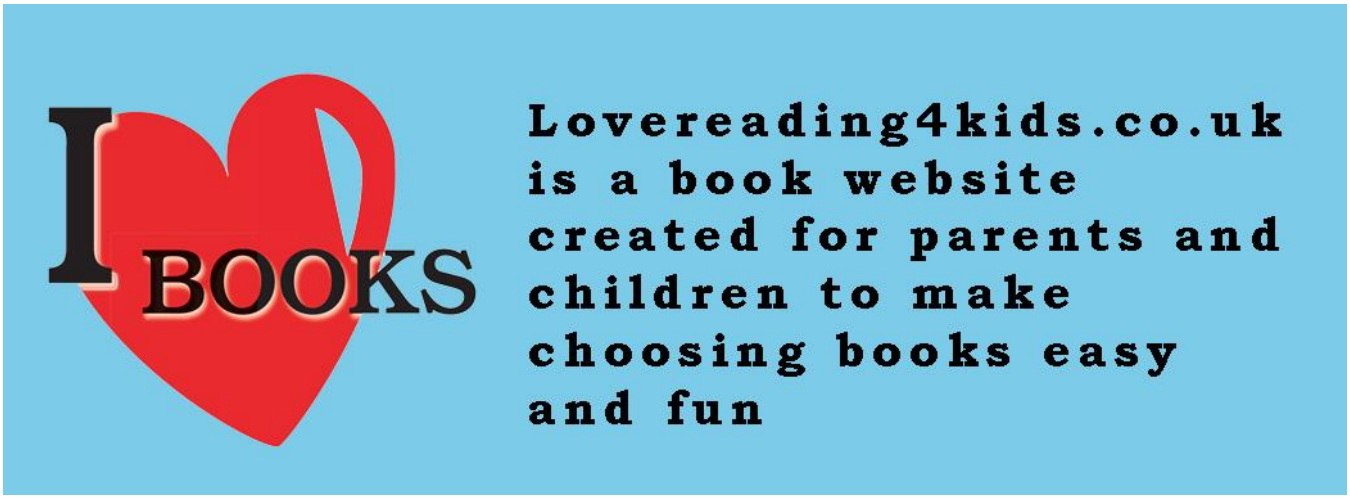


Opening extract from

Alien Rain

Written by

Ruth Morgan

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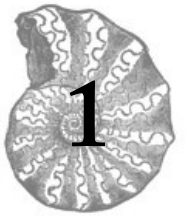
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1

Silence. An awkward, embarrassing silence. My ears felt hot. I imagined them pulsing like warning lights, even if the rest of my face was under control. Deputy Vilia smiled in my direction.

Had she really said what I thought she'd said?

'Bree Aurora, you *are* the fourth member of the mission, so very well done,' Deputy Vilia repeated. 'Congratulations to all four students. Your parents have been messaged with the news this afternoon and I am sure they are all delighted. Remember, although you have been chosen because you have impressed Core Panel, this is where the hard work begins. The February (B) launch is a mere six months away. As for the rest of you, there will be other chances to join an Earth mission and just because you haven't been chosen this time, you must not give up hope. Our Great Quest and Purpose is common to all…' She laid one hand on her opposite shoulder in salute.

'…and all act as one.' We saluted back.

Deputy Vilia re-rolled the luminous blue ceremonial holoscroll and with a snap of her fingers it shrank to a pinprick of light and disappeared into the pocket of her tunic. She swept from the room.

'Congratulations. Very impressive. Now back to work.' Professor Coro seldom displayed emotion, but his normally half-closed eyes bulged a little. Was he finding it as hard as I was to digest the final name upon the list? Or was that just my paranoia? I didn't want to see anyone else's reaction, but I felt a soft bump from Catti's elbow and looked up. She was staring at me, open mouthed. I shook my head, ever so slightly.

I must be dreaming. I returned to the virtual frog I'd been in the middle of dissecting. A neat, labelled row of intestines, liver and pancreas sat to one side of the poor beast and with its webbed feet outstretched and its mouth open wide, it looked as though it couldn't take in the news either. Would a frog express surprise or shock? I guessed not. I knew that a frog was an amphibian and unable to process complex thought, but I had never *seen* a real frog. There were no frogs on Mars.

Once school was over, I rode Skyrail home with Catti and we got our first chance to discuss the big news. Our class had done very well to supply all the students for this mission. The other chosen classmates, Robeen, Nisien and Halley, unlike me, really were exceptional students.

'You've done brilliantly.' Catti still looked staggered. I swear she hadn't closed her gaping great hole of a mouth once since the announcement.

'I guess … so.'

The train was packed, hot and noisy but we'd managed to grab a seat next to the window.

'Guess nothing. You should have seen Teyra's face, she would literally *kill* to be going with you. And the fact that Robeen's got on and she hasn't, well, that must hurt. Ha!'

I winced. Robeen and Teyra always competed to be top of the class and it was always one or the other who got the best overall average at the end of each week. Always.

'Catti.' I dropped my voice, afraid someone might overhear. 'Why me? Why do you think I'm on the list? I mean, my marks are nowhere near theirs.'

This was an understatement. In the two years since gaining my scholarship to Pioneer School, my average grades had been falling steadily, but this term they'd taken a dramatic nosedive. The likes of Teyra and Robeen achieved 95 percent plus. My overall average was floundering around the 59 mark. Anyone who finished the year below 50 was automatically asked to leave the school. No second chances.

The truth was I found the work hard and with each passing week, I seemed to be struggling more. Long days of gruelling lessons, piles of homework and worst of all,

continual tests – I felt ground down by the weight of it all. How would my parents feel if I was asked to leave Pioneer School? The idea upset me so much, I'd shut the thought away in the little box in my daydreamy head marked 'Do Not Disturb'.

'It must be a mistake.'

Catti gave my arm a little squeeze. 'Come on, Bree. Core Panel have chosen *you* and they don't make mistakes. Don't worry about Teyra, she won't say anything. It was just funny to see the look on her face. When Robeen's name was read out, she must have felt certain hers would be too.'

Of course Teyra wouldn't say anything mean. Pioneer School students were honour-bound to support the lucky few who made it on to real missions.

'You can't blame her, can you? I would have expected to be chosen if I were her. I would have expected one of Coro's frogs to be chosen before me.'

'You're funny!' Catti laughed.

'Right. When did "funny" earn you a place on an Earth mission?'

She struggled to answer. 'You're very good at Empathy.'

True, Empathy was the lesson I always felt most confident in, but even there, I never got top marks.

'Teyra's last poem was plastered all over the walls of the school.'

'So what? Stop looking so worried, Bree. Can you

believe it? In six months time you'll be heading for Earth! I would give *anything* to be going where you're going, it's what we all dream of. I'm so pleased for you, you know I am. I'm only sad I won't be seeing so much of you for the next six months, with all this special training you'll be getting. It's so exciting! This is the biggest chance for you.'

The train was nearing Canton Station, Catti's home stop. When the bing-bong announcement struck up, she got to her feet.

'Don't worry. And forget Teyra, she'll get her chance some day. See you tomorrow.' With a wave, Catti was swallowed up in the exiting crowd.

The doors closed, sounding like they were shushing the noisy commuters as they left, and the train pulled off again. I live in Roath on the other side of the city and I always find this last leg of the trip home most exciting, when Skytrain climbs to its highest level, only a few metres short of the rim of the upperDome, before its two-mile-long top-speed flight from west to east.

One of my earliest memories is being two or three years old and lying with my head in my mother's lap, looking up through the glass roof of the train and the glass roof of the upperDome at the bright pink sky, while she stroked my forehead with her finger and sung the familiar nursery rhyme:

There was a man called Mister Drome
And Mister Drome he built a home
Drome's home was a very fine Dome
A very fine Dome indeed
And the red wind blew and the red wind blew
But it couldn't blow Drome's Dome down.

For years, I imagined that Mr Drome must have been among the early pioneers who first terraformed Mars. Later of course, I learnt that there never had been a Mr Drome. The government made up these nursery rhymes, making up a history so we felt more like we belonged here. My parents had been sung the same songs as children, and their parents before them.

A storm was raging out there, a swirling confusion of orange grit and dust. There are often violent storms on Mars. Aboard the train, of course I couldn't hear it, but I had once heard a recording of a Mars storm and found the deep bass howling and high-pitched squealing unnatural and scary. That afternoon, face to face with that wild swirling, I was very relieved that six metres of re-enforced, radiation-resistant glass separated our transparent bullet train from the uncontrollable outside world. I also gave thanks for the brave teams of technicians like my dad who made daily safety surveys.

The view of our city, nestling mainly below ground level, is spectacular from up here, but best of all, I love

picking out the historical buildings which nestle like small, rich jewels amongst the high-rise office and apartment blocks. Cardiff was once called 'New Cardiff' but the 'New' has long since been dropped. Old Cardiff is back on Earth. When the first pioneers built these Domes – because of course Cardiff is only one of many hundreds on Mars – it was decided that for the psychological wellbeing of the first settlers, replicas of buildings they had known well on Earth should be built there too.

First, the crouching spider of the Sports Stadium comes into view and nearby stands one of my favourites, Cardiff Castle, from the days of Kings and Queens. Best of all is the pale slab of the Museum, standing alone on its small green island of parkland and trees. It's always been a special place for me, where I've learnt more about our distant Earth than from any classes at school. And dreamt more too.

I always gather my belongings together when I see Roath Park Lake, with its tiny white model lighthouse commemorating a pioneer called Scott who travelled to one frozen end of the Earth and died there, once upon a time. Swans swim on the illuminated water. Swans and chickens are the only birds in Cardiff and although I'm not sure about the chickens, which are kept in cages, I know the swans have been specially bred not to do what they do upon Earth – take to the air and fly like a train.

Skytrain began its descent to Roath Station. The Dome was replaced by grey buildings closing in on either side.

I exited with the crowd as usual at level six, where the walkway transported me beneath three shiny white arches into the sixth stratum of Albany Towers. I felt distant and dazed. Where the corridors divided, I took the left, heading past Mackintosh Avenue and into Keppoch Court. The wall display changed from savannah to rainforest and the air filled with the soft sound of rain: the walls sensed that rainforest was the most pleasing scene to me. If anyone else had been present, they would have had to make a democratic choice about which scene to display. Normally I marvelled at the water droplets bouncing off the multi-shaped leaves and took in deep breaths of the smell of the Earth rain. Someone's approximate idea of the rain smell, at least.

But that afternoon I just wanted to get home quickly and face my mother. I had an ever-tightening knot in my stomach. It made me think of knotted frog intestines before they've been unravelled and labelled. It wasn't how someone should feel returning home with good news, surely?



2

A left turn, then a right and I was home, number 6.21, a low blank white frontage like all the others. That afternoon, the mood tiles around the doorway glowed turquoise, a sign that all was happiness and harmony within. When the door melted open, Mum stood in the middle of the hallway as though she had been standing there for hours, a huge smile plastered across her face, but tears in her eyes too.

'Bree!' She rushed at me, clasped my face in her hands and kissed me over and over. 'We're so, so proud of you my darling. So, so proud. I knew you could do it and you have!' She wrapped her arms around me.

'Oh.' I couldn't think what to say. And she was squeezing the breath out of me.

'Now, you mustn't worry about us,' Mum said, holding me at arm's length again. 'You'll obviously be gone for quite a while…'

'Twelve months,' I said.

'I know.' Setting her chin at a familiar, determined

angle, she stared at me with misty-eyed pride. 'We must just be strong about that. This is the biggest opportunity for you, Bree, the biggest anyone can image. This is everything we've ever dreamed of, ever since you won your scholarship. Nothing must spoil this chance for you.'

I opened my mouth, then closed it again, frog-like. Even though the school sent them a report on my performance every day, I knew my parents didn't really appreciate how badly I'd been doing and I hadn't spelt it out to them. As the first of my family to get into one of the upper academies, and an only child, I was the entire focus of my parents' ambitions. Everything that happened to our family, even Dad's promotion to Chief of his team of safety technicians, seemed to stem from my passing the exams for Pioneer School. His promotion meant we could move to our enviable new address, and so on… If the Aurora family were on the up and up, that seemed largely down to me.

How could I question Core Panel's decision in front of Mum? She wouldn't have understood.

'Who else is going? Any of your friends?'

'Not friends exactly, but the three others are from my class.'

Mum stayed silent, expecting further details.

'There's Robeen who's, well, she's very clever. And two boys called Halley and Nisien.'

'Oh? And what are they like?'

'Well, they're very … intelligent too. Halley's good at sports.'

She nodded her head slowly, as though satisfied I was in the right sort of company for this trip, with classmates comfortably in my league. I swallowed, but I couldn't get rid of the lump in my throat, the one bunging up what I really wanted to say.

This isn't right! Don't you understand, Mum, there must be some mistake? I'm not as smart as the other three and never will be, not if I live to be two hundred, so why, why, why has Core Panel picked me?

Instead, doing my best to look happy, I headed for my room.

'Your father will be back in an hour,' she called after me. 'Then we'll eat?'

'Fine,' I called back. 'I've got homework anyway.'

I did have homework, but there was no way I was going to be able to settle to it. None of it was in by the next day. I lay on my bed. The small light hovering above my desk made my old toy dragon look as though he was in the spotlight on a stage. Perhaps he was about to deliver a speech, yet another speech about how well I'd done and maybe round it off with a celebratory dance.

So what could I do? Would I really be happy if I kicked up a fuss, demanded to know the reason I'd been selected, and then got dropped from the mission? Of course not.

But on the other hand, what if someone – one of the Professors – actually did believe in me, enough to give me this chance in good faith? What if someone had seen through the bad marks to the real Bree underneath, the Bree who knew that she didn't understand everything, but often secretly felt she understood more of what was *really* going on than all the Robeens and Teyras of this world. Like in Empathy lessons – that poem of Teyra's, which they'd all gone wild about at school, I hadn't rated at all, although naturally I'd kept my opinion to myself.

At Pioneer School, Empathy is taught through poetry writing. We sit in a circle and a virtual image is projected into the middle as a stimulus. Sometimes these images are of human faces and situations, and these are easier, but sometimes we're shown a natural force or object from Earth, something we'd never encounter in real life. Sometimes we find out what the force or object would feel like. Sometimes we smell it or even taste it. We'd been shown clouds, volcanoes, a rhinoceros, a stained-glass window and something called a tea ceremony.

During one lesson we'd been shown a wave breaking on a shore somewhere on Earth. Teyra's poem began like this:

Wave
The wave is a domestic cat
Pouncing playfully on the shore

Springing on its liquid paws
Biting the sand with its foamy jaws…

Why, I wondered privately, was the wave a cat and why was the cat a wave? What was the point? The image of 'springing on liquid paws' fell down completely as far as I was concerned and why 'foamy jaws'? Was the cat suffering from that nasty-sounding Earth disease, rabies? The cat metaphor was dragged out like slow torture over seven more verses and for no real reason.

But oh no, it turned out Teyra had done something *incredibly* clever and complex by comparing one unfamiliar earth object (a wave) with another (a cat), which gained her a lot of extra marks. The poem ticked loads of other boxes as well: there was alliteration (*P*ouncing *p*layfully…) and a strict rhythm. It ticked so many empathetic poetry boxes that soon the whole school was raving about it. Teyra's cat-wave poem illustrated the Pioneer School walls for weeks.

By contrast, my poem was simple. It's not a great poem but I don't mind showing it to you.

Waves
My thoughts are like waves
Bobbing happily at sea
Till one spies some distant shore
Where smiling knowledge suns itself

It breaks away, begins to roll
Inward
Building in expectancy, building in delight.
Arriving at last, rearing up and crashing down
It smashes up and fizzles out,
Wishing it could fight the long, slow, backward drag.

Like I say, it's not perfect, but it says something I felt at the time and I was satisfied with it. At the end of the lesson, Prof Eisenhaur read it through several times with a puckered expression.

'I like it,' he said, in a way that suggested he didn't really know why. 'Though compared to the others it's a little on the short side.'

My heart sank. Still, at least he awarded me a respectable 75 percent which bulked up my overall average for that day. I'd done a bit of alliterating and had included some internal rhymes, after all.

Prof Eisenhaur had seen something in my poem, I was sure. Perhaps he had read it again later and maybe he'd reconsidered my *real* potential as a student. Did Prof Eisenhaur sit on the Core Panel? If so, could he have been the one who'd suggested me for the expedition?

Hmmmm.

I started feeling a bit better.



Next morning, I felt a lot better. I started to give in to excitement. I'd been chosen – did it really matter why? I had to take it as a massive compliment, there was no other way *to* take it. And best of all, most unbelievably best of all, I was actually going to Earth.

Earth!

Catti was absolutely right, I needed to relax, and enjoy it.

Getting into Pioneer School was a great achievement, but the crowning glory for any student was to be selected for one of the Earth missions. So few ever were. A handful of students got to tag along on each of the three yearly missions organised by the Cardiff SSO: the interDome Scientific Survey Organisation. The missions tried to find out more about the motherplanet and our ancestors, the Earth humans who wiped themselves out centuries ago in a cataclysmic war. There was a lot we didn't know about this 'War for Earth' and there were no impartial eyewitness accounts. Only certain cities on Mars had SSOs and Cardiff's was one of the biggest and best

respected. If you went to Pioneer School, it was taken for granted that one day you would get a job there.

Everything was actually pretty fantastic! The day before, it hadn't even *occurred* to me that getting chosen meant no more dreaded tests and grades. For the next six months, I wouldn't even be at school. Students picked for the missions received full-time training at the impressive SSO Headquarters in Thornhill. Then of course there was the three months' flight to Earth, six months on Earth and three months' return flight. By the time I returned I'd be so skilled up, the work wouldn't seem half so difficult, and in any case that was all so far off in the future, it wasn't worth worrying about. Even if I continued to do badly at school when I got back, would they honestly be able to kick out a student who'd been on an *Earth mission*? No, so why worry? All my prayers had been answered at once.

A message appeared on my tile as I was eating breakfast, telling me I was expected that morning at the SSO Headquarters. Tiles are skin-thin computers which we all have permanently bonded onto the palms of our non-dominant hands at the age of six. Within the hour, I was heading north on Skyrail.

The SSO building rose out of the ground like a hill, its swooping sections of roof covered in neatly clipped grass where the workers played golf in their free time. The building has its very own Skyrail station and I felt important disembarking with a bunch of brainy-looking

scientists, straight into the enormous round main concourse, all bright white and greys with splashes of acid-bright colour here and there.

For the first time I gazed around the concourse and saw groups of scientists holding meetings about the vast floorspace. Overhead there hung a huge silver ellipsoid, like a flattish onion, with complex work reflected on the translucent computer walls. Four escalators rose up to it with a continual stream of scientists going up and down, dressed in their grey padded tunics with the red dragon SSO logo. There were also escalators to the gyms and spacecraft simulators on the upper floors.

I had no idea where to report, so it was almost a relief to spot Robeen Bowen-Owen standing by herself, looking equally lost in the milling crowd.

'Hello,' I said.

Robeen turned around and her mouth stretched a little at the corners. 'I'm not sure where to go,' she said. 'Oh, congratulations, by the way. I haven't had the chance to say well done to you. The four of us have done well.' Her voice was flat. It wasn't particularly kind of her to say what she'd just said, it was just what was expected of impeccably behaved Pioneer students.

'Thanks, Robeen, you too. I'm delighted for you.' I smiled weakly past her into thin air, but couldn't help noticing the sidelong glance she gave me, and the ever-so-slight dismissive sigh.

Someone tapped me on the shoulder. We turned to meet the gleaming smile of a scientist only a little older than us. She was carrying some dark blue tunics over her arm.

'Greetings,' she said. 'I'm Grace Hassan. I'm the student link officer here at SSO. You must be…' she consulted her tile '…Robeen, and you're Bree. The boys are upstairs already and I was just fetching these.' She patted the tunics. 'Shall we go on up?' She led the way to one of the escalators at the side of the concourse.

Nisien and Halley were sitting on a sofa on the second-floor balcony looking out over the concourse. Robeen and I sat on the sofa opposite. Grace activated blue curtain walls which slid around us, enclosing us in a small soundproof room. She took a pen from her pocket and drew a rectangle on the wall, which instantly turned into a darker blue screen. She wrote:

EARTH EXPEDITION

LAUNCH DATE 2 FEBRUARY (B)3016

'First of all, take one of these.' Grace passed each of us a tunic. 'You can put them on straight away if you like. It's important you feel you belong here as soon as possible.'

The blue tunics were emblazoned with the SSO logo and mine fitted perfectly. For the first time I noticed that the eye of the dragon was actually a small, glittering Earth ringed with clouds. I felt a flutter of excitement. Little by

little I really was starting to believe I belonged on the mission after all. It was becoming real.

'You may not have been aware of it, but you've come through a very rigorous selection process,' Grace continued. She was more serious now, down to business. 'For months your teachers have been watching you closely, making notes, discussing your aptitudes. They only select students of the highest capabilities who they also feel will be able to cope with … certain new information about the motherplanet, information which here at the SSO we feel it is better the general public are … not made aware of. Some people just wouldn't be able to cope with it, you see. Even though our ancestors have lived on Mars for so many generations, there is still this link to the Earth … up here.' Grace tapped her forehead with a perfectly manicured nail and looked round, making eye contact with us all. 'Are you okay with that? Okay for me to continue?'

I wanted to pinch myself to see if I was dreaming. Grace was clearly about to impart very serious, classified information. Did I deserve to hear this?

Nisien cleared his throat. He was another ultra-serious type but more vocal than Robeen. 'If our professors believe we are ready for such knowledge, I'm pretty confident we can handle it,' he said.

'Great,' said Grace. She scrolled a little on her tile and on the dark blue screen appeared an image of Cardiff

Castle with the animal wall in the foreground. 'You all know this place?'

We nodded. 'Of course,' said Robeen.

'It's a beautiful building,' Grace continued. 'And, of course, our Dome was a very different place when it was built here, life was just getting started. We sometimes forget what a big step it was to relocate to another planet. A lot of customs from Earth were imported, like the names of our months although our months are in two parts – February (A) and (B) for example – because a year is twice as long on Mars as it is on Earth. Familiar structures like the Castle made the settlers feel at home too. It's a little known fact that they're not full size. That's right!' She registered our surprise. 'The ancient landmarks we know and love are only three quarters the size of the originals back on Earth. They always have been a very important link to the motherplanet.'

Grace sighed and scrolled about on her tile again. The original image was replaced with another. Robeen, sitting to the right of me, gasped. I couldn't immediately make out what I was looking at.

'Quite a shock, isn't it?' said Grace. She paused to let us absorb the picture, before carrying on. 'This is the Castle on Earth, as it was six years ago. If any changes have occurred since, it can only have been further deterioration, but I haven't any more recent pictures. You can probably see for yourselves why we don't make this public.'

The Castle in the picture was barely recognisable. The top of the clock tower was missing. Heaps of rubble lay on wet, marshy ground. The walls were laced with holes and the animal wall had gone. Scrubby bushes were growing in the rubble and high up in the dilapidated walls.

Nisien cleared his throat. 'A lot of people wouldn't be able to cope with this,' he said. 'I can absolutely see why you don't tell everyone.'

'And you appreciate that you mustn't say anything public about it either?' said Grace. 'We have to tell you because you're obviously going to see it for yourselves.'

'Naturally we won't say anything, not even to our families.' Nisien looked around us all as though he were some kind of spokesperson.

'It's *really* important,' said Grace.

I managed to nod.

'Believe me, people wouldn't want to know,' she continued. 'And what's the point in upsetting them? What's the point of undermining their sense of who they are and where they come from? Great efforts have always been made to keep our society as happy and free from strife as possible. We don't want to make the same mistakes humans did on Earth and we don't want any general panic. That's why we keep findings like these quiet. Missions from other SSOs have made similar unfortunate discoveries: the Golden Gate Bridge has

collapsed, there's very little left of the Sydney Opera House, I could go on…'

I piped up. 'But … what about the Museum?'

It was unthinkable that the place I loved most in the world, the place I had always dreamed about visiting – although up until yesterday I'd never imagined I would – might be a sorry wreck.

'The Museum has fared better than many other landmarks.' Consulting her tile, Grace brought up an image of the original on Earth. She couldn't keep a weariness out of her voice. 'It isn't deteriorating as rapidly, maybe because of its sturdy shape.'

I breathed a sigh of relief, then caught Nisien's eye and wished I hadn't. I didn't want to show weakness.

The building on the screen, once called the *National Museum of Wales,* was clearly still my Museum, the one I loved so very much, even though the stone was badly discoloured and flowering bushes and creepers had taken root between the cracks in the walls, even though it stood in a lake of mud. The familiar statues were still on top with their harps and helmets and hammers. It was still in one piece and it was still my Museum.

Grace wrote something new on the screen: the word 'PURPOSE' which she underlined.

'So,' she said briskly, 'moving on, what is the actual purpose of these surveys we conduct every three years? Any ideas?'

'To find out about what happened in the War for Earth.' Robeen just managed to jump in before Nisien. Grace wrote down what she said, word for word.

'Yes, we're still trying to understand our warlike ancestors and you are there to assist the archaeologists dedicated to finding out more. What else?'

'To prepare for recolonisation?' said Nisien.

Grace wrote down what he'd said.

'Let me show you something,' she said. Up on the screen appeared what I knew from Professor Coro's lessons was a dragonfly. Compared to the size of the tree it hovered over, the insect looked enormous.

'This,' said Grace, with a sharp intake of breath, 'is a dragomansk. Something else the public don't know about and wouldn't want to. What I'm about to tell you is also not for public consumption, is that clear?' She looked around and we all nodded again. As she talked, she called up a series of pictures of the dome-eyed dragomansk, which began to look more and more sinister. A close-up of the face of a dead one showed powerful, serrated mandibles.

'They were originally developed as a medium-grade weapon by Earth humans centuries ago. Further development during the War for Earth turned them into the most fearsome killing machine. The dragomansk's biology and its role as a weapon are completely synthesised.' Grace spotted the perplexed look on my face.

'Don't worry, you'll learn a lot more about that in training, but it's important you grasp this first: the whole reason for their existence, its entire purpose is to kill humans, although they will eat any animal to fuel their short lives. They are ferocious breeders and have become the dominant species on Earth, overwhelmingly the dominant species. Basically, they're all over the place. They have hampered the success of all SSO missions. We've tried just about everything we can think of to eradicate them, but haven't succeeded … as yet. Here you'll be trained to deal with these creatures, mainly how to stay out of their way, to be honest. Don't worry – we have effective weapons which we'll teach you how to use.'

Don't worry? The four of us stared at one another.

'You've done remarkably well to keep all this quiet,' said Nisien.

'The general public don't want to know. They really don't. I know it's a lot for you to take in.' She smiled. 'I remember the first time I was told. But as students who have been chosen for this mission, you should be able to cope with the knowledge. Ready for something else?'

I wasn't at all sure, but I wasn't about to admit it. Grace wrote another word: 'RESOURCES' then highlighted it by drawing a box around it, a livid yellow box.

'Resources,' she said. 'As we've just seen, the Earth is in ruins. It may have deteriorated to the point where it could not possibly sustain great numbers of humans any

more. We are beginning to think that recolonisation may be impossible. Somehow, the Martian race will have to be made to accept it.' She frowned and I wondered if she wished she'd phrased the last bit differently.

'Yet there remain Earth's vast and vital resources,' she continued. 'Listen: we need to start thinking of Earth more as a store cupboard we can use to extend our magnificent colonisation projects, both on our own world and out across the solar system, to the moons of Jupiter or Saturn. Expansion is, after all, our Great Quest and Purpose. One of the reasons for conducting these surveys is, in actual fact, to detect and map the location of these resources: previously undetected gas, heavy metals, oil. In fifteen to twenty years' time, all the archaeology will be over. We'll have found out all we're ever likely to and we'll also have the technology to start bringing back much, much larger amounts of these resources. All our best brains have been dedicated to this over the past few years.'

'So Earth will carry on deteriorating?' I blurted out, stupidly. Even though I understood what she'd said, I couldn't quite believe it.

Grace smiled to suggest she appreciated my finer feelings, but her smile fell away quickly. 'The government realises it will take time for our people on Mars to accept this. We appreciate all the motherplanet has given us and all she continues to give us, but what we need most of all are these vital resources, to make progress in the right

direction. You'll come to see this for yourselves. It may take a thousand years before the mining is over or it may take ten thousand, nobody really knows. But we must continue to progress or as a species we're lost. Our Great Quest and Purpose is common to all…'

'…and all act as one.' Although I saluted with the others, it was with a heavy heart.

On the platform, I thought about our Great Quest and Purpose. I'd grown up swearing allegiance to it, same as everyone else I knew, but we'd also been raised to believe that recolonisation of Earth was a fundamental part of the plan. On the other hand, if Earth was in as much of a state as Grace had described, perhaps it was best to take what it had left to give and move on? The thought still made me very uncomfortable.

'Are you okay?' Halley was waiting for the same train as me. Robeen and Nisien had left for different platforms. I hadn't noticed him and his question shook me.

'Oh … of course.' I couldn't show any weakness.

Halley smiled. 'It's been quite a day,' he said. 'I can't quite believe that exercise programme they're going to put us through, starting first thing tomorrow.'

I just stopped myself rolling my eyes. Halley was one of the fittest athletes in the school. 'Oh, I'm sure you'll cope fine.'

The train pulled up and we got in. It was far from full

but without asking Halley dropped into the seat next to mine. I'd never spoken to him at school but he wasn't like Robeen and Nisien. Halley was very bright but he was also chatty and a bit of a joker, although during Grace's talk he'd been the quietest, which had surprised me.

'Quite a few revelations,' he whispered. 'You know, about the landmarks on Earth. It's no wonder they've been keeping that quiet. Shocker.'

'Yes,' I said, before lowering my own voice to a whisper. 'I'm glad the Museum's not too bad.'

'…for now,' whispered Halley in return. 'I probably shouldn't say it, but we're very lucky to have got onto this expedition. Once the archaeology's over in a few years, will there be any more Pioneer School missions? Will there be any point? If we can't recolonise, all we'll be doing is sucking everything out of the ground and bringing it home. The Earth's going to end up just a hollow shell.' Not that he'd ever seen a shell, of course, unless he'd visited the Museum.

I glanced around. 'You're right, you probably shouldn't be saying that,' I whispered.

Halley looked stung. To make peace with him, I carried on, 'I always knew Earth was in a pretty bad way, but nothing like what we've learnt today. You're right: I think we're all in shock.'

'And the dragomansk?' Halley whistled and shook his head. 'I mean, sure it's dangerous, a top-grade killing

machine but … it's kind of amazing as well, you have to admit.'

'I suppose, if you like that kind of thing.'

Halley laughed. The train pulled up at Cathays station and he stood up.

'See you tomorrow, then.' For a moment, his eyes looked desperately sad, but he gave me a cute, lopsided smile before leaving and I decided I liked him.

An extra bonus of the mission was that we were let out of our SSO training an hour earlier than at school. When the train pulled up at Roath Station, I decided not to get off. My mother worked at the local energy plant on Thursdays and nobody would be home yet, so I kept my seat and carried on to the central terminus.

In the middle of the frantic city centre, the Museum always appears cool and calm, set apart on its shady green mound. I knew from old pictures that the Earth Museum was part of a complex of buildings. Our Museum stands alone, splendid in its bleached stone magnificence. To think, on Earth it was even bigger! I was never sure what I felt when I stood in front of it: some sort of uplifting yet unsettling sense that it was all out there, everything I didn't know yet, a lot perhaps I'd never know. Why did it feel good to feel so small and insignificant? Not good perhaps, but … compelling. Perhaps the best word for what I felt is *awestruck.*

That afternoon, I climbed the steps and entered through the great bronze doors with their spiky flower heads. In the cool marble hall, I could have climbed either set of stairs to the upper galleries, but as usual, I headed straight on through the double doors, to Origins of Earth. Here I could lose myself for hours, though I rarely had time to do so. Sometimes I would sit in the dark and watch the looping presentations describe the rise and decline of the motherplanet and the earliest history of our first pioneers. The exhibits I loved best were the ancient rocks, minerals and fossils that had actually been brought from the Earth Museum. I loved the sounds of the names: ammonite, trilobite, Jurassic, Cambrian, Ordovician… I'd wander around saying them over and over to myself, as long as no one else was about.

My visit that day was different because I kept thinking about Grace's presentation. Halley was right: we were tremendously lucky to be going on what would probably be one of the last archaeological expeditions to Earth. Surely I was the luckiest of all to have sneaked on to it, almost like a stowaway. When I thought about the four of us: brainy Robeen, brainy *and* pushy Nisien, sporty Halley, I couldn't come up with any impressive adjective for my own name.

Why *had* they chosen me?

But I couldn't start thinking that way again, I had to try and stay positive. Although Grace's presentation had

shocked us all, this was still the biggest chance of my life. Professor Eisenhaur must have spotted my talent for Empathy and I'd been selected to add balance to the group. That's why I'd been chosen, surely…



4

There was no time to be negative. Days and weeks sped past in a blur and by mid October (B), all four of us were undeniably fitter, stronger and faster physically and mentally, thanks to the intensive SSO astronaut training programme. An early start each morning in the gym was followed by team-building tasks and puzzles I found I enjoyed, especially when I was partnered with Halley. Each afternoon we attended lessons on the tasks we would be engaged in on Earth, such as cleaning and classifying archaeological finds, and there was a lot more to this than I'd imagined. We also found out more about the dragomansk, a lot more.

Genetically engineered by Earth humans as the ultimate weapon in their many vicious wars, in mankind's absence they had overrun the planet. It had proved impossible to eradicate them for one sinister reason: the dragomansk was in constant flight, it even slept on the wing. If it died or was just still for more than a few seconds, its DNA – its genetic code – would randomly encrypt

itself. Short of capturing a live one, which no one had succeeded in doing, although several had died trying, it was impossible to study its genetic make-up. Impossible to find:

a) a way of destroying the whole species, though the technology to do this existed if the code could be discovered, or
b) an antidote to its deadly acid poison, its main weapon.

Effective ways of poisoning them in great numbers had yet to be found and picking them off one by one was impossible, they were too prolific. More worrying still, they would swarm in large groups known as a 'metamansk'. We were all trained to use *sauroters,* anti-dragomansk weapons, and every day we had shooting practice.

Before long, all the doubts I'd had about being selected seemed ridiculous. Of course I deserved my place, of course I fitted right in with the other three, and if it took me a little longer to arrive at a correct answer, well, I got there in the end. I was a better team player than Nisien or Robeen and that had to count for something. On the rare occasions I returned to school, I couldn't help enjoying the way Catti and my other friends reacted. They didn't need to say anything, I could see in their eyes how impressed they were by my new confidence.

The only thing I missed about school was Empathy, the subject I'd always enjoyed so much. To make up for it,

on a Thursday afternoon after training and before going home, I visited the Museum. Several times I'd been on the point of asking Halley if he wanted to go with me, but I always stopped myself. That magic, stolen hour on a Thursday was so precious; a time when I could be utterly by myself to *be* myself, and I was afraid he might spoil it without meaning to. He might think it boring, or worse, think *I* was boring.

The Museum was normally winding down, as the parties of schoolchildren left, so I had the luxury of roaming the low-lit exhibition spaces undisturbed. Sometimes I felt inspired to write scraps of poems, but I was equally content to simply daydream. Would Halley have understood my desire to sit there amongst the ammonites and trilobites? I doubted it.

Gneiss, the oldest rock
From the Acasta River
Burnished with a dark grey shimmer…
Polished crinoidal limestone,
Pale feathery segments of flower beasts
Darting through Silurian reefs…
Black mirror anthracite
Secrets of fern forests within.
Peacock Vein, Gwaun Cae Gurwen

The descriptions of the rocks and fossils were like little poems in themselves: *fossiliferous limestone … garnet-bearing metamorphosed basalt … stromatolite in banded iron formation…* I rolled the words over and over my tongue like a kind of meditation. I was relieved to find I still felt the same way about the Museum. In fact, knowing that its larger relative on Earth was slowly sliding into ruins gave me a strange romantic ache. I kind of liked it.

As the weeks went by, the tension within the SSO building began to mount. You could feel it just walking in there of a morning, a palpable, fraught buzz. The scientists flung their arms around a little more wildly and their sofa meetings didn't seem as relaxed. Even Robeen, normally the most cool and controlled of us four, appeared jittery. We'd all been taught deep breathing techniques in our counselling classes and I found myself having to put them into practice more and more often. As the launch date loomed, it seemed more than a bit unreal that we would soon be boarding the SSO ship *Byd 33* and heading for Earth.

We were used to the weekly medical examinations measuring our physical reactions to the exercise programme and flight simulators, so it wasn't entirely a surprise when, at the start of January (A) we were ushered into the medical suite where Grace Hassan gave us a hurried presentation about a brand new piece of

equipment we would be trialling, students only. These new *celephets* would monitor the effects of Earth's atmosphere and gravity on our bodies, including the rate of oxygen absorption in the cells of our organs and any knock-on effects in their function. This kind of recording and analysis had gone on for years, but the celephets were designed to give far more sophisticated results.

'Human beings can still breathe on Earth, let me reassure you,' Grace emphasised, 'but the air quality is deteriorating. Part of the reason for including you guys on this particular mission is to trial this new piece of kit. Small, unobtrusive…' Grace held up the bluey-silver shimmering film between her thumb and forefinger. It was about the length of a finger but v-shaped at either end. 'But it will instantly relay hugely valuable information about your bodies' reactions to the environment, which will help us to plan future missions. All you need do is wear it and forget about it.'

'Do we wear it on our chests?' asked Nisien.

'No,' said Grace. 'Good guess but you're going to be wearing it…' She turned round, tilted her head down and pointed to the base of her skull. 'Here. We'll shave away a small section of your hair before applying the celephet. It's a minor surgical procedure with a small, local anaesthetic, just as when your tiles were applied. Simple! The celephet doesn't hurt and will be removed painlessly when you return to Mars, then your hair will grow back and it'll be

just as though it was never there. But we'll be in possession of vital information. You'll have done your jobs simply by wearing them.'

It didn't sound too bad. Grace said that the celephet had only just been given the green light for use and would need a little running-in before we set off for Earth, allowing for last minute alterations if necessary. We would be fitted with them immediately.

'You're lucky. I mean look at mine!' On the train, Halley turned around and pointed rather unnecessarily at the silver celephet glued to the base of his skull. 'People are going to think I'm andro-boy or something.'

It was true. In an age where human-organ-interface-computers were virtually undetectable – besides tiles of course – the celephets did stand out. I felt my own, running my finger tentatively round the smooth edge. Just like our tiles, it was tightly attached, almost like a second skin.

'You'll probably start a new fashion,' I teased. 'It suits you. Everyone's going to want one.'

He shrugged.

I asked, 'Does yours feel kind of prickly, like you're desperate to scratch what's going on under there?'

'Not really,' said Halley. 'More like desperate to get it off.' Although he hadn't stopped moaning, I suspected he was actually quite proud of it. The way he'd chosen to

stand rather than sit in the empty seat by me, and the way he cast his eyes around suggested he wanted people to notice.

Mine was itching like crazy, but Grace had told us there could be some minor side effects to the tissue-glue binding it to the skin. We'd repeatedly been promised that it was very, very safe and above all, it was for the good of our Great Quest and Purpose.

I had the first nightmare that night. I woke in a breathless panic, not knowing where I was. My well-practised breathing technique kicked in automatically as I tried to grasp the last fading wisps of the horrible dream. I'd been walking through the sixth-stratum courtyard of Albany Towers when two dark, blurry-edged but humanoid shapes started following me. In true nightmare fashion, everyone disappeared except these shadowy shapes which gained on me as I ran down random dingy corridors, my legs growing heavier with every step. Has all the fitness training counted for nothing? I thought. They didn't have faces, they barely had outlines and I had no idea what they wanted with me. They didn't make a sound, which was horrible too. As they closed the gap between us, I found it more and more difficult to run. Rounding a corner, there, standing before me as though it had been waiting for me a very long time was … was…

That's when I woke up.

Funnily enough, the next morning at the SSO there was an unscheduled check-up on the celephets. Mine had stopped itching and I didn't immediately think of telling anyone my dream, but when I did mention it, right at the end of the briefing, Grace Hassan's reaction struck me as odd. She re-powered her tile and asked me some pointed questions.

'How long would you say the dream lasted?'

'I have no idea,' I said.

'And when you say *nightmare,* what was so frightening about it?'

The others were staring at me, three faces in a row, and I felt a bit silly. It was only a dream and I didn't want to make a big deal of it.

'The shadow people, I guess. They were chasing me down corridors.'

'Uh-huh? What did they look like, exactly, these shadow people?'

'Just … shadows.'

'Human-shaped shadows?'

I nodded. Grace scrolled around on her tile.

'Like this?' she said.

On the screen was a shape approximately like one of the shadows.

'I … I can't be sure. A bit. Is it important?'

Grace's frown lifted and she smiled. 'Not really, Bree. We just don't want you to be distressed, that's all. I suppose

we're all quite keyed up, aren't we, with the launch a few weeks off, so it's not really surprising if we have bad dreams.'

'I think I had a bad dream last night,' interjected Nisien, who hated being left out.

'Well,' said Grace, 'not surprising, like I say. If anyone wants to speak to one of our counsellors about unpleasant dreams, I can arrange that. Tell me if you have any more, will you?'

This last request seemed directed at me. Whatever Nisien's dream had been, Grace clearly wasn't bothered about *his*. I wondered why she hadn't shown more interest, but then we had to rush to morning training and the moment was gone.

That dream wasn't the last. Soon I was having nightmares every night, often more than one per night. I wondered if they were in some way connected to the celephet, which sat so innocently on the back of my head, leeching into my skin. The others didn't seem to be affected, at least they didn't say anything. When I asked Halley whether he'd had any nightmares, he said no. Eventually I did tell Grace, choosing a time when we could be alone. I didn't want to make a fuss about stupid dreams in front of the others.

Grace recorded everything on her tile and made me recount as many details as I could. The dreams always started off somewhere I knew well, but the shadow people

would chase me into unfamiliar places, crumbling and decaying around me. There was always some final horrible surprise, too horrible for words, waiting round a corner or down in a valley or over the brow of a hill, paralysing me with fright … but that's when I'd wake up.

Grace seemed to take it all very seriously but again said not to worry, that it was to be expected with so little time to go until the launch. She said the nightmares were nothing to do with my celephet – if they were, wouldn't the other students be having them too? I was probably more sensitive than the others. Did I think I might need some more counselling? I said firmly no. I had counselling coming out of my ears, thank you very much.

In spite of the dreams, I felt very, very ready for the mission. I felt confident, well trained, almost *over* trained, and all I wanted was to get on that spacecraft and begin our three-month journey to Earth. The launch couldn't come too soon.



I didn't have nightmares the night before the launch because I got no sleep. Of course, this was to be expected.

Saying goodbye to my parents in the departure lounge was hard. None of the parents managed to keep their tears to themselves, but to our credit, we students remained calm and strong. We'd role-played the scenario again and again in class. When I saw my mother set her jaw in its familiar determined fashion, I knew that she and Dad were going to be all right without me. I was making them so proud.

We felt like a tight little team, the four of us standing shoulder to shoulder for the student group portrait, then as part of the whole group portrait of twenty-four astronauts leaving for Earth. Most had already served on previous missions and we knew several by name but it was the first time we'd met Dr Carter Barat, the ship's Chief Medical Officer, who also turned out to have invented the celephet.

Doc Carter, as he introduced himself, smiled very handsomely and directly at me and asked to take a quick look at my celephet once we'd done our last personal equipment safety checks. I had the weird feeling that the new Doctor was keen to see mine in particular. As he'd approached me, Nisien had pointed at his celephet rather comically, but Doc Carter ignored him completely. He asked if I wouldn't mind turning around. I lifted my hair and he stood so close, I could feel his breath on the back of my neck. A pat on the shoulder told me that he'd finished.

We rode to the edge of the Dome in wagons, up a series of escalators to the upperDome. Having locked down our helmets and given our suits final checks, we went through the northern three air locks. In the final one, Halley took my hand and although it was hard to feel much through the thick gloves, I could sense a small squeeze. None of us students had ever set foot outside the Dome before. Halley and I turned to look at each other through our green-tinted visors and I could see excitement and fear written on his face. This was *it*, what it had all been leading up to.

Outside, all was calm. A small breath of wind kicked up the dust, which was a weird brownish colour seen through the visors, as was the sky. The small sun was very bright. Without our suits, the water in our bodies would be nearing boiling point already. I remember looking down at my boots shuffling through the grit, making the

first marks I'd ever made upon the true surface of our planet. When I turned to look at the upperDome, it appeared very lonely, an insignificant looking grey-veined bubble in the dust, but one that contained my whole life and everything I loved. The thought of leaving it made my legs weak and I had to fight the impulse to run back. Thankfully, my well-rehearsed breathing technique kicked in again — inward breaths through the nose to the count of seven, outward breaths through the mouth for five — and I found myself calming down. I decided not to look back any more. During the hour-long flight to the launch pad, we passed only one other Dome in the distance, which Halley thought might be London. Apart from that, the land was barren and featureless, just rocks and hills, a big contrast to the interior of our green Dome.

Each of these Domes' subterranean environments are carefully engineered, with its own limited ecosystem: light is mainly artificial of course, and there are only a certain number of different plants for oxygen production and food, three species of bee for pollination (there are supposed to be at least twenty thousand species on Earth) and everything is carefully balanced and constantly monitored. Earth always seemed so fecund and exotic to me, with its incredibly complex plant and animal life. Of course, it was also a scarily chaotic world with so many dangers and illnesses, unlike Mars, a planet devoid of disease.

'What are you looking forward to most?' Halley asked through the radio link.

'Rain,' I said, in a strange voice. 'And waterfalls. Preferably standing under a waterfall in the rain.'

'Getting super soaking wet,' smirked Halley. 'What is this thing with you and rain?'

'Don't know.' I shrugged. 'Just always liked the idea.'

We'd been playing this game for ages. Seeing a waterfall in the rain was a pretty tame ambition by our standards but the best I could come up with just then. Previously, we'd thought up some great ones: *a frog eating blackberries on top of a pyramid … a domestic cat skiing down an exploding volcano* (too cruel). Even if these fake wishes were possible, the chances of getting to see them were nil. Although there was talk of a possible link-up with scientists in the south of France, most of our time would be spent in Cardiff helping the two archaeologists on the mission. We did have a realistic list of must-sees, of course, but we also had to keep reminding ourselves that this wasn't a pleasure trip.

*T*o see rain, real, natural rain descending from the skies, was achievable and would be wondrous, nothing any of us students had seen before.

At last we reached the spacecraft, standing alone in the middle of the desert. A little further off was the Dome which housed the huge factory converting the liquid hydrogen fuel for each journey from underground water

ice. After a further round of safety checks, we climbed a staircase and entered a low chamber, larger but in other ways similar to the launch simulator we'd been practising in at the SSO. Two circles of chairs pointed outwards like a starburst. We were packed together snugly with lots of cushioning. After some final encouragement, the base team left and I felt the heavy door close and lock behind them. For six hours we'd have to stay in these chairs. Our suits would deal with bodily functions. After that, we'd be free to move.

My heart was hammering as the ship's engines powered up. For the first time, I had to concentrate to bring my breathing under control, which was made more difficult when you were lying down. A deceptively fragile-looking cage structure closed over us. There was a deafening roar and the whole chamber started to shake. The seconds felt like hours. I shut my eyes and breathed and counted and waited for the G-force to kick in.

All sound fell away. My whole body was crushed back into my seat as the ship shot forwards. I could not move a muscle. It felt like I was about to explode. Tears streamed down my cheeks into my ears. I tried taking my mind to a calm place, like I'd been taught.

My place was the Museum. I tried to imagine myself wandering about in its marble rooms, bare feet padding across the cool floor. I tried to visualise myself among the rocks and fossils … the metamorphosed basalt … the

crinoidal limestone … and tried desperately to feel at peace.

It had to stop soon. If it didn't, I was going to die.

I *was* going to die.

The horrendous pressure eventually began to subside. It lessened, bit by bit, over the next twenty minutes and when the launch was finally over, everyone clapped and cheered in their muted, muffled way. The cage released with a hiss and rose up to lock on to the ceiling of the chamber. Our seats began to tilt up. Halley gave me a double thumbs up, as far as his gloves would allow. I was so glad it was over. Glad I hadn't died.

There were five main living spaces aboard the *Byd* including the launch chamber which now turned into our bedroom-cum-rest-room. The four other chambers were for scientific work, exercise and recreation and were loosely timetabled, though nobody seemed to mind if anyone spent longer than they were allowed in one. Students were granted more time in the recreation rooms than other astronauts, but we were expected to continue our studies each day, concentrating mainly on the natural history of Earth and known history of human beings. We were supposed to make weekly group transmissions to school and I knew how exciting it was at school when we received broadcasts from mission students. We'd also receive feedback from our Professors.

I already knew a little of the history of previous SSO missions to Earth, but Nisien helped me fill in the gaps one afternoon when the four of us were talking in the smaller recreation chamber.

'Do we actually appreciate how lucky we are to be on board the *Byd 33*, as opposed to the *Byd 9*?' Nisien asked.

'No, but I guess we're about to.' Halley winked at me.

'Well, to start with, the earliest expeditions took twice as long to reach Earth.'

Robeen gave Nisien a sidelong look, as though she was waiting for her chance to jump in. She never let Nisien get away with knowing everything if she could help it.

'Wow, I didn't know that,' I said, cursing myself when I saw the smug look creep across Robeen's face.

'Yeah,' said Halley. 'Imagine keeping each other company for *that* length of time.'

'Indeed.' As usual, Nisien hadn't picked up on Halley's not-so-subtle irony. 'But much worse than that, on the *Byd 9* the artificial gravity failed, so the astronauts spent most of their time weightless. No gravity, no weight. There they were, floating around and when they got to Earth…'

'When they got to Earth,' Robeen jumped in, 'where the gravity is three times that on Mars, half of them died. It's quite a famous disaster story. *Simply put*, their bones collapsed under the strain. They'd been losing bone mass for the whole trip anyway and with the effect of the extra

gravity…' Robeen did a sort of crumpling mime with her fingers.

'Your face…' Halley sniggered at me.

'No, come on, it's not funny,' I said. 'It's horrible.'

He carried on laughing and I gave him a shove.

'Ah, but *actually* the really clever thing,' Nisien held his finger aloft, 'and this is why you mustn't worry, Bree, is that the artificial gravity on board the *Byd 33* increases subtly over the period we're travelling, which means that when we get there…'

'…because we've continued to exercise…' Robeen added.

'We won't notice the gravity difference between Mars and Earth.' Nisien and Robeen uttered this last sentence together, rushing to get to the end first. They glared at each other and Halley had to bite his lip to stop himself laughing.

'I wasn't worried,' I said. 'I knew all that stuff, well, most of it. If there was a risk of us getting crushed, we'd have been warned. I just feel sad for the ones who made those early trips and didn't survive. They gave their lives, didn't they, so we could be doing this right now?'

This was fairly typical: discussions between the four of us normally became a boringly predictable competition between Robeen and Nisien and although I occasionally learned something new, I found it tiring. I sometimes stepped in to try and keep the peace, but Halley did his

utmost to whip up the competition between them, then he'd sit back and enjoy the results. Of course, there were no full-blown arguments. This would have broken one of the fundamental rules aboard the *Byd*: arguments between crew members were not tolerated because they endangered the mission. We had to be professional at all times. The tension between Nisien and Robeen simmered, but at least we always worked out who was going to say what in our weekly broadcasts to school, when it was vital to put on a good show and appear a harmonious team.

Clever as Robeen was, no one could match Nisien on knowledge not just of the present *Byd* ship, but of every single *Byd* ship ever. He probably knew more than any of the engineers who worked on the present craft. It wasn't just the big differences like the number of chambers on board or the types of thrusters in the engines. He knew all the little details: the number, shape and exact position of the windows, the fact that the doors on board two of the *Byd*s, numbers 14 and 27, opened to the left rather than the right, the subtle changes in the logo, currently a silhouette of the SSO dragon, only with a larger glittery eye. The length and breadth of Nisien's knowledge was staggering. Much of the detail seemed of no use, but it was all equally fascinating to him.

So our journey continued…



The tension between Nisien and Robeen only got worse. Silly, knockabout ball games in the larger recreation space became as hotly contested as the inter-Dome Olympics, particularly when only the four of us were taking part. In sports, Halley had to slow down to give the rest of us a chance, but even if he was winning comfortably, Nisien and Robeen would fight for second place as though their lives depended upon it.

Boredom could be a problem, but as with everything else, we had been trained to spot the signs and deal with it. Nisien was never bored because he could always retreat into his spaceship studies and Robeen played a lot of Kyrachess on her tile. Halley struggled most, but he and I soon established ourselves as the ship comedians and spent much of our free time chatting about nothing or teasing the friendlier astronauts when Captain Calamus wasn't around, making up jokes and just being stupid. You could kill quite a bit of time being plain stupid and somehow it never felt like a waste. When we'd had enough

of this, we'd retreat to the second, smaller recreation chamber with its floor-to-ceiling viewing deck, and gaze out, our faces pressed right up against the glass, imagining that we weren't on board the *Byd* at all but drifting together through the immensity of space. Sometimes, if no one was about, we held hands.

We were standing like this one afternoon, just looking out and saying whatever popped into our heads. On Mars, you never get a great view of the night sky. You can see Phobos, the larger of the Martian moons, quite clearly and sometimes the smaller Deimos, but only light from the brightest stars can pierce the dusty upperDome.

'The thing about space is … everything's so far away from everything else.'

I didn't mind what I said to Halley any more. Nisien would have patronised me and Robeen would have looked smug, but I felt comfortable enough with Halley to risk saying something stupid. Pretty much everything you said sounded stupid when you felt so small.

'I know what you mean,' he replied.

'When I first imagined travelling through space, I kind of pictured us whooshing right past stars, out into the middle of them, but they're just as far away as they were before.'

'There are so, so many,' marvelled Halley. 'And to think, this is only a bit of one arm of our galaxy.'

'You can't even call it sky any more, can you?' I said. 'I

mean it's sky when it's above you. When you're looking *up* at it.' We laughed.

The velvet blackness was infused with stars and the Milky Way rippled through the centre. Everything was so far off. We felt very, very alone.

'I can't wait to see the Earth moon,' I said. 'It's supposed to be huge.'

'Have you been having any more of those nightmares?' Halley turned to me. 'I've been meaning to ask.'

'No, thank goodness. It's weird – they stopped as soon as I came on board. I asked Grace if they were anything to do with this.' I touched the celephet at the back of my head. 'But she kept saying no.'

'They said it wouldn't hurt to take it off but … I don't know.' Halley touched his gingerly and made a face. His didn't seem exactly like mine. When I looked at him in profile, it didn't seem as flush with his skin.

'Can I touch it?' I asked.

'Why?'

'Just curious.'

Halley nodded. When I probed it gently with one finger, the edge felt loose.

'Turn right around,' I said.

'Why?' But Halley shrugged and did as I asked.

No, it definitely was not my imagination. Halley's celephet wasn't embedded in his skin the way mine was. I tried giving it a little wiggle.

'Hey, stop it!'

'When did Doc Carter last check yours?'

'Why? Is there something the matter?'

'I just wondered. He checks mine daily.'

'Aren't you the lucky one!' Halley grinned. 'Can't remember. A couple of days ago?'

'Why would he check mine so often and not yours?'

'He likes you more?' He dug me in the ribs with his elbow.

I was being serious. This was the same suspicion I'd had the day of the launch and several times since, in fact every time Doc Carter came towards me with that dangerously handsome smile. He only seemed bothered about my celephet, which unlike Halley's was now more firmly rooted into my skin than it had been when we left Mars. He didn't check the others as frequently or as conscientiously.

Halley was staring out at space again. 'Check with the Doc if you're worried,' he said.

'I will. But first I'm going to take a look at Nisien and Robeen's', only don't tell them why. You know what they're like, Nisien will kick up a fuss because I'm getting checked more often than he is.'

'And then Robeen will make a fuss to top Nisien's fuss.' Halley laughed.

It struck me that Halley didn't seem particularly bothered that my celephet looked different from his.

So I did a little investigating. I nosed about behind Nisien as he sat drawing plans of the ship and I peered beneath Robeen's hair as she took the Krynian rook with her Kyrion bishop. Their celephets seemed loose, just like Halley's. Whenever he moved, Nisien's wiggled. I decided to see Doc Carter.

I found him working in the lab.

'Bree? Are you all right?' He rose to his feet.

'I think so,' I replied. 'I'm a bit worried about my celephet.'

'May I?' He walked around me and I lifted my hair to let him take a look. I felt his fingertip slide over its surface and around the edge. 'It looks fine. What's wrong? Nightmares again?'

Why would he suggest nightmares when I hadn't mentioned them to him? Grace must have done. Yet she'd dismissed them so completely, why would she have bothered to tell Doc Carter?

'Not nightmares,' I said. 'But mine looks different from the others. It's really sunken into my skin. Halley's is loose and so is Nisien's. Robeen's doesn't look like mine either, I checked.'

Doc Carter offered me his seat, so I sat. 'Uh-huh.' He folded his arms and smiled his glossiest smile, although he didn't meet my eye. 'The fact is Bree, yours is the only one still working. Yes, that's right. There was a high chance they wouldn't "take" and it's mighty lucky for us that one

of the four did. That yours did. I'm very pleased with you, Bree, the celephet seems to have melded perfectly with your body and we're getting great results. Would you like to see this morning's?'

He pointed at the holoscreen behind me, which was covered in squiggles. 'Here we are: oxygen absorption rate here … oxygen delivery rate to stomach … right ear … left foot… There are sixteen other graphs in this one set alone, all looking pretty similar. Would you like to see them?'

I tried to decipher the squiggles but soon gave up. 'So all this is going on right now?' I reached behind my head and fingered the celephet again. It felt so thin and insubstantial, it was amazing to think that it was somehow connecting with all these different bits of my body and sending the computer all this information. 'I can't feel anything.'

'You shouldn't,' he said. 'And it'll be whipped off when we get home, just like that, as though it had never been there.' He looked at me, giving me another of his very pronounced smiles which were beginning to set me on edge.

'But what about those nightmares I had? Did Grace mention them to you?'

'Hmmm? Oh yes, she did. Are you getting them now?'

'No.'

'Good. No need to worry then,' said the Doc. 'Possibly

it was some small side effect but it's over now. There's absolutely no need to be worried, I promise.'

As I was about to leave, I asked, 'If I hadn't found it out, would you have told me? That mine was the only one still working?'

'Probably not. There, I'm being honest. Only because we scientists never interfere if we don't need to.'

'And are you going to tell the others?'

'Tell you what, let's leave that up to you.'

I struggled with what Doc Carter had told me, how something so important had been kept from us all. I didn't much fancy a full-on inquisition from Nisien and Robeen, but I was going to tell Halley. First I needed some time alone and the best place was the launch chamber.

I paused as I was about to go in. It sounded as though someone was in there already. Crying.

I found Robeen curled up in a chair. As soon as she saw me, she straightened up and swiped the tears from her face.

'Robeen? What's wrong?' I walked across to her.

'Nothing.'

'Something must be.'

She made a huge effort to stop the tears, but finally overcome, her mouth crumpled and she buried her face in her hands. 'Go away,' she moaned.

I wasn't sure what to do. Robeen wasn't my favourite person and I was tempted to leave her to it, but then I remembered why I'd been chosen for the mission: my talent for Empathy. Painfully aware that Robeen looked down on me, this felt like a golden opportunity to demonstrate I had some skills.

'You can tell me what it is.' I spoke slowly and soothingly. 'You should tell someone. Remember what our counsellors at the SSO told us? You need to share it, Robeen, or it could do you some harm.'

I sat down next to her. Slowly, her shoulders stopped shaking and she turned to me with red eyes.

'It's my cello practice,' she whispered, barely opening her mouth.

'Your cello practice? But you've been practising on the virtual cello, I've heard you.'

'It's not the same.' She shook her head, her expression utter despair. 'I need to practise for at least two hours daily, but the virtual cello is rubbish, it has no tone and I have to keep the volume right down. It's worse than useless.'

I was at a real loss to know what to say. Her reaction seemed so extreme. 'I suppose a virtual cello's better than nothing. There's no room for a real one on board, is there?'

'You don't understand,' she said. 'I'm supposed to get a double distinction in my next exam and I won't if I don't practise properly. I'll fail, I know I will.'

'But surely you won't *fail* if you don't get a double

distinction, you'll just get a lower mark.' I knew I was treading on dangerous ground. Her expression was changing from grief to annoyance as if I was controlling it with a dial. 'And what's the worst that could happen?' I blundered on. 'If you did fail, you could always try it again, couldn't you?'

Robeen glanced at the exit and I could see her physically swallow her anger. It wouldn't do to let anyone know that any kind of argument was taking place.

'Look,' I said. 'Talk of failure is ridiculous. You're brilliant at the cello, Robeen. You're terrific! If you went a whole year without practising, I bet you'd still scrape a pass. And if you don't get a double distinction this time, everyone will know it's because you've been on this mission. There's no shame in that.'

'*You* wouldn't understand,' Robeen said, jutting her face at mine. With eyes ablaze, she jumped up and made for the exit without another look at me. I stayed where I was. Yes, I probably didn't understand: when had I achieved a double distinction in anything?

For the next few days, Robeen and I barely spoke.

'What do you think caused the War for Earth?' Halley was in a reflective mood one afternoon and the question seemed genuine. He'd been robbed of the fun of stirring up trouble between the other two because Robeen had taken her virtual cello elsewhere.

'Hmm. Probably a combination of things,' said Nisien. He'd joined us on the viewing deck. 'They wouldn't have needed much of an excuse, they were an excessively warlike people. Look at the weapon they created, the dragomansk. Very nasty, very nasty indeed. It seems that most of their wars were about tribal ideas. You know, this lot believed one thing, that lot believed another. The irony being, it was all stuff that could never be proven scientifically.'

'They had *wars* about what they *believed*?' To me this seemed incredible.

'I read about that,' said Halley. 'It wasn't that simple though, was it? The tribes wanted what each other had a lot of the time, too. All those resources Grace talked about. We want them now, don't we? We're going to be taking resources away from creatures still living on Earth.'

'We won't be taking them from human beings,' Nisien said.

Should that make a difference? I wondered.

This was a discussion we definitely couldn't report as part of our broadcast to school later that day. That our Great Quest and Purpose meant stripping Earth of its resources and leaving it barren, was forbidden territory. Earth was still the much-loved motherplanet and I guessed the government must be struggling with how they would get the idea accepted by the population.

'Of course, unlike us, Earth humans were barbarians,'

Nisien went on. 'Just look at their weapons and look at the mess they made of keeping them under control! The dragomansk spit *acid*, for goodness sake! Those filthy beasts rule the whole planet now, while their creators died out long ago. Bad planning if you ask me.'

'Although it's strange we don't know more about the War for Earth,' observed Halley. 'That's the biggest mystery, how come we know so little… Obviously when it was all going on, communication between Earth and Mars broke down and no one from our planet made the journey back for centuries, but still you'd think we'd have found some record by now. Our archaeologists have been at it for years. By the way, do you notice how they've only sent two archaeologists on this mission? It's almost as if they've given up. The survey's changing to something else now.'

Halley was making some interesting points, but I still wanted to rebut Nisien's earlier comment. 'You can't just write Earth humans off like that,' I said. 'We're their descendants after all.'

'Barbarians, that's all they were.' Nisien shook his head at me patronisingly.

'Well, perhaps we'll get a little closer to the truth by the end of this mission and perhaps we won't,' said Halley.

'Perhaps we never will,' I sighed.



7

The arrival date, 15 May (B) was soon upon us. I'll never forget my first sight of Earth, the motherplanet, the blue planet with an atmosphere all its own. It was breathtaking. While the *Byd* was set in orbit around Earth, we were allowed to spend some time in the second recreation room, gazing in wonder at the different continents and oceans passing below us while Nisien explained in hushed tones how we were going to land, even though we all knew anyway, how the rest chamber became the landing pod rotating from its section of the ship, elegantly like a card from a deck, before beginning its final descent. Nisien was just as overwhelmed as the rest of us; carrying on explaining was his way of coping with it. Only two technicians would remain aboard the *Byd* to close down the craft in the orbit it would maintain for the next six months. For the rest of the mission, these technicians would spend most of their time shuttling back and forth between the Earth and the *Byd*, refuelling it for its homeward flight.

The landing wasn't half as bad as the launch, with the heat shield protecting our entry into Earth's atmosphere. We landed smoothly and bang on target, in a field to the west of Cardiff. The clapping and cheering went on for ages before Captain Calamus unbuckled herself from her seat and stood up, raised her visor and made the salute: 'Our Great Quest and Purpose…' she began and we saluted back with tears in our eyes.

We kept our hoods and visors on to disembark. Although the air on Earth is breathable, we were supposed to wear them outside because of the dragomansk. Along with everything else, this still seemed a little unreal. Were the creatures really as dangerous as we'd been told? I could only hope that if I ever had to use my sauroter, all the training I'd received would kick in, because at that moment I couldn't remember a thing.

It was bizarre, going down such an ordinary set of steps, as though we'd just made a journey across town on Skyrail. Despite the enhanced gravity on board and our fitness programme, I felt heavy. We were wading through thigh-high, boggy grass carrying large packs of belongings, and movement took effort. When we halted a short distance from our landing pod, I was already panting, but at least I wasn't the only one.

Looking up, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Even through the visor and the mesh of my hood, it was extraordinary.

The sky!

The sky had opened up overhead, either that or someone had taken the top of my head off. It was impossible to judge its colour through the visor, but it didn't appear to be as blue as I'd been expecting.

Even more extraordinary was the huge sun hanging like a pale disc in the west. After three months on board the ship, its brightness was insanely intense. The air was thick with the insects we'd been warned about, but they weren't too great a distraction; I could have stayed there in that field for the whole six months, just staring up at the immense, open sky. There were a lot of 'Wow!'s and Pico, a veteran of two previous expeditions and the senior archaeologist, patted my arm.

'Incredible, huh?'

I nodded although 'incredible' was too small a word. Could any word do it justice? I could see identical rapturous expressions on my fellow students' faces and I was tempted to take a photograph of Robeen's face. I could keep it as evidence the next time we got into an argument about her stupid cello practice. Wasn't this worth the pain of forgoing a double distinction in an exam? Wasn't it worth … everything?

'Doesn't matter how many times I see it.' Pico whistled.

'Come on, we can't stay long in one place,' Captain Calamus started to walk and we followed.

The air seemed thin. Breathing oxygen-depleted air on a planet with three times the gravity of your own was certainly going to be a strain.

'How's everyone feeling?' Doc Carter asked, but I noticed how he'd positioned himself next to me again. In the corner of my eye I saw his gaze straying to the back of my head, but when I turned his way, he looked at the sky like everyone else.

I'd told Nisien and Robeen about the celephets the day before, having shared the secret with Halley weeks earlier. Nisien had only shrugged his shoulders but Robeen had looked even more sour than usual. I'd guessed the news would make her jealous – it meant that handsome Doc Carter would make a bigger fuss of me than anyone else. Since our silly cello argument I didn't care. The irony was, I didn't welcome the attention I got from Doc Carter. I'd have preferred him to treat me exactly like the others. It was hardly flattering: his interest in me wasn't really about *me* at all, but his invention, which happened to enjoy being on the back of my head.

A sudden mechanical whirring made us all turn. I didn't recognise what I was looking at, but whatever it was, it was flying straight towards us like a gigantic clockwork toy. I realised what it was, as everyone began shouting at once, 'Dragomansk! Run! Quick, run.'

I did run, as fast as I could, which wasn't very fast at all, to a clump of trees – an unfamiliar species standing to

one side of the field. We'd been trained to spot the best sheltering places and these trees were perfect. The giant creature came to a halt, hovering just beyond the branches, its huge eyes level with our heads. The way it peered at us suggested that there was an intelligence at work behind those huge, domed, multi-faceted eyes. The whirring wings became faster and higher pitched, making the creature sound annoyed. Its wings were barely visible, a blur, but its dangerously sharp, clashing mandibles were clear. Our first sight of a dragomansk and the pictures we'd been shown at the SSO didn't do this terrifying spectacle justice.

'Get back,' a voice yelled and I was dragged backwards. Two astronauts stepped out and fired their sauroters, hitting the dragomansk squarely between the eyes. It crumpled as though an invisible hand had screwed it up, and fell to the ground with a dull, weighty thud.

'To the amphibical.'

'The amphibical now!'

Doc Carter steered me after the others. We began to run across the field to the road where I could see a super-sized amphibical, the multi-terrain vehicle used for getting about on Earth.

'Dragomansk!' someone shouted. Another one was hovering above the trees. It flew straight for us and started spitting brown liquid, which scorched the grass on either side, as we zigzagged our way to the vehicle, the way we'd

been trained. I hoped this craft would start, I knew nobody would have driven it since the last mission, but there was no time to worry about that now.

The last pair of astronauts hung behind, firing their sauroters into the air. With their visors lowered, I couldn't see who they were. The sky was full of flashing lights. The dragomansk darted back and fore, high and low, in a bewildering sky dance and as the amphibical's doors opened and we climbed in, the two astronauts stayed outside, defending us and trying to get a clear shot.

'Is everyone alright?' shouted Captain Calamus. 'Was anyone hit?'

I looked down. A streak of brown dragomansk spit bubbled on my sleeve. Before I knew it, Doc Carter removed a small canister from his belt and sprayed the white neutralising powder up and down my arm. When the air around us cleared, he brushed away the neutralised gunk. I had a powder canister in my own belt, we all did, and I cursed myself for not reacting quicker.

'Thanks,' I said.

'It's all right.' He examined my arm. 'There's no damage to your suit but this stuff's corrosive. It'll dissolve organic matter in seconds. Are you sure you're all right, Bree?'

'Yes, yes, I'm fine.'

A couple of the others had also caught some of the spit on their suits and had to be treated with neutralising

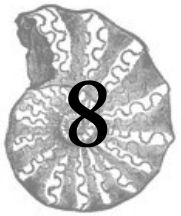
powder. The battle continued outside. All at once there was a loud bang and a large dent appeared in the metal roof. Bubbling brown liquid trickled down the window next to me and I flinched.

'It's dead and it's on the roof,' shouted one of the astronauts.

A face appeared at the doorway – Cole Huxtable, one of the senior exploratory scientists aboard the *Byd*. 'Captain,' he panted. 'Permission to secure the thing to the roof. We can take it to the base for dissection.'

'Permission granted,' replied Calamus. 'Now let's get out of here. All operational?'

'Operational!' came the cry and the lights snapped on all around the cabin.



8

Our first encounter with a dragomansk had been terrifying. What had seemed unreal before was now hard and sudden reality.

The mood aboard the amphibical was subdued. I found myself wedged between Doc Carter and the window. When I turned and caught Halley's eye, he mouthed the words 'best friends' and did a little hand-holdy mime whilst nodding at the back of the Doctor's head. Halley's ability to make a joke after what we'd just been through made me wish I was sitting next to him. I smiled and shook my head, but then I spotted Robeen on the other side of the aisle watching us through narrowed eyes. I turned to face the front again.

'You sure you're okay?' asked Doc Carter. I was sick and tired of him asking me that.

'Great,' I said. 'And hopefully all the excitement has given you some good results on the celephet.'

'As long as *you're* okay,' he repeated

It felt like an odd anticlimax to our amazing journey,

to be stuffed aboard the amphibical as though we were taking an everyday ride across town. From time to time, the thing on the roof shifted and when we rounded a corner, one of its wings came loose and flopped down outside my window. I had a good view of its translucent hexagonal panes as it beat time against the glass. The waving wing was as horrible as it was fascinating. Still, my attention was mainly focused beyond the wing: at an alien world which stretched in every direction as far as the eye could see, with barely a trace of visible human activity. A world lit by a bright suffusing light from the enormous sun. There was too much to look at and my eyes wanted to be everywhere at once. I had to remind myself that these were natural hills, the first I'd ever seen, and the trees covering them hadn't been deliberately planted but had simply grown there. A wild world unedited by humans.

I spotted several more dragomansk and got my first view of an enormous metamansk, the group flying together in perfect synchrony. It was a chilling sight. Grace hadn't exaggerated their numbers. Fortunately, as Doc Carter was quick to remind me, the dragomansk only recognised and attacked humanoid shapes, so if you were sitting in a vehicle or under cover, you were generally safe, although you were still encouraged to wear your hood and visor as a precaution.

We were detained several times on our journey into Cardiff. The Doc explained that this was always the way;

with the long gaps between missions, they always returned to find problems. The extreme weather on Earth caused cracks and holes in the road and there were other hazards too: landslides and fallen trees, for example. We came across two horizontal trees blocking our path at different points in the journey and it took time to clear them, even with all the equipment on board. Technology on Earth was a peculiar mixture of old and new and a lot of it was clunky. Night had fallen by the time we finally arrived at the Cardiff Earth Base – the CEB. We couldn't see much outside and were too exhausted to be as excited as we should have been.

The four of us were instructed to stay in a reception room for an hour before bed, where we stripped off our kit and were given something to eat. We were all tired and grouchy.

'It's hard to believe we're finally here,' said Halley, dropping his backsack.

'I expected … I don't know what I expected,' I said. 'But not this.'

'A welcoming party perhaps?' said Robeen. She'd hardly spoken since our arrival and was sitting at the table, staring at nothing.

'Er … no.'

'Those dragomansk,' said Nisien. 'That's one welcoming party I could have done without.'

'They are incredible though,' said Halley. 'Just like a

beautiful machine. So streamlined.' He caressed the air as though he were running his hand over the sleek, elongated body of the beast.

'You're joking,' said Nisien. 'Its whole reason for existing is to kill us.'

Halley shrugged his shoulder and smiled.

'It is so dark out there,' I said, putting my face up to the window, trying to screen out the reflections of the room with my hands.

'It's what we call night,' said Robeen.

'You don't get what I mean.' I couldn't let her have the last word. 'Cardiff, it's so featureless like this. You can't get a sense of what it's like. If only it wasn't so cloudy.' The clouds had piled in since our arrival, huge swirling masses which probably held a lot of rain. The first rain we would ever see, perhaps. I was just about to make this point to Halley, when Robeen rose, pushing the table away from her, its feet scraping the floor.

'Tell you what,' she said. 'If it bothers you that much, Bree, why don't you go and have a chat with Doc Carter about it?'

'Meaning what?' I spun round to face her.

'Meaning you hardly leave him alone.'

'Me? It's him!'

From the corner of my eye, I noticed something: a single drop of what must be rain hitting the window, then another, then another. But I was simply too cross to pay

attention. Robeen was ruining what should have been a wonderful moment for me.

'Hey, Robeen.' Halley stepped in between us. 'You know that's not true. Doc Carter pays her a lot of attention but only because her celephet's still working. She can't help that, can she? She's saved his whole experiment for him.'

'Then I guess there was some point in her coming.' She said it under her breath but it was still audible. Not waiting for a reaction, she turned on her heel and left the room. My mouth fell open.

'I can't believe she just said that.' Halley shook his head at me. 'Are you okay?'

'She's overwrought,' said Nisien.

'And jealous,' added Halley. 'She needs to go and cool off.'

I said nothing. From the very earliest stages of our training, probably from that first morning at the SSO, Robeen had stuck her knife into me. Ever since, she'd taken every opportunity of giving it a nasty little twist, taking bitter pleasure in reminding me how undeserving I was of my place. Halley was right: she was jealous but that was only part of it. I wanted to scream and shout at her, call her pathetic and unfair – something I wasn't allowed to do, of course – but I also wanted to show her how very wrong she was. I did deserve to be on the mission, every bit as much as her. Somehow I'd prove it.

'Just ignore it, Bree,' said Nisien. 'If you get into an argument and they find out, you'll be punished and it's just not worth it. Not after everything it's taken to get here.'

'He's right,' said Halley.

'I know.'

Water droplets were hitting the window more and more frequently, little silvery magnifications of the black world that lay outside like a sleeping monster. No rainbows. It was nothing like I'd been imagining or looking forward to.

'Rain,' Nisien said. 'Our first rain.'

As though his words had broken a spell, the rain stopped abruptly, the last few drops running diagonally across the glass in the direction the wind was blowing.

Halley sat down and began fiddling with an empty food wrapper. 'Just think, it's down in the lab right now,' he said.

'What are you talking about?' I snapped.

'The dragomansk.'

'Oh, *that,*' said Nisien.

'I overheard Cole Huxtable saying they were taking it to one of the labs in the basement for dissection.' Halley had scrunched the wrapper into a ball and was tossing it into the air and catching it between two fingers.

'Surely not much point in that,' said Nisien. 'Its DNA became encrypted the very moment it was shot dead.'

Halley jumped to his feet as though charged with a bolt of energy. He tossed the food wrapper over his shoulder then kicked it into the corner. 'I'd love to take another look at it.'

'It wasn't exactly a pretty sight, all mangled on that roof,' sighed Nisien.

I pictured the flopping wing outside the window. When the vehicle had brushed up against some bushes, the bottom of the wing had torn off, making it swing about even more, which curiously made it seem more dead than ever. It sickened me to think of that dead, waving wing.

'Who'll come with me?' Although Halley's voice dropped to a whisper, he still sounded like a commander rousing his troops to battle. 'Who'll take another look at it later when everyone's asleep? Come on, let's do it.'

'Count me out,' said Nisien. 'I'm not going looking for trouble as soon as we've arrived.'

'It's not about getting into trouble, it's about learning,' Halley urged. 'This thirst for knowledge we're all supposed to have. That's why we were chosen to come here in the first place, surely?'

His comment made me feel uncomfortable again.

'It's just a dead insect.' Robeen was standing in the doorway with her hands on her hips. 'What do you think you're going to learn from gawping at it?'

'How a mangled insect looks with its legs all screwed

up?' said Nisien. 'Kind of like this…?' He curled up his arms and legs and screwed his face into an extraordinary grimace. Robeen laughed. It had a mocking edge and although he'd been trying to console me, Nisien laughed back. For the first time he and Robeen laughed together, as though they were the only ones getting the joke.

'Nice one Nisien,' said Halley, frowning. 'Of course I wasn't being serious. All I'll be doing tonight is falling asleep, soon as my head hits the bed.'

'Bree? Bree.'

I woke from a deep and dreamless sleep to find Halley crouching beside me, shaking me gently but insistently.

'What?' I could have been on Mars, Earth, anywhere or nowhere in between.

'Shhhh!'

We both turned towards Robeen whose bed was the other side of mine. Fortunately, she hadn't stirred.

I started to remember where I was, but I was more desperate for sleep than anything else.

'What is it? I'm asleep.' I squeezed my eyes shut and wished myself back into oblivion.

'Come into the corridor.' Halley shook me again and beckoned. Admitting defeat, I rose up, rubbing my eyes, and padded after him. Thanks to the ancient technology, the door swished open then closed softly behind us.

Tiny pairs of blue emergency lights were set at

intervals along the ceiling but a much stronger light was pouring through the window at the end. I thought some vehicle must be outside, pointing its headlights at the building.

'Come and see the moon. It's completely round, a full moon!' Halley drew a circle in the air. 'How lucky is that?'

I blinked myself awake. Of course I wanted to see the moon, especially a completely round, full moon. It was on our real, no-joking-around list of things we absolutely had to see while we were on Earth, number four, I think. Smiling blearily and brushing my hair from my eyes, I let him lead me to the window.

'Oh,' I said. 'Oh yes, thank you.'

The smothering clouds had cleared in one patch of the sky directly above us. Right in the middle shone a huge pearl set in a radiant halo. The light of the full moon revealed treasures in the landscape below, silvering the wet marshland and the ruins as far as the skyline, throwing long shadows down before them as though the buildings were bowing to us, welcoming us. It was my first view of the old Cardiff.

'I think I can see craters,' said Halley. 'Can you believe that we're here, seeing the Earth moon? It's so much better than Phobos.'

Overwhelmed, I rested my head on his shoulder. We had stood like this looking out into space so many times on the *Byd's* viewing deck, now here we were doing the

same on Earth. It staggered me every time I thought about it, like a looping miracle.

'Let's go outside, out there,' Halley whispered. 'Let's really see the moon when there's nothing between us and it.'

'It's not safe. There's dragomansk everywhere. They even sleep on the wing, remember?'

Halley half-pulled the sauroter from his pocket by way of reply.

We agreed to meet back in the corridor once we were dressed. We only had to tiptoe down one set of stairs and when we reached the front door, which you had to open manually as in ancient times, we found it unlocked. Out we stepped, beaming at each another. We too were bathed in moonlight. Straight ahead stood a tumbledown wall and the remains of other buildings below us marked what would once have been the street, their line broken by trees and mounds of rubble smothered in plant life. I'd never been any place like it, a place of such silent malevolence, its violent past obvious everywhere. The tall, solitary ruins reminded me of arms, rising up to shake their fists at the sky. The area around the CEB, like the service roads, was raised above the level of the marsh so we were looking down upon the nearby land. The devastation was also strangely beautiful and it was right in front of us; we weren't being protected from it by a man-made dome. That made me feel grown-up, responsible for myself for perhaps the first time ever. A shiver ran down my spine.

We were wearing our hoods and visors, of course, and the early warning system on our tiles would alert us of any large flying objects in the immediate vicinity.

'It's so beautiful.' Halley shook his head. 'So incredibly beautiful. Can you believe we're here?'

'It's extraordinary. And we're breathing air that's just … all around us!' Everything I said sounded ridiculous but I didn't care. Anyone who would have leapt to judge me was fast asleep upstairs anyway. I didn't have to worry about *them*.

'The flies are a bit annoying but – yes. Air. Air you can breathe in and out. Air our lungs were designed for, more or less. Perhaps less oxygen than we're used to but… And what's that around the moon? An atmosphere?' He meant the halo.

'No, it doesn't have an atmosphere to speak of. You know, the moon might even have been a part of Earth once, no one's sure. And you never see the other side of it from Earth, did you know that? It's in synchronous rotation.'

'You know a lot, don't you?' said Halley, after a pause.

'Don't sound so surprised!'

'I didn't mean anything by that.'

I laughed. 'I know a few facts. It's all those hours I've spent at our Museum. That's where I intend going as soon as we get some time off: the real one, here on Earth.' In all honesty, I wanted to go right there and then.

'Right.' He looked puzzled. 'And … do you want me to go with you?'

'If you want.'

I would sooner have gone alone, but we'd already been told that none of us were allowed to wander off on our own. Still, it was kind of Halley to offer and perhaps he wouldn't think me boring or weird for wanting to spend time there, now we'd had this conversation. Perhaps I'd underestimated him.

'You shouldn't mind Robeen.'

'Oh, why go and mention *her*?'

I'd got used to Halley's tendency to change direction in his conversation all the time, but Robeen was the last person I wanted to talk about.

'No, listen,' he said. 'I just wanted to say, I know she's got to you but she's not that much of a genius, I reckon. She just knows how to play it at school, chasing the marks and pleasing the professors, but she hasn't really got it in here.' He tapped his chest. 'You have, Bree. You've got it.'

I squirmed and laughed at the same time. 'Why are you being so *nice* to me?'

Halley stuck out his tongue and pulled a stupid face. 'Don't know,' he said. 'Maybe it's the moon's fault.'

I swallowed and looked up at it again. Minutes passed.

'When I first got chosen,' I said, my eyes fixed on the silvery ball, 'I couldn't help wondering why? Why me rather than … say … Teyra?'

'She's just another Robeen,' said Halley. 'It's like they came out of the same mould. Su-per bo-ring.'

'Yes, but I'm sure other people at school were wondering too. You know, sometimes I do find the work at school *hard.'* I whispered this, feeling my heartbeat quicken. It was the first time I had put my fears into words since that talk on the bus with Catti but I trusted Halley and the moment seemed right somehow. It was a relief.

'Sometimes we all do.'

'Empathy, yes, I can do that but it doesn't even begin to make up for the bad marks I get in other subjects. That's why I couldn't believe I'd got picked. I was worried it might be some mistake or … or … I don't know. Every time Robeen says something like she said earlier, it brings back those feelings.'

'Oh, Empathy?' said Halley. 'You're brilliant at it. I'd do anything to get out of writing poems.'

'It's actually what I do in my spare time, write poems. I can't believe I'm telling you this. While you're running round and round the athletics track breaking records, I'm sitting in the Museum all by myself, dreaming and scribbling away. That's my favourite place in the world. I'd love to find a way of basing my project at the Museum, whatever my project turns out to be.'

As well as assisting on archaeological digs, each student had to undertake a project. All I really wanted to do was write poems about the ancient rocks and fossils. I

didn't know how many exhibits remained in the Earth's Museum but researching them would give me a great excuse to spend time there. As I stood next to Halley in the moonlight, this thought sent a delicious shiver right through me.

'But that's amazing,' said Halley. 'Your poems are like my running.'

'Don't judge them till you've read them!'

'I just know they're great. That's what I mean, you choose to write poems but not because anyone's giving you marks for it.' It might have been the moonlight but for a moment Halley's eyes looked extra shiny. 'And you're here! And we're here! Can you believe this even one little bit?'

He took me by the shoulders and we began jumping round and round excitedly, then I shushed him and he shushed me and we had an out-shushing each other competition, laughing like idiots in between.

'We'll wake them up,' I said. 'Halley, thanks. You always make me feel better. I'm not going to worry about Robeen anymore.' At the time I really meant it.

Calmer now, he looked up at the moon then back at me. 'I want to take another look at that dragomansk. Are you coming?'

'You must be joking,' I said. 'We'll get into so much trouble, Halley.'

'But everyone else is asleep. No one's noticed we're out here, have they? This is probably the only chance we're

ever going to get. Come on, come with me?' He took both my hands in his.

'Why do you want to see it so much?'

'My project.' Suddenly he looked serious. 'I've decided I'm going to do my project on insects and their connection with human history.'

'Since when?'

'Since I saw the dragomansk. I want to take a close-up look at those eyes. They're … compartmentalised. What would it be like to see the world through eyes like that? Look.'

Halley scrolled about on his tile and held up a picture of an insect's head.

'This is a dragonfly,' he said. 'Beautiful. But in its natural state it's only about as long as my finger. Imagine how it's been altered to become what it is now: the perfect weapon.'

'So perfect it can't be destroyed.'

'At the moment,' he said. 'I know the dragomansk is scary but it's beautiful and amazing too and there is so much we don't know about it. It's as though something's being kept from us.'

I stared at him, like he'd gone mad.

'I'm serious! Put it this way: I want to see that dragomansk as much as you want to go to the Museum, and if we *do* succeed in wiping them out, there won't be many chances *to* see them.'

'We're nowhere near wiping them out.'

'Maybe we're not … or maybe … we are.'

'All right,' I said slowly. His answer seemed odd. 'I'll come but only for a few minutes. They've probably got it locked up.'

'Nothing's locked round here, hadn't you noticed?' He flashed me a smile, holding the ancient door handle, which belonged in some kind of museum itself. 'There's no need with no one around.'

Rough stone steps led down to the basement. The blue emergency lights overhead weren't enough to see by and we turned on our tilelights. There were several doors along the narrow corridor but the first ones only led to storerooms. At the end of the corridor, we found a set of double doors. They *shooshed* apart to admit us to a large lab. By this time our eyes had grown accustomed to the dark, but as we roamed around the rows of shiny steel tables, it was obvious that what we were searching for wasn't there. I listened for noises overhead or footsteps on the stairs, but all was perfectly still. We left the lab and I followed Halley down a second corridor identical to the first. This time he made straight for the glass double doors at the end.

'There it is,' he whispered. 'Damn it, this door is locked!' He waved his hand over the recognition pad. In theory all members of the SSO mission had equal access to all areas at the Base.

Peering through the circular glass windows, we could see the dragomansk lying on its back, stretched out across three tables put end to end. Its enormous, bulbous head was staring straight at us, upside down, but it was impossible to make out details. Its stiff, spindly legs were bent and splayed. With disgust, I saw that its wings, or what were left of them, had been broken off. They were hanging over the edge of another table, bent at odd angles but still reflecting flecks of turquoise light. Somewhere a draft must have been blowing, because the flecks of light swapped round and back again. I wondered if, being so light and fragile, the wings had simply snapped off. I remembered my initial impression that the one we'd seen hovering on the edge of the wood was some kind of toy.

'Why lock the door?' Halley was annoyed.

'Because it's hazardous. You saw the horrible stuff that came out of it. '

'Meaning they don't trust us.'

'And you really think they should?'

He went in the adjoining cupboard to see if it had a side door into the lab but it didn't. I couldn't understand the attraction the dead creature held for him but I accepted it. If he did come with me to the Museum, wouldn't I expect him to put up with my interest in the fossils and rocks?

In the end Halley sighed, defeated. 'Let's go then,' he said.



9

After a morning spent painstakingly cleaning and sorting partly decayed items which had been dug out of a muddy pit, few of which I recognised, the four of us were more than ready for a break. Pico had already half-excavated the site on a previous mission. It had once been part of something called a shopping centre. It had yielded up enough of its secrets to keep Pico happy and now he was keen to move on to a new site along the coast.

'I'll drive you back,' Lana Leoni called over her shoulder as she led the way to one of the amphibicals. 'I have to pick some equipment up from Base. Let's go via a more scenic route this time, shall we?'

Lana was the other archaeologist and as one of the younger astronauts, she'd been happy enough to join in with our clowning around on the *Byd*. This was her first visit to Earth. She had a pin-sharp mind and I was shocked to learn that in all her time at Pioneer School she hadn't once been picked for an Earth mission.

There was nothing very scenic about the site: a

sterilised white brick temporary lab on anonymous rubbly marshland. The air was warm, sticky and thick with droning flies. You could almost imagine that these insects were curious to see what was going on, so intent were they upon plaguing us. Fortunately, if an insect did find its way into our suits, the skin-seal we sprayed all over ourselves each morning would stop any bites and diseases.

Low clouds had been blanketing the skies all morning but I was still amazed to have all that open sky above me. But I couldn't stand staring at it for long while there was work to be done. There'd been four major dragomansk alerts that morning but no attacks and we'd witnessed another metamansk formation, really close-up this time, over twenty individual creatures. It was hugely impressive to see them flying in synch with one another, flitting up and down, backwards and forwards, like one gargantuan insect. Impressive and terrifying. We'd seen what a single dragomansk could do; it was horrific to imagine what damage a host of them might inflict. We watched and waited inside the lab until the metamansk broke up, the individuals peeling away from the main group and heading off in different directions. Pico told us this was typical. No one knew why they gathered together but some sort of information sharing was suspected. I remembered the way our first dragomansk had seemed to look at us so intelligently when we'd taken cover beneath the trees.

'Come on, let's have a turn at driving. We've all had lessons,' said Halley.

'Don't forget who's senior,' Lana laughed. 'You're only allowed to drive the class ones and this is a class three. Get in.'

Reluctantly, I climbed in beside Robeen in the rear while Nisien and Halley sat next to Lana. She waved her hand and the roof closed over our heads.

'That drago – drago – what's its name again? Those big things we've seen fluttering about all morning.' This was Halley being funny.

'Drago-*mansk*,' Lana sighed. 'You'd better remember its name. Or at least remember what to do if you spot one.'

Halley laughed.

'We know what to do,' said Nisien in a sing-song voice.

'Oh yes, drago-*mansk*,' said Halley, ignoring him. 'Only one thing worse, right? When they all gang up together. By the way, that one that dropped on the roof yesterday, do you know when they're going to dissect it?'

'I don't know and if I did, I wouldn't tell you.'

Lana rotated her finger expertly in the steering zone, the amphibical turned one hundred and eighty degrees and we started off through the marsh although it wasn't long before we were back up on the service road.

'What's the point in dissecting it?' said Robeen. 'We're not going to find out how to kill the dragomansk by dissecting one; its genetic code is corrupted now, isn't it?'

'We've tried all sorts of ways to get rid of them,' said Lana. 'I guess we just have to keep trying. They're such a menace. Whoever finds a solution will be an international hero, that's for sure.'

'A galactic hero, surely?' corrected Nisien. 'How about it, Halley? Halley would really like to take a look…' From where I was sitting I couldn't see exactly what Halley did to Nisien, but he immediately stopped speaking.

'I'd like to take a look at Cardiff,' Halley cut in. 'I think we all would, right?'

He leaned over and raised his eyebrows at Robeen and me. Robeen said nothing but I muttered, 'Absolutely, yes.'

Halley went on, 'We arrived yesterday in the dark and today we were straight out into the field. The very wet, boggy field. We haven't exactly seen much of the place yet.'

'Remember, that is why we're here,' Nisien said. 'To assist with the archaeology.'

Halley muttered something under his breath.

'Well, you'll get your chance to look around this afternoon,' said Lana. 'You're lucky, you're getting some free time with the class ones.' These were the two-seater amphibicals.

'Great,' said Halley.

'Keep your sauroters ready at all times,' said Lana. 'Seriously, this is no joke. I know you've been told time and time again, but you can't be told enough: as long as you stay in the amphibical you're usually fine, it's humanoid

shapes they're programmed to attack, but don't take any chances. If even one flies over your vehicle, just park, undercover if possible, and wait till it's gone. They never stay anywhere long. Be careful. Look, we're at the Castle.'

Lana slowed the vehicle and turned it to face the famous, ruined tower. Although our training should have prepared us, I wasn't ready for the shock of seeing my beloved Castle in such a sorry state. I could have cried. It was ridiculous to imagine it might ever be rebuilt: who would bother when the whole Earth was being stripped back to nothing and abandoned?

'We can get out briefly because I'm covering us but remember, you mustn't do this on your own, not this afternoon or ever! Not unless one of us is with you. If I raise the alarm it's straight back to the class three, right?'

We all agreed. Lana reminded us to prime our sauroters and we activated the dragomansk alert on our tiles. Climbing from the vehicle, we began to pick our way through the soggy marsh, taking care not to stray too far from the amphibical. It was slow going because the water came up to our knees and I was still adjusting to feeling so much heavier on Earth. I did manage to scramble up a rubble mound and near the top I noticed what looked like an eye peering out of a shadowy gap between the stones. Intrigued, I started removing the stones and brushing the dust and grit away from the flowing-haired figure before I realised exactly what it was. Only the upper half was

visible and its left hand held the top of what looked like a round shield carved with spiky patterns, but of course, it wasn't a shield, it was the sun. I shuddered. Here was Sol, one of the statues I had gazed at so many times on our own Castle tower back home, except that while ours was richly painted, this one was bare stone with crispy, silver grey lichen spreading across it like some disfiguring disease. Sol's features were worn and softened but his face still wore the same cool and remote expression, his heavy-lidded eyes gazing past my shoulder, lost in thought. Without really thinking what I was doing, I pulled off my gloves, reached out and traced around the statue's nose and lips with the tip of my finger.

'Don't do that.' A sharp voice behind me broke the spell.

I turned. Robeen looked at me as though she'd forgotten to clean the toilet plumbing of her spacesuit.

'You're contaminating a cultural artefact.'

'I'm brushing off the dust,' I replied. 'That's hardly going to damage it.'

'You are *actually* contaminating it,' Robeen gave a very condescending sigh. 'Remember our lessons at the SSO, Bree? You're not even wearing gloves.'

I stood up, furious with Robeen but more so with myself. I knew she was right but I wasn't about to admit it and the worst thing was, I had handed her a perfect excuse to criticise me. Contamination of artefacts was lesson one in the preschool guide to archaeology.

'Rubbish,' I said. 'We're traipsing all over this stuff. You could be doing damage right now treading on those stones, have you thought of that?'

'I'm not deliberately rubbing my hands over precious artefacts. Acids from my skin aren't contaminating them, Bree.'

'Oh shut up!' I said. 'Go away and practise your cello.'

Robeen's eyes narrowed and her voice dropped. The others were nearby, after all. 'That comment's about all I'd expect from you,' she sneered. 'How you ever got chosen for this mission is anyone's guess.'

'And you,' I said out loud, 'do you know why you got chosen, Robeen? Core Panel thought they'd do the whole school a favour and get your miserable face out of the way for a bit. Everyone's sick to death of you thinking you're so much better that anyone else.'

'I don't think I'm better than *everyone* else.'

'Oh, and what *could* you mean by that, I wonder?'

'Hey,' Lana called over. 'What's going on?'

'It's Bree,' Robeen said calmly. 'She was touching that statue with her bare hands and contaminating it. I advised her to stop and she started yelling at me.'

'I wasn't yelling, I was only…'

'Bree, you're still raising your voice,' warned Lana. She stumbled over to us.

'But did you hear what she said to me?' I protested.

'No, but I heard what you said to her and that was

enough. I'm going to have to report this matter when we get back to Base. You'd better make friends, right? Or at least keep out of each other's way till you've calmed down. Bree, you know as well as I do why we have to get along on expeditions. If we all fell out, the work wouldn't get done and the mission would fall apart! You need to think about that. Anyway, Robeen's right, you shouldn't be touching anything without gloves on. Put them back on, that's an order.'

Halley and Nisien were staring at us and a disdainful smile tweaked the corners of Robeen's mouth. I cursed myself for taking the bait. As Lana said, arguments amongst an expeditionary team were really frowned upon, even more so than at school, and now I'd gone and landed myself in trouble in the most pathetic way possible. I guessed I'd be losing my free time that afternoon at the very least. If anyone thought Bree Aurora didn't deserve a place on the mission, she'd just gone and proved them right.

Rain began falling from the sky, real rain.

We all looked up and watched the cool, gentle rain patter on our visors. Halley spread his arms wide, even though there was no chance of him actually feeling the rain on his skin. The lumps of stone we'd clambered over began to stain a darker grey. There were plenty of gasps and 'Wow-wows!' all around, even from Lana.

There weren't any from me. It was the second time

Robeen had managed to ruin what should have been an incredible moment. Even Sol was crying.

Back at Base, the argument was reported to Doc Carter, or at least he was the one who came to our quarters to investigate it. Yet, reclining in a chair with his feet bare and a drink dangling in one hand, he seemed surprisingly relaxed about the whole matter.

'So, I've heard all about it and all I'm going to say is it shouldn't have happened and it better not happen again, right? You don't really need me to go into the reasons why we don't fight and argue on these missions, do you?'

He looked at each of us in turn and we shook our heads. Outside, the rain fell steadily, striping the windows and obscuring the view. It hadn't stopped since we'd left the Castle.

'Bree, is that all right?'

'Yes.'

'Fine. Investigation over.'

He rose to leave. I couldn't believe that he wasn't going to say any more. I'd escaped a punishment but I wasn't really satisfied. Why was he treating the matter so casually? Would it have been the same story if one of the others had got in trouble? Robeen looked shocked and something else too: as though I disgusted her. Well, I decided to show her I didn't expect or want special treatment.

'Um, can I say something?' I said.

The Doc stopped and pinned me with a quizzical smile. 'Of course.'

'I was expecting you to at least ask me to apologise to Robeen.'

'I don't think that's necessary.' He wrinkled his nose. 'From what I hear, things were said on both sides. Just don't let it happen again.'

'I'd sooner apologise properly.' I turned to Robeen, looking her squarely in the face. 'Robeen, you were right, I shouldn't have taken off my gloves. I only did so because I … well, I just wanted to touch the statue, I found it so beautiful. I did it but I shouldn't have.'

'That's all I was saying,' Robeen said warily, like I'd caught her off-guard.

'I know and I'm sorry.'

'That's very, very good of you, Bree. Commendable, I would say.' Doc Carter rested his hand on my shoulder like a proud uncle, then gave it a little squeeze. I froze. It felt awful to be so patronised by him and in front of the others. Why was he being like this?

Another smile and he turned to leave a second time.

'I don't think it is "good" of me,' I said. 'It's just what I ought to do.'

This time he paused in the doorway. 'Well, that's wonderful. There's poetry in your soul, Bree. You know, I even understand why you took your gloves off. I might well have done so myself. Just … not again, okay?'

Damn!

'Now…' Doc Carter held up his finger as though he'd remembered something. 'What are your plans for this afternoon?'

'A bit of a wander, maybe?' Nisien chirped up. Robeen said nothing.

'Okay, just no wandering outside the specified range and stay in your pairs, yes? Nisien and Robeen, Bree and Halley. The class ones are outside ready for you. So where are you going?'

'Oh, here and there,' said Nisien. 'I was hoping to take a closer look at the amphibicals. I've an idea how I might construct a device to deal better with objects that block our way, like the fallen trees that held us up when we arrived. I'd like to do it for my project.'

'Sounds great.' I noticed the way Doc Carter ignored Robeen completely. 'And how about you, Bree and Halley?'

Halley let me go first. 'Well, Halley says he's happy to come to the Museum with me,' I said. 'If that's all right still?' I looked at him for confirmation.

'Sure,' said Halley.

'Wonderful.' Doc Carter raised his eyebrows at Halley.

'Oh, but before we go,' said Halley. 'My project's going to be about insects and I was wondering if Bree and I could take another look at the dead dragomansk down in the lab? We're both interested in seeing it again, aren't we?'

It was my turn to nod.

Doc Carter smacked his lips. 'Sorry,' he said. 'We performed the dissection this morning and it's gone.'

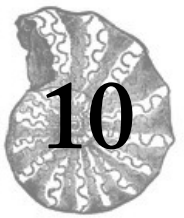
'Gone?' Halley frowned.

'The body's been discarded. It didn't tell us anything. We didn't really expect it to. We're more interested in pursuing *other* methods of countering the dragomansk threat at the moment.'

'Where was it discarded? We could still see it, couldn't we?'

'Couldn't we?' I echoed.

'No. No means no.' Doc Carter seemed a little irritated. 'It's unsafe. It's been taken away. You don't think we're going to take chances with you, do you? We couldn't let you near that thing, so forget it. Instead, just go and enjoy the Museum this afternoon.' Turning my way, he switched back to automatic smile mode before leaving the room.



Halley bared his teeth and swung the amphibical round so fast we nearly overbalanced. A great arc of water sprayed up on his side and there was a loud mechanical rasp of protest beneath our seats. I lurched across and swiped my hand across the steering zone, righting the craft with an even bigger splash.

'Do you want me to drive?' It was difficult to sound sufficiently angry when your visor flattened everything you said.

'No.'

'Halley, I know you're annoyed but we could easily tip up and then what?'

'It's infuriating,' he said. 'We're grown up enough to travel all this way to Earth but – did you hear Doc Carter? All that stuff about protecting us and not taking chances. It was obvious how much I wanted to see the dragomansk, but there are some secrets they just aren't going to share with us. I reckon they just sent us on that boring dig this morning so they could get rid of the body without us seeing.'

'I doubt it.' I thought Halley was being paranoid. 'Not everything revolves around us, you know. We're supposed to be helping out in the field. That's what we're here for.'

'Don't, you sound like Nisien.'

We travelled in and out of the marsh, over water and mud, with Halley still driving far too fast. The heaps of rubble were so smothered in plant life, they looked like small hills. It was like a game, the way Halley steered straight at the rubble mounds, and only swerved away at the last possible moment. I didn't like it. He shouldn't have been driving in the mood he was in. Our navigation panel showed that we were heading for the Museum but nothing outside would have told us that. We rounded a corner and thanks to Halley's chaotic steering, found ourselves at the mouth of what looked like a canal, winding its way between rows of ruined buildings. The entrance to the canal was completely hidden in the shadow of a huge rubble and mud mound, so we could easily have missed it. It looked intriguing and keen as I was to get to the Museum, I didn't protest when Halley brought the vehicle to a standstill.

'It says "Queen Street",' he said, pointing at the navigation panel. 'The Castle's just over there. Why didn't we notice this when we were driving back with Lana this morning?'

'It's so well hidden, I guess.'

Halley was silent.

'Let's!' I answered the curiosity written all over his face.

We cruised slowly down the canal. The gentle motion seemed to placate Halley and in no time he was back to his old self. There was something stately and ghostly about the place, as though we'd stumbled across a secret grove undisturbed for hundreds of years. When we slowed the amphibical and gave the rocking water time to still, we noticed strange insects skating about on the water, their long legs spread out and their feet making the smallest possible indentations on the surface. These were the first indigenous animals we'd seen anywhere in Cardiff other than the airborne insects we were used to by now. High above, I could hear birdsong, strange echoes of recordings I'd listened to back home, which were sometimes piped into the corridors of Mackintosh Avenue and Keppoch Court. I dug my elbow into Halley and pointed at the sky. It took him a moment to tune into what I could hear, and when he got it he smiled and nodded.

The old street was a corridor lined with tall buildings still standing or possibly just their facades, hemming the water in on either side. Light bounced off the water, casting undulating shimmers on the slimy green marble and exposed brick, and also across the enormous roots of ancient trees rising from the water. On these incredible root systems sprang colonies of ferns and startlingly bright flowering plants. The variety of plant life was amazing – any one of those roots would have provided more than

enough study for one of our student projects. It was the best example yet of how rich and diverse, how *interesting* life was on Earth, probably how uncontrollable too, although I was beginning to realise how much I didn't mind that. Most of the people I knew would have feared this uncontrollable aspect, so alien to everything we were raised with. How many kinds of plants could there be on the face of the Earth, if a single root could be home to so many? How many species of animals? It was nothing like our controlled and perfectly regulated Martian ecology.

Thick curtains of furry stalks, attached to the branches above our heads, hung down over the roots. They resembled the strings of a harp held by one of the statues on top of the Museum. High above us, the leafy canopy acted as a ceiling to the canal corridor, blotting out the sky and completing this feeling of enclosure, of privacy.

It was frustrating, having the glass roof of the amphibical between us and all these sights and sounds.

'Can we retract this?' I asked, giving it a tap.

Without answering, Halley waved his hand and the whole roof section rotated back into the shell of the craft. I removed my visor and then peeled back the hood of my suit. If I'd stopped to think I wouldn't have done it, it was so expressly forbidden, but I just reacted. It was ridiculous really. The extreme heat and moisture hit me full in the face, but the noise of the insects struck me more. Their sound was louder and more echoey in this enclosed space,

as though I could feel the air vibrating with the loud yet fragile and papery hum.

'You're crazy,' said the flattened voice beside me.

'This whole thing's crazy,' I whispered, gazing around at the amazing little world we'd stumbled upon.

'But it's dangerous.' Halley was leaning over so his mouth was near my ear, and this time, although he was speaking quietly, it was with his real voice rather than the flattened version. He'd removed his visor and hood too. 'We must stay alert, Bree. It's so loud here, we'd never hear a dragomansk and with the lid off, it could get us easily.'

'We've got these.' I held up my tile, showing the dormant alert signal. 'Anyway, no dragomansk is going to get in here, the trees are too close together. Remember yesterday, the one that couldn't get into the wood? Its wingspan was too big. It'd be exactly the same here.'

'Let's hope so.'

Doc Carter would have been furious if he'd known, only because of the risk to his precious celephet. With the heat and excitement making my heart speed like crazy, Doc Carter's graphs were probably going wild. The thought made me smile.

Although I tried convincing myself and Halley that we were safe without our headgear, we proceeded very slowly and froze whenever we heard a rustling in the branches or a plop in the water. It was ridiculously exciting,

the most exciting thing I'd ever done. With my head exposed it felt as though I was actually part of everything.

I sensed eyes on us, lots and lots looking down at us from the branches and peering from between the roots and leaves, and just as I was wondering if Halley was sensing it too, he leaned over and whispered in my ear, 'Doesn't it feel like we're being watched?'

I nodded.

We came to a crossroads and turned right into a side canal, heading deeper and deeper into a maze of water, trees and buildings until it struck me where we were.

'I know this. Remember that picture of the arcade? That ancient covered arcade from hundreds and hundreds of years ago? These were "cafes". This is where our ancestors met each another. This is where they must have held the tea ceremonies.'

It all bore scant resemblance to the picture I'd seen, with the towering trees breaking through the masonry, creating a dead end up ahead. Yet something about the rounded sweep of the wood and broken metalwork, now mere rusty prongs poking out of the water, convinced me this was it.

'Can't remember,' said Halley.

As we reached the great roots of the biggest tree blocking our way, a small creature almost the same colour as the root launched itself, diving into the water and swimming in a big circle in front of our craft. Again, it

took me a few moments to realise what it was. A real live frog, with all its body parts intact rather than dead and splayed out on a screen. When I dug my elbow into Halley and pointed, recognition dawned on his face.

'If only Coro were here now,' he said.

'I'm glad he isn't. *Scalpels at the ready*,' I mimicked our teacher's gruff voice.

'Slice it cleanly!' said Halley and we both laughed.

The frog stopped swimming as though it had heard us, fled back to its root and clambered up onto it with its bizarrely jointed legs. We watched its shiny little body scuttle off between the ferns.

'There's so much life here,' said Halley. 'But it's hiding from us.'

'We're aliens, aren't we?' We looked at each other. It was true, in a way. We did and yet didn't belong in this world.

It grew lighter as we reached an end to the canal system. The water broadened out into a lake and the surrounding marshland. We replaced our hoods and Halley closed the roof just before a large v-formation metamansk came flying towards the west where the sun now hung in a pale, watery blue sky. Halley backed us into the mouth of the canal and we watched them pass. Whatever mission this metamansk was on, it looked scarily organised and determined. These weren't just overgrown insects getting on with their lives and trying

to stay out of trouble, the way the small ones buzzing round our masks were doing, they *were* the trouble and they seemed to know it.

'It's creepy. Where are they going? What do they want?' I said.

'Us, of course. It's what they were bred for.'

'Do you think they're intelligent? That they've got some kind of plan?'

Halley shrugged his shoulders. 'It's time we headed for the Museum,' he said.

There it was at last. I could hardly believe I was here, in front of my beloved Museum. It took my breath away. Imagine a face you're very familiar with, one you love very much, which has all of a sudden aged by a thousand years, and has also, bizarrely, swelled in size. I still recognised the face but couldn't help wondering what it had been through. As in Grace's photograph, it was standing in the middle of a muddy area of swamp surrounded by other fine buildings, unlike our own Museum on Mars which stood alone. There were ancient words carved into the top which didn't appear on our Museum, mostly unreadable except one: CYMRU still stood proud.

Halley must have sensed my mood because he didn't say a word. He piloted the amphibical as far as the top of the steps and the row of great pillars and we stepped out. The floor was caked in a thick layer of mud. The heads of

weird, long-faced, horned beasts above the door were unfamiliar but the bronze doors themselves, tall, slim and decorated with flower heads, were only larger versions of the ones I knew so well. One of the doors opened reluctantly when I gave it a shove, grating along the floor, and although it wouldn't open very wide, the gap was just large enough for us to squeeze through.

Inside was very dark. Chinks of light shone between the boards fixed over the windows, including the semicircular windows near the roof, and a little light followed us through the doorway, stealing in like an intruder. We removed our gloves and held up our illuminated tiles. The air was cool and I was relieved, when I removed my hood, that there were far fewer insects inside the building than out. It seemed as if the vast hall contained a huge gathering of Earth people who had fallen silent the minute we entered and were now staring at us very strangely. Halley grabbed my arm. We were rooted to the spot, uncertain and apprehensive, but as our eyes adjusted to the darkness, we realised that these 'people' were larger than life and that several were on large blocks.

'They're statues,' I whispered. Why was I whispering?

'They're what?'

'Statues,' I said out loud. 'They were popular here on Earth. They were valued as works of art. There aren't any in our Museum back home. Well, we don't have them at all, do we?'

'But what did they do? What was their purpose?'

'I don't know. To tell a story? Or act as some kind of warning?' I was looking at the statue of a naked man holding a sword in one hand and a gruesome, severed head in the other.

'I don't like "warning",' Halley continued to whisper. He still isn't sure we're safe, I thought.

'Trust me,' I said. 'They can't harm us.'

As we walked around, our feet echoed in the crowded yet empty hall. Some of the statues were carved from white stone and others were dark metal. I ran my tilelight over the many different faces. There was a man in a tall, pointed hat sitting playing a drum and shouting over his shoulder; there was an old man in long robes raising his fist as though he were ready to strike down his enemies; there was a warrior sitting high on a horse.

A couple of enormous pictures on the wall were also of warriors. In one, a team of them marched through the darkness, the explosions around them lighting their faces with a sickly, green glow. One was falling with his arm outstretched, perhaps at the very moment of his death. A robotic machine seemed to be chasing them.

'They certainly had a liking for war,' I called over to Halley, my voice echoing round the hall.

'Yes,' he answered. 'Except come and take a look at this.'

He was near one of the staircases, studying the pale shape of two large Earth humans, male and female, their

bodies curved around one another. Their pose made the cold, unfeeling stone seem warm and alive and as our tilelights swept over the curves of their arms and legs up to their heads, we saw that they were locked in a kiss.

'It's amazing,' I said. 'Quite unlike the others. Perhaps these people weren't obsessed with war the whole time?'

Halley took my hand and in a quick movement, kissed my cheek gently. 'I'm sorry.' He heaved a sigh.

I was surprised. 'That's okay,' I said, although I felt sure that it wasn't the kiss he was apologising for. 'Why sorry?'

'Just … sorry.' He let go of my hand and walked off into the gloom.

'Where are you going?'

'To see if I can find exhibits for my project. Or something.' It didn't sound like he meant it but I didn't feel like rushing after him. All I wanted to do was explore the Museum, to fulfil the dreams I'd dreamt a thousand times and the truth was I preferred to be on my own. Halley was in one of his strange moods but I was used to them. Here I was at last, in my Museum. It was time to explore.

It felt as though I'd shrunk: the place was so familiar yet so big. I knew exactly where I wanted to go first, through the central doors to the Origins of Earth section. The layout was completely different from the layout I knew and with my tile my only source of light, it was much darker in this maze of rooms than it had been in the main hall. Any

organised displays had long been dismantled but many ancient stones and fossils lay in heaps around the edges of one large room. I bent to touch them with my bare hands. Robeen would not have approved.

Fossiliferous limestone … garnet-bearing metamorphosed basalt … stromatolite in banded iron formation… The beautiful words were missing but I recognised the different types of rock, crystal and fossil, jumbled together as though they had just spilled up out of the Earth. A lump of anthracite caught the light from my tile and shone with an impossibly black gleam. On its side lay a huge, ugly fossil fish, its monstrous jaws parted as though about to attack. The scales of the fish were intricate and beautiful and I ran my fingertips over them. There was a huge amethyst geode, as big as a seat, and the geometric clusters of intense purple crystals seemed the truest expression of colour I'd ever seen. It was as though all this abandoned treasure had been waiting patiently in the dark for a very long time, waiting for someone to come and really appreciate them. In the dark I really could touch them, feel their cool shapes and textures, and no one would know.

Perhaps my project, which was supposed to have some scientific basis, could combine an analysis of these rocks and fossils with my own poems? I was wondering whether I'd be able to get away with this when I heard footsteps in the next room.

'Halley,' I called. 'Come here a moment, this is amazing!' Maybe it wouldn't be as amazing to him as it was to me, but I needed to share it with him, anyway.

The footsteps stopped as though they'd heard me.

Silence.

'Halley!' I yelled. I was worried, remembering that he'd been acting strangely.

I went to the doorway leading to the next room. This was another of those impossibly old-fashioned doors with manual handles. Opening it carefully, I shone my tilelight inside. The room was empty.

'Bree, here!' It sounded as though Halley was back in the hall again. I retraced my steps. When I reached him, he was wide-eyed with excitement. He grabbed my hand.

'Didn't you hear me call?' I asked but he wasn't listening. He dragged me past the statues to the staircase.

'Back in there, in the Origins of Earth?' I tried again. 'I was calling and calling. Didn't you hear me?'

'I've found something upstairs,' Halley said, oblivious. 'You must see this.'

I followed him up, his tilelight illuminating the stone steps. I was annoyed that whatever he'd discovered had to take precedence, but it was useless complaining when he was so fired up. Rounding the corner, we climbed to the balcony.

'Through here…'

'Wait – you mean you were up here all the time?'

'Come on!'

'Halley…'

Back home, these upper galleries are full of artworks, mainly holo-sensory projections, but this was completely empty. It echoed to the tiniest footfall, the tiniest whisper. It seemed to echo to the rapid beating of my heart.

'There's nothing here,' I said, still confused about what had happened downstairs.

'There is. It's here … and through there. Just look around.'

I turned to the patch of wall he was shining his tilelight at and there it was. A drawing in heavy, rough black strokes that looked as though it had been done in a hurry or more likely in a fit of rage or madness. A drawing of an eye, a large, compound eye.

'Dragomansk,' whispered Halley.

I searched the wall with my light. Every tiny area was covered with these black drawings, all telling the same story. A chill spread right through me. The dragomansk and metamansk were in flight all over the walls. Below them open-mouthed Earth humans ran for their lives, their arms raised in panic or surrender, running from the lethal streams of acid shooting from the beasts' mouths, vapourising whatever it hit. The dragomansk were as intent on their deadly mission in these pictures as they were in real life.

The images were awful and somehow seemed even

worse because of the terrible silence of the dark room, as though the noises were sealed inside the pictures, like a giant, invisible hand blocking their mouths and stifling their screams.

I crept closer, my horror increasing moment by moment.

The dragomansk were not the only beasts attacking the humans. Hundreds of terror-stricken humans were also running from a huge ground-based creature emerging over the brow of a hill, very like the machine in the picture downstairs. It looked like an enormous, armoured louse trundling blindly along, snapping its whip-like antennae through the air. Further over, another one was curled up in a ball and rolling straight at a scattering pack of panicking humans, sending them running straight into the jaws of giant grey worms which were popping out of earthquake-like fissures in the ground, sightless worms with needle-sharp teeth. Overhead, dangly-legged flying spiders dropped bombs of smoking fire.

Enormous predatory armoured insects grown far beyond their normal size rampaged all over the countryside in these pictures, taking easy aim at their soft-bodied human prey as if they were hunting for sport.

'They're through here too.' Halley stood in the doorway on the other side of the room. 'They're everywhere, the walls are completely black with them from top to bottom. It's insane.'

'I don't want to see any more.' Yet I couldn't tear my eyes away. 'Do you think it actually happened, all this? Or is it someone's imagination?'

'I'd love to know. How much of this do you think our people know? Captain Calamus? Or Doc Carter and the rest of them? Even our professors at school, even Core Panel? What aren't they telling us about the history of those last days?'

'Perhaps no one's ever seen these pictures.'

'They must have.'

'Well, we know not everything's made public. People wouldn't be able to cope with it. They don't want to think of Earth like this.' I floundered.

There were fresh horrors in the dark wherever I pointed my tile: angry and terrified eyes; swarms attacking a single human left behind by the crowd and sinking to her knees; vibrating antennae and rows of teeth bared ready to attack; running legs and flailing arms. There were the piles of slaughtered victims, and swarms of insects feasting on them, sucking up their blood through long, tubular tongues.

'There were loads of them,' whispered Halley. 'The dragomansk are the only ones that have survived. They must have killed off the others. They triumphed.'

'Let's go,' I pleaded.

Halley seemed lost in an awful wonder. 'You know, it's almost like someone's trying to communicate with us in

this primitive way,' he said. 'But if all this really was going on, it must have been filmed a million times over. Where are those recordings?'

'I don't know.'

'There must be something somewhere, some recording. This can't be the only record. I'm going to look downstairs.'

'Halley, I need to tell you something.' But he had already shot out of the door. Unwilling to be alone in that terrible room, I followed him downstairs. 'Halley? Halley!'

He spun around. 'Sorry, what is it?'

'I heard something.'

'Like what?'

'When I was downstairs in Origins of Earth. I heard footsteps in the room next door and I assumed it was you. But it couldn't have been, could it? You were up here. And when I looked inside the room, it was empty.'

'Footsteps?'

'That's what it sounded like, yes.'

Halley took a deep breath. 'You'd better show me.'

We went into the room with the fossils and stones. Halley searched the walls for any more pictures but to my relief they were blank. I showed him where I'd been crouching beside the massive amethyst geode when I'd heard the footsteps. The room next door contained even more fossils and minerals, all jumbled together as though they'd been tipped from the pockets of a scavenging giant on his return home. We called out but no one answered.

All was silent. We wandered further and further around the display rooms until we were practically climbing over the jumble of exhibits: more statues, flaking pictures in huge carved frames, even a collection of ancient musical instruments. When I tripped and grabbed hold of something to stop myself falling, I realised I'd grasped an ancient cello, made of wood. What would Robeen have given to get her hands on it, assuming it was still playable?

We arrived back at the start of Origins of Earth.

'There's no one else here,' said Halley. 'Not unless they're hiding. But why would they?'

'It doesn't make sense. It couldn't be someone from our expedition, could it?'

Halley didn't reply, but squeezed my hand.

'You do believe me?' I said.

'Yes.' To my surprise, he looked as though he really did. He hadn't questioned how real those footsteps had been. Had it been the other way round, I knew I would have.

'Are you sure you're all right?' he said.

'I'm fine. Don't start asking me that, please. Doc Carter keeps asking me over and over: Are you all right? Are you all right?'

I felt panicky, hemmed in, as though I couldn't breathe. I leant against the wall and tears filled my eyes.

'Sorry, hush, sorry.' Halley stroked my arm. 'I only meant… Do you want to go?'

'I suppose so, but I will want to come back. Soon.' I

meant it. Breathing slowly to calm myself, for the first time in my life, I felt my jaw set itself at the same determined angle as my mother's. The Museum was the one place on Earth where I wanted to be and no footsteps, real or imaginary, would drive me away.

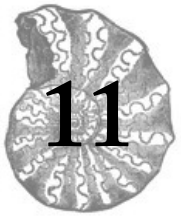
'I'm coming back too,' said Halley. 'To look for some evidence for … well, you know. I want to carry on studying those pictures upstairs. I'll find some way of putting them in my project if I can. I might copy parts of them, try and feel what the people who drew them were feeling.' Halley was an amazing artist.

'As long as you don't expect me to go up there again.'

'Of course not. I'd say that's enough for one day though, agreed?'

'Agreed.'

We replaced our hoods and visors before squeezing back through the gap in the outer door. It clanged when we heaved it shut.



11

The dream returned that night. I landed right in the middle of it, dropped into a dark corridor which I realised had to be deep in the cold bowels of the Museum. I heard a single set of slow, echoing footsteps behind me. It was pitch black and I had no chance of seeing whoever or whatever it was so, just like every other time, I ran. Up one corridor and down the next, bouncing off the walls in a blind, sweaty panic. I simply couldn't shake off those relentless footsteps. The sound mingled with my own pounding pulse till I couldn't tell which was which. Rounding the final bend, I just stopped myself from running smack into the gigantic head of a dragomansk. It was the size of a house and was illuminated by a sickly, garish green light. It stared at me curiously with its enormous compound eyes, turning its head slowly from side to side as though it didn't know what to make of this tiny puppet-doll. Finding my voice at last, I screamed and woke myself up.

I didn't know if I'd screamed in real life but if I had, at

least I hadn't woken Robeen. As I lay there trembling and working hard to steady my breathing I decided that, against orders, I would not be reporting the dream to Doc Carter. I wouldn't report any of my dreams to him now, no matter how bad they got.

A couple of days later, time spent relocating to the new dig site on the coast, the four of us were called to Doc Carter's room.

'The fact is, we're very interested in the particular projects you students have chosen,' Doc Carter began. Multiple graphs on the holoscreen behind his shoulder winked and flashed as new data arrived and I tried to forget that it was all coming from the celephet on the back of my head. I tried to focus on what he was saying but it was hard.

'Nisien, the initial designs you've made for modifying the amphibical are ingenious and we really want to see what becomes of them. It's terrific that Robeen has agreed to team up with you on this potentially groundbreaking piece of work.' Nisien beamed as though his birthdays had all come at once but Robeen merely nodded and kept her eyes on the floor. I didn't get the feeling she was particularly interested in Nisien's mechanical obsessions and I felt sorry for her. Didn't she have a project of her own? At Pioneer School, Robeen was one of the superstar students, up for every award going, and it was hard to

believe this was the same girl: a Robeen pushed into the background. I realised why she might hate me so much for all the extra attention I was getting.

'As for you two…' Doc Carter turned to Halley and myself, his eyes aglow. 'Your respective Museum projects. Well, we've read your proposals and we're sure they'll add greatly to our appreciation of Earth's natural and geological history, so well done.'

I'd feared my proposal might seem a little weak compared with the others but obviously I needn't have worried. I didn't know who he meant by 'we'; who were the ones who read and considered the proposals? Probably members of the expeditionary party, Captain Calamus and maybe Core Panel back home. And Doc Carter, of course. He was right in the middle of all this decision-making.

'Thanks,' said Halley. There was a hard edge to his voice. If the Doctor noticed, he didn't show it.

'That's why,' each one of Doc Carter's immaculate white teeth seemed to twinkle like a scale played on a keyboard and he flexed his fingers with glee, 'for the first time ever, we're suspending student archaeological duties. It's more important you concentrate upon your very worthwhile projects. The class ones are at your disposal anytime, just remember the safety rules: visors down, alert signals on and sauroters at the ready. And of course if you're outside, you must stay near cover at all times. Call for help anytime, that goes without saying. Nisien and

Robeen, you'll remain at Base to study the amphibicals so that shouldn't be a problem.'

Poor Robeen, I thought again.

'Is everyone happy with that?' Doc Carter said.

'You bet,' said Nisien. Robeen said nothing and neither did Halley. I was happy, sort of. Happy to be returning to the Museum so soon. I'd convinced myself that the mysterious footsteps were something else, like creaks in the old building. I was keen to go back and begin dreaming about the rocks and fossils.

The morning was bright and for the first time, the sky was truly blue, a real marvel. The huge white puffy clouds high in the atmosphere barely seemed to move. If only I could have taken off my hood and visor and found a dry piece of ground to lie down and stare up at it. Outside the Base, Halley and I stood looking upwards for as long as we dared.

This time I drove, taking a similar route to our first outing. I guessed Halley wouldn't protest if we took a detour via the Queen Street and arcade canals. I pulled the amphibical into shelter three times after alerts that dragomansk were about. The first two times, individual creatures came into view and didn't stay long, but on the third we saw an enormous metamansk, the biggest we'd seen, weaving through the air, backwards and forwards, up and down, changing direction continually. I tried not to think about the dreadful pictures on the gallery walls.

'Just look at them,' I said. 'They're vile.'

'Vile but … interesting. Fascinating. Look how they all move together so perfectly.'

'Halley,' I said. 'You can't mean it. You know they'd kill us if they knew we were here.' But I could see he did mean it.

'What do you think they eat?'

'Small animals. Large animals.' I hated even talking about them. 'Did you see there's no wildlife out in the open, except the water animals and the insects? The birds and mammals are all hiding in the woods and canals, where the dragomansk can't reach.'

'They must have been the deadliest of all the engineered insects, if the pictures on the Museum walls are accurate. Once they'd polished off the humans they must have started attacking one another in some kind of big insect war. The dragomansk came out on top.'

'No wonder there's so little left of Cardiff.'

'No wonder we're so keen to find a way to get rid of them.' Halley changed the subject, perhaps because he could see I'd had enough. 'At least we're out here experiencing something. Imagine being Nisien, stuck back at Base. What a waste after coming all this way.'

'He's happy enough,' I said. 'Imagine being Robeen, stuck there helping him. She didn't look happy, despite what Doc Carter said. She must be bored out of her mind.'

The metamansk broke up and once they were all out

of sight, I edged our craft out of its hiding place and we set off again.

'Don't tell me you feel sorry for her, after the trouble she got you into?'

'Trouble? What trouble? I was expecting a lot more than I got. Doc Carter practically ended up congratulating me. Sometimes I don't like him. Don't trust him anyway.' I flinched as I said it, as though the celephet could transmit my thoughts straight to his computer. But of course, that was stupid.

'You're strange,' Halley sighed. 'Doc Carter's nice to you so you don't like him.'

'But why's he being so nice?'

'It's that celephet of yours. He's pleased it's working, that's all. You've saved his whole experiment. How many times do I have to reassure you?' Halley shook his head but his voice, even behind the visor, sounded strained.

'Yes, but sometimes I get the feeling that's not the whole story, about the celephet,' I said. 'You know, like you feel they're not telling us everything about the dragomansk. Like there are these secrets they won't trust us with. You said something like that the other day. Didn't you, Halley?'

Halley said nothing.

The canals were just as beautiful as they'd been the first time and once more we ended up opening the roof and

slipping back our visors and hoods. Our sauroters were primed and ready if the unthinkable happened and a dragomansk did appear, but that didn't seem likely: the gaps between the trees were too narrow, and a thick mesh of hairy creepers hung from every branch, creepers we had to keep brushing out of the way to get anywhere. We saw more frogs, different kinds, and this time caught the flicker of larger creatures' eyes, spying on us from the depths of dense vegetation. We saw more movement, the flash of limbs. I spotted something which might have been a very large domestic cat disappearing into the shadows behind a building. Maybe wildlife roamed the ruined buildings too. Halley seemed just as enchanted with our private watery garden as I was and we spent about an hour exploring before heading for the Museum.

I suppose Halley went straight upstairs to contemplate those stomach-turning pictures. He said he was combing the place for contemporary evidence: recordings, photographs or written accounts of what had happened in those dreadful last days. Me, I made a beeline for Origins of Earth, keen to explore but also hoping to begin a new poem.

So there I was, crouching in the darkness in the huge room, pouring over the ammonites and trilobites, as though I were fishing them up one by one from the bottom of the ocean. I daydreamt about warm, tropical seas full of such creatures and my awareness of my

surroundings seemed to blur and drift away. In my imagination I was there, swimming amongst long-extinct animals in the tropical shallows, feeling the warmth of the sun filtering through the clear water on to my bare skin and knowing that when I surfaced, there it would be overhead, the bright, life-giving sun set in an enormous clear blue sky. It wasn't like any place I could go to on Mars and as the sensual impressions swept over me I realised something for the first time: biologically I didn't really belong on my home planet. It seemed obvious, but it hadn't till then; the origin of my species was Earth. Earth, where I could breathe the air freely, Earth with its scary, out-of-control lushness and fecundity. It was on this mystifying, rich and diverse planet that I most longed to be.

The footsteps were indistinct at first. I tried my best to imagine they were something else, something expanding or contracting in the old building. They stopped and I was relieved, but they started again and there really was no mistaking them. In the room next door, someone was walking up and down, pacing a few steps then turning, pacing then turning. I could only see the door as a dark rectangle set in the dark wall, and at any moment I expected someone to appear.

I had felt fear before in my life, but not like this. I'd thought there couldn't be anything scarier than being on board the *Byd* as it launched, when I was sure I was about

to die. But the fear I felt alone in that room was very different. On Mars everything is known, everything is expected. This was entirely new, this primitive icy fear of the unknown. A real physical chill suffused my body and I couldn't get up or shout out. I couldn't do anything except stay kneeling where I was, following the sound of the footsteps as they paced this way and that on the other side of the wall. They sounded impatient, cross even, especially when they turned. Then as suddenly as they'd begun, the footsteps ceased.

The enchantment broken, I sprang to my feet. If the footsteps were Halley playing tricks, I would catch him this time. In my heart of hearts, I knew it wasn't him. And if it wasn't Halley and it wasn't another member of the crew, who was it? Without stopping to get scared again, I ran to the door, turned the ancient ball handle and opened it, flashing my tilelight around the rectangular room. I had already known there wouldn't be anyone there. But someone *had* been, I was sure.

I ran back into the hall and called Halley. The doors to the gallery wheezed open and he appeared on the landing, leaning over the balcony. We had a little chat, nothing important, and he returned to whatever he was doing. I went to sit amongst the statues. I don't know why I didn't tell him what had just happened.

I realised what the footsteps reminded me of: my dream, of course. They had been on the other side of a

wall rather than chasing me down corridors but it took me a while to calm down before I could return to the fossil room. When I did, nothing happened; there were no more footsteps. I began to relax, pleased with myself for facing this strange new fear. Maybe it was the adrenalin rush but I was inspired to begin my poem:

Down amongst primitive fish
Curving their ways, discovering
New powers to dart and jab…

When Halley and I met for lunch, I still didn't mention the footsteps. It seemed he'd forgotten all about them. I read him the start of my poem and he showed me some sketches he had made of the pictures upstairs. He told me he'd made staircases of books to view and copy the drawings higher up on the walls. Probably priceless books but they'd done the job. I found Halley's copies almost as disturbing as the real pictures, but I swallowed my dislike and praised Halley's technical ability. He had captured the gory scenes very well.

Of course, I would never have set foot in the common room if I'd realised Robeen and Nisien were having an argument, one of those horrible, whispered arguments designed to avoid attention.

'All you had to do was hold the light steady!' Nisien's

voice was hoarse and high-pitched with indignation. He saw me standing in the doorway. 'Have a good day?' he spluttered. 'Because I haven't. The afternoon's been utterly wasted all because Robeen couldn't keep her tilelight pointed in the right place and … and…'

'…and he lasered through the wrong wires,' Robeen finished his sentence for him. 'It was nothing to do with me or the light. You just got it wrong, Nisien. Wrong, wrong, wrong.'

She knew exactly which buttons to press; this was the boy who couldn't tolerate getting anything wrong.

'You've been working on a real amphibical then?' I said. 'I didn't realise your project was so advanced.'

'We've been in the rotten service room all afternoon,' said Robeen. 'They've given him some useless decommissioned heap of rust to fiddle about with.'

'*Fiddle about with*?' His face turned very red. 'No wonder you were acting so not-bothered, yawning and shaking your light about all over the place. I couldn't concentrate. I couldn't see what I was doing. Now I'll have to trace those tiny wires back to their source and that could take days. I bet you did it on purpose, Robeen, you're a very jealous girl. You know how absolutely *vital* my project is to this entire mission.'

'No, it's not.'

'Well, all the missions to come then! You just can't stand it that it's my project that's impressed everyone.'

'Oh yes, your project. YOUR project.' Robeen seemed close to tears.

I wanted to turn round and leave them to it, but I didn't. I felt like consoling Robeen and maybe asking her if there wasn't some project of her own she would rather do? Surely there was still time to submit an idea? Then I remembered what had happened the last time I'd tried being kind to Robeen.

As they continued their argument, it crossed my mind, not for the first time, how lucky Halley and I were to be spending all our time at the Museum. Nisien was incredibly bright and if he managed to make it work, his new amphibical device would be of tremendous benefit to future missions. I began to feel a little afraid: what were Halley and I actually *doing* at the Museum? Writing poems, drawing pictures? Nothing remotely scientific, that's for sure. When Doc Carter came to realise how insignificant they were, would we find ourselves roped into Nisien's project instead? I'd had an almighty fright at the Museum that morning but it was still where I wanted to be. If I could spend the rest of my time on Earth with Halley at the Museum and in the canals, that was all right by me. There were plenty of treasures still to be uncovered there, plenty of secrets to be revealed and dreams dreamed.

'And you!' Robeen rounded on me, trying to keep control of her tears. 'Now I suppose you're going to

report us to your precious Doc Carter. You'll enjoy that, won't you?'

'Of course not.' I walked out of the room. Robeen really had no idea. She was obnoxious and Halley was right: I was some kind of idiot to feel a particle of sympathy for her.



12

The days went by. For Halley and me they followed the same pattern: exploring the network of canals followed by uninterrupted time at the Museum. No one at Base, not even Doc Carter, asked any questions about what we were doing, so we carried on just as we liked. Halley began studying the real, indigenous dragonflies, the ones that had evolved on Earth over millions of years. There were plenty of specimens at the Museum. He started comparing them with the dragomansk, or at least with the drawings of the creature on the gallery walls upstairs. One difference he noted was the flexible neck of the dragomansk, which meant it could turn its monstrous head from side to side. The head of the dragonfly was fused to the rest of its body. Halley's borderline obsession with the species didn't lessen but it seemed harmless enough. Halley was like a dragonfly himself, flitting from interest to interest, and in a few weeks time, something else would have captured him.

I didn't tell him about the footsteps for several days. They came and they went, always on the other side of the

wall. The same icy fear spread through me when I heard them but I was also bloody-mindedly determined that mere footsteps weren't going to scare me away from my beloved fossils. Before long, I could shut my eyes and wait calmly until they'd finished, then return to my work. They always stopped.

My poem was progressing and I decided that photographs of my various finds would illustrate it well. I started wondering what might happen to my poems when we got home. To see them displayed on the walls of the school or the corridor walkways of Albany Court didn't seem too ambitious.

Whole cities of coral, spires and domes
Temples of honeycomb and chain
Favosites, halycites…

I loved the scientific names of the extinct corals, but would they be off-putting to readers who weren't familiar with them? I was so wrapped up in this problem one afternoon, I only half-registered that the footsteps had begun. I was still wrestling with it when:

BANG.

Startled, I looked up. The door in the corner seemed different although I couldn't think why. I peered into the gloom.

The ancient door was closing, very slowly. Then:

BANG.

The door flew open, slamming against the wall. It closed slowly again.

BANG.

I was on my feet now. The door was heavy and it must be taking some force to throw it open so violently. This wasn't the wind blowing through the building. Someone was doing this on purpose.

'Halley!' I shouted. There was no way he could hear me if he was upstairs.

BANG BANG BANG BANG.

Was someone trying to scare me? I covered my mouth, my hands cold and clammy.

Quick heavy footsteps walked over from the corner of the room. I could hear them on the marble tiled floor. I held up my tilelight with one trembling hand, but no shaking or confusion could explain what it showed: that no one was there.

The footsteps stopped just short of me and then, horribly, I could feel the definite presence of someone or something breathing into my face. I could hear and feel sharp, angry breaths.

I bolted for the exit but that door slammed in my face. I grasped the ancient handle with slippery hands and pushed and pulled as hard as I could, forgetting which way it should open. It would not budge. Behind me, the footsteps were approaching stealthily.

Gasping for breath, I ran in a circle around the thing I couldn't see. I was in one of my nightmares. Whatever it was followed me. The footsteps wished me harm, I knew they did, but what could they do to me if they caught me? I wasn't waiting around to find out.

I saw that the door in the corner was open again so I ran for the next room. The footsteps grew louder, echoing all around me, echoing in my head. Through the empty room I ran, into another and another, and still the steps came. They weren't panicking. They knew they were going to get me in the end. I didn't know where I was or where I was going and the more I panicked, the more I stumbled over the jumble of ancient exhibits heaped up like the mounds of rubble outside. My tilelight shook so much it was hard to see. Just like my dream, the terrible footsteps seemed to gain on me but never actually catch me up, as though they were driving me somewhere. I knew that they were very, very angry. I didn't know why but I was sure they wanted to kill me.

Round and round I tumbled, through the maze of rooms. Little by little, I realised that the pounding was now just the blood pulsing in my ears. Even then, I carried on stumbling, cutting and bruising myself on sharp objects in the dark. Finally, I had to stop. I was so out of breath. I emerged into the hall, in tears.

'Halley!' I screamed and this time he heard.

'So all the time we've been here, you've been hearing these footsteps?'

'They didn't seem threatening really, not until today,' I snivelled.

Halley didn't look straight at me but I could see he was annoyed.

'You've been really brave,' he said. 'But I don't think it's such a good idea us being here anymore.'

'There has to be some rational explanation.' I had to cling onto that.

He shook his head. 'Yeah well, ask Doc Carter.'

'What do you mean?'

'Just ask him, will you?'

I stared at him. 'Halley, there's something you're not telling me.'

'Come on, let's go before anything worse happens.'

'Halley!'

On our journey back to Base, I kept on asking him what he knew that I didn't. It was starting to drive me crazy: what exactly *was* the big secret? How did he know Doc Carter had something to tell me? Halley backtracked, denying he knew anything, but drove in that infuriated, dangerous way of his that told me something was very wrong. The feeling that something was being kept from me brought back my other worries: what was I doing on this mission? Why me, not Teyra?

We drove along the canals. At the most easterly exit, the alert sounded on out tiles and we spotted a lone dragomansk in the sky above the lake. Halley's hand hovered in the steering zone, bringing us to a halt, then he clawed at the air and we reversed until we were three trees back from the entrance.

'What right have you to be annoyed? It's me that should be annoyed. You're keeping something from me, I know you are.' I was absolutely furious, but Halley wasn't in the mood to talk. Replacing his hood and visor, he retracted the roof and stepped out of the vehicle into the water. He pulled his sauroter from its holster.

'I've told you everything I can. They keep secrets from us.' He bared his teeth in a grimace. 'Secrets about the dragomansk, Bree. About other things too. Well, I've had enough. I'm sick of it.' He primed his weapon like some kind of hero and waded off towards the entrance.

'Halley, get back here now. Where do you think you're going?'

I stood up inside the vehicle and watched him pass one tree, then another and finally, unbelievably, walk beyond the last tree, right out into the open. My jaw dropped. He waved his arms above his head, as though beckoning an aircraft to land. For a moment, the dragomansk disappeared from my view, but in seconds it reappeared, heading directly for the canal. It had seen him. Halley began wading back inside. The dragomansk fired

streams of brown acid which turned the water to clouds of steam. Halley zigzagged, evading the dragomansk's fire, but as soon as he was beneath the first tree, he turned and I could see the idiot taking photos with his tile. He seemed oblivious to my screams.

The dragomansk was stuck at the entrance of the canal. The span of its blurry wings was too wide to let it fly in. It hovered in frustration, pretty much as we had seen one do that first day in the wood. Aggravated, it kept firing at Halley, shooting into the water, churning it into a bubbling cauldron. The enclosed space filled with an acrid smell and those great menacing eyes through the clouds and spray looked like some infernal steam-driven machine. The amphibical was rocked so much by the waves I had to sit down. Coming to my senses, I closed the roof of the vehicle.

Halley turned to face me and grinned, giving me a thumbs up. 'You take a picture.' He pointed at me and signalled.

'You idiot,' I bellowed, not that he could hear me. I was furious with his stupid grinning face. 'You're going to get yourself killed. Get away from there.'

The dragomansk's head turned and I saw its domey eye in profile for the first time. Fear gripped my insides as I realised what it was doing. The humming of its wings changed, becoming deeper and more rasping. It had succeeded in entering the tunnel. I was certain that the

creature had managed to get his left pair of wings past the first tree trunk and was beginning to sidle in.

'Look!' I pointed. Halley spun to face the dragomansk. I shrunk in terror when I saw him backing slowly away from it. He stumbled and I feared he would fall backwards into the water. If he did, the beast would be on top of him in seconds. It was negotiating its wings around the tree to its right, as though it were elbowing its way through an assault course. With horror I saw that its wings were sawing partway into the tree, shaving off pieces of bark which flew up into the air.

Halley's arms were trembling as he raised his sauroter and when he fired his aim was hopelessly wide. With the churning water, the steam and the vibrating wings ripping through the bark and vegetation, it was difficult to be sure how near the dragomansk was. Faced with this terrifying blur, this advancing death machine, Halley finally began running back to me. His splashing looked comical and pathetic but the fear I could see through his visor was very real.

A sudden flash and the dragomansk collapsed, one of its wings shattering against a tree like a broken stained-glass window. Halley missed it because he was still desperately trying to reach our amphibical. Shifting across to the driving seat, I powered up the engine, retracting the roof to let him clamber in. But we didn't drive off immediately. We were spellbound by the creature's tangled

remains, its floating legs and tattered wings, appearing little by little as the steam dispersed. Its punctured head was half-submerged and from it bloomed a filthy mixture of blood and brains and acid. The death shot certainly hadn't come from Halley's weapon.

The filth was churned up again as a large silver amphibical drove straight at us at high speed, cutting through the wreckage and pulling up level with Halley's side of our vehicle. Their roof was open. Cole Huxtable was driving and Doc Carter, sitting grimly in the passenger seat, had obviously just discharged his sauroter. I'd hardly ever seen him without his trademark smile and for a moment I didn't recognise him. He pointed up the canal and mouthed the word 'follow' very clearly. I had no choice but to swing our own craft around and do as he said.

Halley entered the room with a thunderous look on his face. 'You next,' he said. Someone had left a pair of boots lying on the floor and as he passed, he kicked one across the room, just missing Nisien by the window.

'Hey,' said Nisien.

Halley grabbed my arm. He turned so the other two wouldn't hear him. 'Just ask Doc Carter about those footsteps,' he said and almost as an afterthought, 'but don't tell him I said to, all right?'

'Course not.' From the corner of my eye I could see Robeen looking at us. I was positive she hadn't made a

move in her game of Kyrachess for at least twenty minutes. Her curiosity must be on fire. Leaning closer towards Halley I whispered, 'I'd prefer it if you told me, though.'

Halley let go of me, sighed and shook his head.

I had a tense walk up to Doc Carter's room. I sensed I was about to find something out and I wasn't going to like it.

Above all else, I was scared that Halley knew something I didn't. Yes, he could be crazy and unpredictable but I'd always thought of him as my one real friend on the mission. Could he really have been keeping anything from me, anything *big*?

Doc Carter wasn't smiling as I entered his room. I saw the graphs flickering and updating themselves continually on the holoscreen behind his head. My hand crept up to the back of my head and the celephet which I had grown almost to hate. Somehow, I knew that his invention was at the bottom of the nasty surprise I felt sure was coming. Now I was there, I didn't want to know.

'I'm very disappointed, Bree,' he said. 'And very, very annoyed.'

I couldn't think what to say.

Doc Carter lowered his eyes to the floor then looked at me again. 'Though more so with Halley than with you. What the hell did you think you were doing, facing down

a dragomansk like that? Why didn't you call for help? You could have been killed, the pair of you.'

'It all happened so quickly. Halley…' But I stopped. I wasn't going to put the blame solely on Halley, even if it had been his fault really. If there were any punishments, I wanted to be treated the same as everyone else for once, even if it meant – what? Being confined to Base?

'Halley was contravening safety rule number one in the idiot's guide to not getting yourself killed. At least you stayed in the vehicle.'

I swallowed.

'It was pure chance Cole and I happened to be nearby. Have you any idea how dangerous these creatures are? Haven't we managed to impress that on you? You sat through all the lectures, Bree, weren't you listening?'

Now it was my turn to stare at the floor.

'You could have died this morning, quite easily. This isn't some game we're playing here. We're doing our absolute utmost to find a way to rid the planet of these creatures precisely because they are so dangerous. Until we do, we can't make any further plans for Earth.'

'Like stealing its resources?'

I immediately wished I'd kept my mouth shut. I'd meant stripping, not stealing anyway; I hadn't meant it to come out like that. I caught a look of absolute fury on Doc Carter's face before he jumped from his seat and started pacing the room. Quick, angry footsteps again, I thought.

'I'll pretend I didn't hear that,' he said eventually. 'Such disloyal thoughts have no place on this mission. I hope you remember our Great Quest and Purpose, Bree?'

'I'm sorry,' I said.

His voice became calmer. 'You're doing your bit by wearing your celephet. It's advancing our knowledge for future missions. But Halley, no. He will be punished for this morning's escapade – no more trips out in the class ones for the time being.'

Doc Carter leaned against the wall with his arms folded.

'But that means no more visits to the Museum,' I said.

He gave an annoyed smiley snort but then visibly reined in whatever he was feeling. His reaction was puzzling.

'You really love it there, don't you? I'm glad. Sounds great, doesn't it, a trip to Earth? But it's hard work most of the time and let's face it, there's not much to see here once you've taken in the endless rubble and marshland. You've discovered the best bits of Cardiff: the canals and the buildings round the Museum. Next month some of us meet up with colleagues in France but I'm not sure if there'll be room for you lot. So, this is it. This is as good as it gets.'

'You've known about us visiting the canals?'

'I guessed. The canals have their own fascinating little ecosystem and plenty of students have admired them over

the years and have learnt a lot, too. They've always been safe areas till now, as long as you observe normal safety precautions. The last thing we need is our friend Halley actually encouraging the dragomansk to find their way in there. They have intelligence, you know: if one of them learns how to get in, it returns and tells the others in that big dance of theirs. Before we know it, that whole area will be destroyed too. It'll end up the same as everywhere else. You wouldn't want that, would you?'

'No, of course not. I'm so sorry. What happened this morning was stupid.'

He was right, of course. Halley's moment of madness could have endangered the precious ecosystem in the canals. The thought of not being allowed near the canals or even the Museum again was unbearable.

'Halley's a liability,' Doc Carter went on. 'I'm going to swap him and Robeen around. She'll go with you to the Museum tomorrow and he can stay and help Nisien.'

My immediate reaction was relief but then again – Robeen? How were she and I going to manage to spend any time in one another's company? No wonder Halley had looked so angry; staying behind to assist Nisien was going to be pure torture for him.

'We don't exactly get on. Me and Robeen,' I said.

'Yes, I do recall what happened the other day.' He nodded. 'But you'll just have to "get on", won't you? If you want to return to the Museum. I'm seeing Robeen next

and I'll explain the situation to her. Between you and me, I don't think she's relished Nisien's project and I'm guessing she'll jump at the chance of going with you.'

'I suppose so…'

'If you want to continue your project at the Museum, you'll have to put up with Robeen and that's it.' He arched his eyebrows and looked at me pointedly, but his tile began bleeping. He flew to the holoscreen to correct the build-up of overlapping data, cursing mildly under his breath. 'So, unless there was anything else?' he said over his shoulder.

'Yes,' I said. 'There is actually.'

'Go on.'

I took a few breaths. This was it, the moment I'd been dreading. 'I've been hearing footsteps,' I began.

'Footsteps?' His smile wavered a little.

'At the Museum. Today someone even chased after me, at least the footsteps did. There was nobody really there. But it felt like there was. I could feel breathing in my face.'

'Are you joking?'

'No.'

'It felt like someone was there with you? Not Halley, you're sure?'

'Yes. I mean no. No, it definitely wasn't Halley.'

'Real footsteps?'

'Yes!'

'But this is incredible,' Doc Carter looked genuinely

taken aback. He clapped one hand to his head and continued speaking, largely to himself. 'If we've summoned up a physical manifestation, I can hardly believe it. These results are better than we could have imagined.'

'Please, whatever it was wanted to harm me, I know it. I was terrified. Doc Carter, I have to know something. Please listen. What's the big secret?'

He rounded on me. 'Secret? Who said anything about a secret?'

'No one but…' I was cursing myself for putting this the wrong way, too. Why couldn't I ever get it right?

'There's no secret,' he said. 'Or…' He turned to the holoscreen a moment and looked as though he were trying to figure something out. Minutes passed. 'All right,' he said, changing track. 'I knew this day might come but I wasn't sure when. Sit down, Bree.'

'I don't want to sit down.'

'Please.' He reached out with his foot and dragged over a stool, gesturing for me to sit. He was less sure of himself now, I could feel it.

The room had one small window. Raindrops began trickling down the glass. On Mars, the walls of Keppoch Court always called up perfect beautiful images of rain because they sensed I enjoyed it, but the real, grey rain on Earth seemed determined to fall at times of stress. I was beginning to hate the real rain.

'Right,' he said. 'Bree, what else have you seen? Or heard?'

I described how the footsteps chased me. He listened, amazed.

'How do you feel about going back to the Museum?'

'I want to,' I said. 'Of course I *want* to. I'm getting on well with my poems and well, most of the time the footsteps haven't been bothering me. They do sound angry though. Whatever it is, *is* angry. Furious. I don't want to be chased again. I can't think of any logical explanation for why it's happening, but there must be one.'

'They can't hurt you,' he broke in. He took my hand and I flinched, wanting desperately to pull away. His hand was sweaty and it trembled slightly. 'The footsteps, they can't hurt you. Believe me, Bree, I'd never put you in a position where you'd be in any kind of danger.'

'Please just tell me what this is about,' I said in a small voice.

'All right.'

He let go of my hand and tapped his tile, then pointed at the large multi-layered graph which appeared on the holoscreen, replacing the four smaller ones.

'This is one reading sent from your celephet this morning while you were at the Museum. This data can be read as an image. Would you like to see what came in this morning?'

Without waiting for an answer he tapped on his tile

and the screen was covered by lines working their way down from the top of the screen, forming themselves into an image. When it was halfway down I felt the blood freeze in my veins. The image was unmistakable. It was an odd face, an Earth human face, screaming a silent yet horrifying scream, its eyes screwed shut, practically invisible. It looked like one of the faces drawn on the gallery wall: a face in pain.

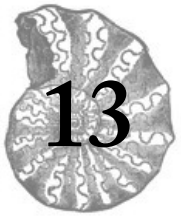
Doc Carter turned to me. His eyes sparkled with triumph. 'This is the best data we've received yet,' he said. 'It's better than I imagined we could get and you've made it possible, Bree. Without you, I wouldn't be achieving this.'

'But what is it?' I cried, standing and looking from his face to the face on the screen and back again. I shook away his hand as it reached for me. Recognising my distress, he quickly reconfigured the data to graph form.

'Are you all right?' He tried to put his hand on my shoulder but I shook that away too.

'What was it?' I pointed at the screen. 'That? You mean that picture came from this?' I pointed at the celephet.

'All right, all right, calm down and sit down.' I only complied when I saw he wasn't going to tell me any more until I had.



13

'Your celephet,' Doc Carter began again, speaking slowly, his fingertips tapping together. We sat facing one another. 'Your celephet has made contact with the energy of a former inhabitant of Earth. Not with the person him or herself, that's why there's no need to be scared or upset. Just the energy of this unknown person who died a very long time ago. I'll try and put it simply, Bree: Earth humans discovered a way of storing a part of their consciousness and after their deaths, this finite amount of consciousness could be awakened. For a while, anyway.'

'Storing their consciousness? Where?'

'Anywhere that had some emotional resonance for that person. Or in an object. We can't know exactly where in this case. The Museum certainly has an emotional resonance for you, hasn't it? Others must have felt the same way. This person did, whoever he or she was.'

I hadn't the faintest idea what he was talking about but I tried to hang on as the explanation unrolled, bit by bit.

'We guessed there might be an energy stored somewhere in the building, lying dormant. We picked up on certain irregular patterns in the atmosphere, if you like. We guessed that this energy could have useful information for us. You see the Museum – the *National Museum of Wales* as it was then – was the base of a resistance movement in the War for Earth. The scientists in this movement developed the dragomansk to its ultimate, deadliest form, the one we're still battling against. Oh, both sides had been tinkering with its genetic make-up for years, but its final code, the one that encrypts itself upon death, was developed at the Museum. Of course, they left us no record of the true code. The resistance took that secret to their graves. Unless we know the code, we'll never be able to destroy them and the dragomansk are the most serious barrier to our Great Quest and Purpose.'

He stopped, giving me time to digest what I'd heard.

'Go on,' I said.

'Well, the celephet is my invention, as you know. It probes the atmosphere for these hidden energies. It's been successful in latching on to this one, but that's just the start. Now it can ask questions of the consciousness and it will keep on asking and asking, it won't give up until it gets an answer.'

'What's the question?' But I already knew.

'It's asking for the dragomansk's genetic code, of course.'

'Of course.'

Doc Carter leaned forward and skewered me with his startlingly blue eyes. 'For a long time I wasn't sure if the prototype for my invention would be ready for this mission but suddenly there was a breakthrough and, well, I persuaded the interDome Survey Panel to let me try it out. Never in my wildest dreams did I envisage it being so successful so quickly. I thought this was simply the beginning of a long, long process of trial and error, but these results are sensational. What you've just told me has completely blown me away. Footsteps! A real physical manifestation! You are a big part of this, Bree. We're a great team.'

'But you lied to me. Why couldn't you have told me the truth about the celephet from the beginning, instead of spinning lies about oxygen absorption and all the rest of it? Was it all lies?'

'With the best of motives.'

'But it's my head it's attached to! I had a right to know even if you didn't tell the others.'

Doc Carter waved his fingers, asking me to calm down. 'Please understand, Bree. I couldn't tell you. You're an imaginative girl and you might have simply imagined a presence if I'd told you. You would have been on the lookout for it, consciously and subconsciously. This had to be a clinical trial. And I thought you might have been too scared to go through with it. I didn't know you then,

Bree. I didn't realise what a brave and capable person you are. Now it's obvious you can cope with it, so there's no reason why you can't be told the truth. And I had no idea you were going to get any physical manifestations. Those footsteps, I mean. I didn't know anything quite that scary was going to happen. Not that there's any danger.'

I didn't like the way he kept denying the danger. How did he *know?* 'So you've no idea whose energy it is?'

'No. We're just hoping that it is from the particular era we're interested in; the war era, the end of the human occupation of Earth. The science that produced this phenomenon seems to date from that period. It's not something that's been experimented with before or since. Still, the celephet's getting a strong reaction so I think we can be hopeful. We'll get our answer soon, I'm sure.'

'So all you want me to do is…'

'What you've been doing, Bree. Carry on as normal. All you need do is be there and the celephet will do the rest. You're a channel, that's all, it won't affect you. And it's a bonus that you actually want to go to the Museum to write your poems. Which, I am sure, are absolutely wonderful, I can't wait to see them.' He beamed.

'How will you know when you have the answer?' I nodded at the screen.

'Because when all the data's been analysed, I'll be able to animate the face you just saw and it will tell us where the records are hidden, if it knows. The celephet is *very*

insistent. All this is going to take time. It's just me working on it, you see. This is what you might call a "maverick" project and I have colleagues back at the SSO who doubt I'll get very far with it, although I managed to persuade others. I had to really fight to get myself and my invention on to this mission. But we're going to show them, aren't we, Bree?'

His tone was low now, conspiratorial. I was beginning to appreciate why he hadn't told me the truth. He couldn't jeopardise a clinical trial, could he? It seemed to make sense.

'You might not realise it but you, Bree Aurora, are the most valuable person on this mission. You are our biggest chance of cracking this problem so we can move on with our Great Quest and Purpose. I'm being serious.'

I laughed, nervously. 'Me?'

'Yes, you.'

'You told us all the same lie, I suppose,' I said, thinking aloud, trying to make everything all right again. 'But it just so happened my celephet was the one that worked. Doc Carter, can I ask you something?'

'Ask away.'

'Why did I get chosen for this mission? My grades at school weren't that brilliant, not like the others. Was it because I'm good at Empathy? I mean, that was the only reason I could think of myself.'

'You've got it,' he nodded emphatically. 'Your empathetic talents. That's why you got chosen, yes.'

I couldn't help myself. 'And Halley doesn't know any of this, does he?'

'What's he said?' The doctor's eyes narrowed a fraction.

'Nothing,' I said. 'Nothing.' It was best not to go there. Perhaps Halley knew and perhaps he didn't. I guessed Doc Carter probably had told him the bare minimum if, as seemed likely, he'd ordered Halley to chaperone me, to look after me while I was at the Museum. Halley's odd behaviour made sense now. He'd felt guilty at having to keep secrets from me. A lot was beginning to fall into place but that wasn't a bad feeling and I didn't want to blame Halley.

'So those nightmares—?'

'Yes.' He nodded. 'The nightmares were just the celephet tuning in, if you like, preparing its host. You, I mean. The celephet has to be attached to a human to work and, well, not any old human either. You've done well, Bree. I'm really proud of you.'

All these compliments. It did seem like some kind of vindication. Never again would I be bothered by Robeen's snide remarks, now I knew how much I deserved my place on board the mission. Yet there was something still bothering me.

'That face,' I said, pointing at the screen although the face wasn't there now.

'Brilliant.' Doc Carter shook his head in disbelief. 'Just brilliant.'

'But it looked as though it was in such *pain.*'

'It's just an energy, Bree. It's merely the residue of a person who was alive hundreds of years ago. It can't feel pain, not as we know pain.'

'You're sure?'

'Sure I'm sure. Don't worry about it.'

I nodded. I wanted desperately to believe what he was saying because after all the weeks and months of worry it was such a relief to be absolutely certain why I was on the mission, to know beyond all doubt that I deserved my place.

'I'd sooner you didn't talk to Halley about this,' he added.

Sensing there was no point in trying to plead Halley's case, I simply nodded.

'And that's what he told you?'

'Yes.'

Halley and I were on the fourth floor in a small, unused room where we knew we wouldn't be disturbed. Even so, we kept our voices low. I'd given Doc Carter my word I wouldn't discuss what he'd told me with anyone else, but I couldn't not share it with Halley.

'How do you feel?' He looked concerned. He seemed to have forgotten his own situation and was thinking about me.

'I don't know,' I said. 'It's hard to take it on board, that

this thing on the back of my head…' When I touched the celephet now it was with a new, grim respect. '…is communicating with a dead person. You should have seen its face. Urgh, I don't want to think about it.' Yet the more I tried to shut it out of my memory, the more I kept seeing the strange face with its tiny screwed up eyes and silently screaming mouth.

'It's pretty freakish, put that way.'

'There's one thing I am glad about.' I returned to the window, where Halley stood looking out at the wasteland and rested my head on his shoulder. It had stopped raining. 'I thought … I don't know what I thought really, but I imagined it was something worse and that you were involved – you know, against me. I'm sorry, Halley. I understand why you couldn't tell me anything. You must have hated that. No wonder you behaved a bit weirdly at times. Weirdly even for you.'

Halley shrugged his other shoulder, not looking at me.

'But I feel better now. At last I know what this has all been about and guess what? I was right in the first place. I was chosen because of my skills in Empathy. Doc Carter told me so. I've been thinking about it and maybe it's helped the celephet work, who knows?'

'Good old Doc Carter,' said Halley. 'Why doesn't he go to the Museum himself instead of dragging the rest of us into it?'

'Don't be like that.' I shook his arm. 'Apparently the

data has to be collected some distance away or there's some kind of feedback and the celephet stops working.'

'Told you quite a lot, didn't he?' Halley sighed.

We watched a huge metamansk flying in a great arc from the north-west. It met up with a smaller formation which had been circling the marsh and it looked as though the two groups were about to crash into each other. Instead they filtered into one with immaculately timed and breathtaking choreography. After swirling around in an ever tightening vortex, off they went again in one massive group, flying in their bewildering up and down and side to side motion, flying into the sweet pink sunset which made me feel a little homesick.

'Are you listening to me?' I said. 'Honestly, I don't blame you for anything. I know why I'm here and it's fine. More than that, I'm relieved. Just be a good boy for a few days and Doc Carter's bound to let us pair up again. I'm sure I can persuade him.'

'If anyone can, you can,' muttered Halley.

Now I knew how vital I was to Doc Carter's plans, I thought I probably could talk him round. He'd told me I was the most vital part of the mission and that lit me up inside. Me, the most valuable member; this is what I'd been waiting to hear my whole life. I shook Halley's arm again, craving his attention.

'The last person I want escorting me is Robeen. I mean, she can say what she likes to me now, I don't give a damn, but

she chills my blood worse than any ghost. That's what these energies were called on Earth once upon a time. Ghosts.'

I caught a flicker of a smile on Halley's lips. Yes, in a few short days we would be back together again. We were a team.

Robeen surprised me, she was acting so pleasantly all of a sudden. If the days she'd spent as Nisien's dogsbody had been as much of a slog as I imagined, a ride out to the Museum with me must have seemed a real treat. She actually *smiled* at me as I started up the amphibical the next day – at least she did that corner of the mouth stretching thing. I returned the smile briefly. It felt good to be in the driving seat; Robeen was coming with me rather than the other way around.

We didn't say much on the journey. We were forced to take cover twice due to dragomansk alerts and as we waited for the coast to clear, the silence hung between us oppressively. I wondered whether to suggest the usual detour via the canals or not. They had been such a very special place for Halley and me. Of course, we wouldn't be able to remove the roof, let alone our hoods and visors, Robeen being such a stickler for the rules, but after the previous day, I didn't fancy taking risks. In the end, my desire to visit the canals won out over loyalty to Halley and I suppose I also liked being the one introducing her to the place.

'Want to see something great?' I asked.

'All right.' She glanced at me, still a little aloof.

When we arrived at the canals, Robeen's jaw dropped. This bright little world was so very different from the bleak rubble-and-marsh landscape she was used to. 'It's so beautiful,' she said. 'I can hardly believe it!' I could see that she meant it.

I took her to all the best places, acting like a tour guide. We went frog spotting and birdwatching. Halley and I had discovered that if we sat very still for a good long time, we could catch sight of the creatures we could hear twittering and calling in the far-off branches. I avoided the exit where Halley had tempted the dragomansk, scared of coming across its twisted remains and having to explain what had happened. There were plenty of other places to go.

'Each root system is like its own little world.' Robeen spoke almost to herself, as though she still wasn't quite willing to acknowledge me properly, even after I'd taken the trouble to show her all the best bits. Maybe she just didn't like to admit that I was the one in charge.

'That's exactly what we've always said, Halley and me.' I wasn't about to let myself be sidelined again. 'We'd better be off, we should be at the Museum by now.' I reversed quickly up the cul-de-sac where we'd spent twenty minutes counting the different kinds of butterflies. We'd got up to eight, possibly nine. From the corner of my eye

I saw the green shadows flit across Robeen's disappointed face. I knew she would have liked to spend more time there.

When we got to the Museum I let her wander around and marvel at the statues in the hall, but then a problem occurred to me. 'Do you know what it is I do here?' I chanced. She was studying the white marble woman who looked so miserable, the one I'd compared to Robeen to make Halley laugh on several occasions.

'No.' She turned to me with such a blank expression that even in the dim light, I knew she was telling the truth. Robeen knew nothing of what was really going on with the celephet, I was certain. The only reason she was there was because Doc Carter didn't want me to be completely alone.

'I write poems through there.' I pointed at the doorway through to the Origins of Earth. 'It's my project. What did you intend doing?' I didn't want her trailing after me and guessed Doc Carter wouldn't want it either. Being in a creative state to write my poems might somehow be assisting the celephet and Robeen's presence would only cramp that creativity. It wasn't just me being nasty.

'Don't worry about me,' she said. I knew I'd offended her. It didn't take much.

'There's plenty to explore,' I said. 'If you liked the canals there's a lot of old natural history exhibits down that end. They're a bit jumbled up. You could even come up with a

project of your own. I'm sure it's not too late. You could write a proposal quickly and hand it in?'

'As if anyone would be remotely interested,' she muttered as she walked away into the gloom, much as Halley had done on that first day. I couldn't help but feel a shade sorry for her. So far, the mission had been a massive let-down for poor, brilliant Robeen. Oh well, we couldn't all be the most valuable member of the mission, could we?

I was at a crucial stage in my poem and I was also determined that whatever happened, however angry the footsteps got, however many doors banged or however many times it ran at me, I would stand my ground and let the celephet do its work. I wasn't going to allow myself to get scared. In the cold, hard light of day there was nothing to be scared of; like Doc Carter said, the energy couldn't hurt me. I felt like a real pioneer, perhaps the first Pioneer School had ever truly produced. I, Bree Aurora, was at the very cutting edge of exploration, a vital facilitator to our Great Quest and Purpose. I felt important.

Try as I might, I couldn't completely shake off my nerves entering the fossil room again. It seemed even darker and even bigger. The ceiling was so high it might not have been there. I steeled myself. No matter what happened, I would carry on with my brilliant poem and let the celephet do the rest; the celephet that was at that very moment firing its question out into the unknown without my feeling a thing.

In a gesture of defiance, I decided to position myself right slap in the centre of the room. On previous days I'd sorted the creamy coloured limestone fossils of crinoids, the floaty, feathery, stalk-like creatures which once dwelt in the shallow seas when Wales was further south on the planet's surface. These fossils fascinated me, because the animals looked so little like animals and because they still appeared to be in motion, waving their thin, fine tentacles to trap food particles and scoop them into their flower-head mouths. I wanted to capture the sensation of what it must have been like to swim amongst them. With our exploration of the real Earth limited by the dragomansk, this was the next best thing. My ambition for my Museum poems was, I suppose, to communicate to people on Mars a little of what Earth had been like, its spectacular diversity, its beautiful messiness.

Some of the limestone slabs were quite large but they were also fairly thin and I was able to carry them with care. I laid them flat, arranging them in a circle like a giant Celtic torc. I'd have been too embarrassed to go to all that trouble if anyone else had been with me but on my own in the dark, I could do pretty much as I liked. Once the fossils were as I wanted them, I sat in the middle and set my tilelight to its dimmest setting. I swept the soft light over the fossils, imagining the light as rippling water, imagining what the crinoids would have been like all those millions of years ago. Transfixed by their beauty, I soon became lost in the picture in my imagination:

Water from the melting poles
Warmed into life by the sun…

I forgot where I was. I was back in the primordial reef, swimming amongst the crinoids long before humans. This is what it's like when you're completely taken over: the words are gifted to you and you *know* when the words are right.

The footsteps began in the next room, pacing this way, pacing that, just on the other side of the wall. This time I made a deliberate effort not to pay too much attention to them, to allow the celephet to do its job. It would get on with its work and I would get on with mine.

When the door banged open, I jumped, but I willed myself to breathe, to calm down and I just about managed to refocus. I told myself, I'm sitting in the middle of a near circle. A circle's a powerful shape. I'm surrounded by the fossils I love. My crinoid circle will protect me.

I felt protected.

…Stirred into life by currents,
Swept into life by the tides…

The footsteps began to circle slowly, outside the protective fossil wall. I kept my eyes on my tile and carried on writing. The steps were so crisp, exactly as though they belonged to a real, physical presence just out of view. Now

they were behind me, now they were walking round one side, and now they were in front again. Yet, if I looked up I knew there would be nothing there. One moment they were circling in a clockwise direction, the next they changed to counter-clockwise. Maybe I was right, maybe the ring of crinoids did offer me some symbolic protection from whoever this energy had once belonged to. It was dead, absolutely dead now. There was nothing to fear, there really was nothing to fear. I kept telling myself this even as the hairs on my arms and the back of my neck started to rise.

The footsteps stopped but I sensed that it hadn't left this time. I could have sworn that a real human presence was standing in front of me and the reason I knew it was because – oh. Oh. I could hear breathing again. It wasn't my imagination and I couldn't pretend it was; I really could hear breathing right there in front of me, somewhere in the dark. Quick, angry breaths. I couldn't concentrate on the words on my tile now, but I wasn't about to look at whoever was standing there, if anyone was. It was my turn to shut my eyes.

The breathing was right in my face. The energy had entered the circle and I wasn't staying still because I'd decided to stay still. I was so absolutely terrified *I could not move.* I squeezed my eyes even more tightly shut. I knew that if I looked up, I *would* see something. Something I'd never forget. The icy cold breath was blowing aggressively into my face. Whoever it was was so close now.

The breath blasted me with a roar.

'GO AWAY!'

I opened my eyes. I wished I hadn't, even though the face I saw hung in the air a mere fraction of a second. It was the same face as the one on Doc Carter's holoscreen, the same agonised expression, but now it was in colour. The strange eyes, such *alien* eyes were open this time, staring out of their sockets, and the horrible open mouth was like bloody gash, the lips pulling back from the teeth. It was there and it was gone, along with the breath and all sense of another presence. It didn't melt away: one moment it was there and the next it wasn't.

A voice began to scream and it took me a little while before I realised that it was me screaming. I had to hold my shaking hand over my mouth to stifle the noise. I couldn't speak, I couldn't get up; I sat trembling violently in the middle of the stone circle that wouldn't protect me from anything. My belief in it had been ridiculous.

Doc Carter had said the energy couldn't harm me but it had: it had broken my sense of safety, probably forever. Now I knew such agony existed, how could I feel another moment's peace again?

I only vaguely remember Robeen picking me up and asking me questions I couldn't answer, then leading me from the room.



'I'm sorry, I can't tell you what's been going on. I'm not allowed to tell anyone,' I whispered hoarsely. An hour after my fright in the fossil room, we were sitting next to the open front door. Robeen sat patiently beside me, looking confused but at the same time sympathetic.

'Is it something to do with your celephet?'

I nodded. I could admit that much.

'Wow. I'm glad mine didn't work after all. Sorry. I mean, I've never seen anyone look so scared. You were petrified. Are you sure you're all right now?'

I nodded but I was so cold that I couldn't stop my teeth from chattering. Outside, the bright sunshine was marred by the masses of flies, a grey mist even on the sunniest days. I wanted to walk outside, fling back my head and soak up some of that sunshine, warm my bones and rid myself of the darkness, but of course, that was impossible.

After a while, she said, 'It's pointless my asking you any more, I suppose?'

I nodded.

'Well, if Doc Carter's putting you through this, I wish he'd stop.'

'Thanks,' I said. 'But it's something I have to do, you don't understand.' It was an odd echo of that fraught conversation we'd had about her cello practice on board the *Byd*, which seemed so long ago now.

Even at that moment I knew I would go back in there and carry on. Why? Because the worst fear of all was my fear of losing this new important sense of myself. I had travelled all those millions of miles to empathise with the unknown and get an answer to the biggest question facing our species, to further our Great Quest and Purpose. I had to succeed or I was nothing and didn't deserve my place on board the mission.

'You're brave, Bree,' said Robeen. 'If I'd had the kind of fright you've just had, I wouldn't want to do it, whatever "it" is.'

I felt suspicious. Was Robeen trying to put me off, jealous of my getting all the attention again? But no, her eyes were full of worry and she wasn't that good an actress; with Robeen what you saw was what you got. The mission hadn't been a success for her, but at least those endless hours she'd spent as Nisien's sidekick seemed to have worn down her big-headedness. She'd changed for the better, it seemed.

'Thank you,' I said.

'What for?'

'Just what you said then. It helps.'

She smiled, sort of. It was still a bit of a non-committal, *Robeenesque* smile but it was genuine. There was a lovely person in there somewhere, all it needed was a bit of encouragement.

'Oh, I've just remembered something.' I hesitated, in case what I was about to say turned out to be stupid. In the end I couldn't not tell her. 'You haven't done much cello practice in a while?'

'The virtual cello's worse than useless.' She frowned. 'I've stopped playing altogether.'

'Well, I don't know if this suggestion's any good, but when I was here with Halley the other day, we found a room which has loads of ancient musical instruments in it and I'm sure I spotted a cello. I know I did because I grabbed it when I fell over. I nearly put my foot through it.'

'Really?' Her eyes lit up.

'It's very old,' I said. 'I don't know if it actually works. We were in a rush so I couldn't stop for much of a look. I don't know a lot about cellos.' Now I'd told her, I was certain there'd be something wrong with it.

'Do you think … would you feel well enough to show me?' she asked.

I couldn't face going through the fossil room quite yet but there was another way to get to the rooms beyond. 'Of course, let's go now.'

Let's go and get this over with, I thought, even though it meant stepping back into the dark.

Robeen was delighted. For the first time I could remember, a huge smile radiated across her face, impossible to miss even in the dark cluttered room. She'd dug the cello from the jumble of other instruments and amazingly, it still had all its strings intact, protected so Robeen assured me, by a special coating still used by cellists on Mars. She thought it was probably still playable. Rummaging around she found a bow then between us, we lugged the instrument through several adjacent rooms and back to the hall.

She sat on the edge of one of the statue plinths and used her tile to tune the strings. They were so old, I still expected them to snap when she turned the pegs but, they didn't. The very first touches of the bow upon the strings, even when they weren't fully in tune, were magical, like a voice from another age. The deep, rich notes echoed around the hall. Robeen was soon utterly absorbed in tuning the instrument. I retreated, sat on the floor and leant against a marble column. She began to play properly and the most beautiful, resonant music swirled around the hall, filling the entire space. It was a rich, glowing kind of sound, so beautiful it took my breath away and I marvelled how at one Robeen seemed with the instrument, as though they were old friends with a deep understanding between them. The magnificent sound of the real old cello

was completely different to the flat and tinny virtual instrument she'd been forced to use on the *Byd* and for the first time I could appreciate her frustration. I sat there listening for a long, long time while Robeen played on and when she stopped, her face was wet with tears, yet she smiled. The music seemed to have unlocked some part of her, the human part.

We stayed in the hall for the rest of the day, her playing and me listening. I was glad there was something to distract me from thinking about what awaited me back in Origins of Earth, but I also felt guilty for not going straight back in there. I decided I would speak to Doc Carter. I just needed some extra reassurance that there was no physical danger.

On the way back to Base Robeen was, if anything, more quiet than usual, but she also seemed perfectly happy and at peace for the first time since I'd known her. I was glad.

I went straight to Doc Carter. He was exactly where I expected to find him, analysing my celephet's data on the holoscreen. He spun around, delighted to see me.

'Today has been the best!' He grabbed me by the arms and for a moment I thought he was going to kiss me.

'I couldn't stay in the room very long,' I said, catching my breath. 'In the room where … the things happen.'

'Doesn't matter,' he said. 'I've actually managed to animate a short clip. We're getting somewhere at last!'

'Doc Carter,' I began.

'No, in a minute, just look…' In his excitement, he'd forgotten how much I'd hated the face the day before. He tapped his tile and before I could offer any kind of protest, up it came again: the face, the one I'd seen that afternoon, hanging in the air right in front of me. This time its lips were moving slightly, forming themselves into an 'o'. Presumably the 'o' in 'Go away'. The animation was on a loop and the awful face kept forming the shape of the letter over and over again. What was this cruelty? Why was I being shown this again?

'Stop it.' I backed away. 'I don't want to see it! I saw it in the Museum. It was there, right in front of me. It said, "Go away." That's what it said. "Go away".'

And if 'Go away' was the answer to the celephet's question, how was that going to help us with our dragomansk problem?

Doc Carter was stunned. He tapped his tile hastily and the face reverted to flickering graphs. 'It appeared to you this time? That face appeared… You're certain you didn't imagine it?'

'Of course not!' I was furious.

Doc Carter sat down heavily on his chair as though the breath had been knocked out of him. He ran his fingers through his hair then tipped his head back and swivelled this way and that with what I took to be joy. 'This is just phenomenal. My celephet, my invention! It's

working better than, well, I could ever have imagined.' He bit his lower lip and closed his eyes.

Wait a moment, I thought. *It's* brilliant? *The celephet* is brilliant? What had happened to *You're brilliant, Bree?*

'I was scared. It appeared this close to me.' I put my hand in front of my face to illustrate just how close. 'Actually, no, I wasn't just scared, I was terrified, nearly out of my wits. If Robeen hadn't been there…'

'You didn't tell her?'

'No! I mean, naturally she wondered why I was screaming my head off but I managed not to tell her.'

'Good.'

'Doc Carter, I need to know I'm not in any danger. It felt like I was. I don't think I'll ever be able to sleep again after seeing that … thing.'

'Oh Bree.' He got up, took me by the arm and guided me to his seat. I eyed the graphs on the holoscreen dubiously as he leaned over me and practically purred like a domestic cat. 'How many times do I have to tell you? You're not in any danger. It's an energy, that's all, a residue in the air. It cannot hurt you. Now, you've been great and I just need you to carry on being great a little while longer. The celephet works so well on you.'

'Because of…'

'Because of your Empathy skills, yes, obviously.'

I just needed to hear him say it again.

'At this rate, in a few days we'll have it: the

dragomansk's genetic code and then these deadly creatures will be history. Think how famous we'll be back home, Bree, think what we'll have achieved.'

'I really was terrified.' I didn't think he was taking my feelings into consideration at all.

'But you're a brave girl,' he said. 'I'm relying on you to keep the bravery up a little longer. Let the celephet do its work. You're not in any danger, I promise. Go back to the Museum with Robeen tomorrow and do exactly what you did today. Exactly the same, right? I'll make sure your poems get plastered all over the walls of Cardiff if that's what you want. People will be reading your fine poems as they walk to work. Just hang on a little longer, Bree, that's all I ask, a little longer!'

What choice did I have? I had to agree. In a way I was like Robeen. She and her newly found cello were made for one another and it seemed as though me and my celephet were the same. Well, it wasn't exactly *my* celephet, of course. It was Doc Carter's invention.

I awoke in the night in the middle of a bad dream. It didn't seem like one of my usual nightmares, although I couldn't remember much about it, but it had left me with a horrible, lingering unease. I couldn't get back to sleep and although I still felt drained by the day's events, I couldn't just lie there listening to Robeen's steady breathing and envying her blissful sleep. I decided to go and wake

Halley. Fair's fair, I thought, he woke me that first night. I was desperate to talk and he was the only one I could talk to, the only one beside Doc Carter.

I crept along the corridor and as I approached, the door of Halley and Nisien's bedroom drew back without a sound. Halley's bed was nearer the door. It was empty, the bedclothes hanging off the edge of the bed as though he'd left in a hurry. If Halley couldn't sleep either, that was perfect: the two of us could while away the hours chatting, maybe go up to the common room and gaze at the moonlit view.

There weren't many places he could have gone so I began searching as quietly as possible with only the blue emergency lights for company. When I stepped into the third-floor corridor, I heard voices and recognised them as Halley and Doc Carter's. They were coming from Doc Carter's room. A light was showing but the door was closed. When I realised the two of them were in an argument I stopped. Doc Carter's voice rose and fell sharply as though he was struggling to restrain himself. For an SSO scientist to be scrapping with a mere student was unheard of, but I guessed what it was about. Halley had miscalculated wildly, thinking he could plead his case to return to the Museum with me while Doc Carter was still furious about the canal incident. I couldn't hear what they were saying from where I stood near the stairwell so I edged my way along the wall until I reached the door,

taking care not to trigger the sensor to open it. They were speaking more softly now and I could only make out the occasional word.

'…impossible, your behaviour … dangerous … no alternative…' said Doc Carter.

'Trust me … contribute … work on the dragomansk project…' Halley countered.

Poor Halley, Doc Carter wasn't budging. I would have more success in a couple of days' time, especially if I promised to keep a close eye on Halley and make sure he didn't get up to any more stupid stunts. Why hadn't Halley left this to me? I was sure I could get the Doc to do anything now. I didn't feel comfortable eavesdropping and was just about to head back to the stairwell when something Halley said stopped me.

'…if I tell Bree the real reason?'

Alert now, I strained to hear more. I didn't have to wait long before the argument escalated again. Before my perfect bubble of happiness burst.

'So you'd tell her, would you?' Doc Carter was enraged and trying in vain to keep a hold of himself. He sounded like a recording of someone shouting with the volume turned halfway down. 'Tell her and jeopardise everything?'

'Yes,' Halley retorted. 'If you don't let me back out there, I'll tell her.'

'That's blackmail,' said Doc Carter.

'Call it what you like.'

'And how do you think she'll take it, Halley? How do you think your *friend* is going to feel when you tell her she was chosen for this mission because she was just plain *stupid*? Because I required a lesser intellect that wouldn't fight the celephet and block it? The weaker the brain the better for this particular job and hers has been perfect. Do you really think she's going to thank you for telling her that?'

I didn't hear Halley's reply. My head was swimming. Here it was, the real truth at last; the awful worm of truth writhing around in the rotten apple of lies that they'd fed me. Hadn't I always known it, deep down? Hadn't I always known how fundamentally stupid I was? I felt faint. Doc Carter carried on and on, grinding home the truth almost as though he knew that I was standing outside and it was giving him some kind of sadistic pleasure.

'At the moment, she's willing to comply. We only need a few more days' data, I'm absolutely sure of that. And it's perfect. She's perfect!' He laughed unpleasantly. He'd obviously got the better of Halley and was enjoying the fact that he'd cut him down to size. 'There's no need to tell her any more than I have. She thinks these amazing "empathy skills" of hers are helping the celephet work. I mean really, she does. It's priceless.'

'You should see the poems she writes, they're really good,' protested Halley.

'I don't care about her damn poems, what have they got to do with it?'

'She's not as stupid as you think.'

'Then why's the celephet working as well as it is, eh? The channels through her mind are like a clear highway. The celephet's working because it's unimpeded by the slightest intellect. A trained monkey might have done just as well.'

I slid down the wall, silent tears slipping down my cheeks.

'You're afraid if I tell her, she won't help you anymore,' said Halley.

'Now look!' Doc Carter switched to sounding angry again. 'Let me remind you why you're on this mission. You're no grade A mega-starred student yourself. It was only the fact that you were willing to befriend Bree and spy on her for me that earned you your place. And the girl just does as she's asked so you've actually had a very easy job. She won't like finding out about that either, will she? More to the point, you ruin my experiment now and I will ruin your life, Halley. Not just here but back at school too. You'd better stop and think about that.'

Something slammed into something, maybe a fist against a table, and I scrambled to my feet and made it round the corner before the door to Carter's room opened and Halley came storming past. He didn't see me but for a split second I saw him in profile. His features were so strained, he didn't look like himself at all. But why would that surprise me? The Halley I knew was gone forever. The Halley I knew had never really existed.

I had to get away but where could I go? I didn't want to risk meeting Halley on the stairs. After checking that Carter wasn't about to emerge from his room, I crossed the corridor and headed for the back stairwell. I made it down to our corridor and was thankful to find it empty.

I dressed quickly, feeling as though I was going to be sick. I didn't know what time it was but outside the moon and stars glittered in the space-black sky. All I knew was that I had to get out of the building and away from everyone before I cracked up completely.

How many rules was I breaking, taking a class one and going off by myself in the middle of the night? Did it matter? Before starting off, I saw that the dim light was still on in the Doc's room on the third floor. He'd forgive me whatever I did, there'd be no punishments for me. He'd act a bit annoyed, then pat me on the head and tell me what a clever girl I was. What had he said? A trained monkey could have done just as well?

I set off, driving fast. When a single dragomansk appeared overhead I didn't stop, I simply ignored it and fortunately it ignored me. I was heading for the only place I could go where I could be alone and let go of the feelings that were boiling inside me. I headed for the canals.

I cruised along until I found the cul-de-sac where Robeen and I had sat that afternoon watching butterflies. I retracted the roof and pulled off my visor and hood. Then I let go, unable to hold on any longer. I could howl

my head off, there was no one to hear besides the canal's watchful, hidden inhabitants. They wouldn't tell.

I didn't know which was worse: knowing the real reason I'd been chosen for the mission or the knowledge that Halley had betrayed me. All that time, his friendship had been nothing but an act. I'd fallen for it so easily. I *was* stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

As my crying subsided into heaving sobs, I became more aware of my surroundings. The canal was very different at night. I turned the amphibical 180 degrees so I was facing the junction, with the giant tree root blockade behind me. The air was cooler than in the daytime and there were fewer insects on the wing but the sound of chirruping bugs echoed loudly in the enclosed space. The moon was bright and a few silvery shards of light broke through the canopy and reflected on the dark wavelets slapping against the roots and walls of the buildings. Every so often a gust of wind swept down the passageway.

My insides feeling completely hollowed out. I climbed shakily from the vehicle and balanced on one of the roots, something I'd never attempted before. I was still crying, not really knowing what I was doing. As I stood there, gripping the tree with my fingertips and with my boots slithering about on the moss, I wished Doc Carter could see me. I could break as many rules as I liked, couldn't I? I jumped into the water and waded out into the middle of the canal. It was hard work but I got a long way, as far

as the main Queen Street junction. I sat on another root and thought about my situation, or tried to.

The only small thing I had on my side was that Carter and Halley didn't know I knew the truth. I'd have to return to Base and get back into bed before anyone realised I was gone. I lifted my hair and ran my finger over the hated celephet which was thoroughly embedded in my skin. When I pressed down hard I could just feel the flimsy edge of it. With my thumbnail, I picked at the bottom. I sat there picking for a good, long time until it felt sore, but to my awful delight, a small area did feel looser. I could snag my thumbnail under it ever so slightly. When I pulled the nail away, it was sticky with blood.

Even as upset as I was, I didn't underestimate the seriousness of what I'd just done. Covering the celephet with my hair, I decided it was time I returned to Base.



15

'You're quiet.'

'Missing you, that's all.'

I made myself look at Halley, straight into his eyes, and I made myself smile. I'd got up early to have breakfast by myself but he'd obviously had the same idea and he looked about as tired as I felt. His face was ashen.

'How's Robeen?' he smirked. 'Charming as ever?'

'She's all right actually,' I said. 'Do you remember the room where we found all those musical instruments? I took Robeen there and we discovered an old cello, so she can practise to her heart's content now. Whenever we're at the Museum – it's too big to fit into a class one. It's really cheered her up. Surprisingly enough we're getting on fine.'

'Oh?' Halley looked thrown.

'I showed her the canals too. They took her breath away. She was really grateful to me for showing her.'

'But you're still missing me? You're still going to ask Doc Carter if we can partner up again?'

'Oh. Yes.'

Halley frowned. 'Well, you're the golden girl. If anyone can change his mind, you can.'

The golden girl. The golden girl who was stupid enough to think you were her friend? I just managed to keep the words balanced on the tip of my tongue.

'Of course,' I said instead. 'But we'd better leave it awhile, I think. He won't have calmed down yet. Not after the dragomansk episode.'

'I guess not.'

A small fly was dying on the table between us, its final act to push itself round and round in a circle on a leg no bigger than an eyelash.

'Why did you do it?' I asked. 'You still haven't told me.'

Halley started ripping his breakfast wrapper up into tiny pieces, a habit I'd previously found endearing. 'I don't know really,' he said. 'I just wanted a better look at it. They wouldn't let us look at the other one, the one in the lab. I don't know, I hate all the secrecy here. I hate having things kept from me.'

You and me both, I thought. I wondered how to fill the silence that followed, watching while the small fly died at last.

'How's Nisien's project coming along?' I asked.

'Super boringly,' said Halley, making balls of torn-up wrapper and flicking them up in the air with his thumbnail. 'My brain's turning to mush.'

'Poor you.'

'You have no idea how obsessed with vehicles he is.'

'Not so different from you and the dragomansk.'

'I guess.' He blew out some air and looked round the empty room. Only nine of us remained at Base now, including us four. Most of the scientists had left to survey different sites around the country.

'At least Nisien's obsession is likely to end up being useful,' I said. 'You seem to admire these monsters, these weapons. Why?'

'All I wanted was to see one up close, that's all. And I want to find out about those pictures on the gallery walls. The dragomansk is like some last surviving dinosaur from a whole world of man-made insect monsters we're not being told about. The dragomansk will soon be gone. We're amongst the last to see them.'

'You think they'll be gone soon?'

'I imagine they'll find a way, yes.'

I'd have loved to have asked him more but was afraid of making him suspicious. Better to play dumb – which was all anyone was expecting of me anyway.

'Halley, you mainly want to see a dragomansk because you're not allowed. If someone says you can't do something, you have to go and prove them wrong. Isn't that the truth?'

'There may be something in it.' He half-smiled but then went on earnestly, 'Look, I can probably stand being with Nisien another couple of days but no longer than

that. Please Bree, go to Doc Carter and beg him if you have to. It's driving me crazy hanging around here all day long. I won't do anything ridiculous again, or dangerous, I promise. Say you'll do this for me, please?'

What a lying, worthless piece of dirt, I thought, but naturally I promised I would and he looked relieved.

I had another go at the celephet while I was waiting for Robeen to get ready. It was painstaking and painful work but I picked at it for as long as I could stand. I'll spare you the details but by the time I'd finished, there was a definite wound which bled more than before. I washed and dried it carefully, scattered on some regulation medicating powder which we carried at all times and covered it with my hair. I knew full well I was going to get into proper trouble for this, but I didn't care. Once I'd managed to get the celephet off, Doc Carter probably wouldn't allow me back to the Museum, but I couldn't help that either; I didn't feel like writing any more poems anyway.

For the first time I started thinking that the dragomansk might not be so bad. It was about the only thing standing in the way of Earth's destruction. Did I really want to hasten that? It was a scary thought, a traitorous thought. I didn't give a damn about that either.

When Robeen and I arrived at the Museum I was in no mood to head straight for the Origins of Earth, so I

sat and listened to her play for a bit before going to explore elsewhere. I found my way down to the first basement level and was amazed by the tunnel-like corridors which opened up before me, the rooms crammed floor to ceiling with the most extraordinary treasures. I guessed exhibits from the upper galleries had been moved to these lower levels to protect them in the war. There was so much down there, maybe a lot of art had been moved to the Museum for safekeeping.

In one room I came across a large, ornate bed covered with piles of heavily framed pictures. The cover of the bed caught my eye, the sumptuous golden tapestry glistening as my tilelight swept over it. I ran my fingers across the cover ever so lightly, only to feel it disintegrate beneath my touch. A few golden fibres clung to my fingertips. I imagined a lot of the treasures would be this way: seemingly well preserved until they were touched, when they simply fell to bits. All gone, forever.

There were suits of armour piled crazily on top of couches and jewelled cabinets. There were rolled-up carpets and yet more statues. There were pictures, pictures everywhere, darkened by age or mould, but here an eye peeped out at me, there a mouth grinned or a hand fluttered. These basement rooms were noticeably colder and damper than the ones at ground level. I could still hear Robeen playing in the distance. The music only made me sad. I felt wretched. I wanted to talk to someone and there

was no one, absolutely no one. Halley, my one friend and ally, was gone and in his place was a stranger I hated.

I removed a stack of bowls from the seat of a finely carved chair and sat down, feeling the material tear beneath my weight. It was probably a thousand years old. My tilelight shone at the floor and cast large, vague shadows onto the ceiling. I didn't feel scared and I didn't care what might turn up to bother me because it couldn't possibly make me feel worse than I already did. If the face started shouting at me again, I was going to shout back. My sobs made the giant shadows dance all around me as though they were laughing and jeering at me. Stupid girl.

Gradually I became aware that there was someone else in the room with me and it felt as though the person – I sensed a single person – was very close. My chair stood on one side of a narrow gangway and opposite was a larger high-backed chair, piled with books.

To my stirring horror, the book on the top started to shuffle forwards on its own ever … so … slowly until it was teetering on the edge, rocking to and fro teasingly. When it fell, its pages fluttered open before it hit the ground with a soft slap. I jumped, but before I could react further, the next book began to work its way forward. It fell and the next one and the next. An unseen hand was pushing the books off the chair one by one. The exaggerated shadow of the chair on the wall rose and fell, rose and fell as the chair began to rock backwards and

forwards and I could hear the soft bump of the wooden feet on the ground. Finally, the rest of the books avalanched onto the floor, thumping one on top of the other until the last one fell and there was silence. The chair tipped back into an upright position.

I could hardly breathe. That same unfamiliar fear of the unknown fastened me to my seat.

I could not make out any shape in the chair and yet I knew someone had sat down on it and was sitting so close that I could have reached out and touched them. Slowly, slowly the air seemed to harden within the chair, that's the only way I can describe it. I felt no threat this time but I did feel scared, too scared to shine my tilelight directly on to the chair, yet absolutely terrified of turning it off. I was almost too scared to blink, in case in that shaved second the dark matter in the chair might suddenly coagulate into my nightmare.

So I sat and it sat. I didn't know if it wanted me to do anything and I certainly wasn't going to ask. Presumably the celephet was asking its question, but how long before the thing in the chair got fed up with that and screamed at me to go away again, or worse? Of course I wouldn't shout back at it as I'd boasted to myself. I couldn't trust a thing Carter said and I only had his word that this energy, or whatever it was, wouldn't hurt me.

I was still half-aware of the far-off cello music drifting sadly and sweetly down the stairs and through the corridors.

I heard something else crackle above my head. A shower of sparks fell from the ceiling, but I couldn't tear my eyes away from the chair. Suddenly and horribly unexpectedly, a harsh, sulphurous yellow light flashed on and off, on and off. Something had brought the old electricity system back to life. I looked up at the ceiling and all around me. The light was incredibly bright, flashing on and off, making everything in the room almost unbearably sharp: the case of stuffed red foxes fighting each other in the snow, the silken tapestry of interwoven branches and leaves which had been torn in two, the model of the moon with its craters, the darkened portrait of a woman and her children.

And the man in the chair.

On and off, on and off. In the light I could see him sitting bolt upright with his eyes closed, like a dead man. On and off, on and off. In the dark I could still see the negative of his shape.

I opened my mouth to scream but the sound stuck in my throat.

On and off, on and off, until the crackling stopped and a last few sparks burned themselves out halfway to the ground. There was silence.

I could sense that he was still there. The impression of him was burned onto my eyeballs, his eyes and mouth dark, sketchy shapes. A young, curly-haired Earth man, slim-faced and shabbily dressed, stubble on his cheeks, with his strange eyes closed and his lips slightly parted.

I jumped. My tile was bleeping with an incoming message.

The man started to melt into the vague impression of hardened air I had seen first of all.

I raised my tile level with my face and scrolled to find the message.

One word. Sender unknown.

BACH

Robeen finished playing, the final notes from her cello disappearing like vapour, and I knew I was alone again.

BACH

What did it mean?

The encounter hadn't been as terrible as the last but it was more unsettling. I went to find Robeen in the hall. I decided to show her the message, even though I couldn't tell her where it had come from. Of course, I couldn't be sure the message had come from the man in the chair, but the whole business was so strange, I was prepared to believe anything.

'Bach,' she said. 'Funny, that's what I was just playing. That music was by Johann Sebastian Bach.' I must have looked confused, but at least she hadn't explained as though she was speaking to an idiot, the way she would have done once. 'Who sent it?'

'I don't know.' I did. The man in the chair.

Robeen just chuckled, a most un-Robeen-like thing to do.

'Coincidence I suppose,' she said. 'Bach's my favourite composer, always has been. It's impossible to do him justice on the virtual cello, no matter how well you play.'

'And you play brilliantly, Robeen,' I said. 'I've always told you that.'

'Bree? What is it? What's wrong?'

I turned away, afraid I was going to cry. 'Please, carry on playing.' I sat at the feet of the unhappy marble girl. 'It's wonderful.'

That intense look on the man's face, the message on my tile, they both told me the same thing: how much he'd loved Robeen's playing. Now we were sort of friends, that shouldn't have mattered, but it was just another reminder of how clever she was and how stupid I was. All I could do was make the man mad and that wasn't me, it was the damn celephet goading him. Robeen's musical skills had calmed the dead man's energy, had soothed it. Her music had even made him appear, a full body appearance for the first time. Well, I wasn't going to reveal that to Doc Carter and make his day.

My hand crept up to the back of my head and I picked at the celephet again. I was more determined than ever to get it off, no matter how painful, no matter what.

On returning to Base that afternoon, I knew that avoiding Doc Carter was going to be impossible. If I had stopped the celephet from working properly already and he hadn't

received any data, he was bound to want to check it. I didn't want to think what would happen then. What was the worst he could do to me?

There was a big surprise in store. Lana Leoni was hurrying out of the front door cradling a large equipment box, looking as busy as ever and apologetic.

'I'm sorry but Doc Carter's had to go away for a couple of days,' she said. 'He asked me to explain to you but I'm just on my way up to the site. He's gone to Mumbai to train SSO scientists there.'

'Mumbai?'

'Yes, I'm really sorry, Bree.' Lana had seen my amazement but hadn't spotted the underlying relief. 'I know you two are still working on this invention of his; I don't know much about it but it's obviously hugely important. He was hoping there'd be no need to go but then he got a call through this morning and he couldn't very well say no, it would have been undiplomatic, you know: "frowned upon". Our organisations have been working together very closely for the last few years. '

'Honestly, it's fine. Any idea when he'll be back?'

'A day or two is all I know. But he told me to tell you to carry on. He said he wouldn't have much time to work on it while he's away, but for you to carry on at the Museum and he's got absolute faith in you. Does that make sense?'

'Perfectly,' I said, trying not to smile.

'Great.' After a few steps she turned and called back. 'He took Halley with him.'

Of course he had. Halley couldn't be trusted to hang about with me at Base in case he decided to tell the truth for once in his life.

'Halley'll be pleased,' said Robeen. 'He'll get to see a lot more of Earth.'

I felt strangely elated. Two days lay ahead without Carter or the hateful, treacherous Halley. My interest in my poem immediately re-kindled. Even if no one on Earth or Mars believed it was any good or gave the remotest damn about it, I would satisfy *myself* by finishing it. I would also get rid of the parasite clinging to the back on my head and the man in the chair and the footsteps in the dark would cease. Once Carter returned, it would all be over: no more days at the Museum and some unimaginable punishment for me, but hey, that was at least two days away and I was going to spend that time doing what I most wanted to do in this world or any other. No one was going to stop me.

The next day, I made straight for Origins of Earth and constructed a larger arrangement of crinoid fossils, ammonites and trilobites on the floor all around me. I was going to let my imagination run riot. Let it swim through tropical seas, swing from the branches of trees, run headlong through fields and descend into crystal-filled

caves. Let it fly over all the wonders of Earth. When Robeen began playing in the hall, the music swelled to a heartbreaking sweetness, permeating the chill darkness. I wasn't surprised when the footsteps began and they didn't sound angry at all. I almost managed to ignore them but not quite. I guessed they belonged to the man in the chair and couldn't help but wonder who he had been. Had he really been one of the scientists who'd developed the dragomansk? Doc Carter was so sure he'd tuned the celephet to that specific period in history but how could he possibly know? Whoever the man in the chair had been, his anger bore out everything I'd been told about the warlike Earth humans.

I was almost past caring. I'd had another go at the celephet that morning and it felt like it was at least half off. When it finally came off, I'd lose any chance of finding out about the dead man. It was Robeen and her music he'd responded to so well, not me, so he could get lost. We weren't about to discover the dragomansk's genetic code either, but if the dragomask were safe, the Earth would stay safe a little longer. Of course, this thought was best kept to myself.

I failed to add anything to my poem. I wrote a few weak, unimaginative lines but I found it impossible to get into the right creative state, even though I tried and tried, even though I knew that this was one of my last chances. The elation I'd felt the day before had vanished and in its

place were the familiar inner voices taunting me, telling me how useless I was, how stupid, how talentless compared to someone like Robeen. Her beautiful playing began to grate on me. The sound of the slow footsteps, treading gently and reverentially on the other side of the wall annoyed the hell out of me. Even a ghost could detect Robeen's talent. All it could find to say to an inadequate idiot like me was, 'Go away'. Well, there was something I could do about it. Gritting my teeth against the pain, I managed to get my finger right underneath the celephet. My finger went under and came out on the other side. I tugged sharply, four times, my finger sticky with blood and sliding about. I could just about tolerate how much it hurt, right up to the fifth tug when the celephet came away, pinging off like a tooth coming out of its socket. I cried out in spite of myself and the footsteps ceased.

They ceased.

I couldn't see where the hateful patch had gone, all I knew was it wasn't attached to me anymore. I felt a little blood trickle down the back of my neck and remembered that I hadn't replenished the medicating powder in the small canister tucked into my belt. I realised how dangerous this was, exposing a very open wound to the unstable Earth air which was full of hazardous, alien microbes. This was yet another situation they'd given us big warnings us about, the risk of infection if you happened to injure yourself. I was sure well-prepared

Robeen would have some medicating powder, but if I asked her for some, she'd want to know why. I hesitated, but I had no option: I would have to ask for the powder.

'What happened?' said Robeen. 'Let me see. Bree, your celephet. It's gone!'

'I know.'

'But it was the only one working! Doc Carter's going to be…'

I gave her a warning look.

'I mean,' she carried on, 'the wound must be really painful.'

I bent over and let her sprinkle the blue powder onto the back of my head.

'There's no need to tell anyone, Robeen. I know I'm going to get into trouble but I can't help that.'

'You mean… You didn't pull it off – not *on purpose*?'

I nearly laughed, she sounded so shocked. I was on the point of denying it but then I thought, no. Even if I couldn't tell everything, I wanted to tell someone *something*. Robeen was the obvious choice.

'Sit down.' We both sat on the bottom of the staircase. 'Do you remember earlier on, at the start of the mission? You didn't think I deserved a place on it?'

She looked uncomfortable. 'I'm sorry I said those things. I didn't mean it, Bree, I was just in a bad mood. I feel better now I can play the cello again and of course, it's you I've got to thank for that.'

'Shut up, Robeen,' I said, startling her. 'You meant every word and you know you did. You were right. I don't deserve to be here with you and Nisien.' I deliberately didn't include Halley. 'I was only chosen because the celephet would work on me and probably wouldn't on you. Doc Carter already knew that, before we started off.'

Robeen's eyes grew round and her mouth hung open. 'You mean…'

'Yes. I don't know if Doc Carter even put proper celephets on the rest of you. They must be vastly expensive. Yours were probably dummies. Mine was the only one he had any confidence in, but he didn't tell me that, not at first. Believe me, I was as sick of Doc Carter's attention as you were. You have no idea how stifled I've been feeling all this time but he only ever valued me because of the celephet. So you were right, you were all right. I don't deserve to be here. Teyra should be here, not me.'

Robeen looked like she didn't know what to say.

'It's all right,' I said, tears filling my eyes. 'I'm all right with it. Now I've finally got the damn thing off. He should have told me what was going on from the very beginning. Well, no, I'm not all right. I'm angry. So angry.'



16

I didn't make any further progress with my poem and by the time we left I was thoroughly depressed. Robeen tried to comfort me, saying that my poems were reason enough for me to be on the mission, but it sounded hollow. She hadn't even read them and I didn't want her to. I didn't want anyone to, ever.

I tortured myself all afternoon and evening. My last chance to finish my poem was slipping away and I so wanted to finish it, even though it was probably total rubbish. Writing poems had always made me feel good. It satisfied some inner need, but I'd confused 'feeling good' with the poetry actually *being* good. For all her friendliness, Robeen made it worse because her playing only reminded me how talented she was and how useless I was. The only way my poem was ever going to get finished was if I could be alone at the Museum and the only time that was possible was nighttime.

I'd sneaked off with a class one before – I knew I could get away with it. It was probably easier now there were

only a few of us left at Base. Security was lax. Everyone on the mission was trusted and too busy to bother checking equipment in or out. That night, once we were all in bed and I'd allowed time for the rest of them to get to sleep, I took my chance.

I was used to making my way around the Museum in the dark with only my tilelight for company so I wasn't worried to be going there at night. I knew coolly and rationally that there wouldn't be anything there to hurt me, if there ever had been. The dead man in the chair was gone for good and the celephet was stowed safely in a drawer in my bedroom at Base. I was hoping that by the time Doc Carter returned, my wound might not look so bad and I might persuade him that the celephet had worked itself loose. Another part of me would have enjoyed looking him squarely in the face and confessing what I'd done and why I'd done it, but I wasn't as brave as all that. My best hope was to try and persuade him that I wasn't to blame, then merge into the background for the rest of the trip and fly back home, safe in the knowledge that they'd never kick anyone out of Pioneer School if they'd been on a mission to Earth. Yes, I was back to that again.

The sky was bright with stars and there was a fine view of the western arm of the galaxy, once known by Earth humans as the Milky Way. The pale stone of the Museum

glowed in the moonlight, as did the other buildings around it, the ones I hadn't explored yet and wasn't likely to now. I found it pitch black inside as expected and turned the beam of my tile up full. The fossils were still spread out all over the floor in Origins of Earth exactly as I'd left them. I sat down in the middle.

To my surprise, the words began flowing freely but suffused with a new sadness. I knew I'd never forget this room. In spite of the horror, it was my own special, private place on an amazing planet which was nearing the end of its existence.

After working on the new section for a bit, I decided to review the start of the poem for the umpteenth time. It was quite different now, beginning with the fossils themselves:

Growing a world
A moment of life, captured like a photograph
Etched upon rock by layers of time

Wasn't 'like a photograph' rather overplaying the point? Instead I tried:

A moment of life captured,
Etched upon rock by layers of time,
Bodies of stone.

'Rock' and 'stone' were too much together. 'Bodies of stone' was the stronger phrase, so I'd keep that. I carried on playing around until I arrived at:

A moment of life, etched by layers of time,
Bodies captured in stone.

I liked it, it sounded right. The poem carried on:

Before life chose what it wanted to be,
Scales could be feathery, feathers could be scaly
Crinoid arms could be both,
Fishing in warm Silurian seas…

I'd had this debate with myself before. Although I was imagining a scene from long ago before humans appeared, how could I write without some human viewpoint? What excited me about the proterozoic era was the potential for life to evolve in so many different directions, and how could you really write about that without the standpoint of knowing what came next in Earth's history? I decided not to let this worry me for the moment; I was enjoying myself too much.

The poem was becoming quite long. I returned to the lines I'd set down previously, about the bodies of these and other extinct creatures forming the Earth's limestone layers:

Depositing their shelly skeletons,
their … their…

I didn't know what came next.

There was a bleep on my tile. I froze. Someone must have realised that I wasn't in my bed and now they were looking for me. Maybe whoever it was had even found the celephet in my bedside table. My insides clenched. Yet as I looked at my hand and the flashing incoming message signal, another thought occurred to me: hadn't I turned off my messaging function that afternoon? I was almost sure … no, I *was* sure. To block any messages from Mumbai I had switched it off after stowing the celephet in my bedside drawer. So who could this message be *from*?

I held my finger above the 'open' button before finally pressing it. The screen widened. One word, just one.

CARAPACES

What? What did that mean? The sender was unknown.

'Carapaces?' I turned the word over in my mind but didn't think I'd ever heard of it before.

A bleep on my tile. I took nearly as long as the last time to open the new message.

A BILLION CALCITE CARAPACES

Another bleep. Another message.

COULD COME NEXT

I held my hand away from myself in horror. If I could

have shaken my tile right off my hand, I think I would have, I wouldn't have been able to help myself. I looked around. There was no one there in the room with me.

How was I supposed to respond to this message? I had to, if I wasn't about to jump to my feet and run away. 'What are carapaces?' I typed tentatively. With the hairs rising on the back of my neck, I sent the message.

Almost instantly, the reply came.

SHELL OF THE TRILOBITE

I nearly fainted. How could this be happening? Someone was playing a joke on me. It had to be Halley. But then I remembered Halley was with Doc Carter in Mumbai.

I waited but there were no more messages. The only other time I'd received a message from 'sender unknown' was in the Museum and that had turned out to be…

The man in the chair.

But why would the man in the chair be sending me messages? The celephet was gone and so was Robeen's cello music, the reason he'd responded so gently the last time. There was no reason for him to be there, no reason at all. If this was someone's idea of a joke, I would find out soon enough, but if it was the man in the chair, why should he want to contact me of all people? I'd have to send a message to 'sender unknown'.

'Who are you?' I sent. Again, immediately, came the reply:

JONAH

'Where are you Jonah?' I sent.

HERE WITH BREE

Seeing my name flash up on my tile made me want to bolt again. But somehow I steadied myself, resolving to sit tight and see it out to the end.

'Why are you contacting me?'

WRITING A POEM

'Yes? And?'

ME TOO

'You write poems, Jonah?' I asked, inanely.

YES

I didn't know what to type next. I felt I wasn't alone in the room any more, the same feeling I was used to by now. Whoever was there knew what I'd written on my tile, which was supposed to be completely private. There was only one way to settle it.

'Are you the man in the chair, Jonah? The man who appeared to me downstairs?'

YES

I was trying not to remember the man as I'd seen him, his pale skin, brows contracted and eyes closed, his lips slightly parted, it was too scary. Yet I'd seen him with my own eyes, so why wouldn't I believe he was sending me these messages now? My tile bleeped with a new message.

QUESTIONS STOPPED

I wondered what this meant, then realised he must be referring to the celephet and its repeated question.

'I stopped it,' I sent.

IT WAS TORTURE

The face on Doc Carter's holoscreen. I had been right: the face had looked as though it was being tortured.

'I'm sorry,' I sent.

NEVER AGAIN PLEASE

'Yes, I promise.' I was reasonably confident that I'd completely disabled the celephet.

I had to get to the heart of this, the reason Jonah was speaking to me. It wasn't the celephet and it wasn't Robeen's music, so what was it?

'Jonah,' I typed. 'Why are you making contact with me? Why are you talking now? Why are you awake?' I didn't know how else to put it. What had made this consciousness, however and wherever it was stored, wake up? I sent the message.

YOU

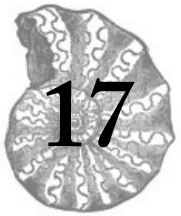
'Me, Jonah? What do you mean?'

YOU, BREE

ONLY YOU

I stared at the message, with hope waking in my heart. Another message came through almost immediately.

LET'S WRITE A POEM



I had to return to Base while it was still dark. I couldn't risk anyone finding out what I'd been up to. I climbed into bed with a couple of hours to go until morning, but it was impossible to sleep, I was too amazed and elated. It had been me all along, after all; I was the reason for Jonah's appearance. It was me, not Robeen and emphatically not the stupid celephet, which had been a complete waste of time. The information it sought could never have been got out of Jonah through torture, he'd assured me of that. How thoroughly nasty and cruel Doc Carter's experiment had been. I was so glad I'd put an end to it. How I'd love to tell him that when he got back from Mumbai and why shouldn't I enjoy the moment when I revealed that I wasn't as stupid and talentless as they all thought?

Why? Because I was certain telling the truth would be dangerous in ways I couldn't begin to imagine. Even if they believed me, was I naive enough to think they'd just leave me and Jonah in peace to carry on writing our poetry in the darkness of the fossil room? No, they'd find some

more horrible way of getting at him through me, using whatever vicious means they deemed necessary. Above all else, I had to protect Jonah.

Tired but happy, I was mulling all this over at breakfast, sitting by myself in the corner where I wouldn't be disturbed, when Lana detoured in my direction. She looked worried. This wasn't good.

'I heard from Doc Carter this morning,' she said. 'He tried calling you but couldn't get through. Perhaps you have "call" switched off on your tile?'

I did, of course, on purpose.

'He's a bit concerned,' she went on. 'Well, more than a bit, actually. Has something gone wrong with your celephet?' She knew the name of it now. 'The information it's been sending him has just stopped.'

'My celephet?' What could I say? Of course Carter would have found out that it wasn't transmitting, even if he wasn't working on the data on the other side of the planet. My hand strayed up to my neck.

'Yes. As soon as he's back he can check for himself but … can I just take a look? I promised to call him back.' She put down her breakfast tray.

'It came off,' I said quickly. 'Please don't look, it's very sore. I just found it lying on the pillow in the middle of the night. I didn't know what to do. I've been very upset about it.' Not having had a chance to rehearse this excuse properly, I hoped it sounded convincing.

'Come on, I'd better see. Promise I'll be gentle.' I had to lift my hair and let her take a look. 'Ow, that does look sore,' she said. 'Did you remember to medicate?'

I nodded.

'Well, I suppose when he gets back, Doc Carter might be able to reattach it.' She looked very perturbed.

'I have it safe in my drawer upstairs.'

Lana lifted her eyebrows. 'He's not going to like it but I'll have to tell him,' she said. 'Or you? You could give him a call.'

I looked up at her pleadingly and shook my head.

'All right. I'm sure there's no need to be scared. I'll explain it to him, but when he gets back, you'll have to tell him exactly what happened, right?'

I felt a little guilty. Judging by her reaction, I guessed Carter might have ordered her to keep an eye on me even though she didn't seem to know much about the experiment. I didn't want to get her in trouble as well.

Before Robeen and I headed out, I pretended I'd forgotten something and went back upstairs. Opening my cabinet drawer, I took out the celephet and stabbed a laying-out pin, one of my archaeological tools, right through it, pulling so the pinprick elongated into a ragged little tear which might look as though the slivery patch had snagged on something. If the celephet had caught on a sharp object and torn, it might have ceased to work and might have 'died' and dropped off on its own. I wanted to

make absolutely sure it couldn't be fixed and looking at it now, I thought I'd probably succeeded. Carter might have had several more up his sleeve, but he had said mine was the prototype. Robeen, Nisien and Halley must all have been fitted with dummies. It was scary sitting there with the celephet in my hand, seeing the state it was in and knowing that I was the one who'd wrecked Carter's experiment. I just hoped I could make him believe my feeble excuse.

A cruise along the canals cleared my head before we arrived at the Museum. Robeen had decided to compare the tonal qualities of ancient musical instruments for her project and intended spending the morning sorting through the other instruments in the room where we'd found the cello. I knew exactly where I wanted to be.

I knelt in the darkness, waiting patiently for the feeling to arrive that someone was there with me.

'Jonah,' I whispered into the dark. 'Jonah, I'm back.'

After a while I switched my attention to the next line of the poem. It worked. When I looked up again, the air was beginning to contract around the shape of Jonah, a human shape darker than the dark surrounding it.

YOU

The word appeared on my tile.

'Yes?' I answered out loud rather than responding on my tile. It just seemed right.

BREE

'Yes.'

DON'T WANT TO SEE ME

What could I say? I didn't, but I didn't want to insult him either. 'I'm sorry. I'm scared,' I said. 'I saw you once before, remember? It gave me such a fright. Can't we just carry on like this?'

WANT TO HEAR ME?

I remembered the other time I'd heard his voice and still didn't know what to say. He wasn't likely to shout this time, but to hear a dead man's voice speaking to me over the centuries? It was hard to get my head around. Yet I was happy to hold millions-of-years-old fossils in my hands and they were old and dead. 'Go on then,' I said.

His voice, when it started, came and went as if he was tuning in; now louder, now quieter, now more distinct and now tangled with static. His voice came from all around me and seemed to be inside my head as well.

'Bree, I'm here, Bree, I'm here,' he said again and again.

'I'm here, Jonah.' I thought it might be important to keep talking. 'You're doing well,' I said. 'Don't give up. I want you to talk to me, I really do. I want to hear your voice.'

Jonah's voice eventually seemed to settle within the fuzzy human shape. 'Thank you, Bree.' He sounded exhausted, as though his presence were a heavy object he had to lift into the world. Despite this, it was a young

man's voice. 'It's been a long time … a long time. It's … a shock.'

'For me too,' I said. 'It's shocking, but I'm glad. I've got shivers running down my spine right now, I'm shivering all over. I can't believe you're actually here speaking to me.'

'I can communicate with you,' the voice said. 'You, no one else.'

I smiled at the shape in the darkness.

'Why me?' I chanced. It felt as though I might be fishing for compliments but having beaten myself up so many times about being so talentless and stupid, I guess I was allowed.

Jonah's voice was starting to fade again. 'I can connect with you. I am … I am…'

'Please stay with me, Jonah. You are a poet, aren't you? Like me?'

'Geologist,' he corrected me. 'But I do write poetry … keep it mainly to myself.'

I could relate to this, I did exactly the same. 'Then I'm privileged. What's it like where you are … or where you've been … where you've just come from?' I hoped that wasn't an unacceptable question.

The voice of Jonah came and went, above my head this time. It sounded like a large bird swooping around the room. A bird trying to find a place to land.

'Sorry, I didn't hear you?' I said. 'Can you say it again?'

'I'm here with you.' The voice was right in front of

me again, sudden, sharp, and it made me jump. He hadn't answered my question and I didn't feel like asking again.

'Thank you for coming,' I said. 'Thank you for being here and helping me. You don't know how much you have helped me.'

'I've been away a long time … a long time…' It was extraordinary how this normal-sounding human voice was coming from a shape almost touching distance away. 'Then again, it might only have been a heartbeat.'

Does he realise he's dead? I wondered. This seemed too sensitive a question to ask until we knew one another better. 'Do you work here, at the Museum?' I decided to stick to the present tense.

'Work? Yes and live here.'

'Live' might square with what Doc Carter had told me about the Museum being the headquarters of the resistance movement, if Jonah had belonged to that. If times were bad, members of the resistance might have ended up living here. The place was built like a fortress after all. If times were bad… I remembered the drawings in the gallery upstairs and shuddered.

I noticed Jonah never took the initiative to speak and decided I'd better keep talking. 'I was thinking of calling our collection of poems "Missing Earth" or something like that. What do you think? When I get home, there's a lot I'm going to miss about this place.'

'There's a lot I miss,' said Jonah. 'Earth was so beautiful … but in these last days…' His voice cracked. '…in these last days…'

'I think I've seen something of what happened in the last days,' I said. 'There are drawings upstairs on the walls. All those enormous insects attacking the people. It looks like some kind of hell.'

'Yes,' Jonah replied. 'The drawings. Malaky's drawings. He spent hours up there … hours and hours and days and days; drawing, drawing… He wouldn't come away. His mind had gone. His mind had gone. That's all he had left.' There was something so chilling about the matter-of-fact way he said it.

'You couldn't go outside?' I said.

'Of course not,' said Jonah. 'You don't remember?'

'I wasn't there.'

'You weren't … there?'

There was a catch in his voice and I was afraid of upsetting him with further questions about these 'last days'. Afraid of upsetting a ghost? If he didn't realise he *was* a ghost, it seemed likely the realisation would come as a blow. Jonah sounded confused, his voice was slow and thoughtful as though he were trying to make sense of the situation. I thought it best to return to the poem. I picked up a section of ammonite, polished to reveal the intricate patterns through the spiral.

'Didn't these become extinct the same time as the

dinosaurs?' I knew the answer but it was a way to get him talking about something else.

'Yes, but it has a relative, the nautilus. It swims in deeper seas, of course, the ammonites lived in shallow, tropical waters.' You could tell from his voice that Jonah was pleased to be talking about his specialist subject. Relieved, too.

'Tell me about them.'

And he did. Jonah rambled on about ammonites and nautili, explaining their structure, their secret coil of chambers which were added to by one chamber each year, their means of jet propulsion through the water and the way they caught food with their grasping tentacles. It was completely fascinating and as he warmed to his subject, his voice grew stronger and more animated.

I learnt so much more about the Earth that day just sitting in that dark room and listening to his voice: how Earth came to be and about the evolution of different species. I think he even forgot I was there for a lot of the time and I was too entranced to ask many questions. On and on he talked about the formation and variety of gemstones in the Earth and the work of volcanoes in shaping the land; of the rise of the continents through different geological eras; describing a variety of exotic animals now extinct; how birds evolved from dinosaurs; how the eye evolved in response to light. For the first time I really took on board the almost unimaginable time scales

involved. When you really thought about it, it made the rate at which decisions were currently being made about the Earth seem reckless.

Listening to Jonah was wonderful. But a slow, uncomfortable feeling was stealing over me. Previous doubts I'd had were beginning to crystallise into something more certain.

When you've been brought up believing in something, I guess you're bound to feel guilty the first time you start to question it. I'd grown up pledging an unquestioning allegiance to our Great Quest and Purpose, to the expansion of human settlement beyond Mars, and so had everyone else I knew. Sitting there in the dark, listening to the amazing story of Earth, something which had been nagging at me all the time I'd been on Earth now hardened into a plain fact.

If our Great Quest and Purpose meant stripping our motherplanet of all its precious and unrecoverable assets, then it was wrong.

There wasn't much writing done that day. Time was growing short before Doc Carter's return, when I'd have to answer for what had happened to the celephet. As Jonah and I said goodbye late that afternoon, as his voice and his shape melted into the darkness, I resolved to return alone that night and make more progress on what I now thought of as *our* poem. I really wanted to get on with it while there was still time.

Unfortunately, I was so exhausted, having barely slept for forty-eight hours, that I fell into a deep and dreamless sleep the moment I laid down my head and was conscious of nothing until morning.

I felt really angry with myself, so when at breakfast I discovered that Doc Carter and Halley wouldn't be returning until the following day, I could have wept with joy. One more uninterrupted day with Jonah – it seemed that this would definitely be my last.

It may seem strange how I could carry on these meetings with Jonah without Robeen getting the slightest bit suspicious, but you don't know Robeen: she was so thoroughly immersed in her ancient instrument research, nothing else mattered, certainly not whatever I was up to. She didn't ask me any more about the celephet, she just left me alone. In every respect, she was the perfect partner. That extra day felt like a gift from the gods.

Outside, it was extremely bright and sunny and some of the golden warmth seemed to seep into the ancient building, even as far as its darkest heart, where Jonah and I sat together. Out amongst the statues in the hall, Robeen played Bach very expertly and beautifully on the variety of stringed instruments she'd found and Jonah loved the music, but I didn't feel threatened by this now. I felt safe in the knowledge that I was the real reason he was there. We spent the whole day on the poem, sparking ideas off each other, batting words back and forth, chatting, even

laughing. I forgot he was, that word again, a ghost. I was really excited with what we had created. It was a wonderful day.

My last good day.

'Tell me again what happened?' Doc Carter nursed his creased forehead with one hand and held the torn celephet in the other. Although clearly angry, he hadn't blown his top the way I'd feared.

'It was exactly as I told you: I was at the Museum, exploring some of the rooms in the dark. My foot caught in a rope, I bent down to free it and I felt something scratch the back of my neck. It may have been a nail sticking out of an old picture frame, there are lots of things like that lying about in those rooms.' Having rehearsed my story so many times, I was afraid that it might sound too polished. I tried my best to re-phrase bits of what I'd said last time and the time before. 'I didn't realise it was damaged but the next morning when I woke up, there it was lying on the pillow. I was so shocked and worried and … and frightened about what you'd say. I'm really disappointed with myself. I'm sorry.'

'Well, I still have all that data to analyse from before I left…' He rested his chin on his knuckles, his eyes still fixed on the celephet. He hadn't looked at me, his trained monkey, once.

'Mmmm,' I nodded. 'That's good.'

I wondered if he was really buying my story.

'Why was your message function turned off, Bree? I was trying to contact you for days.'

'I'm sorry but I always keep "call" turned off when I'm writing.'

'You're not writing poems all the time!' he almost yelled, just reining it in at the last moment. 'You should have contacted me straight away, as soon as this happened.'

'I know. I was worried.'

I really felt like yelling back at him but knew I couldn't. Even after everything that had happened since I'd last seen Carter, even though I was so thrilled I'd made contact with Jonah, I couldn't forget the way the Doctor had lied to me and I resented him for thinking me so stupid, especially now. If only he knew that I was the one who had made contact with a spirit from the past and not just made contact either but was actually communicating with an ancient human. It wasn't his precious invention doing this, it was me.

But he couldn't know. I had to keep it to myself if I was going to protect Jonah.

'That's quite a nasty scar you have but it will heal,' he said. 'In a few weeks we can try again.'

'You think you can mend the celephet?' I faltered. 'It looks pretty wrecked.'

'I brought some replacement components and there are facilities I can use in the lab downstairs. It'll be tricky but

I think I can manage it.'

With sudden exasperation, he slammed his fist on the table. I jumped.

'Damn it, we're this close, this close.' He held up his thumb and forefinger, indicating a tiny gap. 'We have to try again. If the data we've collected already doesn't give us the answer, we must.'

'Doc Carter,' I knew I was risking being shouted at but had to say it anyway, 'I don't know if the celephet was doing any good.'

He goggled at me. The look on his face said it all: how dare this stupid girl doubt my invention?

'What I mean is,' I went on, hastily, swallowing my own temper, 'all the energy ever did was shout and scream at the celephet to go away.'

'That's all you *heard,* Bree,' he snapped. 'The celephet may have picked up more.'

'All right,' I said. 'But all it seemed to do was torture this poor energy.'

'It got results.'

'But through *torture*? Is that really the best way?'

'Bree, anyone would think this energy has feelings. It is just a residual energy in the atmosphere, nothing more. It's something from the distant past that the celephet has been clever enough to tune into. You can't torture energy.'

So: stupid Bree, clever celephet.

'It felt like torture. You weren't there,' I protested.

'Yes, well, when we try the experiment again … and I mean *when* Bree, not *if*, I'll be keeping a much, much closer eye on you. Remember why we're doing this. Remember it's to further our Great Quest and Purpose.'

More like your own quest and purpose, I thought. Your own fame and fortune, Doc Carter. He swung round on his stool and I took it as my signal to leave. Despite his annoyance, I'd expected something far worse and guessed that he'd gone easy on me because he'd obviously need my help with his revolting experiment once the celephet was fixed. I wasn't about to refuse to ever wear it again, that would have been very dangerous. I assumed from what he'd said that it would take weeks to mend the nasty thing and that left me time enough to come up with a plan.

Facing Carter was bad enough but I'd been dreading seeing Halley again. We ran into each other in the corridor, near the window where we'd viewed the moon together the night we first arrived. He greeted me with a huge smile plastered across his face. He was so wrapped up in what he wanted to tell me that he didn't notice how forced my own smile was. He put his arm through mine, keeping in step with me. We carried on up the stairs to the fourth-floor common room.

'You will not believe what I have to tell you,' he began.

'Whatever it is, you look pretty pleased with yourself,' I said. 'How was India?'

'Oh!' He let go of my arm and did a funny little jig of

a dance as though words alone couldn't express his delight. He rounded it off with one word, 'Grrreat!'

He waited until we entered the common room before telling me more. This was the most comfortable room in the building with super-squashy sofas facing a panoramic view of Cardiff, but it was usually empty in the daytime when everyone was busy at work. I'd just wanted a quiet place where I could get my head together following my interview with Doc Carter, but now here I was with Halley.

'Ah, good, we can be alone,' he said, stressing the word 'alone' in comical fashion.

Fantastic, I thought.

He threw himself onto one sofa and I sat on the edge of a different one.

'Go on then,' I said.

'Where shall I begin?' I felt like slapping the sappy grin off his face but sat patiently, waiting for whatever he was itching to say. 'All right. I didn't know I was going until half an hour before, so sorry to start with,' he said. 'I did try calling you in Mumbai but your "call" signal was switched off?'

I shrugged. I didn't see why I should explain this again and to him of all people. He must have thought I was annoyed at him for leaving without saying goodbye.

'Anyway,' he continued, 'if I could have persuaded Doc Carter to take you along, I would have done, but of course he wanted you to stay here, didn't he?'

'I guess so.'

'Bree…' He sat on the edge of his seat, leaning towards me and waving his hands to emphasise what he was saying. 'I have seen such amazing things. I've walked on golden sandy beaches. I've explored tropical forests. I've been out in nature. It's like our canals but much, much more. It's so different from here.'

'What about the dragomansk?'

'Oh, they're there like they're everywhere. I got to see some amazing metamansk, so big they filled the sky. We had to take the usual precautions. The heat is so much worse, we had to wear these special suits with cool air circulating inside or our enzymes would have started breaking down. It's even less habitable than here.' He tried to reach out and take my hand but I flinched and withdrew it. 'Bree, I know you're mad at me for going without you but I couldn't help that. Please let me tell you what I saw there, it was unbelievable.'

My dislike of him was deepening. He was so different from the last time we'd met, when he'd seemed so distraught. Doc Carter had bought him off with this amazing trip and now he'd do anything Carter asked of him, I just knew it. Including spying on me again.

'Fine,' I said. 'I'm waiting.'

'There were shells on the beach, huge conch shells in all colours. They reminded me of your fossils. Best of all was the sea. It was the clearest, purest blue I have ever seen, clear

as a crystal. We actually went into the sea, Bree, can you imagine that? We saw everything there is to see in the water.'

'How? You didn't swim? You couldn't have.'

'In an amphibical!' He laughed. 'The larger ones – the class fours – can go underwater. We were down there for hours. I saw great shoals of fish, all the colours of the rainbow. I saw sharks and eels and seahorses and … I saw a nautilus. A real nautilus, like the ammonites you like at the Museum? I saw a real live one in the sea!'

'I'm surprised Doc Carter had time for all that,' I cut in, stunned by the horrible coincidence. It was almost as though he'd just butted in on one of my and Jonah's conversations.

'Oh, he didn't, he was working. It was just a bit of a treat for me. I went with some of the scientists from their Base who've been surveying the minerals underwater. I was thinking about you, Bree. I was wishing you were there with me the whole time.' He reached across again. I stood up and folded my arms.

'You should count yourself lucky,' I said curtly.

'I do. Bree, if I'd only had the chance I would have taken you with me…'

'I would only have got in the way.'

'No!'

'I have to go.' I turned for the door.

'Wait,' he said. 'Listen. We're only here on Earth for a short time. Any chance we get, we should be out there

looking at it, experiencing it! It's difficult, I know, but we should at least try! You spend all your time in that Museum amongst the old rocks and fossils, but they're dead, Bree, and it's dark in there and depressing. I know Doc Carter wants you there some of the time but you need to get out, into the light. I want to show you what you've been missing.'

I turned back to face him. 'You think you know about the Museum, but you don't. I'm happy there. Look!' I spun around and showed him the back of my neck. 'This happened while you were away. The celephet fell off. I'm not allowed back there until it's repaired and that could take weeks. The Museum's the only place on Earth I want to be, Halley. The only place.'

It wasn't exactly true. What he'd described sounded amazing and part of me longed to see it for myself, but I didn't want to go anywhere in Halley's company ever again. In any case, I really was having the best time of my life at the Museum with Jonah.

'Oh please, listen to yourself!' He threw back his head, exasperated.

'When I should listen to you, I suppose?' I cried. I hadn't intended having a full-blown row with Halley but now I'd started, I couldn't stop, much as I tried keeping my voice down. 'Why can't I make up my own mind? Why can't I decide what I want to do? If I want to sit in the dark and write poems, that's up to me, surely?'

'That really is what you came all the way to Earth to do?'

'Yes, it is!'

'I've never heard anything so stupid.'

'Oh.' My breath was short now. 'Is that what you think of me then? Stupid? Making all these *stupid* decisions for myself? Who the hell do I think I am, making my own choices? How ridiculous. Why don't I just listen to the intelligent ones on board this mission?'

'I didn't say you're stupid. I don't think that. Bree, will you just shut up a minute? Shut up!'

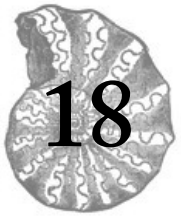
Now we were talking across each other, our voices raised, and I was past the point of caring whether anyone heard us. Still, I wasn't about to reveal to Halley how I'd overheard him and Doc Carter arguing the night before they left, otherwise he'd just scamper back to Carter like a faithful little pet and tell him everything.

'Bree.' He put out his hand but I moved so the sofa was between us. 'What's happened? You and me, we came all the way here dreaming of what we were going to see and do together. I thought we were friends? I thought of you as my best friend.'

I couldn't say anything. I was shaking with anger.

'What's happened?' he asked again. 'This isn't about me going to Mumbai without you, is it? Please tell me what I've done wrong.'

'Nothing.' On the verge of tears, I bolted from the room.



18

Of the four of us, Nisien had really steamed ahead with his project and it was impossible not to be impressed with what he'd achieved so far.

The technology on board the existing vehicles to clear obstructions was old-fashioned and didn't always perform well, as we'd seen on the day we landed. The huge demands upon the small team of mechanics on board a mission meant that this was the kind of issue which never really got properly sorted. The current way to deal with obstructions on the road was to seal, freeze and shatter them and the vehicles were very good at this, but the larger remains still had to be cleared away manually which took time. Nisien's idea was simple but effective. He'd worked out a way of flattening the seal during the freezing process and putting pressure on the midpoint, so that when the seal ruptured, the shattered remains got blasted out on either side, leaving the path in front of the craft relatively clear.

Having replaced the wires he'd disabled accidentally

when Robeen had been helping him, Nisien had already modified the equipment on a decommissioned amphibical, a hulking class four brute at least thirty years old, and although it didn't work perfectly yet – the debris often got blown back at the vehicle itself – he was getting there. When he gave us a demonstration one afternoon on the back road from the workshop to the main service road, the craft froze and dispersed a huge pile of wood that had been dragged up from the marshes. Safe in the amphibical's cabin, we watched as the frozen fragments exploded in great arcs to either side of us, leaving the road fairly clear. It was a near perfect demonstration and we gave Nisien a round of applause. Robeen, to her own surprise and ours, planted a kiss on his cheek. Nisien was delighted and of course, we'd also filmed the momentous event to send back to school.

Our weekly broadcasts to Pioneer School were basically all about Nisien's project. To me, the broadcasts were just a chore to be got through and since learning the truth about why I'd been chosen for the mission, I felt so thoroughly betrayed by Core Panel I couldn't work up any enthusiasm for them. Since I couldn't report what I'd really been up to at the Museum, it was a relief to let Nisien enjoy centre stage. Robeen explained her musical instrument discoveries and once he'd returned from Mumbai, it was impossible to shut Halley up about what he'd seen on his trip. When I absolutely *had* to say

something, I talked about the weather, but they weren't expecting that much of me, so what did it matter?

As I'd told Halley, with the celephet broken, I wasn't spending time at the Museum any more, not legitimately anyway. Until it was mended, Robeen and I were back helping the archaeologists. One afternoon, Lana took Robeen to the Museum in one of the larger amphibicals and they brought a lot of the musical instruments back to Base so Robeen could carry on with her project and, best of all, practise on the real cello.

So the days went by. The new archaeological site was on the headland just below Cardiff, where caves had been carved into the sides of the cliffs. They were believed to have been hideouts in the last days. No one knew exactly how long these 'last days' had lasted but they'd been long enough for humans to tunnel their way right into the cliffs and establish communities. Most of the caves had collapsed long ago but it was still possible to enter one or two which had been declared safe, via the steep steps carved into the cliffsides. There were no human remains in the caves but plenty of artefacts, furniture and cooking utensils. Some of the rooms looked as though the inhabitants had left only minutes before, which was eerie.

You could imagine these caves as the perfect place to hide from giant monstrous insects: the entrances were

small but once you'd made it through the first tunnel, the rooms opened out so you could stand up in them. The structures were re-enforced with metal cages so they were safe from collapse or from the gigantic, tunnelling worms. It seemed strange that humans had ended up living in dwellings like large replicas of a beetle's burrow and when I shared the thought with Pico, he agreed with me. He told me he'd seen the drawings at the Museum and had found them terrible. When I'd first heard we were going to these caves, I'd been afraid that we might find more apocalyptic scenes on the walls, similar to those at the Museum. The drawings we actually found, and there were many, drawn with varying degrees of skill, portrayed a more idyllic world – peaceful landscapes where smiling adults and children worked and played. Perhaps the people who'd drawn them had clung to the hope that the Earth could be like that again someday.

People sometimes commented on how tired I looked, how I couldn't stop yawning, but on the whole they were too busy to take much notice. I was tired. I was still spending hours each night writing poems with Jonah at the Museum. His vast store cupboard of knowledge about the Earth and memories of places he'd travelled to before the War was an endless source of inspiration. The poems we wrote were wonderful, if I say so myself, and of course, I'm entitled to because they weren't mine alone. Jonah was a true poet; he could open my eyes, help me feel that I'd

seen things I'd never physically seen and give me exactly the words to describe them.

My fellow poet remained hidden, a blurred shape within the crinoid circle, a warm, mellifluous voice which came and went, a humorous voice full of humanity, so real and so near, yet so far away. I felt so close to him, so happy I had someone to talk to, but I found myself shying away from some things. I didn't understand where he was, for a start, or rather where his consciousness was stored.Somehow, he had latched on to my brain patterns, my ability to empathise and possibly my deep feelings for Earth, although in a way it was easier to believe this was some ancient magic and that the crinoid circle had charmed him back into existence. Each time we spoke, he seemed to be carrying on from where we'd left off previously, as though when I wasn't there, he didn't exist.

Then there was the War for Earth and the last days; I longed to know more but I was afraid that making him tell me might shunt him into remembering his own death. I would do absolutely anything to avoid causing him any more pain. In all the excitement, it was easy to forget that the brief candle flame of his consciousness wasn't going to last forever. Doc Carter had explained it to me; a stored consciousness had a limited lifespan, if you could call it that, and one day soon Jonah would have used up his existence.

Quite unexpectedly one night, he began talking about

the War without my asking him. It had been a hard day on site and I'd really been looking forward to spending time with Jonah, but he seemed unable to tune in his voice and it swooped over my head and circled in the air over and over again. I was alarmed and kept talking and encouraging him but as soon as his voice settled, I noticed how different he looked. The shapes I thought of as his head and shoulders were sort of slumped.

'What's the matter?' I asked.

'I grow weary,' he said. 'I haven't strength for this anymore.'

'No!' It was too soon.

'The last days were terrible…' Were. He'd switched to the past tense.

'Then don't think of them, Jonah. There's no need to talk about them.'

'I must.'

A cold shiver ran through me, matching the vibrations of his laboured words. It was impossible to speak, almost impossible to breathe. At any moment Jonah would be snuffed out and I was scared of doing anything. I felt the way you'd feel holding a sick baby bird, scared of doing anything that might extinguish that faint, stilted little heartbeat.

His voice came in gasps now. 'Outside, the land was being ripped apart by the creatures … there was no hope…'

'Please, you don't have to tell me.'

'I must. Before my time … before my time is up…'

'Go on then,' I said feebly.

'The last days … we were the last few … the people were dead … the last days…' He seemed to be losing his way.

'You were here at the Museum?' I couldn't think what to ask. There were so many questions I should have been asking but I couldn't collect my thoughts. This was so sudden and frightening.

'I have to tell … have to tell…'

'You were under attack from those creatures?'

'We made a pact … we all went out together…'

I was struggling to keep calm, groping for questions – it might be my last chance to ask.

'"*We*"? Who were you fighting? Were the different countries battling against each other, like a world war?'

'We all went together … we looked up in the sky and there *they* were…' 'They' was said with such disgust.

I tried a different tack. 'The dragomansk were in the sky? Was it your side that changed them, Jonah? Were you the ones that altered their genetic code?'

'I don't … mean … the dragomansk. I mean … *them*. *They* were in the sky. You remember, we were at war with … *them*…'

'I'm sorry, I don't remember. Who, Jonah, who?'

'We were the last… We went out together … hand in

hand, to show them … that they couldn't crush us … we still wouldn't tell them what they wanted to know … they watched us die but there was nothing they could do…'

My stomach felt as though it had dropped through a trapdoor.

'Tell us the dragomansk's code…' he said, mimicking a different voice.

Please no, I thought.

'Who were you fighting, Jonah?'

'Tell us the dragomansk's code…'

'Jonah, who was it? Who was your enemy?'

'*Them. The Martians.*'

The words hung between us in the air like a noose.

'Jonah, the War for Earth was between the peoples of Earth.'

'No!' It was a weird, tormented sound, hardly human. 'The Martians … the Martians…'

'Jonah…'

'They wanted to take everything…'

I felt sick.

'We built the creatures to defend ourselves … but we couldn't control them…' There was an ominous death rattle in his voice now.

'We chose to go out and be slaughtered … by our own weapons in front of the Martians … the choice was ours, not theirs … we left Earth protected, Bree … from *them* … from *them*…'

A crackling began high above us and the old electric lights began to flicker. I was shaking from the impact of what I'd just heard. The alternate crackling and humming intensified until one of the fittings exploded with a bang and a shower of sparks. The humming became like the mad hum of giant insects and the remaining lights became brighter and brighter until they were an intense, near blinding brightness.

And there he was again, Jonah, kneeling before me, so close our knees were nearly touching, and his eyes were open. His eyes. His strange Earth human eyes. I'd seen such eyes before, in paintings and on the statues downstairs, but this was the first time a real pair of Earth human eyes had looked straight into mine. Of course, Jonah and I had got to know each other in the dark, where we seemed so very alike, the biggest difference hadn't occurred to me. Now I could see him properly and it wasn't his deathly pale skin or thin, drawn cheeks which startled me but his small eyes about a third the size of my own.

And when Jonah's small eyes peered into mine, their irises blue as an Earth summer sky, his expression grew so full of horror and disgust I almost turned my head away in shame. For the first time, Jonah could see who and what I was.

There was no time to plead my case, even if I could have found the words. There was a deafening bang and all the fittings exploded at once. Blooms of sparks vanished

as they fell to the floor and I knew that I was alone in the dark again, now and forever. Jonah had gone and he wasn't coming back. The negative image of his mouth and small eyes open in horror lingered a little before melting away into the blackness.

I felt numb. For the next few days I didn't return to the Museum. I hadn't the heart and there was no point. Jonah wasn't coming back. Who could blame him?

Back on site, I set about the mundane tasks I was given pretty mechanically. The cliffs faced the sea and although I had seen this amazing, vast expanse of water once or twice before, now I was there all day long, I could truly appreciate the spectacle, its ever changing appearance against the dramatic, shifting weather in the skies. The waves were dark and silty, unlike the crystal blue waters of the Arabian Sea which had so delighted Halley. There were two islands straight across the water, one steep and the other flat. They looked as lonely as I felt.

Pico and Lana finally discovered what they'd hoped to find, a burial cave. They got very excited about the artefacts they discovered tucked amongst the skeletons which seemed to point to strange, unrecorded rituals. There was so much to do that afternoons off were cancelled. I carried on sifting and scrubbing, labelling and cataloguing, but my heart wasn't in it. Doubtless our findings would make a fascinating broadcast back to the

interDome network on Mars. Well-known experts would debate the discoveries, but interesting though it all was, to me it was just part of a big cover-up, a diversion. Mining surveys were plotting the best areas to begin drilling and extracting the materials from the ground beneath our feet, but they were barely mentioned. When the scientific teams returned to Base from around the country, they didn't talk to us students about where they'd been or what they'd been doing, almost like they'd been ordered not to.

One afternoon, a brief conversation with Pico made me think he felt the same way. He was taking a break in the mouth of the burial cave and I went to sit beside him. He wasn't doing anything, just staring out to sea. He didn't acknowledge me, but he began talking.

'Beautiful,' he said. 'Doesn't matter how many times I see it, it's just like that first time.'

'You said something similar before,' I said. 'The day we landed. About the sky.'

'Uh-huh. Although it's lonely here and that can get to you.'

We sat in silence awhile.

'Someday soon it won't be here,' I said. 'That'll be a shame.'

Pico looked at me quickly then all around us.

'I wouldn't let anyone else hear you say that. Not in that tone of voice, anyway.'

'But don't you think it's sad?'

He looked at me steadily for a few moments and nodded.

'You know, there was a time not so long ago when recolonisation was still the plan,' he whispered. 'Once we'd found a way of dealing with the you-know-what problem.' He cocked his thumb at the sky.

'That's what I'd always thought.'

'Well, it's true. Somehow, quite recently, those in charge have done a,' he rotated his finger, '180 degree on this one.'

'Don't you think if they knew, enough people on Mars would still want recolonisation? Isn't that what they'd vote for?'

'If they were given the choice.' Pico raised his eyebrows.

'Why not?' I said. 'Don't they deserve a vote? This is where we all come from.'

'You don't have to try and persuade me.' Pico looked around again. 'Look, we shouldn't even be talking about this. Forget what I just said. Don't mention it to anyone, all right? Come on, we have work to do.'

I followed him back through the tunnel into the burial cave, but I couldn't forget what he'd said. Although the future for Earth seemed so bleak, at least there was someone else who felt the way I did. And if Pico felt that way, others would too.

Each evening we got together with the boys to eat and compare notes, and work on ideas for our next broadcast. Halley didn't seem bored at Base any longer and he and

Nisien appeared to be getting on better, having found a common interest at last. They were still on the testing phase of Nisien's invention and Halley seemed to have found his purpose in life: causing large explosions of frozen debris. He took a childish delight in challenging Nisien's machine with larger and larger piles of rubble and wood and the two of them would talk animatedly and wave their arms to illustrate the biggest explosions while Robeen and I just smiled weakly in the right places when we could be bothered.

Nisien had finally settled on a name for the invention. Naturally he'd named it after himself, although the 'Barroblaster' (his surname was Barr) wasn't a name I could imagine anyone taking seriously.

Doc Carter appeared at the clifftop site one afternoon as we were sorting artefacts in the mobile lab. I hadn't spoken to him properly since our interview about the celephet. Now he was brusque, giving me a quick, forced smile as he asked me to show him the back of my head. I left the delicate glass beads I had been cleaning on the workbench.

'How's your analysis going?' I asked over my shoulder, thinking I'd better show some kind of interest.

'Encouraging,' he spoke over my head and I felt his fingertips trace my healing wound. 'Although we haven't got our answer yet, I'm confident we will. A few more days

at the Museum and I'm certain we'll succeed. Unbelievable how unlucky we were really, having the celephet catch on something and fall off like that. It's not a chance I'm willing to risk again. There, good. Healing nicely.' He patted me on the shoulders to show he'd finished and I let my hair fall back down. 'In another week we'll try again. I've nearly fixed the celephet. Few more tests, that's all.'

He walked around me, studying me with cool disdain and I felt a sudden fear. For the first time, I wondered to what lengths he might go to get me to co-operate? If I refused, what then? Would he order me to be held down kicking and screaming, to reconnect his precious invention? Would he anaesthetise me, knocking me out cold to make it easier to reinstall me at the Museum? All the celephet required was a human interface. Did the human in question need to be awake? Although I felt sure Jonah would never willingly reappear to me, it was possible that some traces of his consciousness might remain. I imagined myself, unconscious and chained to a hospital bed in the middle of the fossil room, while the tortured soul of Jonah flew around screaming in agony, like a bird caught in an ever-tightening trap. The image haunted me for the rest of the day.

Back at Base, I tried not to be on my own with Halley. I was afraid of getting into an argument with him and letting something slip. If Halley found out about Jonah

and told DocCarter, that would be it: I'd be chained to the hospital bed, a dumb instrument of torture. It was impossible to avoid him all the time though, and the morning after Carter's clifftop visit, he sought me out after breakfast.

The second stairwell wasn't much used and I'd got into a habit of going there to be alone. There was a window on the fourth-floor landing facing north and if you climbed on to the deep sill you had a good view of the brown, distant hills, the local breeding ground of the dragomansk in some old legends. This bleak view mirrored my desolate thoughts. I kept thinking about the War for Earth. How could I accept that I'd been lied to my whole life? That this war had not been fought between the warlike Earth human tribes as we'd all been taught? We oh-so-peace-loving Martians had been the enemy of Earth back then – and we still were. In a sense, the War for Earth had never ended and we, the old enemy, were now gearing up for the final, decisive battle. Ours was just the advance party.

'There you are.' I heard Halley descend the short flight of stairs behind me. 'I've been round the building twice trying to find you.'

'Why were you trying to find me?'

He hauled himself up next to me on the sill. 'Squeeze up,' he said, shoving me over. 'Why shouldn't I look for you? Still friends, aren't we? Huh?'

'Yes,' I said, with a terse smile.

'I think I know what's wrong with you,' he sung breezily. 'I've worked it out. Earth fever. It's this place, it gets to you after a while. It's so big and empty and ruinous and… Well, you mustn't let it get to you, that's all. Have you been back to the canals recently?'

'Not for a while,' I said.

'It might help.' He bumped me softly with his shoulder. 'Hey, Bree. I think I've managed to work my way back into Doc Carter's good books, finally. How about if we ask to borrow a class one this afternoon and go back to the canals? Or even somewhere new. That'd cheer you up.'

'I don't need *cheering up*,' I snapped. 'I'm fine.'

'Rubbish, you hardly talk these days. I know I'm always messing about but I've been worried about you, Bree. Truthfully. Hey, don't you remember that list we made, of all the things we wanted to do and see on Earth?'

I knew he was going to start talking about Mumbai again.

'I've seen what I came to see.'

Halley sighed. 'The Museum? And that's it? There is so much more out there.' He stressed every word. 'The jungles in Mumbai are teeming with life the dragomansk can't reach, monkeys call out to each other in the treetops at dusk, the wild cats prowl in the night and you just catch a flicker of their eyes in the undergrowth. Glowing. They live in caves to escape the worst of the daytime heat.'

'Halley…'

'Remember our frog at the canal? Well, we saw several, but that first one, I mean? Wasn't it a magical moment? There are frogs in every shade of every colour of the rainbow in that jungle, you would not believe your eyes. Acid yellows and greens, neon blues… Some of them live up high in the trees and never come down. There are pools up there in the middle of the leaf-cups and they're like whole little worlds in themselves.'

'You've told me this before.'

'You're just like one of those frogs, you know that? The Museum's become your little pool, but there's a lot more to explore, even around here.' Annoyance crept into his voice.

'You don't know what you're talking about. You don't know what's been going on at the Museum. I've been doing a lot more there than you think.' This was getting dangerous.

'Oh come on!' he cried in exasperation. 'What's wrong with you? It's as if now you're here, you've shut down. Writing poems in that place seems to be your only goal in life.'

'I don't go there now, do I?'

'And you're just moping because you can't. But don't you understand what I'm saying? Forget the Museum, Bree. It'll be time to go back home before we know it and right now is when you should be making the most of your time here on Earth.'

'Because it's not going to be here much longer? Not when the diggers move in? As soon as we find a way of getting rid of the dragomansk, that can happen much, much quicker, can't it?'

He looked stunned, as though I'd slapped him.

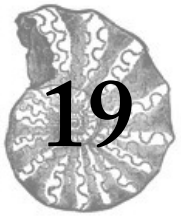
'It's going to happen anyway,' he said in a small voice. 'DNA's been collected from all these creatures. It's all in storage on Mars. This world can be reproduced again someday.'

'They won't have collected all the DNA, how can they have? It's impossible. And anyway, they'll never recreate this again!'

'It's going to happen, no matter what we do. It's our Great Quest and Purpose, Bree.'

Halley sounded utterly deflated. I didn't answer, it was best not to, but I so wanted to tell him what a massive, *massive* hypocrite he was, pretending to be so concerned about Earth whilst all the time he was helping destroy it by doing Carter's dirty work.

'I just think you should make the most of your time here, that's all,' he repeated in a small voice and jumping from the windowsill, he left without saying any more. I returned to the desolate view while his footsteps echoed on the stairs.



19

That night I sneaked out to the Museum, only to wander aimlessly through the rooms, remembering Jonah and hating myself for being who and what I was. It felt empty now in a way it never had previously, like a fossilised shell abandoned by life. I sat amongst the statues and cried, then I thought about the pictures on the walls upstairs and shuddered. What had Jonah said?

'We chose to go out and be slaughtered … slaughtered by our own weapons in front of the Martians…'

After a long time sitting thinking about it, I made myself go up. It was the first time I'd been in the galleries since Halley and I had found them. Flashing my tilelight around, I saw Halley's staircases of books. The pictures were as gruesome as I remembered; my imagination didn't have to heighten their terror, they really were the stuff of nightmares. Then, for the first time, I saw what Halley must have failed to see too. High above the dragomansk and metamansk filling the air, small and high up in the clouds like ancient gods inspecting the scene for their own

amusement, I could just make out exaggeratedly bug-eyed Martians sitting in ships which looked very like primitive versions of the *Byd's* own landing craft. One of them was even performing our salute. With so much else going on in the picture, you would certainly have missed them if you weren't looking for them. The Martians looked on as the monstrous creatures attacked the very side which had developed them to this, their final and deadliest form. In the face of such horror, the idea that Jonah and his colleagues, the last survivors on this part of Earth, would sooner sacrifice themselves than give up the secret which might have saved them, was haunting and tragic. I'd soon had my fill and descending to the great hall again, I went to the fossil room. I felt ready to say some of the things I should have said to Jonah that last time, even though it was too late. If a trace of his consciousness still survived, it didn't want to have anything to do with me.

Settling myself in the middle of the crinoid circle, I read all our poems aloud one by one, but the images merely floated away and vanished in the cold, empty air. There was no audience.

'Jonah,' I began. 'There's a slim chance you may be listening … if you can hear me, all I'm asking is that you listen. Give me a chance to explain something. You know what I am and you know where I come from, but Jonah, you should know as well as I do how much I love Earth. And there are plenty of people on Mars who love it too…'

I sat quietly for a moment. I felt nothing, no other presence, yet I felt compelled to continue.

'I didn't know that we were enemies, your people and mine. They've never told us that, I mean it's not generally known on Mars, I mean… We knew about the War for Earth of course but… For a long time after, the people from my planet didn't come back here not for hundreds of years. I guess the War must have drained our resources. Gradually, the cities on Mars became bigger and more and more Domes were built. That's where we live, mostly dug into the ground under these great glass Domes full of air we can breathe because outside we'd … we'd … anyway, about ninety years ago, the missions started…'

My voice faltered. If Jonah was listening, it was going to be hard to tell him the next part.

'These missions are surveys, you see? The ones in charge want to take what they failed to take all those centuries ago. Only they want more. This time they won't stop until they've taken it all. But this world can never be recreated, no matter how much DNA they collect. The interconnectedness of everything, you couldn't replicate that. Everything we can possibly learn from Earth will be gone and, you see, this is where I come from too. It's where my ancestors lived once upon a time. Jonah, despite the way I look to you, I don't just come from Mars, I come from Earth too.'

I dissolved into tears. No one was listening and no one

cared. I could scream and wail about the unfairness of everything as much as I liked, but it wouldn't make any difference. Halley was right – about that, at least.

'Bree?'

I scrambled to my feet.

'Who are you talking to?' Doc Carter stepped from the shadows. He shone his tilelight full at me so I couldn't see him properly. How long had he been standing there? How much had he heard?

'No one.' I tried to swallow my tears.

Carter came to the edge of the crinoid circle and I had to squint at him through the blinding light. When he lowered his tile, I could see that his expression was a mixture of fear and suspicion.

'How do you know all these things,' he asked slowly, 'about the War for Earth?'

'There are pictures upstairs,' I faltered. 'It shows it all. The Earth humans being attacked. The Mars humans in ships in the sky. It's not exactly the way we've been told.'

'You worked all this out from the pictures upstairs?'

I nodded, biting my lip, shaking. There was a long pause.

'The human mind can be fragile, Bree.' He couldn't disguise the nervous quiver in his voice. 'You know how strong our people's feelings are for the motherplanet, even though unlike us they're never going to come here. For the good of the people, the decision was taken long ago never to reveal these … details…'

'Details?' I cried, tears cascading down my cheeks. 'We were the enemy! We were the ones who fought them in the War for Earth. We watched them die! These are more than just "details".'

'Earth humans were stupid and self-destructive,' he countered. 'They could have saved themselves. If they'd handed over the code, we had the technology to destroy their weapons.'

I shook my head and looked at him with revulsion. 'If they'd handed over the code we would have overrun them anyway.'

'Who's Jonah?' he said.

The question pulled me up short. 'It's just the name I gave… It's what I started calling the energy. That face on the screen.'

'Really?' Carter looked unconvinced. 'In a couple of days the celephet will be ready,' he said.

The more I tried to control my sobs, the more I trembled. 'The celephet won't do any good,' I blurted out.

'And why's that?'

'Because Jonah, I mean the energy, will not submit to torture. That's all the celephet does. I've told you before. It's an instrument of torture.'

Carter stepped into the circle, standing right in front of me, almost in the same place where Jonah normally sat. I saw his face twitching.

'Bree…' His voice was unsteady. 'The celephet is going

to work and do you know why? I've devoted the past ten years of my life to it, that's why. It's my whole reason for being here. It will work.'

'It won't work,' I said in a small voice.

'IT WILL WORK!' he shouted in my face. I was terrified. His nostrils flared and his shoulders heaved. I shrank from him but in the shocked silence which followed, only punctuated by my shaky breathing and gulping, he made a big, visible effort to regain control of himself.

'What I heard you say a few moments ago was highly treasonable. Were I to report it to Core Panel, it would certainly spell the end of your school career and that would just be the start.'

I stared at him.

'And you don't think I bought that story about the celephet getting caught on something, do you? I'm not a fool. You deliberately destroyed it and put the future of our Great Quest and Purpose in jeopardy.'

I continued to stare at his flawless, plastic good looks, at strange odds with his mean mouth and the tic at the corner of his eye. I hadn't the strength to deny what he'd just said and I knew that my silence condemned me as much as an admission of guilt.

'I thought so.' He nodded. 'Another treasonable offence. This isn't looking good for you. Or your family.'

'Lock me up then,' I mouthed in spite of myself, in

spite of the dreadful fear which had clutched me hearing those last three words.

Carter took a deep breath. 'I could order that,' he said. 'We can do this the hard way, or we can do this the easy way, but the result will be the same, I promise. Despite all you've done to try to wreck my plans, I'm willing to give you one last chance, but you'll have to promise, *promise,* to co-operate this time.'

Why was he giving me this choice? Knowing for a fact that I'd deliberately ruined his experiment once before, why would he try to get me to co-operate again? I knew the answer: he *still* thought I was stupid, didn't he? To him, I was as I had always been, a silly girl of low intelligence he could manipulate, if not as easily as he'd originally thought, to fall in with his plans. Doing it his 'easy way' would be preferable because it wouldn't attract any negative attention from the rest of the crew: Pico, Lana Leoni, my friends, people who I guessed would still argue for recolonisation of Earth if they got the chance.

'So.' His voice was suddenly warm and hushed. His finger stroked the curve of my cheek, a hair's breadth from my skin. My body stiffened. 'Will you wear the celephet for me again, Bree? Willingly?'

I looked up into his red-rimmed eyes. He knew he'd won. What could I do? I swallowed. I nodded.

'Is that a yes, Bree?'

It took some effort to part my lips in the shape of a 'yes'.

'All right then.' I tried not to flinch as he laid his hands on my shoulders, massaging his thumbs backwards and forwards in a loving and forgiving manner, claiming me as his own once more. 'That's it. That's good. Good girl.'

I let him guide me from the fossil room, back through the hall, his arm firmly around me. All the time he talked in that special low, reassuring tone of his, promising that there was no danger and that back home we were going to be famous and our names would go down in history. I nodded from time to time, feigning acquiescence. But although pretending might buy me some time, I was so, so *sick* of pretending. My stomach felt queasy and I was still trembling as we replaced our hoods and visors and I automatically headed for the class one parked at the top of the steps.

'No.' He pulled me back. 'You're coming back to Base with me, Bree. No more night-time jaunts for you. You'll be here again soon enough.'

I had no choice. I climbed into his sleek machine and he lowered the roof. I hadn't been in one of these more modern, entirely voice-operated amphibicals but I appreciated the smoother, faster ride straight away. Once he'd set the autopilot, we negotiated speedily and effortlessly thorough the dark maze of the humped landscape and then he spoke to me again.

'This place can get to you. You've been up on that site for too long. Tell you what, how would you like to go out

for the day tomorrow? I'll get Halley to take you somewhere. You'll feel better for it, I guarantee.'

I said nothing.



20

That evening there was a storm, the first huge Earth storm I'd witnessed, with thunder rumbling like the belly of some hungry sky-god, forks of lightning leaping to Earth and endless heavy rain hammering down. Most of the crew at Base congregated in the fourth-floor common room and we turned out the lights, to view the lightning's ferocity as it tore the sky apart.

When the rain was at its heaviest and visibility at its lowest level, a dragomansk flew head-on into the window with an enormous, shocking bang. It was only squashed against the glass for a split second. I saw its eyes burst on the pane which ran with sticky, brown bubbling acid before it fell. Fortunately there was no damage to the window. I wondered if it had survived and, if not, whether Halley would be out hunting for the corpse tomorrow morning or whether he'd left that phase behind.

In bed that night I listened to a fully orchestrated gale being conducted outside. Gusts of wind moaned and whistled round the building and sudden blasts shook the

windows. The recordings I'd heard of the storms on Mars were worse than this, much worse, but here I was conscious that only a thin layer of brick protected us from violent elements beyond our control.

Strangely, with so much else to worry about, what had preoccupied me all evening was why everyone was insisting that Earth had 'got to me'. Annoyingly, Halley and Carter were right – it had. Our Dome is home to many thousands of people packed into a relatively small space so you're never alone for long, but having viewed the Dome from the outside, I could appreciate how solitary it actually was. On board the *Byd* we'd been little more than a small, insignificant little group of atomic clusters hurtling through endless space, but at least you could hold the hand of another human being when you started thinking that way. Why had being on Earth so particularly got to me? Perhaps because it felt like the most lonely of all lonely places in the universe, a place which should have been able to sustain human life in abundance, but was virtually empty of it; a place where it should have been possible to roam about unconfined, except you could not. Earth was the cradle of human life, yet humans weren't welcome there anymore.

Although the wind had calmed by breakfast, it was still moaning, aggrieved that it hadn't managed to find its way into the building, and though the rain was lighter, it fell incessantly. The sky above us was filled with a strange,

sickly, sulphurous light and the western edge was turning darker by the minute. Nisien, Robeen and I sat at our table. Nisien was complaining that he wouldn't be able to carry out the tests he'd wanted to that morning because Halley was taking me out on a trip. Eventually, even Robeen looked up from her Kyrachess and asked him to give it a rest. Halley had already messaged me, asking me to meet him by the entrance straight after breakfast. I guessed that at that very moment he was probably being given his final briefing by Carter, but I was past caring. The thought of having to spend an entire day with him turned my stomach.

'So here we are again.' Halley was already waiting by the front entrance, but he didn't seem as sure of himself as usual, I could tell by the way he hugged his visor to his chest. If I was going to go along with the charade, I decided I might as well make it look convincing. When he saw me smile, his body relaxed a little.

'I'm under orders to give you a fun day out.' He did an unconvincing little mock salute. I walked up, placed my hand on his shoulder and kissed his cheek, biting my lip teasingly at the look of surprise on his face.

'That's to say sorry for giving you such a hard time,' I sighed and tilted my head to one side. 'I don't know what's been wrong with me. Well, I do: it was being holed up in that Museum all those days. You were right, you and Doc

Carter. And I do know how worried you've both been about me. Thanks for that.'

Halley nodded.

'Anyway,' I said. 'I'm glad we're going out, just you and me. It'll be fun.'

'Where do you fancy, then?'

'I don't mind. We could start with the canals. I mean, if you want to?'

'I guess it's always been a special place for us, huh?' He was relaxing more and more.

I took his hand and swung it to and fro. 'But no dragomansk hunting, deal?'

He shook his head. 'Oh deal, I mean, oh, definitely not,' he flustered. 'I can't say I don't find them fascinating, but no, I think I learned my lesson there.'

'Come on then, let's go.' I gave his hand a quick squeeze and we prepared to leave, but just at the last moment he pulled me back.

'How about a real adventure?'

'What do you mean?'

He glanced up the stairwell to check that no one was coming, then looked at me and that wicked secret smile I'd once loved spread slowly across his face.

'Follow me.' Still holding my hand, he led me down a small, dark passage. I knew immediately which way we were heading, straight for the service rooms. I was forced to run to keep up with him.

'You must be joking!' I said as he let go of my hand and approached the class four parked in the middle of the workshop. No one else was around, the day's work hadn't begun. He climbed onto the skirt of the vehicle and squinted inside, then held out his arm, beckoning me.

'I have the activation code,' he said, 'up here.' He tapped his forehead.

'Do you know how seriously Nisien's going to kill you?' I said. 'Never mind just you, me as well!' But before I could make any more protests, the roof of the hulking amphibical was retracting and Halley was climbing in and crooking his finger at me.

'Aw, come on,' he said.

Against my better judgement, I stepped up onto the skirt. Halley patted the seat next to his, inviting me in. 'This thing's proper heavy-duty. We can go much further, inland or out along the coast, if you like. We wouldn't be able to do that in a class one. Nothing can stand in our way, not with the "Barroblaster" on board. Come on, then.'

The doors at the front of the workshop were already beginning to slide apart, preparing for our exit.

'You're mad. You don't have the authority to do this.' On impulse and because at heart I was past caring, I climbed in and the roof slid shut above our heads.

'I have all the authority I need,' he laughed. 'Especially with you here.'

'How do you mean?'

'Nothing.' But he was chuckling to himself and I knew exactly what he meant: I was everyone's ticket to getting what they wanted. As long as he followed Carter's instructions, which were basically to look after me and get me to cheer the hell up, and as long as he brought me back in one piece, Halley was right: he probably could get away with it. A minor slap on the wrist at worst. The way he rubbed his nose with his finger so casually, the way he whistled softly through his teeth as he began steering the brute up the ramp so expertly … everything exuded a mean kind of confidence.

I turned to see Nisien careering into the workshop, calling out and waving his arms above his head. The look on his face was one of frustrated outrage but we were already trundling on to the back road with the vehicle's giant wheels kicking up dust. When he glanced at the rear view screen and saw Nisien screaming at us to stop, Halley roared with laughter.

'He'll thank me.' He wiped tears of mirth from his eyes. 'Believe me, he will thank me. This thing hasn't had any kind of proper test drive with his machine on board yet. It'll speed up the whole process. I'm doing him a favour.'

'Are you sure this vehicle's safe? It's rattling, listen. Wasn't it decommissioned?'

'It's absolutely safe. One hundred and one percent.' His eyes twinkled as he glanced at me. 'All right: one hundred

and two percent. Look, I wouldn't risk it, would I? Especially not with you on board. It's mechanically sound, it's just an old model and they rattle. It's built like an elephant. We drove one just like it out in Mumbai.' By now, Nisien was out of sight.

'We could have offered to take him and Robeen with us. It's big enough. We could have all had an adventure together,' I said.

''Fraid not. Nisien might not realise it but it's his turn to help out at the site today. He'll be up there at the caves with Robeen thoroughly enjoying himself in half an hour. By then, he'll have forgotten about it.'

'I really doubt that.'

'In any case, I much prefer just the two of us, don't you?'

'Well, yes, of course.'

I felt sorry for Robeen having to spend the day with Nisien in one of his moods and this time the mood was perfectly justifiable which would only make it worse. Still, remembering the little act I'd signed up to, I smiled sweetly at Halley.

We drove to the coast, taking a wide detour to avoid the clifftop site. The class four was a lot more rattley and echoey than the more modern vehicles I was used to but it got us easily over some pretty rough terrain after we left the road. Halley was ecstatic when we came across a fallen tree blocking our path, its huge earthy root system upended towards us. Rather than go around it, which we

could easily have done, he decided to road test the Barroblaster. The freezing beam shot from the front of the amphibical, encasing the tree in a brilliant blue light. This appeared to harden before our eyes as an invisible force squeezed the tree flatter and flatter in the middle. The blue beam shut off abruptly and the long double ellipse of the tree exploded at either end just the way I'd seen in demonstrations, only this tree was big and the burst of frozen wood shards and sparkling, powdered ice was even more spectacular. Halley whooped in delight and a 'wow' or two escaped me.

It soon felt like we'd left civilisation far behind. The rain came and went but the amphibical powered effortlessly through the great gusts of wind that tried to stop us like a warning hand. The sea to our left was dark and forbidding and the choppy waves reminded me of that poem I'd written at school. How long ago that seemed now and how strange to think that when I wrote it, I'd never seen a wave in real life. Would my poem be different if I wrote it now? I guessed it would. For all the heartache it had brought me, I knew that being on Earth was the most amazing privilege.

'Where are you taking us?'

'Dunno,' said Halley. 'But I know what I'm trying to find.'

'What?' He didn't answer but I could see him smile to himself. He glanced at me, then reached over and took my

hand, held it up to his mouth and kissed it. It made my skin crawl.

'Do you remember us on the way to Earth, Bree?' he said. 'Making plans about all the things we were going to see and do, remember that?'

'Of course.'

'Earth hasn't always lived up to your dreams, has it? But it can do, believe me.'

I knew what was coming.

'Like your journey to Mumbai?' I may have let a hint of impatience creep into my voice. Clearly, yes, I would have loved to have seen Mumbai for myself, but these secondhand reports from Halley were wearing.

He studied me then shouted, 'Hold on!' We veered off to the right.

I could see why: a truly enormous metamansk was heading straight for us. The sparse group of trees we nestled amongst gave enough shelter for us to observe their amazing display in safety. There must have been five hundred creatures in this group, darkening the sky in a miasma of movement and whirring noise. They performed their extraordinary and varied motions with perfect timing, almost mimicking a single animal, and it was breathtaking to watch. The metamansk actually did resemble single animals from time to time – you could spot them momentarily, the way you could catch glimpses of creatures in shifting cloud patterns on Earth. A mouth

would open here, a set of paws rear up there or a dorsal fin would emerge and for a moment the whole beast would porpoise through the air before it broke up again.

We watched for a while but my thoughts had returned to my overwhelming problem. I might let myself be distracted for a short time, but it was always there: soon, the dreaded celephet would be fixed to the back of my head again and the torture would recommence. Jonah already hated me, but the thought of being turned into the means of torturing what remained of his consciousness was more than I could bear. Maybe that was why I felt so detached: my head simply couldn't take any more. I couldn't think straight and there didn't seem to be any solution. I desperately needed a plan. How long could I carry on pretending to co-operate but basically doing nothing? Time was running out.

'Extraordinary,' said Halley. His voice jolted me back to the present with a start. 'Once I thought it was the most amazing creature ever to have existed, but now I know there are other creatures just as incredible, many we haven't even heard about on Mars. I saw plenty in…'

'Mumbai.' We finished his sentence off together.

'I'd like to show you a little of what I mean.'

I wouldn't meet his earnest gaze but kept focusing on the metamansk show. 'That would be … nice.'

'I was wondering where you went, Bree.' His voice dropped a little. 'Somehow you weren't the same person I

knew aboard the *Byd*. Just wanting to be at that Museum all the time. That's not what we came for, is it?'

'I thought I was the same person.'

'Trust me, you weren't.' He laughed.

I could feel the anger and resentment stir inside me again, at the bottom of a deep, dark well. I couldn't afford to show it though, I couldn't and wouldn't. The metamansk rose right up into the air and performed an amazing pirouette before the individuals began peeling off in different directions. As more and more of them left, the action became faster and faster until those that remained just blew apart like the seed heads of the yellow flowers that were scattered all over the grass before us.

Our amphibical emerged from the spindly trees once we were sure the dragomansk were all far enough away. We carried on heading west. Slowly, the sky began to clear of rainclouds and the sun came out, although the wind was still blustery enough to whip the waves into small peaks. We followed the track down until we were on a level with the sea itself, then Halley spun us out into the shallows. We began speeding along on top of the water much faster, following the curve of the coastline. Halley whooped with joy and it did feel exhilarating, skimming on top of the water at such speed, especially as the sunshine strengthened, accenting the waves with a brilliant, silvery, ever-shifting shimmer. If I had been in the right mood, it would have been a wonderful

experience. I carried on pretending to enjoy myself for all I was worth, smiling until the muscles in my face hurt. The class four seemed in its natural element at last, no longer the awkward, lumbering brute it was on solid ground, but graceful on the water, like a dancer.

'See?' said Halley, leaning back with his head in his hands, snaking his hips from side to side in his seat, guiding the vehicle with one knee in the steering zone. 'This is what we should be doing. This is what we should always have been doing, Bree.'

He was so in control, so sure of himself. So sure of me and of how dumb I was. I hated him more at that moment than I had at any time before and I struggled now because I was so tempted to strike at him, whatever the consequences.

'You've got to live.' He cocked his eyebrow and grinned, a dimple appearing in his cheek. 'Live first, then you can write your poems.'

That was it.

'I know that,' I said through my teeth.

'Sorry?'

'You assume I haven't been alive but I have. More truly alive than you can imagine.'

'All that sitting about in the…'

'That's where I have been most alive.'

Halley frowned and sunk lower in his seat. The amphibical began to speed even faster, as though his mood was controlling it, and for the first time the engine

sounded as though it was straining. A grind of protest came from beneath our seats and the holomap flickered. We rounded a corner and came up against a row of rocks jutting out of the water like fangs. Halley leapt forwards and with a flick of his fingers performed a sharp sudden turn to avoid them, but then, rather than turn back towards land, we headed on out to sea.

'I don't understand, aren't you enjoying yourself?' He grimaced, his flattened palms and twitching fingers attempting to regain a perfect balance.

'With you, no. If I can be honest.'

'Not again.' He shook his head. 'What's wrong with you now?'

'*I know.*' My stomach was in knots but I couldn't keep it locked up any longer. I wouldn't tell him about Jonah, though.

'You know? Know what?'

'I know about you. I know what you're doing here.'

Halley spun his hand in the steering zone and we turned a huge circle in the water.

'What I'm doing here?' I almost couldn't hear him above the screeches of complaint from the class four.

'I heard you and Carter,' I yelled, and when he looked at me I could see understanding was beginning to dawn. 'When you were in Carter's room.'

'You don't know what you heard!' He couldn't tear his eyes away from me. We continued to circle.

'Why? Because I'm too stupid?'

'Bree, no!' He tried to take my hand, forgetting that his was still needed to control the craft. It immediately lurched backwards, squealing, an almost animal-sounding protest of pain. Halley cursed and waved his hand angrily in the steering zone. The amphibical jolted us backwards and forwards, throwing us about in our seats before Halley regained control. We started heading out to sea again.

'You pretended to be my friend,' I said.

'I am your friend. I always was your friend.'

'LIAR!'

'Don't.' Halley slowed the vehicle until it came to a standstill. The engine shut off and we bobbed gently on the water. By now, we were a long, long way from land. When he turned to look at me, he looked fearful and ashamed. 'How long have you known?'

'You argued with Carter the night before you left for Mumbai and I was just outside the door. Oh, I expect you've had numerous chats about me, but that's the night I found out … what you both think of me.'

'Bree, you've got…'

'Don't tell me I've got it wrong!' I laughed.

'I was going to say, you've got to forgive me.'

There was a pause. Golden sunlight plated the vast expanse of water ahead of us and it was strange to be floating in one spot and not making a sound. We were utterly alone, bobbing gently along as though nothing

mattered. The sky was clear. It was rare to find dragomansk far out at sea, apparently.

'Why should I forgive you?' I asked.

'I'm the one who doesn't deserve to be on this mission. I'm only here because I agreed to lie and cheat and spy on you for Carter. I am a liar, I'm despicable and I know I am. Still, you have to forgive me.'

'That makes no sense,' I said.

'Love makes no sense.'

I burst out laughing. Halley looked spent, drained. He wasn't laughing.

'You are – what? You are excusing yourself now by saying – what?'

'That I'm in love.' He looked as though he wanted to say more but couldn't. We both fell silent.

'Love' was a strange word to come out of Halley's mouth. Back home 'love' was an archaic concept, cherished the same way as the ancient buildings, but nobody ever really talked about actively being 'in' it. So Halley was 'in love' with – me? With himself, I could buy, but with *me*? This had to be the biggest, most breathtaking lie of the lot. What did he think I was? Oh yes, that's right: stupid.

'Just listen.' He'd turned pale and his voice was strained as he sat rigid, staring straight ahead at the sea. It was a truly brilliant act, really almost convincing. 'I'm not proud to say it but I signed up to Carter's plan straight away. He came to school one afternoon and for

some reason, which can't be much of a compliment, I was the one called to Deputy Vilia's office. She wasn't there but he was. He explained everything and I agreed to act as your companion and keep an eye on you, there didn't seem any harm in it really. He told me about the celephets: that yours was the only one that really worked and he told me why. He promised me the celephet wasn't dangerous, same as he did to you. Well, you can guess why I agreed to the plan, the whole lie, can't you? I knew that this was the only way I'd ever get on an Earth mission and coming to Earth had always been my dream, same as everyone at school. It's what we all dream about all the time, isn't it? I never stood a chance of getting picked, not ordinarily. I mean, I'm good at sports but I'm not that super-stunningly bright, not like Nisien, not like Robeen. And not like you either, Bree. That's what Carter doesn't realise: he thinks you're unintelligent, but I don't. You have real talent. What you've got, they don't really teach at school. I started appreciating it as soon as I got to know you. And I learnt just enough from Empathy classes to know how they'd have put it, those old poets. I've fallen into love.'

'Will you stop using that word?' I cried. 'No one says that word! If you think for a moment that I could ever believe what you're saying…'

'You have to,' he whispered. 'Or I don't know what I'm going to do. It's in poems, isn't it, that word? It must be

what I'm feeling, Bree, because I think about you all the time.'

'You liar.' I whispered.

'Yes.' He nodded. 'I've lied my head off, but not about this.'

I tried to imagine myself encased in a hard, impenetrable shell. It wasn't fair, having more woe and worry piled on top of me, squeezing the life out of me, when I was already fighting for breath.

'This is like being buried alive,' I muttered. Then to Halley, 'So you're quite happy about what's going to happen to me next? You're happy Carter's going to reattach that thing to the back of my head? You don't mind that, even though you love me so very much?'

He twitched, his chest rising and falling. 'It won't be for long though, will it? Once he's got the dragomansk code, that'll be it. It'll all be over.'

'I believe it might kill me this time.' I was watching him very carefully.

'No!' He shook his head fervently. 'Carter's promised me no harm can come to you.'

'Harm has already come to me,' I protested. 'Do you know what the celephet actually does? It tortures, Halley. It latches onto the consciousness and then it tortures it to try and get it to reveal what it wants to know. Carter's lied to you.'

He was still shaking his head.

'Listen,' I said. 'Listen to me. The consciousness will kick back, of course it will and I'm the one in the firing line, not you and certainly not Carter. My mind isn't as empty as he thinks, it's not some kind of empty channel, and I will get hurt by it, Halley, badly hurt. If he sticks that celephet on me again and sends me back in there, I believe I might lose my mind.'

He ran his fingers through his hair. 'I don't know what to do,' he moaned. He reached out tentatively, his fingers flexing with nerves and this time I let him take my hand.

'Help me,' I said and he nodded, ashen-faced. Could I trust him? What choice did I have?

'I'll talk to Carter,' he whispered.

'What's that going to do?'

He frowned as though he were fighting back tears. 'Then we'll find a different way.'

We were still drifting along, the sun smiling down on us and on the sea all around us.

My thoughts are like waves
Bobbing happily at sea…

I let him kiss my hand and put it to his cheek, wishing I could wholeheartedly trust him. At least he wasn't driving me straight back to Carter, but that didn't reassure me completely. Halley was inconsistent, he blew like the wind. Maybe it was because he was struggling with his

conscience. Because he knew he'd done wrong. This I could just about believe.

'We could always run away,' he said, speaking slowly at first but then speeding up. 'And go back when it's time to return home. That's it!'

I actually considered this for a moment as if it was a serious proposition. What would it be like to live as fugitives? Would it be possible to build a shelter and find food? If we lived deep in the forest like other creatures did, the dragomansk wouldn't be able to get us. True, the fuel cylinders powering the amphibical would need changing, but could we return to Base quickly and stock up before disappearing, now, while everyone else was out of the building? On the other hand, SSO vehicles were probably easily traceable, and this one stood out a mile. How on earth would we hide it? And then of course there were the problems we'd face when it was time to go home.

'We'd be marked down as traitors,' I said. 'That would be the end for us and our families.'

'Unless we just stay. Stay here on Earth forever or until the next mission arrives in a few years time. Pretend we had amnesia or just got sick. I bet we could think up a good excuse. We'd be heroes.'

There was a mad enthusiasm in his eyes and he was squeezing my hand almost too tightly. 'Wait a minute,' I said. 'Halley, I don't think so.'

'You and me!' he cried. 'We could do all those things we always talked about on board the *Byd*, go everywhere, see everything before it's too late. It's tearing me apart, that Earth's going to get destroyed and I've been one of the ones bringing it about. What kind of idiot am I?'

'What'll we eat?' I yelped but he wasn't listening, his eyes were roaming everywhere, his ideas accelerating to warp speed. It felt like he might be about to do something incredibly stupid and not for the first time.

'Listen to me, Halley, what will we eat?' I practically spelt out the words.

'What did our ancestors eat?' he shrugged.

'I don't know!' I cried. 'And that's the point, neither do you!'

'All right, we catch small things, frogs and birds and cook them on a fire. That would work.'

'And how do we get fire?' This was becoming farcical.

'Our ancestors discovered how and so can we if we have to. We've seen fire, we've seen what it looks like in Empathy classes, there must be some around.'

'Okay, Halley, calm down. We need to … we need … what are you doing?'

He was starting up the amphibical, his fingers poking and prodding the air then wriggling wildly.

'This is where it starts.' His eyes shone as though lit by an interior sun. 'This is what I've been yearning to show you, Bree. Where I've been planning to take you today.

After this, you'll realise that anything's possible for you and me.'

Without waiting for a reply, he flipped his hands up in the steering zone and the front of the class four crested sharply into the air. For a heart-stopping moment the sea was no longer visible. Then we dived, slapping the surface hard and then plunging through it, through a wall of bubbles, diving down steeply with the engines at full-tilt. There was no time to protest and the shock had knocked the ability to scream out of me. I just hung on to my seat, wide-eyed. Halley was making those crazed, whooping noises again, but he must have retained some self-control as before we hit the sea floor, he executed an expert steering action, as if he was gathering and pulling strings with his fingertips. The amphibical slowed until it was horizontal again and we began cutting through the water easily. Two strong lights snapped on at the front of the craft. The bubbles dispersed but the water remained an obscure greyish-green.



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'Bet you weren't expecting that!' Halley laughed.

I eventually managed to squeeze a few words out. 'Are you sure we can do this?'

He smiled. 'We're doing it.'

The amphibical certainly seemed responsive to the gentle movements he was making with a single crooked finger. It slipped through the water without protest as though relieved to have returned to its natural element. 'Now, let's see how many creatures we can spot down here.'

I tried to question him about the class four, which had been decommissioned for some time, but he came back at me with the same assurances. These larger vehicles were designed to cope with submersion and ours was almost identical to the one in which he'd explored the ocean around Mumbai. After a while I shut up and concentrated on what I could see.

We'd experienced a couple of foggy mornings on Earth and being in the depths of the sea was a bit like that, with objects appearing without warning. A gentle glow

descended from the surface some distance above us, but the lights at the front of the ship were the biggest help. Great, waving ribbons of brown seaweed loomed up in front of us, and soon we began to spot creatures too. Fish of all different shapes, sizes and colours swum past. Sometimes the fish swam in shoals which put me in mind of the metamansk, chopping and changing direction with all the speed, grace and intelligence of a single creature. We negotiated our way through an eerie forest of translucent jellyfish with enormous, dangling tentacles, then caught up with a pod of dolphins and began to follow on their tails until they succeeded in losing us. I had no idea how far out from land we were and although it was exciting to be there and it had certainly taken my mind off anything else, I was still nervous and after a while I managed to persuade Halley we should head back to shallower waters.

Popping back out at the surface, I was relieved to see land, but after a few moments of drifting along, we ducked back under and headed along the coast, keeping west and just below the surface of the water where the amphibical performed best. In the distance we could see a reef approaching and Halley slowed the craft right down to allow us to explore. We rounded a small hill of rocks and soft-bodied corals. What I had taken to be part of the hill, covered in waving fronds, suddenly blanched and the arms of a small octopus unfurled before us. The octopus was

clearly frightened and it shot away, landing on the seabed where it curled up and turned into what looked like a brown stone.

It was a whole new amazingly colourful world to explore. The reef was home to such an abundance of life, as though this was where the party had been happening all along. We saw brightly coloured anemones and spiny starfish and great shoals of wrasse; curiously fringed cuttlefish which I discovered on my tile was another cephalopod and relative of the nautilus, so relative of the extinct ammonite. All around we found creatures expertly hiding themselves from their enemies. From a fissure between rocks, a large wide-eyed fish the exact same colour and texture as the rock itself poked out its head, probably on the hunt. I wondered if it ever left its fissure. Soon I was wiping tears from my eyes; this was so like my poetical dreams of Silurian seas, except it was far, far better. Halley was right: this had to be seen, it had to be lived and right then I felt as if we could do anything together, the two of us. I wanted to believe it so much, to believe in him again, because then I wouldn't be on my own. But could I ever forgive him? Could I forget what he'd done?

We couldn't stop pointing things out to each other excitedly. Halley steered with extreme care and we kept our distance from the reef; we could have damaged it or it could have damaged us if we strayed too close. In the shallows, the roof of the amphibical came right out of the

water again and we could see how far we were from land. I didn't want to think about going back home, I wanted to stay there forever.

We were about to dive again when we hit and rebounded off something in the water, something the class four's sonar clearly hadn't picked up.

'Damn!' said Halley. He tried to reverse the craft but failed. 'It's caught on something.' The more he tried to back away, the more the engine strained, but whatever we were caught on, it was holding us tight. Each time we pulled a little away from it, only to smack back into it again.

'You'd better stop,' I said. 'This isn't working.'

'I could use the freezing mechanism but we're too close, we'd be caught up in the explosion.' He shut off the engine. We bobbed up and down, at least the rear of the craft did, the front was held firm.

'I'll have to take a look,' he said. He bit his lip and cursed. There didn't seem any other option so he opened the roof and climbed out. We both put our hoods and visors on. On his hands and knees, he edged to the front of the vehicle. It dipped lower in the water. I saw him reach down and struggle with something below the surface, fighting to keep his balance. His whole stance showed his frustration, and he stopped from time to time for a rest before trying again. He clambered off the vehicle on to what I guessed was a rock just beneath the surface.

He grabbed hold of the front of the vehicle and heaved, but whatever he was trying to do wasn't working either.

'Nisien's machine's caught on a rock and I'm scared of damaging it,' he yelled.

I had a vision of Nisien's volcanic outrage if he heard his beloved prototype Barroblaster had been wrecked.

'I'll get out to make it lighter,' I shouted and copied him, edging along the slippery front of the craft on my hands and knees. I splashed into the water on top of a rocky shelf; we were lucky not to have smashed into it. When Halley got his head out of the way, I could see the problem: a spike of rock had impaled itself through the gap between the chassis and the Barroblaster casing. Between us we attempted to lift the front of the craft but it wouldn't budge. We sat back on our knees, panting.

'There's an obvious design flaw,' said Halley. 'The gap there. We'll have to tell him. If we ever go back, that is.'

My heart sank. If we ever go back? Of course we would have to go back. The truth was crushing.

'There could be something inside the amphibical we can use to break the rock spike,' I said to the back of his head. We both knew that using our sauroters was out of the question, again because of the likely damage to the Barroblaster.

I crawled back to the cabin and searched inside. Any kit it contained was sparse and rudimentary by the standards of more modern craft and for the first time I

noticed the lack of normal emergency equipment, obviously because no one expected this particular amphibical to be driven far beyond the Base compound, let alone as far as we'd gone that morning. Diving into the sea had been beyond reckless, particularly if the sonar was faulty. Nevertheless, my heart ached for everything I had seen and I wanted so much to keep faith with that afternoon's dream. If only we didn't have to return to Base.

I heard Halley chipping away at the rock with something and guessed he must have found a tool in his utility belt, or a stone from the reef. Turning to look, I was horrified to see that he'd removed his visor and was using its hard edge to hit the rock below the waterline. The water was splashing up into his face.

'What are you doing?' I cried. 'Put that back on.'

Halley sat up again. 'Anything in there?' he called.

'Nothing.'

'Got no choice.' He shrugged, looking at the sky, which had darkened incredibly quickly while we were underwater. 'It's loosening though, I don't think it'll take long.'

I looked at the sky too. There was no sign of any dragomansk. We were closer to land now though, so closer to danger.

'Do you want me to get out again?'

'No,' he called. 'When this rock breaks, it'll shoot backwards. Someone needs to stay inside and steer, we can't swim in all this kit.'

I primed my sauroter and stood up in the cabin to keep him covered. It was strange, with all the technology we were used to, here was Halley, bashing about in the sea with a makeshift axe. The sound of the splashing blows mixed with his curses. I could see how frustrated he was getting as his gloves slipped and he struggled with the wet visor. He removed the gloves and threw them on to the front of the vehicle. I stretched over and rescued them before they fell into the sea. The sky was still clear of enemies but to make everything worse, it had started to rain. The sea was cold and choppy and I had to concentrate on keeping the rear of the vehicle steady. I hoped the rock would break soon.

'Ow!' Shaking his hand, Halley squirmed in pain.

'Are you all right?'

He smiled half-heartedly back at me, sucking his finger. 'Won't be long.' Crouching again, he took a few swings then stopped to reassess the situation. Without saying a word, he whipped off his hood and began wrapping it around the visor.

'Halley, put that back on!'

'Only for a second,' he called, not looking at me. 'I just can't get a grip on this thing. And if it would just stop raining here all the time, that'd help.'

'Do you want your gloves back?'

He shook his head, still absorbed in the task. This was incredibly dangerous and I kept on sweeping the skies with my sauroter.

Halley fell back. 'Yeah, done it!' he shouted.

Everything happened at once. The amphibical lurched back and crashed into the water. I had to drop the sauroter into the passenger seat before I could balance the vehicle. The alarm sounded on my tile. From the corner of my eye I saw a dark blotch appear in the sky in the swirl of grey clouds and grow as it headed for us.

'Put your hood on. Dragomansk!' I yelled.

He had already seen it and was on his feet but his hood and visor were gone. I could see them drifting away on the water to his right. He was already shooting at the creature as I reversed the vehicle, trying to get it level with the rock shelf so he could jump in. It was above Halley in seconds.

'GET IN NOW!' I screamed but it was impossible for Halley to turn his back on the humming beast. It flitted in the air just metres above his head, preparing to take aim, its jaws parting in a rictus grin. Halley's shots had all gone wide. I joined in, but it was hard to aim when the amphibical was jolting about and each shot from my sauroter sent it wobbling even more. Under cover of my fire, Halley turned, but a bolt of brown filth shot from the gaping jaws, hitting Halley straight on the back of the head. He dropped down to his knees and in absolute terror I saw him put his hand to the back of his head and stare at the hissing wetness on his fingers. He screamed. Smoke rose in a halo around his head and I shrieked too, but the dragomansk was gearing up for another shot.

With one hand, I fired my sauroter. With the other, I somehow managed to catch hold of Halley's shoulder and wrench him up over the side of the amphibical so he tumbled bloody head first into the footwell. My shot had gone wide but with Halley inside I could command the roof to close. With forensic precision, the dragomansk shot at the impenetrable roof, covering the screen with the poisonous, bubbling acid.

'Halley, Halley!' I shook him. The back of his head was an indescribable mess. I removed the canister of neutralising powder from my belt and sprayed it over him. He was twitching and groaning. Crouching beside him, I tried lifting his head very gently to look at his face. His eyes had rolled back in his head and although he was still breathing, he was out cold.

I backed the amphibical away from the rock shelf. The dragomansk was still firing, coating the whole craft in so much sticky glue, I could feel it beginning to weigh us down in the water. If this continued, I realised, we might sink. I didn't know how to dive so I just kept reversing as quickly as I could. I activated the old front roll-cleaner but a third of the way down the front window panel, it jammed in the brown mess. I tried it again but it was stuck fast. Now I was left with a much-reduced view of the outside and for all I knew, I could be reversing into anything, even another part of the reef. The dragomansk was still attacking us, flitting here and there, its course impossible to predict.

I hadn't tried to use the Barroblaster myself before but it used very simple holographic sights and was activated by one big stupid-looking button to the right of the steering zone. There was no safety mechanism to tell you how far back you had to be from the target so I simply had to guess. Aiming was going to be difficult with only a small rectangle to see through, which was covered in rain. I knew I had just one shot left before my view was completely obliterated. With clammy, shaking hands, I activated the sights and the luminous green tunnel appeared which I adjusted to contain it within the clear part of the window. At some point, the dragomansk had to fly into the centre of my sights, but I must wait for that to happen and the longer I waited, the more I could feel the acid goo striking the craft and the more I could feel us sinking.

'Come on, come on,' I said through gritted teeth. For all I knew, Halley was dying in the footwell, curled up in a foetal position. If the dragomansk took much longer, we'd both be dead and at the bottom of the sea.

My finger on the button was shaking. Then through the tiny area of window, the dragomansk shot sideways into view. It was there ahead of me, staring at me with its enormous compound eyes and for a moment, squinting through the rain, I could see what it saw, the reflection of our amphibical. I even thought I could see myself, a tiny pale face staring out of a small dark rectangle, reflected a

myriad times in their glassy surface … before I pressed the button.

The blue beam shot from the front of the craft and encased the creature. I watched in awful exhilaration as it flattened to an ellipse. When the beam shut off, the ellipse exploded on either side in vile plumes of goo. I reversed again as quickly as I could, which wasn't very quickly now, and spun my hand in the steering zone to turn us around. I had to get us away from the acid slick coating the water, but more than anything else I had to get Halley medical help.



'Captain Calamus, please, how is he?' The Captain walked down the corridor without stopping to acknowledge me and I had to run after her. When she did slow down and turn, she wouldn't meet my eye.

'Dying a slow and unpleasant death,' she said. 'Doctor Carter is doing his best for him. He hasn't regained consciousness, which is probably a blessing. Where the acid has eaten away the flesh, it has allowed poison to be delivered straight to his nervous system. At present, nothing can be done to save him.'

She was rubbing her forehead distractedly. 'Irresponsible.' She was only just managing to control her temper. 'Wasteful disregard for life. Never has such an incident happened on one of *my* missions and you are both wholly responsible. When Halley dies, you alone must answer for what the pair of you were doing in the middle of the sea in a remote location, in a decommissioned vehicle and disregarding the most basic safety requirements.' By the end of this speech she was visibly shaking.

It wasn't the moment to try and explain and I knew it couldn't be justified. I was broken by the news about Halley. It didn't seem real. I felt sick and light-headed.

'Can I see him?' I asked.

'No.'

'Please…'

'Halley has one chance, but it's a very slim one,' she continued in the same angry tone. 'I know all about the celephet and your opposition to it. If you agree to Doctor Carter's fitting it again, if we finally discover the genetic code of the dragomansk it may be possible to create an antidote that could save your friend. We have the technology to make one quickly, but only if we get that code.'

'Captain Calamus.' I was trembling. 'The celephet won't work, you have to believe me.'

She waved her hand dismissively, nearly striking me, and strode off. I called after her but she didn't reply. I was left on my own in the empty corridor. For one paranoid moment, I wondered if the whole horrible episode was yet another of Carter's plans to try and get me to wear the celephet; then I remembered the excruciating agony on Halley's face as I pulled him into the cabin and the sight of him curled up in the footwell with the back of his head in such a mess and I hated myself. In the room behind me Doc Carter was trying to save his life and what was I doing?

If I'd honestly believed that wearing the celephet could have helped, I might have agreed to it, but I knew with absolute certainty that it was at best futile. There was only one chance to save Halley and to quote the Captain, it was a very slim one. While everyone was busy trying to save his life, I would slip back to the Museum.

Nothing had changed since the first day Halley and I set foot in the hall of statues because no one ever went there. I crept in like a fugitive. I was about to ask the unthinkable. In the fossil room, I began by clearing away the crinoid circle on the floor, stacking the fossils neatly against the wall. The circle had been my construct, now it felt like my intrusion. The Museum wasn't mine and I wanted to show some respect. There wasn't much time though, I had to ask what I had come to ask.

I turned off my tile and stood in the near total darkness with only the smallest light stealing in through the open doorway behind me. I knew some of our poems off by heart. I recited them. The room was so very dark, it was easy to imagine faces, shapes that moved. I finished.

'Jonah?' I said. 'I'm going to choose to believe you can hear me because I'm too scared to believe you can't. I've come to ask you something, but it's not on behalf of my people, it's for me. My friend is dying…' I had to gulp back the tears because it wasn't time to break down yet, there was still this great request I had to make.

'Jonah?' I continued. 'My friend is dying because he was

attacked by the dragomansk. All that might save him now is … is…'

A grey shape swooped past my head. I decided to carry on.

'All that might save him is an antidote and you know the only way we could possibly make one. If we know the dragomansk genetic code. Jonah, can you help me? My friend is dying.'

Bird-like flapping circled over my head.

'Oh, thank you,' I cried. 'Jonah, thank you for coming back. I want to save him, but I know what this will mean. I will make you this one promise: if you give me the code, I will do everything in my power to safeguard the Earth. I have a plan and I think it might work.'

'Tired.' The word echoed around the room, from every corner at once. 'Tired … tired … tired…'

'I know,' I said.

'Tired of death.' The voice was right in front of me. 'Tired of seeing others die.'

'Yes, yes.'

'My time is slipping away, I can feel it.'

'Please tell me,' I said. 'You know we feel the same about Earth. You know I don't want to harm Earth. And there are others just like me in my world, but they don't know what's going on.'

'I … I wish…'

'I give you my word I will do all I can to make Earth

safe, just tell me please.' I was rambling now and it was important to shut up and listen.

'We stepped out together, we were all struck down.' His voice seemed to be weakening.

'Please stay with me,' I whispered. 'Please tell me, Jonah. What is the secret of the dragomansk's code?'

'I was holding Malaky's hand. He went down before I did… I saw the flesh on his chest burst apart and his screams, his terrible screams… I knew I was next.'

'This is what happened to my friend, Halley. He was struck from behind in his head but – the same.'

There was a pause and for one horrible moment, I thought he'd gone.

'SAVE HIM!' cried Jonah.

'Yes?'

'Malaky's drawings, the code is on the wing…'

'Upstairs?'

'The code … on the wing…' His voice was fading fast.

'Jonah, thank you!'

'The code…'

'Jonah?'

'On the wing.'

And he'd gone.

On the floor amidst a pile of similar stones, in the dark, a small fossil glowed for the first time. A small fossil ammonite. It glowed once then began to fade, as though some phosphorescent light deep within it were dying. I

picked it up before the light finally went out. I held it to my lips.

I braved the awful gallery with a new sense of purpose. With my tilelight, I searched all the walls twice over, clambering up and down Halley's book staircases with my heart pounding, but I couldn't see it because I was panicking so much. It had to be there, it just had to.

Starting again by the door, I slowed right down and disciplined myself to make a steady and thorough search. This was only the first room of these pictures, but I had to start somewhere and if I made a thorough search and still couldn't find the code, I would go to the next room and the next. I wouldn't stop until I had found it.

The dragomansk were pictured with their wings a blur, as we were used to seeing them in real life. They bore down upon the hysterical men, women and children, all drawn in heavy, angry scratches. I was about a third of the way across the second wall when I spotted it, a dragomansk rising over a hill in the distance, its wings actually drawn in rather than just indicated as movement. I had to make a hurried new staircase of books to get a better look. The higher I climbed, the surer I became that this dragomansk was different from the others, more precisely drawn, and when I managed to get myself into a position where I could put my eye right up close to one of the wings, balancing precariously with one hand flat on

the wall, I could see a pattern inscribed on it. A tiny, intricate mass of unfamiliar symbols written in rows.

I had found it! I had found it!

I photographed the wing with my tile, very carefully and several times over, then sent the images to Carter, to Calamus, to Lana, to Pico, to everyone with the message:

The dragomansk code. It was at the museum all along.
sent from Bree Aurora.

On my return to Base, I was summoned to the Captain's quarters on the top floor of the building. I had never been there before. The large room was circular with windows all around. I was instructed to sit in the chair in the middle opposite the Captain's long, empty desk. Ahead of me was the same view you could see from the lounge on the floor below, with the sea in the distance. The weather was calm and still, no hint of rain, just mist on the distant brown hills to the north. I was left all on my own for maybe an hour before the door opened and in came Captain Calamus and Doc Carter. They looked like strangers, less certain of themselves than usual. The Captain sat behind the desk and Doc Carter sat by her side.

'How's Halley?' I faltered. 'Did you make the antidote?'

Doc Carter cleared his throat. 'Yes, and we've given it to him,' he said.

'It's early days but … he appears to be responding well,' added the Captain.

'Thank you,' I said.

Captain Calamus leaned forward and folded her hands on the desk, knitting her fingers together. I could see her reflection in its polished surface, right down to the furrowed brow.

'How did you do it, Bree?' she said. 'The best minds have been working on this for years, trying to discover the code.' She gave Carter a little nod of acknowledgement as she said this and he folded his arms, staring at me intently.

'You just found it, drawn on the gallery wall?' she went on. 'No one has taken notice of those old drawings for years. And the secret was there in plain view the whole time? How did you find that out?'

'The celephet,' Carter jumped in. 'The celephet, it must have been. Somehow the information has bridged its way into the girl's unconscious. The celephet told her where to find the code and it's just remained buried in her mind until today. There's no other explanation.' He threw up his hands.

'The celephet had nothing to do with it,' I said.

'Then how do *you* explain it?' The Captain's tones were measured.

From the corner of my eye, I could see a metamansk, riding the air currents in the west where the sun was almost setting, preparing to disperse its individuals across the skyline. The creatures' days were numbered. Soon, the dragomansk stranglehold upon Earth would be at an end. And then…

'Why was I chosen for this mission?' I asked.

'What does that have to do with it?' Carter snapped.

'Actually, you don't have to tell me, I already know. And you do too, Captain. And Core Panel at school. You had a problem, didn't you? Pioneer School is filled with elite students. How were you going to find someone of a low enough intelligence to be able to wear the celephet and not compromise it?'

They both looked dumbstruck.

'I don't see what this has got to do with…' Captain Calamus began.

'It has everything to do with it.' My voice was stronger now, bolstered up by all the frustration, all the pain I had been feeling for weeks. 'You were wrong. My intelligence is fine, it is just of a different type. My brain is different from your analytical brains. I have a talent, but it's an unusual one that the school can't measure so they never gave me much credit for it. My empathy and my imagination has led us to the code.'

'This is nonsense.' Carter shut his eyes and shook his head emphatically. 'It was the celephet.'

'It was not the damn celephet,' I said quietly, impressed by my calm. Carter glared at me. 'You've analysed the data, there was nothing there of any use, was there?'

The Captain lifted her hand, imploring Carter to allow me to carry on.

'Your invention did nothing,' I said, 'but torture the

consciousness that was stored at the Museum, who had a name by the way. His name was Jonah, I didn't make it up. I've been talking to him for weeks, stealing back to the Museum each night. We've been writing poems together. He's gone now, I'm glad to say, gone for good. He'll not be subjected to any more torture, Doctor Carter. That screaming face, telling us all to go away – that was Jonah, responding to your celephet. Oh, and by the way…' I removed the small ammonite from my pocket. 'This was it. The storage device. You might be interested.'

The two of them stared incredulously at the insignificant piece of limestone. After letting them look for a moment, I replaced it in my pocket.

'And this is how—?' said the Captain.

'How I learned the secret, yes. I returned to the Museum this afternoon because I was desperate to help Halley, but I knew that the celephet was useless. I begged Jonah to help me. I didn't know if he would or not. We're the old enemy, aren't we, us Martians? That's right, Captain, I know all about the War for Earth and he knows I know.' I nodded at Carter. The Captain turned to him, but his eyes stayed fixed on me as though he wanted to kill me. 'I did it myself, do you understand that now?' I said.

'The evidence seems … quite compelling,' said the Captain.

Carter jumped to his feet, his face a mixture of rage and frustration. I felt triumphant. I'm almost ashamed to

say so, with Halley still fighting for his life downstairs, but I did. I met his gaze, steadily and surely.

He strode from the room and I was left with the Captain.

'It seems you are owed some sort of apology,' she said. 'And the Martian race owes you a debt of thanks. You have hastened the next stage in our Great Quest and Purpose, Bree Aurora, and your name will live on.'

This was it, the moment I'd most feared.

'Our Great Quest and Purpose,' I said, 'has meant different things at different times, hasn't it, Captain?'

'I don't follow you.'

'Well, at one time, and not that long ago, the recolonisation of Earth was an integral part of our Great Quest and Purpose. I know that's true.'

She smiled and shook her head, feigning confusion.

'I have something else to tell you,' I said. 'When I left the Museum this afternoon, once I'd sent you the message about the code, I didn't come straight back to Base. I took a detour, out towards the landing craft where I knew I'd have the time and privacy to make a broadcast.'

The Captain's smile faded.

'I sent my broadcast to everyone I know on Mars, everyone at Pioneer School, to all my friends and their families as well as my own. I sent it to a hundred and twenty-nine people altogether and I asked them to share it as quickly as possible. That was almost two hours ago,

plenty of time for it to be spreading from our Dome to others across Mars right now. I sent our poems, Jonah's and mine, which are about how precious life is here and how vital it is that we preserve it. How we have a countless amount still to learn here that will help us achieve a successful future, even if it means we'll take longer to get there.'

'You told them—?'

'I told them about the danger Earth is in. I told them everything I know.'

The Captain scrolled on her tile and her eyes widened. With all that had been happening at Base over the past few hours, she clearly hadn't had time to check on incoming messages from Mars.

'Bree,' she whispered. 'Bree, what have you done?'

'I may have reset our Great Quest and Purpose, Captain Calamus. I sincerely hope so.'

Postscript: One of the poems that I sent with my message back to Mars.

Frog

Solemn frog,
Most unsmiling creature,
You enter the pool like a large drop of rain
And swim with liquid grace, absurd geometry
And glassy brightness,
Around the dry rock where I sit on this hot afternoon,
Causing minimal surface disturbance,
Casting diminutive waves.
Almighty frog,
King of the mirror canals,
Climbing out coated in liquefied light
You slip between leaves, out of sight.

Ruth Morgan grew up in Llandovery and studied English at Cardiff University. She has written extensively for children of all ages, including scripts for animation and radio. Ruth lives in Penarth with her partner, illustrator Chris Glynn and their son, Gethin. As well as writing, Ruth teaches part-time and is a visiting storyteller at Cardiff Castle. Her many interests include amateur astronomy.