fear-filled cry bit into me, spurring me on to shove harder against the sleep-images that had us trapped.

Finally, the Commander’s face faded and I became conscious of my body once more. I was lay on my back, but there was nothing on top of me, no hands at my throat. There was someone else here: a warm body thrashed restlessly beside me; then I heard the whirring, beeping sounds of the pod.

I had broken free.

* * *

The nightmare was behind me. Mostly awake now, I turned my attention to Balik. He was deeply asleep, his limbs shuddering violently as he struggled against his nightmare captor. Sweat bathed his face and when I tried to take his shoulder my fingers slipped away. I braced myself to try more forcefully, though I was scared of being overly rough and waking Balik too abruptly.

“Balik,” I shook his arm gently. “Balik, wake up – you’re dreaming.” I jiggled him harder, but he was still too deep in the nightmare.

“No,” he murmured weakly, his head shaking from side to side. Though I tried not to I saw flashes of the dream-images leaking from his mind. The violence was escalating. Balik believed he was dying. Really dying, at the hands of the creatures that had tortured him. I couldn’t leave him trapped in his nightmare any longer.

“Balik,” my voice was firm and loud. “Wake up, now!” I took both his shoulders and shook him hard.

“NO!”

Balik shot bolt upright, shouting into my face and almost knocking me to the floor.

“It’s me!” Grabbing him in my arms, I pulled him close. It would take him a few moments to get his bearings. “It’s OK, it’s me.” I repeated. “You were dreaming, but it’s over now.”

Balik sighed loudly, but said nothing and I held on tightly rubbing his back as he leaned against me. Beneath my fingers I could feel his muscles trembling, like he could barely sit up. Shuffling closer Balik sagged onto me and I rested my head on his shoulder, listening to his heart beating hard and fast, until his shaking stopped.

“The dream was so real,” he murmured.

“I know.” An echo of hands around my throat, squeezing out the air passed through my mind. “It’s going to be alright,” I crooned softly, barely whispering the words.

It was difficult not to keep seeing the images from our shared nightmare, but I forced them away. Balik hadn’t attacked me – I didn’t have to be scared of him – it was his dream and I’d just slipped into it by accident. Balik had been the one who lived through that horror and he needed me to be strong for him. We couldn’t dwell on the past.

Balik’s heartbeat slowed to a normal rhythm and his breathing became softer, caressing my hair as it passed over my head. “It’s just you and me.” I told him, the same words springing to my lips as always – this was how we had spent many nights since leaving the *SS Hope*. I felt Balik’s mouth move against my shoulder – it was a little smile. Without intending to listen I heard soft laughter inside his mind, even if

he didn't feel like laughing aloud. He remembered my words from a different time and place.

“You and me,” he echoed, pulling away now and tilting my face up to his.

I stared into his eyes. They were clear of sleep and nightmares. “Always.” I told him, my lips curving into a smile. That had been his line once, now it was mine.

“Always,” Balik murmured against my jawbone the words grazing my skin as I arched my neck backwards. “You and me, always.”

His whisper mingled with the kisses he brushed along my throat. I closed my eyes, relieved just to have him safe in my arms. For a time I had feared we would never be together again. Then I had feared we would not be free. Now I had both.

I lay beside Balik, his breath soft and warm in my ear. He was sleeping once more; no nightmares this time thankfully. The quiet in the small craft – aside from the faint beeps and whirling of equipment – left me time to my own thoughts. My mind had returned to Balik's dream, even though I didn't want to think about what The Collective had done to him.

Weeks had passed since we got away, but the presence of The Collective was still thick around us. For Balik it was in his nightmares: the anger and hate he felt towards the creatures that had been systematically killing us to get at the medical cure that existed in our tissue and organs. For me it was...complicated.

There was anger and hate in me, just the same as Balik. The Collective had murdered my friends, people I loved. Tears sprang immediately to my eyes when I remembered my best friend Ami: her infectious grin and bright confidence as she chattered a mile-a-minute through the latest gossip. I swallowed pain, not wanting to

cry – tears didn't make anything better. Ami was dead, along with her boyfriend Patrick. I'd seen their violent abduction in a dream – not a dream – before I knew that I was hearing people's thoughts...reading their minds...

Hearing thoughts, reading minds... That was the bigger problem.

I still struggled to believe the fact that I was able to do these weird things because I was more closely bound to The Collective than I would have ever thought possible. My father – my biological father – was one of them! Not just one of The Collective, but an Architect: the most powerful strand of The Collective race.

If he had not shared his memories with me – projecting them into my mind and soul – I would not have believed any member of The Collective capable of love. They were disconnected from all emotion, only focused on their combined ability to survive. They didn't even seem to think independently, they simply followed the instructions of the Architects.

Except the Commander...

The Commander's face appeared in my head. It wasn't my memory – I'd never met him. This was how Balik had seen him: when the Commander had tortured and interrogated him, trying to find out where I had hidden in the Family Quarter.

I'd only seen inside the Commander's mind. But, everything I had sensed there told me that he was different to the others, just as my father had been. Only one was evil and the other was...

I didn't have an answer for what I thought my father was, despite many hours reflecting on the topic. All I knew was what he had shown me: how he fell in love with a human test-subject, my mother; and how his fellow Architects had killed her as they tried to extract a cure from her body for the disease that was ravaging their

civilisation. Her death severed my father's connection to The Collective, permanently.

I let my mind drift through the memories he'd given me and saw how he had taken the only thing left of my mother: the cells The Collective had taken for reproduction. Me.

Through his eyes, I saw myself in microscopic detail: cells in a petrie-dish awaiting fertilisation. I watched as he took his own DNA and implanted it into my cells, before placing me back into the system that had been created because of my mother. I felt his revulsion at what he was doing, as well as his resignation that it was the only way to save the last remaining part of my mother. He knew there was no way to remove me without destroying the cells.

Father had also given me his memories of watching me grow up in the Family Quarter. Every one was tinged with his hope that what he had done would help me break free of the system and escape. Sometimes I could see Balik in these memories too, as father worked to ensure that his DNA remained purely human, believing that Balik's altered perspective on things would be enough to challenge me and help me find a way out.

I sighed and brought myself back to the present. Father had been right about Balik, at least. I wasn't so sure about myself.

Here we were. Me – part human, part Architect – half of me a creature that Balik hated to his very core. Balik – one hundred per cent human – no Collective DNA in his system. We were running from those who had taught us everything we knew; the way I looked at the world around me was a reflection of what they had wanted me to know. It was only recent I had seen anything new.

Perhaps this was easier for Balik than me? He had always distrusted the systems on *SS Hope* and for a long time he had looked at things differently. I had accepted everything, my whole life – until I began hearing voices.

Who are you kidding?

My sarcastic inner voice decided to interrupt. At least it was a familiar voice I'd heard my whole life.

I knew this wasn't about what I had or hadn't known about *Hope*. This was about the fact I could not escape that The Collective's thoughts – everything that they are – were inbuilt into *me* now. I was more closely bound to them than I could admit, even to myself it seemed.

What scared me most of all was what the future consequences of this connection to The Collective might be. I hated knowing that no matter how far Balik and I ran, the truth of what I was, would not change.

Would my companion remain by my side if he knew who I truly was?

The same question as always slid through my mind. I didn't even bother trying to answer it.

“Don't be sad.”

Balik's voice startled me. I hadn't realised he was awake. I tried to shake away my thoughts, but they were too thick.

“I'm not,” I muttered. He reached over and brushed away a single tear that had spilled onto my cheek. I hadn't even realised I was crying. “Well...not *very* sad,” I amended, trying to smile. The other tears remained frozen at the edges of my lashes.

“No matter what's out there, you don't need to be scared or sad. You have me.”

I couldn't stop myself from seeing inside his thoughts, as I tried to understand what Balik was thinking. He was wondering – as he often did – if there was something bothering me that he didn't know about.

He was right, of course. Especially as he thought my secrecy was aimed at protecting him. But, he suspected the wrong thing: that they had hurt me as I tried to escape and didn't want to upset him.

“I'm OK.” I didn't want him worrying unnecessarily. “I was just thinking.”

Balik pulled me close, placing a kiss on my forehead. “We're free of them now.”

How I wished that were true. The fact that I heard Balik's words in his head a split-second before they passed his lips, reminded me that I was anything but free. The Collective and their power were inside of me now, just as much as they ever had been. I closed my eyes, trying to block out the truth, and leaned into Balik.

“You'll stay with me...” My breath whispered over his open lips, I wasn't sure if it was a question or not.

“It's you and me,” he agreed.

Balik wasn't trying to comfort me. He was stating a truth he was confident in: his voice was calm and strong. I could see he was looking forward to a new future: one we could share, one where we were free. His certainty gave me courage.

I nodded, accepting his words, although my tears remained, unshed on my lashes.

Holding me into his side, Balik brushed his lips against my hair. “I'll look after you Cassie. I won't let anything hurt you again.”

My head shook lightly against his shoulder. “That's not why I worry. We both know The Collective hurt you more terribly than anything they did to me.”

“They hurt us both,” he insisted. “It was just in different ways.”

I could see he was thinking of the friends I had lost. People I cared about. Balik had never allowed himself to care for anyone but me, so he had less to lose from that point of view. But, I also saw he was holding back the memories of his own suffering. He would not allow memories of his torture darken his waking hours and I watched him force them away, closing a heavy door behind them.

Within a moment, Balik’s thoughts returned to what I had lost and I could sense he was heading into dangerous territory when the image of my father swam through his mind. He was beginning to wonder again about the connection between us...about why one of The Collective would work against them to help a human...

“I’m going to grab a shower,” I announced abruptly, sliding free of Balik’s embrace.

His arms were normally protective and comforting, but I couldn’t face getting trapped inside my own lies right now. Images of my earlier dream returned – I didn’t have the answers for Balik, yet – and I felt as if I were being choked by my inability to say anything more.

“Are you OK?” Balik rolled over in the bunk, watching me go.

“Yep,” I nodded, not looking at him. “I just want to get cleaned up and stop festering in bed.”

“I kind of like festering,” he replied, a gentle invitation in his voice.

“Well, that’s good,” I said, pretending not to hear anything more than the words he’d spoken – he was too distracting... “You fester and I’ll shower.”

The narrow door to the bathroom slid shut behind me as I dodged inside. It was rare that I ever wanted to close Balik out, but right now I did. I needed some space inside my head for my own thoughts, without getting clouded with his

questions, or my ever-present guilt. For a few silent moments, I simply stood in the centre of the tiny room and waited to catch up with myself.

There was literally a small circle of space to stand at the centre of the room. Shower and toilet sat side-by-side, compact and functional. In the opposite corner was the sink, with a single mirror-screen above it. A rack for holding towels was above the toilet. That was it. No space wasted, in a pod that was originally designed to transport human 'subjects' from Earth to the *SS Hope*.

I sighed and stepped towards the sink.

It is an odd sensation, to gaze at your reflection and see a stranger looking back. I examined my face, poring over every detail, line and blemish; searching for any outward indication that I was changing, but there was nothing new or different that I could see. My eyes were red around the edges, but other than that they looked normal. The skin on my cheeks looked a little duller than usual, but limited diet and recycled air would not be helping my complexion much. Outwardly, I was still me.

I stared into the black spheres of my pupils, as if I could somehow gaze deep inside myself to find the answers I needed. There was nothing there except darkness. The reflection of the girl in front of me, only held more questions: what was growing inside me...what would it do to me next...?

Unable to face my reflection any longer I looked away. Glancing down into the sink, I splashed my hands into the cold water, that I didn't remember filling the sink with. My hands moved slowly, jerking as though they were under someone else's control. My familiar limbs – like so much else – were alien to me.

Chapter 2

I sighed. It was night, according to the pod's clock, and time to sleep. The problem was my mind would not switch off: too busy thinking about the small blue-green sphere waiting for us in the darkness ahead. I shuffled backwards, to get closer to Balik, who was lying behind me. His warmth helped me relax a little.

Balik sighed lightly, echoing my own discontent.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"Um-huh."

"You're not uncomfortable are you?"

"No." I replied.

"You're sure?" he double-checked.

"Sure."

"Just thinking?" he guessed.

I smiled. This conversation was obviously so familiar to him, that he already knew my answers. "Yes. Just thinking."

He kissed the back of my head through my hair. "Tell me. What's keeping you awake tonight?"

"Wondering, really – nothing in particular."

"Wondering about...?" He encouraged.

"A bit about us, really. Where we're going. What it might be like."

He chuckled. "You mean, you don't think The Collective told us the truth about Earth? I'm shocked you would even think them capable of lying!"

"Ha ha – sarcasm noted." I rolled my eyes, even though Balik couldn't see me.

"You're not actually that far off the mark, though. I was just thinking that some of

things they told us *were* truthful, even if a lot wasn't. It makes me wonder which parts about Earth were real and which weren't."

"Oh right. So, you're *really* thinking about this." His joking tone vanished.

"Um-huh." I nodded. "It would be nice to know what's waiting for us. That's all."

"It would." He agreed, taking my shoulder and rolling me over in the small bunk to face him. "So, do you have any thoughts on what might be waiting for us?"

"Well," I drawled, taking a deep breath as I gathered my words – it was a little more difficult to be coherent when Balik and I were so close together. "I was thinking that there must be some truth in what we were taught in school: about the number of people that were dying on Earth. It would seem odd for The Collective to go into so much detail about the wars, the famines, the environmental problems..."

"Why?" Balik asked.

Because my father told me that they wouldn't have taken sentient creatures, like us, for testing, if we hadn't already been butchering ourselves on Earth...

I knew that was the truth: I'd seen glimpses of father's memories of the first humans who came onboard *Hope*. They were unbelievably violent – with each other and anyone else that got in their way – The Collective had not lied about that. The merged consciousness that connected the society of The Collective had held similar memories: the Commander who had tortured Balik particularly.

Something made me pause, distracting me from my initial train of thought...The Commander. The creature I'd seen in Balik's memories – in his nightmares – was different to the one I'd seen and followed, when I connected into The Collective consciousness. I had always thought he was different to the others, but I suddenly realised now just how far those differences went. The violence I'd seen

him enact – from Balik’s memories – had not been visible to the other members of The Collective. Not even the Architects.

How was that possible?

It wasn’t possible. At least, it shouldn’t have been possible. Father had shown me how every single thing that a member of The Collective did, thought, or felt, was seen by every other living member of the society. The merged consciousness made them essentially a single organism. But, when I’d seen inside the Commander’s mind, there had been nothing about him torturing Balik.

I scanned back through everything I could recall from the Commander’s mind, when I’d watched him with the Architect. There was nothing. Not even a hint of violence, or even anger towards Balik. Nothing went beyond the duty he felt to The Collective and wanting to protect them. But, Balik’s memories wouldn’t lie. Those things *had* happened – the hatred and anger the Commander possessed, had been real.

There was something father had said, about some within The Collective becoming *more human* – like he had – but in other ways; the negatives. Had he been talking about The Commander then? Had he known, although the others didn’t appear to?

I didn’t have the information to answer that. It seemed like it should have been impossible for The Commander to hide his actions from the society around him – especially the Architects – but, perhaps he had... After all, isn’t that exactly what father had learned to do?

I wasn’t sure that hate could motivate as much as love. Father’s ability to hide part of himself from the rest of The Collective, came from his finding love and then having it taken away from him... It didn’t seem right that the same thing could *just happen* to someone else without such powerful, exceptional circumstances...

Why hadn't I realised this difference about the Commander before?

It felt significant.

“Are you OK? You've not said anything for about five minutes.”

Balik's voice brought me back to the present, back to my senses. I smiled apologetically as I scrambled to remember where we had been up to. I couldn't repeat what I'd just been thinking!

What had we been talking about before I got sidetracked?

“I'm sorry. I just got...distracted.”

“Don't worry about it.” Balik grazed his fingers across my cheek as he spoke. “There's still a lot to think through. We need to be sure that wherever we're heading for is safe.”

Safe.

Father hadn't said Earth was safe, had he? His words drifted through my mind, just as they had when he spoke them on *Hope*. “*If you choose Earth, you need to believe that it can't all be bad – after all it created your Mother.*”

Remembering this jogged my memory. My fears about Earth and what was ahead of us – that's what we'd been talking about! I'd been wondering what might have been true and what wasn't...

Well, I couldn't repeat what my father had told me – Balik still struggled to understand why I trusted him, it would only bring up more questions if I said I believed something because he had told me.

It can't be all bad... That didn't sound so great either.

I avoided Balik's gaze, whilst I came up with another plausible reason for my idea that The Collective had taught us a lot of truths about humans on Earth. “Do you remember what I told you about seeing inside The Collective consciousness; that the

first human test-subjects wouldn't accept being brought away from Earth without any explanation?"

He nodded. "That was when the human subjects were the most violent and rejected the situations given to them?"

"That's right." I confirmed. "I saw that for the later groups, The Collective developed a more sophisticated system: the bodysuits, to make them appear human; introducing the idea of *saving* a select group of people by taking them to the space station –"

Balik's lip curled in disgust. "They made abduction more palatable."

"In some ways – yes." I didn't want to get diverted into a conversation about the rights and wrongs of The Collective, so I pushed on. "All I was thinking was that, if they created the system to make it easier for people to accept the change, they must have based that system on something that already existed – otherwise why would it work?"

"That makes sense." Balik agreed. "Whatever system The Collective created would have to be consistent with the known world of the humans they took onboard *Hope*..."

I could see Balik was working logically through the idea. He was staring past my shoulder, his eyes focused on the navigation console behind me. When he began nodding to himself, I knew there was more coming.

"You're right. There must have been enough truth in the explanation The Collective gave to the new test-subjects, to make them believe that they were going somewhere better."

That brought me right back to my first point. “So, if that’s the case, what do you think might be real? What’s out there?” I jerked my head towards the front of the pod, where Balik’s gaze was still fixed.

“What you’re really asking me is *did the human race destroy themselves completely*, which is what The Collective taught us.”

“OK. That’s what I’m asking.”

Balik went quiet for a moment. I waited.

“I’m not sure that’s the right question.” He said, at last.

“Why not?”

“Because what The Collective taught us was probably different to what they told the original humans brought from Earth.”

I didn’t follow. “Why would it be different?”

“They didn’t need us to accept a change of environment in the Family Quarter: we’d never known any other life. We were children, ready to be nurtured – and controlled – in the way they thought best to meet their own needs. Wouldn’t more people question why we were living in the space station, if we were told there was still life on Earth?”

“I suppose they would.” Hadn’t I wondered about it, even though I’d always been taught that life on Earth for humans had ended? Balik was right.

“So, for our generation living on the space station, the history they gave us could be different from that given to our parents leaving Earth.”

“Because there was no one left from that generation to teach us,” I realised.

Balik’s eyes found mine, his mouth tightening into a grim line. “Because The Collective killed our parents, they could teach us whatever history they wanted.”

I swallowed. Only I knew that *both* my parents weren't dead. One of them was alive and well – responsible for much of what The Collective had done.

An uncomfortable silence began to stretch between us. It was just like when we'd had out *discussions* back in the Family Quarter: different perspectives, coming together, searching for answers. Back then I would wonder what Balik was thinking, why he was so angry. Now I knew why he had been that way, and that he had been right all along.

There was another difference too. Now, when Balik was silent, I could still hear what he thought: the things he didn't feel safe saying to me out loud. I almost missed the silence, when he could have some privacy from me and I might only guess at what was happening inside his head. These days, I couldn't get away from it.

I could see that Balik was drifting away, into the dangerous territory he normally kept locked away during his waking hours. He was thinking about *Them*, as he referred to The Collective. About what they had done to us and how he wanted to fight back against them – how he wanted to take apart their world, one piece at a time until nothing remained.

I couldn't stand listening to his thoughts – angry and hard. In these moments, I found it hard to recognise the person I loved. In these moments, I think that man almost disappeared entirely.

“Come back to me,” I whispered, barely able to speak through the overwhelming barrage of emotion Balik was churning up. I took his face and pulled it close to mine, kissing his lips. I moved gently at first, then harder as I felt the grip on the poison that filled Balik's mind begin to slip. The darkness and pain faded and he came back: his arms wrapped around me, drawing our bodies close together. No

thoughts, no nightmares, could come between us when we were like this. The whole world was this one, small space for a few short minutes.

“I’m back.” He breathed eventually, pulling back an inch.

“I know.” It was a relief. I rested my forehead against Balik’s and waited for him to open his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, eyes still closed.

“You don’t have to be. It happens to me too – it’s easy to get lost inside ourselves.”

We lay together, quiet now. Even Balik’s thoughts had become a light background hum: back to his usual wonderings about the pod systems, things he wanted to check or change. They were easy to block out. I closed my eyes.

“You’ve lost weight.”

Balik’s voice startled me. I’d started to doze.

Opening my eyes I had to blink a few times, until I woke up fully and could see again. Balik was tracing his fingers across the top of my bare stomach, brushing over the shadows where the bottom of my rib cage was visible.

“We both have.” I took his hand and laced my fingers through his. “It’s what happens when you split food rations down to an eighth of normal adult intake.”

“Maybe we should exercise less.” Balik wondered aloud.

I shook my head. “You know we need to. The lower gravity levels in the pod will reduce our muscle tone if we don’t do some exercise.”

“We could do less than we’ve been doing, though.”

He was picturing the fighting and strength training we'd been doing over the last three weeks. It was hard and it was tiring, but it kept my mind off other things. And somewhere, deep down, I felt like we would need it.

"We'll need to be fit – and strong – for Earth." I reminded him. "We don't know what it will be like, or how bad the environment will be. We need to keep training."

"Fitness won't be much use, if we're so hungry and thin we can't do anything."

That was true, but we had no choice. "You did the calculations on how far it was to Earth – how long we needed the food to last – we've followed that plan for the last month. We're nearly there now. It doesn't make sense to change anything."

"There are only a few packets of dehydrated soup left."

"Yum." I quirked my eyebrows, making Balik laugh.

"Hey, there's a chicken and noodle one! I know how to treat a girl."

"Well, you never told me it was chicken noodle – now I feel really special."

"I'll even bulk it up with extra water. Just for you." He winked.

"Now I know you're spoiling me!"

We laughed at our own stupid joke for a minute, before quieting down.

"Do you think we're getting space hysteria or giddiness from food deprivation?" Balik asked.

"Probably," I agreed. "It wasn't that funny."

"Are you actually hungry now?"

"A little," my stomach was grumbling and squeaking a little, but nothing too major. "I'll wait until breakfast."

"OK. Noodle soup for breakfast it is."

“With extra water, don’t forget.”

“Of course not.” Balik smiled. “You know, I was thinking, about what you said before.”

“Before?”

“About Earth and what might be there.” He explained.

“Oh, right. *That* before.”

“The probes I’ve been sending out have picked up some information. There are places we definitely want to avoid: extreme environments that are hot or cold, have little water or no vegetation.”

I sat up, immediately interested. “I didn’t realise you’d had that much information come back with the probes.”

He nodded. “On the last two or three. Each time I’ve been able to build up a picture of what’s there and adjust the scanning parameters for the next probe.”

“What else have you found?”

“There’s some areas with very high radiation levels. Uninhabitable.”

“High radiation? What would cause that?”

“I’m not sure. An accident maybe – perhaps on Earth it had been harnessed and used as an energy source.”

“Like The Collective used water splitting?” I recalled the photosynthesis-like process they used to generate power onboard *Hope*, just as they had on their home planet. It would make sense that humans on Earth would need something similar.

“I was thinking it might be something like that. Although, water splitting was a completely clean process: there were no negative outputs, no energy spikes, no risks.

“I also think you were right about The Collective telling the truth about some aspects of life on Earth. The environmental issues appear to be accurate; there’s evidence of high sea levels, extreme weather systems, that kind of thing.”

“And people?” I was almost too scared to ask.

“There are definitely people there. Pockets of life in quite a few locations, although nothing in the radioactive areas, and very little where the physical environment becomes very difficult.”

I sat back, leaning against the pod wall beside the bunk.

“I don’t believe it.” That was half true, at least. I did and didn’t believe what Balik was saying. After so long wondering, to actually *know* something – it felt strange. “Were you able to find out anything else?”

Balik’s head shook. “The probes only take single images, track specific environmental things; it’s difficult to work out anything in detail on what the people are doing. One thing that does come up a lot: there’s activity during the day, but in many places that stops at nightfall. I wonder if they go underground, or into caves, in some areas.”

“How do you know that?”

“Sharp temperature drop off at sunset, coincides with the probe not getting images of people. It’s different during the day.”

Balik shrugged, as if he were explaining the most simple of things. We were talking about people – other humans, who lived completely differently to us! Living underground...in caves...? How similar were we to them? They sounded more like animals, than humans. At least, the humans The Collective had taught us about. The humans they had taught us to be.

“Do you have a plan?” I knew I shouldn’t have been counting on Balik having the answers, but I couldn’t help it. My own head was so crammed full of my lies and worries about what would happen, I’d not spared enough time to think about the reality of our next step.

“From all the locations I’ve had data on, I think I’ve selected the best place to go first. It has a good mixture of vegetation, little environmental issues – although it will seem quite cold, and wet to us – ”

“Wet?”

“It rains a lot.” Balik replied. “From what I’ve seen so far, at least. But, not high amounts, that would bring on dangers like flooding. It just seems to be a damp place.”

“Rain.” I echoed, realising that there were going to be so many new experiences for us when we reached Earth. Things that were normal – things that maybe went unnoticed – if you had lived with them your whole life. I tried to picture the world Balik was describing, but all that came back to me was the white plastic cage of the Family Quarter, with its pretty parks and quiet life. Somehow, I didn’t expect any of that on Earth.

“I’ve also been looking at the centres of population. I don’t think we want to go anywhere too heavily populated at first: it might be dangerous and we probably stand a better chance against nature than a large community we have no information on. There are a few possible options, far enough away that we could establish ourselves, before observing them and possibly making contact.”

“That sounds sensible,” I agreed, shying away from the idea of landing in the middle of a large city, filled with people. There were memories I’d seen inside The

Collective consciousness that suggested lots of humans meant lots of problems. “Can you show me?”

“Sure,” Balik agreed, beginning to sit up. “I was going to ask you anyway, it’d be good to decide together.”

I smiled at him. *Decide...*

Free choice: it was an interesting idea compared to our lives on *Hope*. No control, no one choosing a path for you, it felt amazing and scary at the same time.

Chapter 3

“We’re getting close now.”

The thin door of the bathroom didn’t hide the eagerness in Balik’s voice as he called to me.

“OK – I’ll be out in a second,” I shouted back, excited flutters tickling my insides. We were nearly there, nearly *home*, as Balik insisted on calling it.

“Come on! We’re just descending through the upper atmosphere – you should come and buckle in up front with me, just in case there’s some turbulence.”

Glancing into the mirror one last time, I looked into the face of a new person. I had decided the past was behind us – I would live with whatever consequences there were from being part-Architect – I didn’t need to share that with Balik. It made no difference to who I was.

A new life lay ahead of us and it was about to start. Anticipation was etched into every line of my face. We had made it. Earth. I reached out to unlock the door.

A bright flash crackled in front of me as though the very air was alight. A fraction of a second later a deafening boom echoed through the ship and I was knocked off my feet, landing painfully on the hard plastic edge of the toilet. My ribs crunched as I tried to stand and I knew I had broken bones. Biting back a scream I reached up with my right arm and pulled myself up, the ribs on my left side burning with the movement.

The floor was bouncing, rippling like it was made of elastic, not reinforced alloy. Dragging myself forward I made it out of the bathroom and onto the main deck of the craft. It was shuddering just as much, the floor beneath my feet buckling and twisting.

“What’s happening?” I tried to shout to Balik, but was interrupted by another blinding flash and a louder bang.

The floor bucked beneath me and I fell again, landing flat on my face. I tried to catch myself as I stumbled, with my arms outstretched, but there was nothing to grab on to. As my ribs crunched onto the deck, burning pain scorched through my chest, making me scream out.

For a long few moments I lay, unmoving, completely dazed whilst everything around me rocked. Every part of me was floppy and tired.

Was I dying? Is this how it felt to die?

“I would like to sleep,” I muttered to no one.

I don’t think sleep is an option right now.

There was a ringing in my ears, which wouldn’t stop and behind me an intense heat was tearing through my clothes. Something was telling me I needed to move, but it was hard to make anything happen. I just wanted to lie here with my eyes closed.

“CASSIE!”

Balik’s panicked voice caught my attention. It made me remember where I was – who I was with – and that they might also be in danger. The realisation brought me to my senses and with that came more pain.

I closed my eyes tightly and put my hands to my ears, trying to block out the ringing noise. Pressing them tight against my head, I realised that the sound was inside me and not coming from outside. Swallowing hard, my ears popped and the ringing faded.

“Are you OK?” Balik called out, I sensed a little relief from him now that he could see me moving, but it was a very little – mainly I felt terror and shock, but I couldn’t be sure whether they were his feelings or my own.

Lifting my head I looked behind me and saw smoke billowing beyond the bathroom door but nothing more. “What’s happening?” I screamed to Balik, who was staring wild-eyed at me from across the room.

“Some sort of weapon, I think – something attacked us.”

“WHAT?!” I yelled, but my voice was lost in the roar of another explosion and I was flung forwards.

Something from the ceiling – a small panel – fell and hit my shoulder. Then another. The tiny ship was creaking and groaning, equipment crackling as the walls started to split. Chunks of metal and plastic spewed into the air.

“Out! Get out of there!” Balik shouted, trying to make himself heard above the din.

I tried to stand, but fell back onto my side. Everything was shaking and screeching as the metal hull began to peel away. Balik lunged over to where I’d fallen and hauled me up, shoving me towards the cockpit as the wall to my left groaned and ripped open. Small shards and splinters filled the air, stinging my eyes and making it hard to breathe. We were still too high in the atmosphere: as the oxygen leaked out through the ruptured walls there was nothing to replace it.

Balik was ahead of me, dragging me forwards now and I crawled blindly behind, following his shouts. A chunk of falling debris hit my back, winding me and I lost Balik’s hand. Another piece, the size of my fist glanced off my shoulder before skittering away across what remained of the floor. The craft was tipping crazily from side-to-side as it tried to recover stability.

“Faster,” Balik yelled. “Keep moving.”

He was at the panels now, trying to do anything to maintain the integrity of the ship. From his expression I could see it was useless. As I crawled to him, he gripped my arm and pulled me up.

Suddenly the groaning stopped. The ship still shook, but less violently than a moment ago. Overhead the lights flickered then went out, throwing the enclosed space into darkness and shadows.