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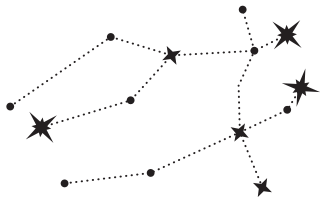
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This book is dedicated to all the people
who have ever felt like they didn't fit in.

And to my husband, Mark, who loves me exactly
the way I am, even when that is A LOT – as far as they go.



PROLOGUE

Earth year 3886

There were two babies lying side by side in the crib. One of the twins was fast asleep. Blaze with his bright red hair was stocky and had his arms flung out so they took up the whole space. The other baby, half his size with fine auburn hair – and as yet unnamed, because nothing her parents tried seemed to fit – was scrunched in a ball at the end of the mattress, all wide eyes and gasping fish mouth. Little silent tears rolled down her face.

She was definitely awake.

Fluro looked around for help, but their parents were out for the night and he was on duty. He had a list, which he took out of his waistcoat pocket, but big eyes and silent tears were not on it.

'Well then, wide-awake little one, we need to go off-plan here. Any thoughts?' Fluro folded the list

carefully back into his pocket and bent his head over the crib. 'Hey there, stop pulling my moustache! It *is* a fine specimen, but it's not to be mauled.'

The tiny baby giggled as Blaze grunted in his sleep. His leg kicked out at his twin sister.

'This space is unfairly distributed,' Fluro stated. 'Shall we take action and go for a little wander? I can't miss it, and you may as well join me.'

✸

Fluro let out a gigantic *oof* as he settled his bulky frame into one of the uncomfortable angular chairs on the balcony of the Nova family's apartment.

'Now there, if you face in that direction – stop kicking me! – you shall enjoy the fun too.'

He smoothed his handlebar moustache and adjusted his monocle. His eyes moved up the neon skyscrapers that dominated the streets, squashed together to make the most of every centimetre of space. Luminous travellator walkways hundreds of floors up linked the buildings. Cars beeped and crawled slowly across the skyways in the gridlocked city, and hologram billboards blared out adverts for the latest dronebots and new Sky Malls. The buildings and the sky above bathed them both in a fluorescent glow.

The one thing they couldn't see were the stars.

'Everyone has forgotten what we once had,' said Fluro with a sigh. 'I wish we could witness them. Against a real night sky, not this artificial glow. Even if it wasn't for the shell, all this befuddling light pollution would make those wondrous gaseous giants nigh on impossible to see, as they pursue their stately paths light years above us.'

The baby on his knees jerked and she let out a little yelp like a puppy.

'Too bright, little one? Or are you reacting to the secret I have gifted you?' Fluro dropped his booming voice to a whisper. 'I know the truth of what is beyond our false sky, and the lies that keep it secret, the hate that it masks and the desperate people it keeps outside. This secret is far too dangerous to share, so I'm only telling you because I know you won't remember, and sometimes I just need to say it out loud. Thank you for listening.'

She yawned in response, and he pulled out his pocket watch to count down the seconds. 'Centuries ago, people would *choose* to come on holiday to places like this, with its glittering neon and flashing lights. But cities like ours were few back then – in most of the world there were quiet fields and trees

and deserts and everywhere a night sky . . .' Out of habit, Fluro glanced over his shoulder. 'Who would have guessed then that today most of us don't give any thought to the fact that we are a planet, and have no idea that it means we are part of something bigger, an entire galaxy! And the unspeakable horrors we have committed to be *safe* in that secret.'

He readjusted his arms awkwardly and placed the baby so that her head was nestled in the crook of his elbow, her face gazing upwards, towards the artificial shield above that encircled the entire planet like an eggshell made of blinding, fluorescent light, keeping the galaxy beyond firmly hidden away.

'Two thousand, two hundred and four years ago, an astronomer called Edward Halley recorded seeing a burning object as it shot through the night sky. And every seventy-five or seventy-six years, we get to celebrate that moment when Halley's Comet is visible for several weeks after its long journey around the sun.'

Fluro snorted. 'Well, it *would* be visible, if it wasn't for that blasted shell.' He looked down at the baby. 'This is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and though you are exceedingly wriggly I'm very glad I get to spend it with you. According to my calculations,

this is the very moment that Halley's Comet will be closest to our planet.'

She burped and giggled, then grabbed his chunky index finger.

'Right, here goes. Look up and imagine.' Fluro closed his eyes and pictured himself sitting on a hill in the middle of fields, his back against an old oak tree. No illumination. No city blaring. The sky above was completely velvet-black, apart from the awe-inspiring display of hundreds of thousands of twinkling stars, and there, traversing the sky, the comet burned, leaving the light of its tail in its wake.

He opened his eyes and blinked rapidly. Could he really see it? He gasped as tiny shimmering lights – almost like spores in earthy tones – poured down from the sky and gathered together in the shape of an arrow, zipping and darting as if they were looking for something. Fluro held his breath as he saw the spores hesitate, pause as though they were listening, and then change their course towards him.

Not him. *Her!* They were coming for the baby!

She let out a cry of delight. Fluro looked on in awe as the spores danced around her head, and she laughed out loud and tried to grab at them.

He knew he should protect her, flee, cover her face, do something! Instead, frozen with wonder, he watched as the glittering spores faded away to dust, leaving behind a constellation of freckles upon her little face. He saw one tiny spore that remained by her right ear, its glisten fading, and he reached out and touched it just before it disappeared. A burst of electricity shot through him, making him feel as though his teeth were going to shatter. And when he looked at his index finger, he saw there was now a trio of stars upon its tip.

Stars? Why did he think that?

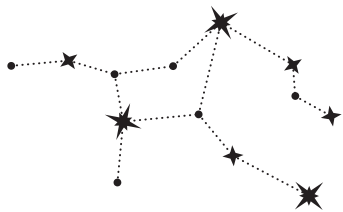
Freckles, *freckles* on his fingertip, silly old man.

Fluro studied the baby's face as his brain frantically whirred and he attempted to close his open mouth and make sense of what he'd witnessed. His brain jolted back into gear as he realized he needed to protect this child in his arms.

'That's going to take a bit of explaining when I hand you back to your parents, and a lot of omission. Do you know how rare freckles are these days? I'll simply pretend I didn't notice anything when they ask me, bumbling old fool that I am. I'm sure we can convince them that freckles sometimes manifest in the first few weeks of life, right?'

She swiped her hand over her face, as if her brand-new freckles were making her itch.

'I suppose they are something for you to get used to, little one. Let's get you back to bed. Everyone with their boring, plain faces is going to be jealous – and you are going to be so proud of your freckles!'



CHAPTER ONE

Earth year 3897

Today was the day.

Today was the day I – nope, I couldn't let myself think about that yet, or I'd just crawl back into bed.

Maybe I *could* crawl back into bed? No one would probably even notice.

'Astrifer Nova, you up yet?' shrieked my mam from outside my bedroom door.

Well, that was that plan scuppered. There was no point hiding.

'M'up,' I mumbled back at her, leaving the cosy safety of my bed – jumping, really, before it flipped itself over to become my desk. There was meant to be a safety feature that made sure you were safely out of it before it flipped, but my doofus of a brother, Blaze, had somehow removed it and I often found myself upside down, splattered flat on the floor in

the middle of the night, to the sound of him nearly wetting himself with laughter in his room next door.

I wrenched on my hologrammatic jumpsuit in the school colours of cerise and lime.

After I'd tripped over my own feet and finally got my legs into the jumpsuit's correct legs, I asked our homebot to administer my morning asthma meds and up my dose (my breath had been more scratchy than usual), then turn my bedroom wall into a mirror. Last time I left home without checking my face, it turned out I had sleep-drool on my chin, and I didn't want to have a day like that one again. It was incredible how many things Blaze could think of that rhymed with *drool* – bet his English teacher wished he tried that hard in class. But he didn't have to, did he? Blaze the athlete, the chosen one.

My entire body suddenly appeared in front of me as the mirror mode clicked in, and I stared at my reflection, feeling deflated, like a wrinkled balloon.

It wasn't because of the shiny jumpsuit I'd put on with the ridiculous epaulettes (modelled on those the Neon Government wore) that looked like they could balance breakfast, a small child *and* a zonk-ball on each of my shoulders. And it wasn't the fact that I was still shorter than Blaze.

I was deflated because my whole face was still covered in freckles.

I tapped my hair to activate the bobble function and it was instantly pinned back. I moved closer to the mirror and traced the uneven specks on my face with my finger, stretching the skin to check for any sneaky new additions. My skin was really pale pink, the sort that blushed all over at the slightest thing, especially if someone looked at me, and along with my very fine auburn hair, now scraped back in a ponytail, it all came together in the perfect mix to enhance my freckles. Ugh.

I sighed and turned off mirror mode. Every morning, there they were. Even today, which was *also*, by the way, my eleventh birthday, *and* the day-that-must-not-be-mentioned because otherwise I might actually be sick.

I sat on the edge of my desk chair and began to count the attempts. The first was laser treatment. The freckles popped back on my face before I'd even left the room, which meant an immediate refund and befuddled reactions from everyone at the clinic. The second attempt was burnt sage scent and a chant in a tent in the alternative district of the shopping mall. The tent was set on fire. My freckles

stayed. I'd had three different attempts at three different clinics with the latest permanent make-up machines. *Just pop in your ideal look from these millions of images and we'll make a blend that suits you!* They had to send for an engineer each time when their machine malfunctioned. In one of the most bizarre efforts, I had my cheeks licked repeatedly by a 'sacred cockatoo' at the city zoo on the seventy-ninth floor of the Freedom Complex and, as I'd predicted, my freckles remained. Then I tried genetic treatments that used DNA from Blaze. Zip. Nada. Nowt. Still freckled.

Blaze said my freckle DNA must be the only bit of me that's stronger than him.

I checked the time, then pulled the old atlas out of the drawer I'd labelled 'IN-DEPTH REVISION – MATHS' to keep out prying eyes (Blaze's). I carefully ran my fingers over the gold-embossed lettering on the cover and began to flick through the pages.

I looked up at my wall where I'd tacked up the maps I'd made. For my seventh birthday, Uncle Fluro had found me a supply of *real* paper and pencils of all different grades. You had to actually sharpen them – they didn't do it automatically – and all these beautiful wibbly bits of wood shavings,

like rose petals, came off. (I kept those in my pants drawer with my other special things because Blaze doesn't look there either. When you have a twin, you have to get good at creating hiding places.)

I was getting better at drawing maps, with my cross-hatching more precise and intricate than in my early attempts. My calligraphy – fancy squiggly lettering – was less wobbly too. There was nowhere on Earth left to discover, of course, so instead I mapped my days – recorded the routes I took, added doodles of things I'd encountered and wrote out phrases I'd overheard. Uncle Fluro called them my 'life-story maps', and I liked that. Last year I gave him one for Christmas and I thought he might have died because (a) he didn't say anything for seventeen and a half minutes, which was a very long time for him, and (b) he's old. But it was OK – he wasn't dead. He just said he was astonished. Most people are astonished with me for not-good reasons, so that was very lovely indeed.

I was about to fall into my finger-twirling flow of my favourite daydream of being an explorer and a cartographer (the fancy name for a map-maker), when there was a bang on my door and I snapped to attention and hurriedly hid my atlas.

'Countdown to Work-path Allocation Ceremony is go! Move it, Astrifer!' yelled Dad from the other side of my door. 'Oh, and happy birthday, by the way!'

My stomach went back into overdrive and the sick feeling intensified. No chance of being assigned 'cartographer' today, that was certain. Blaze would get his dream, while mine was crushed before it had even begun.

Hold on. In Future class, we were learning to become a new generation of perfect thinkers.

'*No chance* is a very negative mindset,' I said to myself. 'PMA – positive mental attitude all the way. Here goes *everything*!'

My desk suddenly flipped over and I had to leap out of the way as I heard Blaze laughing outside my room. 'Happy birthday, twinnie!'

'Blaze Nova, just wait until I –'

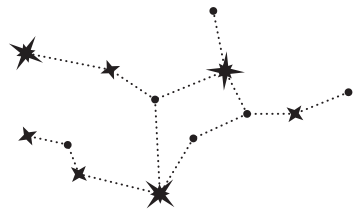
My foot caught in the other leg of the jumpsuit and I hurtled across the room as I desperately tried to stay upright. I crashed into the wall with my shoulder and the mirror mode pinged back on. I looked up at my freckles.

'Blaze and Astrifer Nova, hurry up right now or you won't have time to open your presents before the WPA ceremony!' yelled Mam.

I peered closer at my reflection, then grabbed the thick concealer that was my last-resort attempt to have skin like everyone else's. As I smeared it all over my face, I noted that there was possibly even a new freckle by my nose. Did they multiply when I wasn't looking? *That* was my birthday present: I was stuck with my freckles, including a new one. *And* it was the day of the Work-path Allocation Ceremony. The day Blaze's whole future and mine would be decided.

So I'd say this was guaranteed to be the *worst birthday ever*, but . . . PMA! *Think positive, Astrifer. It will be fine. No – it'll be great!*

After all, how bad could it get?



CHAPTER TWO

'Uncle Fluro came by after you'd gone to bed last night,' said Dad as I stepped into the living room, where everyone had gathered.

Blaze was in the corner doing a headstand against the LED wall. I tried to push him over by poking him in the ribs, in retaliation for the desk–bed flip – and the millions of other mean things he'd done. But instead he clonked me on the head with his foot, so I sat on the couch and pretended that it didn't hurt.

'I thought I'd heard him!' I said to Dad. 'Why didn't you wake me?'

'Baby girl, he has no concept of kids and bedtime on school nights,' said Mam as she moved some cushions from behind me to the other side, to make the couch symmetrical.

I glared at her. 'I'm actually sitting here, Mam!' But she pretended not to notice.

Then she *did* notice my face and bent right over me, her eyes so close I could see the laughter lines around them.

'You missed a bit,' she said, and took out the concealer she always carried in her pocket, squeezed a splodge on to her finger, then dabbed it on the end of my nose. 'Is that a new one? A birthday freckle present! How cute. Now remember: *we* love you –'

'– exactly the way you are,' Blaze and Dad chimed in. Blaze followed it with the exaggerated sound of someone being sick.

'Look at this, Ava.'

Dad pinged an image from his watch to the LED wall. Mam glanced up from smearing my face in goo to stare at the advertisement for a new fancy skyscraper and its penthouse apartments that was partly hidden behind a head-standing Blaze.

'We're happy exactly where we are,' Mam admonished Dad, but there was a teeny wistful look in her eye and I couldn't fail to notice that the skyscraper was the one right next to where my best friend Rainbow lives.

Ex-best friend, I mean.

I shook my head to get rid of the image of me and her playing in this living room, the time we tied all Blaze's athletic gear into knots and used it to form a gigantic sculpture of him. You could tell it was him by the broad shoulders and massive head. She was always brilliant at being on my side and stopping Blaze from being quite so evil to me. Or at least she would help me get back at him.

Dad nodded, but I spotted him gazing at the gleaming skyscraper's sprawling rooftop pool complex before he flicked it off. We lived in a tiny apartment in the really crammed area of town. We were lucky to have a balcony, but Dad was always daydreaming of more space. He said we kids were his ticket out of here. But when he said that, he mostly looked at Blaze.

'Can we open the presents from Uncle Fluro now?' asked upside-down Blaze.

'Birthday breakfast first,' said Mam.

I stopped thinking about Rainbow by focusing on Uncle Fluro instead. He wasn't actually related to us, but was a close friend of the family. Mam said he was lonely because he didn't have a family of his own, so making him part of ours and calling him uncle was the right thing to do. He was the

President of the Seed Research Society, the SRS, based at the Museum of Trees, which was my favourite place. Blaze thought Uncle Fluro's work was deathly boring. I mean, there *was* that time when Uncle Fluro talked so much about seed propagation that I fell asleep in my soup and nearly drowned. Most of the time, though, I thought it was really interesting to listen to him talk about old weird things from the past, if you could stop him going off at tangents.

Uncle Fluro sort of looked like a walrus – gigantic, tall and wide, with a moustache. He wore a monocle, which was just a glass lens placed over one eye to help him see. Because he's so ancient this wasn't immediately rectified at birth, like they do now, but even when he had the choice later on to fix his eye, he refused to get surgery, which was another thing that Blaze thought was weird about him.

I loved going to Uncle Fluro's domain, the Museum of Trees. Apart from some volunteers and the kids who were taken there on school trips in their first term, few people went there any more. There was always a new e-petition to tear the museum down to make way for a new skyscraper, but it had a preservation order.

The museum is the only place that doesn't hurt my brain.

Dad had made pancakes for breakfast, a special birthday treat. My stomach was doing nervous flips even before I thought of food, but I sat down at the table and gamely poured syrup over my stack anyway. *Remember your positive mental attitude, Astrifer! Today is going to be great.*

I looked over to see Blaze going bright red as he timed his headstand. And people called *me* weird?

If I could join the Neon Government, no one would call me weird any more. Maybe at the Work-path Allocation Ceremony I would be set on the way to becoming a top general! *See how positive my mental attitude is? General Astrifer Nova has a nice ring to it.*

'Nervous?' asked Dad as the homebot turned the lights up to brighter daylight settings. I had to blink repeatedly at the sudden glare.

'Nah,' said Blaze as he turned himself the right way up and plonked himself down at the table. He grabbed a pancake from his stack, then swiftly dropped it and blew on his fingers.

'There's no way they'll give me anything but athlete,' he said in his massively irritating, smug voice as he poured on syrup, then squirted bright-pink

strawberry canned cream and rammed it into his mouth.

'That's my boy,' said Dad, and gave him a high five.

'It's her you've got to worry about,' Blaze said through a mouthful, and pointed a sticky finger at me. 'I'm betting the Eight Ball gives her sky-parking attendant, or greeter at Zapster's Drive-Thru. Ooh, or skyscraper window washer! Actually, I wouldn't mind that one. But Azzy wouldn't cope – she's scared of heights!'

'Stop being so mean to your sister!' said Mam as she leaned over to nick some of my food. 'Oh, best pancakes yet, Jet!' she said to Dad, and blew him a kiss, which he pretended to catch. Parents are gross.

'Anyway, pet,' she continued to me after she'd wiped her fingers on my napkin. 'Those jobs are automated, so I'm sure you'll get something much better than that.' Then she gave me a grin that wasn't very encouraging and it sort of wobbled off her face.

'Change of subject from boring Astrifer and her soon-to-be nosedive of a career,' said Blaze, flicking a dollop of cream at me. 'Who's excited about her ex-best pal's dad being at our ceremony?'

At this, any smidgen of appetite I'd had faded away, and I slowly placed my fork down on my plate. A week ago, the school newsletter had pinged up on the screen to announce that our school had won the worldwide competition to have President Attack and all his entourage attend our Work-path Allocation Ceremony. President Attack was not only the leader of the Highlighters – the elite – and the Neon Government – the people who ruled over us – but also Rainbow's dad. At first I thought this was too much of a sinister coincidence, purely designed so he could have his final laugh about splitting up our friendship and rubbing it in my freckled face.

Then I swiftly realized he would have forgotten about me the second he closed our front door and that I meant absolutely diddly-squat to him.

The excited conversation around the table faded to a buzz as I shook my head to try to stop the memory of the last time I saw him. No good. It slunk into my head on replay, fast-forwarding from the beginning of my friendship with Rainbow, right to the end when he destroyed it.

The first time I met Rainbow was in Year Three when she joined our school and stole the e-pad from Henry Short, the kid who had started everyone

calling me FMS (I can only whisper it in my head as the full words hurt too much – Facial Mud Splatter), and she used it to hack the school e-system to send notes to every parent telling them that Henry's hair was so minging it had nits – which everyone thought had been eradicated hundreds of years ago – *and* that he was also responsible for killing the school cyber-hamster. I thought she was the bravest, most awesome person in the whole world ever, but it was an accidentally out-loud thought and I ended up actually telling her. She gave me an unexpected hug so tight I thought I would explode, but in a good way. I didn't mind being hugged by Rainbow. Then she told me that we were best friends now. We were exact opposites of each other, but opposites that seemed to somehow match. My fine auburn hair, her rainbow-coloured afro hair. My parents with their jobs as a Sky Shuttle engineer (Mam) and schoolteacher (Dad) and her dad being the leader of, well, everyone. Her love for cyber-cats, mine for cyber-dogs. We were brilliant together!

Until her dad stepped in.

'It's not that I'm opposed to their friendship,' Rainbow and I heard him saying to my parents as we pressed our ears up against my bedroom door so

we could listen to them in the hallway on the other side, our hands tightly gripped together. 'I'm sure you understand the spotlight that Rainbow is about to step into. I've kept her out of the limelight until now, but all eyes will be on her soon. Rainbow is progressing to the Highlighter Academy – the place for the elite to be taught all they need to know to thrive – and your daughter is, well, not.' I could picture him peering down his nose as he said that, and Rainbow gripped my hand tighter. 'Now is the ideal time to help the girls forge new paths and new friendships.'

'Rainbow will always be welcome here,' I heard my mam say.

'I'm not sure . . .' There was a pause. I imagined President Attack's wasp-stung expression as he took in our cramped hallway, brimming with all the stuff that wouldn't quite fit anywhere else. 'I'm not sure that would be wise. Never mind the, erm, *disparity* in circumstances; there's also the issue of your daughter's singular appearance. It attracts attention enough already and raises the wrong sort of questions. Really, it wouldn't be fair to her, would it, to risk further exposure and public critique?'

I remembered the way my entire body tingled with shame, and how I dropped Rainbow's hand from mine. It was the first time it had been made so plain that I was not one of the elite – and, in actual fact, someone to be avoided and looked down upon.

Rainbow screamed and kicked out, yelling as her dad dragged her from our flat, but I just stood there in resigned silence, a single tear rolling down my cheek.

I reached a hand up to my cheek now, puzzled by its wetness as I tried desperately to make the image fade in my mind.

'You still with us, Azzy?' Blaze waved his hand in front of my face and then wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve. 'Weirdo. What presents did Fluro –'

Mam coughed.

'What did *Uncle* Fluro bring?' asked Blaze.

Dad grinned in response, saying nothing.

'Show me!' exclaimed Blaze.

I knew how much Blaze resented being made to hang out with Uncle Fluro, but even he couldn't deny how brilliant Uncle Fluro's birthday presents always were. The memory of the ancient nautical compass he gave me, which mariners would have

used to find their way at sea, made me nearly forget about Rainbow, and what day it was, and the thought of seeing her dad. Instead, I got all fizzy inside, and clicked my fingers repeatedly in anticipation of what this year's present might be.

'Outside on the balcony,' said Dad.

Blaze sprang from the table, wrenched open the balcony door and leaped through it. I slowly plopped off my chair and followed them all out on to the balcony.

We lived on the 452nd floor of our skyscraper, and the day exploded to greet me. I screwed my eyes shut tight and gulped repeatedly to try to dampen the clashing sounds until I got used to the glare and chaos. Well, until I could cope with it, anyway. No one else I knew needed to acclimatize themself the way I did, had to brace themself against the onslaught that was outdoors.

I took deep belly breaths into my tummy, pushing them out and in again, just like Uncle Fluro had taught me. In my dreams there were no skyscrapers, or 3D adverts leaping across the buildings; the landscape was dusky blue with a scattering of pinpoints of light. I held on to this image to calm myself down.

When I opened my eyes, neon billboards flashed, advertising sports clothes and teams while the sponsors shouted taglines in an ear-piercing cacophony of noise. I saw a giant holographic Rainbow, her black skin bejewelled with diamantés, and she was wearing her signature Highlighter Kid jumpsuit, beaming out from an advert for their new TV show.

It's really hard to forget about your ex-best friend when she's a certified megastar.

I cast my eyes in the opposite direction. Buildings towered around ours, painted in excruciating shades of pink and lime and yellow, with flashing bulbs and banners. I looked up to the sky above at its usual daytime setting of ever-changing fluorescent light.

'Check this out, Azzy!'

Blaze sat astride a brand-new, top-of-the-range electro-bike, exactly the same one that was being advertised on the building opposite, where digital fireworks exploded as the hologrammatic bike spun in a 360-degree move, the tinny and brash jingle repeating over and over.

I gave Blaze a thumbs up and he rolled his eyes at me. 'No wonder no one thinks you're cool.'

I looked around hopefully for my present, and Mam handed me a small plastic protective envelope

that contained something hard, that couldn't be bent. I ripped open the parcel, knowing that if Blaze got that bike, this must be special too.

'Oh,' I said in a small voice as I inspected a flat, shiny disc with a hole in its centre. It looked like a metal doughnut that had been squashed and was as big as my hand.

'It's a – erm . . . Mam, what is this?' I asked, holding it up for them all to see.

'Is it a Frisbee? You can't even throw properly!' crowed Blaze.

Before I had time to respond, Dad said, 'OK, you have your gifts – now on to school for the ceremony!'

With that, he bundled us all off the balcony, through our apartment as he activated our outdoor shoes and they pinged on, and out of the front door.

'Can't be late today!' he said, locking the door behind us.

'Race you to the elevator!' said Mam.

'Race you down the stairs!' countered Blaze.

'You're on!' yelled Mam and Dad in sync, as Mam elbowed Blaze out of the way to get a head start.

The others raced off, leaving me behind. I traced the edge of the shiny disc with my finger, wondering

what it could be. Then I walked to the elevator, pressed the button and took a puff of my inhaler as I waited for it to arrive. Could Blaze be right, and it was just a Frisbee?

That would pretty much sum up the day so far.