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MAGICALIA

Storm of Chaos



JENNIFER BELL

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For Beks

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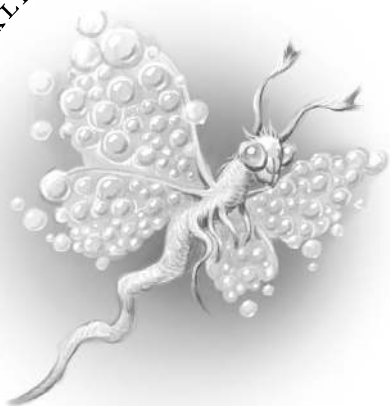


JENNIFER BELL



WALKER
BOOKS

— STICKLISH —



FROM THE NOTEBOOK OF BITSY WILDER

CONJURING ESSENTIALS:

Magicores – strange creatures with unique powers.

Every species is conjured from a different source emotion that shapes its behaviour, appearance and abilities.

Magicare Type – Species are grouped into six types:



Armourer magicores are red-eyed
and have a remarkable physical gift



Clairvoyant magicores are white-eyed
and can influence the minds of others



Elemental magicores are blue-eyed and have the
ability to control a particular force, energy or element



Metamorph magicores are yellow-eyed
and are talented at transformations



Weaver magicores are green-eyed
and can craft remarkable objects



Hunter magicores are purple-eyed
and skilled in seeking particular things

Farthingstone – a strange meteorite that landed on Earth thousands of years ago. It gives some people the power to conjure magicores.

Farthingdust – particles that appear when a magicore is conjured or extinguished.

Wild Magicore – a magicore whose conjuror dies before they have extinguished. Wild magicores are black-eyed and have enormous energy reserves, enabling them to exist for centuries. They have a will of their own.

Magi-woven – crafted by magicores.

Energy Level – magicore species with more powerful abilities require more energy to conjure. There are five scaling energy levels:

ALPHA · BETA · GAMMA · DELTA · OMEGA

(Note: Omega-level magicores can only be conjured using Arkwright's Gyrowheel, an ancient magi-woven device crafted by Gilander Arkwright, founder of the Weaver Guild.)

Cosmodynamic – cosmodynamic people can use farthingstone to transform the energy in their bodies into magicores. Most people, however, are cosmotypical. For them, farthingstone is useless.

Conservatoire – a top-secret academy where cosmodynamic children, or initiates, are trained to be

conjurors. There are six conservatoires in the world, one on every continent except Antarctica.

Shade – an illusion all magicores can cast to turn themselves invisible.

Riddlejax – an ancient conjuror with mysterious powers, responsible for the deaths of many innocent people. He can shapeshift and steal energy from other people's magicores so he heals faster and ages more slowly. Riddlejax wants cosmodynamic people to rule over cosmotypical people and will stop at nothing to achieve his aims.

Chaos-conjurors – followers of Riddlejax. There are estimated to be close to two hundred.

Chaosphere – a symbol used by chaos-conjurors.

Guild – an organization of conjurors who use their skills to benefit humanity in secret. There are six guilds that work together in an Alliance:



ARMOURER GUILD

Guild Colour: Red

Role: Security and transport

Headquarters: Red Citadel

Characteristics: Decisive, brave and proud



CLAIRVOYANT GUILD

Guild Colour: White

Role: Medicine and healing

Headquarters: Cloud Gardens

Characteristics: Thoughtful, kind and sensitive



ELEMENTAL GUILD

Guild Colour: Blue

Role: Science and exploration

Headquarters: Azure Institute

Characteristics: Curious, experimental and imaginative



METAMORPH GUILD

Guild Colour: Yellow

Role: Trade

Headquarters: Golden Palace

Characteristics: Flexible, quick-thinking and perceptive



WEAVER GUILD

Guild Colour: Green

Role: Art and engineering

Headquarters: Emerald Caves

Characteristics: Outgoing, creative and spontaneous



HUNTER GUILD

Guild Colour: Purple

Role: Espionage

Headquarters: Secret Barracks

Characteristics: Strong-willed, ambitious and loyal



1

Bitsy's stomach lurched as the lubberwharl cabin plummeted. The floor shook, and she grabbed hold of her best friend, Kosh, to avoid stumbling into any of the other initiates crammed inside the metal cabin.

"Can anyone tell me a fact about a lubberwharl?" Master Ollennu asked, raising his voice above the roar outside.

"Lubberwharls sometimes stink like three-day-old used underpants?" their friend Mateo offered, spreading his feet to steady himself.

Master Ollennu chuckled. "Lubberwharls are a unique species of magicore that use odours to communicate, so yes, if they're in a bad mood, they can smell unpleasant. There is a lubberwharl beneath us right now, carrying this cabin."

Bitsy wrinkled her nose, glad she hadn't seen – or smelled – the lubberwharl when they'd boarded. Other than the shimmering threads of light in the walls that indicated it was magi-woven, the cabin had looked like an ordinary lift. Unlike a lift, however, it could travel anywhere.

Steadying herself against the cabin wall, a girl with round glasses piped up. “Lubberwharls are metamorph-type magicores. Their source emotion is satisfaction – the pleasant feeling you get when you quench your thirst or scratch an itch.”

“That's right,” Master Ollennu said, pulling a wad of stapled booklets from a pocket in his emerald-green conjuring overalls. “Lubberwharls also have the unique ability to change their density at will, allowing them to become as light as a feather or as heavy as lead.”

Bitsy thought about how helium balloons floated because helium was less dense than air. “Is that how lubberwharls move around?” she guessed as the cabin juddered. “They make themselves less dense than their surroundings?”

“Or more dense,” Kosh added. “We're moving *down* right now. That must be because the lubberwharl carrying this cabin is denser than whatever it's moving through, right?”

Master Ollennu nodded as he handed everyone a booklet. “Sounds like you two have an excellent grasp

of science – something that will come in useful on today’s field trip. We’re on our way to Futurecore, the largest exhibition of new inventions in the conjuring world. It’s held every four years at the Azure Institute, the Elemental Guild headquarters. In order to earn your *ELEMENTAL HISTORY* badges, you must complete these questionnaires during your visit.”

As Bitsy collected her questionnaire, she surveyed the various badges sewn onto the straps of other initiates’ black overalls. They’d been earned by spending evenings, weekends and school holidays during the last year training to be conjurors at the European Conservatoire of Conjuring. Since she and Kosh had only enrolled three months ago, they had some catching up to do.

“My parents said there’s always loads of cool stuff at Futurecore,” Mateo whispered to Bitsy and Kosh, fiddling excitedly with the camera hanging around his neck. He wore a *Legend of Zelda* T-shirt under his overalls, and his curly dark hair was tucked behind his ears. “I’ve always wanted to visit the Azure Institute, too. This trip is going to be awesome!”

Bitsy assumed her dad, an Elemental, had visited Futurecore before and made a mental note to ask him more about it when she got home. She grinned at Kosh. Exploring a new place in the conjuring world would be incredible but doing it with your best friends? Even better.

Everyone wobbled as the lubberwharl cabin came to a stop. There was a loud clang, and then the cabin doors slid open. “This way!” Master Ollennu called, walking into a noisy crowd.

Stuffing her questionnaire into her leather satchel, Bitsy followed the group into a vast, brightly lit glass dome bustling with conjurors wearing different-coloured overalls. She gasped as she caught sight of silvery fish swimming around in the dark water behind the glass. “How are we *underwater*? Ten minutes ago, we were inside the conservatoire!”

“Is this building even safe?” Kosh asked, staring up at the glass roof and the tonnes of water pressing down on it. “Where precisely *is* the Azure Institute?”

“It’s rumoured to be somewhere at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean, but the exact location of every guild headquarters is top secret,” Mateo told them, pointing a thumb over his shoulder. “Lubberwharls travel via secret underground waterways to reach the oceans. They’re the only way to get down here – and yes, it’s perfectly safe.”

Looking behind them, Bitsy staggered. Their cabin was docked at a port in the dome wall, but the real spectacle was bobbing in the water behind it – a huge, blubbery magicore with velvety brown skin, flippers and a heart-shaped tail that flicked playfully through the water. The lubberwharl had round yellow eyes, a toothless grin

and a long, feathery moustache that wrapped around their jaw and neck like a cosy scarf. Two straps fastened over their flippers, attaching them to the cabin, which they wore like a back-to-front rucksack against their squishy belly. “Where’s the lubberwharl’s conjuror?” Bitsy asked, stunned.

Mateo pointed to several other lubberwharl cabins docked around the dome’s edge, where initiates and conjurors were either disembarking or boarding. Once each cabin was reloaded with people, the lubberwharl carrying it released a bubble from their mouth before rising through the water and vanishing out of sight. “Lubberwharls travel back and forth from wherever in the world their conjuror is located,” he explained. “Their conjurors act like anchors, so they must remain on the surface to guide their lubberwharls back. You’ll learn more about it when you take RIDING LUBBERWHARLS later this term.” He pointed to a yellow star-shaped badge on the straps of his overalls, grinning.

“Less talking, more listening, please!” Master Ollennu called as they approached a group of armourer guards standing in front of a wall of lockers. Ahead of them, the crowd filtered into an adjoining glass dome under a huge silver arch. Bitsy could tell it was magi-woven because it glittered like the walls of the lubberwharl cabin.

As Master Ollennu pulled a ring off his middle finger,

Bitsy saw it glow green and realized it must be made of farthingstone. He passed it to one of the armourer guards, who secured it in a locker and handed him a small key in return. “For safety reasons, only exhibitors are allowed magicores inside Futurecore, so all visitors must place their farthingstones in a magi-woven locker before entering the exhibition through that magicore energy scanner,” Master Ollennu explained. “We can collect our farthingstones when we leave.”

“Is that really necessary?” Bitsy asked, fiddling with the farthingstone pendant hanging around her neck. It had once belonged to her mum, who had passed away when she was five, and she wasn’t keen on parting with it.

“The inventions showcased at Futurecore are highly experimental,” Master Ollennu replied. “Although exhibitors are required to test their inventions before they demonstrate them, unexpected surprises can still happen, especially if there are hundreds of unpredictable magicores around. I remember a past Futurecore before this rule was introduced, where a device got stuck in the feathers of an orloon and made the creature shoot snow from its armpits, creating a blizzard in the exhibition hall. Several people had to be taken to hospital with frostbite! Believe me, these precautions are absolutely necessary.”

Sighing in resignation, Bitsy did as Master Ollennu had instructed and handed over her farthingstone

pendant. Mateo did the same with his beaded farthingstone bracelet and Kosh with his farthingstone whistle, each tucking their locker key safely into a pocket of their overalls. Once the other initiates had surrendered their farthingstones, the group joined the flow of people entering the exhibition.

The thrum of footsteps and voices got louder as they shuffled under the scanner into the adjoining dome. “Whoa!” Kosh exclaimed, standing on his tiptoes to see over people’s shoulders. “Look at this place!”

As the crowd parted, Bitsy’s eyebrows shot up as she finally took in the view. The exhibition was spread across an area the size of a football field, with stalls arranged in a grid. Inventors wearing different-coloured overalls called enthusiastically to passing conjurors, demonstrating whirring machinery, whizzing gadgets and bubbling chemicals. Glowing paper planes flew loop-the-loops through the air while various magicores scurried along the aisles. Fireworks erupted overhead with loud bangs and whistles, painting the glass ceiling with dazzling flashes of colour.

Mateo aimed his camera left and right, snapping furiously. “This is incredible!”

An acrid chemical smell wafted into Bitsy’s nostrils, swiftly followed by the delicious aromas of apple and cinnamon. Her insides fizzed with excitement as she

looked around, curious about where the smells were coming from.

“Everyone, remember where we are,” Master Ollennu instructed. “We’ll meet back here in three hours. Enjoy exploring – and don’t forget to complete those questionnaires!”

As initiates raced off in groups, Master Ollennu wandered towards a stand with a display of ornate perfume bottles and a flashing sign that read: **MEDISCENT: HEAL MINOR WOUNDS WITH A SINGLE SPRITZ!**

“The questionnaires can wait,” Kosh muttered, grabbing an exhibition brochure from a nearby rack and scanning it eagerly. “What invention shall we look at first? Shoes that allow you to walk upside-down or a gadget that turns pencil shavings into solid gold?”

Mateo pointed towards a kiosk overflowing with vintage sweet jars, each filled with a brightly coloured jelly bean, pastille or gummy. “Look – they’re handing out free samples at that one!”

Bitsy sniffed the air and realized the sweet stand was where the strange aromas were coming from. Kosh tucked the exhibition brochure into his pocket as the three of them rushed over. A blonde woman in white overalls was offering some initiates a bowl of neon orange jelly beans. “Try a delicious Boost Bean,” she said in a soft French

accent. “Proven to refuel your energy between conjuring!”

The kiosk had an official sign displaying the exhibitor’s name, a French flag and a large silver rosette awarded by Futurecore judges. As Mateo grabbed a handful of Boost Beans, Bitsy’s attention was drawn to a jar of swirly blue hard-boiled sweets labelled SHATTERDROPS: BREAK TO LIQUIFY ANY MATERIAL. She was about to ask the exhibitor what exactly that meant when a voice from the booth next to them cried, “ROLL UP! ROLL UP!”

A tall girl with a farthingstone headband glittering in her tight brown curls stood waving her hands in front of her like a magician. Under her black overalls, she wore a tie-dyed T-shirt printed with the slogan MY OTHER T-SHIRT IS A PROTOTYPE. “Imagine if you could see through the eyes of *any* magicore!” she announced dramatically. Her booth was empty except for a handmade sign displaying her name – *Skye Fraser* – and the Australian flag. There was no rosette. “Well, now you can with my amazing *neurobands*!” She held up a thin metal tube no bigger than her hand. “Can I get a volunteer to help me demonstrate?”

At the vintage sweets kiosk, a few initiates scoffed and turned their noses up. One dark-eyed boy sneered, “Looks like a stupid tin can. I bet it doesn’t even work.”

Skye’s face fell as the other initiates laughed, making Bitsy’s jaw stiffen. It must take guts to exhibit an invention

at Futurecore, especially if you were only an initiate. “Why are some people so nasty?” she muttered.

“I don’t know,” Kosh said, scowling at the dark-eyed boy. “It’s a pity no one has invented a machine to give people personality upgrades because I can think of a few who need one.”

As the sniggering initiates wandered along to the next stall, Skye swallowed and asked in a quieter voice, “Can I get a volunteer? *Please?*”

Bitsy, Kosh and Mateo all immediately raised their hands, making Skye’s face light up. “All three of you! Thank you, but I only need one volunteer...” Her cheeks flushed as she nodded at Kosh. “Will you please stand next to me?”

As Kosh positioned himself beside Skye, Bitsy felt a swell of pride, glad that her friends were the kind of people who lifted others up rather than putting them down.

After asking for Kosh’s name, Skye twisted one end of the neuroband anticlockwise, and Bitsy stared in amazement as the tube-shaped device instantly transformed into a much wider ring, the size of a crown. Skye placed the neuroband on Kosh’s head, gently pushing it down over his grey Oddingham FC beanie so it rested across his temples. A pattern of white lights flashed around the edge of the device, making it glitter like tinsel.

“Neurobands come in pairs: one is worn by you, and the other is worn by the magicore whose eyes you wish to

see through,” Skye explained, tapping her farthingstone headband and whispering, “Calculus, my guy, you’re up.”

A twinkling cloud of farthingdust burst from Skye’s headband with a soft crackle. The particles swirled through the air and morphed into a small, green-eyed magicore whose body appeared to be crafted from scrap metal. Calculus’s skin was made of welded copper plates, and a line of hexagonal bolts ran down his spine. With his long whiskers, pointed snout and round ears, he looked a bit like a rat. Electricity sparked along his wiry tail as he sniffed the air in Kosh’s direction, his whiskers twitching.

“Is Calculus a *raritas*?” Mateo asked, smiling. “I’ve never seen one before, but I’ve read about them.”

Calculus studied Mateo carefully. The magicore took a step forward, hesitated, then quickly scurried back. Bitsy noticed he wore a tiny neuroband – just like the one Kosh was wearing, but smaller – around his neck like a collar.

“His source emotion is uncertainty,” Skye said, scratching Calculus in just the right spot under his chin to make him squeak with joy. “Raritas are weaver types with the ability to craft unique machines. Calculus and I engineered the neurobands together. For this demonstration, he will cast a shade to turn himself invisible and hide somewhere near by. The neuroband should allow Kosh to see through Calculus’s eyes and identify where he is. Off you go, Cal!”

On cue, Calculus flicked his tail and vanished. “Now, shut your eyes,” Skye told Kosh.

Throwing Bitsy an uncertain glance, Kosh closed his eyes ... and flinched. “No way!” he spluttered, holding his arms out in front of him like a zombie. “It’s like looking through a fishbowl! I can see the world exactly how Calculus sees it!”

“That’s right!” Skye said excitedly. “Can you tell us where Calculus is?”

A wrinkle appeared on Kosh’s forehead. After a moment, he opened his eyes and scanned his surroundings, before pointing to a stout, bearded man in blue overalls standing a few metres away. “Calculus is standing by that guy’s feet.”

In an instant, Calculus appeared exactly where Kosh had indicated, his wiry tail swishing in delight.

Bitsy gasped and burst into applause. “Wow, what an invention!”

“It’s amazing!” Mateo said, clapping.

Skye beamed as Calculus scurried up her legs and settled into the top pocket of her overalls. “Thanks,” she said with a sigh. “You’re the first people to see me demonstrate the neurobands since the exhibition opened. I think because I’m the only initiate exhibiting, no one’s taking me seriously.” She gestured to her handwritten exhibitor’s sign. “Not even the organizers. I had to make that myself.”

“That’s so unfair,” Bitsy said, frustration burning inside her. “You deserve to be treated the same as any other exhibitor.”

Kosh lifted the neuroband off his head and returned it to Skye. “Still, to be the *only* initiate exhibiting is pretty amazing.”

Skye’s cheeks flushed. “It’s because I entered my neurobands into a science fair two months ago at my conservatoire – the Oceanic Conservatoire of Conjuging. First prize was a chance to exhibit them here.” Her eyes sparkled as she scanned the bustling scene around them. “My dream is to become a great inventor someday. I’ve always wanted to showcase my inventions at a prestigious event like this.”

Bitsy desperately wanted to try out the neurobands herself, and was already buzzing with questions – about the science fair and the Oceanic Conservatoire – when a bell rang, resonating loudly across the glass dome. All around them, people sprang into action, talking excitedly and hurrying off in the same direction.

“The Beaufort Prize demonstration! It’s starting!” Skye twisted a latch on the side of Calculus’s neuroband to unfasten it from around his neck. She then rotated both neurobands anticlockwise, resizing them until they looked like silver bangles, and slid them onto her wrist.

“Beaufort Prize?” Bitsy asked.

“The number one prize at Futurecore!” Skye flipped her exhibitor sign around to show a scrawled message: *Back in 20 mins*. “The winning exhibitor gets to present their invention in a big auditorium on the other side of the dome. I can’t miss it! Are you coming?”

Bitsy glanced at Kosh and Mateo, who both nodded eagerly. “Yeah, for sure. Do you know what the winning invention is?”

Skye leaned closer to Bitsy, her eyes wide. “It’s the most mind-blowing thing you’ll ever see! It has the potential to revolutionize the conjuring world as we know it. Come on – we need to get a good seat!”



2

Bitsy stepped aside to avoid someone's elbow as she and the others squeezed through the crowds outside the auditorium. "Skye, wait for us!"

Skye looked back over her shoulder. "Sorry, I'm just really excited! The Beaufort Prize is awarded once every four years. Everyone who wins it becomes a legend!"

"Why's it called the Beaufort Prize?" Kosh asked, hurrying closer.

"It's named after the Beaufort brothers – four gifted elemental conjurors who lived two hundred years ago." Calculus rocked around in Skye's pocket, clinging to the fabric of her overalls with his gleaming copper claws. "This year's winner is a little-known inventor called Emerson Park. He's never won anything at

Futurecore before. It's so inspiring!"

Mateo switched his camera to the video setting and started recording as they funnelled into a large auditorium with an empty stage on one side and a semi-circular bank of seating opposite. A huge, glittering BEAUFORT PRIZE sign hung from the ceiling. Skye pointed to some empty chairs in the third row, and they hurried over to claim them.

The auditorium filled quickly. Once the doors had closed and the lights dimmed, everyone fell silent, gazing at the dark stage. As Skye leaned forward in her chair, trembling with excitement, Bitsy smiled knowingly. Just like Skye, she had a dream, too – to become an investigative journalist like her mum. It was the reason she always carried her trusty reporter's notebook and pencil. She pulled them out of a pocket in her overalls. She had been thinking about asking whether she could start a student newspaper at the conservatoire, and this could serve as a perfect opportunity to gather notes for a sample story.

All at once, the spotlights illuminated. A hole opened in the centre of the stage, and a platform rose, lifting a bulky object covered by a black satin sheet. A voice announced through an overhead speaker: "*Futurecore is proud to introduce the winner of the Beaufort Prize, Mr Emerson Park!*"

Skye applauded enthusiastically as a portly man with

an askew red bow tie and messy brown hair stumbled onto the stage from behind a curtain. His square glasses had been mended with gaffer tape, and the pockets of his overalls were stuffed with all manner of things, from crumpled bits of paper and what looked like an empty crisp packet to screwdrivers and pliers. Bitsy blinked in surprise at the yellow colour of their overalls. She hadn't expected a member of the Metamorph Guild to be the winning inventor. Metamorphs weren't known for their scientific nature, like elementals, or their creativity, like weavers. Instead, they were characterized by being quick-thinking and perceptive.

Murmurs rippled through the audience as a peculiar magicore squirmed out from behind Emerson's legs. They were the size of a small dog but resembled a slimy maggot with pale yellow skin and brown ridges along their body. Bitsy wasn't sure where their head was, as she couldn't see any eyes, ears or mouth.

"What species are *they*?" Kosh hissed.

Mateo pulled a face as he aimed his camera at the stage. "I have no idea, but they're revolting."

On the floor by her feet, Bitsy felt her satchel vibrating and guessed that *Magicalia*, her magi-woven encyclopaedia of magicores, wanted to tell her the answer. Ensuring that no one in the row behind could see, she carefully pulled the book out and placed it on her lap. It

jumped open to a page in the D section, and Bitsy quickly found the right species:

disgust
GROSSI

[*Metamorph, delta-level*]



The grossi most closely resembles a giant grub, with a round body that is typically yellow or green and covered in dark, bumpy crests. Grossis have strong muscles and use concertina movements to propel themselves forward or jump into the air, leaving a slimy trail wherever they go. Their slime has many useful properties and can be used as an active ingredient in both healing salves and poisons. A grossi's unique power enables them to create perfect clones of themselves and other objects using their slime. When a grossi is extinguished, so are all of their clones.

“Magicalia says they’re a grossi,” Bitsy whispered to the others. “They’re conjured from disgust.”

“That makes sense,” Skye muttered, glancing curiously at *Magicalia*. “Cool book.”

Bitsy jotted a quick note in her notebook and then slipped *Magicalia* back into her satchel.

On stage, Emerson Park tapped a microphone clipped to his overalls, and a loud boom echoed around

the auditorium, making everyone wince. “Uh, sorry,” Emerson mumbled, his cheeks flushing. “Welcome to this demonstration of my Beaufort Prize-winning invention: the *replicator*!” His voice faltered just enough to betray his nerves, and Bitsy felt a pang of sympathy.

With shaking fingers, Emerson pulled on the black satin sheet, and it slid off to reveal an odd contraption featuring metal gauges, corkscrew pipes, pistons and a large brass funnel. One glass chamber contained a shiny mass of yellowish-brown slime.

Emerson smiled at the device and then pulled a crumpled piece of paper from one of his pockets. He studied it nervously and then looked up at the audience. “It is often said that a conjuror’s greatest limitation is the inability to conjure more than one magicore at a time,” he remarked, gesturing towards his grossi, who glistened like honey beneath the auditorium lights. “That’s why, using grossi slime from Sludger here, I developed the replicator. It enables conjurors to create duplicates of their magicores, known as *replicores*.”

Whispers filled the auditorium as Bitsy stared in disbelief at Kosh and Mateo. She now understood why Skye thought the replicator could revolutionize the conjuring world. If every conjuror could control a group of magicores – even duplicate ones – they would become significantly more powerful.

“Replicores are different to magicores,” Emerson continued, pushing up his glasses as he scanned his notes. “Magicores naturally extinguish once they have expended all their energy – or if they are slain – but a replicore’s energy continuously replicates within itself, allowing it to exist for a significantly longer time. Unlike wild magicores, who possess free will, replicores can also be controlled. May I have a volunteer to assist me with a demonstration?”

Everyone’s hands shot up. Desperate to learn more, Bitsy waved her arm above her head like she did whenever she wanted to catch her teacher’s attention at school. Emerson stuffed his notes back into his pocket and squinted into the bright lights. “What about *you* – the initiate in the third row with the blonde hair?”

Bitsy froze as she realized Emerson was pointing at her. “*Me?*”

Emerson nodded. “Would you like to join us on stage?”

As the audience burst into applause, Bitsy felt a rush of adrenaline. This was going to be amazing! Returning her notebook and pencil to her pocket, she got quickly to her feet.

“You’re so lucky!” Skye said as Bitsy shuffled past.

Bitsy’s insides did somersaults as she climbed the stairs to the stage, suddenly conscious that everyone was looking at her.

“What’s your name?” Emerson asked as she drew next to him.

“Bitsy Wilder,” she replied quietly.

A flicker of recognition crossed Emerson’s face, making Bitsy squirm. It was possible Emerson knew her name because her aunt, Melasina Spires, was the infamous leader of the Hunter Guild. However, it was far more likely that Emerson recognized Bitsy as one of the few people who had come face to face with a mysterious evil conjuror named Riddlejax. In the spring, Bitsy, Kosh and Mateo had prevented Riddlejax from stealing a powerful weapon called the gyrowheel, and just this summer, they had thwarted his plot to ignite a war between the cosmodynamic and cosmotypical worlds. Troublingly, no one had seen or heard from Riddlejax since...

“Well, Bitsy, thank you for volunteering.” Emerson patted her on the shoulder and turned to the audience. His grossi, Sludger, wriggled closer, leaving a slimy trail on the stage. “As Bitsy doesn’t currently have her farthingstone with her, she is going to borrow my farthingstone magnifying glass for this demonstration. Bitsy, I need you to conjure a fretfawn, which I will then replicate using the replicator.”

Fretfawn... Bitsy racked her brains as Emerson produced a small magnifying glass with a farthingstone handle from another of his pockets and handed it to her.

She'd read the entry for fretfawn in *Magicalia* before. While she couldn't remember everything it said, she was almost certain that fretfawns were metamorph-type magicores conjured from nervousness.

The handle on Emerson's magnifying glass glowed a mottled pattern of six different colours as Bitsy clasped it in her fingers, each shade representing a different type of magicore that she could conjure. Looking out at the audience, she gulped. She'd never conjured a fretfawn before, but the process was the same whatever magicore species you were conjuring, and with the practice she'd gained over the last few months, conjuring had become easier. Although she'd never done it with this many people watching her before...

"Take your time," Emerson said kindly.

Bitsy took a deep breath and tried to recall an instance, other than this one, when she had felt nervous. Nervousness was the sensation of inner turmoil you got before an event that you'd been dreading. It brought jitters to your body and made you want to gnaw on your fingernails. Bitsy could think of several occasions when she'd felt nervous – auditioning for the school play, encountering an unknown magicore and venturing into a dangerous place in the conjuring world. However, it was an earlier memory that stood out: her first day at a new school when she was just six years old. It wasn't

long after her mum had passed away, and she and her dad had moved to a new area. She remembered the feeling of butterflies in her stomach as she'd entered her classroom and been introduced to her new classmates. She recalled the dryness in her mouth and the itchiness of her new uniform. She evoked the gentle tone of her new teacher's voice and the distinct smell of crayons in the air...

The handle of the magnifying glass turned warm under Bitsy's fingers as a cloud of twinkling farthingdust burst through her knuckles and whirled into the air. The particles transformed into a long-legged magicore with mottled brown fur, who tumbled onto the stage in a clatter of hooves. The fretfawn resembled a startled deer with furry black antlers and wide golden eyes that peered out from behind a pair of enormous floppy ears. Bitsy sensed the fretfawn was a "he", and as he stumbled back a few paces, looking around anxiously, she got the distinct impression that he wanted nothing more than to bolt off the stage and hide.

"Marvellous!" Emerson exclaimed, collecting his magnifying glass from Bitsy and picking up a hose connected to the replicator. "Now, I just need your fretfawn to hold still..."

Sensing her fretfawn's unease, Bitsy reached towards him and let him sniff the back of her hand before gently stroking his nose. He batted his eyelashes, clip-clopping

his hooves calmly. “It’s all right, *Crayon*,” she whispered, knowing magicore names had to relate to the memory used to conjure them. “I just need you to stay right there.”

Emerson flicked a switch on the replicator and it began to buzz. The slime inside the glass chamber bubbled and a puff of smoke burst from the device’s brass funnel. Emerson frowned as if he hadn’t expected that to happen, but then aimed the nozzle on the end of the hose towards Crayon.

Yellow mist erupted out, falling over Crayon like fine rain. As droplets landed on the stage near Crayon’s hooves, they formed a thick fog that swirled around Crayon’s legs and body as if taking his measurements. The fog then floated into the space beside Crayon, shifting into the shape of a long-legged creature. With a squeaky pop, it vanished to reveal another fretfawn with mottled brown fur and floppy ears.

A *replicore*. Bitsy blinked, unable to believe the resemblance. The replicore looked exactly like Crayon, with one glaring difference: they had no eyes.

Emerson jumped at the sight of the replicore’s empty eye sockets lined with fur. “Uh, that’s not supposed to happen, but the replicator is only a prototype! I’m still tweaking it!”

Bitsy waved a hand in front of the replicore’s snout, but they didn’t react. She wondered how they were going

to move around if they couldn't see; perhaps their other senses would compensate.

"Bitsy's fretfawn is now this replicore's *source magicore*," Emerson continued hastily to murmurs in the audience. "Replicores are tethered to their source magicore and will copy their actions at *all* times, as I will now demonstrate." He pulled two strawberries out of a pocket in his overalls and placed them on the stage floor. "Bitsy, can you please tell your fretfawn to enlarge one of these?"

It was then that Bitsy remembered another piece of information from *Magicalia* – that fretfawns could alter the size of objects. "Go ahead," she told Crayon encouragingly. "You can do it."

Focusing his gaze on the strawberries, Crayon stomped a hoof against the stage, and one of the strawberries puffed up like a balloon. A split second later, the replicore stomped one of *their* hooves, and the other strawberry began to swell. The strawberries quickly grew to the size of footballs and then to the size of car tyres.

"That'll do," Emerson said.

Beaming with pride, Bitsy gently patted Crayon on the neck. He stomped a hoof, and his strawberry stopped enlarging. The replicore copied Crayon's actions, and the other strawberry stopped, too.

As the audience applauded, another puff of smoke

billowed from the replicator's brass funnel. The slime inside the glass chamber bubbled wildly, and the machine's buzzing escalated into a worrying rattle. Emerson frowned and hurried around the back of the device.

"Is something else wrong?" Bitsy murmured discreetly as the audience continued clapping.

"I'm not sure," Emerson replied, holding a hand over his microphone. He squinted through his glasses as he examined the replicator. "When I checked the replicating engine before I came on stage, it was working fine, but it looks different now. I think someone's tinkered with it."

"How could they?" Bitsy asked. "It's been sitting on stage under a sheet this whole time."

Just then, more yellow mist exploded from the replicator nozzle, spraying all over Crayon, who used his ears as makeshift umbrellas to shield his face. Emerson leaped to grab the replicator hose as it twisted into the air like a dancing cobra, thrashing uncontrollably. "It's malfunctioning!" he cried into his microphone.

The audience gasped as yellow fog swirled around Crayon and then bounced across the stage, creating tens of replicore fretfawns with no eyes. *Pop!* One materialized at the back of the stage. *Pop!* Another appeared in front of Bitsy. *Pop!* The grossi, Sludger, wriggled out of the way just in time to avoid being trampled by one,

while – *pop!* – another materialized right on top of the giant strawberries, accidentally kicking them into the audience. Yelps and laughter rang out as the fruits bounced off the floor and exploded, splattering people with juice and seeds.

As mist continued spraying from the nozzle, Emerson wrestled with the hose, desperately trying to tie it in a knot. “I can’t make it stop!”

Bitsy’s pulse thudded as she raced around the replicator, searching for a switch or lever she could pull to turn the machine off. She shot a helpless look at Kosh, Mateo and Skye in the third row...

Suddenly, the stage lights turned blood red, and the audience started shrieking.

“Bitsy!” Kosh yelled, pointing behind her.

She spun around. Projected onto the wall behind the stage was a large black symbol resembling a tangled ball of string. A chill ran down her spine as she recognized the design.

It was a *chaosphere* – the symbol of chaos-conjurors, followers of Riddlejax.



3

Bitsy shuddered as memories of her previous encounters with chaos-conjurors flooded back. Under Riddlejax's orders, they had tried to kill her and her friends on multiple occasions. And now they were *here*.

Frantic shrieks of "Chaos-conjurors!" filled the auditorium as the audience rushed to the exits. Bitsy scanned the fleeing audience, knowing that any one of them could be a chaos-conjuror. They had to be responsible for sabotaging the replicator. But why? What was Riddlejax's plan?

Just then, Crayon gave an ear-piercing howl, hopping around in pain. Bitsy caught sight of a strange, oozing bite mark on his leg before – *poof!* – he burst into farthingdust.

"Crayon, no!" Ice pierced her chest as she felt

Crayon extinguish. Something must have attacked him. Something *invisible*.

“Bitsy!” Kosh called, zigzagging past numerous replicores to reach her. Skye was hot on his heels with Mateo, who was still recording everything on his camera. “We need to get out of here, now!”

Bitsy instinctively reached for her farthingstone pendant, only to flinch when she remembered it was in a locker outside the exhibition. Aside from the exhibitors, no one at Futurecore could conjure magicores. A cold, heavy feeling sank to the bottom of her stomach like wet cement. That had to be why Riddlejax had ordered his chaos-conjurors to strike in some way now – because everyone was vulnerable.

“Mr Park, you have to leave the auditorium!” Skye called, hurrying towards Emerson as Calculus poked his nose out of her overalls pocket.

Sweaty and panting, Emerson gazed hollowly at the chaosphere. The replicator’s glass chamber was empty of slime, and the hose had gone limp in his hand. “This was my big chance,” he muttered, looking tearily down at the hose. “Everything I’ve worked for...”

“That doesn’t matter right now!” Mateo said, his camera now swinging around his neck as he yanked the hose from Emerson’s grasp. “Everyone’s in danger and we need to go!”

Realizing that the auditorium was nearly empty, Emerson shook his head and scooped Sludger into his arms before following Bitsy and the others towards the stairs. Weaving between the dozens of replicores on stage, Bitsy noticed they were all trotting around, flapping their giant ears and sniffing the air. “Are the replicores supposed to be moving?” she asked Emerson. “I thought they could only copy what their source magicore does.”

“Yes, but since your fretfawn extinguished, the replicores no longer have a source magicore,” he replied as they hurried down the steps. “It wouldn’t matter if you reconjured your fretfawn—once a replicore loses connection with their source magicore, it’s impossible to restore.”

“So, who’s controlling them?” Kosh questioned.

With a bleat of panic, a replicore stumbled off stage and galloped towards the auditorium exit. The commotion startled the other replicores, who bolted in different directions. Some bumped into each other before casting shades and turning invisible. Thinking of Crayon’s invisible assailant, Bitsy was concerned that the replicores might begin attacking people. One stomped its hooves, and a chair in the front row began snapping and cracking as it grew bigger and bigger...

Staring in horror, Emerson gulped like he was swallowing gross slime. “No *one* is controlling them. No one can! Whoever meddled with my replicator disabled

the failsafe that extinguishes the replicores once their source magicore is extinguished. I can't undo it!"

"But that means..." A chill traced Bitsy's spine as she realized that whoever had sabotaged the replicator had probably also extinguished Crayon as part of a calculated plan to unleash the replicores.

The floor trembled as a loud thud echoed behind them. Bitsy looked over her shoulder to see that the Beaufort Prize banner, four times its original size, had snapped free from its chains and crashed onto the stage.

"Look out!" Skye cried, pulling Bitsy out of the way as a replicore tore past, bleating wildly.

"Thanks," Bitsy gasped, her heart racing.

The replicores charged into the exhibition and stumbled to a halt. Panicked screams filled the air. People were scattering as fiery debris rained from above. In one direction, smoke billowed from where a colossal paper plane – its wings crumpled and twisted – had crashed to the ground and caught alight. In another, a test tube the size of a lorry lay on its side as green liquid spilled out of it, frothing and fizzing.

"How many replicores are there?" Kosh asked, his eyes wide.

Emerson pushed a shaky hand through his messy hair. "The replicator slime was completely depleted, so there must be at least fifty."

“Fifty!” Bitsy’s chest tightened, realizing that the lives of everyone in the building were in danger. The replicores might not be destructive by nature, but they were blind, frightened and lost. Without meaning to, they could devastate the entire exhibition. She looked around for Master Ollennu and the initiates they had travelled here with, but she couldn’t spot any of them. Everyone seemed to be rushing towards the giant silver scanner at the exhibition entrance, no doubt desperate to escape. “Are the lubberwharl cabins the fastest way out of here?” she asked Emerson.

“They’re the *only* way out of here,” he replied, tucking Sludger under his armpit like an oversized, slimy rugby ball. “Time to run!”

The group sprinted along the nearest aisle, passing abandoned kiosks and destroyed stalls. Bitsy’s pulse raced as she hopped over piles of broken glass, weaving through the remains of inventions that had once been humming or twirling. Wind buffeted her shoulders, and she instinctively ducked as she heard something swooping above. “Get down!” she shouted.

Kosh and Emerson dropped to their knees. Calculus let out a startled squeal and Skye fell to the floor as an electricity cable as large as a tree trunk soared over their heads and crashed to the ground in a shower of sparks, blocking the path ahead.

Behind them, Mateo skidded to a halt. “Which way now?”

“Over there!” Getting back to his feet, Emerson hurdled a pile of splintered table legs and squeezed between two exhibition booths as tools and crumpled paper fell out of his pockets.

Following closely behind, Bitsy and the others emerged into a tightly packed crowd of conjurors frantically trying to flee the exhibition. Standing on her tiptoes, Bitsy saw that a bottleneck had formed as people pushed through the silver scanner to reach the farthingstone lockers and lubberwharf cabins beyond. Near by, she spotted the vintage sweets kiosk they had visited earlier. Some of the jars had toppled over and shattered; one even seemed to be shoving the others away from it, almost as if it were ... *growing!*

Bitsy gasped as a table collapsed under the weight of the rapidly expanding jar, which thudded to the ground and began rolling towards the crowd. “Look out!” she screamed.

Picking up speed, the jar rapidly grew to the size of a car. People shrieked and stumbled over one another, trying to get out of the way. Mateo dived beneath a table while Skye and Emerson fled into the crowd. Bitsy grabbed Kosh’s arm and dragged him to safety seconds before the jar hurtled past.

With a startlingly loud *bang*, the jar finally shattered against the dome wall, throwing a dozen boulder-sized pink jelly beans into the air. They soared over the yelling crowd.

“Move!”

“Take cover!”

“Get out of the way!”

Too late, Bitsy realized that a jelly bean was hurtling straight towards the table where Mateo was hiding.

“Mateo, watch out!”

But as he tried to scramble away, the jelly bean crashed down. The table buckled and Mateo yowled in pain as the jelly bean landed on his foot.

“Hold on!” Kosh shouted as he and Bitsy sprinted over.

Bitsy crouched beside Mateo. “It’s going to be all right,” she reassured him, looking worriedly at his foot. “Can you pull your foot out?”

Tears of pain wobbled in Mateo’s eyes as he tugged at his knee. “No, it’s trapped!”

“Bitsy – help me push this.” Kosh pressed his hands against the jelly bean as Bitsy positioned herself beside him. “One, two ... three!”

Gritting her teeth, Bitsy pushed the jelly bean with all her strength, but it didn’t even wobble. “It’s no use. It won’t budge!”

At that moment, a flash of copper darted past Bitsy's head as Calculus leaped over her shoulder onto the jelly bean, his wiry whiskers twitching as he sniffed around.

"We can help!" Skye said breathlessly, appearing at Bitsy's side. "Calculus can weave a device to lift this; just hang on."

"There's not enough time!" Mateo cried, pointing above them.

Bitsy looked up and tensed. A massive crack was spreading across the dome ceiling. Tracing it back, she saw that where the jelly bean jar had hit the dome wall, the impact had caused a fracture.

"I thought you said this place was perfectly safe!" Kosh exclaimed.

"I thought it was!" Mateo protested, grimacing.

Panic gripped Bitsy's chest, but she tried to focus. They needed to free Mateo's foot and get out of there before the ceiling caved in and they all drowned. The ceiling was the only thing protecting them from the crushing ocean outside the dome. She scanned the area, searching for inspiration. As her gaze swept over the vintage sweets kiosk, she remembered the jar of shatterdrops she'd noticed earlier and the intriguing instructions on the jar: SHATTERDROPS: BREAK TO LIQUIFY ANY MATERIAL. "I've got an idea! Stay here!"

Her heart pounded as she ran over and scanned

the wreckage. Spotting the smashed jar of swirly blue shatterdrops, she quickly grabbed one.

“This isn’t time for a snack!” Kosh cried as Bitsy hurried back with the sweet.

“I don’t want to eat it,” Bitsy explained, hoping with all her might that her idea worked. “Everyone, stand back!”

Calculus dived into Skye’s pocket, and as everyone shuffled back, Bitsy held the shatterdrop up to the jelly bean and squashed it between her fingers. A glittering gold liquid burst out of the middle of the shatterdrop and trickled onto the jelly bean, sizzling where it landed...

The jelly bean wobbled as if it were made of actual jelly. Then, it began to sag and lose shape, transforming into a thick pink custard that oozed onto the floor.

“What the—?” Kosh stumbled back as the gunge crept towards his trainers.

“Yes!” Bitsy cheered, flooding with relief. “The label said shatterdrops liquify any material, but I wasn’t sure it would work.”

As the custard pooled around Mateo, his foot slipped free. “Bitsy, you genius!”

The liquid jelly bean spread across the floor, filling the air with a sugary smell, as Kosh and Skye pulled Mateo up. Bitsy hung his camera around her neck and shouldered his rucksack. “Can you walk?” she asked,

glancing worriedly at the widening crack in the ceiling.

Mateo tried to put weight on his foot and winced. “No.”

“Lean on me,” Kosh said, sliding his shoulder under Mateo’s armpit. “Let’s go.”

The crowds around the magicore scanner had thankfully cleared, allowing the four of them to hurry straight through the silver arch. The adjoining dome pulsed with noise as people piled into lubberwharl cabins while armourer guards bellowed instructions through loudspeakers, telling everyone to remain calm. An anxious crowd massed around the magi-woven lockers, desperately trying to retrieve their farthingstones.

Searching the crowd, Bitsy spied Emerson Park, red-faced and panting, being shuffled into a lubberwharl cabin and felt relieved to see he was OK. She waved as she spotted Master Ollennu. His green overalls were caked with dust, and sweat glistened on his furrowed brow. “Master Ollennu, over here!”

Master Ollennu’s expression brightened when he saw her, and he rushed over. “There you are! I’ve been searching for the three of you everywhere. Mateo, are you OK?”

“My foot got squashed,” he explained in a strained voice.

Master Ollennu winced and patted Mateo’s shoulder. “Try to take some deep breaths while I find a clairvoyant

to heal you. We have to claim our farthingstones and get out of here – the building isn't safe any more."

"Where are all the replicores?" Bitsy asked, surprised that she couldn't see any. "Have they been extinguished?"

Deep lines appeared between Master Ollennu's brows. "Some have, but we think others managed to escape into lubberwharl cabins with everyone else while wearing shades. A few of the cabins were seen re-sizing as they were being carried away."

"Escape?" Skye echoed. "So, where are they now?"

Master Ollennu sighed and shook his head. "Nobody knows. Lubberwharl cabins connect to buildings all around the world, so the replicores could be anywhere."

A nauseating wave of dread washed over Bitsy. If the replicores entered the cosmotypical world, they would wreak havoc. Thousands of cosmotypical lives would be at risk. It would endanger the entire conjuring world.

Which is precisely Riddlejax's intention, Bitsy thought. She swallowed hard, aware with sickening certainty that this had been his plan all along – to engineer the perfect storm of chaos.

— ZENTAUR —



4

Twenty-four hours had passed since Futurecore, but Bitsy still couldn't shake the terrifying images of the chaos-conjuror attack from her mind: the panicked faces of the fleeing crowds, the oversized obstacles flying through the air ... and the chaosphere. All morning at the European Conservatoire of Conjuring, it was all anyone had wanted to talk about. Other initiates had been cornering Bitsy, Kosh and Mateo, asking to hear every detail of their escape. It was exhausting, so during a break between their first two workshops, the three of them slipped away to seek refuge in a familiar, shadowy warehouse on the twenty-ninth floor.

"Mr Z?" Bitsy called, her voice echoing off the enormous shipping containers stacked inside. Mateo had

learned about the abandoned warehouse from his older sister, Esme, and since no one ever used it, they'd adopted it as their secret hideout. "Mr Z, it's only us!"

Mateo pulled a bunch of fresh lavender from his rucksack as Kosh shut the warehouse door behind them, plunging them into darkness. "We brought your favourite!"

Light flickered behind a shipping container, and a goat-like magicore the size of a tractor plodded out, his fleecy blue-and-white coat glowing warmly. Two backwards-facing horns jutted between his floppy ears, while dewdrop crystals jangled like windchimes in his shaggy beard. His large black eyes, as round and shiny as bowling balls, indicated he was a wild magicore – a zentaur, conjured from calmness.

Baah, he bleated gently, trotting over. He nuzzled his pillowy snout into Bitsy's blonde curls, then licked Mateo's and Kosh's faces with his rough black tongue.

"Good to see you too, Mr Z," Kosh giggled, wiping his face dry on the sleeve of the Oddingham FC shirt he wore under his overalls.

Gazing up at Mr Z's kind face, Mateo smiled thinly. "I'm not sure even *you* can make us feel relaxed today, big guy," he said, giving Mr Z the bunch of lavender to hold between his front teeth. "The three of us escaped a chaos-conjuror attack yesterday at Futurecore."

Concern swam in Mr Z's big black eyes.

"We're all right," Kosh reassured the zentaur as they stepped through the open door of a large shipping container at the bottom of a stack. Inside, there were three mismatched chairs and a garden table topped with a few bottled drinks, a multipack of crisps and a packet of biscuits. "Well ... Mateo's foot was crushed, but thanks to some magi-woven bandages, it's healed now."

Mr Z was too big to fit inside the container, so he stuck his head through the doorway and placed the lavender on the floor in front of him. He nudged Mateo's foot with his nose, bleating softly.

"Honestly, it's fine. I just wish it were that easy to fix everything else." Mateo pulled a copy of the *Magicore Times* out of his rucksack and tossed it onto the table. "My parents were reading this earlier. What happened at Futurecore was just the beginning – look at the front page."

Bitsy took a seat and drew the newspaper closer. Beneath the headline "*REPLICORES ON THE RAMPAGE*" was an article describing yesterday's incident accompanied by a photo of a replicore fretfawn bolting blindly through a crowd of terrified people. Flashing back to yesterday's escape, Bitsy shuddered. The three of them had been lucky to retrieve their farthingstones and scramble into a lubberwharl cabin before the Azure Institute had flooded.

The building had since been declared off-limits while the Elemental Guild carried out magi-woven repairs.

“Check out the second paragraph in the main article,” Mateo said as he and Kosh sat down. “It’s worse than we thought.”

Bitsy found the section Mateo was referring to. Her eyes flicked left to right as she read it urgently:

In the past twenty-four hours, there have been forty-nine reported incidents involving replicores around the world. These include in Toronto, Canada, where seventy-four people sustained injuries when a giant hockey puck flew into the stands during an ice hockey game, and in Johannesburg, South Africa, where a six-storey building was reduced to the size of a doll’s house, creating a dangerous sinkhole that pulled in nearby structures and caused hundreds of casualties. In response, the Alliance has declared a state of emergency and is coordinating crisis management from the Cloud Gardens, Clairvoyant Guild Headquarters. Clairvoyant conjurors are working tirelessly to modify memories and create illusions, aiming to shield the cosmotypical population from the truth

behind these incidents. Hundreds of four-conjurator extinguisher teams – coined x-teams – have been deployed to track down and extinguish the escaped replicores before they cause further harm. While Riddlejax and his chaos-conjurors are undoubtedly behind this, allegations have been circling that the replicator’s inventor, Emerson Park, had not conducted the required safety tests on the device before demonstrating it at Futurecore. The newspaper reached out to Mr Park for a response, but at the time of going to press, he wasn’t available for comment.

A lump formed in Bitsy’s throat as she considered how many innocent people had already been hurt. She understood firsthand the pain that Riddlejax could inflict – he’d been responsible for her mum’s fatal car accident. “Riddlejax doesn’t care how many lives he destroys in his pursuit of power,” she said, handing the newspaper to Kosh. “He’ll do whatever it takes to destroy the Alliance and rule over cosmotypical people.”

“The Alliance is already struggling to cope with this,” Mateo said, concern etched on his face. “Most conjurors have already been recruited to join an x-team, including many of the conservatoire staff and both of my parents.”

“My great-aunt Ravi has been tasked with crafting magi-woven supplies for some of the x-teams,” Kosh added. “She’s working all hours.”

“Yeah, and my dad’s joined an x-team, too,” Bitsy added. She and Kosh were now staying with Kosh’s cosmotypical parents, who believed that their visits to the conservatoire were for a half-term martial arts training camp. “And don’t forget there will also be chaos-conjurors on those x-teams, trying to sabotage operations. No one will have any idea who they can trust.”

Kosh scowled as he looked up from reading the newspaper. “Riddlejax is always one step ahead of the Alliance. I’ll bet he’s already plotting another attack while the Alliance is weakened.”

Bitsy clenched her fists, remembering that she, Kosh and Mateo had made a pact at the end of summer to fight Riddlejax and his chaos-conjurors. She took out her reporter’s notebook and pencil. “We’ve got to do something to help the Alliance. We were there yesterday – maybe we can identify the chaos-conjuror who sabotaged Emerson’s replicator and extinguished Crayon?”

Kosh rubbed his chin. “You said Crayon had a bite mark on his leg?”

“I only glimpsed it for a second,” Bitsy replied, jotting *bite mark* in her notebook. “The wound was oozing and pussy. It looked like it had been made by a magicore

with lots of teeth. They must have been wearing a shade because I didn't see them."

Mateo fiddled with the beads on his farthingstone bracelet, thinking carefully. "Everyone entered Futurecore through a magicore energy scanner, so even if an invisible magicore had snuck through, security would have detected them. That means the magicore responsible must have been conjured *inside* the exhibition."

Bitsy's eyes widened as something dawned on her. "But the only people with farthingstones were the exhibitors! No one else could have conjured a magicore. The chaos-conjurer must be one of them!"

"It's always possible Riddlejax was posing as one of the exhibitors," Kosh said ominously. "He can change his appearance anytime he wants."

Bitsy shuddered, thinking how powerful Riddlejax was. His dangerous experiments with farthingstone had given him abilities that no other conjurer possessed.

"Maybe, but he's far too devious to risk being trapped in the Azure Institute, surrounded by all those armourer guards," Mateo said. "It's more likely he instructed a chaos-conjurer to carry out his plans for him."

"In that case, we need to compile a list of suspects." Kosh patted the pockets of his overalls. "I think I've still got that exhibition brochure I picked up yesterday."

He retrieved a crinkled pamphlet from his pocket and

opened it out on the table between them. It contained a comprehensive list of all the Futurecore exhibitors, complete with photographs and brief biographies for each person. Bitsy beamed as she spotted Skye proudly holding the Australian flag in her photo. She was grateful that they'd all exchanged numbers before escaping Futurecore, and that Skye had texted to tell them that she'd safely returned home to Sydney in Australia. Bitsy's smile faded as she skimmed the rest of the list, flipping through the pages of the brochure. "There are over sixty exhibitors here. How are we going to narrow it down?"

"Luckily for us, I filmed the demonstration." With a smug grin, Mateo showed them the screen on the back of his camera. "We can watch the footage on here and see which exhibitors we can identify from their photos in the exhibition brochure. We should be able to rule out anyone whose magicore was still visible when Crayon was bitten."

Bitsy made notes as they slowly and carefully studied Mateo's recording. Every time they crossed someone's name out, she felt a buzz of hope. They were immediately able to discount at least three dozen exhibitors in the demonstration hall, including Skye, who'd had Calculus sticking out of her top pocket when Crayon was bitten.

"We can rule out Emerson Park as he had Sludger with him on stage the whole time," Bitsy pointed out. "Plus, he seems too bungling to be a chaos-conjurer."

Kosh frowned. “If we’ve learned anything over the past six months, it’s that *anyone* could be a chaos-conjuror.”

Bitsy swallowed, thinking of people they had trusted who had proven to be chaos-conjurors in the past. “I suppose you’re right, but it says here that Emerson was rejected entry to Futurecore *five* times.” She pointed to Emerson’s biography in the brochure. “It makes no sense for him to sabotage his hard-fought success now.”

“In that case, that leaves” – Kosh counted the photos on the exhibitor list that hadn’t been crossed out – “*nine* suspects who could be the chaos-conjuror we’re looking for.”

Bitsy copied the list into her notebook. It contained conjurors from all six guilds:

Alf Trauner – Austria – Metamorph
Dr Betty Makane – Uganda – Elemental
Erik Kloss – Norway – Armourer
Gabriel Rojas – Chile – Hunter
Prof. Marieta Singh – Fiji – Elemental
Jocelyn O’Hart – Ireland – Weaver
Alexander Brewster – United Kingdom – Weaver
Vanna Reid – Canada – Elemental
Dr Zoyah Khan – Pakistan – Clairvoyant

A few caught her eye – the burly Norwegian armourer

named Erik Kloss, the Chilean hunter with piercing blue eyes called Gabriel Rojas, and the stern-faced, flame-haired Canadian elemental named Vanna Reid. Bitsy tried to remember if she'd seen any of them acting suspiciously at Futurecore, but their faces didn't ring any bells.

As she tucked the exhibition brochure inside her notebook, a siren wailed around the warehouse, making her flinch. "What's that?"

Mr Z lifted his head and yawned, not the slightest bit bothered.

"I'm not sure," Mateo replied, frowning. "I've never heard it before."

An urgent voice called over a loudspeaker: "*All staff and initiates must gather for an emergency meeting on the ground floor of the atrium. NOW!*"

"Sounds important," Kosh said, shouldering his rucksack. "We'd better find out what's going on."

They took a lift down through the atrium – an enormous space at the heart of the conservatoire where you could see the building's levels rotating slowly like the rings of a kaleidoscope. Emerging on the ground floor, they were greeted by a noisy crowd of staff and initiates, all gathered around Chancellor Hershel's desk in the centre.

The crowd hushed as the Chancellor climbed on top of her desk and lifted her chin to address them. "Apologies if you have had to leave your workshops, but I've just

received an urgent message from the Alliance.”

She wiped her hands on the back of her yellow overalls and tucked a few strands of her neat, strawberry-blond bob behind her ears. She seemed nervous, which made Bitsy sweat. The Chancellor was nearly as calm under pressure as Mr Z.

“I’m sure you’re all aware of the ongoing replicore crisis and the harm it is doing around the world,” the Chancellor stated gravely. “Unfortunately, the x-teams deployed to extinguish the replicores are struggling to track them without *ipperisks* – a hunter-type species with the unique ability to sense magicore energy, allowing them to locate not only magicores but also replicores.”

“Couldn’t they use fidglets to track the replicores?” Bitsy whispered to Kosh, thinking of his fidglet, Swift. Not only could she generate temporary gateways called “pull-throughs” that moved matter from one place to another, but she could also determine the fastest route to whatever her conjuror was seeking.

Mateo kept his voice low. “Fidglets have limitations. Although they can find the fastest route to an object or place, they can’t locate a human or magicore.”

The Chancellor took a deep breath as she scanned everyone’s faces, her eyes shining. “Ipperisks can only be conjured by adult hunters and initiates, and since there aren’t enough adult hunters available to conjure