

## CHAPTER ONE

# The Crash

The instant that the starship burst out of interspace, Jess Worthy felt himself snap free of his safety harness's grip on his lap and shoulders. The human boy tumbled over Mallot's furry owl-like head toward the passenger module's forward bulkhead, where he thudded against the upper wall and hung briefly as if sitting on the ceiling. He didn't sit long. The artificial gravity pulled him head first to the floor, knocking off his glasses. Stuck against the wall with his butt in the air – looking as if he'd tried to somersault through the bulkhead – he opened his eyes and gasped for air.

“Jess, are you all right?” Mallot asked. “Why wasn't your belt buckled?”

Jess couldn't speak for a few seconds. He could barely breathe. But even without his glasses, he saw a wiggling green blur a couple seats behind Mallot. Kedra Teffen-4-Brect, the squat green troll from Cammardon, was twitching her ears. That was what her species called “laughing their ears off,” according to Jess's biovox, which translated body language, as well as speech. He could do without the translation this time.

“Hey, Worthy,” Kedra said, “if that's how you fly your own ship, how have you managed to stay alive so long in the Alien Integration Program?”

“Stop joking, Kedra,” Anfa said from the right column of seats. “Jess, are you hurt? What happened?”

Jess rolled over and sat on the floor, feeling for bruises and checking for broken bones or blood. “I'm OK, I guess. Someone unbuckled my harness.” He glared at the green blur behind his seat.

“Worthy!” a voice boomed from the cockpit. “Stop goofing off. Get back in your seat. We just emerged from interspace on the wrong side of this binary system, and we're about to slingshot around a gas-giant planet. Double-check your harnesses, all of you.”

If Auron was worried enough to shout at Jess, then this bunch of misfits must be in for a rough ride. Nothing scared that mountain of muscle. The Thal could make an 800-pound gorilla run with just a glance. And that was his happy face. Jess scrambled across the floor toward his seat, sweeping his hands about in search of his glasses.

“Jess, the pilot just gave you an order,” Mallot said. “Get back in your seat.”

“I’ve got to find my glasses before they get smashed.”

“Just buckle up. Quick! You can find them later. Or make new ones in the facsimile generator.”

Jess growled and started for his seat. The ship dived and pitched to the left, and Jess flew into Saralestra’s lap.

“Get your smelly, oily, porous body off me!” The beautiful Veyan girl shoved Jess back to the aisle floor. “You know never to touch a Platinum Maiden. You don’t need your biovox to tell you that.”

“Sorry! It was an accident! The ship’s bouncing all over. Didn’t you notice?”

“*Never insult the visual acuity of a Platinum Maiden of Exuus,*” the friendly biovox said inside Jess’s head.

“Are you insulting my powers of observation as well, Mr. Worthy?” Saralestra fixed her huge electric-blue eyes on him. “Did your acrobatics injure your brain or damage your biovox?”

Jess crawled toward his seat, fighting the ship’s roller-coaster maneuvers. On one of the ship’s banks to the right, his glasses slid to his hand. That was lucky. He grabbed them and threw himself back into his seat, cinching his harness as tightly as he could. This time he kept one hand on the buckle to prevent further sabotage. He put his glasses back on and looked at Saralestra.

“It wasn’t my fault. Someone undid my harness. Did you see who?”

The Veyan girl glared at Jess for a moment with that unfeeling look that said she was a Platinum Maiden, the highest social caste and beauty class on her home world of Exuus. The biovox’s cultural prompts reminded Jess of that about a thousand times too many. Saralestra liked to remind him too. “No, Mr. Worthy. I was looking out my window at the time.” She turned away. Then Jess felt a warm, wet puff on the back of his neck.

“You’re not sorry, human,” Kedra said, leaning in closer. “Are you really *that* clumsy? Or were you just trying to touch the Veyan?” She puffed harder. “Actually, I would wager you’re both clumsy *and* unable to control yourself.”

Jess couldn’t see whether Kedra was laughing or doing the Cammardonian version of turning up her nose, or both. Cammardonians didn’t have noses. Laughter was a combination of twitching their bat-wing ears and puffing through the nostrils at the corners of their mouths. But so was turning up their noses. An accurate translation depended on the ear-twitching pattern. Of course, even facing away from Kedra, Jess could have his biovox translate Kedra’s body language. But why bother? This group survival exercise hadn’t even begun, and Jess already was tired of Kedra’s taunts and her bragging about her money.

“Well, Worthy? Which is it?” Kedra poked at his shoulder from around the seat – an easy maneuver because Cammardonian arms bent in two places with their dual elbows.

*“Shoulder tapping is a sign of disrespect on Cammardon,”* Jess’s biovox reminded him. *“The proper action is to walk away, pretending to be too wealthy to respond to such an insult.”*

“So, are you just clumsy, Worthy? Or are you going to blame your primitive human hormones?”

Did Kedra unbuckle the harness? Jess had no idea how she would profit from a stunt that could have seriously injured him, possibly even killed him. But she’s the prime suspect. With those long wiggly arms, she could have reached Jess’s buckle without anyone noticing. It couldn’t have been Mallot. He’s an Ardan, a species from an advanced planet that has been in the Galactic Union for thousands of years. And he’s studying to be an officer in Galactic Union Security. He’d never risk his career. Platinum Maiden Saralestra wouldn’t risk touching Jess at all. He’d have to be a prince on Earth for her to even consider it. And Anfa? No way. The Emmon girl was studying to be a doctor on her planet, Olis, and she likes helping people, not playing jokes on them. That left one suspect, a green, one-eyed...

*“Shoulder tapping is a sign of disrespect on Cammardon...”*

This time, Jess was too fast for Kedra. He grabbed her finger and pulled forward until he heard her forehead thump on the back of his seat.

“Puff! Ahh! Let go, human!”

She tried to jerk free, but Jess clenched her long green finger with both hands as hard as he could.

“On Earth, you know what ‘pull my finger’ means? I’ll let go as soon as you fart.” Jess grinned as the girl yanked again and again to retrieve her finger.

“You’re disgusting, human! Let go or I’ll report you to Dr. Paragon!”

“Did you unhook my harness?”

“No!”

“It must have been you. No one else could reach it.”

“I swear on the bank vault of my ancestors that I didn’t do it. Now let go!”

“Promise you won’t touch me or anything of mine again for the rest of this trip?”

“All right, I’ll never lay a finger on you again, human. Let go! Mallot! Tell Worthy to let me go!”

“Jess, please let her go,” Mallot said. “You’ve made your point.”

“Sure. Whatever you say.”

Kedra kept yanking her hand over and over to release it from Jess's grip. Jess waited for her next yank to let go. She slapped into her seat with a thump and a sputtering "puff!" from her wide green lips. It wasn't as painful as flying into a bulkhead, but that smidgen of revenge was sweet enough.

Anyway, Kedra swore on what? The bank vault of her ancestors? What did that mean? Was that some "stick a needle in my eye" kids' thing that didn't count if they crossed their fingers?

*"Cammarдонians are truthful when they swear on their family fortunes,"* the biovox said in Jess's brain.

But did Kedra follow her planet's rules when she was out in space? Jess didn't know. If only the biovox had a lie-detector function; that would be handy. But who else could have unbuckled the harness?

"Oh, look at that!" Anfa said, pointing out her window to the massive gaseous planet's swirling colors. "It's beautiful. Look at the amazing patterns. I'm sure that no two such planets look exactly alike."

The views Jess caught through his window and the other portals around the passenger module reminded him of Jupiter and its many moons. He couldn't tell if this gas giant was as big as Jupiter. But when he pressed his face to the window to see as far forward as possible, he saw a bright white moon that clung to some atmosphere. The ship was passing very near that moon.

"That's where we should have come out of interspace – the other star in this binary system," Anfa said, pointing out her window toward a bright star. "Looks like we're going around the gas giant and then toward that other star."

Jess could tell that the view of the gas giant excited Anfa. The hairs of her thick, horse-like mane bristled straight out. As an Emmon, short fur covered her wolf-like face and her body, while her mane ran from the bridge of her snout over her head. It was like a Mohawk haircut that continued down her spine. Actually, Jess had no idea how far down her mane went because her gown covered her like a long overcoat. She looked like a cross between a horse and a wolf wearing a wedding gown.

As the passengers gazed at the huge planet to the ship's right or moons of vastly varying sizes and colors to the left, Jess looked around at the crew. What a freak show. Two furry animals that walked and talked like people, a green one-eyed dwarf, and a girl who made a Barbie doll look only slightly more feminine than a boy.

*"It is impolite to stare at someone on Exuus – even more so than on Earth,"* the biovox pointed out to Jess. But no one was paying attention to him. They were enjoying the scenery. Well, so was Jess. He stared at Saralestra. Falling in her lap moments earlier was the closest he'd ever

been to either of the Veyan girls in the Alien Integration Program. And he'd never seen a human girl as stunning as Saralestra. Her skin glowed flawless bronze without a single freckle, mole or birthmark. Her piercing blue eyes must have been twice as big as a human's. At about 6 feet tall, she towered over everyone else in the passenger module, and the shuttle's weightless free-fall at the moment floated her long shroud of blond hair around her body like a mermaid underwater. Her swimming hair concealed the sudden left turn of her head to look out Mallot's window toward the moons. Her eyes caught Jess's. Busted!

"You are staring at me, Mr. Worthy. Stop it."

"I wasn't staring. I was looking back and forth between the windows."

The ship lurched again, hard enough to throw all the passengers against their safety straps. Jess already was holding his harness with both hands, but the others gasped as though someone had slugged them in the gut. An explosion rocked the shuttle, and a blinding flash filled the compartment. Everyone began to talk at once, so frantically that Jess's biovox couldn't keep up with the translations. Words broke into squeaks and barks like a bad cell-phone connection from a caller at a noisy zoo. The passenger module's alarm light glowed blue, indicating a life-threatening emergency.

"Aah! Puff, puff, puff!"

"What's wrong, Kedra?" Anfa said. "Are you hurt?"

"Worse! I lost my financial feed, along with my link to the I-network. It's gone! Completely gone!"

Jess, who also sensed his biovox had lost its link, turned around toward Kedra. "We're in serious trouble, and you're worried about your money?"

"My Galactic Union portfolio requires constant monitoring. The timing of buy and sell orders is crucial to..."

"I've lost my link, too," Anfa said. Saralestra and Mallot also said they'd lost their links. Jess said he had as well. Without their biovox's links through the ship's nexus – more than a mere computer – to the Interspatial network, only life support and person-to-person communication worked.

"Whatever that explosion was," Mallot said, "it must have done severe damage. But don't worry. Auron's a very experienced pilot."

"Aren't we getting awfully close to that moon?" Kedra said. "What's going on? Are we going to crash?"

"Auron," Mallot said. "Can you hear me? Can you tell us what's happening?"

The pilot didn't reply. If he was incapacitated or dead, the passengers might be in trouble. The nexus could fly the ship, run all its systems. But Jess and the passengers had no idea if the nexus was working because their I-network links had died. If both the pilot and the nexus were out of commission, they'd be dead in minutes – a crater on an icy moon.

The shuttle lurched to the left, and the crew felt the moon's gravity. Jess pressed his nose against his window. Barely within sight behind the ship, the moon's daylight side shrank into a crescent, and for a moment, he would swear he saw waves rippling through floating ice. But perhaps that was a trick of light through the misty atmosphere.

The ship swooped entirely into the night side. The blue alarm light started to flash, and the craft began to shudder. It felt like riding a jackhammer. The glow of compressed gases blazed past their windows as they entered a meteoric plunge into the moon's atmosphere. The braking effect pulled the passengers forward with such force that they hung from their safety harnesses. Jess couldn't hold his head, arms and legs back, so he let them rest on the back of Mallot's seat. Jess twisted his head and saw that Anfa was doing the same thing, while holding her mane tightly to her scalp. That was the Emmon expression of terror. Kedra whimpered and puffed like a steam locomotive. Maybe she was hyperventilating. Jess didn't know. They were all as scared as he was.

"Emergency landing procedure!" Auron's voice shouted. "Prepare to evacuate!"

It sounded more like "Eeemmmerrrgennncyyy lllandddddd ppproceeddddddure" because it felt as if the ship would shake itself apart. But it was a relief to hear Auron's voice. The giant Thal was from an advanced world. And he was Saralestra's "peer scholar" – a sort of mentor in the Alien Integration Program. Auron could get them out of this mess.

The turbulent ride eased a bit, and the meteoric flame of plasma blocking their view faded and vanished. Jess looked out his window. Jagged mountain peaks swept past, and vast, white plains stretched below the ship.

"Emergency matter transmissions initiating," Auron said. "Just follow procedure, meet at the survival kit."

Jess saw the top of Mallot's head vanish. Anfa followed, and the sudden cessation of Kedra's puffing meant that she'd gone too. Jess watched Saralestra. She turned and looked at him. For the first time, the instant before she disappeared, her face made an expression. His biovox couldn't figure it out. It looked like a combination of pain and anger, as if she were blaming Jess for their shuttle's imminent crash. He braced himself for transmission to the moon's surface, tucking his chin to his

chest so that he was ready to curl into a ball and roll onto the ground in case he materialized a tad too high.

A tingly electric pulse shot through his body. And it hurt. Matter transmission never had hurt before. Then for an instant all light, sound, smell and feeling ceased, swallowed by oblivion.

## CHAPTER TWO

# The Frozen Body

The nothingness of matter transmission lasted no time, and yet there was time to dream. Or daydream. It was impossible to say which, and not every species experienced these instant dreams. For Jess, it flashed like a movie clip in his brain – or mental pictures of a book he'd read a few weeks earlier – Jonathan Livingston Seagull arriving on one world even before the fictional bird had left the previous one. Jess didn't have time to analyze whether this dream held any meaning. Before he realized that he was no longer strapped into the starship's passenger seat, he hovered for an instant a couple meters above a vast snowscape, then belly-flopped onto the surface, flapping his arms like a seagull – as if that would help. It didn't.

Jess made this world's first snow angel, face down, knocking the breath out of him for the second time on this trip. How could the nexus miss the surface by so much? Maybe this wasn't a good weekend for a trip across the galaxy.

He gasped for air, which his biovox supplied in such a minimal volume that it felt as if someone were smothering him with a pillow. A sonic boom pounded his body as the shuttle rumbled overhead. Jess couldn't see the ship, but its roar rolled across the landscape, echoing over the lifeless, frozen snowdrifts long after a bright flash lit the horizon. Did the ship actually explode? Weird. Sure, vehicles crashed all the time on Earth, as well as the home worlds of Anfa, Saralestra and Kedra. But accidents were rare for Galactic Union technology. Maybe this wasn't an accident. Jess had no way to tell. He wasn't in the cockpit. Well, the ship's nexus surely sent a distress call to Galactic Union Security the instant something went wrong, so a rescue ship would be here any time.

Jess stood in the powdery snow, and his feet sank nearly knee-deep in the soft upper layers. The fresh snowfall helped soften his landing, but he wondered why his biovox didn't cushion his impact at all. He surveyed the icy landscape. It shimmered like the land of Christmas under the binary twin's starlight, which bathed the vast plain as brightly as a full moon on Earth. But this world was itself a moon about as big as Earth. Rugged mountains surrounded the expansive lowland of snowdrifts, some taller than Jess. A faint breeze whispered in his ears, and he tasted the filtered and sanitized mixture of gases that his biovox provided.

“Hello? Can anybody hear me? Auron? Mallot?” Although the biovoxes should be able to communicate with each other, Jess heard nothing. “Biovox check – what’s wrong? Why can’t I talk to anyone?”

*“Biovox telecommunications are not functioning.”*

“How about a queue to the survival kit? Can you do that?”

*“No. All functions that require telecommunication are unavailable.”*

“Why? Not enough power or what?”

*“Unknown.”*

“OK, the survival kit and Auron must be somewhere between here and where I saw the ship crash. If I walk that way, I’ll find something or someone sooner or later.”

Jess looked in the direction where he saw the ship’s fiery impact and chose a particularly high, rocky mountain peak on the horizon to use as a landmark. He took a step, which sank with a hollow scrunch into the fluffy snow. This hike would take awhile. The survival kit could be miles away.

After walking for a few minutes – more like wading – Jess trudged up one of the bigger snowdrifts in his path to take another look around. By the time he reached the top, he was so out of breath that he swore he wouldn’t climb one of these big lumps again unless his life was at stake. He slumped with his hands on his knees, gasping for air. The biovox must have been struggling to provide him a breathable mixture of gases from this atmosphere, let alone insulate him from the biting cold. His stomach gurgled with hunger, so he looked forward to getting some food supplement and a biovox battery out of the survival kit, if he could find it.

He straightened up and looked all around. Nothing moved as far as he could see. Where was everyone? They should have materialized a bit closer together. So Jess plodded ahead in a slow steady rhythm. *Kathunk, kathunk.* He wondered if this snow was made of water or whether this world was so cold that this stuff was frozen gases.

After what seemed like an hour of wading across the icy quicksand, Jess saw a square shape atop a snowdrift. That wasn’t a natural shape. It had to be the survival kit. Jess sloshed through the snow toward it and put his hand over the biovox-activated latch, anticipating a fuller stomach once he’d slapped on a battery and a packet of concentrated foodstuffs.

*“Open,”* he thought when he touched the latch. Nothing happened. He ordered his biovox to use its own power to activate the mechanism. He felt a brief sting of intense cold for half a second as some of the biovox’s life-sustaining energy diverted into opening the survival kit. *Bam!* The lid flipped open from the force of a small explosion. Jess flung

himself backward, blocking his face. He fell on his back, making the second snow angel in this moon's history. After a moment of silence, Jess crept up to the kit and peered inside.

"Great! Just great."

The kit had materialized almost entirely in the ice. Everything was ruined. It must have been one of the batteries that exploded, shorted out by the snow. Jess pulled items from the kit, finding one biovox battery intact. Everything else was embedded in ice, combined with it chemically the moment it materialized. Then he saw the medical scanner strapped to the inside of the lid. He grabbed it and turned it on.

"A little scorched but working. OK, scan the contents of the survival kit. Is anything still useful? The food, the batteries, the regular scanner?"

"One biovox battery and this scanner are functional. All the other contents are merged with native compounds and rendered useless."

"What about the – what do you call it? – the emergency beacon?"

"Destroyed."

Nice. Nothing had gone right on this trip so far. "Auron, where are you? You should have been here *before* me."

"You can't tell the difference between a Thal and a Platinum Maiden of Exuus?"

Jess looked over his shoulder and saw the Veyan girl's silhouette approaching. He jumped up and wheeled around. For an instant, Jess caught her cold stare. Her icy blue eyes and cascading blond hair gleamed in the bright star's light. Jess's eyes darted around, and he turned back toward the survival kit.

"I haven't seen or heard from Auron or anyone else," he told her. "And that's not all. Most of the survival kit's ruined. It materialized in the snow."

Saralestra strutted forward with incredible poise considering how deeply her shiny boots sank into the snow. She looked into the kit and pulled at a packet of concentrated foodstuff, but the top tore off in her hand, leaving the rest embedded in the ice.

"Mr. Worthy, where is the emergency beacon?"

"I told you. Everything in there's ruined but the medical scanner and one biovox battery. We need to find Auron. He's got an emergency beacon with him."

"Why haven't you used the scanner to locate him?"

Because he'd just found the survival kit a minute ago. That's why. What else did she expect? A palace built of snow waiting for her? Jess stifled a growl and held up the scanner.

"Display locations of all shuttle passengers."

The device projected a three-dimensional map of the valley between Jess and Saralestra. The image glowed brilliantly in the night air, like a 3D role-playing game, but Jess stared straight through it at the Veyan girl's face. He struggled to pull his eyes away from her striking features and luminous blond hair. Earth to Jess – stop staring at her. Focus on the display.

Tiny animated characters representing each of the crew members inched across the snowy wasteland. Names floated next to each figure – Jess saw them spelled in Roman letters, and he knew that Saralestra saw them in her world's written language. Images representing Kedra, Anfa and Mallot meandered toward the blue dot marking the survival kit and the standing figures for Jess and Saralestra. A dot representing Auron sat motionless a few hundred meters away. That didn't look right.

“Medical emergency,” the scanner said. “Auron's biovox is damaged and running out of energy. Failure estimated in seven minutes. Take medical scanner and biovox battery to his location immediately.”

Above the dot representing Auron, a set of red bar graphs popped up showing several vital signs. No respiration. No circulatory function. No brain activity. Body temperature well below the freezing point of water. Yet Auron's biovox indicated that it was keeping the Thal alive. Jess looked at Saralestra. She only returned the glassy emotionless gaze that infuriated Jess, even though he knew it was natural for her species and culture.

“Give me a queue to Auron's location, the fastest route possible,” Jess told the scanner, grabbing the battery and throwing himself into a squishy jog along the blue line that he now saw hovering over the snow.

“Mr. Worthy, where are you going? You're no doctor. What do you know about medical aid or Auron's physiology?”

“I know he's about to die. The medical scanner will tell me what to do! Wait here for the others!”

“You have neither the right nor the status to order me...”

Jess's vigorous gasps and scrunchy scramble through the snow helped drown out Saralestra's voice. He wasn't interested in listening anyway. He followed the blue line that stretched across the desert of ice, seeming to lead toward the distant twin star of this binary system. That's where they were supposed to be – on a boring group survival exercise on a planet orbiting that other star. How did the ship's nexus make such a big navigational error? What caused the explosion and the crash? Only Auron could answer those questions, if he survived.

When the biovox queue led over a snowdrift, Jess scrambled on all fours over the crest and staggered down the other side. The drifts kept getting higher, like a storm brewing in a frozen sea. After a few minutes,

Jess began to slow. His heart pounded, and he gasped three times for each step. His legs ached, then started to tingle into numbness.

“Medical emergency critical,” the scanner said. “The Thal’s biovox has about three minutes of power remaining.”

Jess pushed forward as hard as he could.

“How ... *gasp* ... much ... *gasp* ... far ... *gasp* ... ther?”

Jess could have asked the scanner mentally, but he was in no condition to think of that.

“Five meters.”

The queue arced over a wall of snow-covered ice. Jess slumped over the top and threw his legs over, letting his limp body slide down the other side. He plunged into the bottom of a long trench and faced an even steeper wall of ice. How many more of these did he need to climb over?

“The Thal’s biovox has one minute of power remaining.”

Feeling as if he’d just done a thousand pushups and needed to do one more, he climbed to his feet. His groan echoed across the cold silence, and the icy world moaned back. He could swear he felt its tortured rumble, like a monster inside an egg straining to crack its shell. Was that a moonquake? Maybe this glacier or whatever was sensitive to noise, like an avalanche-prone mountain on Earth. Better groan quietly from now on. Jess didn’t want to trigger a quake that would split open the ice and swallow him.

Jess threw himself against the blue line that led up the trench wall. What he saw next made him scream – Auron’s head on the top of the ice. Jess fell back into the trench with an “oof.” For an instant, he thought the Thal’s head had been chopped off. Then he realized that Auron had materialized inside the ice up to his neck with his face frozen in a grimace of shock and agony.

“Scanner, is Auron really alive?”

“Yes, held in stasis by his biovox and allowed to freeze in order to more easily preserve his brain. However, the nano-components in his body are inoperative. Only the few remaining in his head are functioning. They will run out of power in 20 seconds.”

Jess placed the biovox battery atop Auron’s frosty, bluish head. It stuck like a magnet.

“Will that keep him alive?”

“Yes.”

“For how long?”

“It will keep the Thal in stasis for about 85 hours, with a margin of error of seven hours depending on how much energy his remaining biovox components can collect from this environment.”

“Good. That’s a lot longer than we’ll need. We’ll be picked up long before then. Is Auron’s emergency beacon OK? Can you activate it remotely, or do I need to dig it out of the ice?”

“Nothing below the Thal’s neck is functional.”

“Oh, man. No quick rescue today, I guess. If only Auron had materialized a meter this way. Hey, scanner, why didn’t his biovox’s pass-through work? Shouldn’t it have let him walk right out of this block of ice?”

“Apparently, it malfunctioned.”

“Duh. Why?”

“Unknown.”

“OK. Fine. A ship will find us eventually.”

*“I wouldn’t count on that.”*

It wasn’t the scanner’s voice. Jess looked around.

“Who is that? I don’t recognize your voice.”

*“I wouldn’t waste your only battery on your pilot. You’re going to need it if you want to live.”*

“Who is that?” Jess shouted at the top of his lungs, loudly enough to generate an echo over the ice.

*“I’ll give you a hint: I offered you friendship from the beginning, before you even joined the Alien Integration Program. Our friendship went a little sideways, but I’m willing to forgive...”*

“Hah! *You forgive me? Friendship?* You tried to *kill* me. *Twice.*” Jess dug his heel into the snow and growled. “Now it all makes sense. The wrong side of the star system, the crash, the survival kit, Auron. Did you unbuckle my harness too?”

*“You’re clever considering your brain’s size and primitive configuration.”*

“Nice. Thanks. What’re you doing here? What do you want?”

*“That was a compliment, but no matter. I just want to give you some advice. Take the battery off the Thal. Use it yourself. You’re already tired and hungry. It’s the only way you’ll have a slim chance at survival. And it would be merciful to let the Thal die painlessly.”*

“Well, that’s about as useful as all the other so-called advice you’ve ever given me. If you want us dead, why don’t you just shoot us?”

*“Take the battery and put it on. Leave the Thal behind.”*

Jess held up the medical scanner and spoke to it. “What’s the next step to rescue Auron?”

“Place scanner next to the Thal’s head,” the device replied.

Jess put it in the crunchy snow beside Auron. A red flash glistened around the Thal’s neck, and the frozen head tumbled toward Jess. He caught it with both arms, and fell on his back yet again. This time, it felt

as if someone had tossed a heavy bowling ball at him without warning. Jess was getting tired of making these accidental snow angels. He set Auron atop the wall of ice behind him and retrieved the scanner, putting it in his pocket. Then he threw himself over the wall of ice back the way he came and hefted Auron's rock-solid head.

*"You're going to wish you'd saved that battery for yourself. Now all of you will probably die on this moon."*

"Shut up."