

# Earth Girl

## 1. Sweetie-pie

Though I am my father's first and for a time was his only child, he had me raised secretly, in a row of narrow rooms between his apartment's inner and the outer walls, for me to be hidden from the government.

When I was seven and I asked my care-mother why me in the secret rooms, why not my brother or little sister? Hen said only one child per adult might be born and your father wanted a boy. I learned about my family by peering through the louvres into the house.

When I was seven I wasn't interested in the government. I wanted to know about my mother. Soon after I was born, as Hen told it, my mother won a ticket in the Life Lottery.

"What's the Life Lottery?" I said.

"Well, Sweetie-pie, a Life Lottery is held when the government decides we have too many people for the amount of food grown that year. They have their computer pick a date and all the people in the country who were born on that date, in whatever year, win a ticket in the Life Lottery."

Though she pressed her lips together to tell me she was done, I said, "Then what?"

Hen stared at me like she wondered if I was old enough to hear the bad news and I stared back, willing her to tell me.

"The winners are collected by the police and marched to the space elevator and then taken to the alien starship. So it is said."

So-it-is-said meant it was gossip and that nobody really knew. I tried to imagine my mother among the thousands of people in the starship. "How is that ship big enough for all the people in all the Life Lotteries?" None of the starships I saw on my computer were big enough for ten people, let alone thousands.

"That's another unknown," Hen said. "Some people say that Procyon Products own dozens of the silo-ships parked near the top of the space elevator. And that they have a contract—that's an agreement—with the government to keep the Life Lottery winners asleep up there in the silos until they might be needed."

"So no alien starship?"

"No to no. The alien starship is definitely real. In the morning, I'll bring you a little telescope to borrow. Standing on the toilet lid and peering out of the little window, you should be able to find the alien thing in the western sky tomorrow night."

I was seven then. Hen could still distract me really well. I didn't ask, for instance, needed for what? I didn't ask why people thought the alien starship had anything to do with the Life Lotteries. Or how Procyon Products kept the winners asleep for years.

For a few weeks, I studied the starship often. Sometimes it hung so low I could make out its shape. Two pyramids stuck bottom to bottom. Still only as big as my baby sister's fist but nothing like any of our starships. At times, at sunrise and sunset, two and maybe four sides glittered with reflected sunlight.

One night, when Hen had already been gone for over an hour, there was a power cut. My computer died under my hands and the little night lights in the hidden house faded. All the walkway lights on the outside of the building flipped off.

The apartment was silent. Had the family all already gone to bed? It was as late as that already? I sat in the black dark wondering if I was frightened enough to press the red button. Or should I hide in my bed because probably no one would come?

A narrow, faint blue light beam slanted into the bathroom. My thoughts of hiding died. Of course I had to have a look. I scabbled for the telescope on the desk beside the computer. Felt my way to the bathroom, a short distance, closed the lid of the toilet and climbed up into the blue light. Wedged my elbows in the little window frame and lifted the telescope.

Almost stepped back, almost fell, before I remembered where I was. The alien spaceship hung high up but almost directly in front of my window in Urb Five! I grabbed one of the bars of the grill and hung on.

The beam slowly, softly retracted back into the alien spaceship. It was no bigger, no nearer than normal, I guessed, making my fingers in a circle the size of a baby's fist to compare.

I looked again through the telescope. Saw that same beautiful blue light play over the ship's whole shape. Then pink light. Then lavender. A gap of dark. Then came blues and yellows and a rich forest green. Another gap. Yellows and reds followed by sun gold, and then sun orange when it is on the way down the sky.

Then it did it all again, faster. And again, and faster again. Like it was a pattern.

Too fast for me to count how many times it made the pattern before the dark stayed dark. I closed my eyes for the trick Hen taught me for seeing the same patterns in opposite colours on the dark screen of the inside of my eyes. I wedged the telescope on the window sill behind the grill and climbed down.

Now I did hide in my bed, under the blankets in case the lights came back on. Stared and stared at the pattern in my eyes, to try and count the times the ship had flashed the pattern.

Seven?

## 2. Names

I remembered my mother again when I studied my father's second wife through the ventilation louvres in the inner wall. She and my father and my brother called my little sister Honey-bun the way Hen called me Sweetie-pie.

"Why don't my little sister and I have proper names like my brother has?" I said.

"Nothing to stop you from naming the both of you," Hen said. "Though they'll have to stay secret names for now."

Proper names! It seemed like another distraction, but I made it my project for that day.

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"I'm calling my sister Du. It means strong in Irish. Is it OK for a girl's name?" I was too excited to wait for Hen's answer. "I wanted a strong name too, so I am Kosi," I said.

"It suits you very well," Hen said. "Du is good for a girl or a boy. One of the good things about it is that not many people will know it is a name. It will help keep her safe."

Maybe I looked puzzled. "She's hidden too?"

Hen only looked at me and I recalled that my father or her mother never took Du outside the apartment.

That day was the first time I contacted Du. I'd peered through the louvres all my life to learn the family's routines, first with Hen holding me up with her hand over my mouth. Silence was a must. One of our louvres drew air into the hidden house from the living room of the apartment. The second louvre was the air outflow going into the indoor garden to be refreshed.

My father went out soon after seven. He'd take my brother to his school and then went off to his office job.

Was Du, at four years old, ever alone? Her mother had started her on schoolwork. While Du practiced her letters in the living room, her mother made beds and cleaned the bathroom. She'd call out a letter or sound when Du hesitated, but did not come to her side.

I'd reversed the air inflow into the hidden house so that air blew into the living room. "Du," I whisper-shouted. "Du! Little sister!" I hung a strip of paper between two vanes of the louvre, so it fluttered to catch her attention.

She looked up just as her mother called out. "Now copy all my letters underneath them," Du's mother said. She shut the living room door.

Du pulled a chair under the louvre. "She's having a shower. Are you the secret?" Her dark eyes flashed with excitement.

“Us talking like this has to be our secret—yours and mine—from everyone else in the house. Can you do a secret like that?”

“Oh yes. I’m very good at secrets. I will never look at the louvre when anyone else is in the room.”

I smiled. “I gave us proper names. You are Du. It means strong, because you are strong. I am Kosi. Do you know about butterfly kisses?” I showed her, blew her a kiss through the wide open louvre.

She smiled so wide my heart nearly burst. “Got to copy my letters now,” she said. “What letters in my name?”

I told her her letters. D-U. I did not forget to reverse the louvre for air inflow.

Du was back at the table copying letters when her mother returned with a cup of coffee for herself and a glass of soy for Du, I was glad to see.

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When he came to the hidden house for his hour a week and I told him my name, my father said, “Why Kosi? When not Belle, or Emily, or Melissa?”

“Because I am strong,” I said.

My father laughed. “Strong is for soldiers and house guards.”

I tried again, “Because my hair is like a lion’s hair.”

My father frowned. He said, “I need you silent while you live between the walls.”

I wished he’d said no lion’s roars allowed.

Du. Nobody except Hen and I talked about my baby sister using that name, and nobody but Hen used my new name until she took me visiting.

### **3. Lilah & Jules**

Hen brought outdoor clothes and shoes for me. Long pants with pockets and a hoodie, she said it was called. A knit jumper with a hood to cover my head.

I complained about the worn-down trainers. I might’ve lived indoors up to then, but I knew old when I saw it.

“I need you to pretend you are my girl,” Hen said. “And as I am not rich, you will always be wearing hand-me-downs when you are with me. And also, you will be expected to already know all about everything we see, hear and smell out there. What am I saying with that?”

“No questions. Keep my lips buttoned.” We had practiced me keeping silent from the time that I was five, while Hen pretended buying things at pretend-stalls and pretend-shops.

But anyway, I was so agog at everything that I didn’t have time to even think up questions and can hardly remember the details of my first outing with Hen. Though I do remember stepping into an elevator buggy. The floor wobbled under me and I clutched at Hen for support.

She punched a code into the buggy’s input pad and we rose up the outside of our building. Stopped at the top. She called someone called Lilah on her mobile.

A few minutes later a much larger buggy-like thing stopped beside ours and opened its door right by where our buggy’s outer door was. The person in the doorway waved a coder at our buggy’s door.

I heard the door lock snick back and Hen slid back that door. She took me by my arm, a tighter grip she’d ever used, and we stepped from our buggy, over a narrow gap between the two, into the big one.

“Hey, Jules. Lilah,” Hen said. She hugged both the women. “Good to see you. Meet my girl, Kosi. You’re allowed to talk in here, Kosi-girl,” she said to me. “Jules and Lilah are my good friends and they’ve been asking to meet you.”

“And you can ask any question you like,” Jules said. She was tall and thin. Lilah was a similar height to Hen, and what Hen called cuddly. Her eyes were like brown pools. Jules’s green eyes glittered with laughter.

Lilah hugged me. Jules grinned. “Not every day we have a youngster visiting. You’ll have a cuppa?” she said squeezing Hen’s shoulders.

Hen said yes and Jules took me with her to show me round. “The bunks on the left, mine is the upper. The kitchenette and bathroom on the right.” We stopped at the kitchenette to set out mugs and get a jug boiling.

My gaze was drawn to the end of the room, the light there. That whole end was a curved window, and the view drew me like I was one of the steel pins Hen’s magnet picked up when she let me play with it.

Jules, following me, put my hands on the shining brass rail running the length of the desk in front of the window. “Hold on,” she said. She set her hands moving over the levers, lights and keypads inset on the desk. “Just moving us from beside the buggy you came in, to a place where we won’t be interrupted.”

I gasped. “You are driving us?” All my hidden early childhood, the game that Hen always got me quiet with was driving. I drove the alien spaceship (my favourite), ordinary spaceships (my next favourite), trains, fly-cars, hover-buses. Whatever mode of transport Hen could think up. I decided right then that cranes would now be my second choice.

More outings followed, one every couple of months. “We can’t go out together too often,” Hen said. “People will wonder why you aren’t in school.”

At first, we explored Parra 5 Central. Then we studied the Fetchers running about everywhere, kids a few years older than me who fetched letters and small parcels from their senders and carried them to their destinations.

When we got home, Hen had me map our routes, and then Fetcher routes where we’d been able to hear them tell their supervisors of their destinations, and tell her how I thought they would travel. On foot, by buggy or by air-car in the case of a senior Fetcher who needed to cross the water to Parra Central 6.

“Most of them would’ve gone to Fetcher School down in the basement of Parra Central 5,” Hen said. “You could go to school there when you are old enough.”

“Will my father allow it?”

“It’s what I can get you ready for. Best to have something up your sleeve when your father makes his move. He won’t keep you for long after your challenge.”

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By the time I was 11 years, 12 hours and 30 minutes old, life in the hidden rooms had got pretty boring. Hen and I lunched in the little dinette, at the little table for two. My birthday cake with eleven candles on it waited on the little sink bench.

I sighed eating my soy roll with my favourite filling, the spinach and egg mix, flavoured lightly with salt. Hen had her favourite filling which was chopped lettuce and tomato on pesto. She said nothing about my sighs.

When she stood up to fetch the cake to the table, she said, “Eleven is a good number. Like 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, and 13, it is a prime number that can only be divided by itself and 1. I’ve always liked to make prime number birthdays special in some way. Do you remember what we did when you were five?”

I thought back. “Watched my new baby sister in her crib through that window in the computer you made into the apartment?”

“What did we do when you were seven?” Hen said.

I perked up. “Started the secret outings. You took me to see Jules and Lilah, and we took the rest of the birthday cake for morning tea. Jules said that one day when I was older and I had longer arms, she might let me drive the caboose along the crane’s arm.”

Hen’s expression changed. “Today, however, is not a day for outings,” she said. “There’s a sweep going on out there. Government lackeys are picking up anyone without their ID on them.”

“The police?”

“The government seems to have employed a special taskforce they’ve put in charge of running the de-population program.” She forestalled me asking why. “Do you remember I said there was a Life Lottery happening last week?”

I nodded.

“The sweep is to make up the numbers, there must always be a thousand human cattle going up the elevator to feed into the silos. Apparently, the Life Lottery didn’t raise enough winners.”

“You’re angry,” I discovered.

“Very. Very angry. And upset,” she said with tears in her voice. “One of my girls was picked up this morning. She was on her way to the Fetcher School. Didn’t have her ID on her. My favourite little scatterbrain. She was gone before I could save her.”

I was shocked. What? Hen had more girls than just me? I felt smaller suddenly. I might’ve even slumped. I felt like a balloon losing air when you don’t knot the mouth quick enough.

Hen stared sternly across the little table at me. “Now don’t go thinking you’re not important to me,” she said. “I love all my girls. By the time you’re thirteen, I will have raised four hidden girls and two of my own. But that’s not a prime number. I want to raise seven girls.”

The shock didn’t go away. The excitement of a prime number birthday, of any birthday for that matter faded. I felt deflated.

Hen thought a while. “I’m trying to remember how I made that window in the computer into the apartment, when you were five. Me teaching you how to do that, may help you help me look after Du until she can come and live with me.”

“Oh! You mean Du to be your seventh girl?”

“I do. One of the ways people save their legal children from the Life Lottery is by replacing them with a hidden child when the police—or now the thugs replacing them—come to pick them up. The taskforce won’t care what child they carry with them, they’ll only be interested in getting the numbers. I won’t have either you or Du getting picked up.”

I didn’t want to believe that my father was capable of any such thing.

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Learning how to input the program for the window made me feel as powerful as a lion. What we saw as a result not so much.

There was an upset in the apartment. I heard my little sister screaming and crying, accusing her brother of punching her when no one was looking. I’m on her side, he is such a sly weasel. (A weasel is a slinking olden days predator, now probably extinct.) She begged her mother to believe her but her mother slapped her and accused her of upsetting her brother! I was so angry!

Hen reached past my hands on the keyboard and shut the virtual window. “Remember that your brother is also Du’s mother’s child,” she said. “It’s hard sometimes for a carer to know who started the fight though there are more productive ways she could’ve handled that.”

I went to stand at the sealed louvre and pretended I was a hawk with Xray vision sending my anger through. Unhelpful to Du, I know. Helpful to me. I got over it.

The rest of the day, Hen took me through all the routines she’d taught me. “You never know when and where you’ll need a bit of tumbling.”

Then she introduced a new one. Not tumbling but slithering.

“Now slither from one end of the rooms to the other not touching the floor once,” she said. “What will you pretend to be for this one?”

I sized up the problem. Slither from my bunk to the top of the wardrobe? “A gecko? Too bad I don’t have sticky pads on my hands and feet.”

Hen laughed through tears. “Needs must, and necessity is the mother of invention. You are my favourite imagineer.”

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That night, after Hen kissed me good-night-sleep-tight before she left for home, I had a lot to think about.

About 11 pm, going by the little clock on the beam above my tumbling station, I heard a bunch of people singing. Sounding like the chorus of angels I saw in a movie, coming from the bathroom.

Had Hen left a gadget in there for me to discover? Why would she have put in the bathroom of all places? Quick thoughts that fluttered through my mind as I threw back my blanket and rolled from my bunk and padded into the bathroom.

Into the blue light, which was everywhere. The alien starship had come? I climbed onto the toilet lid, almost too tall now to see properly out through the grill. I bent my knees resting them against the wall either side of the cistern pipe.

The blue light receded as it did before, taking the choir of angels with it.

I glanced everywhere outside. Was there anyone else awake, watching? I craned my neck, lifted my face to the place where I saw it four years ago.

The alien starship seemed to hang lower than last time. Nearer. This time I could only barely fit it between my two curved hands and my hands too had grown.

The soft kind blue now shaded into a dull aqua that, mixed with a dark pink made an angry shade of purple clouds. That same dark pink mixed with a yellow of the sun shining through

a cloud of smoke. Dirty orange. The smeared sunlight mixed with dull aqua coloured the nearby clouds with the green of a hailstorm coming.

Hailstones the size of oranges fell into the water between Parra 5 and the next row of urbs. A few thunked on the outdoor walkway and exploded into their parts.

Then the pattern of light began to flash. Also as before. Slowly at first. I counted them aloud and as I counted the colours lightened and reverted to the joyous colour-play I saw when I was seven.

Afterwards I waited a long time to see what the starship would do next.

At first it just hung there like it kept me company, then finally sent a burst of singing that stopped with all the singers on one note, as if the chorus came to the end of their song. Telling me something?

Like go to bed? Go to sleep? How likely was that with eleven colour-bursts burning the inside of my eye lids.

Eleven!

Dry-mouthed, because my jaw is hanging open, I thought the event through. There's a pattern. The starship first came when I was seven and sent seven bursts of colour. Next it came when I was eleven and it sent eleven bursts of colour.

How did it know? How does it know me? Is Hen involved in this, with her theory of prime numbers? How could she be?

I burrowed into my blankets. If there is a pattern, it'll come again when I am thirteen.

#### **4. The Day Before My Birthday**

When I was nine or ten my first challenge had seemed a hundred years away. But time passes, as Hen says. I started my journal last week. Hen's suggestion to get me over a mood of unhealthy anticipation.

I laughed. Unhealthy anticipation? But I set to. What else was there? I wrote everything I could remember from about age five, including all about the alien starship. Which took quite a few days out of the week.

Tomorrow is my thirteenth birthday, the day of my challenge.

I opened the virtual window into the apartment and checked that Du was alright. More schooling for Du with her mother close by. My brother and father not on the premises.

Hen and I ate my birthday cake, one day early without my father, as usual. "I'm not important to my father," I complained. My nerves talking. I already knew how much more important my brother was to my father than me or Du.

Hen changed the subject. "You've already chosen your name." Traditionally, thirteenth birthdays were for choosing a proper name. "I'm sure he'll be here tomorrow to tell you your challenge. Hidden children are a family's treasure. Insurance in case something happens to the legal children."

I ignored that she didn't sound convinced about me being my family's treasure. "What could happen to my brother? He is so ... protected." My father hired two soldiers. One woman to guard him, and one to guard my brother.

"These days, the Life Lotteries target the families of the government's enemies." Hen pressed her lips together and I knew I'd have find the rest out for myself. Because lots of questions. For instance, what about the supposed randomly chosen dates for Life Lotteries? And how was my father an enemy of the government?

We ate and drank under the air scrubber so the smells, or rather, the aroma of the birthday cake went straight outside. I had my milk-tea. Hen her coffee.

Tomorrow is the day I get to go outside and by myself, both supposedly for the first time in my life. A big act is required as my father must not know that Hen has been taking me out for six years. "You are a good actor," Hen said.

She'd be let go instantly if he discovered it, probably without pay. The thing about the going-out-by-myself is that the government supposedly doesn't know that hidden children exist, so hidden kids are safer running around on their own than with family. Safer for their families and the kids themselves, according to Hen.

The thought of losing Hen would be enough to give me nightmares. My acting would be impeccable.

There's still the rest of today to spend. When I stand on the closed toilet lid, I'm now too tall to see out of the ventilation grill and if the alien starship were to visit tonight, I'd have to straddle the toilet to see out of the window. Hardly comfortable. Maybe kneeling will work?

This morning the sea smells deep green and mysterious.

"A breeze carries the smell up the side of the building," Hen said. She's squeezed beside the toilet, beside me. She put her arm around me. "If you look left of the lights of Parra 6, you'll see Parra 10. In front of Parra 10 is Parra 11. There are twelve of these urbs arrange in neat rows, all standing in the sea."

I knew that. Where's she going with that? I rattle off what I know to get her started. "I live on Level 6, in the south-eastern corner of 5W, one of the four dorm stacks surrounding Parra 5 Central."

"You've got it." She let me go and I fidgeted with nervous energy. She put on a pair of magnifying goggles and handed me mine. "Let's see if we can make out all the urbs, and if there's anything to see of the green land beyond?"

I get the idea that the green lands are actually what we're looking at, more than the urbs.

“Green because there are farms there, crops growing?” I said. Then I get mad. Volatile. “How many years of Life Lotteries? How can there still not be enough crops now for us?” I parroted the social media platforms I visited online when Hen was off duty for the ten hours when I was meant to be asleep. She’d begun to be absent in those hours when I was seven.

When I asked him one day, my father said I wasn’t a baby anymore. He couldn’t afford to keep a servant twenty-four seven longer than necessary. “You’re safe in here and there is the red button to call me if you feel ill.”

Hen heard him fine. She said it was to be expected. “No use being angry with him, Kosi-mine. He’s only doing what he knows. And he’s opened a door for me to help you in other ways.”

So instead of being angry with my father, I was often angry with the alien starship. I’d had no more personal visits. It only seemed personal, I’d lately begun to think. Though there was no mention of the starship’s strange actions anywhere in the ParraNet. No-one saw it? Hard to believe.

Some websites said the ship continued to hang in our skies to help Earth to recover from its environmental breakdown and climate troubles. “How long before the Antarctic and the Arctic Ocean freeze over again? Wasn’t the starship supposed to be helping with that, the freezing?” I knew it could do it. That hailstorm, after all.

“I don’t know, pet,” Hen said. “I do know of a bunch of wanderers who herd camels. Out there,” she said, pointing. “Away over the mountains. They call it their Lodestar. They’ve learned to navigate by it. Suggests a whole different alien starship?”

“Each to his own.” I cracked a grin. “Hen. I love you. Still trying to distract me into a different world.”

She smiled. “It’s out there.”

I longed to go outside, but by myself? How would that be? Would Hen stay in the house while I had my adventure?

Reading my face she said, “I’ll be here when you get back, Kosi-mine.”

I hugged her and threw the goggles on my bed. Grabbed hold of the acrobat-harness hanging in the doorway between my bed and the dinette.

I input my routine into the harness controls and stood perfectly still so the straps could secure themselves around me. Then I rolled into my favourite sequence of forward and backward. paces, turns, tumbles and back-flips. I spun in place, not getting anywhere. I’d never gotten anywhere but that would soon change.

“It’s here,” said a voice loud on the outside of the building.

“I reckon. With the amount of noise in the pipes!”

Hen was instantly at the doorway punching the keys that froze my harness, and me with it.

We listened like a couple of prey animals before they start running. What I've seen on nature videos. There's nowhere to run in our house.

After a long time, Hen pushed me in front of her—slow as snails, past the dining nook that had an air-scrubber above the tabletop microwave. Into Hen's bed-nook. Luckily, she hadn't folded her bed to the wall. I said it was early. Meaning we had somewhere to sit out of sight of the grills.

We'd practiced these manoeuvres every day of my life. This was the first time in my living memory it was for real. What? I asked with raised eyebrows.

Hen signed to explain. Maintenance personnel on the gangway above the grills. The desalination pipes on the outside of the building for that express purpose, ease of fixing.

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I purposely stayed awake that night to see if the alien spaceship would come.

Nada.

## **5. The Disguise**

Starting at the back, furthest from my father's study, the hidden house is the bathroom, my cupboard room, Hen's room, the dinette and the living room all in a row. Father's study is wider with three doors out. He would probably say three doors in.

Hen and I have access to the study through the slider between the hidden house and the study. When we go out together we come and go through what she calls the back door, nearest to the hidden house. The same door I will go through today. I woke every hour from midnight with questions I was so excited. Poor Hen.

"Worry about yourself," Hen said. "How will you take in all the detail your father will tell you?"

My father said everything twice, so I'm not re-telling it word for word. What it all boils down to is that I'm to make my way across to Parra 5 Central, and then down to its 6th level. I'm to get its layout straight enough in my mind that I will be able to draw a map when I get home.

Duh. How many maps had I already drawn for Hen? Still, he wasn't to know that. I'm to find his locker in one of the corridors adjacent, and bring home the contents. "And make sure to be back before dark. Five simple things." He went on and on.

I interrupted. "Why are you making it all sound so difficult?"

My father got red in the face but the imp in me continued. "I've studied the visuals. I know the look of the concourse." I was thinking at this rate there wouldn't be any time for me to do some ordinary sightseeing, like where is the best food-stall today.

"I'll get her dressed," Hen said.

She took me into her room. An open carry-cloth lay on her bed displaying a denim shirt stained with old sweat and muddy with I-don't-know-what, and cargoes in roughly the same condition. Frayed edges. Lots of pockets was the only advantage I could see.

I pulled back. "These clothes are even older than ..." I'd been going to say my previous outdoor wear, but remembered my father was in his study and the door between him and us stood open.

Hen mumbled. "You'll go out looking like a Fetcher urchin, not a target for every mischief because you're still the most ignorant kid in the concourse. Dozens of Fetchers running around with some as new at it as you. No one will mess with you with the Fetcher House supposedly backing you."

Hen said all this with a little smile. Laughing at me about the way I pulled on the disguise while trying to keep the disgust off my face. I had to fold my top lip between my teeth to keep from pulling up my nose.

Next Hen misted my lion's hair with water and brushed it flat. Then mussed it to resemble the casually disarranged hair of the ID pic of the Fetcher girl she'd found on the ParaNet.

I checked my new appearance in the mirror. "Mmm." Maybe I did like it a bit.

Hen grinned with a finger in front of her lips and gesturing with her head toward my father next door. "We haven't finished yet. You'll remember the work we did on odour. Remember this smell?" She sprayed a horrible, dirty-smelling stink over me.

I gasped. "Not all over me!"

"You want to go out smelling of a hidden house?"

"This place smells?" Learning the odours Hen brought me in bottles and sealed in plasteel bags, I'd been proud of my quick nose. "I can't smell anything!"

"Because you're accustomed to it. Tell me what I'm spraying."

"As sweet as rot, with sharp undertones of urine."

She nodded, and passed me an extremely old BigEars earpiece with someone else's earwax still on it. "All Fetchers have some or other com-device, most of them at least as old as this one. I doubt this one can be made to work."

I nearly gagged up my breakfast. But what Hen insists on, I mostly do. We cleaned the earwax off. I fitted the gadget into one of my ears.

Before she led me back into my father's study for him to check me over, Hen squeezed her lips together with her fingers. Warning me not to back-answer him.

I must have conformed to his idea of what I should look and smell like, because he gave me a

key-card to get into his locker and a cell phone with enough credit on it to get home from Para Central Level 6. I should think of the mobile and the credit as his birthday presents, he said.

Though he shrank from the stink enveloping me, I insisted hugging him, politely, for thanks.

## **6. The Elevator Buggies**

We were out through the back door. “What’s through there?” Hen said as she hustled me past the glass sliding doors on the right. “Do you recall it from the map?”

The from-the-map bit was part of the act, my father possibly being still within hearing distance. “The transport pick-up yard for our level, where hover cabs pick up and drop off people, and deliver stuff.” I had eyes only for the door at the end of the corridor. Steel grey.

Hen stamped on the sensa-mat. “This is how to get the old door to take notice.”

Finally it slid into the wall to the left. We stepped through, over a sill. Hen let the door slide shut behind us. At the end of the covered area, a curtain of ... “Is that rain?” I asked.

“It sure is!” Hen said with a smile in her voice.

I shot out, as far as the safety rails. Drops touched down on my face and arms. They soaked into my Fetcher clothes. They fell into my eyes sometimes and into my mouth – I opened wide – and tasted only of water. I was outside again! This time in the rain! Getting wet!

The rain fell in long staves from a light misty place full of half-visible struts and girders high up between my building and the one opposite. I breathed in the fresh cool air. The rain hissed where it splatted against the wall.

Far below was a darkness. The staves became silvery drops streaking down into that dark. Another, deeper breath. The rain-wet air swept away my indoor life.

Finally I looked at the building opposite.

Hen stood beside me, enjoying my acting. “That’s where our utilities are,” she said for our listener. “Our shops, medi-labs and schools. People call it Parra-Five-Central.” She stopped. Waited.

I gabbled that lesson. “Parra being the name of our particular city. Five the number of our urb, and Central referring to it being in the centre as well as being central to the urb.” As always, there was a lot to see, and this time I had to remember everything to do myself.

A couple of elevator buggies crawled down tracks fastened to the opposite wall. “The rails hold the buggies?” I didn’t give Hen time to explain. “Ten openings make ten floors?”

“Twenty floors. Every second one with an opening. Inside is a spiralling concourse where people can walk up or down to every level ...”

Finally we heard a succession of doors closing in the apartment—from near at hand to further, —which were my father leaving his study. Him trusting Hen to set me on my way.

“Call down a buggy,” Hen said. “Your address is W—8—20 short for West Tower, Level 8, Residential Unit 20. What’s your address?”

I made a song of it. “W for West Tower, 8 for Level 8, 20 for Residential Unit Number 20. W for West Tower, 8 for Level 8, 20 for Residential Unit Number 20. W for West Tower, 8 for Level 8, 20 for Residential Unit Number 20.”

Hen laughed, hand on my arm. “On your way back, if anyone asks where you’re going, or why you’re going there, say that your mother, Bardelote Henry, works here. That you’re meeting her.”

Stunned, I said stupidly, “That’s you?”

“My name. Yes.”

“But I call you Hen because of me being your chick!”

She hugged me. “You’re my chick whether I’m Hen or Bardelote.”

After we sniffled up our emotions, Hen said, “Key-in your destination as soon as you get into the buggy and the door is closed.”

“6th level?”

“True, your father didn’t say Level 6 where. All right, let’s say 6-W. That’s Level 6 West, the side of Central that faces West Tower. Slot your cell into the top of the keypad,” Hen said. “And you will see it taking your credits.”

“OK.”

“Now you wait for a buggy,” Hen said. “Go for it, Kosi-girl!”

She hugged me. I didn’t watch her go back into the hidden house. I bent over the guard rail to watch a rattling hum approach from below. A metal roof approximately the size of Hen’s bedroom ceiling rose up in front of me. The rest of the buggy, a faded green metal cage, stopped in front of me. Its metal gate hooked the gate in the railing and concertinaed open.

I stepped into the cage. Rickety wood-look-alike floor, bare of paint. Ribbed ceiling. Barred window-holes all around. No glass. From the door it would be two steps to every corner, I knew from previous rides. The corners nearest the building’s walls, on their outside, had four half-open metal fists grabbing the metal rails attached to the front of the building. Top and bottom.

Which was how the buggies were able to slide up and down without falling off, I thought. I swallowed down fright. *They’ve lasted all these years ... not going to fall now.* Didn’t answer how they were powered, though. The cage door closed, dragging the gate shut with it.

Clatter-clash.

“Where from and where to?” the buggy said by way of a small speaker above the door.

“W—8—20 to Parra Central West, level 6.” The read-out said 4 credits gone. Which meant 6 credits remained. I took my mobile back. “Okay. What now?”

Thud.

I jumped. The ribs in the ceiling lowered and released a leg each ending in a brass foot. I had to shift my foot out of a recessed brass footprint set in the floor.

The buggy said, “Be still among the guide rails or be restrained.”

Huh? Never had that happen before. How? Why? Maybe it didn’t mean me personally. But what if it did? I held one-handed onto one of the polished guide rails. Mussed up my hair to feel bigger and braver.

## **7. Crooked Fist**

The buggy hummed as it slid up the wall. The floor vibrating under my feet told of an engine underneath. The brassy fists moving along the rails outside made the whining sliding sound I’d often heard lying in bed in the hidden house. Trying to fall asleep, that mysterious metallic whining constantly stopping and starting kept me company.

When I was four or five, I asked Hen every day. “What’s that slipping sliding squealing in the night?”

She’d say things like, “A Fetcher bringing the groceries.” Or, “A Fetcher fetching a breakfast for someone working through the night.” Or the Fetcher would bring a kite, if it became a windy night. Towards the end of her patience, I asked purely to hear what she could come up with. The Fetcher fetching old bread for feeding hungry ducks was one of her last stories.

I turned within the confines of the guide rails by my sides. Across the divide, wide rectangular openings came into view at the top as the buggy slid up, and disappeared below. A fly-car swooped between the two buildings and entered the highest opening.

A cacophony of sound erupted from there.

I startled, then distinguished between emergency sirens, hooting of vehicles and shouting by people. A fly-car caused all that upset? I grinned. Out came the fly-car. Swooping down between the two buildings, it re-entered by the lowest dark opening I could see. If other people could make mistakes too, I decided, I’d be alright.

Clunk! The buggy stopped and bounced a little. The door stayed shut. A large hook, like a crane hook, dangling from a many-stranded steel cable, coming from where-I didn’t-know, and snagged a fist near the wall.

The hook slid around the fist until it sat securely. I leaned towards it from my place between the guide rails, tracing the path of the cable leading from it with my startled gaze. Mist and cloud above.

Clunk. Clunk. The fists on the outside of the buggy being hooked? I turned following the sounds. Clack! I held my breath. Clack! This was happening to my left, the second fist near the wall. I had to see what was happening. Ran quickly to that corner.

“Passengers stay in their places, please,” the buggy said.

“I’m not moving.”

Clack. The hook hit the fist. Did not engage. Swung back for another try. Made it.

I breathed relief. Uh-oh. The little lever that was meant to be pressed back and spring forward to close the circle, hadn't sprung forward. The fist sat loose in the lower wider arc of the hook.

The cables tightened. I strained to see up through the slow-moving cloud. I saw a huge ... A huge horizontal crane beam with what looked like a freight-container dwelling hanging from underneath? The structure, whatever it was, hung above and at right angles to the building. I felt like I should recognise it but I was too distracted.

The whole thing looked something like the robotic cranes that once carted shipping containers from ships to the shore, and onto trucks and such. Building complexes such as ours, Hen said, installed them to lift elevator buggies from one side of the divide between buildings, to the other.

The buggy began to rise above the top of the building. Or rather, the right-hand fist slid free from the rail.

The left-hand fist rolled in its hook. Slid free. The buggy floor tilted! Help! I slid too before I had hold of the guide rails again.

A quick look. The fist looked skewed. It didn't fit well around the top of the rail. And probably me weighting down that corner of the buggy tightened the skew of the fist.

The other three hooks clashed and clattered. The buggy juddered.

Was that the other three cables jiggling the buggy? Maybe to see if they could loosen it? My hands were slippery with cold sweat but I grabbed a further guide rail to make wider hold, my feet in a wider stance to balance against the shocks.

I grew dizzy watching the roof of the buggy swaying a tiny distance again and again from the crippled fist as the crane, by way of its cables, tried to fit the loose fist back onto its rail. The two sets of couplings at the bottom of the buggy squealed and resisted being moved back and forth. Would they bend as well?

The crooked fist groaned, then twisted on its shank like on a loaf of bread dough. Hen again, that I knew that. But metal? Twisting like that? Not possible.

I should get out of there.

How?

## **8. The Starship**

The buggy jerked down a little in the corner where I clung to the guide bars.

*Ee-ee-eng.* A wrenching squeal in that same corner. The door slid back in its bent frame, and wedging fast, formed a triangular hole.

My chance! The gap had to be large enough! I leapt for the framework, scrambled up it like a monkey. Right foot on a window frame. Left foot in a narrow slot in the door. One hand on the door frame. One arm reaching over the drop to the concrete lip surrounding the roof.

The buggy juddered as I pushed off from it. One foot, two feet. Two arms over the lip. Snap! The buggy helped by swaying away.

I clambered up the wall with tiptoes and knees. Slung my knee over. Wrenched my shoulder up and over. Rolled over the containment wall. Lay there, looking up at the sky. Low cloud. Blue between the foggy patches.

Thank you, Hen, for insisting I learn all those moves. She'd say, get up onto the top of the wardrobe anyway except by using a chair. Get up onto the bed from lying on the floor. Get up onto the bed, over the rolled-up mattress, from lying on the floor.

The buggy clanged against the wall below me as a wind stroked the cables and whistled along the buggy's roof. I didn't want to be right there hearing the buggy break loose and fall, and shatter on the wall on its way down. Imagining I might've still been in it. I crept away from the brink, sore hands, scraped knees.

Toward the only thing on the roof other than me. It didn't make sense. A concrete palm tree in a concrete pot? I curled round it. Like, I anchored myself to it. Shivered while I waited for the buggy to fall.

— — — —

I must've fallen asleep. All those hours last night waiting for the blue light, and my excitement. Waking Hen every tick of the clock for another question. I stretched beside the palm in the pot.

The whole roof area was blue. I rolled into it until I had the blue light all over me. Looked up. An octahedron-shaped starship—I found the word for its shape in a geometry text—hung over me. My starship, of course. So low in the sky now that my hands couldn't contain its shape. The size of the whole of Du when she was a baby.

I'm dreaming, and in the dream I rose to my feet and walked all round the edge of the rooftop of West Tower 5. The surrounding urbs were dim shapes standing in the night black water. Beyond a cone of blue light rising into the night dark, I couldn't see any lights, proof that no one else was even up out of bed.

I dreamed back to my seventh birthday, when the alien starship had seemed to be playing happy colours. Then my eleventh birthday that began with unhappy and became happy.

Now there were only stuttering shades of blue, many of them muddied and old. Ongoing in a random flow, without a pattern. There was no chorus singing their ethereal harmonies. Only a sputtering that reminded me of a broken speaker in my computer. Even in the dream, if that's what it was, I knew something was wrong.

If there'd been a person up in it, even an alien, wouldn't they have come out to ask for help? Though what could I do? Not a spaceship mechanic, technician or even a real Fetcher yet. So if no alien, no driver was the ship trying to run itself? If it was an AI, who sent it? "Is this you telling me you have no driver?" I called.

It seemed to me that it tried to answer. Blue grey green dirty aqua colours spattered close to its body with an occasional pure clear sandy gold yellow flaring among the mud.

My lion hair colour. Like it hoped for something. Asked for help. I spread my arms to the starship. "How?"

Next thing the thinning blue cone faded and all attempts at the colour play stopped. The largeness of the ship receded and became a shadow against the stars.

"Here she is," said a woman. "Luck is with us. Tell me you are all right, love?"

Huh? I recognised her voice. "Lilah? I ....?"

A second woman arrived. Jules. "Kosi? Is it you, girl? You saved yourself. Good work. The buggy could tell us you were here by the conversation you had. Get the first aid kit, Lilah."

"I only told it I'd stay where I was," I said.

"Buggy also told me you hired for W-8," Jules said. She doused my knees and my hands with some stinging yellow stuff. "We'll set you down there, give you a chit to explain what took you so long."

"Tha-ank y-y-you." My teeth chattered. The dawn cold hit me. The dream, I wanted to keep it. I tucked it into a secret place in my mind. Concentrate on this now. My challenge still to be achieved.

"She needs a hot drink," Lilah said.

"We've got the coffee," Jules said. "Let's have you on your feet, young one."

They guided me to their ... “What’s this place, please? I remember it but not the name.”

Jules laughed. “Our caboose. Our cubby in the sky. Usually strung up there under the crane gantry.” She pointed. “You remember that? I’m asking to make sure you don’t have a concussion.”

“No. No, I don’t think I hit my head.” I glanced up to where the starship glittered in the dawn sky and that’d just be reflections from the sun still below the horizon, off all its surfaces with none of its own colours in the mix. Then it rolled forward. Disappeared. Huh?

Did I really see that? Noticed Jules watched me like a hawk. I made my glance up there into an exploratory circling of my head to prove I hadn’t hurt my neck. That I was OK.

The clouds were gone. The crane beam across the divide between the buildings was perfectly visible. The caboose, hung from four cables and nestled close enough to the roof that I could step over the door-sill and into it without seeing the gap.

“It’s been a while since you were here,” Lilah said. “Remember where everything is?”

“You live here, I’ve always wanted to ask?” I said.

Jules laughed. “I knew you had more questions.”

“Two weeks here, working. Two weeks at home with our families,” Lilah said.

The caboose shifted.

Lilah grabbed me to stop me falling over. She placed my hands on the polished brass handrail that I now saw went right around the whole inside of the caboose.

She closed the door and fastened drop bars across it. “Hinges and door-locks allow the door to shift sometimes,” she explained. “The drop bars will stop us falling out if the caboose cantilevers.”

I didn’t know what cantilever meant exactly but got the general idea.

Jules drew me with her to the wide window and the desk in front. “Saw you dreaming of driving that time. Since we’re short of a buggy, and that buggy is still hanging from its cabling and cluttering the route, we’ll take you across and down to Central Level 8. Press down on that button and you can get us under way.”

## **9. The Helpful Soldier**

I danced through the grey bare-concrete doorway with the 8-W painted above it, so excited to have helped Jules drive the caboose over the gulf. The concrete space opened out to each side into a concourse filled with hundreds of people moving as though they all knew exactly where they were going.

I didn’t. I was on the wrong level for a start. Would I have enough time to browse through the

stalls as some of the crowd were also doing? Besides, I was hungry. Would I be able to buy something for 2 credits? I had to keep 4 for the way back.

Someone stood or sat selling something by every grey column. Hoping to make a sale, a flower-seller lifted bunches from one or other of a half dozen water-filled buckets to show off the blooms.

“Are these real flowers?” I said, sniffing the air for any fragrance.

“On your way, Fetcher.”

At the column next to her a water-seller had built a pyramid of bottles on a cart. I wasn't thirsty, I walked on.

When I smelled the fluffy popped corn the next woman had in a couple of big baskets, I swallowed a sudden rush of spit. “I'm hungry enough for three bags,” I told her, smiling.

“These aren't for the likes of you, Fetcher,” said that stall-holder. Not friendly.

What was it with these stall holders? I couldn't walk away. I stayed to drool.

The popcorn seller screeched. “Get away! You stink!” She flapped her hands at me to get me gone and caught the eye of a soldier-woman passing. “Help me get rid of this pest? Give you a bag of popcorn?”

The soldier came ambling over. She was tall and had muscles showing under her uniform. She grabbed my arm and towed me away. “Pew! You do stink! Though you do look like a fetcher. You're not on your level whoever you are. Tell you what, do me a fetch and I won't report you.”

She took my silence as agreement. “You look like a beginner. But never mind, we all have to start somewhere.”

What could I say? I nodded. “Fetch what?”

“A girl of my house left her shoes on Level 7. New shoes that she took off while waiting for her transport, because she got blisters, the silly little goose. Worse, she was too embarrassed to go back for them when she realised that she'd forgotten them.”

She walked me to the balustrade overlooking the flight space, keeping hold of my arm tight enough that I couldn't wrench loose. “Can you see them?”

Level 7 was the next level down. Seats surrounded the open space where you could wait for your ride. There weren't any shoes that I could see near the seats on the opposite, eastern, side of the concourse. “Did she say where on level 7?”

“I don't remember. I was too busy regretting that I would have to make another trip into central.” The soldier dragged me north so we could check Level 7 south and then Level 7 west.

“There, under that seat!”

“Check. Go fetch them, Fetcher.”

I remembered that I had the challenge. “I have a fetch on Level Six, can I do that at the same time?”

“Why not? Two fetches at the same time will get your brain cells going. You got the first address imprinted in your mind?”

I nodded.

“Run the shoes down to West Tower, Level 7, Apartment 12. Put them in the entry and pick up your credit chit.”

Easy. The girl who owned the shoes lived in the same building as me, on the level below. And she wasn't a hidden child. I wished we could've been friends. My stomach grumbled and I remembered I was about to fall off my perch with hunger. “I'm too hungry to run.”

“Well, we better get you fuelled up.” The soldier walked me to a snack stall. “Much more wholesome than popcorn.”

“One of those?” I pointed at a sort of roll that looked appetising.

“Soy protein filling. That'll be 15 credits,” the stall-holder said. “Sauce?” she said so frostily I didn't bother.

The soldier paid by swiping her mobile.

While I gobbled down the roll, she stared into space. Disowning my lack of table manners, maybe.

Licking my fingers after eating, I re-checked out the way Parra Central's levels were connected. In case everything had been rebuilt since I was here with Hen. In two opposite corners were wide ramps going to the floors above and below. The other opposite corners had spiral stairs, one on either side of the wide maw where the flying transports went in and out. “W-7-12, you said.”

She nodded and took out her cell, dismissing me.

Me—I took off left—towards the ramps.

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### **The Challenge**

From halfway between Level 8 and Level 7 in Parra Central, I glanced over to where I'd left the soldier. She was still there, now watching me. At the bottom of the Level 7 ramp, I turned to walk back along the western side of the concourse and imagined that every one of the

people around me watched me.

I almost missed the shoes, I was so intent on what I imagined. With my face even redder, I backtracked to the seat, put the shoes in my pack and looked around as nonchalantly as I could to plan the next leg of my journey.

This level was even busier than Level 8 and often I had to dodge around people getting into and out of their transports. In the eastern half of the concourse, I had to push my way through the crowds in a produce market among the columns.

Finally I made it to Level 6. Glancing back up to Level 8, I saw that the soldier had gone. I could relax that meant. Enjoy the crowds? Better concentrate on finding the bank of lockers my father told me about.

Nothing looking like lockers in the first corridor where I looked. Not in the second or third. I went clockwise around the outer edge of the concourse. Fewer people walked by the wall, so progress good until someone ran into me full-pelt from the opposite direction.

I went into tumbling mode, stepped back, and could keep to my feet.

She fell. "Who are you?" she said rudely. A girl not much bigger than me, dressed in fetcher garb with shin-length pants and shirt of faded, patchy tans and no-colours and a short raggedy overskirt of worn denim.

"I'm sorry. Are you hurt?" I put my hand out to help her up but she scrambled up by herself.

"If you'd been one of our fetchers, you would've known that this is an anti-clockwise route," she said. "So who are you? What's a beginner like you doing here?"

Three things I didn't know how to answer and one I could've observed. "OK, anti-clockwise. I'll remember that."

"What the hell, Jackie?" a little voice burred from the side of the fetcher's ear. Oh, she had an earpiece in.

She talked at it out of the side of her mouth. "Can you see me, Gladdy? I caught a foreign fetcher on our patch. She ran clockwise along the outer edge and we met."

"What info have you got from her so far?" the little voice said.

"Nothing except that she'll remember the anti-clockwise for next time. She looks like a beginner?"

"Don't let her get away," Gladdy said as if I couldn't hear every word she said. "We'll take her in."

"Sorry," Jackie said to me with her hand over her ear. "Gladdy is my ganger. She's up there somewhere." She gestured vaguely into the direction of an upper level. "Today is my try-out for skipping up from the beginner class finally."

So maybe Jackie would understand. I gabbled out everything I thought that might help. “I have to go. I’m in disguise. I’m on my challenge. I’m one of Hen’s girls.” I tore out of her grip and continued on my way, still going clock-wise, the next corridor entrance only a few paces.

And there were the lockers, a three-high bank of them. My heart beating hard, I shot to the end of the row and stood flat against the wall, hiding.

Jackie and Gladdy entered the corridor arguing loudly. Jackie defended herself with the things I said. “I only know what she said. She said she is one of Hen’s girls like I would know who Hen is?”

“Hen? Doesn’t ring a bell,” Gladdy said. “You failed the trial obviously. Crashing into someone, you should be able to keep upright. Like her. More time in the gym for you.”

Their voices retreated around the corner and became part of the background hum on the concourse. I peered round the corner to see if they were really gone. When I was sure, I turned to the lockers to get an idea of their lay-out. How were they numbered—or named for that matter—along the rows? Or up and down?

I stared numbly at the middle row of lockers. Scarily, I couldn’t recall whether my father told me a number. I saw things like Smrn61. Nwhs203. A bunch of letters followed by a bunch of numbers. Or the other way around. Like, 54Ssmth. Most were a mix-up. Rn6m7E.

Codes in other words. My father meant me to work out his code? I gasped for air. My hands went slippery with sweat. He hadn’t told me anything. Or I didn’t hear, being so super confident. Then I was clammy all over. Breathing too fast.

Someone walked up to the lockers and passed his mobile over a code. The locker door popped open. “Looking to find, fetcher? Or looking to learn?” he said over his shoulder.

“Trying to remember,” I said. I shrugged, trying for .... “It’ll come to me.”

He slammed shut his locker. “Good luck with that.” Walked away with whatever he got out under his arm.

I remembered finally that Hen taught me heaps about cracking codes. I looked the weird numbers over more carefully. Just the six lockers nearest, to start with. No vowels apart from a capital E. Comparing it to other capital letters along the row, I thought it might refer to the dorm stacks E S W N. Ours was W.

The numerals could then refer to Levels and Apartment numbers. Work on them later. Back to the fact of no vowels. What had Hen said about them?

Think think. Ah. A long time ago paper was very precious and no computers then. Words were made shorter by leaving out the vowels so more could be fitted on a page. I looked at the six codes in front of me.

Not one had a W, meaning—if I was right—not one of the people who owned these lockers came from my tower. I started at the beginning. Top row first locker. Was there a W in that code. No. Moved along. Found all the W codes along there and studied how they might make up a name. None could be turned into Moran.

Middle row. I got quicker. Fifth locker from the end...? I smirked. Moran@W820 got made into M8r20nW. I passed my mobile over the code.

*Click.*

The most satisfying click I heard in a long time. I opened the door.

What? Nothing there. Nothing lay in the locker. Empty. Bare walls. Bare base. I felt all over the ceiling of it. Nothing. Not believing my eyes or my hand, I did it all again. Not even a note. Everything light in me dumped down to my stomach and made it heavier than lead. My father meant me to fail?

Failing at the challenge meant ... nobody ever said, but I knew it would be serious. Tears started. I couldn't stop them. I slammed the locker door shut and stepped around the corner again. Hid again. I failed at my challenge. Not smart enough. How did that happen? I cried three sobs worth and thought of a worse thing. Was it worth going home to find out?

Yes. I had to warn Hen. And what about Du, how could I help her now? Got my bandana from around my neck. Mopped up. Remembered dully that I am my father's daughter and that he'd been practicing his smarts a lot longer than I have. Probably something Hen said at one or another time. Warning me.

But now, I'm going to need to be really really smart to outsmart whatever he's got planned for me. And act more convincingly than I ever acted before.

I still had those shoes to deliver. They'd give me an excuse if I needed one to be over there.

## **10. Where is Hen?**

When I left the corridor I went straight into the crowd so it took me a while to finally arrive on the walkway facing Parra-West across the way.

Which was the name of our dorm block, according to the letters high up under its roof. Did I even look back this morning, to make sure of it? I shook my head at my lackadaisical attitude then. Level 7, Unit 12 was where I had to go with the shoes. I punched in the numbers in the Buggy Booking Box on the wall.

Waited. Mist gambolled between the buildings. The underside of the caboose under the crane-beam slid to and fro. Comforting. I dropped my gaze. Didn't want to miss my transport. Didn't want to seem to be the wrong person, say that soldier was still watching. Or my father for that matter. What if he shadowed me?

A buggy stopped in front of me and I got in. I rode up. The hooks engaged nicely with the fists on the buggy. Thank you, Jules and Lilah. The buggy swayed across the gulf.

On the other side the buggy bounced a little. I imagined the lower fists seeking the rails to hold onto. The machinery under the buggy whined harder as the buggy quested for the exact fit. A balloon of worry swelled and swelled under my breastbone.

Zzatt!

There! The fists slid over the rail. The balloon popped and relief filled me. The buggy slid down until the upper fists also engaged. Clunk, clatter, clash! The hooks went swinging up into the fog. The buggy slid down and passed a number of doorways without stopping. I read the numerals as we passed them. 10, 9, 8 ...

The buggy slowed. I read Level Number 7 beside the gate into the exterior corridor. The buggy stopped so that its floor lined up with the level's floor. The panel opposite to the door I'd entered became a door in its turn. It slid aside, catching a guardrail as it went by. All of it the same as I had experienced many times before.

"Passengers may disembark," the buggy said.

I tottered out. It took me a couple paces to find my normal gait. I looked up, wanting a break in the clouds. Even a micro-second's worth of seeing the starship would've been good. But just rain again blew at me. The buggy clashed its door shut and sank toward the lower floors. I was alone in the Level 7 entry.

Which was good. I walked along the walkway around the outside of the building with as normal a pace as I could manage. Something you'd obviously only do in fine weather, or if you were pretending to be a fetcher, like I was, without the proper codes to walk the inside corridors.

Around the corner from Parra-Central where I hoped to find Residence 12, I finally saw the sun, almost overhead. The building had hardly any shadow and the sky surrounding the sun was more white than blue. Hen said to never stare into the sun because you'd go blind in less than a minute. I broke out into a sweat from the heat radiating from the walls nearby and Level 7's steel walkway, and maybe also my worries. On I go.

Residence 12 was the corner unit. I set the shoes neatly side by side on the doormat, not to give real fetchers a bad name, and started home.

I figured that I could find a door on Level 7 into the central transport yard where a flight of stairs would lead me to Level 8. I'd stopped feeling very clever back at the lockers and was not surprised when I arrived in front of the glass doors into the Level 7 corridors and they didn't open for me.

But I danced like a demon on the sensa-mats. And swore and screamed in a whisper voice. It didn't help. The doors stayed shut.

Finally, a cab came sliding in to drop someone home. The woman straightaway saw me sitting there by the doors. And of course I told her the story Hen told me to tell.

“Bardelote Henry?” she said. “Bardelote is a mother? That’s been a well-kept secret.” She looked me up and down for more secrets. “Just started in fetching, have you? I need someone for my groceries. Remember that for when you have a bit of experience, okay? My address is W-7 Apartment number 4.”

While she talked, she drew me with her into the building. I didn’t break the spell. In the corridor we parted ways. She went to the left and turned the corner. I waited until she was out of sight and made a dash for the concrete internal stairs, up two short flights to Level 8, along the concrete corridor to the door into the study.

At least that was unlocked.

My father, at his desk, stared at me with an utter amazement that changed to disappointment and then to white-hot rage. He pointed me into the hidden house.

I went without a protest. I had to warn Hen. I searched the place in five steps. No Hen! Behind me, the door between the study and the hidden house slid shut. The locks nicked shut. I was a prisoner.

## **11. My Little Sister**

I was so tired I went to bed early. It’s also the most comfortable and secure-feeling place when Hen isn’t in the hidden house with me. I need that feeling to stop thinking of all the worst things that could still happen.

Breakfast the next day was hard. At first I watched the family eating theirs. My father glanced toward the louvres every time he forked up a mouthful of scrambled egg on toast. I sock-footed to the study door, hoping against hope that it was unlocked and that there was a tray of food for me on the desk.

But the door to the study was still locked and did not budge to all my pushing, pulling, beating it, and jumping on the sensa-mat. Both the louvres were sealed when I got back to them. I imagined he’d done it just to shut me out.

Out of pure frustration, and hunger—I had to take my mind off it—I distracted myself with researching our urb, Parra 5. You can never tell when a bit of in-depth knowledge will come in handy.

Satellite views show this complex to be one of dozens. All in the form of a + sign, four dormitory stacks around a utility stack. Dormitories are where people live. Utilities are where they work in shops, stalls, kiosks. Clinics. Schools. Offices. Barracks. Labs. All stuff I already know.

These days, says the Parranet, most life styles encourage further travel. The utility blocks now contain two levels of transport facilities. Where for instance you can catch a bus to the nearest air travel port or a cab to take you home in comfort. OK, that’s new.

The elevator buggies every complex has threading between their buildings are well past their prime and prone to accident and failure. Duh.

It used to be that the areas in the utilities blocks that are now used for transport pick-ups were food gardens. But since the Life Lotteries have indeed crimped the population, there's land again to farm. Or so says the government website.

I'm keeping my hunger down by drinking lots of water. My gut complains loudly every time I think of food. I search out and break into the emergency snack supply that Hen kept under her bed. If I eat just three bars a day, I can last for 6 days. Surely my father will have given in by then?

More research will keep my mind off the whole deal.

All the central buildings in each complex are eight sided. All buildings have that transport well in the centre, for ease of fly-car use, I presume. There's a lot of maths about the proportions that I can't be bothered with.

Later in the morning there's an upset in the non-hidden house, or should I say another upset. Hen and I have been hearing them for a while and trying to ignore them. Something is coming to a head she said once with a pinched expression. And she gestured zip-your-lips. The same thing as saying don't-ask.

I opened the virtual window by way of the macro I invented that is now always skulking somewhere on my monitor.

My father entered the living room from the garden room. Atrium to him. He frowned about all the noise. But he says, "Why don't I take my little sweetheart for that walk I've been promising her?"

Du, his little sweetheart for that minute—I mean, has he ever taken any notice of her? Not that I recall. Well, Du was over the moon. Of course. "Yes please, Daddy. Can we feed the ducks?" He nodded. She glowed with happiness. "Please wait, Daddy, and I'll get us some bread."

I'm crying because it's happening and I don't have anyway of preventing it. I'm a prisoner.

"What about me?" says my brother. I don't see what his mother promises him because I'm all eyes for the little mite stepping out proudly with her father, bread bag in hand, babbling happily.

I hear them passing by the study door. I hear the glass doors sliding open and shut, and the faint whine of a cab sliding away.

One hour, forty-seven minutes and thirty-two seconds later, my father returns without my sister. A special little treat for a special little girl? Why didn't I think so? I miss you, Hen.

I named my sister Du because it means strong. But she is still only a little one. Where could my father have left her? I need to get out of the house and find her.

## 12. In the Dark

Someone came into the study.

A long time ago Hen made a hole in the wall beside the door to be prepared, she said, and to see who entered.

It was my father. He sat at the house desk and woke it.

“Where’s Hen?” I said through the hole, though I wanted to ask where he’d left Du.

“You didn’t come back at the agreed time so I put her off,” he said without looking up.

“You sacked her,” I said.

He did his fierce anger thing with his mouth. He snarled silently, showing off his strong white teeth. “Go sit on your bed,” he said.

I stalked back to my bedroom and my bed, where I was meant to sit with my hands neatly on my lap, my feet together on the mat, while he stood over me and told me what he thought of this or that of my actions.

He didn’t come.

After a while, as his true daughter, I seethed with some anger of my own. I had to get out and find Du. Hen would be easy to find as she was affiliated with the Fetcher House. “Can I tell you why I was late?” I said meekly through the hole. Previous experience taught me it would do me no good to show any anger.

“Won’t make any difference,” he said.

I abandoned being-good and being-polite. “Difference to what?”

“Maybe your passing will be more peaceful if I tell you of *my* difficulties. And so maybe you won’t haunt me.”

Thinking that they were the two most awful things a father could say to his daughter if he was serious—and he didn’t sound like he was joking—I almost missed what he said about my mother.

“Your mother went the way of Life Lottery winners. What was I to do with you when my new wife demanded her rightful two children?” He stared back into his past. “We had our boy. He started off very well and I admit we got our hopes up.”

“For what?” I said to get him out of his dream.

“About the middle of his childhood, his schoolwork went to average. We had him assessed, taught by the best and then retested. I almost had to let you pass then, money was so tight. We never dreamed he wouldn’t make it into one of the feeder schools to the University of

Alien Biology. We were so, so disappointed.” He drooped, reliving it.

And then he perked up. I wasn’t even jealous about my brother’s schooling because the way my father perked up, so callously. Something awful had to be coming.

“That same week we heard about the Gen-En-Co Smart Kids program. The company provided two ways to get into their program. One, they ran a lottery for five unencumbered places for those who didn’t have any children already or enough credit to buy their way in.”

“Wait, what do you mean by unencumbered?” I hoped it didn’t mean what I suspected.

“Means what I said. People who didn’t have any children already,” he said.

“You had me, my brother and my sister.” I surprised myself with my accusatory tone.

He shrugged. Wafted us out of the way with one hand. “We put our names down for one of those places right away. Second, Gen-En-Co auctioned off fifteen places per intake. Though we didn’t have the credit, we thought to maximise our chances. Gen-En-Co had ancillary requirements that not everyone could fill. But we figured we could provide them with the smart male child they required ... we had one male already after all ... for their experimental education program. A gamble that didn’t pay off.”

My heart beat sluggishly from fright. He’d already dumped Du. Abandoned her somewhere, like Hansel’s and Gretel’s and all the other fairy tale parents left their children behind. What would he do with my brother? With me? My hands filmed with cold sweat.

“But never mind, yesterday we heard that we’d won a place! We’ve been accepted! One more week and we’ll move into our luxury quarters at Gen-En-Co. We’ll finally be free from government interference, the world is our oyster.”

Did he think that if he told me, I would excuse him his crime? Hen taught me what was what, and what my father and stepmother were doing wasn’t it.

He shut the computer down and went into the legal house. The louvres stayed sealed.

I lay on my bed, did not sleep. I let myself be angry. I didn’t want to be scared.

Everyone got up with the birds, as Hen used to say. I always asked her, what birds? The ones that sing the dawn chorus, she said. One day I will hear the dawn chorus.

Now I listened at the louvres. I heard my brother pretending that he thought they were all going on a holiday. He knew something was up because half the time he behaved like a five year old, like Du, as if he was trying to be her and him at the same time.

My father entered the study through the outside door. He woke the inbuilt desk computer. “House,” he said. Then, “Go to sleep. Put the utilities into dormancy.”

The lights in the hidden house dimmed. Then the remaining pinpricks of light winked out. I kept my hands flat on my desk to keep it active and glowing. The dormancy state crept

around my hands—maybe their warmth stopped it advancing—then edged under my hands. Finally the desk’s input surface died and went opaque.

*Schlick.* The door locked itself after my father on his way out.

Hen always let me have a night-light but now I couldn’t see anything no matter how hard I looked. I concentrated on sound. Water gurgled in the pipes. A chugging outside. A low buzzing from overhead.

The buzzing stopped.

The aircon stopped?

I got up off the chair and held onto the desk to make sure it didn’t run away into the dark. Touched the wall with an outstretched hand. How hard was it to remember directions when I could only see stars and them only when I rubbed my eyes. Left hand to the wall.

No. Better idea. I sank to the floor. Crawled to the bathroom, skimming the wall with my left flank. There, the door jamb. I rose onto my knees, clambering my hands up the jamb.

The bathroom ceiling was low because I was taller now. I reached overhead. The air-vent was above my head, just inside the bathroom door. I stuck my fingers into the little squares of the grill covering the vent.

On hot days my fingertips would get icy cold. On cold days my fingers used to get warmed. A neat trick I worked out all by myself in my seventh year. Then, I had had to stand on my desk chair.

No air moved in or out through the vents. No air! How quickly would I use up what I had? How fast if I cried and screamed? I bit my lip and stared hard into the dark.

After a while I remembered that Hen wouldn’t have left without making sure I could escape.

## **10. The Princess-and-the-Pea Event**

How did Hen get out of the house when my father forgot to leave a door unlocked? She’d make an exasperated sound, then fetch her ...?

Fetch her magnet. That was it, a big magnet. I concentrated remembering its shape and size and weight. A cube that filled Hen’s hand, the upper face in her palm. Her fingers and thumb grappled three sides. She’d heft it and swipe a door lock with it, then put it away.

Where would she have hidden it? I didn’t flutter around searching, wasting my energy or air. I let my mind search the places where my father would never think to look. Therefore not the bathroom cabinet, my shelves or Hen’s shelves. Not under my bed.

I checked the boxes by touch. Kneeling by Hen’s bed, I dragged them out. The first one was for the emergency food. I felt around in it. Three packets remained. Shoved that box back. The middle box was for Hen’s outdoor clothes when she was with me, her indoor clothes

when she wasn't. I got a lump in my throat stroking her soft old indoor shirt. Shoved that box back under the bed. If I cried, I'd be using up more air than I could afford.

The last box contained a spare set of fetcher-type clothes for me, in case I needed a new identity. The fetchers out in the concourse probably all knew, or knew of me, by now. Might help to be able to move around without them realising there-she-goes. I undressed and dressed, feeling all the hems and seams and pockets in the fetcher clothes again, in case I missed any secrets. No secrets. Best thing about my new outfit? No smell.

I tossed my old clothes into the box. Not the magnet yet.

Our living room had my desk by the inner wall, and a table and two chairs by the unit's outer wall, where we ate and played games. A pretend porthole was set into the wall beside the table that I used to delight in programming with outdoor scenes with palm trees.

Back to finding the magnet. I crawled around on my hands and knees to check the undersides of things. I banged my head on the table and then the desk.

I stopped until I had imagined the rooms and the furniture from my blind point of view on the floor. I think I dozed off. All the excitement, I suppose. Plus being hollow in the gut. I shifted to Hen's bed. My head near the door, my feet on the pillow. I doubted that Hen would be back to rile at me. Only two doors between me and freedom—and finding Du—if I left the door between Hen's room and the living room open.

I would've slept but for the lump under my shoulder. What on Earth did Hen keep in her bed? I ripped apart her carefully tucked-in sheets and quilt. Whatever it was, it wasn't in the bed. I folded the mattress back onto itself.

Yes! The magnet! It sat half in the depression left by the bed-leg being extended out further because of Hen suddenly deciding one day that she wanted the bed higher.

I laughed. What did Hen tell my father for a reason that she suddenly wanted her bed hoicked up? I remembered his embarrassment having to hold it up, just so, while she crawled half-under it to adjust the screw collar. Ha ha, she bested you, my unnatural father!

Nothing was going to stop me now. I swiped the magnet over the door lock of the door between me and the study. The door swished open. Swiping the door-stop at the top of the track, I set the door on open. Waltzed through, feeling giddy with excitement and hunger. I swiped the door between me and freedom. Nothing. No go. Zilch. Zero. Nought. The magnet didn't work on the back door!

I almost threw the cube at the green line outlining the house computer where it was set in the study's table top. Just in time letting my arm fall without allowing the magnet to fall to the ground. Whenever Hen let me hold the magnet when I was still real young she cupped her hands under it.

After setting the magnet gently on the table top beside the computer, I threw myself into my father's chair. I woke the computer. Cheered, turning all the lights on, both in my hidden rooms and the legal house. Got the the aircon going. Opened the louvres. Unlocked the

internal doors. “Yes, yes, yes! Tra-lah!”

Opened a charger, and rested my mobile on it.

I danced into the legal house, laughing victoriously.

No furniture remained. Didn't look, or smell, like a house where anyone would be coming home. That sobered me. Breathing didn't feel so good anymore. Just the dust was left, and the stale places where the heavy furniture had stood.

The litter bin in the kitchen held a half bag of bread cubes, the remains of the duck food presumably. I was hungry enough that I gobbled up a handful of them and sucked water from my water-bottle. Why didn't my father leave them with Du?

Unless there'd been no ducks in the scenario. He was away one-and-three-quarter-hours. There and back meant he'd abandoned her maybe fifty minutes out. Or an hour for her little legs to walk there, and half an hour for him to walk back. Rough guess, remember.

I had to get out there myself.

In one of the empty rooms I found a calico-look shoulder bag with a packet of coffee shots tucked deep in a corner. My food supply. I added the rest of the duck food in its plastic bag.

Back to the study. Pocketing my recharged mobile, I went back to studying my father's filing system. Ha! A file with the staff's codes to get in and out of the house. Hen's code was N-G-9A.

N-G-9A? Could that be her house code as well? N for North. G for Ground Level. The rest referring to a unit down there maybe. I was hazy on accommodation at ground level.

I couldn't wait any longer, had to know if it worked. I punched N-G-9A into the keypad by the exit door. The door slid open! I was out and could order a ride ... Wait! I forgot I had no more credit on my mobile.

Beg Jules and Lilah up top for a ride across? But after that? I had to eat and Du would be hungry too by now.

Back into the study. Dropped back into the system. Deeper and deeper. The-man-my-father was a lot more careful with his own codes.

There. Numbers.

According to his credit records, my father had three children. Each child – Daughter, Son, Daughter – had a row of figures assigned to them that were storing varying large amounts, larger than the amount in my father's own row.

I transferred one hundred credits from his account to my mobile. Enough so it would be easy to misread the new total of 500 as the original total of 600. Deleted everything in the names of his three children. Because he acted like he had no children.

## 14. Finding Du

The elevator buggy rattled up from wherever it made its previous stop. Good to know that I wasn't the only one using the buggies though I hadn't seen anyone yet since escaping. I glanced up to see the crane-arm and the caboose hanging under it. Jules and Lilah were up there. Not totally alone in the scene.

The crane-arm stuck out from Utilities. Sunlight glinted off the cabling sliding within the latticed arm. Although the sky above the crane was pale blue, mist rose between the two buildings. I leaned over the safety rail to see the chasm between the buildings deep in shadow. I still hadn't seen ground level.

The buggy stopped, the door slid aside and I jumped aboard. The buggy rocked and the door didn't close. Oops. I stepped here, there, then found the place where my weight balanced the floor and allowed the door shut.

While the buggy did its thing crossing the divide, I dug into my food bag and chewed bread cubes. Drank water.

On the other side the buggy descended and stopped. I shot out and waved upward with big swings of my arms. I couldn't stop grinning when the steam whistle hooted. At least somebody appreciated that I was alive.

Staring in through the concrete doorway into the concourse with barely a plan, doubts reared their heads in me. I felt hollow. Meeting up with someone like Hen right now would've been good. And what would she have said being summoned to shore up a lack of courage? Go at it, girl!

Though she did also always say to look before you leap. And think your task through before you commit yourself. My task, find Du. Find the duck pond where she was abandoned. How?

The doorway was wide enough to take a fly-car, I remembered, but only high enough that I could and would—yes—with a jump touch the overhead jamb. For luck. Then I pushed slowly through the murmuring crowd, shamelessly eavesdropping on every conversation about children, and what they might right now be doing.

Nobody talked about taking kids to parks, playgrounds or duck-ponds. Too early in the day, I suppose. Most kids had just been dropped off at daycare or school.

What if all the green spaces and playgrounds had been disappeared to make way for fly-cars? As had the market gardens?

Mmm. I'd have to be smarter. But on an empty stomach? I remembered I had no smell on my clothes. I joined a queue lining up for food. Bought two roll-ups and a bottle of water. No drama. Ate and thought up my next move. Joined the queue again.

“Still hungry?” said the woman serving.

“For my sister,” I said. “Her favourite is soy cheese with brown sugar.”

“Spoiling her,” the server said.

“A treat,” I said. “She said she was at the park,” I said. “But she’s little. Didn’t tell me which park. Just that it had a duck-pond and it was near here?”

A couple of people in the queue laughed. “Everything is near here, pet,” said a woman at the end of the line. “Your parents never took you to the roof? A little one, is she by herself?”

Ignoring that woman, I paid the stall-holder for Du’s roll-up and a bottle of water and started toward the ramps. If Hen ever took me to the roof in the days of the secret outings, I didn’t remember it. Wonder why she didn’t?

The woman from the end of the queue followed me. “You should hurry,” she said. “Going-to-feed-the-ducks is a thing people do to dump their excess children. Who knows what happens to them afterwards?”

Startled into action, I mouthed a thanks at her before starting to run. My mind raced ahead. Du, if she was still at the pond, had been alone up there through the night.

A heavy weight thumped into my back. I slammed to the concrete. “Gotcha!” someone shouted and sat on my legs, flattening my knees against the concrete pavement.

“Ouch! Get off me!” I said.

“Be quiet,” the someone hissed. “It’s a fair catch.” Out of the side of her mouth she said, “You can all relax. I’ve got her.”

It was Jackie sitting on my legs.

Complaints came out of her earpiece and she addressed them. “She passed you, dipstick. She’s obviously smarter than you are. Go home. Miz Henry squared it with the House. We can have the rest of the day off.”

“You said Miz Henry.” I struggled free from under her. “You’re talking about Hen. Where is she? Get *off* me!”

“Only if you don’t run,” Jackie said.

“You sound a lot like my brother used to,” I said. “I won’t hurt you if you don’t run, he’d say to my little sister.”

She let me get to my feet. Even dusted me off.

“You need to let me go,” I said. “If Hen doesn’t have Du yet, I need to go up to the roof. To the duck-pond.”

“Hey, you are weird. How about first asking what’s your name? It’s Jackie by the way. Miz

Henry told me yours. Kosi Lionhair. Seriously weird.”

“The fetcher complaining at you through your earpiece the first time we met, called you Jackie. Her name is Gladdy.”

Jackie frowned, glanced about, then smiled. “Miz Henry set this up. A fetch to fetch a fetcher, she said. She told me what you’re like. She’s got a real sense of smart.”

“Does she have Du?” I said. “If not, let me go. She could still be up there. She could’ve hidden.” I got ready to pull free.

Jackie talked into her earpiece, inquiring about Du. “Oh. Okay.” She turned back to me. “Let’s go. We’re to meet Miz Henry and Rhoka in the freight elevator.” She led me into the only wide corridor raying off from the concourse. “What size kid are we looking for?”

“She’s six. About this high.” I patted my elbow. “A little higher than my waist.” Then I ran. Not going to wait for the elevator.

Jackie dithered. She was torn. She’d been given her instructions.

I ran up the next ramp. And back-tracking in space but rising in the second dimension along the next ramp. Zig zagged like a ..., and came into a green space from its rear. I stopped. Need to get my bearings.

The elevator? I’m glad I gave it a miss. Too obvious. Too big. The centre of the scene. I tiptoed among a bunch of solid sapling trunks. Nothing underfoot. Like no dry leaves or sticks. Overhead a cloud of digital veg. Wonder if they had any real, actual saplings fronting the display?

No need for me to risk my cover to find out. Listening hard for a little voice, I skulked along the back of the display and noted four entries in the corners. The elevator made a fifth one. No Du yet.

Ping. Ping. The elevator disgorged at least four people. Hen. I recognised her voice. Rohka, adult female. Jackie and maybe the elevator attendant. And they all spread into the central park-style landscape. And started calling out to Du.

What the hell? Too many strangers. Though she might know Hen. I couldn’t recall if they ever met. I slide-footed a couple of paces inward. Started sideways to get a circle happening. If Du was still here, I had to hope she’d be hiding and that I’d meet her within the so-called forest.

About a quarter of the circle, about level with the second corner entrance, an elevator dinged. Not the same sound as the freight elevator. More a people conveyance. A larger bunch of people got out, I saw through the sapling forest. Half a dozen. Police uniforms. I felt relieved. Police helped people.

They advanced on Hen and her group, apparently seeming to think they could herd Hen and the others back the way they’d come.

Hen and Rohka argued their case for being there though I didn't hear exactly what they said. The freight elevator man argued. "Why would you not expect people to come searching for a lost little one?" he said loud.

Didn't listen for what Jackie might have to add, for it came to me that Hen and the rest were being a diversion. I side-stepped through the forest, freezing whenever the police faced my way.

"Du," I said softly to my side. "Wake up." In case she was asleep. "Du. It's Kosi Lionhair coming to find you. Hen is out there stopping the bad people catching us. I'm in the forest with you. Silent voice, silent feet, Du."

Another quarter circle. The police had forced Hen and the others nearer to elevator bay. It looked like two or three of them were ready to peel off and start the hunt.

"A clever ploy, isn't it?" Hen said.

"What is?" said the police operative holding her.

"The way people breed up multiple kids. Sure, they do all the hard work of the first five years, but then get to drop them off here and go home for another try. I'm curious. What's in it for you? Apart from the job. What do you do with them? Little slaves in your bunk houses?"

One of the police laughed shortly. He might have chinned upward.

It meant something to Hen obviously. "You send them into *space*?" She was being extra disbelieving. "That has got to be the limit." She gestured futility with her upturned hands.

The police lost their patience and said some hard words. A lightweight weight rose from the ground and pushed at my side. I looked down. Du. Tear-stained and grubby.

Finger in front of my lips. She nodded. I gripped her hand and guided her into a slow, silent, slip-sliding movement back toward the second corner exit.

Ignoring the arguments at the elevator hub—the discussion had escalated into shouting and even screeching—Du and I slipped into the tunnel-mouth. Just enough light to see by. Dark grey sprayed concrete walls that around only one right-angled corner went to dark red plush.

Huh? Velvet? Du and I both gravitated to the wall for a feel.

"Nice, isn't it?" Jackie said from behind. "That's a movie theatre through there. Obviously not for the likes of us. You got her." She sounded grudging. "Hen said you would. Let's go."

"Where to?" I said.

"Home to Hen's place. And you know the way, I understand." Jackie laughed. "Prove it." She took Du's other hand.

## **15: Ground Level**

Jackie's mystery-making started while I input credits to get a buggy. "Punch in Level 1 for going to the Fetcher House, Kosi. We've got to go there first."

I laughed. "Is this you trying to get used to my name? Is it that unusual?" I teased. "Level 1 or the Fetcher House?" I had my finger hovering.

She frowned. "Yes and yes. You'll be in my group. I'd better get used to you fast. Both. We'll need tokens, and the likes of you and me get them at the Fetcher House. The elevator to Ground Level takes off from Level One."

Oh. "Because it is like a vending machine?" I guessed, trying out some of my learning.

"Human operated, because of all the different things that have to happen to the freight. Some of it goes to the rubbish lighter. Some goes to the recycling centre. Some are grocery orders for the people living on the boats. Parra Five doesn't have enough tech, so it's quicker if a human makes the decisions."

People living on the boats? I had images in my mind for freighters going from place to place, and boats crossing sea-lanes aka ferries and boats, for catching fish aka trawlers. None for people-living-on-boats kind of boats.

The buggy rattled down to the first floor and a voice encouraged us off with a cheery word. "Jackie and Kosi for the Fetcher House."

The lane to the Fetcher House was filled with a line of khaki-green uniformed soldiers, but my mind was on who announced us. “That was Li ...”

Jackie put her arm around my neck, hand over my mouth. “Shh. We don’t normally get crowds down here. And definitely no green-clads.”

That was Lilah’s voice, I had been going to say.

Jackie took my hand. She hissed. “Pretend you’re younger than me.” She tipped a soldier on her elbow. “We’re Fetchers going home to the Fetcher House?”

The crowd parted and showed itself to be a group of people being encircled by a line of green-clads. The people being contained inside sagged, maybe from tiredness, standing up for a while. Who knew how long they’d been there already. They looked unkempt, Hen’s word for un-brushed and unwashed.

The space we were in wasn’t a large concourse. There wasn’t a transport well in the centre, I realised. Instead a dark-grey cubical structure with three doors a side, squatted in the centre. Green-clads guarded its doorways.

We trotted into the crowd.

Jackie glanced furtively for ways through. I glanced at the soldiers. How many kinds of army were there? Hen never mentioned green-clads. Their prisoners looked at the ground and muttered at each other. I wouldn’t mind drifting over and hearing what they said.

Jackie dragged me through a squared archway into another even smaller area. An overflow of people half-filled that area too. Here the green-clads surrounded the unkempt solidly, making a chain of themselves with arms over each other’s shoulders.

Jackie repeated her story. “Fetchers going home.” We ducked under and made for a pair of young guards dressed in washed-out camouflage, standing in front of a wide grey door. “Zee. Bodhi.” Jack nodded. “This is Kosi Lionhair?”

“Miz Bardelote Henry’s older girl?” Zee said like she didn’t want to be overheard either.

Bodhi studied me openly. “Hey there, Fetchers. It’s just about dinner time. What took you so long?”

I nodded. I wasn’t sure what I could say where.

“Could she stay here with you while I get some tokens?” Jackie said. “Miz Henry asked to have her to stay overnight until she is processed in tomorrow.”

“I love it. Didn’t I tell you something would turn up?” Zee said at Bodhi with a head gesture towards the crowd. “Incomplete Life Lottery intake. The buzz I’m hearing is that they can’t take off without the full complement. We’re flaunting our licences not to get taken up out of spite and or frustration.” This to Jackie and me.

They both wore large colourful badges on their left breast pockets. I had no badge. I put my hand over my pocket. Neither did Jackie have a badge.

Zee talked into her BigEar mouthpiece with it almost pressed against her lips.

The door opened enough to let through two adult guard-women whose shirts bore numerous badges. The tallest of two said, "Good work, Zee. You're with me, taking these children to Miz Henry's house."

Jackie took my hand again like the word *children* was a signal. The second woman took Zee's place. Zee took a rear position while the first woman walked between me and the green-clads.

It was only five paces to some of the same doors as in the cubical place in the other hall. The woman gestured her head at the green-clad soldier guarding the door and she stepped aside. "Jackie?" she said.

Jackie pressed a button.

I squeezed her hand, asking. "Elevator," she mumbled. I nodded. Had watched numerous film clips of elevators over the years.

*Ping.* The elevator arrived at Level 1. Its door slid into the wall. We all hustled into a little room. The door slid shut with Zee pressing a similar button on the inside jamb. "Take any of the green-clads to Ground Level yet?" the older woman said.

"Good day to you too, Rokha," a man said. "No. All safe down there. You expecting to go up again?" He stood in a rear corner, dressed in mid-grey, the same colour as the walls. Well camouflaged, I thought in Hen's voice to cover that I hadn't noticed him, a man. My face got hot just the same.

Everyone around me relaxed a bit. "Not today, I think," Rokha said.

"Wise move. I was intending to stall everything midway," the man said. "I drive them, girlie," he said into my blushing face.

I nodded. "Thank you." The elevator creeping down is the only word for the sensation of progressing in millimetres. The elevator man stared out of what I now saw was a long narrow window by his side. He had a remote in his hand.

"Water is up to the boards," the man said. "Can the kids manage? Try not to splash down."

"Not a problem," Rokha said.

The sensation of stopping and starting stopped. The driver pushed through us and did something to the doors and went back to his place. He'd kinked them inward, and folded them aside. A narrow space had opened up. A cold breeze roiled among us. Everybody had something on them that fluttered. My hair lifted to remind me that I was as strong as a lion.

Rokha went first. Sat down, legs out. Rolled over onto her front. Hung onto one of the doors. Slid down. Thump-clop.

“Water over the boards,” Zee said. She kneeled in front of the doorway. “Jackie, you’re next. Rokha will catch you.”

Jack disappeared. Thump-clop. Softer that time. From being caught, I assumed. My turn. I sat down. Wanted badly to see where I was going. Looked down. Rokha’s and Jack’s faces. Water as far as I could see, and over the boardwalk they stood on.

“Lie down and roll over, Kosi,” Zee said. She grabbed my wrists when I started to slide. “Good kid. You’ve done some of the tumbles.”

“In the doorway. Hen taught me,” I gasped.

She smiled. “I remember that. Wriggle down easy. When Rokha catches your legs, make yourself into a pole. Miz Bardelote Henry is my hero.”

I hung full length before Rokha grabbed me around my lower legs. I made myself a pole. She let me down easy, hand over hand up my body, and set me on my feet. Hardly any sound.

“You two start,” she said at Jackie. Keep to the middle.” She turned to Zee’s legs dangling down.

“Let’s go,” Jack said.

On three sides of us were the tall cliffs of our buildings. The rest was so much sky that I dizzied and stumbled. Splash. Wet to the knee and elbow. At that level a row of boat-hulls both sides of the walkway stopped me seeing the rest of the water.

“First time I was properly outside I did the same,” Jack said. “Hen’s boat is at the end. I think it’s urgent we get there. We’ll wade. Less splashing.”

We waded, meaning we slid our feet over the boards through the water. We passed eight boats on the right-hand side. All shapes, several sizes. None were as big as my imagined boats. The plank-way was awash.

## **16: Hen’s House**

I started running because I saw Hen with a small person clinging to her side. “Du?” I called.

Hen and Du stood in the shadows under an awning in the middle of a deck crowded with stuff. Coils of rope. Sausages of rolled up fabric (sails?) Bits and pieces of all kinds of materials.

Jackie pulled at my shirt. Same handful. “Watch it,” she said.

I looked where she pointed. The edge of the plank-way trembled under my feet. Next step was in a gap a metre wide. Dark green water. “Deep?”

“You bet. That black siding is the hull of the boat. We need to get on board over there.” She dragged me over there by my hand as though I was the little sister.

A walkway connected the plank-way with the boat’s side. Our feet thumping onto the walkway vibrated the walkway. We jumped down on a plank deck—*thud*—which vibrated under me with a deeper note. I walked toward Hen. There was just too much unfamiliar gear on the deck to run.

Hen pulled me and Jackie under the tent with her. Hugged me. “I’m so so happy to see you, Kosi Lionhair!” She hugged Jackie. “You’re a champion, Jackie Fetcher!”

Jackie grinned.

The little person, who was Du, pulled at Hen’s clothes. “Me! Me am a champion too?” she said.

Hen dropped one hand from hugging me and cupped and stroked Du’s head. “You too, my lovely. This is your sister Kosi. Remember me telling you about her?”

Du stuck her thumb in her mouth and looked at Jackie and me like we were invaders. Like she didn’t remember me.

“Down the ladder-stair, you three,” Hen said. “Jackie, show Kosi where to put her feet. And, Jackie? Please take Du. I need to talk with Rokha and Zee. Maybe even cast off and put out into the river.”

Still the same Hen. Good at conveying an emergency without saying so. Well, it had been an emergency the whole time since Jackie and I dived through that crowd on Level 1. How could that affect us out here?

Du started struggling in Jack’s arms as soon as we all heard the hatch above us close. She actually whined, something I’d never heard her do before. “Hen! I want Hen!”

“Miz Henry is busy, it sounds like.” Jack cupped a hand around his ear to listen better.

I did the same and listened too. So did Du in the end, thumb still in her mouth.

Two pairs of footsteps arrived running along the plank-way. Splash-ash. Splash-ash. Splash-ash. Two voices. Rokha and Zee speaking in quick short murmured sentences.

“Did you warn the rest of the boats?” Hen said. Her voice as clear as if she stood next to us.

Jack pointed at a vent on the wall among a dozen pictures of all kinds of places and things. With a glance I recognised a couple that Hen brought to the hidden House for me to borrow, the waterfall with trees and plants and mosses surrounding it, and the scary cactus in a sandy

desert. Hen's voice was calm. Zee was nervous, with quick spurts of murmured words.

"Jackie," said Jackie's BigEar. She turned away to talk.

I recognised Rokha's voice. I looked around the room, like an Aladdin's cave, with coloured cloths hanging from the walls, over chairs, and one rich red fringed rug draped over a table just the same as the meal-time table in the hidden House.

"My cubby," Du said, seeing where I looked. She dropped to her knees and crawled under the table. Sat there staring at me through the fringing. Glowering. Finally lying back on a couple of cushions, like a princess. But staring me gone.

And there were the framed prints. A kangaroo. A pair of galahs. Also statuettes, also of animals, and the tableaux. They were the little trays with a scene to take apart and build up again. I looked for the little space elevator.

Hen had so many of the little scenes, I realised now, that some had to be stored in boxes on shelves. And one wall was all shelves. But overflow stuff stood on every surface, at the edges of the floor, on the table. Dress-up things hung from the ceiling and the walls. Loops of calico bunched things, and bows of silk frottage tied them to make a passage through for walking among all the gear.

I smiled, despite the flavour of emergency in the air. This room resembled the disaster in Hen's stories that was always waiting to happen if I didn't keep the hidden House tidy. Then I saw my absolute favourite object when I was an angry six-year-old. Hen let me borrow it for months.

Du sat up as I crossed the room in two steps and picked up the glass sphere with snow in it. Hen encouraged me to shake up a storm in it whenever I felt stormy, so that snow puffed and twirled and whirled inside it. I cried when I discovered she had taken it home.

"Mine," Du said but she didn't sound convinced.

"I'm your sister?" I said. "Sisters share."

"I'm Brother's little sister," she said around her thumb.

"And my little sister."

"Only Hen is mine."

I tried to recall what she'd been like before.

"I'll show you through," Jackie said. "You want to come, Du?"

She'd been coming already, slipping her hand into Jackie's hand. "My Jackie."

I rolled my eyes. Mine. Mine. Mine. Was that all she could say? "I'm your sister whether you like it or not," I said.

We went through a door in the left corner of the room, into a grey-lit single-file corridor. The left side of the corridor followed the shape of the hull to a narrow floor.

Jackie stopped. “Watch my hand? Here’s the light switch.” She flipped it. The corridor became gold-lit. “Did you two ever meet at your house?” she said instead of telling me the light was powered by the sun or some technical fact.

Good thing she was in front, I was so embarrassed. I fizzed hot all over. Of course Du didn’t know me. We’d never met except a couple of times with the louvre between us. And she is only six years old, I reminded myself. I thought I owned Hen then. “No windows,” I said to distract myself.

“Portholes in the room we just left, that are covered with the shawls, and portholes in the kitchen up front. This is the bunk-room, where visitors sleep.” Jackie opened a door beside us. Three sets of double bunks crowded the room. A washable rug outlined the place where people would have to take turns dressing. “Seen it?”

I nodded. No windows, I didn’t say. Just like the hidden House.

“I’m not a visitors,” said Du in a confronted tone of voice.

Jackie smiled over Du’s head. I might’ve been able to appreciate it if I wasn’t confronted myself. I didn’t smile back.

Jackie shrugged. “This is the bathroom,” she said, opening the next door.

Shower basin toilet. A square of washable tiles to stand on.

“Hen’s room,” she said, indicating that door.

“And mine too!” Du said.

Jackie frowned at me to warn me not to re-act. “And finally the kitchen and stair to the front hatch. The layout is back to front to most other boats, Hen told me. She hasn’t told me the reason. Maybe you can get that story from her?”

I shrugged. “You seem to know her as well as I do. Ask her in a different way. She likes people to think for themselves.”

## **17: Being a Big Sister**

Du ushered us through a door under a ladder-stair. She took her thumb out of her mouth long enough to say, “Kitchen.” Plugged up again, Du silently pointed out the sink, stove and fridge all in a row along the left.

I looked at everything. The long narrow window along the top of the bench, covered with a strip of yellow fabric. Small door in the nose of the boat. At the right, a U shaped seating

bench around a table. A yellow tea-towel cloth serving as tablecloth that lay diagonally across the tabletop. A single decorative object in the middle. A matching tea-towel-curtained window.

The sink was deep. The stove was enclosed in a cage presumably so that pots and pans couldn't fall off when the boat moved. A fridge next to that. I laughed inside because Hen had described her house to me without me knowing in one of her stories.

I puzzled about the curtains here and in the front room. Hen hated shutting out the sky. *Oh yes. The boat is tied up along the plank-way.* "The curtains are so people can't see in?"

"I reckon," Jackie said. "What we're going to do now is ... um ... have some supper. You two sit at the table and I'll see if I remember everything. You tell me if I don't, Du."

I slid onto the bench. This kitchen was how I knew it was Hen's place. She loved plain and everything in its place. One decorative object to meditate on, in this case a bit of grainy wood in the middle of the table. I blinked and blinked. I couldn't cry, I had found her again when she wasn't mine anymore.

Du climbed up beside me. "First the placemats," she said.

"You find them," Jackie said. "Three places."

"We're eating alone?" I said.

"We're together," she said with a warning look toward Du counting out placemats from a purpose-made slot in the bench-back. "I'll tell you later."

"Later alligator," Du said, sitting back down and sliding the placemats in place. "Spoons? For soup?"

"Yeah, I can do that," Jackie said. "Boat is lying still," she explained. She found a jar of soup in the refrigerator. Was there always soup, I wondered? She poured it into a pot on the stove. Lit a place underneath the pot with a real flame.

"A blue flame! I never saw fire except for a yellow candle flame," I said. "What's it burning?"

"Some kind of gas, in a really really strong steel bottle kept under the stove."

Du dug in my ribs with a pointy finger. "Soup bowls," she said.

"What?"

"Soup bowls, in the seat back. Show you?" she offered.

I kneeled up on the seat. Du was there before me, walking on the seat. She put her finger in a hole in the panelling and lifted it. A deep purpose-made box held the bowls. I handed her three, one by one. Slotted the panel back. The whole back of the seat held compartments.

Each panel had on it an image of the thing it contained.

Jackie poured luke-warm soup into our bowls. She shrugged, glancing at Du. It couldn't be too hot, she meant. I was so hungry I didn't care. Only that it had real baby carrots in it. "Where ...?"

Jack shook her head.

Probably she thought I was going to ask where Hen was. "Where does Hen get these carrots from?" I said.

"From the boat market," Du said. "The boats come from a long long way where they grow things. And where the ducks are." Her mouth trembled.

Jackie hissed.

I nodded. Guilty as charged. I'd have to try harder to be a good big sister. "What about a drink?" I said. "Are there cups for water in this seat?"

Du brightened. She leapt up and handed me cups, one by one, as she got them from a further slot.

Washing up was more of the same with Du putting everything back, one by one. Jackie took us to the bathroom. "You're sisters. Get yourself ready for bed." Very crafty.

"Shower-baths are not in my routine," Du said primly.

Hen-and-Du already had a routine? The envy-animal in me licked its lips with a green tongue. How many days since Hen found her? I pressed the envy-animal down.

"What about you show me your routine?" I helped her wash her face and hands the way Hen used to help me. Then washed my own. Borrowed Du's toothbrush.

Jackie had the bunk-room door open. "I'm thinking it would be better for anyone coming in late, like Zee and Rokha, if we all slept on the top bunks. Du near the wall of the boat, you in front of her. It's quite wide, that bunk. I'll go at right angles to you. Near your head. To talk," she mouthed at the end.

Du stopped complaining when Jackie said of course no undressing, and guided her up the ladder. I followed and arranged Du's pillow. Jackie went to the bathroom and I made myself comfortable to wait.

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## **18: On Hen's Boat**

When I woke the room was dark with a finger-thick torch beam flashing around. "Who's there?" I whispered.

“Zee,” she said, pointing the torch beam at her own face. Wet.

From crying, rain, or had she been in the river?

“What’s going on?” Jackie said out of the dark near me.

“A bunch of EMBers turned up,” Zee said. “Bounty hunters.” She swallowed a sob. “They’re up on the deck, holding Hen and Rokha. Your father was awarded 3 years of your labour in return for the 30,000 credits you stole from him,” Zee said, sounding ... spiteful?

“The EMBers will free Hen and Rokha when they get you, Kosi,” she added like she’d decided something.

I sat up in a hurry. My head connected to the ceiling, thunk. “Ouch! I only took a hundred credits!” My heart thudded nearly in my throat. Zee seemed to be saying I should just go and give myself into the EMBers’ hands?

“Thirty thousand is probably what it cost your father to hire Hen,” Jackie said. “You’re trying to influence her, Zee. Unfair. What about me?”

“Rokha reminded them that you’re a licensed Fetcher.”

“Hurry up, girl,” a stranger called from the deck.

“You all have already decided what my mind has got to be?” I said. I trembled hard enough that the bunks shook. Thankfully Du did not wake up.

“Not me,” Jackie said. She put her hand on my arm to keep me company. “But Zee is Hen’s daughter in the same way that you are. And she went with Hen to find Du,” Jackie said softly.

I cried. “How could I help not being there?”

“Hen said what you decide to do is up to you alone,” Zee said grudgingly.

Typical Hen, I thought. Always training me for my future. Behind me, Du slept on, snuffling like a little rabbit into the pillow. My little sister, too young to live without Hen.

I got my voice steadied. “I’m glad we went to bed with our clothes on.” Even Zee, though she was years older than me, was apparently was too young to live without Hen.

I swung onto the ladder and pulled my pillow around in front of Du to stop her rolling over the edge of the bunk.

“Here’s mine,” Jack said, shoving it across.

“You’re not going as well?” Zee said. She sobbed. “Everyone will give me hell.”

“It’s my decision as we just said,” Jack said. “Kosi has got a much better chance of getting away with me there. A Fetcher will always know more byways than the uppity Earth Maintenance and Base engineers. And I have studied the byways diligently, as you will know.”

Zee stayed in the bunkroom to be with Du when she woke. “Go up the forward ladder-stair. Maybe you won’t be grabbed as you come out of the hatch.”

Jack went first.

Three of the EMBers were women. Two of them held Hen and Rokha. The lone man threatened us with a taser on a stick.

### **18: The Life Lottery Intake**

Amazingly, the EMBer women released their captives as they had promised when the EMBer man herded Jack and me onto the plank-way. They were that honourable.

We—I’m sure Jack was too—were looking for escape straightaway. I thought we would run and jump over the boats alongside, maybe. But there was still the same crowd probably being herded from the boats by the same, if weary, green-clads. Nowhere to run.

“We will be all right,” Jack muttered.

Hen stood alongside us with her on the boat, us on the plank-way. “You’re strong, Kosi. Follow Jacqui, she knows the byways.”

“That’s enough of the good advice,” one of the EMBer women said. “And call the boy by his proper name. He is Ozymandias O’Loughlin, heir of his House.”

Ozymandias! Poor Jack. No wonder he changed his name. I sneered at the EMBer’s complicated hair-do of golden hair. Totally un-soldier-like. She stepped forward and gripped my arm. “Bene. Lydia. You look after the boy.”

Bene and Lydia presumably stepped to Jack’s sides and took his arms. How would we get away? The man collapsed the stick and holstered the taser.

“Best foot forward,” Jack said.

“No need for cheekiness. Your House needs you,” said the man.

“You’re out here. And being an EMBer?” Jack said.

“My House has three heirs,” the man said bitterly.

Jack laughed. “Poor diddums.” He sobered. “The Fetcher House owns my loyalty and nothing can change that.”

I listened with only half an ear. The things happening around us were by far the more important. The boats alongside showed signs—abandoned clothes, food containers and even the odd shoe—that they'd been pressed into service for over-night camping.

We reached the tail end of the green-clads. An old one-stripe soldier juggling a tablet and stylus dropped back. “This has got to be Kosi Lionhair? She matches her headshot. We have her listed as travelling with us?”

“That can't be right, er um Corporal,” said the golden-haired EMBer. “She was sentenced yesterday by the Family Court. Three years hard labour in the service of her father.”

Hard labour in my father's control? Worse and worse. I trod on Jack's heels to get his attention. We had to get going!

He warned me with a look over his shoulder. He hissed. “Keep track of what's going on!”

Huh? “What I was doing?” I tried to remember what passed between him and the EMBers. But I couldn't concentrate with them now quibbling about my future.

“Her father cheated his urb,” said Corporal Fussy. “He has three supernumerary children. We'll take this one out of circulation at least.”

A fly-car screamed out of the west. I turned with it following its curve that ended with it hovering over the plank-way behind us before delicately setting down. The plank-way sank only about another five centimetres.

Behind it again, very quietly, very slowly, Hen's boat drifted away from the jetty. Hen was at an upright wooden wheel at the back. She turned the wheel by pulling at the spokes. It was the way she steered the boat. I remembered her stories about her house-on-a-boat. I hadn't believed them. I swallowed down the sudden gob in my throat. She was taking Du, another of Father's supernumerary children, to safety.

Then she waved, her arm moving to and fro. She seemed to be saying, “Go well, Kosi Lionhair.” I nodded. Not that she'd be able to see my expression.

A lone green-clad stepped from the fly-car. You could tell she was a chief. She wore three gold stripes on each of her shoulders and a temper everywhere else. She strode at groups and lines as if they didn't exist and for her they didn't because everyone in her path moved aside.

“Is this the Life Lottery Intake?” she asked a green-clad who looked skittishly at the EMBers in our party.

The green-clad chief hissed and strode on toward Corporal Fussy. She started her tirade before the corporal could salute. “Why are you arguing? EMBers are nothing to us. And why are you still here? We missed our place in the elevator queue. The clock is ticking. We're contracted for this delivery.”

Anybody could see the new personage wouldn't stand to be crossed, and that the corporal stood up for herself against the wrong person.

"I've been trying to fill our quota," the corporal said. "You told me no fewer than a thousand. You told me it's not the last sweep, so to do it properly. That that would give us the best chance for more work."

The chief looked at Jack, me, and at the four EMBers. "These six should make us our quota and to spare." She waved a hand.

The nearest green-clad personnel obediently enclosed our group. Our EMBers looked bemused, as if this wasn't happening. A mere misunderstanding they seemed to be signalling with their eyes. Didn't put me at my ease.

"But Captain, the rules!" the corporal dared to say.

Or she really really wasn't thinking. Because out of the frying pan into the fire? Or maybe she had her fate picked out and she just needed the captain to seal it? And was that the case with the EMBers as well?

The captain hissed again. "We should've been embarking them this morning. You're stood down!" Next she rattled out a bunch of instructions. "Secure these EMBers. Take their weapons, if any!"

The EMBers released Jack and me like hot cakes to fend off the green-clads jumping into action.

"Ah. A taser. I'll have that," the captain said. "Call down the transporters and get this mob boarded finally!"

Jack grabbed my hand. We dived into the crowd. I think he hoped to get to the front and up some handy backstairs into the Fetcher House.

The crowd gave us not a centimetre to manoeuvre. Every person in it hated the green-clads with growls and hissing and heat. Their anger just about cooked me. We were crushed among them like anchovies in a barrel, being moved by and with them into one of the standing-room-only transporters.

We managed only to stay together. I hung onto Jack like a limpet as Hen used to say when she had to disentangle me from her before she went home. When I was seven. And Du is only five now. So, what I'm doing here—whatever that will turn out to be—is being a good big sister.

Just got to make it come out good for Jack and me as well.

I pointed my chin to the ceiling and shouted. "Breathe in everybody, couple of kids coming

through!” The surprise of it worked. I dragged Jack with me until he got the idea. Most people get skinnier and taller when they breathe in, giving us some room to move.

We popped out near an Emergency Exit.

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Make that, we just about fell into the arms of our EMBers. Probably the breathing-in trick wouldn't work again.

“Hey,” Jack said. “Well met. Almost like we came home to the only people we know.”

Hey kids,” the one called Bene said. “Stick with us.” Her hair was curly and dark, and she had warm eyes with her eye-pupils showing in the brown. Her partner, Lydia, obviously had augmentations. Probably had them done before she joined, EMBers being snooty about anything not natural. Her eyes were tea-brown with no pupils to mar her mystery, ha-ha, and white hair in a soldier-cut.

“Stick with us for what?” the golden-haired one said. Her hair-do hung askew and she had no room to lift her arms to fix it. The crowds crowded close. I was standing right under Bene's arm, smelling her sweat, with Jack between me and Lydia.

“Pallas, please,” said the man. He was squeezed between Lydia and the Emergency Exit. “They're here due to us. Our responsibility I would say.”

That didn't sound as though we were meant to be here with them on this jaunt. Eyes peeled, Kosi Lionhair. Despite being crowded on all sides, the EMBers seemed to lounge. They didn't look worried.

Why not? The previous Life Lottery Sweep I knew anything about was a few years ago. Hen stopped me researching it. She said ... I tried to remember her exact words ... “A Sweep's intake, its people, are never heard of again. By family or friends. It's one of the great mysteries of our times. But I know,” Hen said with a dark frown, “That both Procyon Products and the government are involved in their disappearance. I don't want you to come to their attention and maybe disappear too. Which is what will happen if you keep accessing their websites, Tween Child.”

She only ever called me that when it was life-threateningly serious. I remember that I shuddered. We'd had a couple of life-threatening events by then.

I wondered now why the Earth Maintenance and Base-line Engineers, so-called EMBers, hadn't tried harder to avoid being captured? I could only suspect that since they were government troops too, they were in cahoots with the green-clads?

“We might all be in this transport together, but I have no intention of being data-waved to the Procyon System,” Pallas said.

“What?” A hubbub broke out among the lottery winners.

“Now see what you started,” Lydia said. “They’ll all be wanting to be saved. Like me. I want to be saved.” She stared at Pallas, and Pallas blushed.

“I knew it!” Lydia said. “You have a plan to save just yourself, and maybe—don’t bother denying it—dearest Owen! I always thought you two were a pair of uppity classers. Who, for crying out loud, goes soldiering with a temple-style hairdo?”

Temple-style hairdo? I chortled. “Goes with the name? Pallas?” I said into various amazed faces. “Greek goddess? Maybe our Pallas is trying to live up to her name? See my hairdo? When I know things aren’t going to be easy, I fluff up my lion hair.” I growled.

Long silence while Pallas blushed a fiery red.

Bene smiled so kindly at me that she made me want to sick up. But she wasn’t Hen and so I didn’t know her limits or her sense of humour. The situation wasn’t good.

“Procyon is a Greek name too,” I said instead. “Procyon A and Procyon B are companion stars. They have a planet each. Procyon A is a yellow star like our sun and its planet is Lotor. Procyon B is an old red star. Its planet is called Moera. All of them to do with Greek proto-dogs.”

I lifted my voice a bit to reach everybody listening. They had the right to know.

“A long time ago, Procyon Products ... You’ll remember them from your history lessons as the only commercial outfit to get a licence to use the data generated by the Moogerah Monster? They call themselves PP now.”

A couple of people of the Sweep Intake nodded, remembering.

I took their nods as encouragement. “Yes. Them. You might recall too that they sent a ship-full of people to Lotor. What’s not so much in the news is that they’ve been trying ever since to discover if that ship arrived. And that PP’s latest invention is data-waving. My carer thinks they stole the process from the Procyon alien and his support system who fell to Earth um ... a hundred fifty years ago? Plus or minus?”

“The EMBers made it illegal to use anything from that shuttle,” Pallas said, obviously trying to crush me. “Besides, what would a little girl know?”

I wanted to be rude, but again, the situation. “I’m easily bored, so Hen set me to study Ancient Greek and astronomy. She says that the EMBers and Procyon Products have been in in one another’s pockets since the beginning.”

Jackie squeezed my hand.

I think to tell me to shut up. I took his advice and zipped my lips. Which was a good thing, because we had arrived or whatever you might call it. Landed. The doors slid open and the green-clads in with us started pushing people out by walking at them, and inexorably pushing

them toward the open doorways. The intake from our compartment tensely buzzed their discoveries toward the rest of the crowd.

A column was formed up on a pavement, rows of six. I was starting to recognise a few people. Man with beard and wild blue eyes. Woman snivelling into a hanky. People were tetchy from sleeplessness, my news and nerves in general and who could blame them? I was feeling quite nasty myself. We, and all who went before us, would be 'disappeared' into space? "Why are we letting ourselves be pushed around? There's a thousand of them-and-us, and about ten guards?" I made ready.

"What I'm just saying," Jack mumbled in my ear. "Do the green-clads look wide awake? I think not. We could rush them."

I looked around faster than fast. "Plenty of hiding places among all this mess of buildings." I indicated the structures surrounding the pavement with only a nod of my head.

"You want to go before your time?" the man next to Jack said. "The green-clads have Port Security helping out."

He was right of course. At least a hundred more uniformed personnel, tasers at the ready, surrounded the ranks. Why hadn't I seen them?

"Would it be worse to be put onto the climber tasered, or stone-cold sober and awake?" Lydia said.

"You're asking because you'd rather go tasered?" Owen said.

She indicated Jack and me with a twirl of her finger. "You told me this was a bounty job? We were meant to grab the kids, deliver them to their nearest and dearests with our hands out for the credits, and off we go. Which was how you talked me into it. Isn't that what they said?" she demanded of Bene.

Bene nodded.

Lydia continued. "Halfway to Urb Seven, Pallas, you were messaged. You talked with Owen as a result. But never with Bene or me. I suspected right then we'd been assigned the junior partner slot where the collaterally damaged hang out. So yeah, I'm going to give it a shot. Travel up the space elevator under the influence of a taser." "

She stepped out from amongst us.

Neither Pallas nor Owen moved. In fact, they held Bene back from running after her partner. Jack and I didn't move. Additional collateral damage, we were of one mind.

Everyone watched Lydia getting tasered and be carried into a small doorway at the foot of a large cylinder. As an experiment it had a pretty unexciting outcome.

“That is quite an unusual looking climber,” Jack said. “If that’s what it is meant to be.”

Owen looked up sharply. He studied the cylinder.

It was big but I was more interested in the column of huge letters and numerals lying on their sides.

S I L O 2 3.

### **19: Silo Twenty-Three**

The women who carried Lydia into the silo came out.

“They were inside for two minutes thirty four seconds,” Owen said. “It means that they start loading from the bottom.”

“So if we filter back, we’ll end up being loaded last?” Pallas said.

Good idea, Pallas. I had already told Jack we’d make for the top of the silo. No words of course, too many people listening in. It would definitely be better having the EMBers doing it too, because then Jack’s and my moves would be less noticeable.

“How will that work, a silo climbing up the elevator cable?” Jack said. “It looks too big. It’ll be wrenched around and crack, or when we get into the thin air it’ll explode ...”

One of a bunch of people tacking themselves onto the end of the column heard Jack and laughed. “Don’t worry, young fella. These silos are made for the job.”

“And you’d know?” Jack said. He walked backward.

The newcomers shuffled behind Airport Security, ignored by them, carrying bags and satchels. “Well, we are the crew. Some of us specialise in silo work. Some of us operate the climber.” The speaker indicated various people as she explained.

One of the climber’s personnel took up the story. “Freight climbers are built with a bunch of large protrusions...” he made a fist to illustrate. “...that fit into corresponding slots in a silo. Once there is lift-off, the climber rises a dozen feet to lock in the fists. The slots are gated and off we go.”

“Opposite to the buggies,” I said.

“I suppose it’s easier to load the freight down at ground level,” Jack said.

“You’re not wrong, and a whole lot cheaper. And,” the woman glanced surreptitiously toward the adults with us, “It allows the ... to get on with ... the people to ...”

One of the others talked right over the top of her, and loud, and with warning glances.

“Making the trip up that much more do-able. Economical.” They dropped into a murmur and continued among themselves.

Of course I missed everything important. It allows the something to get on with something the people to something? Cheap is economical. Doing what? Hen, I wish you were here. I nearly let myself whimper. All I could do was listen hard and be prepared for action. I elbowed Jack. “What did you hear?”

He shrugged.

Owen gave out only scepticism. “They hope to keep a silo full of captives biddable? And they have got the silo piggy-backing the climber? They’ll bed us all down.” He narrowed his eyes. “I bet they ...”

“You’re not wrong, EMBer,” interrupted a nearby green-clad with her hands tied in front. “Sedation it will be.” She had an extreme case of wrinkles, in other words she was old, proud and un-augmented. Or poor. She had had one stripe, a dark place on her uniform where it had been ripped off. The corporal. Now ex. I was right about her stupidity.

“They don’t want anyone rampaging,” the ex corporal said. “The damned data-waver is enough to stampede even the steadiest of crowds and that is what this crowd is not.”

Pallas swallowed. “It is?” she said faintly.

Didn’t sound good to me, the bit where I could hardly hear Pallas because she was so worried and or scared. “So what’s a data-waver and what’s scary about it?” I said.

“Pallas is an EMBer,” Jack said. “They don’t get scared.” He cleared his throat to get Pallas’s attention.

I had to agree with Lydia. Pallas and Owen knew something the rest of us didn’t. “How come no one has come screaming and fighting from the silo yet? If there’s a really bad thing happening in there?” I said.

“I bet everybody is so tired due to two sleepless nights they’re all falling onto the bunks and asleep in three seconds,” Owen said.

“What, because I’m the youngest person here I have to be soothed?” I said.

Owen glared at me. When he had my attention he glanced here and there. At Pallas. At Bene. Even at Jack. At a fidgety crew-member. Like he said I’m soothing everyone else through you. Like, yeah, putting me off?

But I nodded. So barely I thought he wouldn’t notice. But he turned off the heat. Looked elsewhere.

Okay, Kosi Lionhair. It wasn’t like Owen soothed me. It looked to me that he smoothed a

way to whatever had to happen. I thrust my fingers up through my hair to fluff it out. Woe betide him, if the EMBers didn't tell Jack and me what was what. When it was safe.

The helpful green-clad prisoner said, "You want to know why I filtered back?"

Nobody offered up a want-to-know. I took my cue from Owen.

The prisoner-person laughed. "I asked myself why a bunch of EMBers would get the same treatment as the rank-and-file?" She shook her head in seeming amazement. "It must be, I came to the conclusion, that these EMBers are undercover?" She waited. "And I'm Marti?"

None of us volunteered our names or responded to anything else.

"Move along, woman," said a security guard.

Marti moved along but was not to be silenced. "So I said to myself ... something is going on other than getting this intake to Lotor. They're never heard of or seen again, right? Can't see EMBers signing up for that. Can you, dearie?" She addressed herself to Bene. "Your partner is in the hold, what do you feel about that now?"

Bene, I snuck a glance, looked forbidding. Like don't mess with me, old woman.

Marti laughed. "I figured that I'd stick with you lot, if you don't mind, to be sure I get back. With my goodies?" She stopped and we still shuffled forward.

Hissing, Bene closed the gap in our rank. She pushed Marti onward.

"That was a compliment," Marti said. "You EMBers are very good at what you do."

Owen scratched his eyebrow nearest the woman. From behind his hand, he mouthed silent letters toward Jack and me. S, P, Y.

Really? I was supposed to believe that? Well duh. It just confirmed that Pallas and Owen were also here for a reason other than getting caught up in a Life Lottery intake being sent to Lotor. What about Jack and me? We were still only collateral damage? Or perhaps they'd been going to hand us over to Bene and Lydia to ...?

Just in time I stopped myself shrugging. No idea. And there was the additional mystery of Marti. Was she sent along the minute her captain clapped eyes on the EMBers in the intake? I tried to think back but there was too much happening.

Now we quarter-turned into a single file and Marti was quicker on her feet than anyone else. Our rank transformed into Pallas, Owen, Jack, me, Bene and Marti. We shuffled into the silo through the single door, the crew at the end.

We filed straight onto a central platform. I had to attend to where I put my feet. A horizontal bar appeared at waist level. The platform started to rise and there was the bar to hold onto.

Just like the buggies, again. The crew were let off in couples and threes at intervals. I didn't see where they went. The spy stayed with us.

Around the walls medics in white were busy on stepped walkways adjacent to rows of stretcher-like bunks fastened in a spiralling pattern to the silo's inner wall. People in white lay on the bunks. The whole intake was already bedded down?

There were dozens of medics, and they always stood in such a way that they hid what they were doing. I craned my head around to count the spirals. Twelve.

The platform stopped. We'd reached the top of its track. Of the half circle of bunks in front of us, three were occupied with people making themselves comfortable. People were undressing and putting on white sleep-suits. Only three vacant bunks remained.

"This is where we'll miss Lydia," Pallas said. "Jack, you're with Owen. Kosi, you're with me. Bene ..." She shrugged. "You're with ... er ..."

"No no no," said a medical attendant. "The girl will have to bunk a couple of tiers down with Ms Marti Fenland. Weight distribution is a serious art."

"Weight distribution is that finely tuned?" I said, walking down the spiral with her and the spy.

"It's actually a mass-to-length ratio we're working with."

Scientific gobbledygook. I put it out of my mind. We'd stopped and the spy lay down on the outer two thirds of the bunk, claiming her place.

"You two together equal an average middle-height," the medical attendant said. "Here's your sleep-suit." She handed me a paper coverall. She keyed some data into her pager. "Put your outdoor clothes in the locker beneath the bed."

The coverall's flimsy consistency and lack of waste vents were a worry. And where were the toilets, for that matter?

Beyond the last bunk, an iris door was set in a wall that overarched the bunks in the last half-loop of the spiral. The wall beside me only seemed vertical, I discovered sweeping my arm up and down it. Definitely arched.

"The Command Module will be through that door," my bunkmate said. "Don't get caught in the open if you want to live."

She'd changed while I looked around. Lay there like she wasn't going to move. "Hurry up," she said. "I don't want you to be noticed. Drawing attention to us and seen as trouble. Probably they'll give us both a double dose of whatever is coming. Better be half-conscious than dead, I always say."

I stepped into the coverall with my clothes still on and pulled it up over me. Arms into the sleeves. Closed the front with a zipper. The only space in the bunk was in the upper quadrant near the wall. I wasn't that small. I climbed over Ms Marti and wriggled until she gave me more space.

"Close your eyes," she said. "Pretend you've already had the go-to-sleeper. Maybe they'll pass us by."

"Close my eyes? No way!"

She kinked her neck, stared at me until I closed my eyes.

Peered through my lashes, of course. My head was higher along the bunk than hers and so I had a good line of sight. She pursed her lips and sucked her cheeks like she generated spit, palmed her mouth and then swallowed.

A dry capsule, I'll bet. Then, quick as a magician, she whipped out a thick blank mask and smoothed it over her face. She contoured the spongy fabric into her eye hollows, around her nose and into her half-open mouth. She settled.

I counted. When nothing happened for three hundred and sixty beats, a wave of tiredness washed over me.

## **20: The Data-Waver**

I startled awake.

Body next to me did not startle with me though it was warm. I shuddered experimentally. So did she. I recalled that her name was Marti and that Owen called her a spy.

I opened my eyes, expecting black-dark. My eyes adjusted. A purple glowed right next to me?

The spy's facemask had patches of tiny luminescent, lavender fungi growing in and under the eye hollow nearest to me, and in the corner of the groove masquerading as a mouth. Not a good look. I shuddered away from her.

When I had a tiny gap between us, I had time to concentrate on a sound I'd been hearing that seemed to be coming nearer. A whisper, like a soft hissing. Might it be someone dreaming aloud? Sleepwalking? I stared over the spy into the cylindrical space in the middle of the ... the ... silo. That was it, SILO 23.

The central space was filled with a lavender ambience. Meaning there were more places where the fungus grew? Movement. Something rose over the foot-end of the bunk. I closed my eyes again, slowly, to tiny cracks, because eyeballs glisten in the semi-dark. The hissing came with the thing.

A pair of eyes rose higher and higher. They blinked without let-up. My feet were beside the spy's knees, with nowhere else to put them unless I drew up my knees. Way too late for that. The eyes, in what I now saw were greenish leathery sockets, busily looked everywhere, always blinking.

The eyes grew from the toe-part of a dark boot-shaped thing. It swayed toward Marti's knees and my feet. Hovered there while the eyes looked us over.

The thing rose higher above the bunk. It had tiny wings that moved faster than a hummingbird's either side of the heel, level with about where a human ankle would fit into the boot.

I didn't stop my staring from behind my eyelids, looking it over. Like it was made of mouldy old leather with purple fungi growing in its wear-creases. A flying boot? Really?

The terrible gaze flicked over my features. *Be still. Stay silent. Don't move. Don't breathe.* My hair earned me a couple of side-to-side passes. The thing hissed. A pair of reptilian membranes slid slowly across moss green pupils from the inner corners of the eyes. I couldn't see a mouth or breathing holes anywhere.

Just before I exploded—that's what I felt like—it swayed forward. Four long white appendages, like threads, hung from where shoelaces normally looped. I forced myself to not to press into the corner, away from those whispering, paper-dry tentacles as they passed over the spy's mask. The mushroom caps by the corner of her mouth expanded and unfolded.

Marti relaxed against me as if she'd been tensely asleep, maybe dreaming a nightmare, and now slid into unconsciousness. The boot continued its progress over us as slowly as a snail. Its back was shaped like an upside-down boot-ankle.

As it passed over me, I saw a warty toad-skinned something writhing within the shadowed interior. *Do not shudder!* The boot rose, to allow it to pass over the next bunk in the spiral?

Remembering that I was a couple beds lower down from Jack and the others, I gathered my feet under me—mustn't touch the spy mustn't touch the spy—and threw myself over onto the walkway. *Thud.*

The steel catwalk vibrated up and down its length while I rolled almost to the edge. Could the boot hear? Had it heard me? I stared down into the hollow core of the silo. Everywhere down where the boot had already been was a purple glow, beaded with hotspots such as the spy.

Hurry. Hurry. I crouch-ran past the thing swaying thoughtfully over the person in the next bunk up. Where's Jack? There. His blue bandanna. The boot seemed to pick up speed. Had it felt the wind of my passage?

Jack was still with Owen. Both hopefully only slept. I pulled them off the bunk. *Thump.*

Thud. Jack on top. “Wha ...?”

I clamped both my hands over Owen’s mouth, crying my fear tears on him. “Be quiet. There’s a thing. Trailing tentacles.”

Jack gripped my wrists. Whispered. “Let him up, he’s awake.”

“We’ve got to get the others before the boot gets to them.” I tried to whisper too. “Trailing poison.” I shook like a bunch of vibrating guitar strings.

“The damned data-waver,” Owen said. “You kids get Bene. I’ll get Pallas.”

With two of us we easily rolled Bene from her bunk. Jack clamped his hand over her mouth the second she would’ve cried out. “The data-waver,” he hissed in her ear.

She made the white-cockatoo sign for OK.

The others crawled to join us. Then the spy also. She’d shed her mushroomy mask.

“So you do this regularly?” I asked.

“I’m undercover,” she said. “Just like you. Only I have a place with the crew.”

“Who do you work for?” Owen said. “Other than the freight company?”

Marti laughed. “That’d be telling, wouldn’t it? We should get out of the way of the data-waver. It seems unhappy as it is.”

We all looked at where the boot swayed over the bunk where Bene had been. Its wraithy white tentacles tip-touched the folds and ridges of Bene’s shape in the thin mattress. Now I shuddered. It made like it recorded Bene’s absence.

The boot sped to the next bed. Jack pushed me. “Go already.” He followed me into the airlock between the hold and the command centre.

The data-waver hesitated over Pallas’s missing shape. The tone of its hissing changed. SSSS-ssss!! It swayed toward us.

“It knows something isn’t right. Lie down. Hide your faces,” Marti said.

Why was she helping us survive the data-waver?

The boot hovered over the catwalk near the airlock door, seeming to hesitate about coming in. I peered from under my arm. It swayed to and fro, to and fro. Oh. I see what it was doing. Swaying, the tentacles swung out. They weren’t long enough to reach us.

But what if it came lower and into the airlock? After the longest time, the data-waver swayed

toward the central space and twirled down with its tentacles swaying outward like streamers on a merry-go-round.

Marti rose and pressed a keypad by the door we came in, and which then irised shut.

Jack did the same on a keypad adjacent to the further door. “Just like an elevator, really,” he said. That door slid open.

“Bene, Kosi, come on,” Pallas said. We stumbled through. Hope flared in me when I saw computer input desks which seemed to promise kinds of possibilities.

Marti closed the door by a keypad this side, seeming to fumble over the input. Why? She didn't the first time.

Pallas pulled me into the five-hug of the EMBers and Jack and me. I suppose we'd gained a kind of safety. Felt churlish thinking it.

But ... Marti, not in the hug, wandered around the command centre. She laughed. “First time ever I'm relaxed in here. Captain is a virago, you know?”

As if that was going to relax me about her. I frowned at Owen. “So what is the story? Why are we here?”

Jack tweaked my sleeve. Glanced toward Owen, telling me to glance likewise.

Owen sent me an electrical current. Well I guess he wished he could've. He opened his eyes wide and fierce and zapped me with a stare of one second or less.

Well pardon me for not attending. “What. Is. Her. Plan? Ask her,” he mouthed.

I almost told him to ask her himself. But then I thought who other than Pallas and the man himself can ask the hard questions? A question coming from a just-a-kid would sound more ... innocent? “Have you got a plan?” I said.

Marti turned, hesitating. She looked like she cast about for something to say. Huh. Why would Owen trust her to tell the truth?

She laughed. “I suppose you kids tacked yourself onto the parade because you thought we were going to Moon Base? I bet you thought to catch a free ride up the elevator. And for what? To see what you could see?”

The rest had the presence of mind to look stunned. But I boiled. “You couldn't be more wrong about us!”

Marti chortled. “You're nothing but a couple of ordinary stowaways. You'll see. And see and

see. But only by looking out of the dome as we go by.”

Stupidly my attention followed her finger pointing out the blister-ports. Windows shaped like, and no bigger than soup bowls, dotted the circumference of the silo just below where it curved into a dome.

“You’ll see the stars for ever and ever, all the time different ones. But forever is a long time. Probably you won’t last that long. Should’ve looked before you leapt.” She glanced back.

Her mistake. I saw with her that she was a backward pace from the airlock. She’d glanced back to see her progress. We had all been adjusting our place in the circle in relation to her. She’d been creeping toward an objective that we still didn’t know.

“What are you talking about?” Jack said. “A silo can only be tethered?”

Marti leapt for the left-side airlock keypad and with leaping fingers input a password. She grabbed Bene’s sleeve. “Come with me, dear. Let me give you your heart’s desire.”

“What? No!” Bene struggled. “What would you know?”

Jack was at the opposite side of the door, at the keypad there. Superfluous engineering wins the day.

Marti laughed. “It’s no good, Fetcher. You’re in the wrong place at the wrong time. I code-pressed the door system.”

I pulled Bene’s other arm to help her free herself. How strong could an old woman be? The airlock door slid open.

“I’ll take you to your lover, of course,” Marti said. “Have you data-waved so you’ll meet on Lotor?”

“Stop that, Kosi,” Bene said. “That is my heart’s desire.”

The cynical expression on Marti’s face told me all I needed to know. I pulled harder. Marti slid a tranquilising gun from her pocket. “Dear dear, I hadn’t bargained on having to trank anyone quite so soon.”

Her talking allowed Jack to pull me away. Had Marti meant that to happen or were we too quick for her?

Marti entered the airlock with Bene following her and the door slid shut.

“You!” Jack said, shaking me. “Why do you always insist taking things to the limit? That stupid old woman could’ve done you real harm!”

“With a trank shot? What is your problem?” I said.

“You’re nearly half the size of an adult,” Jack said. “Ever had an adult-sized dose?”

I blushed from fury. Meaning, I got extremely hot from my chest up. Which has always translated into a blush when I checked a mirror. I didn’t need a mirror now. “Am not! Anyway, you’re not much bigger, Jacqui Fetcher!”

“Quit that bickering,” Pallas said. “You both together elicited the lengths the woman will go to, and her weapon of choice. We can probably find something that’ll neutralise it.”

“Why did you?” Owen said. “Take things to the limit?”

“Remember how I grew up in a Tween House? Saw the same five people dawn to dusk every day of my life until I escaped. How come a Fetcher can’t read a face better than I can?” I said at Jack.

I didn’t give him the opportunity to comment. “Marti has no intention of taking Bene anywhere! She’ll do the deed right there and call the data-waver to the airlock?” I made it a question to force them to think of the possibilities.

Still in bickering mode, Jack said, “So we don’t open the airlock?”

Two could play that game. “She code-pressed the doors?” I said.

Owen fiddled with his fingers by the side of his left eye. Probably adjusting his contact lens input system. Pallas too. They looked at each other with horror before they saw me staring.

Pallas tried to master her face. Owen not. “My apologies, Kosi Lionhair,” he said. “My apologies, Jack Fetcher.”

“The old woman has told you what’s what, has she?” I said. Why didn’t they realise that the old woman had had the upper hand the minute Bene capitulated?

“Threatening us with the data-waver,” Owen said. “Which she has penned up in the airlock, she says.”

“So where is she?” I couldn’t believe that the spy would want to be in the airlock with the data-waver.

“She’s gone to rout out the crew, get them to over-ride the flight sequence,” Pallas said, sounding distant. Like she had one too many shocks.

“A silo has a flight sequence?” Jack said.

“How else would it get to its mooring?” Owen said.

“By tug, I thought?” Jack said.

“Only when they are new and being delivered. Easier to have silos fitted with a basic jet propulsion system. Cheaper than running a tug every single move they make,” Owen said. “Check from the observation blisters.”

Jack and I ran to opposite sides of the dome, to the blister-ports. The little domes of triple-thick plastic glass allowed us to see downward along the hull. Peering askance I saw a thruster-hood extrude. “Got one,” I said. “Not that far below the dome.”

“One here about a third of the way below the dome,” Jack said. “How many all told?”

“Six spirals of six on this model,” Marti said.

Had Owen and Pallas really just allowed the old woman waltz in? Lightning-quick, I checked their faces. Guilty as charged. Whose employ were they in?

“We’ll need to run the engines from up here,” Marti said. “The crew were quite obstreperous.”

“Meaning the crew has been data-waved?” I said, continuing in my ignorant-child mode of getting information.

“You’ve got that quite wrong,” she said. “True, the hovering thing is the data-waver. But what it’s doing with those long white tentacles, is putting people into stasis, and then seeding them with the lavender fungi. Making food for its people. That was its function when it was at home and it doesn’t know any better than to continue with that.”

I asked the next question presenting itself. “Who are its people?”

Marti laughed. “They live at Zoo Hall in Brisbane. You should ask your EMBer friends.”

I suppose she expected me to ask that question next. But our EMBers would keep. “So how does it do the data-waving?”

“Different set of tentacles,” she said.

I remembered my view of the boot from under it. The different-sort-of-tentacles had to be the warty pulsing mass in the boot’s ankle. They suggested something horrible. I shuddered.

“That’s enough chat from the useless luggage,” Marti said. “You and your boyfriend should keep out of my way. It wouldn’t do for me to have to thank you.”

“Why wouldn’t it?” Jack said.

Talk about the pot calling the kettle black.

Marti breathed deep and spritzed the hypodermic to show us our fate.

Wasting the contents. The stuff in it was down by two thirds. She'd had to trunk a lot of the crew because their only other option was the data-waver? Why did they resist if we were only going to a silo anchorage? "Can you recover from stasis when you've been seeded with fungi?" I said. It didn't seem likely.

Marti came into the middle of the room. To be able to reach any of us with a small leap, I decided. She kept the trunk at the ready. "You EMBers had better start working out how to start the engines," she said. "My contacts at Moon Base will probably help if you ask them nicely. But make sure that that is all you do."

"Start the engines?" Owen said. "Right."

But wait, did Marti the spy just co-opt Pallas and Owen into her scheme, whatever it was? I watched the EMBers like a hawk. Surely they knew that they needn't play along if we all rushed Marti together, something that we could organise with a couple of glances?

Owen face-forwarded with Pallas over the nearest computer input station. With hardly any trial-and-error, he set up for the Moon Base link. Telling me he'd done it all before. That he'd practiced for this. That this was part of what the Pallas and Owen team were here for.

I wouldn't have minded being near Jack for company. I felt like a fisher on a rock, all on my lonesome. Which was one of Hen's sayings to describe being alone and highly visible to the wrong people.

## **21: Pallas and Owen**

Owen glanced at Marti in such a way that made me think that maybe he decided that since Marti needed him to start the engines and then probably to fly the craft, he was safe making a couple of demands himself. "Starting her up, I'll need everyone involved," he said.

Marti gestured with the tranquilising gun. "The supernumerary baggage will have to do you."

"Kids?" Owen said toward us.

"Nice of you to ask," Jack said.

Owen nodded. "As I said, for this to work we can't have supernumeraries."

Right. Got it. Jack too, he straightened up like he came to attention. We're not collateral baggage.

"Pallas," Owen said. "I need you to be the runner plus the eye-baller. You'll be checking by way of the blisters that the thrusters fire in their proper sequences. Jack and Kosi and I will input the sequences."

He saw us to our very own input stations either side of him, then addressed Marti. Or maybe

the space above her head. “I’m sorry, but I’ve decided that we’ll do the firing sequences in-house, so to speak, rather than trusting Moon Base’s AI to feed it out to us?” Owen said, seeming to ask without asking. Neat trick.

“My contacts on Moon Base will wonder,” Marti said.

“Let them. This tin can is a silo and it will be punching above its weight. You can tell them that,” Owen said. “Better we catch any glitch as it happens, than be left wondering where the program went wrong at the end with the ‘craft’ not operational.”

I almost laughed. Marti said her bit like she meant to threaten. Owen said his blandly like he stated a fact. Different threats, I’m sure. He meant that Silo 23 was still only a freight warehouse built on the Moon and meant to spend its life in a small area of space near to Earth, the Moon and the top of the space elevator. Punching above its weight meant we’d be going further?

“A silo is usually a stack of doughnuts,” Owen said. “Command centre on top. Each doughnut is fitted with six little supplementary rockets. Distributed over the whole hull in a hexagonal pattern.”

“When there’s no rear thrust assembly like in a space-faring ship,” Jack said. “Why are they called supplementary?”

“Good question I don’t know the answer to,” Owen said.

“Most ships have them even when they have more powerful arrangements for the actual travelling,” Pallas said. “Mostly supplementary rockets are used exactly the way silos use them, moving around in cramped anchorages. It’s become habit to call them supplementary.” She patted the side of the silo. “Good girl. You’ll be a champion.”

That made three references, however vague, to us going beyond the anchorage. I concentrated on my input monitor. It looked like it was slaved—I looked along the row of monitors—yes, Owen had slaved both Jack’s and my keyboards to his set-up. He didn’t need us after all?

Owen gripped my wrist. “The silo is made up of the six doughnuts, remember? Jack, you’re firing 1, I’m doing 2. Kosi, you’re firing 3. Then Jack again with 4, me with 5, and Kosi with 6. I’ve slaved your input boards to mine to help us get our timing spot on.”

“Okay,” I said.

He released my wrist and grinned. “I’ll be doing a bit of reading in between, the code. Need you both totally with me, ready to switch on my say-so? Which will probably not be a shout. More a continuation of my usual mumble when I need to read code very fast.”

“We can do that,” Jack said. “If you’ll at least sign-post by *e-nun-ci-ate-ing* the firing command clearly. A useful word I learnt in Fetcher School designed to do away with garbled

messages no one could understand.”

Jack blushed but I backed him up. “Yes. That. A fast mumble will not get it done.”

Pallas, just behind us, laughed. “They’ve got you there.”

Marti, behind Pallas, scowled. “Less of the talking, more of the doing. I want to see us underway. We have long light years to go.” She laughed at her joke whatever that was.

Owen and Pallas exchanged a lightning told-you-so look. “So, yes. We’d better get the show on the road,” Owen said. He keyed out a few commands and his monitor started to stream what looked like source code.

Every so often, a bit flicked to my or Jack’s monitors. “Pertaining to your sequences. Don’t bother reading. I’ve got it,” Owen said. As if I would have time to make head or tail out of it.

I listened to him mumbling through it instead and kept my eyes glued on the unending and meaningless, to me, stream of letters and words. Waiting for his clearly enunciated command to Jack.

“Firing Sequence 1,” Owen said. Jack had his fingers ready over the right keys. Pressed them down. A roar started spiralling down the hull. Owen pressed his own sequence as he said mine. “Firing Sequence 3.” Two more roars spiralled down on parallel paths.

Owen ignored Pallas running from blister to blister and shouting, “Check!” “Check!” “Check!” and the increasing sound echoing through the hull.

He said, “Firing system 4.” Jack totally ready again.

“Firing system 5,” Owen said perhaps to warn me as he pressed his keys.

“Firing sequence 6.” Which I input as he said it, so that the sixth roar started its spiralling downward path until all the supplementary rockets roared together.

“Good work,” Owen said. “I can see that I’ll have to make you work harder, Kosi. To not give you a second to get distracted.”

Jack frowned at me.

I shrugged. “I did find time to think of other things. What’s with the spiralling?”

“It’s how the ignition is wired up,” Pallas said. “Your last sequence began with Number 6 rocket in the top row. Then Number 1 in the second row, Number 2 in the third row, Number 3 ...”

“...awk!”

Weird sound for Pallas to make? I turned.

Pallas lay unconscious on the floor. Marti removed the trunk gun from Pallas's thigh and jumped for me.

I threw myself sideways off my chair.

Marti changed the angle of her arm and set the trunk gun against Owen's shoulder. Didn't pull the trigger, I guess. "Stop the engines!" she said.

"What if I don't?" Owen said.

Marti shoved the trunk gun across Owen's back and hit Jack in his forearm.

Jack slumped and fell off his chair. Marti checked the amount still in the gun with a lightning glance. She set the trunk back onto Owen. "Better we know where our bodies are approximately, don't you think?"

Huh?

Owen had no such puzzlement. He hit <Escape> and all sounds on the hull stopped. Marti hit him with the trunk juice and he slid down his chair and onto the floor.

## **22: Data-Waved**

With the idea of staying as far from the crazy old woman as possible, I stepped over Pallas still lying where she fell. I had no plan. Just that I wasn't going to be tranked.

Marti followed me. I scooted toward where Jack lay near his workstation.

But Marti stopped by the airlock doors. "You don't get tranked, you impossible little twitch. I don't have enough of the juice. The data-waver will get you or it won't, what do I care?"

She typed into the code-input-pad and as the doors slid aside, she tranked herself. When she was unconscious too, I hid under Jack's desk.

A very weird sound, not like the hissing previously, came from the airlock. Huzz uzz uz ssssz..

The upside-down boot swayed through the opening at the height of Marti's head if she'd been standing. Its thready white feelers cringed like a snail's eyes-on-stalks when they met with Marti's unconscious body.

It went four times round the room touching everyone and searching all the spaces in between. Marti must have let it know there should've been five unconscious people.

The wraithy tentacles drew up until they were like bunches of looped lavender-white

shoelaces.

I gasped, silently I hoped, when a bunch of thick octopus-like arms uncoiled from the boot's opening. With it came an expanding cloud of greenish, miasmal tinges and a half rotten old-boot smell. I sniffed with wide nostrils, not sure that I wouldn't be sick. Probably seeing the air accompanying the octopus arms made the smell seem worse.

But the octopus arms themselves? I realised I'd seen them coiled up in the boot when I was still in the hold. Their warty skin pouched and flexed as the boneless appendages, four of them, straightened as far as they were going to. Not all that far because they twisted and twined together as the boot approached Pallas.

Oh no! The boot descended until it hovered about an arm's length above Pallas's head. The octopus arm tips, about the shape and size of my fingertips, explored Pallas's face. Would she wake?

She did not and the boot dropped in a fell move so that its arms coiled over Pallas's face, enveloping it totally. Was it killing her? Couldn't be eating her. One difference from real octopus arms, I couldn't see any suckers.

The arms loosened and the boot rose with its little wings going as fast as hummingbird wings. The boot flew to Owen next. Must be doing people in order of size? Biggest to smallest meant Marti would be last.

I studied Pallas. She still breathed with a steady pattern of her chest rising and falling. A healthier rhythm it seemed to me than the stupor that the trunk caused. She must've been feeling better even while unconscious, because she had a friendly smile!

What will I do when I'm totally alone with nine hundred and ninety nine people tranked and or put to sleep by the boot? Even if I could trick the boot back into the airlock and discover how to contact Moon Base, will Moon Base even listen to me? Will Earth even want to know me, considering no one ever came back from a Life Lottery flight barring Joddy and Lem? And I bet that they tightened the rules so that that can't happen again.

The boot rose higher after it finished with Owen. I snapped my gaze to him. He breathed well too and smiled too. The boot hovered as if it couldn't make up its mind. Does it even have a mind?

The boot went to Marti when I thought Jack would've been next. Maybe I can save Jack. Pull him with me under the desk. What if the boot came under the desk and discovered me? Anyway it's a no go. Jack is too big. And also the boot already knows him.

I scooted past Jack to Owen. Hissed, "Owen, Owen, wake up!" Might as well be shaking a sack of sand. He isn't at home. Help! The boot has finished with Marti and is swaying toward Jack. I will be alone though everyone was already asleep barring me. I assumed that the trunk would wear off and they'd all wake for us to continue with our trip if you could call it that. Be better if Marti didn't wake.

What if Earth-side won't come to pick us up from the silo? Pallas and Owen surely will be able to contact Moon Base for the EMBers to rescue us if Earth Base doesn't, because we're in a Silo and meant not to come back. I chew the side of my hand. Can't make up my mind. Time is running out.

I do need to be with the others. I clambered over Owen and lie down in the space between him and Pallas, Jack at my feet. Marti is over by the airlock doors. Closed my eyes. I do not want to see.

Yes I do. I do want to see. Open wide. Here it comes. Its swaying octopus arms find me. I hold myself very stiff but can't stop my tremble.

The octopus arms drag their single fingertips over me but I barely feel them. Then the boot is above my chin. Just one of the arms reaches forward with its finger-like end. I see it's more like an elephant's trunk tip than a finger. I can still think but at the same time I'm shuddering like a buggy about to fall from the wall.

The octopus-arm's elephant's trunk tip strokes me. How ridiculous are all those words coming one after another? But it does. The octopus-arm strokes me along my cheek. Like it's saying something comforting in a totally alien language. I don't know what, but I feel calmer. I stop gulping air. I close my mouth and try to breathe normally. Concentrate on that.

The boot hovers right over my face now. The four arm tips all stroke me so softly and so consistently that often I lose my place attending. The very fine hair on my face is hardly displaced so while I hardly feel their touch, I feel very good inside. Warm. Calm. Peaceful.

So much to look at. The arm tip stroking my forehead presses down my eyelids about every third stroke. I understand distantly that the boot wants me to close my eyes. I can't stop staring into the well at the centre of the arms.

Each of the arms has a tree-structure of flat pink coral growing against their inside and lead my stare further in to the surface of the well—I don't know how it works—which is a long way above me ... their fractal branching lead my stare back to their beginnings at the wellhead, where each coral organism sprouts forth from a short trunk.

The surface of the well is pastel green and divided into a field of four equal quarters by an intersecting slit where the ends of the slits feed into the base of each short coral trunk branching out and out though the canopy-edges don't touch those of the other arms. They stay separate.

All the stroking blends together and the view is getting pretty fuzzy. I might as well close my eyes.

The boot outwitted me because I don't feel the exactness of what happens next. If I had I would've been distraught probably. It sucked me up through the well?

I wake standing upright on a transparent floor. Above me are four walls that draw together to an apex. I am inside a pyramid. Below me are four more walls drawing together to an apex. That pyramid is inverted and cleaved to the one I'm in. There's a name for such a shape. Perhaps I'll remember it. The boot holds my hand with one of its boneless soft arms and will show me around, it thinks at me.

It raises its front end, the bit with its eyes, to show where I should look. Overhead, on a couple of adjacent sides of the upper pyramid, is a meadow of green and brown mosses mixed with golden and lavender coloured lichens. Various creatures just as strange as the boot graze and harvest and nibble the delicacies they find among the vegetation.

They remind me of a troop of baboons I once saw in a documentary. Then I see a doll-like manikin among them that drags a huge arm and hand. How uncomfortable that must be. All the creatures, I realise while scooting my gaze from one to the other, are much stranger than baboons. They wave at the boot and chatter amongst themselves and I don't recognise any of the sounds they make.

Through the floor I see a captain's chair capsized so it is upside down, and though I might be making that up, it is at least twice as big as the human-sized captain's chair on Silo 23. We approach a circle in the floor. Reminds me of a porthole though it's big enough to step through which evidently we do. One of the boot's other arms, other than the one holding onto me, strokes my attention away from asking how.

The boot shows off the chair. Everything you could possibly need to drive this alien spaceship hangs off its back or is inset in the armrests and it seems to be covered with the same mouldy kind of material that the boot is made of. Beside it, there's another of the step-through portholes.

Travelling through at least three places—with wonders unremembered there are so many—we arrive in a quadrant where two inward sloping walls are inset with a gallery of sleeping slots for each of the creatures on the ship. They remind me of bunks. Well, not the shape of regular bunks. The boot shows me its sleeping slot, a tight fit that is shaped like an upside-down boot, where it goes to recharge.

Right there on the wall beside it, its sister has her slot, my boot tells me. This sister now climbs out to meet me. They are identical except for their colour. Is the boot itself female too? I ask.

<All the creatures are female apart from himself>

Himself? I want to ask.

<Do you like my sister's colours> my boot asks.

I think I must have frowned a little at their by now obvious strategy. Something is wearing off in me, I fear.

Both the boots together smoothe my brow. The boot's sister's toad-skin is lavender. Its warts are red. Not sure if I like it as much as the green-tinted arms. The outer covering, what I would call the leather, is moss dark.

The sister-boot takes my other hand.

<Humans don't understand how we work> she says.

The boot that brought me says <I wave patterns from a star outward and all the arcs therefrom. My sister waves patterns inward. She will wave you humans back to your first ship. Each of us can work only one direction>

My thoughts stutter over what I don't know. Our first ship? What's the second one when it is at home? The waving. Refers to the data-waving? From a star outward? That must mean then that because we are still in the Solar System, and the boot from Silo 23 referenced Sol, our sun, that she data-waved us from Silo 23 to the *Second Chance*.

Neither of the boots has a mouth to speak with. They look at me and I think their thought. Both the boots think smile-thoughts at me.

<You know so much more already than the patterns that came with you>

The boot sisters herd me toward the porthole in this quadrant.

I go because the arms that aren't holding me twine and coil. The creatures' warts pulse. Though I'd really really like to find out how the quadrant thing works. I was in five or six different spaces, and in my primitive mind two pyramid shapes stuck together at their bases have four quadrants?

The boot sisters stroke my hands, one each. <It's time to join your friends and wake up>

### **23: Waking up**

This time I wake lying down. I'm in a different place on the floor of the command centre, and I thought I only dreamed. Make that a command centre, comes a thought. It's similar but not the same as a Silo's command centre. As if I would know, having experienced only Silo 23, but really, why wouldn't all the silos be the same? There's a problem with that thought. What other ship could it be?

I'd rather go into a lucid dream than wake up totally, but I lift my head and peer around. There seem to be a whole lot more people on the floor. I study them. Nobody I know.

Someone vaguely familiar snuffles and coughs. She opens her eyes and leaps up. She shouts. "Yes! Yes! Yes! I made it! I made it happen!" Dances around.

I get up too. She's shorter than I am and that's weird. Dark brown hair, brown eyes, freckles. She looks like Marti, but maybe twenty years younger? Why am I taller than her?

“Are you with the EMBers?” the Marti look-alike says.

Huh? “No!” I’m affronted. She doesn’t remember me? I grabbed my hair to tease it, the situation was seriously confronting.

What? My hair! It’s different. Longer than I am used to and it falls straight down. I pull a bit of over my face to see it.

It’s too light! I’m a russet blond, like lions, not a blond blonde. Each hair is thin and the whole mass is slippery. I hate it. How else have I changed?

I’m wearing slippery black cycling shorts and a slippery emerald green shirt. I blush because I’m also wearing a slippery sports bra. I need such a substantial bra? I breathe in and out to study my chest. I don’t want to poke and squeeze myself with the Marti-replicate watching me.

Apparently I do need such a garment. Out of sheer embarrassment, I start to catalogue the similarities and differences between Silo 23’s command module and this one.

The Marti look-alike continues to study me. “You won’t be a passenger,” she says with narrowed eyes. “I doubt that any of them are still viable.”

Whatever she is talking about. Jack and Pallas and Owen aren’t among the bodies still on the floor. I miss them desperately. And what if all these strangers don’t wake up, and I have to deal with a Marti replicate on my lonesome? I can’t see it.

The replicate apparently can’t either, because she kneels by the nearest body and starts smacking its face. “Wakey-wakey. Wake up, dear. There’s work to do.”

The command centre on Silo 23 is a simple circular shape, with all the workstations on one level. This one has a mezzanine. I see two old workstations under there. The space under the elevated part must be hell to work in. A green captain’s chair sits on top.

The dome isn’t a dome as I understand it, but a framework of thick struts and braces with a mosaic of small windows. Triple layered, I see when I step nearer at its edge where it is lower. The outside layer of each little pane of glass—if it is glass—is pocked and striated with etchings of what? Space dust? Nothing can be seen outside the starship apart from the dark.

The inside layer of glass is just plain grubby. And it’s like no one has ever wiped down the terminals, desktops or chairs. I could write my name in the dust on the monitors. There are dirt-encrusted sweat stains on all the inputting devices. I see keyboards as old as vintage, as well as a couple of pairs of unloved Big Eye specs. One of the chairs has its stuffing showing, another is so far gone that the wadding hangs from the seat. How old is this ship?

The captain’s chair looks like it has a layer of dust hovering over its moss green velvet

covers. Moss green velvet? Must be an eccentric sort of captain.

“Hello-o?”

The replicate has succeeded in waking someone. The person is quite hesitant rising to her feet. Her expression changes to a frowning doubtful recognition when she sees the replicate. She knows Marti?

Then the stranger’s gaze snags on me.

I only see puzzlement.

If the body I’m in travelled with her on this starship, she surely would’ve recognised me? But she didn’t. She isn’t Marti because Marti is here in a younger version of herself. I work it out. If before we both woke on this new but elderly ship, we came from the same ship then she must be Pallas. It seems unsafe to put that result into words just now.

I make like I’m fluffing out my hair. The stranger nods and blinks. So that was meant to be Pallas winking? I notice the Marti-replicate studying our clumsy signing.

“What?” it said. “That child followed us here? She’ll be no use at all. I need adults. EMBers. People who know the Lotor-side protocols.”

Pallas made the kind of non-committal sound that keeps people talking when it is an ordinary conversation, because they think the person listening is sympathetic to the theory being expounded on. “We should try to wake a few more people,” she said. “Find out what is going on.”

“Mmm.” This time it’s the Marti-replicate seeming to agree. It’s a very different tone to her first joyful outcry.

Five more bodies clad in the green-and-gold sprawled at our feet. I picked someone who looks about my age, or rather the age of my present body, and knelt beside him. “Wake up, Jack.”

It worked. A couple of minutes later, Jack’s voice interrupted me shaking him. “Stop. I’m awake.” He opened his eyes and sat up in a hurry. “Oh. I’m sorry. I thought you were a friend.”

“It’s only with friends you are impatient?” I said.

He blushed then looked at me in a kind of horror-struck way. “You’re Kosi? Kosi Lionhair?”

I didn’t like his disbelief. Probably I blushed as well, a tide of heat rushed over me. “You aren’t anything like yourself either.”

Which had him feeling himself all over and blushing some more. “I hate bike pants.”

I left him to his discoveries. Pallas was talking with someone who didn't remind me of Owen.

The Marti-replicate wasn't letting her target get to his feet. "No. You need to listen to me," she said. She sat on his chest. "I'm the reason you are here. I made this trip happen. So I deserve to get my way about the next leg of our travels."

"The next section is back to Silo 23," the man said.

"Sounds like Owen," Jack said.

"What Pallas and I are contracted for," Owen said. "And we're contracted for taking you, Marti someone or other, back with us. The kids are supernumerary but I'm sure we'll think of a way to get them back too." He rolled from under Marti and got to his feet.

## 25: The Stranger

Pallas cleared her throat. When she had our attention, she nodded at the stranger she'd been talking to. "Meet Luke. He says he chose to remain behind to make room for Joddy and Lem?"

The stranger, tall dark and handsome I don't think, was tall and did have dark brown eyes with dark green glints, and dark brown hair also with dark green glints. Some bits of him—say on the pointy bit of his elbow—looked as if his skin was in the process of wearing away. Fringes of skin hung round a dark, greenish ... wound?

That couldn't be right. When as green as that, human flesh was definitely ill. The man owning the elbow didn't look sick. I concentrated harder and blushed maybe, I certainly felt redly embarrassed. Could what looked like a wound be his actual skin? The torn overlay was a torn overlay. Probably part of life suit. Right.

But still, that meant his skin was dark green. His face wasn't, but I couldn't stare at it to see how he'd solved that problem—by using makeup or with a stocking-weight facemask—because he'd surely notice me staring.

I stared at Jack and Pallas and Owen instead. Even Jack behaved as though he hadn't noticed anything different about the fellow. I frowned at his silent query, asking me what's up?

"Did they get back?" the stranger said. "Joddy and Lem. Only it's been about ..."

The rest of what he might've said went lost in Marti's outcry. "You were in that crew? Oh, I've had such a time waiting to meet you! Can you take me to Lotor? Ple-ase?"

She just about simpered. She certainly tried to grab Luke's arm to get familiar.

"Splat," Jack said. "There goes my dinner."

“Mine too,” I said. “Though it has been a good while since we ate.” Well, I was hungry.

“No food up here,” Luke said. “I always eat in the hold. Get off me, woman!” He shrugged Marti off.

I narrowed my mind’s eyes. Would that be Luke, a dark-green stranger, attending to a pair of stowaways he wouldn’t have known even if he’d been human? Because he definitely wasn’t from Silo 23. Why?

“Man is planning something for us,” Jack said.

“Not a man,” I said right by Jack’s ear. My head in the way of anyone else hearing.

Marti pouted. About what, I wondered. Luke’s interest in us, aka the stowaways? Or had we upset her with our byplay? My brother used to throw tantrums after such pouting. Hen always said that anyone over the age of two had to plan tantrums. So probably Marti was planning something too?

When Luke joined Owen at a workstation without further interaction with either Jack and me, or Marti, Marti started to drag one of the remaining bodies toward the side of the room. “Help me,” she said. “Might as well not trip over them every time we take a step.”

Not such a silly idea as the work gave us a surreptitious opportunity to keep our eyes and ears on any action by the three EMBers.

“It’s pretty weird, this system of borrowing other people’s bodies,” Luke said at the enlivened workstation. “But I have to admit, the way you use his face makes a difference. I mean you don’t resemble Toby?”

My mind was in overdrive trying to figure out how the mind transfer thing worked. The EMBers who had their minds transferred to Lotor had worn bicycle gear. Joddy’s story was pretty sure on that. These bodies, in *The Second Chance*, wore bicycle gear. Did that mean that a bunch of whole body-minds went from here to Lotor? I couldn’t see it.

“Sorry,” Owen said. He introduced Pallas. “Pallas EMBer. Over there we have Jack Fetcher and Kosi Lionhair. The woman wanting to do a Joddy? Her name is Marti. I’m Owen EMBer.”

“Luke EMBer,” the stranger said not missing a beat. “Wanting-to-do-a-Joddy, what’s that?”

Still in her buttering-up mode, Marti laughed delightedly. “Joddy came back youngering? That’s what I’m here for. I want that.”

“It’s a myth, a story put about by PP,” Owen said. “Keep our attention from what’s really happening.”

Luke stopped Owen saying anything more by stopping him with an arm across Owen's chest. "I'd like to hear the woman's thoughts on the matter?" He said it like he and Owen were friends.

"Three EMBers should be plenty," Marti said. "We fly to Lotor and land planet-side. Though I'll want to accompany you while you do your scientific experiments. I could even help. When we're done, we return to Silo 23, then to Earth."

"We fly to Lotor? From here?" Luke said.

He sounded incredulous.

"This is a powered silo ship, isn't it?" Marti said. "Filled with Life Lottery winners?"

"By here, I meant from where in space this ship is currently wallowing?" Luke said. It felt like he was laughing. Jack was starting to laugh with the guy. Pallas and Owen exchanged lightning glances when they worked out the joke. Owen went back to the enlivened workstation, to try and get some facts out of it?

I could see that everyone was going to accept Luke for what he seemed to be—a human with a patronising sense of humour. An EMBer. Someone called Luke.

Luke joined Owen. "Let me."

He talked while he input data. "If you're not here on a rescue mission—and this is not how I imagined how a rescue might unfold—what is your brief?"

He addressed Pallas and Owen of course. And as he had had about fifty years to practice it, his little spiel sounded quite natural.

"All due to Procyon Products gung ho," Owen said about the brief. "Thinking they can do anything."

"It is a rescue," Pallas said. "But also a remediation. PP hit a snag cloning the boots. This mission is a sort of back-to-the-drawing-board attempt entailing the first part of the journey. Namely, can we transfer three people from a silo to The Second Chance and return with four people, possibly?"

"Easy," Luke said.

Three people! "Don't tell me you expected Bene to leave Lydia behind?" I said.

Pallas shook her head and glanced guiltily at Marti.

"And bring home an original data-waver," Owen added.

## 24: The Original Plan

Right. The original plan was that Bene and Lydia would wait on Silo 23. Hold station, I seem to remember that was called in EMBer-speak. Owen, Pallas and Marti would transfer to The Second Chance, wherefrom Owen, Pallas, Marti and Luke, and an original data-waver, would transfer back to Silo 23.

That did seem to mean that Procyon Products knew Luke. Or, that they knew about Luke. Suspicious me wondered where and how he had inserted himself into the records.

“And, anyway,” Marti said. “I decided that we’ll go further forward before we come back.”

Owen zipped his stern-face lips at me—warning me—and tipped his head friendly-faced toward Luke. “Easy, how?” he said neutrally.

Did that mean Owen suspected Luke? Happy days. I wasn’t alone in my suspicions.

Luke chose to answer Marti. “We’re wallowing somewhere between the orbits of Neptune and Uranus, about four billion kilometres from Earth. We haven’t left the Solar System yet?”

So kindly said, that I burned for Marti when I didn’t even like her.

Marti, however, did not miss a beat. “It must be true then,” she said. “That all those people were data-waved. Or—possibly—this ship is on its way back from Lotor. It all happened fifty years ago. And that could be the reason why they are all wearing bike gear? That these are the bodies of the minds that went to Lotor? That somehow only the minds were sent on to the silo?”

Luke laughed. “They’re all wearing bike gear as an expression of support, meant as a morale boosting thing for the poor sapient who drew the short straws and had to go.”

He said sapient! All the other impossibilities sank in the swamp I keep in mind where to store extraneous detail.

I studied Owen, then Jack and Pallas. All of them looked to be trying to calculate without the help of any software, the distance in Earth-years to Lotor. Or back from Lotor to where we were now. As opposed to light years, that would be. Not any of the three, that I could see, wondered about green glints, a dark green elbow and a mispronunciation. Joggle things along?

“You didn’t listen to the whole story obviously,” I said, aiming my voice at Marti. “The

Second Chance never went to Lotor. We're on it. Ask Pallas if you don't believe me."

Pallas nodded.

I shifted my hopes to Pallas. Did she understand the situation we were in? I continued rattling the story, what I knew of it. "Joddy was small for his age, and a couple of years older than me when it all began. In the hold there will be a kid approximately my size next to his poor mother."

"I don't believe they're just in stasis either," Jack said. "They're being used up. Eaten while they are still alive."

Pallas looked sick and well she might. Did she really think Bene and Lydia would still be able to be retrieved when we all got back to Silo 23? I corrected myself. When they all got back to Silo 23.

"All the minds from this ship were data-waved to a ship that had crash-landed on Lotor," I said. "Ask Luke if you don't believe me."

Yeah, I know. Trick question. How else to find out who and what he was?

But he nodded. "The Mary Rose. Doesn't explain why the kid is youngering. Is anyone else?"

"I'll say it again," Owen said. "The youngering thing is a myth. No one I know has met either Joddy or Lem. I'm fairly certain no one from Procyon Products has either."

"I don't blame the boots for the eating," I said, looping back to the earlier conversation. "I doubt that they are all that smart and they are only doing what they know. Like non-sentient animals anywhere."

Oops. I referred to the boots in the plural. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. Glanced up real quick. Didn't see anyone take note.

I continued at speed but more carefully. "So, anyway, when they returned from their travels on Lotor, the EMBers were data-waved back to this ship, The Second Chance, which then travelled back toward Earth. Which would assume they had a flesh-and-blood data-waver with them at the Lotor end. Not just a virtual I mean. Wonder how that worked?"

"You know a lot, Kosi Lionhair," Luke said. "For a person who has never been in space; who wasn't in the world yet when all this happened; and who apparently lived an extremely sheltered life."

He noticed my gaffe about the boots. How does he know about my sheltered life? I couldn't tell what Jack was thinking, his expression like a blank screen.

"You might as well tell us what you think happened next," Luke said, laughing secretly again.

I shrugged. “The rest of the EMBers, with Joddy and Lem, would’ve been data-waved to a silo when it came within reach, and then picked up from the silo by shuttle when the silo got nearer to the Moon. Or the silo itself returned to the elevator.

“Going by the fantasies told in the public domain, there was no separation between bodies and minds. Joddy, Lem and the EMBers were data-waved with their bodies and souls in one unit. While we know that the bodies were those that Lotor made for them. But all of it happened before I was born, as you said.”

Out of the blue, Luke said, “I don’t feel comfortable with the idea of being data-waved one by one. A lot of opportunity for back-stabbing and such.”

Mere astonishment didn’t describe the sudden awareness around the circle. Like they all woke finally.

Luke turned to Owen. “Back-stabbing is the right term?”

Jack, bless his Fetcher heart, half-crouched ready to run. Seeing me watch him, he straightened and grinned. He mocked himself. “Nowhere to run, is there?”

It resembled a standoff with Luke and Owen staring at each other. “Depends on what you want it to mean,” Owen said not wanting to commit, it seemed to me.

Luke blinked.

Oh no! Silver eyes. Did I really see that? The dark brown irises slid back into place a micro-second later.

I stared hard at the deck. Did he see me notice?

“There’s an object unknown to mankind in the hold that will allow us to travel all together,” Luke said. “Now is the time to discover it, I think.”

“You eat in your spacecraft’s hold, I think you said?” Pallas said. “Why wouldn’t you already know all about this mysterious object as yet unknown to mankind?”

Yes. Yes. Yes. Pallas is suspicious. And as an EMBer, she would be the one to know about any technology as yet unknown to mankind. A smidgin of hope grew in me.

I glanced sideways at Owen. A slight frown crinkled his eyes at the corners. Maybe he was suspicious too?

“I’ve been asleep,” Luke said. “Massively good researchers might already know all there is to know about the Second Chance.”

“Asleep?” Jack said. “Don’t make me laugh. You would’ve been a husk by now. Sucked dry.”

If only I could be sure that we were all suspicious about the same things. Massively good researchers! Huh.

The way Luke was behaving? Like he was plotting something. Mine was a plan, I hoped. I started thinking it when Pallas finally told us their mission—can we transfer three people from a silo to The Second Chance and return with four people possibly?

The difference between a plan and a plot is the reasons for doing them. A plan usually had good reasons for doing it. A plot usually required a nasty outcome. I couldn't think of any good reasons for a nasty outcome.

The numbers added up if you discounted Jack and me. Everything that happened so far convinced me that Marti was here as planned. Pallas and Owen and Marti would make up the three. Luke, as the person to be rescued, was the fourth person.

My plan was for Jack to go back to Silo 23 with the others. But I would be staying both in the Second Chance and in space. I almost shuddered thinking it so plainly. So concentrate on the other. With Jack there would be five people to go back?

## **25: Three Boots**

Luke herded us toward the elevator and we went without further ado. Most of us were led by our curiosity, I think, about that amazing object. We arrived on the lower deck almost immediately. Not far to go from the flight deck to the hold on a starship after all.

The doors stayed shut because Luke leaned against the control panel.

“You planning to let us out?” Jack said.

“I had to make this elevator into a kind of airlock,” Luke said. “We need to wait for the air in here to equalise with that out there.”

“Really?” Jack said. He sounded as disbelieving as the rest of us, even Marti, showed on our faces. What could the man possibly have in the hold that would require an equalisation of air between an elevator and a ship's store?

“What did you mean by boots, Kosi Lionhair?” Luke said.

“Yes,” Marti said. “That was an interesting slip of the tongue on the part of a stowaway.”

Oh great. The not-man was going to try to throw us off track with a red herring, if that is the right terminology, and the volunteer will support him in his plot in exchange for getting her way. Good luck with that, sister. “It was in a dream,” I said.

Luke pulled me to his side by my shoulder, at the same time as shaking me hard enough that my teeth rattled. Talk about fingers of steel?

I tried to shrug him off but no go. And no one helped me? I started to feel distinctly obstreperous. “It was a dream I had.” I rolled my eyes at Jack. Telling him to help me with some invention.

Jack shrugged. I might have had to tell the truth—that there was one boot for taking us there and one for taking us back—when Pallas interrupted.

“There are in fact three boots,” she said. “There’s one on Silo 23 and two on this ship. The trouble with the one on Silo 23 is that it is a later model. It’s a third or fourth generation copy and since PP still has no way of communicating with the Huddle, any boots that the Huddle produce seem not to have the same capabilities as the first boots known to science.”

“Which is the reason we need a new one,” Owen said. “As I said.”

I don’t recall Owen saying anything about a new boot. Meep, said the data-waver. She was still with me? Which one? Here’s hoping we don’t go into the different colour schemes.

“Mmm,” Luke said. “How would a non-dreaming EMBer know that there are two boots on this ship?”

Pallas shrugged. “You’re right. I haven’t seen them. But since there has been travel in two directions—there and back—as there has been, there must be two boots.”

Ouch. My plan must go forward with only the colours of the two boots still generally unknown.

“Do you remember the colours of the boot in Silo 23?” Marti said.

It does not pay to cheer too soon. “Talking to me?” I said.

“You were in the bunk with me.”

“Moss green, lavender-white tentacles?”

“Inside the boot’s opening I’m talking about. I know you would’ve taken notice as it went overhead.”

Marti finally thought I was good for something? But would me telling her and everyone else help or hinder the smooth unfolding of the desired events?

Yeah, right. What smooth unfolding? “Umm. Skin like a cane toad. ... I don’t recall the colour exactly ...” I hesitated as if to get confirmation from her. “Greenish with lavender warts?”

“Sounds about right,” she said.

The same Marti who had her eyes closed at the time, I now recalled. I did not sigh. Couldn’t show my relief. We left that boot behind on Silo 23. The sister-boot on this ship, the one with lavender arms and red warts, will wave the others back to Silo 23.

Still holding onto me, Luke hit the doors-open button. Pallas, Owen, Marti and Jack trooped past into the scene from my dream. The same two pyramidal shapes were still joined at their bases. They were filled with the same shining, sunshiny light without any evident light source. The inner walls still looked like upright sheets of smooth water. The creatures grazing downward along their slope swayed and trembled as if they were underwater.

One of the data-wavers hovered near an inner wall, above the hole in the floor.

Everyone except Luke and me staggered about trying to orient themselves on the transparent floor.

Pallas got her footing first. I swear she clenched her jaws when she saw the large-size captain’s chair in the quadrant below connected upside down to the floor we stood on.

The chair was quite close to the inner wall in that space, and we were quite close to one of the corners of the conjoined pyramids. The distance between us and the chair allowed us to see what it was.

Marti looked like someone trying to get her footing on ice. She fell over and picked herself up and fell over again.

Jack turned and stared back at me in Luke’s grasp. “Some dream,” he said. He didn’t sound friendly.

Maybe I looked injured because he proceeded to explain his point of view. “You’re not surprised, shocked, or nauseous like the rest of us?” he said.

“Exactly,” Luke said. “So it can’t be that she just had a dream.” He shook me again. “When were you here?”

“It was a dream,” I said telling Luke as much as Jack. “Marti didn’t trunk me—she said she didn’t have enough of the juice—so when the boot helmeted over me, it gave me a dream? At least, I thought it was a dream.”

“Can’t trust anybody,” Luke said.

Considering it was a boot that gave me the dream, did he mean the boot couldn’t be trusted? Or, that I couldn’t be trusted? But what did he know about me besides nothing? I was a stowaway, a late addition to the adventure, and not even in my own body. Throw him a red herring? It’ll be tit for tat, as the saying goes. “I’d like to know how this alien ship came to be joined to the Second Chance?” I said.

Luke laughed. “One day I came down to the hold to fetch more food and there she was. I confess to antics very similar to the ones the rest of you engaged in just now. Then I explored.”

“I explored very thoroughly,” he said, gazing back onto me.

I stared back as belligerently as I knew how. “Hard to believe,” I said. “The whole story is hard to believe.” I didn’t add in the bit about him. How hard it was to believe him even existing.

“Fellow came down to fetch food and there-she-was-the-alien-ship?” Owen said.

“I also find the there-she-was difficult to believe,” Pallas said. “There will have to be a lot of proof trotted out before I can commit to that story. One of the difficulties being the explanations needed when we arrive back on Earth with you. When there probably are no records of you ever leaving Earth? Or am I mistaken in that?”

“You don’t even rate a mention in that fairy story?” Owen said.

Luke smiled. He didn’t look as if like his Plan A had gone down the gurgler. My Plan A was in all kinds of trouble.

“Don’t stare at me, kid,” he said.

I shifted my gaze. I was coming to a frightening conclusion. I’d thought the trip back to Silo 23 was going to be safe for Jack, and by extension for Pallas and Owen. I needed them to be safe to get Jack back to Earth. Were they really thinking this dangerous not-man should accompany them? Would anyone arrive?

Luke laughed. “One day I dared to sit in that captain’s chair you’ve been admiring, Pallas EMBer. I’m over the shock now and can laugh about it but at the time I clung to the chair like a baby.”

Pallas and Owen just about had disbelief dripping off them but Marti said, “Then what happened?”

Such hope in her voice. I think everyone had forgotten her.

“This ship-combo travels,” Luke said. “I’ve been to a hungry construct orbiting a star called Procyon A. You know that construct as a planet called Lotor. The star is a lot like Sol.”

At least three of us noticed that Luke said Sol and not something familiar like our star. His disguise was nowhere near perfect.

He continued. “I checked out Procyon B as well. It’s large and angry and red. Moera, its planet, orbits in what must once have been a goldilocks position. It’s nothing more than a hot

red rock now. Its people built Lotor intending to live out their time there.”

How did he know?

“You went to Lotor,” Marti said. “So you can go again.”

“Did you hear me say Lotor is a hungry construct?” Luke said. “It was hard work escaping. I won’t be going back in a hurry. This ship,” ... he stamped his foot on the transparent alien floor we were all standing on, ... “is all about time travel. So I’ll be visiting Earth next, where times are more recent.”

Time travel? Huh? My confusion maybe showed on my face. But no worries, everyone else looked just as befuddled. The Second Chance just gets dragged along?

“Earth?” Owen said. “What makes you think you’ll be made welcome? The aliens we already have ...” His gaze into the faraway snagged on one of the data-wavers and I watched him refocus to see the data-waver in the present. A lightning fast understanding crossed his face.

Luke bumbled on about his journeying. “Skip here. Skip there. I got sick of it. After I figured out I was going to be rescued for real—body and all—I brought the combo back here.”

Back here in this part of space, I reminded myself.

After a silent wide-eyed blazing from Owen, Pallas said, “Please explain.”

Similar to how he asked me to rile Marti back in Silo 23 at the beginning of the journey.

“Whenever I wanted time-out...” Luke said. “Time-out is, I think, how you say it. I spent some days on this neighbouring ship, this starship from Earth that you call The Second Chance, to listen in on whatever was going on in the area near at hand.”

Owen frowned at me. Don’t interrupt this long and convoluted account?

“I found it an easy matter to insert myself into the signals from Procyon Products to Moon Base. Moon Base asked details that I’m sure had Procyon Products scratching their heads but never once did they deny my existence.”

I nodded minimally. Wouldn’t dream of it.

“Procyon Products’ famous greed I think you would say,” Luke said. “Since Lotor is a construct, and I was inside it, it was quite easy to study the EMBers sent to Lotor wherever they went. After I escaped and when I claimed to be one of you, Procyon Products turned the task of rescuing me over to EMBER management. Next I hear about you, Owen, Pallas, Bene and Lydia being sent to rescue me.”

My imagination got stuck on this dark-green alien individual climbing into an Earth-made life-suit. Would he even be the right shape to start with? Uh oh, keep listening.

“Nothing about a pair of stowaways,” Marti said.

Luke drilled her with a searchlight stare. “The way people talked about the Marti, I thought they might’ve been hoping she disappeared somewhere. And although she hasn’t, that can still be organised.”

Marti stepped back smartly.

Far in the distance, as seen through three watery and a watery floor, I saw that though the baboon-like animals still grazed on their inverted meadow, one of my data-wavers, make that one of the boots, now flew among the herd, touching its friends—how did I know that—to let them know of ...? Luke’s plan? Did that involve them?

The other data-waver beckoned me with tiny flights forward and back, forward and back, all the time making its way slowly to the hole in the floor.

I glanced at my shipmates. All four seemed engrossed in the scene at hand. I slow-footed toward the data-waver.

“Kosi has the right idea,” Luke said. “We should move forward to the outcome. Please follow her to the captain’s chair.”

Is that where we were going? The marvellous object that could take all of us together back to Silo 23, I recalled. Wits about you, Kosi Lionhair.

I dived through the hole, expecting, I admit, to float through the way you do in zero gravity. Had to swim sideways frantically when I began to fall back! The gravity in the new room felt opposite to the gravity in the room I came from. Barely touched the rim and dragged myself into the new place.

Since nobody wanted Luke to touch them, they jumped or fell into the hole when he had encouraged them far enough.

Once I grappled Jack to the side, I had help getting Owen, Marti and Pallas up. Finally we all stood with our feet on the new floor, feeling like our heads were the wrong way up.

Luke jumped, rebounded and landed beside us like the expert he had to be. He pointed. “Up is always the nock where the walls come together.”

Duh. Telling us now. Thank you for your instructions, I don’t think. But I checked the six places where the walls came together. Where The Second Chance joined the alien starship ....

“Now what?” Jack said.

My moment. “Now we organise to go back to Silo 23, and from there, back to Earth.”

“No. We don’t,” Marti said. “I have said and I have said. I want to go to Lotor.”

“Fine,” I said. “Go ahead and trunk yourself, I’ll bring you the data-waver. I’m friends with them since the dream. And off you go to Lotor.”

Marti’s gaze tracked to where a data-waver awaited our next move. “The green and lavender coloured one brought us here, you said?”

I nodded. “So it’s the other one you need.”

“I don’t see that there’s any way that the EMBers would abandon one of their own, do you?” she said. “Look at the lengths they went to, to fetch him?”

I stopped my lip curling by force. Why did she bother comparing herself—a known quantity—with a mysterious being that Procyon Products would do anything to get their hands on? “Mmm,” I said in a non-committal tone. Encouraging her merely by commenting. How else to get any action happening? My mind was made up.

“So just trunk myself, you said,” Marti said.

“If you have any remaining,” I said.

She laughed. “Well I didn’t waste it on you, did I?”

“No.” The data-wavers meeped a friendly chatter into my mind as they approached. They hovered around me.

Pallas climbed onto the gigantic captain’s chair and stood against the back. “I can’t wait to get my own body back.”

Owen joined her up there and encouraged Jack to crouch in front of them so that he’d be in the middle.

Wonder of wonders, Luke turned to me. “I need you to order the lavender-and-red return trip data-waver into your friend Jack’s hands,” he said. “They are not my friends, as I said.”

Marti frowned. “You told me I’d need the lavender-and-red data-waver?”

Guilty as charged. My plan for Marti was unravelling.

## **26. What it Meant**

Marti jumped forward and grabbed the lavender-and-red data-waver by one of its octopus arms. She swung the creature around her head.

Both the data-wavers screamed so shrilly that I could only fall to my knees with my hands over my ears. Shrilling through me, the one scream continued unabated until the wrenching, flesh-tearing scream arced away. Fell. Plop. Became a meeping, sobbing and painful weeping.

Luke was there before me. He picked up the injured creature by clenching its two remaining arms close to its body and would've grabbed me in the same fell move.

I jumped back. Stayed out of his reach.

“What are you doing, Kosi?” Jack yelled. “Come on!” Owen held him on the seat with a white-knuckled grip.

Luke thrust the injured data-waver into Jack's arms. “Now you!” he said, crouching, getting ready to catch hold of me.

I retreated. “I'm not coming,” I said. “Go back to three years of hard labour in the service of my father? I'd rather explore this amazing, alien ship.”

Pallas grabbed Jack's other flailing arm. Held his hand.

“Kosi!” he shouted. “Hen will speak up for you! After we tell her this whole, amazing story.”

“Me coming back will only complicate life for Du and Zee,” I said. “Hen has them to think about.

“This is all about you being a big sister, isn't it? Sorry I said anything. Please come with us, Kosi.”

Luke laughed. “Too late! At last I have someone to run the ship while I'm away! I will definitely take you up on that offer, Kosi Lionhair!”

He whirled. Shouted. “Drop that!”

Marti dropped the data-waver's bleeding octopus arm.

Luke caught her up and set her onto the chair, holding her in place with one hand.

She scratched at his arm and I had some heebie-jeebies at what came into view. That dark green skin. Reptilian, almost. Scraps of the life suit fluttered to the deck.

Luke adjusted something on a control panel on the chair's side—why had no one seen that yet—and took his hand away as the four on the chair slumped.

That is, the bodies slumped. I could only hope that Jack and Pallas and Owen, and even Marti, had been waved back into their own bodies in SILO 23. The injured data-waver was

gone in its entirety.

Just a single data-waver arm lay writhing on the deck. Its colours dulled until the lavender toad-like skin had a steely black haze over it and the warts were more black than red. The finger-like appendage twitched, though blood had stopped seeping from the torn end.

The second data-waver, with the green and lavender arms, hurried to the herd on the wall. Not grazing now, they gathered in a tight knot near the centre of the meadow. I couldn't tell whether they were interested because I couldn't tell how their faces worked. If they even had faces.

But it was just the fact that they had stopped grazing and seemed to be attentive that made me think they were interested.

“Good riddance,” Luke said as he strode past the data-waver arm.

When he was a good long way off, I picked up the poor arm and cradled it along my sheltering arm. Still alive, it was. Geckoes sometimes regrew from just a tail, didn't they?

Luke walked straight through walls and floors until he arrived directly under the creatures centred on the lichen and moss wall. He shouted and pointed at the nearest of the two nocks adjacent to that wall.

Nocks were what Owen called them. That one looked very similar to the one we came through that we'd thought was an elevator but had turned out to be an airlock. The creatures dropped down to the floor with thuds and thumps that I could feel where I stood. While they were still in movement, Luke started harrying the creatures to make them hurry. What it looked like. Maybe not giving them time to think things through.

The data-waver whizzed from one to the other, touching them with its fingertips.

The group slowed. Turned as one and started back. Luke was completely taken by surprise, the fool, because they surrounded him and dismembered him.

Not bloodily. Not gorily. They just took pieces off him and slipped off the bits of life-suit. Dropped them on the floor. Dark green body parts were all that remained of Luke. Had he even been a real person? His face was a dark green skull with eyeballs in it, and whiter than white teeth.

Now, all the creatures carrying pieces of Luke in their hands, under a handless arm and in one case on a creature's head, continued toward the airlock. If they disappeared from it that would mean there had been a shuttle.

It didn't seem safe to investigate because, hey, not all the creatures left the scene. A very young, naked little girl toddled toward me. Would she be the equivalent to a two-year-old? A one-year-old?

A creature with one normal hand and one huge hand held up—the hand was at least the size of a baby’s cradle and twice that width and shaped a bit like a coracle—held the little one’s hand to stop her falling over, I assumed. Its one-eyed face was hidden in the shadows thrown by the coracle.

The data-waver accompanied them, fluttering first on one side then the other.

They stopped in front of me. The data-waver hovered expectantly. When had I picked up that the data-wavers had expressions?

The little one clambered up the woman with the great hand and peeped over the edge. She held out her hands to me. Or she held out her hands for me to put the data-waver arm in the hand.

I was relieved. It seemed the creatures had a practice, a way of dealing with an injured data-waver. Pallas called that a protocol. Whatever. I started to reach up the arm. The torn end tugged uncomfortably at the crook of my elbow.

Oh no! The arm had started to grow into me! I tried to pull it off me kindly, then fiercely.

The green and lavender data-waver fluttered at me, to stop me, I was hurting its sister she said, and I tried to fend her off. The great hand bent to floor level and the combined efforts of the data-waver and the surprisingly strong baby, had me tumbling into the coracle.

The baby snuggled into me. The data-waver arm still lay in the crook of my arm. Was there nothing I could do? The hand rose and levelled. The person whose hand it was jogged into the direction of the airlock.

Why do anything other than what you offered? The data-waver said. It sat on my head.

I wanted argue. Run the ship, he said. It’d be like running a large computer. I’m good at computers.

You are very kind giving your body to repair this data-waver. Without it we cannot reach our next destination.

What? I could struggle only in my mind.

As soon as I have you in my memory, the data-waver said, we two will leave the shuttle. They will take off for the third planet in the Sol System and we shall run this ship.