



HOPE'S DAUGHTER

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Taking Flight

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Taking Flight is an exclusive Ambrosia Sequence ‘Missing Moment’ – Ambrosia 1.5 – released as a free gift to the readers of *Hope’s Daughter* who have supported me in my first few months as a fledgling author. It fits just before the epilogue to *Hope’s Daughter*.

Thank you to all the Facebook ‘likers’, Twitter followers, readers who have reviewed the book and contacted me, and bloggers I’ve met through interviews, features and reviews – it’s been a lot of fun so far ☺

Mel x

For Darci and Callista the beautiful daughters of H&J who arrived when I was writing this...

I – Taking Flight

My arms dangled limply at my sides despite the fact that my fingers were fidgeting nervously – in, out; clench, release – over and over they jiggle through the same routine. They were as unsure what to do with themselves as I was myself and so I simply stood there, barely conscious. Several inches from the end of my nose, the pod door sealed shut. I blinked once and breathed out. At complete odds with the insanity of the situation I had found myself in, the solid *thud* as the door locked into its housing was reassuring. There was definitely something wrong with that – feeling comforted by this sound – given that we were about to be shot into space in a craft primarily designed to transport waste. I was not quick to dismiss the idea that I might actually be losing my grip on reality now. Unreasonable giddiness and calm was dulling my mind. I blinked and breathed in.

A lonely thought rose from the depths of numb emptiness inside me: we were leaving...Things were happening around me, every one of them beyond my control and comprehension, but one thing was certain: we were getting out.

Is it possible...? Were we really leaving the SS Hope? Had Balik and I achieved what had seemed only a hopeless fantasy a few hours ago? The questions tumbled through my head quickly now: one on top of another, starting before the last had finished, twisting and tumbling in erratic circles. Perhaps I was in shock? Emotional trauma, dehydration, fatigue...any of these things could account for my confusion.

I let the air in my lungs escape as one loud, long sigh. It helped me clear my head of the swirling questions and left only emptiness again. It *was* possible. I was about to leave behind me everything I had ever known. Albeit much of my life had been lies, but it was the only world – the only life – I had ever experienced. Balik and I might

have discovered the terrible secrets of The Collective, but what we were about to do now – leaving everything we had ever known behind – was that any less terrifying?

I ignored the question. It was too complicated to consider. Instead I reached one of my limp arms forward and dimmed the main cabin lights, which were a bright and harsh white, to an acceptable pale, yellow glow. Appeased by my ability to control one small thing, I let my arm drop back to its previous position. The pain in my eyes remained, but the semi-darkness was better.

Still overloaded and numb, I remained frozen in place at the entrance to the pod, staring blindly ahead at the white blankness of the outer door. I could tell I was drifting away and felt light-headed and heavy-limbed simultaneously, which was a strange combination. How long had it been since I'd slept? Eaten or drunk anything? Perhaps it was dehydration that was making me feel like my mind was about to fracture into a million tiny pieces? Or perhaps I had just reached my limit now. How could anyone – human or not – deal with everything that had happened in the last few days?

“Cassie?” Balik’s rasping whisper from behind drew my attention immediately.

The pod was preparing to launch and I realised I could feel slight tremors and movements vibrating through the ship. Turning away from the door I stumbled towards Balik, taking the seat beside him and buckled myself into place. The control panels of the craft curved in an ergonomic arc around the two operator chairs that Balik and I occupied, but there was no point in my looking at them right now. My brain couldn’t have understood what I was seeing, even if I’d tried. My only hope was that my father had done all the appropriate programming on his side of the door. I reached out to Balik without looking at him and slid my hand beneath his as it rested on his knee. Only the lightest of movements told me that he might have felt its presence.

If Balik spoke again in the next few minutes I didn’t hear him. The sound of the pod engines humming to life filled my ears and I closed my eyes. Nerves, fear,

exhaustion...it could have been any number of things that prevented me opening them again. But when an uncomfortable lurch rolled through my stomach I knew that we had launched. I waited for more – something worse – but the craft was smooth. There were no other bumps or jolts to alert me to the fact we were moving.

With a huge effort I forced my eyes open. It felt like they were weighed down with blocks. Even the newly dim light in the cabin hurt my eyes after the blissful darkness, but I managed to blink away the immediate urge to close them. Swivelling my chair slowly, I spun towards Balik. I needed to help him before either of us deteriorated any further. When I saw his face, I realised what an understatement that was.

“Balik?” My voice was a whisper from a hoarse, dry throat. His head pivoted floppily towards the sound, but his eyes remained closed. The adrenaline must have virtually gone. “Balik – can you speak?”

“Yah.” It was more an exhalation than a word.

“I need to move you. I need to get you laid down so that you can rest properly. Can you help me do that?”

“Yah.” The sound was even softer this time. He was rapidly losing consciousness.

Unclipping my seat restraints I struggled to my feet. My lack of balance probably had more to do with my physical condition rather than being on the pod, but I couldn't be sure. The gravity system on the pod gave some stability for passengers, but would not be as strong as the one I was used to from *Hope*. The only benefit might be that it would be easier to carry Balik if he was not weighed down so much. I unfastened his harness and tried not to feel the panic rising inside me when he lolled over to one side as soon as his supports were removed.

Thankfully, the single bunk on the craft I was aiming for was only a couple of metres away from the console. I leaned over Balik for a moment, smoothing the damp dark curls of hair away from his face.

“Don’t worry my love, I’ll make everything better.” I whispered, brushing a light kiss on his lips. It was a promise to myself as much as Balik. “OK,” my tone became practical. “I’m going to pull you forwards from the chair. Lean on me and we’re going to the right of where you’re sitting now. There’s a bunk.”

A deep groan struggled out of Balik’s throat, which I could only take as confirmation and so squaring my shoulders I prepared to move him. Bending at the waist, I leaned in to his body just below the armpit and used my right arm to pull him forward onto my own shoulder. Just this small weight slumped heavily onto me and I wrestled painfully trying to pull Balik’s arm around my neck and shoulders to give me some leverage on his body.

“Come on,” I grunted to myself through gritted teeth and I felt Balik push forward slightly as he tried to help me. He moved enough that I could get my other arm around his back and pull him off the chair. As soon as he cleared the seat Balik’s legs buckled and I was dragged over onto my knees as I tried to keep him upright. “Please move your feet,” I whispered to him, straining with every muscle in my body. “Just a few steps and we’re there.”

I don’t know how we did it, but we got to the bunk. Balik half-rolled, half-fell from my shoulders and landed heavily on the thin mattress of the bed without making a sound. He lay motionless as I hauled myself back to my feet and began searching for the medical supplies my father had pressed into my hands as we left. The packages were in a small pile beside the door where I must have dropped them when we came aboard.

I moved stiffly, with gluey limbs and disoriented steps. Every single action required great concentration on my part: none of my movements were natural and everything was difficult. Several times I dropped items I'd collected, trying to hold them against my body with a floppy arm. Other things I would reach out to grasp, only to re-focus and find that they were further away than I'd thought and I was clasping nothing but air.

Returning eventually with my hands full – I'd raided the small emergency kit inside the pod as well – I settled beside Balik to start work. I tried not to notice how awful he looked, but I couldn't help it. Even at The Clinic we never treated anyone who appeared as ill as Balik did now.

Reaching out to take his hand I froze before I touched his skin.

How could I not have seen this before? My mind was screaming at me now as I fought the waves of revulsion and anger that were rising inside me, directed towards The Collective. Why had they done this to Balik? Was this simply because we tried to break out of their system? Or was the truth something even more basic than resentment of our discoveries...something brutal, perhaps even *human*...that had caused them to do this to him?

The four fingers on Balik's left hand were all dislocated. Each was swollen and bent outward at a painful looking angle. I realised that I hadn't seen this before – when we were still in the holding room – because Balik's left arm had been on the opposite side to me. For the first time I was thankful for his lack of consciousness. The pain must have been agonising for him.

My eyes swept over Balik's face. The sheen of sweat had returned, the droplets catching what little light there was inside the pod cabin turning them to sparkling crystals on his skin. I noticed too that his skin was paler than before, the sallow grey colour remained. As I listened closely, every breath Balik took rasped from his throat,

laboured and shallow. A light flutter of panic whispered in my guts, but it was a good thing: my fear focused my senses through the overwhelming fatigue I felt. Balik needed me to be strong now; *I* needed to concentrate.

Without pause I set to work, trying to prioritise my actions as I would have done in the Clinic. First I would need to examine him thoroughly to see what other injuries there might be: Balik had been badly beaten then sedated to a dangerous level purely to keep him alive. He could have internal injuries as well. Giving myself orders helped me to function. My only fear was that his injuries were just too severe. *Please let me have everything I need to be able to treat him*, I begged.

Inside the medical kit was a pair of sharp metal scissors. I supposed, somewhat absently, there was no need to hide the metal once you were outside the Family Quarter. It seemed such an odd thing for The Collective to exclude from our lives, but there must have been some reason for it. Threading my fingers and thumb through the cool loops on the handle – the metal still felt unfamiliar to me – I grasped Balik's shirt and sliced the fabric away from his skin, pulling the cloth aside as I went. In seconds his bare chest was exposed and I could see the painful rise and fall of his ribcage.

I rummaged through the medical case and found the mini-monitoring unit I needed. Dragging it out I unwound the leads and attached the small pads to them, before securing them in place on Balik's chest. My finger grazed across the activation button switching the machine on. After a second or two the small screen on the unit blinked to life and – detecting the connections to Balik's body – began to run primary diagnostics on him. Whilst I waited for these results I began an external examination.

Going as quickly but gently as I could, my fingers moved across Balik's body, pressing and testing as I went. I found three broken ribs: two on the left, one on the right. Thankfully, there was no pooled blood below the surface of his skin, which might

indicate further internal damage. The dark, painful marks around his throat were awful to look at, but from what I could tell meant only bruising beneath and nothing worse.

The monitor beside me beeped softly to indicate that the initial tests were complete. I read them immediately and muttered my observations aloud, forcing order to my thoughts. “Heart rate is steady, if not strong. Breathing is definitely an issue,” I glanced down at the purple-red stains on Balik’s neck. With the damage to Balik’s ribs and throat the monitor’s assessment was no surprise, anyway, I could hear for myself this was a problem. Dehydration was also not a shock. My fingers flicked across the screen, selecting the chemical analysis. There was estrogen, which shouldn’t have been there and was probably to counteract Balik’s elevated testosterone levels, but that was not a problem. There were barbiturates still present from the chemical coma they had inflicted on him, but all at low levels now, which would make it safe for me to administer a dose of something before I attempted to reset his mangled fingers.

I frowned. What bothered me was the lack of anything else. I had expected some trace elements at least of hallucinogenic drugs from the snapshot of images I’d seen in Balik’s mind when he first awoke. He had seen terrible things, imagined them to be real and so I had assumed a chemical basis for this. But there was nothing in his system to support this. The only other thing I could think of – so much worse than this, if that were possible – was that the physical torments The Collective had subjected Balik to, had generated these memories. Sensory deprivation, I wondered.

Perhaps... I answered my own question and then added another. *How long had we been apart?* I didn’t know how it was possible for The Collective to have done something like this in such a short space of time. Maybe it had been longer than I thought. I counted back mentally. We left The Clinic mid-afternoon and they caught Balik around 6.00pm. Then I spent the night alone in the park, before entering the service tunnel around 8.00am. So that’s just over twelve hours. How long had I been in

the tunnel? There was so little air I blacked out, but how long could it have lasted. In my memory, when I recalled coming to in the pipe, it felt more like waking up. Could it be true that I was asleep, for hours, whilst Balik was tortured? I felt hollow and sick at the idea of it, but I couldn't really know. It was also too late to change anything now; I just had to help Balik. He needed me.

I blinked away the weariness and tears that were burning my eyes to focus on Balik. My medical training began to filter through once more, giving me a schedule to work to: breathing first, then dehydration, fingers, then ribs. There was little actual treatment for broken ribs anyway except rest, but to prepare for resetting Balik's fingers I elevated his hand above his heart and tied a small ice pack onto them with bandages, hopefully it would help to bring down the swelling before I did anything further. In the pile of packages from my father I found dozens of liquid vials for use with a syringe and in the pod's medical kit there were several large pouches of saline.

My hands were trembling slightly as I began setting up a saline drip, making it difficult to carry out the more intricate tasks. I didn't stop to wonder whether it was exhaustion, fear or adrenaline making me shake; I just tried to stop it happening whilst I did the important things. After attaching the pouch to a small handle – conveniently placed above the bunk to help you lever yourself in and out – I managed to steady my grip for the few seconds it took to place the cannula into Balik's hand. It wasn't easy working over him to reach his right hand, but there was no way I could have done anything with his left one. It was a real mess.

Partway along the narrow tube that connected the saline pouch to Balik's hand was a small access point, marked by a white plastic clip. Using one of the sterile syringes I injected a half dose of benzodiazepine and a full measure of morphine into the tube. It would take a couple of minutes to filter into his system before I could begin resetting the fingers.

Levering up off my knees – which throbbed painfully from kneeling beside Balik – I stepped awkwardly towards the control panel at the front of the pod. Now I had straightened up my legs wouldn't bend properly and so I didn't bother sitting in either of the chairs. I couldn't understand much of what the pod was doing to think I would be staying at the panel too long anyway. All I wanted was to find a basic clock module on the system so that I could set two timers. It took me a few minutes to find one, even though the system was similar to those I had used on *Hope*. Thankfully father had adjusted the settings from The Collective's language to English – I hadn't even thought about this issue with everything else that was happening – but since I'd been cut-off from the combined consciousness of The Collective, I wouldn't have been able to read anything on the ship without this change. And neither would Balik.

I set two countdown timers: one to go off in twenty-four hours and one that would sound every hour. If I could let Balik rest for a full day, then he might be coherent enough to reprogram the travel settings of the pod with the remaining forty-eight hours we would have. I *hoped* that would be the case. *If it wasn't...* I couldn't even think about that possibility. The second clock was for me. In order to help Balik's ribs begin healing I would need to rotate him every hour to alternate the pressure from one side to the other. From the heavy lethargy I could feel creeping through my bones there was no chance at all I was not going to sleep, so I would need this timer perhaps more than anything.

All set, I turned around and stumbled back to the bunk. Balik lay exactly as I'd left him: one arm in the air, shallow breaths rasping in and out of his lungs, eyes closed. The drugs would be well into his system by now, which was definitely a good thing I thought as I settled back onto my knees at his side. The memory of having my shoulder *reduced* without any pain relief made me shudder, so to imagine doing something similar to Balik four times as I reset his fingers did not bear thinking about.

Beginning with his little finger, I carefully used the manipulation technique I'd been taught at the Clinic to realign the bones. At first I watched Balik's face, for evidence of pain, but there was none – not with all the drugs I had put into him – and looking at him made it too hard to focus. So I stopped. And pretended that the hand that sat between my own did not belong to a real person – not someone I loved – but was simply a prosthetic limb to practice on. I forced my breath into a regular gentle pattern and worked on the fingers with the same rhythm. Each movement was an odd combination of massaging and pulling to encourage the bones into their proper places. There was no decisive *click* to hear with them, as there had been with my shoulder, but I felt a light snap beneath my own fingers as they found their correct home. It was hard, but soon over.

With all four fingers reset, I made small splints to attach to each so that they were protected and held in the correct position. In the selection of vials I found several anti-inflammatory drugs and injected a quarter dose of one directly into Balik's hand. My mind was getting so clouded now I couldn't remember if it would react with the other drugs I'd already given Balik and so I kept it to a small dose, just in case. Finally, I replaced the ice pack around his fingers and bandaged it loosely into place, before placing his hand onto a pillow at his side to elevate it whilst he slept.

For the first hour I decided to leave Balik as he was; I had pushed and prodded him enough. When the alarm went off I would rotate him for the first time. I had done enough for now – everything I could – rest was what we both needed now. I tried to stand up but found I couldn't. My legs were empty weights, no strength left in them at all. I needed to set the alarm. And I needed to get some fluids into my own body; I would be no use to Balik if I blacked out beside him.

With a series of grunting moves I used the handles and furniture around me to claw myself upwards. In a bent standing position I hobbled to the control panel I'd

prepared earlier. I tapped the screen once to set the clock running, before struggling back to the bunk and collapsing onto the floor. In the few seconds before darkness came I pulled the lid off a small flask of water and let it wash into my mouth. My parched throat rejected the liquid in that first mouthful and it dribbled wetly across my cheeks as I coughed it up. But the smaller second sip went down, then a third and fourth. Then my eyes closed.

* * *

Black meant sleep and emptiness. Then there was noise and light. Light meant movement and pain and thirst. I would awake enough to rotate Balik from one side to another, change his ice pack and drip every few hours and splash water into my mouth. Then I would slide back into darkness.

II – Onwards

When the wailing started I woke fully. There was no haze of sleep blurring my thoughts, just wide-eyed, chest-constricting terror. I flipped upright, ignoring the stiffness in my neck and back from sleeping on the hard floor and cast my eyes around the pod looking for the source of this new, shrieking alarm. I expected something awful: warning that The Collective were bearing down on us, or perhaps that our craft had malfunctioned. My gaze came to rest on the centre screen of the pod's control panel. Four large numbers, white on black, were flashing at me, throbbing in time with the piercing noise.

Breath gushed out of me in a relieved sigh, even though my heart was still hammering sharply. It was the twenty-four hour alarm I'd set for myself to wake Balik. At the thought of his name I immediately turned toward the bunk. The alarm had not disturbed him though. Automatically I checked the monitor beside me: Balik's heartbeat was stronger; his breathing less laboured than it had been for the first few hours. Colour was returning to his skin too, he was still very pale, but I could see the familiar honey-gold glow beginning to emerge.

Forty-eight hours. It seemed like a long time, but I knew if Balik had any problems with re-programming the navigation system it would feel very short indeed. I *could* start looking at it...but if I was being honest with myself I feared making things worse not better. Taking a deep breath I decided that I would give Balik an extra six hours rest before I woke him. It would help reduce the sedative levels in his system if I didn't add any more now and the extra time would be good for him. With that resolved I rolled off the floor onto my knees and stood up. If my bones could have creaked, I'm pretty sure they would have. Twenty-four hours on the floor might have been necessary

as I snoozed from one hour to the next between Balik's treatments, but I regretted not having looked for a blanket at least to cushion my body.

Pulling a fresh saline pouch from the medical supplies strewn about the pod floor, I disconnected the empty one and replace it with the new, flicking it a couple of times with my finger to make sure the liquid was moving properly into the tube. Then I rolled Balik from his right side to his left, using the recovery position technique I'd learned only a few weeks ago. It was easy enough, as Balik's own body did most of the work now that he was lay flat in the bunk; it was only avoiding his injured hand that made it a little complicated. Once he was in position I injected a small anti-inflammatory dose into his hand.

With that accomplished I flopped down into one of the console chairs – taking my half-empty flask of water with me – and spun around so that I faced out toward the main vision panel and the stars beyond. Now that I was more coherent, I allowed myself some time to wake up slowly: sipping my water and trying to rationalise all I'd learned in the past few days. It was a big thing to ask of myself.

There were some things I could not begin to contemplate yet: losing Ami, Patrick and Joel; what had been done to Balik, or what we would do now. It was just too raw. So I closed those questions into a cupboard in my head and locked them away. Instead, my thoughts kept returning to the Architect. My father. It was so odd to think of them as being two parts of the same being. Even though I knew it to be true from everything he'd shown me, I still found it hard to believe.

What will this mean? I couldn't help wondering what other changes I would experience because of my dual heritage. Perhaps, away from the influence of The Collective the *quirks* I'd experienced recently would reduce. Surely that was possible? I remembered Balik's reaction to seeing my father; his confusion and sense of betrayal

when he realised I was accepting his help. How could I ever tell Balik what I was without him hating me?

I stared at the stars for a long while, letting these questions chase themselves around my mind with no hope of answering any of them. Only the familiar beep of the hourly alarm disturbed me and I would continue my futile musings as I moved Balik, changed his ice pack and adjusted his drip. After the third hour I knew I had to stop. The lack of answers would drive me crazy if I didn't.

So I started moving. *Doing* helped me to focus my mind away from everything else except the task at hand. My first job was to retrieve the medical supplies I had abandoned across the floor during my restless slumber. It took me a while to sort through what was used and what wasn't as I'd spent twenty-four hours blindly grabbing what I needed and dropping everything else. Most of the pod cupboards were empty as this wasn't primarily a passenger craft and so I spent a further hour stowing the medical supplies. Finished with this I began exploring the rest of the pod.

Father had stocked several cupboards at the rear of the pod with food. That must have been his plan all along. Dozens and dozens of vacuum-packed meals and drinks were crammed into each. They looked tiny, but I knew that placed in the re-hydrator oven with a small amount of water they would expand into good-sized meals. Looking at them my stomach gurgled noisily, before regretting it and twisting itself into an uncomfortable knot.

When was the last time I'd eaten? My mind struggled backwards still unsure of how long I'd spent stuck inside the service pipe. Nearly thirty hours on the pod, maybe another twenty-four since I'd left the Family Quarter...and I'd only eaten breakfast on the day Balik and I had run away. No food in three days. Just over a day without water as well until we got to the pod. No wonder I'd been so disoriented. Well, I needed to try eating something even if I really didn't feel like it.

Moving cautiously to the medical cupboard I pulled out a powder sachet that would aid rehydration. I poured the blend of vitamins, salts and sugars into a fresh flask of water and shook it to mix them together before taking a sip. My stomach lurched at the new, slightly salty taste. From the food selection I picked up a vegetable soup: solid enough to count as food, but not too heavy after days without eating.

It took me nearly an hour to sip my way through the bottle of water and small bowl of soup. After every mouthful I had to force away a surge of nausea, but I made it finally, even though the last half of the bowl was cold by the time I ate it. My practical side kept telling me it was worth it and I'd feel better soon, but my body was seriously disagreeing.

In a nearby cupboard I found a pillow and two blankets. The floor beside Balik's bunk looked as uncomfortable as ever and so I curled onto one of the chairs, stuffed the pillow behind my head and closed my eyes. Even in the darkness it felt as though I was spinning and the sickly feeling from my stomach crawled cautiously into my throat. I sucked in a deep breath through my nose, then another...

The next thing I knew was that the beeping had started again. It took a while to stir me from sleep this time. I was sluggish and swallowed thickly trying to clear my mouth and head but I was very slow to wake. Finally my eyes struggled open, burning at the bright light in the pod. *I should have dimmed them further before sleeping*, I observed randomly. After blinking over and over again, my sight finally returned.

“Hey, sleepy head...”

My eyes snapped to the bunk at the sound of Balik's husky voice. He still lay on his left side – where I'd placed him after the last change around – and was gazing at me across the small space. I started to move towards him immediately, but couldn't untangle myself from the covers quickly enough.

“No. Don't move. I'm fine.” Balik's words stopped my struggle.

“Are you really?” I whispered, my throat surprisingly sounding hoarser than his. He nodded. Just once. And it broke me.

“Don’t cry, please Cassie, don’t cry. I’m OK. We made it.”

I nodded in agreement, but it didn’t stop the silent tears streaming down my cheeks. I tried to speak, to tell him I was all right but it came out as a squeaking cough. It was only when I heard Balik start moving that I managed to form words.

“Don’t – please – I’ll be OK. I’m just relieved and scared and happy...I didn’t mean to cry.” I used my sleeve to clumsily push the wetness from my eyes. It cleared them for a second or two before they blurred with fresh tears. My muscles ached as I fought against my own features to stop them crumpling as I cried.

“Come here.” Balik said.

I didn’t need a second invitation. Throwing my blankets aside, I hobbled stiff-legged across the short distance and slid into the small space Balik made for me by shuffling across in the bunk. I was careful to move around his bad hand, ribs and tubes; it wasn’t easy getting close to him. But once I was there, his left arm wrapped around me and pulled me against his body. I felt him wince.

“Ribs?” I guessed.

“Yeah,” he agreed, sucking in a breath.

“I think you broke three. Two on the left side.”

“I know,” Balik whispered.

An abrupt headache throbbed at my temples: something black and heavy pushing at me. I rubbed it away, massaging my forehead until it subsided.

“Are you really OK?” Balik asked, when I dropped my hand.

“Just a bit of a headache. I was pretty dehydrated.”

“Me too, I guess.” Balik shook his arm lightly, making the IV tube rattle quietly on the edge of the bunk.

His gaze fell heavily on my own, holding me still with the weight of what I could see behind his eyes. “How do you feel?” I asked eventually.

“Not too bad, to be honest...nice job on the finger splints by the way.” I could hear the smile in Balik’s voice, before it turned sad. “You would have made a good medic if it had been real.”

“I think *real* starts here.”

“You’re right,” Balik squeezed me gently, not pulling his chest this time.

We lay still and quiet for a while...a long while. This was a place I had feared I would never be again: warm and safe in Balik’s arms. It was a terrifying and amazing feeling. I never wanted to leave this moment.

The wailing of the six-hour alarm had me flying out of Balik’s embrace to deactivate the screen.

“What’s that for?” he asked as I turned slowly back to face him, steadying myself against the console after my dizzy rush.

“Do you fancy a little experiment?” Though I tried not to sound it, I felt guilty that I would have to move Balik now. It was too soon for him, but we didn’t have a choice.

“Always,” he grinned – making my heart lift – it was a little thin, but good enough for me.

“This pod is designed for waste disposal. It’s programmed on a rebounding course from the space station that completes after seventy-two hours.”

“How long have we been on here?” Balik asked, immediately guessing what was needed.

“Just over thirty hours.”

“You gave me a long rest.” He speculated – correctly – again.

“You needed it.” I sighed. “I’m sorry if it was too long.”

“It’ll be fine. Just help me get to the control panel and I’ll see what we’ve got to work with.”

III – Questions and Promises

“Where did all this extra stuff come from?” Balik’s head was shoved deep inside one of the food cupboards, muffling his words. A moment later he stepped back, closed the door and opened another to inspect the contents.

I lay on the single bunk with the portable viewing screen in my hands. Since we’d left the *SS Hope* it only connected to the databases on the pod, but there were a decent number of information directories available to make it useful enough. No music or books unfortunately.

“You mean the food?” I asked, looking up.

“Uh-huh, food,” Balik grunted, “and the medical supplies, spare astro repair kit, extensive star charts and navigation data, advanced water and air processing systems...It’s as though the pod was specifically equipped to support a long journey with passengers...”

“And...?”

“And...this is a waste pod primarily. An *unmanned* waste pod...”

I didn’t add anything.

It had taken Balik just three hours to reprogram the pod’s navigation system and override the automatic rebound to the space station that would occur after seventy-two hours. Since then he’d been alternating between exploring the small craft and interrogating the computer systems. I had reminded him to rest a couple of times, but this was typical Balik – in fact I think this was *rest* for him – at least he wasn’t trying to exercise or do anything too strenuous.

I was still exhausted from the lack of sleep and fearful of talking too much – with a seemingly fully awake Balik – until I’d got my story clear inside my head.

Instead I tried to lighten the atmosphere, repeating my earlier statement. “I told you: the – man – on Hope, who helped us. He put us into this pod.” My voice stuttered over the word *man* and I saw Balik flinch momentarily before he consciously smoothed out his features. It was the same, limited detail answer I’d given to one of Balik’s previous queries. We’d not really spoken about anything that had happened – Balik had only been awake for about six hours now and he seemed happy enough to let me rest, rather than pressing me into answering questions.

But I knew that there *were* questions. And that there would come a time when I would have to help Balik answer them...I knew this in the same way that I knew Balik *hated* The Collective. There was such force and anger behind these feelings I could almost see the black-red cloud circling inside his head. My new knowledge – from each side of the problem – helped me less than knowing nothing would have done. Even though he was trying not to push me, I could taste Balik’s thirst to understand why my father had helped us; he wondered what made him different, what made *us* different. I couldn’t even begin to think what I was going to tell him.

Balik’s voice continued in the background, as I tried to tune out. “There’s so much stuff here. Like it was planned or something...it feels...wrong.” Waves of unease rolled off him as he spoke. I swallowed the lump blocking my throat so that I could answer.

“He *must* have done it. He told me he didn’t agree with what the others did to you and he wanted to help us get out.”

Balik shook his head – I only knew this because his shoulders tilted from one side to another, his head was still buried in the cupboard. “Doing this would have taken time – and planning – how could he have known what we were going to do if he wasn’t part of their system?”

I didn't answer because I couldn't. And so the silence expanded between us, growing like an invisible monster in the small space, until I felt like it was going to choke me.

Eventually, Balik spoke again. "I'd seen that *man* before." His words were soft, but cold. "He came to see me when they were holding me in the other place. That MAN was different to the others – I knew it, I could *feel* it when we met – but he did nothing for me. He left me with the others. Left me to die."

I had no words. This was new information to me, but it changed nothing – except perhaps to make it worse. My eyes squeezed tightly shut as I tried to block out the fear, guilt and anger that was battering me. But I couldn't: Balik's pain sliced through my chest, leaving an icy sliver of air trapped inside me. Since we'd begun talking – piecing together a picture of what had happened to us both – I'd known this was going to come. But I hadn't known this; I hadn't known that Balik had met my father. *How could he have allowed this to happen to Balik?*

The answer came to me and it was awful; that's why I knew it was true. My father had allowed Balik's torture, would have permitted his death, if it meant that he was still able to protect me. I might not have been the one beating and kicking Balik, but that did not change the fact that it had happened to him because of me.

"Do you think it's a trick?" Balik's voice – stronger, harder now – startled me from my thoughts and I realised that my eyes were wet with unshed tears.

"No." The word was inaudible. Weak. I cleared my throat, trying to hide my fear and guilt. "No." I said more definitely. "I think it's real. He wanted to get us out."

"Why?" Balik insisted. "Why us?"

I sighed, Balik's questions were forcing me to talk even though I didn't want to. "He did it because he knew my mother. My *real* genetic, *human* mother and he'd wanted to protect her from the others in The Collective. But he failed and that's why he

wanted to protect us.” I spoke without thinking. Without pausing to consider what Balik would want from me now after I’d told him this much. As always, he would need some kind of explanation...but I couldn’t tell him the truth. I knew it now more than ever: I would never be able to tell him. *Balik would hate me because I was one of them.*

There was silence again. When I could stand it no longer, I twisted in the bunk towards where Balik stood. I’d expected him to be investigating the cupboards still, but he wasn’t. He was staring at me with the strangest expression on his face. My mouth opened to speak, although I had no idea what I was going to say; but Balik spoke first.

“He didn’t want to protect *us*,” Balik’s tongue curled oddly around the words, infusing them with a meaning I didn’t fully comprehend. “It was just you. He wanted to get *you* out.”

I opened my mouth then closed it. Opened it and exhaled lightly, but still could not speak. Then my lips pressed tightly shut. Balik just stood – silent and unmoving – his eyes locked onto mine.

“Cassie, I need you to know something.”

I didn’t move, didn’t breathe. Balik’s gaze held mine.

“I might not understand why that creature acted the way that he did. But I’m glad it was you. If I had to go through that again, so that you could get out, I would.” Balik’s words were clear, his voice strong. There was nothing but truth in them and it broke my heart.

“I would never have left without you,” I murmured, my voice weak but no less truthful than his. “I could never have left you. And I never will. We *cannot* be apart again – you can’t put me before yourself as you did on *Hope* – no matter what happens to us. Losing you again would kill me.”

In three long strides Balik was beside me, crouching into the small space of the bunk, resting his weight on his right arm to lean over me. Our faces were mirrors of one another – full of determination and promise – as we pulled closer.

“I will not let anything hurt you,” Balik promised.

“I will not let anything come between us,” I replied with my own whispered oath.

“You and me,” Balik smiled a little.

“Always,” I agreed as I reached up to draw his face to mine and pressed my lips onto his.