

Jenny peered beneath: to her right was a dark-coloured stain on the floor. Inching forward on her stomach, she could see it was blood. She drew back quickly, her heart hammering.

‘What?’ asked Bodie.

Jenny stood up. ‘I’m not sure. I’ll get a torch.’

She returned from the buggy after a few minutes and approached the broken UFO with an amused smile. Two butts, waving in the air, greeted her.

‘What a sight,’ she said.

Matt turned sharply, banging his head on the door.

Jenny chuckled and handed over the torch. Then she waited impatiently while the men inspected the interior. When Bodie sat back, she was beside Matt, on her stomach, in an instant, head and shoulders inside the dark spacecraft.

‘You’d just about get under there,’ said Matt.

Bodie’s hand circled her calf as she began to slide inside. ‘Hang on,’ he said.

Jenny stilled. ‘C’mon, Commander,’ her voice was muffled. ‘The ship’s been here ages. There’s grass growing on the roof, for heaven’s sake. No life could be on board.’

‘And the blood?’

Matt swung the torch across to the patch of red. Under the beam, it appeared almost orange. ‘Could be rust?’ he suggested. ‘But my guess is animals use it as some sort of shelter; the blood looks dry, in any case.’

Bodie clearly wasn’t happy, but Jenny didn’t care about his happiness, and wriggled impatiently beneath his hand. Excitement coupled with the unknown only intensified her longing to explore.

‘Take a look—’ Bodie began, and she immediately kicked free and disappeared inside. Bodie lay on his front and shouted under the door. ‘Make it quick, and come straight back out. And that’s an order!’

Matt rolled the torch into the ship.

Jenny moved towards the strong beam, which picked out an empty room. The ship smelt heavily of damp and rot. The floor was cracked, and sharp blades of grass pushed through.

She swung the torch from one corner of the room to the other.

‘What d’you see?’

‘This room’s empty. I can see another . . .’ She moved towards it.

‘Daykin, get your arse back over here,’ yelled Bodie.

‘Commander!’ Her voice was full of frustration, and it moved away from them.

‘Jenny!’ continued Bodie. ‘The vessel is not only unsafe, it could be harbouring dangerous creatures.’

Jenny stopped and swung the beam at his face. He looked both furious and frightened. Matt, next to him, looked smug. She quickly realised that, if she disobeyed, Logan would come to hear of it and she’d never go out on a space mission again. On the other hand, it might compensate...

‘Kate said there aren’t any dangerous animals here.’

‘She is obviously malfunctioning—’

‘Hey, he admits it at last!’ said Matt.

‘I won’t go far,’ she called, stepping through the broken doorway, but then stopping at the sight that greeted her eyes.

‘Jenny, I gave you an order!’ Bodie’s voice wafted behind her.

An old smell of burnt rubber and smoke became trapped in her lungs and she coughed. She stepped over debris, before stopping sharply. Behind two giant pillars was what looked

like the main pilot's navigation station. Cracked and smashed screens, driving belts, dials and buttons, all of which itched to be pressed or pulled by her inquisitive fingers, were among the mass of protruding wires and other alien electronic gadgetry. Chairs had been ripped from their positions during the impact of the crash, or explosion, whichever had come first.

There were large cracks in the walls, which filtered in the outside light through a tangle of abrasive twigs; after the darkness of the foyer, the ship here didn't seem so dark. Her footsteps were loud as she crossed towards a wide corridor that branched off into narrower paths.

Taking the largest corridor, she almost tripped over the body.

She yelped and backed against the wall. The corpse was badly decomposing, with no possible way of distinguishing between male and female. But, whatever the sex of the creature, it looked incredibly human.

Stepping away, her horrified eyes fell on another body. That, too, was decaying. The eyes on this body were open. At first, she thought they were empty sockets; however, on closer inspection, she could see the eyes were dry, black orbs. At this stage, she knew she should report back, but she carried on, her footsteps echoing and her breath laboured with the thrill of fear.

There were doors along a narrower corridor, many of which were open and allowed her to see small, destroyed, rooms beyond. Some rooms, which Jenny thought were cabins, seemed undamaged. She approached a door and eyed, what looked to her, a sort of coded panel alongside the entrance. She punched the symbols on the raised surface several times, as if expecting the door to slide open. When nothing happened, she crouched, gripped the slight gap at the bottom, and heaved upwards. The door moved just enough for Jenny to wriggle through on her belly.

She didn't go far. The floor was cracked and looked unstable. A healthy tangle of foliage was growing through the fractures, spreading green, tentacle-like arms across the rotting floor. Moss grew up the walls and hung off the ceiling.

Something stirred beneath the greenery. Jenny bit back a shout of alarm as a shelled, segmented creature, the size of a cat, was disturbed by her bright torch, and lumbered across the floor on many short legs to hide under the broken cabin bed.

Unnerved, she scrambled up and, stumbling blindly, tripped in the debris-littered floor. Her hands were outstretched to save herself and hit a neighbouring door with all her weight. Without warning, the door fell inwards, and she fell to the ground with a grunt. She couldn't have been sure but, at that moment, she thought she heard a sharp intake of breath.

She scrambled up and directed the beam around the room. This, too, was a cabin, and it appeared undamaged. It had a bed alongside one wall. Jenny stepped inside, swinging the torch around.

She noticed a shelf edging along one side of the wall. It had openings beneath that held secret objects. She stopped. A cold feeling swept down her backbone, and she shivered. She swung the torch towards the bed that she had disregarded as unimportant before. The cabin smelt different— no, there was more to it than that. For some reason, she couldn't take her eyes off the rumpled bed: this cabin was *lived* in.

Knowingly, she turned to face the door. A large, dark-clothed figure stood between her and her exit.

The creature made no movement, but stood in silence. A helmet that covered its face was

smooth, with seemingly no opening for breathing or vision. Its clothing was ragged, the top half hidden by a thick coat of animal hide.

The figure was huge. Its chest wall was in proportion to its height, and solid arms hung by its sides. The uncovered hands, large and riddled with angry scar tissue, were splayed as if ready to reach out and seize.

The alien spoke. Its voice was so deep it was almost a vibration and Jenny could only guess the meaning of its words.

Suddenly, it approached her.

Jenny stepped back until her shoulder blades made contact with the shelf. The alien leant forward. Towards her.

Jenny cringed, pulling up her shoulders and sinking her chin deep into her chest. But the alien only reached over her head, towards the shelf behind for a small grey oblong object, which it aimed at her. She closed her eyes, expecting instant death. The object made a slight humming noise as the alien swiped the air around her. Opening her eyes, she saw the alien studying the object it had aimed at her.

'Earth.'

Jenny's mouth rounded in surprise.

'Human.'

'Yes!' Encouraged, she stepped forward with an eager smile of appeasement.

But her smile was wiped from her face as a handful of her hair was grasped in his fist, and she was projected forward with such speed her feet left the floor. She hit the wall sideways and, before she was aware of the impact, or of the white-hot pain on her scalp from his tearing fingers, she was propelled out of the cabin and down the corridor.

She was pushed around the decaying bodies and forced through the main navigation room. On approaching the exit, she knew she should warn the men, but didn't dare antagonise the alien any further.

'Jim?' she said tentatively.

Using Bodie's first name had the desired effect. She saw the men's shadows move abruptly from the doorway, and felt the alien behind her tense.

For a brief second, Jenny noticed a large calloused and *clawed* hand before it clasped her forehead, whereupon her head was jerked backwards and her face was twisted around towards a solid chest. She struggled, believing the alien meant to tear her head completely off her shoulders, but she was held powerfully and no amount of struggling would reward her with her freedom. She couldn't remember a time when she had been more scared. Bright stars exploded in her head and nerve tissue beneath screamed for release. A trickle of warm blood from her left nostril dampened the alien's rough hand-made clothes.

The creature forced Jenny towards the door. Her throat filled with the strong odour of the alien's sweat, wood smoke and her own blood. She struggled, gasping for clean air, feeling she was about to suffocate; but she was determined to warn Bodie and Matt of its presence.

She couldn't see very well, her face being partially buried against the wall of the alien's chest, but her hands were free. Without any thought to herself, only wanting to protect her co-travellers, she brought the torch down with all her strength on the extended hand as it reached towards the edge of the door.

The hand immediately curled into a fist and retracted, and a hiss of breath was expelled from a hidden mouth. She was thrust away at arm's length, held around the throat by a clawed hand. It squeezed until any sound she may have made was cut off. Dizziness

swamped her. Then, sunlight fell on her face in a burst of fresh, cold air as the door opened. She opened her eyes and tried to speak, but found her voice was nothing but a gurgle, and watched helpless as Bodie and Matt stared open-mouthed.

They staggered backwards, shouting and swearing at the top of their voices, before spinning around and running towards the base of the depression.

Jenny was hurled to the floor. Winded, but managing to crawl out of the spaceship, she glimpsed Bodie turning to look and calling for her to run. Matt picked up a rock and threw it at the alien as it ran towards them.

She began to stand, but dizziness swamped her. Trying to ignore the sensation, she staggered away from the spacecraft, but the ground shifted under her feet. Time was measured for Jenny, yet around her things were moving fast.

'Jen! Move!' yelled Bodie. The alien was in between her and the two men who, by now, were at the top of the crater. She couldn't see them anymore, but only heard Bodie yelling for her.

'Go! Go! GO!' she yelled, the movement making her eyesight pixilate. She gritted her teeth against the dizziness. 'I'm coming!'

'She's behind us,' yelled Matt from somewhere in the distance. 'Get in your buggy, Bo. Get the fuck in!'

Then, the ground rose up and her head struck a lump of metal debris protruding from the ground.

There was no more shouting. All was quiet and peaceful. Jenny opened her eyes and, in a sudden moment of realisation, she flipped to her side and looked to the top of the hill. With a sick feeling of dread, she rose and scrambled to the top of the crater. It felt like a mountain, and she slipped several times. Expecting to find Bodie and Matt dead; their bodies torn in frenzy under the clawed hands of the alien, she was relieved to find the men and the buggies were gone.

A glint of sunlight reflecting on something in the sky caught her eye. The buggies, now small space shuttles, were on their journey back to *Taurus* as if being hauled back up by an invisible string.

Jenny climbed into the buggy. With shaking hands, she pressed the controls; nothing happened. She spoke into the transmitter, but remembered that Kate was malfunctioning. Her buggy was immobilised.

'No, no, no,' she said. She pressed more buttons on the screen display. She pumped the accelerator, but nothing happened. She couldn't even close the buggy up; instead, it remained open-topped.

She climbed back out, her hands in her hair as panic momentary claimed her.

'It's OK,' she repeated to herself. 'It's OK. It's OK. Breathe.'

Her forehead hurt; she touched it, expecting her fingers to come away bloody, but they were dry. A lump was beginning to protrude, though, and she suspected she had alien finger-marks around her throat.

She glanced around her, as if afraid the alien was close by. Might it be possible that it had gained access to one of the buggies and was inside *Taurus*? Kate was programmed to destroy an intruder immediately, but...

She closed her eyes briefly. She couldn't think that way. She climbed back inside the buggy. She'd be OK. Bodie would realise she'd been left behind. He'd override Kate to get her buggy operational. She'd wait.

She looked upward at the now empty blue sky.

*Won't be long*, she thought. Around her, all she could hear was the pounding of her heart. It was a lonely sound. She sat for a long time with her head tilted back, looking up at the vastness, the emptiness, of the sky.

As one of the suns set, she finally acknowledged that she may have to spend a night alone on a strange planet. Feeling vulnerable and highly visible in the buggy, she climbed out and slipped beneath it. With the protection of its thick tracks either side of her, she felt safer, plus she was sheltered from the icy wind that had sprung up.

She huddled in a ball, trying to get comfortable and remain optimistic; however, as the eerie silence stretched and played on her imagination, it was difficult to keep hold of her positivity. As the shadows lengthened and faded, and the remaining seven moons rose and twilight fell, her confidence had all but gone.

Shock and the long voyage through space had exhausted her body. She slept, unaware, and, for a sweet moment, her nightmare of being left on a desolate planet did not present itself in her dreams.