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opening extract from

GemX

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1

Sixteen-year-old Maxo Evangele Strang ascended in the SkyLift with his right hand attached to his right temple as if he were injured, or in pain. Normally he enjoyed the ride; his building was situated on one of the Heights' higher reaches and had a commanding view over the west side of the Polis. On a clear day one could see all the way from the Enhanced Sector down to the Dreg Estate 4. But on this day Maxo felt not that he was looking out over the world but that the world was looking in at him, more particularly that the world was focused on whatever it was that lay beneath his right hand at his right temple.

This wasn't exactly true.

Far from having his gaze fixed on Maxo's shielding hand, Bovis Frank, a fellow GemX who happened to be travelling in the same glass elevator as Maxo, was staring so hard out of the window you might have thought his life depended on it. And if Bovis also had one hand clamped to his face (which he did, though in his case it was his left hand that seemed welded to the little gap of skin between his eyebrows) Maxo didn't notice. It wasn't that those of the GemX genotype weren't intelligent. They were, preposterously so, in fact. It was just that other people's lives didn't feature very much on their radars. So if Bovis was glad to get out at Sky Floor 6 or Maxo glad to travel on

unhindered, then that's just the way it was.

At Sky Floor 15, the lift door opened and Maxo stepped into the small space between the elevator shaft and what looked like a large flat sheet of steel. Maxo presented the iris of his left eye to a small red scanner and the steel sheet slid noiselessly aside. At no point did Maxo's hand leave his temple, not even when he stepped into LivingSpace1 and the two ordinary walls, picking up on his mood, immediately changed from enlivening pink to soothing green. The most soothing of the eight green options, Maxo noted grimly; things must be bad. Wall three, which was a fifteen-foot plasma TropScreen, sensed his shadow and turned the volume up on the Announcer: *It has now been one hundred and twelve days since the last Atrocity. Leaderene Clore, may her name celeb for ever, and you, the Pure Germline Members of the Polis, are winning. Together we are winning the fight, the Polis is strong, the Polis is healthy, we progress each and every day towards perfection. But we must never once let down our guard, vigilance is everything . . .*

'Shut up,' said Maxo without conviction and the TropScreen continued, oblivious.

Maxo headed for WashSpace2, his en suite shower and personal refreshment room. Once inside, he checked (and then rechecked) that he'd CombLocked the door behind him, even though he knew his GenParents were never in the apartment at this time of day. Then he paused, took a slow breath and finally leant towards the mirror. Sensors automatically measured his distance from the glass and swivelled four spotlights onto the part of his body he was presenting: his face. Maxo Strang took away his hand. The shock made his head dip, made it bounce and reel. The

spotlights readjusted themselves, wheeling with him, dipping and bouncing, trying to keep the light (or so Maxo thought) on the hideous obscenity, for there it was (there it was!), the tiny indentation that stretched from the corner of his eye for about half an inch towards his hairline.

It was true then.

It was worse than true.

Could things be worse than true?

As Maxo pushed down hard on the mica basin surround to steady himself, he heard the sudden purr of his body-hugging ambisuit, a sure sign that the suit's thermostat had been triggered. He must be sweating. He tried to regulate his breathing, to control himself, to concentrate on the rest of his beautiful GemX face. His GenSire, Dr Igo Strang, had chosen well: Maxo had what was still considered, even after sixteen years, to be the premier bone structure, the 740; it had never been superseded. His grey eyes were top of the range Gentype 5.5 and his skull (currently shaven, as was the fashion) unmistakably model 47. Put simply, his perfection was not something he'd ever had to think about, it just existed. It was.

But now there was the line. The half-inch line that had drawn itself on his perfect face. Maxo could not ever remember being so revolted, it was a physical thing, it made him feel that, but for the ambisuit, he might throw up. The suit was working overtime, the high collar was like a thin layer of ice around his neck, it was cooling him, freezing down his emotions. And yet—that Clodrone driver! That's when Maxo had first known there was something wrong. He'd seen it on the face of some lowly sector driver; the surprise, the disgust, on the face of a Clodrone, for celeb's sake! And

that's when he'd put his hand up, he'd felt the little crack, and, of course, he wondered, because it was so unlikely, so horrible, he wondered if there was just a mistake, a pale thread just caught on his temple, nothing to do with him, nothing to do with his body at all. And that's how he'd managed to get home, by covering it up, by not even being tempted to look, by refusing the reflections in the glass of the elevator—which could just have been shadows. But now he was at home and he was standing in front of a mirror with four spotlights telling him the awful truth: he had a crack in his face.

Maxo Evangele Strang opened his mouth and he screamed.

2

In Dreg Estate 4, not many miles (but a very great distance) from the Heights, fifteen-year-old Gala Lorrell vowed never to go to Hospital 17 again. What was the point? It only exhausted her mother and they learnt nothing that they didn't know already: namely that Perle Lorrell was dying and there wasn't anything anyone in the Polis was prepared to do about it.

Her mother was sleeping now, at last at home, at last in her own bed, but she did not look at ease; her frail body was angular and wrong beneath the thin blankets. Gala wanted to see—needed to see—the strong limbs and the generous, laughing face she remembered from childhood, but here was something grey and sucked-in. Gala watched her mother's gaunt fingers twitch restlessly about her neck as if to clutch the sheet tighter, ward off the cold. The fifteen year old went to her own room and took the final blanket from the bed. She could sleep in her clothes, what did it matter?

The blanket was as threadbare as her mother's other covers, but Gala tucked it in as tenderly and as warmly as she could. Then she tidied a few little wisps of hair from her mother's forehead. A moment later, she found herself running soft fingertips down her mother's sunken cheek, as if she could make things well by just wanting. Perle Lorrell exhaled, a very small sound, but

there was something of contentment in it, and Gala felt a sudden wash of gladness.

'Mama,' she said. Perle did not respond, but her sleeping, so Gala thought, looked more gentle.

Time to fix the window, then. The cardboard that Gala'd taped over the broken pane had almost worked loose again. She went to the tiny kitchenette and looked in the relevant drawer.

No tape.

Of course, no tape. Who would have bought tape but her, and she'd forgotten, hadn't she? As if to console herself she reached out and turned on the kitchen tap.

No water.

And she could kill for a cup of something hot. She screwed the tap on full and put the plug in the basin. There would be water some time between now and morning, that's how it worked in the Estates, you got water on a rotational basis. Only you never knew in advance which hours you would have water, and which hours not. People hoarded water, of course, she did it herself, it was the only way to survive. But you couldn't leave the taps running when you were out (and she'd been five hours at the hospital) because, if the basin overflowed, if water ran down into the flat below, well, you never knew, you never knew who was living beneath you, how violent they might be. She'd have to stay awake then, listen out, all night if necessary, because they had to have water, not just for drinking but for washing, she needed to keep her mother clean. What now?

Tape.

No tape.

Water.

Gala went to the bathroom; normally there was always at least a cupful of water left in the bucket. But not today. If Daz had used it to clean his paintbrushes, she'd kill him.

Daz.

Where was Daz? He should be home by now.

Gala turned the taps on in the bathroom, she put the plug in the basin, and the bucket under the showerhead.

Towel. Her brain was thinking slowly, in single items. She was very, very tired. She took the small hand towel from the bathroom to her mother's room. The broken window had never shut properly anyway, there was space between the window and the window frame. Maybe if she was clever, she could wedge the towel somehow, make another layer between her mother and the outside world. She eased the material into the window gap, securing the towel edge around the window catch. Not bad. It might hold, so long as there wasn't too much wind.

When she'd finished, she stood a moment looking out over the sprawling estate. Eastwards was totally dark, the buildings blind except for the strange behind-curtains flickering of candles and the low, uncertain light of torches. She should be grateful about that anyway, grateful that it was her area that had electricity tonight. Electricity wasn't rotational, there were just random power-outs, when the system overloaded somewhere. They said there were power-outs in the Heights as well, but she'd never seen the lights off there. Never.

But she was grateful. It would have been quite impossible to support her mother up the four flights of stairs to their flat with one hand taken up with a torch.

Of course, it would have been better still if the lift had been working, but the lift had been out of action for fifteen months. She didn't see how it would ever be repaired, since no one seemed to know who was responsible for repairing it. In earlier days her mother might have known, might have been able to talk to someone, get a contact, make something happen by force of will. But her mother was ill and no one else seemed to care.

Still, at least they lived on Floor 4. If they'd been allocated Floor 17, well, then things would be desperate. She couldn't afford to think of the people who lived on Floor 17. Gala closed her mother's curtains, pressing them close against the towel, trying to make things as draught-proof as possible. She had to hope there wouldn't be Sudden Onset Snow. Since the Global Warming Catastrophe, weather had become both unpredictable and dangerous. No, they couldn't have a Sudden Onset, they couldn't have that much bad luck.

She was parched, she needed to drink something. She returned to the kitchen; looked in the desolate fridge. The remaining half-pint of milk she'd bought as a treat for her mother was off. There was no keeping milk fresh when the fridge power was so uncertain, she knew that well enough, but she'd wanted her mother to have that milk, the taste of it, its wholesomeness. Only her mother couldn't drink much and now it was off. In the cupboard was tinned milk, but she needed to keep that for her mother's morning tea. Gala put chocolate powder—a lot of chocolate powder—into a pan and heated it with the rancid milk. As she waited for it to boil, she thought again about the hospital.

The consultant assigned to her mother was Dr Parks. He was young and tall, but with a stoop, as though some weight on his shoulders was gradually, relentlessly, crushing him down. The doctor had looked at Perle Lorrell's notes, he had looked at Perle Lorrell. He had shaken his head.

'I'm very sorry,' he had said, 'but cancer is not an officially recognized disease in the Polis any more.' His shoulders sagged further. 'Cancer,' he said, 'is on the eradicated list, you understand what I mean?'

She did understand what he meant. He meant that, because the Enhanced Sector were protected against cancer, because they no longer got cancer, it wasn't worth the drug companies making the anti-cancer medicines. There wasn't enough money in it. The money was in the little pink stabilizers the Enhanced used to control the side effects of their anti-cancer modules. If she had wanted stabilizers . . .

'But cancer isn't an absolutely eradicated disease,' Gala had burst out, 'even in the Enhanced Sector.' Everyone knew that. There were still pre-enhanced and proto-enhanced people with dodgy cancer cover, with immunity from breast cancer maybe but not from lung cancer. The eradicated list—it was all just TropScreen lies! 'So there must be some drugs,' Gala said.

'Yes,' replied the doctor. 'At a price.' He sighed. 'I'm so sorry.'

Gala stirred at the dark milk.

Pain. She wasn't being quite fair about that. Because Dr Parks had given her mother something for pain. In fact, Dr Parks had given her a bottle twice the size of the one he was allowed to prescribe her—diamorphine. Gala knew what it was, her friend Parsha's mother had

died of it. It was a kind of heroin: it stopped the pain but it stopped your life too. Gala had the bottle concealed beneath her pillow. It would stay there until the very last, until after the Agaricus Blazei bloomed. If they bloomed, Gala's mushrooms, the 'cure' for which she'd paid such a price and tended daily with such hope.

The milk bubbled and frothed and smelt bad. Gala was pouring it into a mug when she heard the front door. Stretch.

'And just where the hell do you think you've been?' she burst out as her brother came into the room. She hadn't realized she was still so angry.

Stretch was as good a name for her brother Phylo now at fourteen as it had been when they'd nicknamed him at twelve, when he'd suddenly started to grow, to shoot up. He was as angular as his sister, but much longer and thinner. He moved like a young giraffe, uncertain of why it had such a strangely shaped body. But his eyes were piercing blue and very focused.

'Do you know what day it is,' he flashed back at her.

'Yes,' said Gala. 'The day your mother had an appointment at the hospital. The day you said you'd stay at home and help.'

'Oh.' His face fell. She saw immediately that he counted himself to be in the wrong and her anger melted.

'How were the stairs?' he asked.

'We managed,' she said.

'And the doctor?'

'As we thought.'

'Nothing to be done, then,' said Stretch.

'Yes,' said Gala, and then, 'No.' The mushrooms had

to grow. They had to work. She didn't mention the mushrooms. Stretch had laughed at them before.

'I hate them,' said Stretch. 'I hate them so much.'

'The doctor was nice. Dr Parks. I felt sorry for him.'

'Not the doctor,' said Stretch his voice rising. 'Them! Those little pieces of plastic that call themselves "Enhanced".'

'Yes,' said Gala cutting him off. 'I know.'

There was a brief silence and then Stretch asked, 'Can I have some of that?'

'It's off.'

'Yes,' said Stretch. 'So I smell.' He looked longingly at the cupboard where the tinned milk was, but didn't either ask for the good milk or criticize his sister for buying the fresh.

'Here,' said Gala gratefully, and, taking a second cup, she divided what was left of the chocolate drink.

'So where did you go?' Gala asked.

'To the Lab,' he replied.

'Not again.'

'It's the anniversary. Today's the anniversary.'

Now it was Gala's turn to be in the wrong. Was it possible that she had thought so much about her mother's appointment that she had forgotten to think of her father's disappearance? Four years to the day. He'd gone to the Enhanced Sector in response to a call for Clean Genes, gone with thousands of other Naturals to the lab of Dr Igo Strang to give skin cells in return for a few feligs. Only, while the others had returned, Finn Lorrell had not. Stretch believed that Dr Igo Strang must know something, must be hiding something. Yet what could the man know? He was the Chief Scientist on the programme, not the worker who would have logged her father in, or taken the skin scrape, or watched their

father leave. They'd been through all that. Going to the Lab achieved nothing, just kept Stretch's anger lit.

But she still said, placating him, 'And?'

'They've heightened security,' he burst out. 'Again! There's no talking to anyone. Especially not to Dr Igo Strang.'

Of course. He'd never get to speak to Dr Igo Strang. But Stretch didn't understand that, wouldn't give up. Gala wanted to touch her brother, gentle him as she'd gentled her mother, but her hands remained around her mug.