

PART 5

Once on the darkened bridge, Captain Stubing regained his composure. He turned to Trina with anger on his face.

"You're a decorated officer, Mackey," he said. "How could you mutiny like this?"

"My mom comes first," she told him. "Always."

Mo gestured with his raygun toward the stunned bridge crew. "Andrew and Chevy, tie those guys up. Trina, once you have the good captain secured, help me deactivate the security robots before the power comes back on and they zap us into oblivion."

They finished with time to spare—the bridge was theirs.

"Lockout procedure complete," Trina said from the control panel as the fusion flow returned. "We can run the entire ship from here, and there's no way to get through our defenses."

The lights came back on, followed quickly by blaring warning sirens. The color drained from Andrew's face as the viewscreen lit up.

A huge comet loomed there, on a collision course with the ship.

Chevy ran to the helmsman's station. "Stubing!" he shouted. "Where's the Evade-O-Matic switch?"

The captain clutched the armrests of the chair he had been tied to. "Too late!"

Andrew stared at the screen, unable to look away.

The enormous celestial body rivaled the *Titanic* herself in size. The floor of the bridge tilted as the auto-thrusters desperately tried to turn the ship from its path, but the onrushing comet was moving too fast.

It resembled a gigantic snowball, a massive cone of crystallized water—

"An iceberg!" Chevy screeched. "It looks just like a giant space-iceberg!"

Andrew grimaced. "If we survive this I'm going to kill you, Chevy."

An instant later the entire ship shook as the comet struck it a glancing blow. The bridge pitched wildly and Andrew struggled to avoid losing his feet and dashing his head open on a bulkhead.

The lights flickered, went out, came back on, then went out for good.

Emergency lamps illuminated, washing the bridge in a mauve hue.

On the screen, the comet retreated into the gloom of deep space. Within seconds it had vanished, leaving behind only a wake of glittering fragments.

Trina crawled to her feet. "Is everyone okay?"

"Fine, fine," Mo answered. "How's the ship, Chevy?"

He checked a monitor. "Not good. We've gone into a spin and lost Z-axis stability."

"What does that mean?" Andrew demanded.

Chevy shrugged. "We're sinking."

Andrew punched him in the back of the head.

"Ow!"

Mo hit the comlink. "Come in, Dip. We need a damage report."

The fusion tech's voice sounded high and panicky. Explosions and shouts could be heard in the background. "The hull's been breached in three places and a dozen fusion linkages have been severed. We're spinning out of control."

Andrew looked at Trina. "What are the chances of fixing things?"

She shook her head. "That would take days. We've got about two hours before the spin rate becomes high enough to kill every living thing on board."

"I can't stay for that," Chevy declared. "I have vertigo."

Trina turned to Stubing. "Give me the evacuation codes. We have to abandon ship."

"There aren't enough escape pods," the captain whispered.

Mo grabbed him by his starched collar. "What?! What did you say, man?"

Stubing's eyes widened. "It's standard White Supergiant Star Lines policy. We carry enough pods for the crew and two-thirds of the passengers. Simulations show that in most emergencies requiring an evacuation, at least one-third of the passengers will already be dead."

Trina decked him. Captain Stubing, rendered unconscious, tipped onto the floor along with his attached chair. He slowly slid toward the other side of the listing bridge.

"What do we do?" Andrew asked.

"We have to save ourselves," Trina said.

Mo nodded. "Sounds good to me."

"It's the only way to fix this," Trina continued. "Escape the ship, get to Tempus-4 somehow, and reverse everything. Make it so none of this ever happens."

Andrew opened his mouth to respond, but just then the universe went white. He blinked his eyes to clear his vision, and when he opened them he was back in his bed at home.

"Bloody hell!" he shouted, throwing off the blanket and leaping to his feet. "It was all a dream?"

He pulled on his robe and slippers and ran downstairs. When the door opened he stepped into the grey light and salty sea air of a typical Bristol morning.

Andrew wandered down his cobbled path and peered around the hedge-row lining his property. Out on the sidewalk he spotted Chevy Citation, alternately fiddling with his cell phone and staring up into the sky with a concerned expression.

Andrew opened his mouth to greet him, but quickly changed his mind.

He turned on his heel and walked back toward his front door. He'd make a cup of tea and drink it. If the Earth still existed when he finished, he'd stroll down to the library and start that new Inspector Wayne novel.

...and maybe later he'd check if there really was a Trina Mackey from Exeter.

Who knew, perhaps the day might be salvaged after all.

THE END