

## **Chapter 1: Escaping Hades**

Former EGG David Welch stood alone on the Joule's deck as he panned his binoculars over the smoldering prison island of Hades. At least what was left of it. Everywhere he looked was death. What few trees and foliage the Elgen had left on the island were still burning or glowing in heaps of red and orange embers. Around them scorched human skeletons and bones lay strewn across the landscape like straw after a windstorm. The island's sand, now mostly melted to glass, glistened where streams of morning sunlight broke through the retreating storm clouds, reflecting the vibrant prisms of the color spectrum. Had it not been so terrible, it almost would have been beautiful.

On one side of the crystalline beach were the only signs of life—the scurrying Tuvaluan natives who, along with the Electroclan, had survived the Elgen attack and taken shelter in the underground bunker before the explosion. Welch had left the natives water, food, and the Joule's remaining life rafts to make their journey back to their home islands. Their leader, Enele Saluni, grandson of the former Tuvaluan prime minister (who, at Hatch's orders, had been sentenced to life on display, naked in a monkey cage in the Tuvaluan capital), saluted Welch from the distance. Welch lowered his binoculars and saluted back.

"Everyone's below," Jack said, climbing up the conning tower behind Welch. "Everyone's here."

"Everyone?"

"Everyone who made it," Jack said hoarsely.

Welch raised his binoculars one more time and scanned the horizon along the northern end of the island, looking for signs of Elgen. Again he saw nothing of the once terrible force—at least nothing that was still alive. "All right. Let's get out of here."

Welch followed Jack down the inside of the Joule's conning tower, pausing on the ladder near the top as hydraulic pistons pulled the hatch closed. Pneumatic clamps hissed and clicked around him as the steel hatch was locked airtight. Then Welch climbed down to join the others in the Conn, the Joule's control center.

"Take us down," Welch said to the boat's COB—the chief of the boat—as he stepped from the ladder onto the metal floor.

Even though the Joule could travel as much as fifteen knots faster above surface, Welch didn't want to take the chance of being seen. Outside of the Joule's crew members who Welch had set adrift, he didn't know who had survived. He didn't even know if Hatch had survived. Perhaps no one had. But still, there was no sense in taking chances.

"Yes, sir," the Elgen COB replied, speaking into his microphone. "Down twenty meters."

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Including the COB, there were five Elgen still on the Joule and one Fijian servant. Twelve hours earlier, when Welch and his Glows—Quentin, Tara, Torstyn, and Cassy—had hijacked the Joule, they'd disarmed the seventeen-man crew and then sent everyone off the boat, except for the Joule's COB and the four crew members needed to operate the ship.

Welch had also sent J.D., the boat captain who had betrayed the Electroclan by sailing them into a trap, and his crew with the Elgen.

"Man, don't leave me here," J.D. had said, clinging to the one life raft Welch had left them. "I helped you take this boat."

"You're lucky I'm leaving you alive," Welch said. "But don't get used to it. When Hatch finds out that you helped us hijack the Joule, he'll feed you to his rats."

"You will all die," J.D. said. "Like rats."

Welch looked at him stoically. "Everyone dies. Some just sooner than others. And some, one bite at a time."

J.D. looked at Welch hatefully. "I will die as I choose. No one takes my life but me." Then, letting go of the raft, he sunk down in the black water beneath the heaving waves. He never came up again.

“So ends the traitor,” Welch said to himself.

Quentin had disabled the raft’s outboard motor and radio with an EMP so the Elgen would not be able to alert anyone for hours, giving Welch and the Glows the time they needed to get back to Hades to rescue their friends. That was, if their friends were still alive. Even thirty miles from Hades, they saw and heard the massive explosion. Welch’s first thought was that Hatch had detonated some kind of nuclear device to destroy the island. But there was no mushroom cloud or, outside of the flash, evidence of a nuclear weapon. They weren’t going to leave the islands until they knew for certain if any of their friends had survived.

Hours later, when Welch and company surfaced the Joule off the coast of Hades, they couldn’t believe what they saw. All the Elgen boats were sunk or burning on the surface. They were relieved to find the Electroclan huddled on the beach.

Welch and Quentin sailed to shore to pick up their friends, leaving Cassy, Torstyn, and Tara on board to secure the ship.

Ten minutes after Welch and Quentin left, one of the Elgen crewmen approached Cassy. “Hey, baby. We’ve been cooped up a long, long time.”

“I’m not your baby,” she said. “And don’t take another step.”

He kept walking. “What’s a little girl like you going to do to stop a big man like me?”

Cassy pursed her lips. “You had to ask.” She froze the man’s entire body, including his lungs. He fell over, dropping to the floor with a loud thud.

When she let him go, he gasped for breath, then said, “Please don’t do that again.”

“When I tell you to stop walking, you stop walking. Next time you won’t breathe again. Ever. Do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She smiled sardonically. “?‘Ma’am’? What happened to ‘baby’?”

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Jack was the last to board, gathering the teens in one corner of the Conn. The room echoed with the sounds of grief—sobbing and crying. Especially from Taylor, who was inconsolable. “Michael,” she said over and over. “My Michael.”

McKenna’s arms were around Taylor, the two of them slightly rocking.

“I can’t believe he’s gone,” Taylor said.

McKenna wiped her eyes. “I can’t believe any of this.”

Ostin watched them silently, too emotional to speak. His eyes were red and swollen.

“I knew he had a hero’s heart,” Jack said. “I knew it the moment he came to my door to ask me to take him to California.”

Just then Cassy walked into the Conn. She glanced around the room, then asked, “Where’s Michael?”

From everyone’s silence she knew something bad had happened. She raised her hand to her mouth. “Oh no.”

“He didn’t make it,” Quentin said.

Cassy started crying. She looked over at Taylor. “I’m so sorry.”

Cassy walked over, and the two of them hugged.

“I know you cared about him too,” Taylor said.

“I . . .”

"It's okay that you loved him too," she said softly. "He was easy to love."

"Michael's not the only one we lost," Ian said. "We lost Gervaso and Tanner, too."

Jack swallowed in pain, fighting back tears. Gervaso had been more of a father to him than his real father. Abigail put her arms around him and comforted him with her powers.

"Please don't," Jack said. "I want to feel the pain."

Abigail stopped pulsing. "I understand."

Jack furtively wiped his eyes, then looked out at the others. "Gervaso told me that when he was in ranger training, his drill sergeant told them that they were all going to hell. The only consolation was that they'd already been there, so it wouldn't matter." He rubbed his eyes. "If there's a heaven, I think there's a special pass for heroes."

"I think so too," Zeus said. "There's far too few of them as it is."

"Someday we'll return," Welch said. "When the world has changed. We'll build a memorial to the three of them. Then the whole world will know what they've sacrificed."

There was something hopeful in what Welch had said. After a few more minutes Welch said, "You must all be exhausted. Get some rest." He turned to Tara. "Take them to their bunks."

"Yes, sir," Tara said. "Everyone, follow me."

"Except Cassy," Welch said. "You stay with me. I need some backup."

"Yes, sir."

The rest of the teens followed Tara, single file, out of the Conn. None of them had ever seen anything like the Joule before, which wasn't surprising, since the Joule was the only ship of its kind ever built—a hybrid vault, ship, and submarine. It was tight and narrow with no portholes. Air,

mostly recycled, was continually pumped throughout the vessel, and filled the echoing chambers with a continual hissing. The walls were all riveted metal, as was the floor, which had been coated with thick rubberized flooring that softened and dulled the sound of their footsteps as they walked.

Tara led them down a narrow corridor past the commander's quarters to the first of two bunk rooms. The compartment was designed solely for sleeping. It was only twelve feet wide, with pipe-framed cots on both sides of the room with trampoline-like mattresses. The cots were connected, by brackets, on one side to the wall, while the other side was supported from the ceiling by chains. The beds were stacked four high, with only a few feet of headroom; the bottom bunks were suspended only three inches above the floor.

"This is where we sleep," Tara said. "It's tight, but the Joule is basically a submarine. Everything's tight. Welch wants us all to stay in the same room so we can lock the Elgen crew members in the other."

"I don't care where I sleep," Jack said. "As long as I'm horizontal. I feel like I'm sleepwalking." He took off his shoes and then, using the edges of the lower bunks as steps, climbed up onto the top bunk. Everyone else claimed bunks, except Taylor, who just stood in the middle of the room looking lost.

"C'mon, honey," Abigail said. "You need some rest. You'll feel a little better after you get some rest."

"Sleep won't take this away," Taylor said. "Unless I never wake up."

"I can't take it away, but I can help. Just lie down right here, sweetie," Abigail said, pulling down the covers on a bottom bunk.

Taylor took off her shoes and crawled out across the cot, lying on her back.

"Now just relax," Abigail said. She put her hands on Taylor's head and lightly pulsed. At first, Taylor shuddered; then her body calmed and she breathed out deeply. Within moments she was asleep.

"You have a beautiful gift," Tara said softly.

"Thank you," Abigail said.

For a moment everyone was quiet and the only sounds were the constant hissing of the Joule's air system, Jack's snoring, and the strained, eerie groaning of the vessel. Every now and then the boat creaked like a heavy door on a rusty hinge.

"Does that sound ever stop?" McKenna asked.

"Probably not," Ostin said, speaking for the first time since they'd boarded. His voice was raw and strained.

The pain in his voice hurt her. "Hey, tell me some facts about submarines."

"Sorry," Ostin said. "I'm not in the mood."

McKenna frowned. "How deep do you think we are?"

Ostin breathed out slowly. "The Joule can dive to six hundred feet."

"What makes that sound?"

Ostin sniffed, then said softly, "At six hundred feet the water pressure is 282.6 pounds per square inch. That's a lot of pressure on a pressurized can."

"I heard that the Elgen carry all their wealth in this boat."

"Not all of it," Ostin said. "Just enough for a rainy day."

"That would be a lot of rain," Ian said, suddenly joining the conversation. "There are stacks of gold bullion running two feet high across the length of the boat."

"They'd have to use that much weight as ballast," Ostin said.

"There's also diamonds and boxes of paper currency. I could open the safes that hold them," Ian

said. "Just for fun."

"That would be fun to see," McKenna answered. "Maybe someday we'll share in all that loot."

"Maybe," Ostin said, sounding not at all interested.

Abigail glanced back at McKenna with a sad smile, then climbed onto the bunk above Taylor.

An hour later Cassy walked into the bunk room. "Lunch is ready," she said softly. No one moved. Everyone was asleep. After a few minutes, Cassy went back to the Conn to keep Welch company.