



The Tundra Trials (Bounders)

By Monica Tesler

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But when their pod leader asks Jasper and Mira to secretly test a dangerous new technology that will take their Bouncer abilities to the next level, the kids begin to suspect that there are rifts within Earth Force. The worst part? Jasper must keep the truth from everyone—even his own pod mates.

When Earth Force prepares for an attack against the aliens, the kids are tasked with a treacherous mission. With their loyalties torn, will Jasper and his friends once again fulfill their duty and fight for their planet? And if they do, will the secret tech work as planned or lead their enemies to their doorstep?

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Monica Tesler lives in a coastal community south of Boston with her husband and two boys. She earned her undergraduate and law degrees from the University of Michigan, and she has worked as an attorney for more than fifteen years. She writes on the commuter boat, in coffee shops, and at her kitchen table. She tries to meditate every day but often ends up fantasizing about space, time travel, or strange lands, both real and imagined.

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The Tundra Trials

1

AFTER BREAKING INTO PRISON CELLS and battling aliens, you might think Cole and I would have no problem with Addy's plan to bust into an apartment building's mainframe tonight and take its elevator for a joyride, but you'd be wrong. She's been pestering us ever since I agreed to let her tag along as I show Cole around our district.

"Jasper says you're an ace hacker." My younger sister narrows her eyes at Cole and pushes into his personal space. Even though they're about the same size, Addy seems twice as big as she looms over him on the bench.

"I never said that," Cole stammers. His gaze dodges in every direction except at Addy. He leans so far back I'm worried he's going to fall off the bench and land in the grass of the green block where we're killing time before heading back to the apartment.

Cole's not going to be happy with me. He definitely does not like to be called a hacker, although there's really no other way to describe his mad skills at system manipulation. And I doubt being pushed around by my little sister was high on his wish list when he decided to come stay with us for a few days before we leave for our second tour of duty with Earth Force.

"It doesn't matter what you said." Addy transfers her hands to her hips. "It only matters if it's true. This whole plan hinges on you breaking into the lift system. Can you do it or not?"

"How do you know it will work?" Cole asks.

"Do I really have to go through this again?" Addy rolls her eyes, reminding me of our pod mate, Lucy.

"Mason's dad works in lift maintenance. He told Eric, who told Larina, who told Molls, who told me.

Execute the Lift System Maintenance Protocol and the lift dead drops until the safety tether engages. Easy."

"And we'll free-fall all three hundred floors of the apartment complex," I remind Cole before he chickens out. "Think of the speed! I overheard some older kids talking about it on the rails. It's supposed to be awesome!"

“Fine,” Cole sighs. He won’t look at Addy, but he shoots me a stern stare.

Yep, he’s mad.

“Great!” Addy says, sitting next to Cole on the bench. “Then it’s all set. The plan goes down tonight! While we’re on the subject, I have a couple other ideas that could use Cole’s hacking genius.”

I laugh. “You’re all about the danger and thrills these days, Ads.”

Cole turns his back on Addy. “Speaking of that, Jasper, you better keep your sister away from Marco when she starts at the Academy next spring. They’d make a scary combination.”

“No kidding,” I say. Our pod mate Marco is the walking definition of thrill seeker. He could teach Addy a thing or two, and from the way Addy’s been acting lately, she would definitely go along for the ride.

Addy clears her throat. “Ummm, I can hear you. I’m standing right here. And I can take care of myself at the Academy, thank you very much.”

Cole looks at his shoes. He must be struggling to keep his mouth shut, just like I have since I got home from the EarthBound Academy.

This past spring we were part of the first group of Bounders to be sworn in as Earth Force cadets and sent to space for training. Before we were born, Earth Force discovered a link between brain structure and quantum space travel. They reintroduced the Bounder genes into the population and—Bam!—twelve years later they had the first group ready to be trained as quantum aeronauts to pilot the ships that can bound across the galaxy in an instant.

We weren’t at the space station long before we realized Earth Force wanted the Bounders for more than traditional space travel. They’d stolen biotechnology from an alien race—the Youli—and were convinced the Bounders could master it. And they were right. Now Earth Force is training Bounders to be the front line in their secret war against the Youli. Cole and I have a battle under our belt to prove it.

Addy’s completely in the dark. She still thinks the Academy curriculum is learning how to pilot the quantum bounding ships. Cole and I are under strict confidentiality orders to keep it that way. Revealing the truth about the Academy to anyone is a grave violation of the Earth Force Code of Conduct.

Unfortunately, Cole’s the worst at keeping secrets, and he’s about to blow our cover.

“What?” Addy says, ogling us with an evil stare.

Cole and I stay silent.

“Seriously, what?”

“It’s just . . . ,” Cole starts.

I elbow Cole hard in the ribs. “It’s just nothing. Tell us about those other hacking ideas.”

“Uh-uh, Jasper.” Addy shakes her head. “You know I can spot a secret from a mile away. What are you guys

keeping from me?”

“Like I said, nothing,” I spit out quickly so Cole doesn’t have a chance to even think about telling the truth.

Addy nods at Cole. “Then why is he squirming around on the bench?”

She kneels in front of Cole and tries to make him look her in the eye.

“Cut it out, Addy,” I say. “Leave him alone. It’s just Academy stuff we’re not supposed to talk about. That’s it. You’ll find out soon enough.”

“You must be joking!” Addy springs to her feet and throws her arms in the air. “I’m a Bounder, too, remember? The whole world knows we’re Bounders, J. No more secrets!”

While we’ve been arguing, the green block has filled with workers on their lunch breaks. And now it seems we’re their prime dining entertainment. That is the last thing we need—an accidental announcement to all of Americana East that we’re at war with a technologically advanced alien race.

“Go home, Addy!” I shout. “No one asked you to tag along!”

Addy’s cheeks color pink like my words slapped her skin. Then the muscles in her face move, morphing from shock to hurt to rage.

I expect her to lash out. Addy is rarely one to give in. Instead, she spins on her heels and races up the block.

“Why did you do that?” Cole asks.

“Really?” I remember the nosy diners and lower my voice to a whisper. “You were about to spill the beans, that’s why!”

“You mean about the—”

Before Cole can say another word, I grab his arm and drag him off the bench. I pull him by the sleeve off the green block and into the thick of pedestrian traffic. After a few twists and turns, I duck into an alleyway and spin to face him.

“What the heck, Cole? What part of top-level security clearance don’t you understand?”

“I know, but . . .”

“No buts! I’ve lived in the same apartment with Addy for the last four months! I’ve kept my mouth shut all that time! Never once did I come as close to caving as you did just then.”

“But she’s . . .”

“I said no buts! Geez, Cole. Did you tell everyone in your district about the Youli?” As soon as the word slips from my mouth I cringe. Scanning the alleyway, I’m relieved there’s not a single person remotely in earshot.

“I didn’t tell anyone,” Cole says. “I swear! I basically kept to myself the entire time. But something about being here with you . . . and your sister is a Bounder, too . . . and . . .”

“Look, I get it,” I say, “but we need to be careful. If word got out, it could be a huge problem.”

And now I have another huge problem on my hands: Addy.

“What do we tell your sister?” Cole asks.

“The same thing we should have told her before. Absolutely nothing.”

Cole bounces on his toes. He’s nervous. He really is the worst at secrets.

“Seriously, Cole. Not a word to Addy about the Academy. If she tries to pry it out of you, bring up Evolution or something.”

Cole’s eyes light with a fire only Evolution of Combat can ignite. He’s a genius, like a total game master. I’ve never known anyone who came close to Cole at his Evolution skills. All summer we’ve been syncing up our game modules remotely, and he’s been leading the Battle of Berlin. Just last month, we won World War II. It took Cole more than a year to defeat the level.

“You must have made it further than anyone by now,” I continue.

Cole shrugs. “Now that we’re in the Cold War, the game has changed. There’s a lot of behind-the-scenes human psychology to factor in. That’s not my strength.”

I choke down a laugh. “No kidding. Maybe Lucy can help you,” I joke. Lucy would never help. She hates Evolution. But Cole thinks I’m serious.

“Maybe,” he says. “She can be annoying, but she’s really good with rallying troops.” Cole shoots me a side glance. “On the Paleo Planet—”

“Shhh!” I say, scanning the alleyway again. “I know what you’re talking about! You don’t need to say it.” I press my back against the stone wall and slide down until my butt hits the ground. Cole crouches beside me.

I close my eyes as my brain takes me back to the battle. Lucy rallies the Bounders while Cole issues the marching orders. Marco takes off in his blast pack, charging the Youli on the cliff. His body goes rigid as the alien seizes control of his atoms. For a second, Marco hangs suspended in space, then the Youli flings him across the valley directly into the herd of mammoths. Next thing I know, I’m tackling the alien on top of his ship as his words slip inside my brain. Then Mira bounds amidst the herd of charging wildeboars.

“I’m scared.” I wouldn’t tell most people, but I know Cole understands. All my pod mates understand.

“Earth Force has a huge incentive to protect its military assets,” he says.

Cole offers this factual nugget to make me feel better. It kind of does. But by military assets, he means me. Us. The Bounders. The soldiers they bred to fight their war with the Youli. The next evolution of combat.

“That’s something, I guess.” I stand and brush off the back of my jeans. “Let’s get back. My mom will be

worried.”

And Addy will be mad.

And we’ll still be soldiers.

At least we’re shipping out tomorrow for our second tour. And when we return in the spring for our third, Addy will be twelve and coming with us. She’ll find out the truth soon enough. She’ll learn what it really means to be a Bounder.



Cole and I beeline for my room as soon as we get back to my apartment. I slam the door and sink into the beanbag I begged my parents for after my first tour. If I close my eyes, it’s almost like I’m in our pod room at the Academy with its green grass carpet, starry ceiling, and groovy light sticks. Unfortunately, the hum of Addy’s violin is blowing a hole straight through my imagination. Her sad song is proof that I’m in my bedroom and not in space, and a vivid reminder that I’m the world’s meanest brother.

Cole lays his tablet on my bed and the projection for Evolution of Combat fills the air space above my blanket. “Let’s mess around on some old levels. How about the Middle Ages?”

“Sure, as long as we can joust.” I toss my tablet on the bed, activate, and sync up.

I select my armor, weapon, and horse for my avatar, but Addy’s music won’t let me go. Her notes drift through the walls and down my throat where they take shape as one of those close-to-crying lumps.

I don’t know why I haven’t told her the truth. Like Cole said, she’s a Bounder, and she’ll find out soon enough. But when I got home from the Academy, everything was shaken up, including me. I didn’t know how to be Jasper who fought the Youli while being Jasper, Addy’s brother, background boy, klutz. Plus, Mom was so sure that everything would go back to normal with me at home that I didn’t want to disappoint her. So I left the new Jasper at the space station and went back to my old self. I keep my mouth shut and say Huh? and Oops! and Sorry all the time like I used to. It’s as if I’m in a perpetual holding mode, hovering like a passenger craft waiting for clearance to land, but in my case, I’m waiting to get back to the Academy.

“Hey!” Cole says. “I thought you wanted to joust!”

“Huh?”

“The game, Jasper.”

In the Evolution projection, my very dead knight stays upright on his horse only because he’s skewered by Cole’s lance at the tournament of champions.

“Oops! Sorry.” At least I won’t be in a holding pattern much longer. “Do you mind playing on your own for a few minutes? I’ll be right back.”

Cole doesn’t respond, but I know he’ll be fine. I grab my clarinet from the top of my duffel bag and head into the hall.

When I knock at Addy's room, the music stops, but she doesn't answer. I crack open her door.

She shoves her violin into its case and pushes back her chair. "What do you want?"

I open the door the rest of the way and lift my clarinet. "How about a duet?" Her poster of Maximilian Sheek, the celebrity aeronaut, still hangs above her desk. She probably would've taken it down if I'd told her what a coward Sheek was on the Paleo Planet.

"No." The word's a dismissal. She steps to her closet and ducks inside. "Things have changed, Jasper."

She's right. Things have changed. I've changed. And even though I've tried to hide it, Addy knows.

"Can we talk, then?" I walk into her room and sit at the foot of her bed.

Addy emerges from her closet, arms crossed tightly against her chest. "What? You've finally decided to tell me all your secrets?"

This isn't going to be easy. "Look, Addy, I get it. You're mad. You have a right to be mad. But I'm in a tough spot. The admiral was crystal clear about one thing: confidentiality. We're under strict orders not to talk about certain things, even with our families."

"But I'm not just family. I'm a Bounder. Isn't Earth Force going to share these secrets with me, too?"

"Yes, but not until next spring, when you go to the Academy."

She throws her hands in the air. "I don't get it. If they're going to tell me anyway, why can't you tell me now? Am I not important to you anymore? How come you're choosing them over me?"

Huh? "That's not what I'm doing! You'll always be important to me, Addy."

"Maybe. But you're loyal to them. To Earth Force. Not to me." Addy's voice grows quiet. She climbs onto her bed—careful to keep a meter between us—and snuggles with a purple elephant Dad won at the fair a few summers back.

This is not going well. How do I make her understand without unloading everything I know about Earth Force? "Look, Addy, it's stuff you need to experience for yourself. And most of it's pretty amazing! As for the other stuff . . . well . . . I'll be there to help you through it."

Addy huffs. "What's that supposed to mean? What other stuff?"

"I told you about the confidentiality order, Ads. And I'm really not trying to be cryptic, it's just . . . there was this girl at the Academy. Mira. There was so much to take in, and she helped me. I want you to know that I'll be there for you, like Mira was for me."

Addy's face is all crumpled. I can't tell if she's thinking, or fuming, or about to burst out laughing. She squeezes her elephant so tight I'm sure the stuffing is going to explode all over her bed.

"I'm not happy you're keeping secrets," she finally says, "but I'm glad you talked to me. It's hard enough that you're leaving again. I don't want the night before you go to be filled with fighting."

I relax a little. “Good.” I push up from the bed, and my mind jumps ahead to my jousting match with Cole.

“Not so fast,” Addy says with a sneaky grin on her face. “Let’s hear more about this girl. Mira.”

Oh no. I should have seen that coming a mile away.

“She’s just a friend,” I say.

“Sure.” Addy’s clearly not buying it.

“No, really. She plays the piano, and we played this duet together once, and . . .”

Addy jumps to her feet. All the anger and frustration of moments before, now long gone. “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me you had a girlfriend! That’s the biggest secret of all!”

“Shut up!” I grab a pillow from her bed and deck her with it. “She’s not my girlfriend. But maybe this will give you a clue about why I don’t tell you everything.”

“Fine. She’s not your girlfriend.” The smirk on Addy’s face tells me she doesn’t believe it for a second. “Can I meet her tomorrow at the launch?”

Oh geez. No way. The last thing I need is my sister steamrolling quiet Mira. “No. She’s . . . she’s not what you’d expect. You can meet her next spring when you come to the Academy.”

“Uh-uh, Jasper. I’m meeting her tomorrow, whether you like it or—”

The doorbell rings.

“Who’s that?” she says.

“Let’s find out!” Saved by the bell, I leap off the bed and dash out of the room.

An Earth Force officer stands at the open door. Mom blocks his way into our apartment. Her hands are on her hips, and she’s shaking her head.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” he says. “Those are the orders.”

“What’s going on, Mom?” I ask.

Mom reluctantly steps aside to let the officer enter. She turns to face me. “It seems you and Cole are departing a bit early for your second tour. Make sure your bags are packed. You’re leaving tonight.”

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