

BOOK FIVE

THE QUEST FOR TRUTH

BROCK EASTMAN

WAR PI TI



FOCUS[®]
ON THE FAMILY

Praise for *Hope*

Eastman pens a compelling, twist-laden adventure that will grab you by the throat and won't let go! A must read!

—**Ronie Kendig**, Author, *Tox Files* series

Imagination abounds in this epic series that speaks to the importance of family and truth. I can't wait to watch the Wikk kids take on their greatest adventure yet! Don't miss this one!

—**Laura Martin**, Author, *Edge of Extinction* series,
Float, and *Hoax for Hire*

Strap in and prepare for the final adventure into hyper flight. The rip-roaring action will take you to the edge of the galaxy. *Hope* pulled me in until the very end.

—**Jedidiah Duggar**, Cast Member,
17 Kids and Counting

Praise for The Quest for Truth Series

Racing across the galaxy in a stellar ship, the *Phoenix*, you won't be able to put these books down. Be careful not to rip the pages as you tear through the text and devour the adventure. Thrilling scenes, cool gadgets, and memorable characters are all part of what make The Quest for Truth a must-read series.

—**Wayne Thomas Batson**, best-selling author of
The Door Within Trilogy, The Berinfell Prophecies,
and The Dark Sea Annals

Kids will enjoy the nonstop action, suspense, and excitement in the Wikk family's adventures. Brock Eastman cleverly weaves a thrilling tale that takes young readers on a rollercoaster ride of intrigue and mystery.

—**Jeff Sanders**, fourth grade teacher, Chino, California

The Quest for Truth series is a fast-paced, riveting sci-fi adventure with thrills, plot twists, and a wildly unique story line that will captivate readers from the get-go. Be warned: you won't be able to put these books down! Every book in the series rocks—something that is rare in series most of the time.

—**Melissa Taylor**, Blogger and Writer,
www.imaginationsoup.net

HOPE

THE QUEST FOR TRUTH

TAKEN

RISK

UNLEASH

TANGLE

HOPE

HOPE

THE FIFTH ADVENTURE IN
THE QUEST FOR TRUTH

BROCK EASTMAN



P U B L I S H I N G

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To my Waverly (The Waves):

You are such a spirited little girl. I have no doubt you're going to do amazing things with your life.

Of course, I'll go on a daddy-daughter date with you, anytime, anywhere. Which could end up meaning some big adventures!

Thank you for making Mommy and me laugh and for entertaining us with your songs and dances.

And I'm thankful for penguin too.

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Elsie, oh, your smile continues to keep my heart aglow. Your compassion for others and the way you embrace deep friendships inspire me. You're a fantastic cuddler and always know when to come in and give me a hug or kiss. Your artistic abilities continue to grow, and I love seeing every new drawing you bring me. I can't wait for you to illustrate one of my books!

Waverly, Wavey baby, you're courageous and persistent. I love watching you bounce, jump, spin, and run through your obstacle course. Your profound questions of life always surprise your mom and me and sometimes stump us. But we know you're going to do amazing things because of your curiosity and your tenacity!

Declan, my little man, your love for trains and trucks takes me back to my childhood. I love all your noises and sound effects and your scary sleeping dinosaur. I love how you jump up and down and squeal when you see an airplane flying overhead. You're the best "nuggler" there is.

Mom and Dad, thanks for your encouragement, the numerous books you've given away, and your continued excitement for the series. Thanks for making me feel like a best seller.

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To our Creator, You did it. You made this happen. When I look back and see how this crazy journey began, only You could have such a marvelous plan. It's always been Your series. Thank You for the opportunity to share Your love with others.



Prologue

Oliver stood outside the simulation dome. His wrist beacon showed ten minutes past his appointment. When he arrived, the tech said, “We’re running a program upgrade, but a glitch required a full system restart. Should be ready in five minutes.” That had been fifteen minutes ago.

The testing for the final exam of his Level One Pilot Sequence was tomorrow at 7:00 a.m. sharp, and this was his last chance to practice. Oliver looked up at the darkening sky and the waning green moon. It wouldn’t be long before he’d be headed home on break. If he didn’t pass this simulation, the break might be permanent. Because he was two years younger than most of the other cadets, it had been a special honor for Oliver to gain early admittance to the Federal Star Fleet Academy. He’d quickly risen to the top of his class. Older cadets envied or despised him. One cadet in particular, Drex Powers, made that clear on a daily basis.

Flight was Oliver’s one area of struggle. In fact, he’d received below-average scores in three-quarters of his simulations. And a cadet whose grade was less than sixty percent in any academic course would be disqualified from the program. He needed to pass the final simulation with an eighty percent or higher to stay.

The hatch hissed as the simulator door lifted open. The tech stepped out. “Should be ready now. If you’re hoping to play back your simulation, you’re out of luck. The monitoring application is disabled due to the glitch. Should have it back up tomorrow.”

Oliver nodded. He pressed his palm against the screen next to the hatch.

“Oliver Wikk, cadet first year,” the computer voice said over the speaker. “You are ten minutes late for your simulation. Tardiness will be reported to Commander Hibbard. You have fifty minutes of simulator time.”

That seemed unfair. He’d been five minutes early. It wasn’t his fault that the simulator needed a reboot. Not wanting to waste any more time, he stepped into the dark dome. The lights in the room flicked on, illuminating the pilot seat. The hatch clicked shut as he slipped on his helmet, strapped in, and tapped the control screen before him.

A holographic spaceship rotated before him as the lights dimmed.

“Welcome to Mission BAKEWD-2007,” the computer voice said. “You are in the Woodford Solar System aboard the FSS *Eureka*. Navigation waypoints are loaded into the NavCom, and your mission objectives will be given in flight. Your S0407 shuttle has been armed and is clear for launch. Good luck, Cadet Wikk.”

Instantly the dome transformed into the inside bay of a Federal Star Fleet frigate. The stench of hot metal and the sound of thrumming engines filled the room. These simulations were beyond real. Oliver noticed a half-dozen fighter craft being refueled and armed. He wished the simulation gave him one of those. They were fast and agile, easier to control than a shuttle.

“Cadet Wikk, you are clear for launch,” a man’s voice crackled over the headset.

Oliver tapped the screen before him. His engines rumbled to life, the thrusters burned, and the shuttle lifted off the deck. Pressing the controls forward, he felt the ship accelerate in response. A second later, he cleared the bay doors and headed into deep black space. White points of light glittered in the distance.

“Cadet Wikk, your orders are to proceed to waypoint one and investigate a distress beacon.”

“Yes, sir,” Oliver said.

Oliver tapped the NavCom and highlighted the coordinates listed for waypoint one. He turned the ship hard and engaged the thrusters up to full power. The shuttle lumbered forward at first, then quickly gained speed.

Five minutes later, Oliver approached a band of asteroids. A red dot blinked on the NavCom, representing the distress beacon.

“Half a mile to target,” the computer warned. Oliver decreased the thrusters and took the controls. A damaged trade barge lay on a giant asteroid, sparks sizzling near its engines. Several trade containers floated nearby.

“FSS *Eureka*, this is Cadet Wikk. I have located the distress beacon. A trade barge appears to have crashed into the asteroid belt. Cargo is loose, and the ship is disabled. Requesting permission to open communication with the barge,” Oliver reported, calling in the wreckage.

“Permission granted. Maintain a distance of one mile. Corsair crafts were identified in this quadrant two days prior,” the man said.

Oliver reversed thrusters and moved the shuttle to the assigned distance. He tapped the NavCom and searched for open ComLinks in the vicinity. None were present.

“Communication link unavailable,” Oliver reported. “Requesting permission to do a visual inspection of the barge’s bridge.”

There was an uncomfortable silence. “Cadet Wikk, permission granted for a solo pass over the barge. You are to put shields to one hundred percent.”

Oliver transferred power from the engines to the shields. This would reduce his top speed, but for a pass through the asteroid belt, speed was not necessary—or advised.

The asteroid rotated as Oliver approached, and he had to adjust his vector several degrees. As the barge came into view, he noticed that the front of the bridge had been ripped apart. If there were any survivors, they would be holed up elsewhere in the barge or outside the ship. A thermal scan of the asteroid revealed no heat beyond what the barge’s sparking engines registered.

“The barge appears to be abandoned; no sign of life,” Oliver reported.

Suddenly his NavCom flared with a half-dozen orange dots. “Unidentified craft approaching,” the computer warned.

Oliver tapped the screen only to discover that the ships surrounded him. He was smack in the middle of a Corsair ambush! Oliver twisted the controls of the shuttle, and the ship spun toward the asteroid. The shuttle felt sluggish, so he transferred power back to the engines. If it were one or two Corsairs, he’d have a fighting chance. But with six, even his shields wouldn’t hold up long enough to escape.

Zips of purple light burst around him as his screen flashed warnings of direct hits. “Shuttle is taking fire. Shields at ninety-five percent.”

Oliver armed his tail and belly cannons, then set them to auto. The ship slowed as the weapons came to life. “Target acquired,” the computer said.

“Cadet Wikk, report status. We’ve identified Corsair craft in your vicinity,” the man from the FSS *Eureka* called.

“Affirmative. Corsair ships have engaged. Requesting additional support,” Oliver said.

“Negative, no additional craft available,” the man said.

Oliver thought of the fighter craft being armed on the flight deck when he took off. *Why were they not willing to send support?*

“Utilize evasive maneuvers and return to FSS *Eureka*,” the man said.

Fleeing the asteroid belt into open space while trying to get back to the FSS *Eureka* would sign his own death certificate. The Corsairs would run him down within minutes. No, his best chance at survival was to remain in the asteroid belt and use it to his advantage. He had to divide the Corsairs and take each one out.

Oliver turned and took the shuttle toward the surface of the asteroid. The defensive cannons continued to fire back at the attacking fighters.

“Target destroyed,” the computer confirmed, and one of the orange dots disappeared from the screen. Purple flashes exploded against and around the shuttle.

“Shields at seventy-five percent,” the computer said. At this rate, his ship would be destroyed in less than five minutes. He had to change tactics.

A long crevice in the surface of the asteroid came into view. Oliver sized it up; the shuttle should fit, but so would the Corsair fighters. Still, if he could maneuver into a position that allowed only one of them to target him, he’d extend the life of his shields by transferring the full power to the rear shields. The shuttle went into a dive, and the walls of the crevice swept up around him.

Suddenly his radio buzzed. “This . . . the crew . . . barge DGE7615 . . . requesting immediate extraction . . . are low . . . oxygen . . . multiple injuries.” A red triangle appeared on his screen and began to flash. Oliver knew this was the extraction point for the barge crew.

With five Corsair fighters tailing him, landing to make the rescue would be suicide. He opened his ComLink. “Crew of DGE7615, this is the Federation shuttle sent to rescue you.

I am under fire from Corsair fighters. Will extract once Corsairs are repelled.”

“DGE . . . to Federation Shuttle . . . oxygen at five minutes . . . immediate extraction.”

Oliver flipped coms to the FSS *Eureka*. “Cadet Wikk requesting immediate assistance. I have located the crew of trade barge DGE7615. Multiple injuries reported and oxygen minus five minutes.”

“Cadet Wikk, no craft available to assist. Must attempt rescue extraction alone,” the man said.

Oliver stared at the screen. The red triangle was a short distance up the crevice. His shields were holding at sixty percent, but if he landed, he’d be a sitting duck. Depending on the condition of the injured, he wasn’t sure how quickly they would be able to board. He knew what he’d signed up for: to risk his life for others. This was that moment. If he didn’t land, the crew of the barge was sure to die. If he did land, he risked his own life. But at least the risk would give them a fighting chance.

The cannons on the shuttle continued to fire as Oliver adjusted the vectors of the engines and approached the crew’s position. He returned the shields to full coverage of the ship. Three people in space suits stood, and two lay on the ground.

“Target destroyed,” the computer reported. Two Corsairs down, four to go. “Shields at fifty percent.”

Oliver brought the shuttle down and landed. “Crew of DGE7615, make this quick.” Tapping the screen to open the rear hatch, he watched the video feed as the three men moved their two injured comrades into the ship. The complete extraction took under a minute, but it seemed like forever.

“Shields at forty percent,” the computer reported.

“Secure for liftoff and evasive maneuvers,” Oliver said over the shuttle’s loudspeaker. There was no time to wait for them to get settled. He engaged thrusters, and the shuttle lifted. The shields were decreasing more quickly than enemies were

being eliminated. He had to make a choice. Deactivating the two cannons, he transferred the power to the shields.

“Shields at sixty percent,” the computer reported.

Oliver took the shuttle up as the crevice came to an end. Suddenly, a barrage of small asteroids entered his field of view. He tried turning, but it was too late. The small asteroids peppered the shuttle.

“Shields at fifty percent,” the computer reported.

With shields failing, cannons offline, and the ship’s speed far outmatched by the Corsair fighters, what could he possibly do?

The shuttle passed out of the asteroids, revealing a large cargo pod labeled “fuel” floating ahead. Oliver had an idea. It was risky, but he had to do something, or they’d all be dead.

Oliver activated the grappling launcher used for recovery and extraction. Targeting the large silver pod, he fired. The hook flew forward and snapped onto the pod. Oliver directed ninety percent of the ship’s power to the engines, and the shuttle shot forward. With a powerful jerk, the grappling line snapped tight and yanked the pod forward into the line of the pursuing ships.

The four remaining Corsair ships spread out behind him, trying to get an angle on the shuttle. This was it. Oliver activated the belly cannon and manually fired two shots behind him and at the cargo pod. But in the same instant, the pod twisted, revealing a large fusion symbol.



It was over before he knew it. A flash of bright light enveloped the ship, and the simulation ended with two red words flashing across the screen: *Mission failed.*

Removing his helmet, Oliver held his head in his hands. There was no way he could pass the final exam tomorrow. What would his parents say? They'd been reluctant to allow him to enter the Academy at sixteen in the first place. They believed he should wait another two years. Now he was going to return to them a failure, proving them right. This would confirm the opinion of the other cadets—especially Powers. He'd be sure to gloat to Oliver that he didn't have what it took to be a Star Pilot.

Oliver rubbed his eyes. Why were the lights in the simulator dome still off? He glanced at the screen. The program seemed to have reset itself. A green bar was loading. "Level One Pilot Sequence Final Examination Instructor Mode loaded," the computer said. "Would you like to proceed, Commander Hibbard?"

Oliver was speechless. What had happened? Had the computer actually loaded the final exam simulation? It was a miracle. He'd be able to fly through the full simulation before the actual exam tomorrow. He'd know exactly what to expect and have time to figure out how to ace it. Was this the glitch the tech had been working on?

He looked at the hatch, then down at his wrist beacon. With thirty minutes left of simulation time, surely he could get through the whole thing at least once. He strapped his helmet back on.

"Would you like to proceed, Commander Hibbard?" the computer asked again.

Oliver scratched the back of his neck. This wasn't right. It would be cheating to experience the final exam before it was time. He looked up at the screen. It would be so easy to do it, though. No one would know. He was all alone, and the tech had said the monitoring system was disabled.

What had his dad always said? "The choices you make when no one else knows your options will define who you are."

This was one of those moments his dad was talking about. He had a choice. No one would know if he accessed the simula-

tion. He could get away with it and almost guarantee at least passing the final exam.

No, it would be dishonest. He wanted to be a man of truth. He took off his helmet and set it down.

“Would you like to proceed, Commander Hibbard?” the computer asked again.

“No, close simulation,” Oliver said.

“Simulation closed. Have a good day,” the computer said. The lights in the dome flicked on. Oliver looked at his wrist beacon. He still technically had twenty additional minutes left in the simulator. But if he wasn’t ready now, he doubted twenty more minutes in a simulation would help.



The next morning, Oliver woke early and went to the mess hall for breakfast. Makin Grim and Fallon Walker, two fellow year-one cadets, already sat at a table.

“So did you take it?” Walker asked.

Grim shook his head. “No, it didn’t feel right.”

Were they talking about the glitch that gave access to the final exam simulation?

“I did, and I’m thankful,” Walker said. “It was by far the toughest simulation I’ve experienced yet. I flew the course seven times before I finally had success. I did it an eighth and passed again. Once I’d figured out the right sequence, it was easy.”

Oliver took a seat.

“Yo, Wikk, did you get the glitch?” Walker asked.

Oliver nodded.

“What’d you think?”

Oliver shook his head. “I didn’t take it.”

Walker laughed. “Your loss, man. Aren’t you practically failing the course?”

“Not failing, but I need a high score to pass,” Oliver said.

Walker smirked. “You and Grim are in for a rough morning.”

Drex Powers set down his tray and nodded to Grim and Walker. “You two ready?”

They nodded.

“You both get the glitch?” Drex asked.

“Yes, sir, took it eight times,” Walker said proudly.

“Saw it—didn’t do it,” Grim said.

“Coward,” Powers said. “How about you, Wiff?”

Ignoring the nickname Powers had given him, Oliver didn’t give him the satisfaction of a response.

“He chickened out too,” Walker said. “Did you?”

Drex laughed. “What do you think?”

Walker smiled back.

Oliver wasn’t hungry anymore. His stomach was in knots, his palms sweating. *Did I make the wrong choice?* Failure of the course and disqualification from the Academy seemed a sure thing now. Picking up his tray, he headed to the cleaning station.

“Hey, Wiff, may you crash and burn!” Powers called after him.



Oliver stepped into the classroom. Most cadets were already seated, but Powers, Grim, and Walker were in the back talking quietly. Oliver took his seat and pulled out his e-papyrus. An icon blinked on the screen, notifying him of a new message. It was from Powers.

When Oliver opened the message, a video began to play. A starfighter zipped across the screen, then twisted and plummeted into the ground, causing a fiery explosion. The caption read, *Wiff it good!*

“Commander on deck,” one of the cadets called. Each cadet stood to attention.

Commander Hibbard walked to the center of the room and eyed the class. “Walker, Elzo, Choi, Franklin . . .” Commander Hibbard continued to read off names until three-quarters of the class had been called. Oliver recognized the names of several top-scoring cadet pilots in the course.

“You have all failed this course and are consequently dismissed from the Academy,” Commander Hibbard said.

The cadets looked at each other. A few gasped. Choi looked around frantically.

“Dismissed, sir?” Walker asked.

“Affirmative,” Commander Hibbard said, pointing at the door.

The baffled cadets stammered and mumbled in confusion as they found their way through the exit. Commander Hibbard walked to the door and pulled it closed. Glancing back, Oliver noticed that Powers wore a smug smile on his face while Grim sat in shock beside him. Two other cadets, Amos Embers and Atticus Lee, sat near the front. They and Oliver were the only cadets left.

“Your fellow cadets chose to cheat on their final exam,” Commander Hibbard said. “The Federal Star Fleet Academy does not train cheaters. Over the course of the last few days, each cadet was given the opportunity to cheat. As you just saw, seventy-five percent of the class took what they believed was an easy way to an A. No doubt each of you was tempted, but you all made the right choice. Train you to pilot a starfighter, I can do, but having good character is something only you can build. Your choice in that simulator makes you exactly the

type of pilot we want in our fleet. Congratulations! The five of you have passed your Level One Pilot Sequence final exam.”

Embers let out a cheer, then quickly recovered. “Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

Commander Hibbard nodded. “No thanks needed. You’re the ones who made the honorable choice. Cadets, you are dismissed. I look forward to training you next year.”

Oliver could hardly believe it. The pressure to earn a high score had made it tough to make the right choice. Had the point been to see what each cadet would do under pressure?

Oliver slipped his e-papyrus back into his pack. The other four cadets had already left after exchanging words of thanks and congratulations with Commander Hibbard.

As Oliver approached the door, Commander Hibbard reached out and shook his hand. “Wikk, I know you’ve had a tough time in the simulations this year. But you’re a better pilot than we’ve led you to believe. Nearly half of the scenarios we put you through are virtually impossible to overcome. We do that on purpose. You’ll find next year’s simulations more realistic. Of course, it’s important to remember that, out in space against our enemies, situations are rarely fair or guaranteed to have a positive outcome.”

“Yes, Commander.”

“You’re going to make an excellent pilot,” Commander Hibbard said.

Oliver saluted the Commander and left the class.

In the corridor, Powers and Grim were waiting. Powers looked him up and down. “Well, look who passed. Not by any skill in the pilot’s seat though.”

Oliver glared at him. “I didn’t take you for an honest guy.”

Powers laughed. “That’s the thing. I didn’t choose to not cheat because I thought it was the right thing to do. I didn’t cheat because I knew it was a test.”

This surprised Oliver. “You knew?”

“Wiff, if you had any idea.” Powers turned and started down the hall.

Grim shrugged, then smiled. “I didn’t know. Well, I’ll see you next year.”

“Yeah, see you,” Oliver said. He glanced at his wrist beacon. In a few hours, his parents would arrive to pick him up. He was relieved he wouldn’t be delivering them news of his failure at the Academy. Instead, he was going to thank his parents for instilling positive character traits in him. Making the right choice had paid off big time.



A black and white map of a coastal region. A river flows from the top left towards the center. The land is covered in dense, textured vegetation. In the center, there is a large body of water containing several small islands. Three L-shaped corner brackets are drawn on the map: one in the top left, one in the center right, and one in the bottom left. The text 'Übel Landing' is located near the river's mouth, 'Washed Stone Islands' is in the central water area, and 'Elephant Rock' is on the right side. The word 'T s e' is written vertically in the water, and 'A s s i l e m' is written horizontally below the islands.

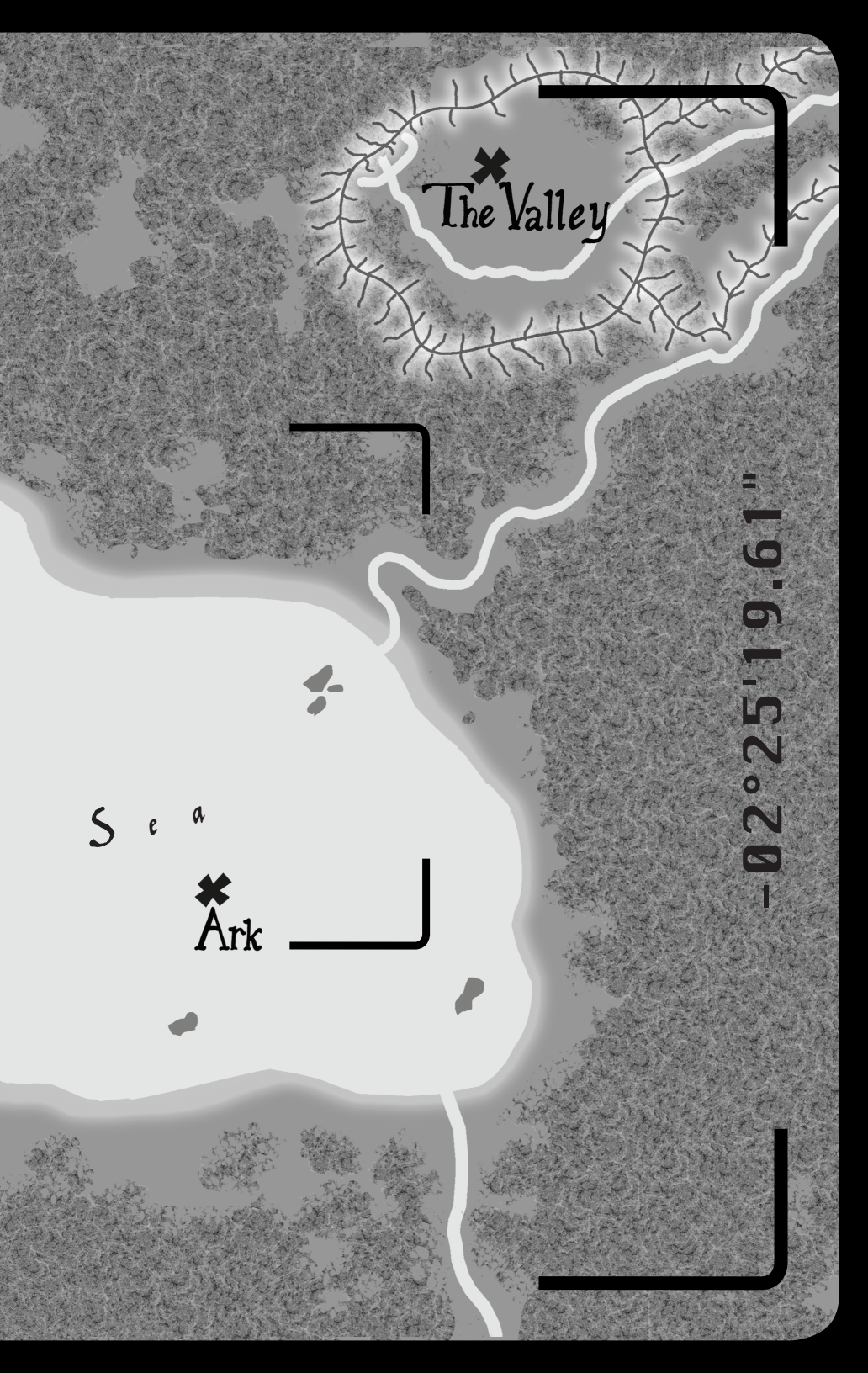
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Into the Trunk

“You really thought you could escape?” The shadowy figure moved forward. “Put your hands where I can see them.” Mason and Tiffany obeyed.

“We’re unarmed,” Tiffany said.

“I’m not taking chances.” The soldier tossed a couple of shock-locks their way. “Put those on.”

Mason reached down and grabbed the restraints, then handed a set to his sister. “We’ll go back with you,” he said.

“I know you will. You’re my ticket up the ranks. I’ve recaptured two of the Wikks. Now put on the shock-locks!”

“You think Lieutenant Jaxon will so easily forgive you?” Mason asked. “You jumped off the skiff.”

“I’ll be in charge of him after I get you two back to base.” The soldier snickered. “Then we’ll see how *he* likes to swim with the sharks.”

Mason gulped. He had begun to slide the shock-locks over his wrists when a blur of black fell from the sky and took the soldier to the ground. Mason stepped back in surprise.

It was Drex, and he’d tackled the man. They wrestled, but Drex held the wrist of the soldier’s gun-wielding hand. Several

shots blasted off nearby rocks as they battled to knock each other out. Mason pulled his sister to the ground to avoid being hit by a stray shot. His bare elbows scraped the ground.

Drex brought his fist down on the man's jaw. *Crack!* The man's eyes rolled back in his head.

"Did you kill him?" Mason asked, horrified.

"No, just knocked him out," Drex said and pushed himself up. He held the soldier's gun in hand.

"Drex!" Tiffany shouted. She cast the shock-locks to the side. Drex briefly aimed the gun at Tiffany and Mason.

A quiver coursed through Mason's body as he glared back at the Corsair. *Was this the moment Drex had been waiting for?*

"What? You thought I was going to shoot you?" Drex asked.

Mason sneered. "Wouldn't have surprised me."

"Stop it, Mason," Tiffany said. "Thanks for rescuing us."

Drex twisted the gun and offered it to Mason.

"No, you hold on to it," Tiffany said. "Mason already has the other Übel weapon."

"SwirlZap," Mason interjected.

"Where is it?" Drex asked.

"In the tent." Mason pointed back at their camp site.

"Not a very good place for it," Drex scoffed.

Mason felt his face redden even more, but he deserved the admonishment. He shouldn't have left it in the tent with Drex in the first place, regardless of the ambush coming from the Übel soldier. He needed to keep himself armed at all times with an enemy like Drex in their company.

"I must have stepped right over it," Drex said. "And the tent has a slit in it now, where I slipped out. But good thing I heard him, or we'd all be headed back to the Übel camp."

Mason didn't like the arrogance in Drex's tone.

Drex tapped the unconscious soldier with his foot. "This is a LugerKX5. I've always wanted to steal one of these from the Übel. This guy must have known someone or bartered for one. They're not standard issue."

Mason didn't care much about how unique the gun was. His only concern now was that Drex was armed.

"Grab the shock-locks and stick them on him," Drex said to Tiffany. She grabbed the cuffs, slipped them over the man's wrists, and activated them.

"Now that I'm rested, I think we should get going," Drex said. "Before daylight reveals our location to the Übel. Once we get to the beach, we can slip into the jungle."

"That water is teeming with sharks," Mason protested. "I don't like that idea."

"We can't contact the Veritas Nachfolger, and we're not signaling the Corsairs or the Übel," Tiffany said.

"We've got weapons. That SwirlZap is plenty powerful," Drex said. "We just need to see which shoreline is the closest. Let's get back on the rock and have another look."

Mason had named the island Elephant Rock because a portion of the isle curved out from the rock and plunged into the water like an elephant's trunk. Mason started up a different direction and spotted a ledge that would make climbing easier.

"Wait," he said, reaching forward.

"What is it?" Tiffany asked.

"A cross of white stones." Mason ran his fingers along it, and the stones turned green. A hiss echoed in front of him under the ledge.

"Whoa," Tiffany said. "A door."

A circular section of the stone rolled to the side. A musty, chilly breeze sifted from the hole.

"This is our way out," Mason said. "Thank You, Creator."

"Wait," Drex said. He stepped closer to the hole. "While I was in DarkStone's tent I saw a map. It was labeled the Washed Stones—"

"Washed Stones? I saw that map too," Tiffany interrupted. "The islands form a ring in the middle of the sea."

"But this isn't one of them," Mason said.

“No, but the Corsair researchers overlaid a second map they compiled from all sorts of scans,” Drex said. “What they saw were tunnels that run from one island to the next as well as the shore.”

Tiffany tapped her mTalk, and the light came on. “Shall we?”

“First, we should pack up the remaining supplies and tent. Who knows what we’ll need down there,” Drex said.

“At least we’re not swimming with the sharks,” Mason said.

“Anything could change,” Drex said. To Mason, it sounded like a threat.

Soon they’d gathered everything: two emergency beacons, a folded tent, a couple of blankets, a dozen fireballs, two H2O converter siphons, and twenty-four instant-meal tubes. They confiscated an additional Oxyverter and Audiox from the still unconscious Übel soldier, as well as his knife, two flares, a small medical kit and an extra light.

Mason wore only swim trunks and a holster for his knife. While the air was warm on the island, he worried it would become frigid in the tunnels. But they were out of options. His sister had only the damp clothing she wore, and Drex had his wetsuit with a camouflage uniform underneath, but they were too big for Mason.

Mason strapped the SwirlZap across his back. The weapon’s cold metal against his skin made him shiver.

Drex shook his head. “Keep it at the ready. There’s no telling what we’ll encounter down here.”