

CHAPTER ONE

It's a Game to *Them!*

Running in darkness, Jess Worthy crashed through a thicket as quickly as he could pry his gangly, 14-year-old body between thorny, scratchy branches.

Faster! Put more distance between me and ... them!

Jess thrust his scraped and bruised hands and arms into the black night and felt nothing. He squeezed between the alien brambles and lunged forward to run again, only to step into empty space where he'd expected ground. His delirious tumble down a marshy embankment ended with a bone-jolting smack against large, rounded river stones, which bonked together and echoed the trickling water of a creek.

Wrong way! Must go uphill!

Crumpled atop cold, dark rocks and gasping hoarsely in the thin, oxygen-starved atmosphere, Jess chomped into his left sleeve to muzzle a dry cough. He heaved deep breaths and listened to the darkness. Beyond his breathing, he heard the trickle of the creek and the buzzes, croaks and chirps of little creatures. Jess imagined crickets, frogs and owls but knew that this wildlife was something alien. He couldn't hear his pursuers. He looked left and right, and saw blackness. He looked upward. Two tiny moons and a few stars lit the wispy clouds above the forest canopy. Every other direction where Jess strained his eyes yielded nothing but abysmal black.

Get off these cold rocks! One of them can see body heat.

Jess felt the river stones roll and clunk as he hobbled onto one foot. He froze.

Quiet! Mustn't make vibrations on hard ground! They'll hear.

Jess steadied himself and stood. He pulled a direction finder from the left side of his belt and draped his jacket over his face and the device to shield its light from prowling eyes. Somewhere on one of these hills in this thickly forested valley, a one-person spaceship waited – Jess's only chance for escape and survival.

Still no signal. Must get higher uphill.

The device, also a flashlight and a sort of key to the starship, was set to indicate the distance to the craft, but only when he was within 100 “kortons” – about 120 meters.

Please, be on this hill. I don't know how many more hills I can search before ... He halted his vision of becoming another hunting trophy. Get moving, Jess!

Feeling the creek bed sloping upward to his left, he reached into the darkness and took a careful, gentle step. Then another. When his feet touched softer ground, he leaned toward it and felt for vegetation to haul himself up the embankment. He pulled on thick, grass-like plants up a steep slope and crawled onto a level spot, springy with layers of damp, musty leaves. On his hands and knees, Jess groped the ground to feel which direction led uphill. He felt a gradual slope and trudged higher.

I shouldn't be here. I should be back on Earth, riding my bike, going to school, all the normal things. But no, I'm kidnapped by aliens and trained to be hunted!

And I haven't got a chance! The Barberian can see infrared, the Carnesaurian can hear footsteps a mile away, and the Sandleroid can rip a tree out of the ground and throw it a hundred feet. And they're all five or ten times bigger than me!

“Our young must learn to hunt,” the alien gamekeeper told Jess and other captives on their way to this planet. “Wild animals are not a sufficient challenge. Nor are intelligent beings such as yourselves – without training. We will train you and arm you, to make you challenging prey.

“When your hunt comes, you will be given a single sidearm that can fire one lethal shot and two stun bursts. You will be pursued by three hunters. Your survival and freedom will depend upon your cunning and endurance.

“Be the best prey that you can be, and live.”

Not even one in ten get out of here alive!

The creek's trickle sounded farther away now. Jess paused to listen again for pursuit. All he could hear was the faint creek water, and nothing else.

Nothing else?!

The warbles and screeches of the nocturnal creatures had quieted, sensing a predator. Terror zapped through Jess's body. He felt for his sidearm.

Not yet! Don't make me use the gun now!

Jess crouched in the darkness, awaiting any sound of the hunter's next move – if it was indeed nearby. The hunter or hunters might be doing the same thing – holding still, waiting for Jess's footsteps to squish across the mushy forest floor.

It can't be the Barberian. It would have seen my body heat.

Minute by minute, Jess strained to breathe silently. The trickling water sounded louder now, because it was the only sound he could hear, besides his breathing and his pulse throbbing in his head.

I can't wait any longer. It'll be sunrise soon. I've got to keep searching, but quietly.

Jess bent forward, reached down and felt the damp, leafy ground with his left hand while holding his right hand beyond his face to feel for trees, brush and other obstacles. He took a slow, gentle step, raising his foot slowly off the mushy leaves and laying it down gingerly. Gradually, he made his way uphill.

Creeping over soggy leaves and pungent grasses, Jess slowly groped his way around wide scaly trunks of towering trees. The two moons illuminated small gaps on the forest floor. Jess crept along the shadowy edges of those spaces. He paused beside one of the massive tree trunks to listen again.

The creek's whisper was too far behind him now to hear. All he could hear was his terrified heartbeat and the flutter of a gentle breeze in the treetops.

I can hear the wind. I must be near the top of this hill.

Jess drew his direction finder again and hunched over it to conceal its light.

A reading! Eighty-three kortons!

Jess was about 100 meters away from life and freedom to go home, to Earth, to Oregon.

I don't care if I crash in the middle of a forest a hundred miles from Salem. I'd even be glad to see my school again!

In his delight, Jess stood and held the direction finder at arm's length, first to the left and then to the right.

Only 82 kortons to the right. The ship is that way.

Jess stepped gently in that direction, still trying to muffle his footsteps but fighting the urge to walk faster, or even run. Maybe he should dash for the ship. Perhaps he should risk

making too much noise rather than risk taking too much time.

As he debated in his mind, a warmer, wetter air enveloped him. Then he smelled it, a familiar stench, the putrid odor of sweaty fur and steamy garbage breath. A dim red light flashed above him, briefly illuminating two eyes atop a mass of muscle and fur. The Carnesaurian had allowed Jess to crawl right to it. The hunter inhaled a deep growl and raised its spear. Jess dived into darkness as the shovel-sized spear point thudded into the leafy ground. The hunter roared as it yanked its spear from the ground, shook the rotting leaves from it and raised it for another jab. Two other roars echoed from a distance.

Jess scrambled blindly again, crashing through thorny brambles that slashed his arms and face. He ran toward where he believed the ship awaited. The Carnesaurian thundered and crashed through the trees behind Jess.

I should have signed up for track at school!

As Jess plowed through the brush, he glanced at the direction finder in his left hand.

Fifty-one kortons! I'm getting closer.

He drew the sidearm with his right hand and squeezed the grip until it clicked into the lethal setting.

I hope I'm not running right into the path of another hunter!

Then Jess realized the thudding strides and crushing of brush beneath his pursuer's feet had ceased. Why? Jess stopped, gasping for air and wiping the blood and sweat from this face, listening. Was the Carnesaurian waiting for the Sandleroid and Barberian to catch up? Or chasing Jess into their club and ax?

Jess glanced at the direction finder.

Fourteen kortons! I'm so close!

Whack! Crash! The treetops snapped and cracked as a boulder pounded into the brushy ground with a bone-shaking thud only a few feet from Jess. Splintered tree limbs rained down on the boy, knocking him to the ground – and the pistol and direction finder from his hands. Gasping in pain from his bruised ribs and aching back, he swept the dark ground with his hands, shuffling through bits of fallen tree limb, dewy grasses and rotting leaves, until he found the pistol. *Whoosh! Bam! Crack!* Another boulder hurtled in Jess's direction, but this one smacked off a tree trunk and away from Jess like a giant baseball

off a massive bat. Jess kept waving his hands across the ground.

Without that direction finder, the ship is useless!

The Barberian must be using its infrared vision to direct the bombardment by the mountainous Sandleroid, Jess figured.

Then what's the Carnosaurian doing?

Jess swiped the ground on his hands and knees in an ever-widening circle.

I've got to find it. Now!

At last Jess felt metal and picked it up. It still indicated 14 as the distance. He stood and swung it around. Thirteen kortons to his left. He bolted that way. The trees and brush thinned. He saw a clearing, lit faintly by the moons, and something gleaming in the middle.

The ship! I made it!

Whish! Ka-thud! A boulder plowed into the clearing.

Jess ran to the tiny starship, which was smaller than a compact car and held a single seat enclosed in a jet-fighter-like canopy. He thrust the direction finder's key into the hatch lock, and the canopy swung open. The engine began to whirl.

Too much noise! Got to take off fast!

Three roars echoed from beyond the trees. The hunters knew that Jess had found the ship. They would stampede straight to its engine's hum. Jess jumped in and closed the canopy.

Come on! Warm up! I've got to take off now!

Jess grabbed the control stick. The engine light turned green, and he pulled back. The dark outline of the forest began to fall around Jess as the craft rose toward the moons and tiny stars.

Thump! The ship jerked to a halt and wobbled from side to side. Then it began to descend, even with the engines screaming at full power.

No! What's happening?

Jess looked at the instruments. He was at full thrust but going down. Was the ship damaged? Was it sabotaged? Jess looked out the canopy. Two snarling faces appeared. The Barberian held the little spaceship from the right side, and the Carnosaurian held it from the left, pulling it toward the ground. Then, ahead of Jess, the Sandleroid lumbered toward him while lofting a boulder above its head. This rock was many times larger than the ones the Sandleroid had thrown from a distance. Jess was

seconds away from being squashed.

It's not fair! I reached the ship! And they're going to kill me anyway? Well, not without a fight!

Jess drew the sidearm and opened the canopy. With one hand, he held the ship's control stick back to maintain upward thrust. He aimed the weapon, set to kill, at the imposing Sandleroid's chest. It snarled at the gun and raised the boulder higher. It was nearly above Jess.

Wait!

If he injured or killed the Sandleroid then surely the huge rock would fall on Jess anyway. He aimed higher and fired at the boulder. Bits of smoking hot rock exploded from the blast point, showering all four of them with shards of smoldering stone. The Sandleroid dropped the rest of the rock to its side and staggered backward, dazed but not seriously wounded. Jess reset the gun to stun, aimed it at the fingers of the surprised Carnosaurian and fired once at each hand. The brute let go, freeing the left side of the little starship, which immediately began to roll out of the Barberian's fingers on the right.

The ship's sudden roll nearly tossed Jess out. He hung for his life by the insides of his knees. The ship bobbed left and right as the two standing beasts made frantic grabs for it, bouncing it back and forth between them. Jess struggled back into the cockpit and pulled hard on the control stick. The little craft wiggled upward and out of the hunters' reach. The ship steadily rose to the level of the treetops, and the howling, infuriated hulks below threw fragments of the blasted boulder at him. *Clunk! Clang!* As Jess closed the canopy, the Carnosaurian's spear whizzed past it so close that Jess felt its wind. But they couldn't stop Jess now. He steered the ship toward the stars and accelerated. Jess had escaped this evil planet.

Now the hard part: finding Earth.