

THE CYSTMASTER
Part 1: The Tunnel Boy

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Abstract

This thesis is comprised of an exegesis “What if: A Thought Experiment” and a novel *The Cystmaster - Part 1: The Tunnel Boy* (referred to hereafter as *The Cystmaster*). *The Cystmaster* is the first draft of a science fiction novel and it is aimed at a young adult audience. It explores a post nuclear society 300 years in the future and attempts to revisit the ecological science fiction writing of the sixties and seventies which was resurrected by writers such as Kim Stanley Robinson in his 1990s *Mars* series.

Both the exegesis and the novel examine the tension between Utopia and Dystopia – the novel dealing with the dynamics of existence and ethics in a radioactive world where food and genetic material are commodities to be offered and traded in a no ownership, anarchistic society. *The Cystmaster* is also a coming of age, love story illustrating the role of adolescents in a society where the guiding imperative is one driven by a collective guilt at the human destruction of the world 300 years earlier. Everyone is attempting to regrow the Earth. Because some people live in highly radioactive environments, those in more benign environments give genetic material, food and other resources to try and balance this equity equation and to ensure world peace. The sacrificial role imposed by this sort of society creates tensions and a loss of choice as well as questions of ethics concerning the roles of children and adolescents. However in striving for a better world, people on the new Earth are drawn together and the general impulse is utopian.

The exegesis attempts to define what constitutes science fiction and compares themes and ideas in *The Cystmaster* to other science fiction novels. To a lesser extent the exegesis also looks at how relevant the novel may be for its intended young adult audience. Aspects of the author’s process are also discussed including some of the difficulties experienced.

‘What if: A Thought Experiment’

“Technological progress is like an axe in the hands of a pathological criminal.’

“Any intelligent fool can make things bigger, more complex and more violent. It takes a touch of genius – and a lot of courage – to move in the opposite direction.”

“A human being is part of a whole, called by us “universe”, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest... a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in all its beauty.”

Einstein

Introduction

This year in completing the thesis for the Master of Creative Writing my goal was to write the first draft of *The Cystmaster*, a coming of age story, written in the science fiction genre and aimed primarily at a young adult audience. I say jokingly, think *Anne of Green Gables* (Montgomery, 1987) with a male, child protagonist, set in the future, 300 years after global warming and a nuclear war devastated the Earth - an unlikely comparison although not without some element of truth.

Frank Herbert, the author of *Dune*, one of the most successful science fiction novels of all time, said about the role of science fiction:

I think science fiction does help, and it points in very interesting directions. It points in relativistic directions. It says that we have the imagination for these other opportunities, these other choices. We tend to tie ourselves down to limited choices. We say, “Well the only answer is...” or, “If you would just...” Whatever follows these two statements narrows the choices right

there. It gets the vision right down close to the ground so that you don't see anything happening outside. Humans tend not to see over a long range. Now we are required, in these generations, to have a longer range view of what we inflict on the world around us. This is where, I think, science fiction is helping. I don't think that the mere writing of such a book as *Brave New World* or *1984* prevents those things which are portrayed in those books from happening. But I do think they alert us to that possibility and make that possibility less likely. They make us aware that we may be going in that direction.

Who2Biography: Frank Herbert, writer

Herbert talks above about two vital aspects of science fiction: the way it can offer both signposts and warnings and also the way that it generates alternative, outside-the-square ideas and solutions. Robinson (1992, 1993, 1995) does this in his *Mars* series. *The Cystmaster* also seeks to do this, warning that Earth could be heading towards resource shortages and nuclear war, then imagining a possible scenario of humans surviving and of humanity as a whole living a more peaceful existence. As yet, the ideas are not fully realised because at this first draft stage, it is essentially an exploratory text.

Thomas Keneally says "...the first draft is very much finding the tale and finding the dynamics of the thing." (Woolfe and Grenville, 1993, p.186) When reading *The Cystmaster* it helps to keep in mind the exploratory nature of the draft, especially as the genre is science fiction and ideas and invention had a large role to play. I was writing this draft to find a story, to create a world and to do a preliminary investigation of a thought experiment. As yet my world is only partially created, my investigation is still ongoing and parts of my story remain hidden.

This exegesis attempts to describe the nature of my thought experiment and the nature of science fiction in relation to my story, my process and the challenges I have faced. I will also be looking at some of the themes and ideas in the story and placing them in a context with other science fiction and young adult literature. Although the exegesis may make my story seem weighty and serious, my intention is merely to tell a story for young adults. I hope the story will have some lightness because the writing felt as though it came not just from the intellect but also from the subconscious adolescent alive still inside of me.

What is science fiction?

Science fiction is known as speculative fiction. Not necessarily possessing a distinctive set of descriptors, works can often identify with various other genres but James and Mendlesohn (2003, p.4) in *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, say science fiction differs primarily from mainstream novels in that the hero of the story in science fiction is not a character but an idea. They call it the “what if.” Le Guin (1980, p. xii) calls it a “thought experiment.” Tuttle (2005, p.19) describes science fiction as a “literature of ideas’ characterised by plot driven stories which are striving for originality. But, she says, science fiction readers also want “... to be challenged intellectually, made to think about things which are far outside the bounds of ordinary life.” (p. 19)

Bradbury (1996, p.103) writes of science fiction: “What’s in those books that makes them as irresistible as Cracker Jack?” *The History of Ideas.*’ Apart from the intellectual appeal of the idea, he says that science fiction should also inspire a sense of wonder, some sort of ‘Wow!’ James and Mendlesohn (2003) agree, saying that the intellectual heart of science fiction is the idea but the emotional heart is the sense of wonder.

Technology is always a major player - some new use of technology or some exploration of a place or time or situation which may have been arrived at by some form of technology.

Le Guin (1980, p. xvi) says:

All fiction is metaphor. Science fiction is metaphor. What sets it apart from older forms of fiction seems to be its use of new metaphors, drawn from certain great dominants of our contemporary life - science, all the sciences, and technology, and the relativistic and the historical outlook, among them. Space travel is one of those metaphors; so is an alternative society, an alternative biology; the future is another; the future, in fiction, is a metaphor.
(p. xvi)

Science fiction is speculative, inventive and descriptive and writers need a problem solving approach. Firstly, there is a “what if”, next, the creation of a new world, either plucked from elsewhere in the galaxy or using the Earth, examined afresh somewhere

else on the space-time continuum. The writer describes the new world and the physical, social, technological, biological or ecological forces acting upon it and speculates about the consequences of those forces, their impact and what the human response will be. The created world is expected to be different in some distinctive way, to our everyday world. Card (1990, p.20) says ‘...Speculative fiction by definition is geared towards an audience that wants strangeness... that wants to spend time in worlds that absolutely are not like the observable world around them.’

In science fiction, characters exist not just as vehicles for story, but to illustrate how external processes have impacted on humanity and how humans have changed to accommodate them. Most mainstream novels tend to involve themselves with internal processes of the character, the power of emotion and psyche, and how individuals are thus motivated to act in relation to their social and physical environments. Science fiction takes a wider view as Card (1990, p. 61) implies, when he says, ‘Speculative fiction is not an escape from the real world.....Speculative fiction instead provides a lens to view the real *world* better ...’ (my italics). As Le Guin (1980) implies above, science fiction uses the metaphors drawn from technology and the sciences, in invented places and other times to say something about the world in which we live *now*.

In his 1965 novel *Dune*, Herbert (1984) describes a desert world in which people ride giant sandworms and where the currency is a future predicting drug called spice, or melange. He was inspired by the new science of ecology, a concept newly reflected in the scientific discourse of the sixties with books such as *Silent Spring* (Carson, 1962) and with James Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis from the sixties in which he postulated that the planet Earth acted as a self regulating, living entity. (Lovelock, 1991)

Le Guin’s 1960 story, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (Le Guin, 1980) describes people who are mostly genderless other than in periods when they come into kemmer, similarly to the way dogs come on heat. Only in the period of kemmer do they have sexual organs and these may be either male or female and can change over a person’s lifetime. This novel illustrated how powerful concepts of gender were; that gender was central to the way humanity structured itself and to the way people behaved. It reflected the beginnings of the sixties feminist movement, questioning the way gendered structures

were taken for granted and experimenting with what would happen if they were changed.

The emotive response to these two stories came primarily because readers had been excited and moved by ideas, imagination and invention. The stories rang true because humans were depicted in ways congruent with our general understanding of humanity, thus the stories were believable and meaningful.

Historically in science fiction, a tension has existed between Utopia and Dystopia. Robinson (1992, 1993, 1995), in his *Mars* series combines an ecological, sociological, technological approach and has written what one front cover reviewer called, a 'future history' of the colonisation of Mars. In a 2007 talk, Robinson said that it was important that science fiction writers maintained '...pessimism of the intellect and an optimism of the will.' (Robinson, 2007). He said we owed it to our children. His writing resurrects a utopian trend in science fiction which was evident in the sixties and seventies. Later, the cyberpunk movement which appeared in the eighties tended to reflect the ideologies of the right (Baccolini, 2004) and works from that period such as *Neuromancer* (Gibson, 1984) contained a blend of cynicism, high tech and dystopian outcomes. By contrast, Robinson presents the pitfalls of modern technology, the modern way of life, and the ecological degradation which could lead to Dystopia, then uses science and the human will to save us. He issues both the warning and then the solutions for the future alluded to by Herbert earlier in this exegesis.

James and Mendlesohn (2003, p.170) write: 'If SF were an education scheme, the report card for the human race would always read I could do better.'

Many science fiction writers believe this and it is the motivation for the direction taken in their stories, as it is in my own. A common theme, is that humans as a race need to be saved from themselves, as though we are flawed and our tendency is always to destroy. Gray (2003, p.182) quotes Bertrand Russell: 'I had supposed that most people liked money better than anything else, but I discovered that they like destruction even better.'

Some science fiction writers, and I am one of these, want a saved world and strive for a more utopian vision. Others, such as Gibson in *Neuromancer* or Huxley in *Brave New*

World prefer to describe Dystopia. In reality, many science fiction stories exist on what could be described as a cycle or continuum in which the stories may be sited closer to Utopia or closer to Dystopia. They may be further classified as either heading towards Utopia or away from Utopia. Thus in stories such as *Hyperion* (Simmons, 2004), the worlds exist in a chaotic and dystopian state but Simmons chooses to put in place technology and people that will save it. By contrast, in *The Saga of the Exiles* (May, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984) the world has been saved and is in a sense utopian but a segment of the population wish to escape this particular Utopia and opt for a more chaotic, dystopian existence.

Baccolini (2004, p.520) says science fiction as a genre has an ‘...oppositional and critical potential...’ implying that science fiction, by its nature, can illustrate and criticise political and socially constructed ideologies. Baccolini suggests women science fiction writers may particularly want to explore and criticise notions and practises which are detrimental to women. She also regards science fiction as a potentially subversive genre, quoting Marc Angenot in Parrinder (1980, p. 46) who said science fiction “...occupies the space outside the literary enclosure, as a forbidden, taboo, and perhaps degraded product – held at bay and yet rich in themes and obsessions which are repressed in high culture.” (Baccolini, 2004, p. 519) Some novels, such as *Brave New World*, 1984 and *The Left Hand of Darkness* have occupied prominent positions in literary circles. Generally however, science fiction is seen as a lesser literary form.

The young adult novel

The Cystmaster is aimed primarily at a young adult audience, which includes readers from around 12-21 years (Wikipedia). With time to read and being less fixed in their tastes, this age group tends to enjoy an eclectic range of stories. As a teenager I read hundreds of young adult stories as well as fiction for adults. I was seeking entertainment, and lacked the opportunity to experience the world more directly. Young adults are often idealistic and searching for identity amidst stories which provoke social commentary and which inform their own values system. Thus, they gain a life view different to their parents’ one, and at a time when they are challenging parental authority. Through young adult books especially, they gain emotional connection to

others involved in issues they themselves are confronting - such as sexuality, drug use or loss of a parent through divorce or death. (Wikipedia)

I questioned whether the story and themes of *The Cystmaster* suited young adults, which inspired me to attend a session at the Auckland 2009 Readers and Writers Festival. Mal Peet, Tobin Anderson and Kate De Goldi were talking about young adult literature. De Goldi was winner of The New Zealand Post 'Book of the Year' for *The 10PM Question*. Anderson had won the American 'National Book Award' for *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing Traitor to the Nation* and Peet, the Carnegie Medal for *Tamar*, both of which were fictional stories based on historical events. *Octavian Nothing* was about slavery and scientific experimentation on humans in 18th century America. *Tamar* was about betrayal and secret agents in Holland in WWII, more than half of the book dealing with the story of the adult spies with no reference to the young adult age group. I read these books trying to understand latest trends in young adult writing. Only De Goldi's would be conventionally regarded as young adult, at 250 pages, with a teenage protagonist and a family setting. *Tamar* was long at 430 pages and *Octavian Nothing* long at 350 pages and volume 1 of a series.

All three authors thought books for young adults should say something worthwhile, maintaining that young adult tastes are not confined only to stories such as the vampire romance, *Twilight* series (Meyer, 2005) or the exciting wizardry of good versus evil in *Harry Potter* (Rowling, 1997), both of which I had quite enjoyed. These last two series also clock up the pages and a conventional wisdom stating that young adult novels should be shorter, does not apply.

Anderson also talked about how young adults had traditionally read "adult" authors such as Shakespeare and Jane Austen. Anderson had been frustrated as an adolescent, at the lack of modern, thought provoking books for young adults and that helped inspire the content and themes in his own writing.

In relation to my own story, our environment, the future world, global warming and nuclear war, are issues that a young adult may need to confront. The coming of age, love story between the teenage main characters, Iessa and Lexi also speaks to a young adult audience as do parts of the plot dealing with parent-child relationships.

Good young adult novels tend to flow lightly and clearly and to speak from the heart in some way. I recently reread *I Heard the Owl Call My Name* which I had borrowed from

the young adult section of the library as a teenager. About a young, terminally ill priest, ministering to an Indian community in Canada, novella size, the plot moves lightly but manages nevertheless to touch the heart.

The fantasy, *Lord of the Rings*, (Tolkien, 1987) enjoying ongoing popularity since the 1950s within the young adult age group, tells an exciting tale and describes a moral journey of the spirit. It has endured because it deals with deeply rooted human values, good versus evil, courage and tenacity, loyalty, spirit and freedom versus slavery to a demigod. The characters in *Lord of the Rings* make sacrifices for the common good. *The Cystmaster* in comparison to these two stories also espouses values such as loyalty and freedom, courage and tenacity however *The Cystmaster* plot moves ponderously - its main failing in terms of a young adult novel. It needs further editing and an injection of excitement and tension.

Science fiction has multilevel demands of scene setting, theme, plot, characterisation, world building, science, imagination to achieve a wow factor. Somehow, they all have to tie in together and that takes time. Robinson took nine years to write his *Mars* series and Herbert five years to write *Dune*. Keneally defines a process of “louvering” when writing each new draft of his novels, referring to the way he edits and layers in meaning, exposing new levels of story at each successive rewrite. (Woolfe and Grenville, 1993) *The Cystmaster* will benefit from this approach hopefully achieving more depth and the pace and lightness of touch more suited to a young adult audience.

The Story

Robinson (2007) said that one person can change history, the starting point for my thought experiment in *The Cystmaster*. I said, “What if a very rich man, highly intuitive, successful and ethical, believed that an all out, nuclear war would actually happen? What if he decided to put in place people, strategies, resources and technology which would allow Earth and the remaining plants, animals and people to have some chance of survival? What if he was successful? What would that look like?” Although not a main character in this story, Michael van Thorson instigated the birth of the new Earth in *The Cystmaster* and is a major influence on my created world. The way events from the past influence the future, has relevance in this novel.

Tuttle (2005, p.19) advises the science fiction writer to ask the following questions:

“What is it that makes us human?

How might future technology change the world and our relationship to it and to each other?

How could society be redesigned to make life more fair?”

I attempted to answer those questions. Firstly, I had a vision of people swimming and working in the sea, growing and harvesting cysts, the air filled bladders from giant kelp. They were swimming fast, like dolphins and seals - being ‘fluid’. Hard on the heels of that vision was the idea of a mother raising her child in a nuclear fallout shelter, 300 years in the future. The mother would die and the child, a boy called Lexi, would psychically “farspeak”, calling for rescue. He would be taken to Aotearoa where he would grow up to be a cystmaster, an expert at growing the giant kelp which is now the main structural resource of the new Earth.

I speculated about what that Earth might be like 300 years in the future, describing Lexi’s life as he grew older. In this sense my story fits the “stranger comes to town” category, like *Anne of Green Gables* or perhaps Anne Holm’s children’s classic *I am David* (1977). Like them, *The Cystmaster* is also a story about an “orphaned” child, an outsider, seeking a sense of home and belonging, a sense of his own identity. That is one of the themes. It also allows me to describe the world through an outsider’s eyes.

The story is also about love in a variety of different forms. Romantic love, and here it again mirrors *Anne of Green Gables*, as Iessa, Lexi’s childhood enemy, becomes the person he loves when he’s older. Love of the Earth, of plants and animals and landscape is also fundamental to *The Cystmaster* as humanity struggles to regrow a flourishing, wild world. The story is also about the way parents love their children. In all of these aspects it has some affinity with *Anne of Green Gables*. However the landscape of the new Earth is a very different one and so the society and culture of the place call forth a very different story.

Le Guin (1980) talks above about the use of metaphor in science fiction ‘...drawn from certain great dominants of our contemporary life science.’ I chose to use four dominants

of contemporary science: nuclear war and global warming which set the scene in 2061 when the war almost ended life on Earth; and genetic engineering and ecology on new Earth, 300 years in the future. I am attempting to write ecological science fiction, in the vein of Herbert's *Dune*, Ursula Le Guin in *The Left Hand of Darkness* or Kim Stanley Robinson in his *Mars* series. I want the biological and physical environment of the new Earth, including radioactivity and the higher sea levels of global warming to actively dictate the society, culture and actions of the people in the story.

Genetic engineering is at the forefront. This evolved because of the young adult audience and having a child as the main protagonist. Adolescents (adols) in the story are growing up in a low radiation area and are milked for their genes, which along with food and structural cyst technology, are given away and shared, used as currency on new Earth to ensure world peace. Orphans and embryos are part of that currency as well as eggs and sperm. A new morality has developed and children's lives are structured to allow them to fulfil the gene donor role when they are older.

In some ways, this resembles stories such as Atwood's feminist science fiction novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Atwood imagines and describes Dystopia in a world based on hierarchies, a cold male logic, unequal power structures and the unequal status of women. The events depicted seem chilling although Baccolini (2004) says that this novel and other women's dystopian novels by '...resisting closure, allow readers and protagonists to hope: the ambiguous open endings maintain the utopian impulse *within* the work.' McCarthy (2006) achieves hope in the open ending to *The Road*, in a similar way. By contrast, the tone in *The Cystmaster* is meant to be pragmatic but also a little unsettling. The reader is meant to feel uncomfortable but also to understand why. The general impulse is utopian. To make a better world, this has to happen and that is almost, but not quite, worthwhile compensation.

Baccolini (2004, p.520) says:

'...Women's science fiction novels have contributed to the exploration and subsequent breakdown of certainties and universalist assumptions – those damaging stereotypes – about gendered identities by addressing in a dialectical engagement with tradition, themes such as the representation of women and their bodies, reproduction and sexuality...'

Women in *The Handmaid's Tale* have no control over their reproductive function; neither do adolescents in *The Cystmaster*. This reflects an historical trend towards the objectification (scientific and social) not just of women's bodies but also of the reproductive process and the reality of falling fertility and reproductive rates in our world. In the dystopian movie *Children of Men*, (Abraham, Bliss, Newman, Shor, Smith, Smith, and Cuarón, 2006) zero fertility results in world wide desperation as childless humans literally lose all hope for a future. Likewise, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, fertility is low and desperate measures are taken. Atwood has an hierarchical, male dominated society dictating solutions and rules - reflecting something evil in the heart of men. In *The Cystmaster*, radiation is the enemy -controlling people's lives, impartial and unselective, affecting everyone. Genemasters and genetic engineers are merely a technological response to this force. The new Earth is attempting to be egalitarian, ensuring that all people have the necessary basics: shelter, clean air, food, water and yes, children. The basic premise of this society is about equity and equality. It is not ethically pure.

The Ideas

Science fiction writers tend to play with similar ideas. Card (1990) says:

If enough of us like your story, we'll accept your boundary as the true one and plant a few stories of our own in your new found land. It's the best gift we can give each other. We're all of us harvesting crops in the land opened up by the pioneers in our field... p.24

He refers here to the boundaries constituting science fiction, and also perhaps to the original ideas, which are then recycled and experimented with in other writers' stories. In *The Cystmaster* I had my own "what if" idea. I imagined my sea cyst colonies although I know that Simmons (2004) briefly mentioned kelp farms and dolphins in the *Hyperion* books. I imagined tunnels and domes, although I know they exist in other science fiction. I also actively adapted ideas from other writers in order to problem-solve events in my story. The nanocu and the uses of nanotechnology came from Peter F. Hamilton (1997) and his *Night's Dawn* trilogy. Psycho-senses and redactors and

farsensors came from authors like McCaffery (1987) in *To Ride Pegasus*, May (1981, 1982, 1983, 1984) from *The Saga of the Exiles*, Butler (1978) from *Mind of My Mind* and Asimov (1983, 1984) from his *Foundation* series. Although I haven't written about boats in any detail, I have in mind visions of them from the movie *Waterworld* (Costner, Gordon & Davis, 2002) and from Oracle's 2010 America's Cup tri-maran and Alinghi's catamaran.

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) was influential in terms of the love he depicts in his father/child relationship and in the bleakness of his world. I was endeavouring to write a story in which the world was saved. His world provided impetus to offer something more hopeful 300 years down the track and the vision of his world as the real beginning to my story was helpful and anchoring.

The other author who was especially influential was Kim Stanley Robinson (1992, 1993, 1995) and his *Mars* series and the concept of terraforming. If we could terraform Mars, why couldn't we re-terraform Earth? One very rich man can make a difference in the *Mars* trilogy, my story is similar. The original spaceship to Mars had genetic material and this was used to create children and other organisms. My story also has stores of genetic material, essential to the reestablishment of biological life and what Nijhuis (2008) refers to as the redesign of habitats and assisted migration of species. In the way that the *Mars* trilogy tends to be utopian, I want my story to be utopian. Robinson also amasses various sciences to make his story real and authentic. It may take another year or two, but my final step will be to make the science in *The Cystmaster* inventive and realistic.

Themes

The Cystmaster was structured around some key themes: the ethics of using various technologies, love, loyalty, the tension between Utopia and Dystopia, the need for natural wildness, finding your own identity. Some of these themes interact on the Utopia/ Dystopia continuum.

Initially, the effects of nuclear war and global warming were planned themes. I imagined the story having a similar structure to *The Sparrow* (Russell, 1998) or *Tamar*

(Peet, 2006) in which two different but related stories alternate, covering two time periods. We learn the past and present in tandem and they finally come together at the end of the story. I wanted to tell the story of a very rich man, Michael, immediately following a nuclear war in the year 2061 and I wanted to tell Lexi's story, 300 years in the future; showing how the decisions (and sacrifices) made by Michael, in effect saved humanity and created a new Earth where humanity's goal was to remake the world like Eden. That story would have had the effects of nuclear war and global warming as a theme and it would have provided more action, drama and tension, however the original idea was too ambitious for me to attempt. Only the future Lexi story has been developed. Later, I would like to experiment with the original idea but it may be that the current story warrants a more sustained treatment and the Michael story will work best as a sub-plot.

As mentioned above, finding one's own identity is a theme of *The Cystmaster*, both in the more conventional sense where people work out who they are by a process of living life and also in the genetic engineering sense. Characters such as Iessa and her father Maika have been engineered with animal genes. They need to find and understand the differences those genes have caused, in order to rediscover in themselves a concept of normal humanity.

Many children in new Earth have come from donated sperm or eggs like my protagonist, Lexi, or from both as a donated embryo. Children may want to know the identity of the donors, especially if they are orphans, knowledge which is retained by genemasters -the gatekeepers of information about people's true genetic identity.

Love in many different forms is a theme: romantic love, love for the Earth, parental love especially so. The way children are treated in *The Cystmaster* is a metaphor for the way our society treats children. In the story, many children have happy, active lives but they are also raised to fill the particular roles the society needs and values. Trained from an early age and given skills to help them do this, they have little opportunity for escape. They are, in essence, commodities and currency. Their parents similarly channelled, sometimes put their society given role before that of loving parent. To various extents the parents sacrifice relationships with their children and in some cases the children themselves.

Linked to love is loyalty. Marco, Lexi and his friend Alo are meant to exemplify this quality to various degrees as is the relationship of the dolphin to Lara and Iessa.

The ethics around the use of technology, the need for natural wildness and the tension between Utopia and Dystopia are interacting themes. Jameson (2005, p. xii) states:

The Utopians not only offer to conceive of such alternate systems; Utopian form is itself a representational meditation on radical difference, radical otherness, and on the systemic nature of the social totality, to the point where one cannot imagine any fundamental change in our social existence which has not first thrown off Utopian visions like so many sparks from a comet.

Imagining something radically, almost unbelievably different or having radical change which is *aiming to make the world better in a true sense*, is perhaps the hallmark of the utopian world in science fiction. In the unwritten, historical back story to *The Cystmaster*, Michael has a utopian vision, taking the only advantage from nuclear war, the end of the old order, and replacing old ideas with a radically different way forward for humanity. In doing so, he puts in place dystopian strategies such as the viruses, genetic engineering and the nanocu. The tension between Dystopia and Utopia in *The Cystmaster* comes from the utopian ends versus the sometimes dystopian means. Michael imagines remaking the world “like Eden” in order to save the Earth and in the hope of a more natural, peaceful existence for humanity and the other life forms on the planet.

Jameson (2005), in *Archaeologies of the Future*, says that the concept of Utopia is a fluid one changing with the ideologies of the times. He says older Marxist traditions “...characterised Utopianism as an idealism deeply and structurally averse to the political as such...” (p. xi) and talks about “...the force of More’s original Utopian starting point...the thought of abolishing money and private property...” (p. 229). These concepts are integral to my version of Utopia which is characterised by minimal, centralised politics and by abundant cultural diversity as each colony creates its own rules and culture. The new Earth is a sort of cooperative, peaceful anarchy which has

been bought at some cost, and is paid for by the free sharing of food and healthy genetic material. It's possibly similar to Le Guin's anarchy in the *Dispossessed* (1974), in which she '...looks into the mechanisms that may be developed by an anarchistic society...' but also the dangers inherent in such a society '...without the continuation of revolutionary ideology'. (Wikipedia). In a lesser way, the tension between technology and ethics, especially the ethics around genetic manipulation and the roles of children, creates similar dangers in *The Cystmaster*. The story also illustrates the importance of natural wildness which exists in a sort of mythical, spiritual way in opposition to the necessity of fulfilling roles in society, something which if pursued too far, can result in a dystopian sort of crazy wildness.

Jameson (2005, p.275) cites a passage in Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, where the protagonist Shevek is beaten unconscious, stating that Le Guin didn't eschew violence as such, as part of Utopia but the institutionalization of violence. In *The Cystmaster* the children are physically very rough with each other. More than one person says that life is tough in the sea cyst zones, as though this fighting and toughening up is necessary for their survival once children start working the cysts.

The original 2061 war happens in a time when people are imprisoned for individual violence and yet a small number of military elite in a small number of nations, legally have the power to eliminate humanity. Humans accept that craziness. That is the true hypocrisy concerning violence, a dystopian scenario and an accurate analogy of the world today, although it does not face yet the pressures of an extra fifty years of global warming. Broome (2008) says the current ethics around global warming run contrary to the methods of measuring economic cost. Depending on which economist's formulae are used, governments will receive differing advice and act accordingly, yet this is like watching your child drowning and refusing to take action until a global positioning system gives you instructions to move. Another dystopian scenario.

So the children in *The Cystmaster* are rough, violent and think for themselves. As adolescents (adols) Iessa exhibits wildness and Lexi a pragmatic thoughtfulness. Both have grown into tenacious, capable, highly talented characters and neither exhibits mindless obedience. They won't allow another war. By contrast, the 1930's classic *Brave New World* (Huxley, 1979) is dystopian science fiction and almost everyone is

obedient. The story has rigid, hierarchical power structures, biologically controlled, social castes, people are trained to like their “unescapable” social destiny. They lack wildness and freedom and most don’t even aspire to it. There is a passage where the savage says,

‘But I like the inconveniences.’

‘We don’t,’ said the Controller. ‘We prefer to do things comfortably.’

‘But I don’t want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness. I want sin.’ (p. 192)

Jay Griffiths (2006) says in her book *Wild*:

I was, in fact, homesick for wildness, and when I found it I knew how intimately – how resonantly – I belonged here. We are charged with this. All of us. For the human spirit has a primal allegiance to wildness, to really live, to snatch the fruit and suck it, to spill the juice. We may think we are domesticated but we are not.”

(p. 2)

Natural wildness is expressed in the sea, land, plants and wildlife and in the animal wildness inside of people, part of Jung’s ancient collective unconscious. When the great white shark kills Lara or the stingray jabs Maika, it is natural wildness. The dolphins represent natural wildness. All are either an impartial force of nature at work or possibly even, nature with an agenda. The rivers are a metaphor for life – the wildness and force of the first river and falls in the story reverberating in people’s consciousness – a huge surge of life. Later, other rivers are connected with love, flowing into an ocean of life which nurtures and provides shelter for the whole world. Maika needs access to wildness in order to be ‘cured’ and so to a certain extent, does Iessa. The new Earth requires that people be too good, for too long.

In *Brave New World*, Huxley asks, what if we mass produce people so that society will be served in the most orderly and efficient way possible and what if we condition them to actually like their ‘unescapable’ social destiny? In *The Cystmaster*, many children are created from collected genetic material. Adults have a miniature computer, a nanocu, implanted in their brains and used in all aspects of their lives. It regularly shows

them the history of the Earth, before, during and after the 2061 war, thus inspiring and conditioning them to work for a rejuvenated Earth. However, in *The Cystmaster*, society is not hierarchical, people don't work to enhance the lives of a structural elite as happens in *Brave New World*. Instead, their role is shared with all people. They accept it because of a common history and the effects of what went before.

Working in the Genre of Science Fiction – My Process

Asimov (1987) said that the predictive role of science fiction is proving itself over time. Ideas from earlier science fiction (such as the invention of the atom bomb) have been shown to come true. Gibson's concept of cyberspace in *Neuromancer* (1984) is another example of this as is Huxley's depiction of the commoditization of people's lives in *Brave New World* in a metaphorical sense. It's as though science fiction writers sometimes write future histories. The corollary, is that science fiction needs to seem plausible.

The Cystmaster world is as yet only partially realised but my goal was to try to make it seem real, consistent and natural. My first step was to imagine a philosophy and a history linked to the philosophy going back to Einstein and statements he made about humanity. What chiefly interested me, was his vision (similar to Bertrand Russell) that human hearts were flawed, and that new technology was moving ahead of the guiding morality and values system that would have rendered that technology safer to use.

I tried to imagine Earth inundated by the waters of global warming. All sorts of marine farming would be encouraged. There would be a significant lack of terrestrial resources –basic ones such as land, food, water, shelter as well as the recently traditional ones of fuel and metal ores. There would be the overwhelming stress of a growing world population, an unfair hierarchy of power and resource use, and conflict over this. These provided the conditions to trigger the collapse of a society (Diamond, 1997) and thus a full blown nuclear war ensued; a cleansing, purging force which left a void into which a new morality and social order could gain some sort of ascendancy.

Gray (2002, p.180) says, ' If you want to understand twenty-first century wars... Future wars will be fought over dwindling natural resources.' Attali (2009) agrees and also implicates religion and the North-South gap, stating as well:

Humanity, which since the sixties has possessed the ability to commit collective suicide, might well use them (weapons)... a worse case scenario, but nothing is impossible here: man's tragedy is that when he can do something, in the end he will always do it. (p.253)

According to Lynas (2004, 2007), a likely outcome of global warming will be accelerated melt of Himalayan glaciers and severe water shortages for Pakistan and India in the latter half of this century. The 2061 war in *The Cystmaster*, begins as Pakistan and India vie for water rights over the Chenab River. The reasons for the war, and thus the beginning of my story, are plausible.

As for plausibility in the rest of the story, I have aimed to make my characters believable, to provide convincing settings and a logical plot although as yet there are still aspects of that which may be confusing. Hopefully the technologies I use seem credible but research is required regarding the science.

Recreating the world –researching and imagining the new Earth and then describing it, is difficult. It is allowable in science fiction to dump information and in general, stories require this to background the created world. Various methods exist – straight dump, diaries, quotes from invented “historical” works or religious texts as Herbert did in *Dune*. Le Guin in *The Left Hand of Darkness* inserts reports from official envoys’ and other government representatives, as well as folk legends, between chapters. My long term revision will include presenting information in a palatable way. It requires thought and finesse. Currently, information and dumps stop the flow of the story. The prologue is one such dump. Various experts agree prologues are a no-no. Still, I have put one in and taken it out several times and finally chosen to use it to introduce Michael and the historical setting right at the beginning. Part 2, Rescue is essentially another dump, existing primarily to provide backstory and introduce characters. Some of this information needs incorporating into the story elsewhere.

Another difficult aspect, is having the idea as the hero. How do you make a story with good characterisation when you also have to fully present your idea?

James and Mendlesohn (2003) say:

It is often said that sf is a genre devoid of convincing characterisation. Whether or not they have the skill, sf writers do not have the space for deep and studied character development, because they are bound to foreground the imagined world, the action-adventure and the gadgets. (p.171)

My idea required a fairly extensive cast, several settings. I lacked time to integrate properly the people story with the science. In a sense I was a visitor to my created world, discovering it but not yet able to interpret all that goes on there. The whole story is yet to come to fruition. It also needs more good science, more gadgets and technology, more that inspires a sense of wonder. They must wait because I need time to think them up and anyway having imagined them, what to call them? The invented lexicon in science fiction is yet another brain stretching exercise. My greatest dissatisfaction though, related to this, is that my story currently straddles a fence somewhere between ordinary character novel and 'authentic' science fiction. *The Sparrow*, (Russell, 1997) although well written, dissatisfied me for similar reasons.

From the craft side, I had trouble with point of view, characterisation, and the natural passing of time and how to speed that up in places. Lexi ages from six to sixteen. Which to show of those intervening years? Who will show it? I used a variable third person point of view but found it tricky, especially when Lexi was a young child. Emotional distance was also a problem. Some characters spoke close to the heart but Lexi always seemed distant after the initial scenes in Owai.

I needed to build enmity between Lexi and Iessa in their childhood whilst still achieving a grudging and hidden respect. As well scenes needed to describe places and situations which were major events. I began to realise what I needed to show (and it was still vague) when I was halfway through the story. Scenes still need to be added. Others need removing. Some sections are bulky and thus boring. King (2001) advises editing as much as possible and then removing another ten percent - good advice, but I have no time left to make the right judgement calls. Related to this, plot is an issue. My story is

situational, this happened thus causing that. There are complications and possibly a lack of clarity in some areas, where things may seem confusing or still unexplained. I would like to intensify the semi-political, power struggle between the genemasters and the genetic engineers and the effect this has on the adols. I would also like a little more humour.

In places, I hint at spiritualism, a little bit of magical realism, sniff of a different sort of genre; not necessarily a good idea for a science fiction, young adult audience who might like their science fiction pure, but those scenes wanted to be written and I like them. Rowling (1997) did a bit of the same sort of crossover with the *Harry Potter* stories. On a larger scale, Hamilton (1996, 1998, 1999) has done the same with his space opera, *Night's Dawn* trilogy.

The Cystmaster has something to say and my conscious mind needs more time to fully understand what that something is. However, it is only a first draft and I look forward to having space from the manuscript so that I can see it more objectively.

Conclusion

The Cystmaster is utopian science fiction which attempts to illustrate a possible 'what if', the survival of the Earth after nuclear war, and the new sort of society which has developed around the reality of nuclear radiation. Utopia is a social construct that by definition can never be fully realised. It is merely an ideological destination. The utopian goal exists against more dystopian realities which manifest in *The Cystmaster* as a tension between ethics and technology, and the compromises needed to exist in a radioactive world. Hopefully the more positive aspects override the negative. The world has survived, people are striving to create a natural, wild world with equity for all people and this is now the accepted way of life.

The Cystmaster is also a coming of age, love story for young adults and this is the main vehicle for the plot. It is hopeful in this sense. The story also works as allegory, illustrating the way parents can choose if they so desire, to prioritise the role of loving parent above the roles allocated by society. In the story, Iessa lives the dream; she gets her father Maika back from the 'dead' and he has a chance to redeem himself as a father. This message is a hopeful one for children and adolescents.

Although *The Cystmaster* is still at an experimental stage, it is working well as a first draft of a young adult novel and also in the initial exploration of ideas, as a thought experiment. The final words in this exegesis can go to Chad Oliver (1981, p.387) in Collins (2003, p. 193). This is the world my thought experiment has as its utopian goal.

The Earth of tomorrow need not be the Earth of today. It does not have to be a plastic anthill smothered in a uniform culture. It will be technologically possible and the record shows that we have a considerable aptitude for dealing with technological problems.... We could have a green Earth again, an Earth free of pollution, an Earth that could be the setting for a thousand experimental lifeways. We could have an Earth on which we recognized our identity as a species, an Earth where racism and mad wars of self-destruction could not exist.

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THE CYSTMASTER 1 - The Tunnel Boy

By Kathryn Ngapo

Prologue

Aotearoa, New Zealand, 2061

Michael

The lodge was by a river.

When the group had their breaks from the conference room they would hear the falls and the roar of the river as it tumbled through the gorge. Some of them would go outside into the cool air and continue their conversations walking on the stone paths that ran through the tall trees surrounding the main building. It seemed natural to discuss modern plant genetics amidst the five hundred year old podocarps, natural to discuss the chaotic state of the world order surrounded by pristine nature. More than one of them said they felt as though they were in a Japanese garden, even though the rocky outcrops, the textures in the landscape and the artistic fall of leaves, had been arranged solely by nature.

At every break, a few followed the path which ran to the lookout above the falls. To stand there, where the roar of the falls made conversation impossible, to see the intensity and rush of that surge of water, the white force of it breaking over the rocks, to breathe in the cloud of vapourised moisture that rose from the river below, to feel the thunder of it vibrating the wooden planks of the lookout - it quieted them - triggered other more peaceful thoughts, or else silenced thinking in favour of the senses.

For two of the afternoon sessions, they went down past the lookout and several hundred metres along the bank to where natural hot-pools steamed in a ferny cleft which fed into the river. Self consciously the first time, they removed the robes supplied by the lodge and slipped into the warm water. Michael was tanned and fit looking, so was the African. The others looked white and under-exercised. They discussed the viruses the first day. The second time they talked about security in the underground fortifications which housed the gene banks.

Their discussions took place over four days from the 12th to the 15th of September. The year was 2061. Later in history the numerologists would find all sorts of significance in the dates.

On one of the rest periods, Michael went to his suite and made a call to his wife Alicia, in the States.

'It's great down here,' he said, 'but I miss you. Why not fly out with the kids and we can have a vacation before we move.'

'Michael,' she said, 'you told me we were moving this week. We've already sent our things up to the mountain. Toby's gone too - and they say he's pining for us.'

'That dog would pine for a donut. I'm pining for you.'

'Oh honey.' She was quiet on the other end of the phone.

He waited and his face reflected back at him in the plate glass window. Why do I look so desperate, he thought?

'I'd love to,' she replied finally, 'but isn't it dangerous right now?' There was tension in her voice but also a certain wistful longing, a willingness to be convinced.

'No more than usual.' He waited again.

'OK.'

The breath which he had not noticed he was holding, hissed out of him.

'I miss you too,' she said. 'Get Jessica to organise the jet for tomorrow. It'll be interesting. We've never been to New Zealand before.'

It seemed right. When the call ended he replaced the receiver with a wry smile on his face and stood for a minute looking out the window over the emerald green lawn to the great trunks of the trees and their arching, green foliage. He saw her mouth, those blue eyes, could almost smell her scent and momentarily was struck by a twist of longing that made him reach out for the window frame and the feeling of balance it offered. He sighed. That woman. He was looking forward to seeing the four kids too. One more day.

Back in the meeting he told them that the family was flying out for a quick vacation before he returned to the States.

Mason, busily shuffling papers, stopped and looked up. 'Is that wise?' he said, unknowingly echoing Alicia. 'Do you think it's safe?'

Michael shrugged. 'What's safe these days?'

The others looked at him and he could see that they thought he was doing yet another crazy thing.

Later, when he asked what they thought of his concept for the genemaster, he received reluctant agreement.

Fernando, the little genetic engineer from Argentina, took off his glasses and polished them with one of the folded napkins on the table. 'I still don't understand why we need genemasters when we have all the genetic expertise we're ever likely to need,' he said, putting his glasses back on.

Michael said, 'Perhaps expertise is not all that is required.'

A few glanced at him briefly from under lowered lids and then looked away again. Others looked straight ahead or down at the table. The African was the only one to meet his gaze.

No-one spoke and in the quiet they could just hear the sound of the falls.

Finally Fernando asked, 'Who will you get to do it?'

'I have someone in mind,' Michael said and smiled. 'I need to ask though. I'll let you know.'

The others flew out the following day for the States and wherever else they came from and the morning after, Michael met his family off their private jet at the local airport. Two days later when the war broke out, no-one was left to worry too much about his whereabouts. They were just one family out of millions of other simultaneously disappeared families, lost into the face of the Earth.

How and why it started would have been written in books that looked at thousand year histories but the event which triggered the war, on September 18, in the year 2061, was the detonation of a 500 kiloton nuclear warhead. Pakistan, desperate for water rights under the Indus Basin Waters Treaty 3, launched a thermonuclear device that landed at lunchtime on 37 million people in Mumbai, India. Home to India's burgeoning economic empire, the main great soak hole for the nation's energy needs, it was a fitting target, a monument to the electricity God, the great thief that was stealing the water, stealing life via the Baglihar and a host of other dams on the Chenab River.

The great water debate that had raged for decades in that part of Asia, that had killed already millions of people in an ongoing war of words and starvation, finally came to a head as countries were drawn into a conflagration that was not about religion or the boundaries of people and nations. It was instead about a long and terrible drought, the result of an accelerated glacial melt caused by global warming in the early years of that century and it was about the ownership of something that everyone knew ought not to be owned.

The paths of the sacred rivers were ancient, running from high in the Himalayas through deep gorges and down through the two nation states, irrigating jungle and desert alike, then down through the plains of the Punjab to the Arabian Sea. The water meant life. That was the reason it started.

India replied with its own bomb which landed on Karachi and the world held its breath as diplomats raced to heal the breach.

Into the deathly quiet, Palestine, facing a drought of its own, screamed tyranny and pointed a finger at Israel and two days later, Israel launched a series of missile strikes against Iranian and Pakistani nuclear power plants and missile silos. Russian diplomats flew in for talks. Right now it's bad they said, but it could get so much worse. Please think what is at stake before it goes too far.

Nothing could stop it. The first bomb had been like a dive from the high platform; the whole thing accelerated towards the bottom and the launch of a full blown war came to seem inevitable; elegantly inevitable to the planners of war, frighteningly so to everyone else. The words of the diplomats fell into the pool of distrust and caused scarcely a ripple. Peace was a five-letter word. The States took the side of Israel and in hours, arsenals were launched, blasting white golden yellow from missile silos and in huge arcing fire-streams erupting out of the blue oceans and the bowels of the nuclear submarines that lurked there.

Eight days after the first attack by Pakistan the war was mostly over, victor-less but not victimless. Big chunks of the Northern Hemisphere lay under clouds of radioactive dust, America the Great was now a radioactive wasteland. Russia was cloaked in death clouds which drifted over Europe and Asia. China, which had stayed silent, hoping to avoid the conflict, had suffered nuclear strikes from Russia, India and the United States. The Middle East – once the cradle of much of human culture and

religion, was now an area of unproductive rubble where radcounters went too far off the scale for recalibration. Fires burned until they had consumed everything.

Billions died. The sun looked a little dimmer. For a while it was not seen.

It was the beginning of a lingering dullness, a grey cold. Plants turned brown and withered. The air was poisonous to breathe. Animals starved and people found them sickened in places they should not be and ate them anyway. The water in the rivers continued to flow, carrying a lode of radioactive toxins and people could no longer safely drink it, as they could not eat or drink their remorse; the remorse of a species which had woken to awareness too late. The remorse soaked into the ether.

Don't ever forget.

And they didn't.

1 - Helena and Lexi

The Tunnels, Cascade Range, The Northern Wastelands, Former United States of America, Year 2359

The Treasure Hunt

‘Let’s have a treasure hunt,’ Helena said.

‘Yahoo, a treasure hunt!’ yelled Lexi. ‘A treasure hunt! What number?’

‘I choose 23.’

‘I choose.... D.’

‘16.’

‘Race you to the bikes.’ Lexi was already running, almost wetting himself with excitement. They tore down the dimly lit tunnel to where their bikes were propped on the wall outside the main living area. He leapt on his, flicked on the headlamp and then went flat out down the tunnel. Helena rang her bell and whizzed past.

They sped past Storage Area 15 and she wasn’t too far in front. He could still run around the storage room pretty fast when they got there. His feet peddled furiously. Ahead of him in the grey darkness, he saw her get off her bike and a shaft of light lit the corridor as she ran into the room. He threw his bike down, only 10 metres or so behind and tore off down a different aisle to beat her to the D section.

11, 12, 13...he counted as he ran past the containers. Helena was running from the other end of the aisle and he slapped the container labelled 16 when she was just two steps away.

‘Beat ya,’ he crowed.

‘Darn.’ Helena ruffled his sweaty, dark hair.

They were both half bent over gasping for breath.

‘I thought I had you that time,’ she said when she had finally recovered. ‘You get to open the box.’ She manoeuvred it off the shelf and on to the concrete floor and handed him the knife. ‘Be careful.’

The container was a stainless steel, round cornered box about 60 cm square. Around the top there was a raised black polymer seal with a ridge, and it was this that Lexi used to guide the knife.

‘Done it’ he said when he had cut around the entire rim.

‘Good boy.’

Helena removed the seal, took a tube of lubricant out of her backpack, rubbed the grease around the ridge and then began to prise the lid, levering each little bit patiently until the lid popped up. Inside, around the containers contents, there was a sealed plastic bag. Lexi opened it and then the one underneath. He removed the desiccant pads, then reached in and took out another plastic bag. He opened it and pulled out a folded woollen garment.

‘What is it?’ He passed it to Helena.

She held it up, half hat – half something else, she couldn’t think what it was. She looked at it curiously for a moment and read the label, then said, ‘I remember what this is now - it’s called a balaclava.’ She put it on and it covered her entire head but he could still see her face. ‘It’s to help keep you warm.’

‘Is it all balaclavas?’ said Lexi and he rummaged through the container pulling out plastic bags. When it was all unpacked, they had two men’s woollen jerseys, two balaclavas, gloves, lots of socks and six pairs of long johns. Everything was much too big for either of them.

‘Let’s put them back,’ said Lexi.

They tidied everything away and Helena said. ‘The first strawberry got ripe today. Do you want it?’

Lexi’s face lit up. ‘Sure do.’

‘Race you back to the growing room then.’

They ran out to their bikes, Lexi in front and Helena tried to grab him to slow him down. She missed and he hopped on and tore off down the tunnel.

‘Lexi, put your light on,’ she shouted after him.

His light went on and she called out, ‘I’m gonna beat ya.’

She pedalled fast, his whoops of excitement echoing back at her from the concrete walls of the tunnel. Another Sunday, she thought. When she got to the growing chamber he was waiting patiently by the strawberry plants. She picked the ripe strawberry and gave it to him. He took a bite and then gave it back.

‘It’s yours,’ she said.

‘It’s yours too.’

She relished her half a strawberry, while he watched her with loving eyes then she picked him up and hugged him.

‘Delicious, just like you. Let’s have lunch.’

But she was thinking. Usually she let Lexi win. Today she couldn’t stop him. Anxiety like a hungry beetle gnawed at the fringe of her subconscious. She shook her head –maybe she just had a Superboy, yes that’s what it was. They had given her a Superboy.

That afternoon, when he was playing with his blocks in the living room, she recorded it in her diary.

I think they may have given me a Superboy, Grace. Maybe I have a Superboy.

Helena Sets the Reflectors

The first ripe strawberry reminded her that she needed to reset the reflectors.

Five nights later when there was a full moon, she unrolled the blackout curtain, fastened it to the hooks around the lightwell and left the note on the bedside table under the small, round glowlamp.

She moved quietly around the room, putting on her head lamp and pulling on the under boots. When she was ready she turned the glowlamp to low and shouldered her pack. Lexi’s dark hair was just visible over the edge of the sheet, and his body was a round, curled up hump under the covers.

‘Look after him for me, Grace.’

She went out and the double doors flapped soundlessly behind her.

She rode slowly in the gentle pool of pale yellow light from the bike lantern and her headlamp, the sound of wheels turning on the concrete floor, the slight wind of movement on her face,

It was a long curving sweep of tunnel to the main entrance. At the metal door, she left the bike propped against a buttress and stripped down to her long underwear. Then taking the adjuster out of her pack, she coded the keypad and the big door opened into the airlock. She went through and tooled the door shut behind her. Another large metal door was directly in front and two smaller doors were set into the side wall to her left. She entered the number, the metal door opened into the outer decom chamber and when she went in, slid shut silently behind her.

A radiation suit hung on the concrete wall. Boots sat next to it in front of a full length mirror. She hurried to pull on the suit, tucking in her hair and then adjusting the bottom ridge on the helmet to fit into the hard groove that ran around the neckline. Standing in front of the mirror, she matched the connectors – chest and neck and the suit began to seal and the rebreather hissed on. Plastic tasting air flooded the helmet. She pulled on the gloves, adjusted the connectors again and they too fused with the suit. The boots were last - big, heavier than you'd expect them to be. She pressed the final set of connectors, the suit sealed and the readout glowed green and ready.

Clipping the adjuster onto one of the attachor loops, she tooled the number into the last control pad. The shield door opened onto moonlight and the silver-bathed face of the mountain and she stepped outside. The door clanged shut. A bar of red light came on in her helmet. She had two hours before the voice would tell her that she was close to the limit. Two whole hours.

It was a world of light and shadow, empty of things, full of space. The full moon shone down, its light reflecting off the white mountain tops that stretched across the horizon, chains of them running from south to north. Between them, black rivers snaked through the valleys, boundaries delineating the areas of each range.

She took the track south, climbing slowly, up and around the mountain on her way to the reflector stage, all her attention on the rough, rubble path. When she wanted to see the view she stopped and looked, then started walking again.

It took twenty one minutes to reach the rotating platform that adjusted the reflectors. Her breathing rasped inside the helmet and sweat made the suit slick and sticky. She brushed loose stones and grit off the top of the round, metal cage and

smoothed away pebbles that might fall into the mechanism when she removed the cover. Bending over, she spaced her gloved hands evenly on the edge of the cage, depressed the lever and the cage slid up a half metre on greased, stainless steel tubes. She took the adjuster, crouched looking for the slot and fit in the key end. When it engaged she began to crank the handle steady and unhurried, imagining the cogs and gears inside the mountain, angling the different light reflectors towards the sun.

It was hot work and she took a break. Her eyes were drawn to the full moon and her throat opened and howled the way Grace had shown her, the way a wolf might have done. The noise echoed in her helmet, loud and confined and she wished she could take the helmet off and launch her howl right out at the moon, feel it flying off up into the sky. Let it go full volume, maybe see what wind felt like. Instead, she contented herself with looking - anywhere her eyes wanted to go. Mountain, river, valley, sky. To look close up at the stones at her feet, at the shadows the moon threw on them, their randomness of shape, even that was a fascination.

She began to crank the handle again, aware of the red bar in her helmet. By the time JUNE A slid under the notched indicator, she was good and hot again and sweating freely. It was done. She disengaged the adjuster, checked the platform for rocks and pebbles then depressed the handle, using her weight to push down the cage until it locked. She tugged to make sure it was properly engaged then checked the red bar. Forty two minutes had elapsed in total, leaving her with just on seventy.

Turning east, she headed across the slope toward the north side. Every so often she paused to look at the mountains. After a while she began to see a rough, chewed out piece in the bottom of the valley which gradually revealed itself as a lake. A little later and she saw the big gouge taken out of the mountain across the valley. A few kilometres –a gulf away. She gazed at the lake, huge and black and glittering, with the round moon reflected there and the rough, unnatural break in the smooth flanks of the mountain, then turned for home.

The voice sounded just as she reached the shield door. The red light blinked while she stood and looked at the mountains. Her breath stilled. Silence. She turned and toolled in the code. The door slid open and she went in.

Books

‘Ah Lexi I love you.’ She said it ten times a day at least –she hugged him, and kissed him, she rubbed his back and ruffled his hair.

‘I love you too, Mother.’

Her name was Helena but she liked him to call her Mother as they did in old Earth times. When he asked why, she said, why not? Her whole life in the tunnels has been lived more the old Earth way and anyway, one of her favourite things was hearing him call her mother.

At night they lay together in bed in an enclosed alcove off the growing chamber. Helena had scavenged the best of the carpets and rugs to line the concrete walls and on the floor they had two fabulous Persian rugs. It made the alcove cosier and Helena fancied it also gave it a lovely, exotic, Aladdin’s cave look. The pipes that carried warmth to the plants also ran under the concrete floor of their room. They needed the heat all year round.

There were many books from old Earth sealed in the storage containers – thousands of them and some were children’s books. At night when they were in bed she read him stories. During the day when the work was done she read more stories. He had favourites. He loved the Hans Christian Andersen fairytales – especially ‘The Little Mermaid’ but whenever Helena read it to him, it also made him sad so he didn’t ask for it often. He also liked books which Helena called ‘Cowboy and Indian’ stories. Some of those stories had taken place near where they lived now. It both fascinated and saddened him to hear this.

Often he asked her to read him the gardening books. The first time he asked for them she had laughed in a serious sort of way.

‘You’ll grow up to be a gardener little Lexi.’

‘Yes,’ he had replied happily. ‘I’d like that.’

Whenever she read a story to him for the first time, she told him, ‘This is what the world used to be like Lexi. It isn’t like this now.’

He saw whole families, towns filled with cars, houses, schools and factories. There was always blue sky. People never lived underground. They were always coming and going, doing things. There were often animals in the stories. Lexi knew that most of

them no longer existed in the new Earth. He said to Helena often, that Earth was better then.

She never argued. 'Yes,' she replied, 'it was.'

When there were things he hadn't seen before, Helena explained so that he could understand what he was looking at.

'How do you know this?' he asked.

'It's what my mother told me when she read me these books,' she said. 'And her mother told her and before her there were many mothers and fathers telling these things to their children. That's how I know.'

Lexi Finds Out About the Colonies

One day that summer of Lexi's sixth year, while they were tending the plants, Lexi asked, 'Does everyone live the way we do here?'

Helena finished plucking a withered leaf off a tomato vine and added it to the compost bucket.

'No Lexi. Some people live like us. Most people live in the colonies now.'

Lexi felt her sadness and it surprised him.

'What are the colonies?'

She mindspoke for him, images of the colonies.

-I'll show you.

Lexi saw round shapes. -What are those?

- They're domes. Plants called strands grow things called cysts- the cysts can be made into domes. Some are on the sea and some are on land.

- I didn't know plants could do that.

- These are sea plants – they're different to our plants.

- Why do the domes have that yellow colour?

- I'm not sure, I know the sea plants have chlorophyll which would make them green I guess, but I think some other pigment makes them yellow. We'll have to look it up in a book.

Most of the domes did have the slightly yellow colour although some were clear. Under some of the domes Lexi could see many trees and plants.

‘That’s so much plants and trees,’ he said, excitedly. ‘I didn’t know Earth still had trees like that.’

‘Some places do. We don’t and I know that there are lots of places where it’s just the same as here. You can’t really go outside because there’s too much radiation and nothing will grow because it’s too cold.’

‘Mindspeak me some more.’

He saw domes, some were surrounded by plants but often they were in barren areas.

-Is that like where we are?

-No. That’s a warm place. It’s probably really hot. We’re the opposite. Here it’s too cold and the bomb blast was close so there’s way more radiation. We need rock around us - a cyst dome wouldn’t work here.

Then she showed him images of the sea domes. He had seen pictures of the sea before and he couldn’t imagine how the domes could possibly exist there.

-They look so big. How can they stay on the water like that?

-I wondered that. I don’t understand the sea. All I know is that the cysts are light and they’re filled with air. That makes them float on top of the water. There’s so many, they support the larger domes even when there’s hundreds of people in them.

‘Have a look at this,’ she said, and showed him the underground colonies. There were many people and the underground living spaces were light filled and airy, very different to his tunnels.

‘They look nice don’t they,’ said Helena, watching his face.

‘Have you been to the colonies?’

‘No. I saw all of that on an image machine.’

‘Why don’t we live in the colonies?’ He was looking at her.

Helena plucked off more dead leaves and put them in the compost bucket.

‘That’s a good question and I don’t really have a good answer. Before you were born, you know I lived here with Grace. Then she died and there was no-one left to look after the plants.’ She waved her arm at the luxuriant, summer growth surrounding them.

‘Do we stay here to look after the plants then?’

‘Yes Lexi.’

‘That’s all right then,’ he said. ‘There must always be someone here to look after the plants.’

He was happy with that answer and when they went back to plucking the dead leaves off the tomato plants, became totally engrossed in the job, and then in trying to find more ripe strawberries.

That night in bed, Helena lay awake thinking long after Lexi had fallen asleep.

She wrote in her diary –

OK, he’s finally asked. I knew it had to happen sometime. How old was I when I asked Grace? I don’t remember and I’ve forgotten what you told me. This is hard. Why is everything so hard?

Lexi Wonders Who His Father Is

The next day when Helena woke, Lexi was lying next to her playing with a strand of her long golden hair, running it gently through his fingers and twirling it over and over.

‘Hello,’ she said. ‘Did you have a good sleep?’

‘Yes I did.’

‘What did you dream about?’

‘I dreamt about seals.’

After another minute of twirling he said, ‘Have we still got the image machine?’

‘What image machine?’

‘The one you saw the colonies on.’

Ah, she thought, there was an inevitability about all of this. ‘It’s around here somewhere Lexi, but it’s broken.’

His eyes dropped and she felt his disappointment.

He looked up again. ‘Have we got another image machine in the storage containers?’ he asked hopefully.

‘No. That was the only one. It came from a man I once knew. He visited and gave me the image machine.’

Lexi propped himself up on one elbow. 'Who was that?' He couldn't remember any visitors.

'Just a man I once knew.'

For a long time Lexi looked at her and didn't say anything. Then he asked, 'Was that man my father?'

Helena considered the question a while and then she said, 'I guess he was Lexi.'

'Show me what he looked like.'

Forgive me Marco, she thought. She opened her mind and he saw a tall smiling man with dark hair. The features were not fully clear –it was almost six years ago –but it was enough for Lexi.

'He looks nice. He has brown hair like mine. What was his name?'

'His name was Marco and he was nice,' Helena said lightly. 'He was here when you were born and then he stayed for a while when you were a little baby.'

'Why did he leave?'

He's so relentless she thought. She paused before replying. A little bit of a lie – she hadn't had to lie to Lexi before. She struggled to find some truth.

'Most people live in the colonies Lexi. That was where his life was.'

'Why didn't he take us with him?'

'He asked, but I didn't want to go. I felt as though I had to stay here with the plants.'

His green eyes gazed into her blue ones. He didn't say anything but she knew he was thinking and that he was unsure. Finally he said, 'I like it here with the plants, that's all right. But I think I might like to see the colonies too.'

Helena reached out and gently, rhythmically, stroked his cheek with the back of her hand. 'I like it here with the plants too, but I can understand why you'd like to see the colonies.'

Why wouldn't she understand? She felt the same way.

The Tunnels

Their underground complex of tunnels was built in the middle of the 21st century just before the wars, by a very wealthy man called Michael van Thorson. He had wanted

the best bomb shelter that money could buy. Helena said to Lexi that the tunnels took five years to build and that other people thought he was crazy to build them.

If you added up all of the different tunnels and joined them together they were about two and a half kilometres long. Some were straight with different rooms and storage areas opening off them, others curved through the mountain with steps linking the different levels.

In the end, four years after the tunnel's completion when war did actually break out, van Thorson was unable to access the complex because a bomb had exploded nearby. Helena said it had been a ground burst, there'd been no wind and it had been radioactive enough to fry everything in the area and then some. This was not supposed to be in the target zone, Helena told Lexi. She thought that perhaps it had been an accident. They had never been able to find out what happened.

That left Helena's ancestors and their children. Here initially to be caretakers of the complex, they ended up instead being survivors of the war. Much later the Genemasters had come and her ancestors had not wanted to leave the tunnel complex for the unknown, but they had agreed to have the babies - to be part of the experiment.

The complex was made of mountain stone, reinforced concrete and steel. Parts of it, the living quarters and growing chamber, were heated by under-floor pipes running from a thermal stream that came from under the mountain.

The living area was full of old, musty furniture and it was impossible to escape the feeling of slightly stagnant air and the lack of natural light there. The rooms carved out of the rock, incorporated curves and were a warm, cream colour. There were paintings on the walls and beautiful rugs on the wooden floors.

They both enjoyed the paintings, and they had a favourite. It was full of light, and clean, beautiful colours - a picture of flowers by the artist Monet. The other one that Helena really loved was of five Polynesian women sitting outside on a long seat and it was called 'The Market' by the painter Gauguin. She liked the way there were five beautiful women - just think of the conversations they could have, she used to say to Lexi. She also liked the way that it was a picture of a place that had lots of sun. The one Lexi liked was also of a hot place with lots of sun. There was a mountain in the distance, part of a blue lake, baked dry, golden colours and rocky ground with trees and houses seeming to grow out of it. Helena called it the Cezanne.

Further back in the mountain where it was very cold and dry, were the huge storage areas. Made up of many different rooms, they were full it seemed, of every imaginable item from the 21st century. It was like Helena and Lexi's own private museum of 21st century artefacts. Even after hundreds of years, more than half of the containers had never been opened.

To Helena, the most important item by far, was the specially prepared dehydrated food, stored in row after row of metal containers. Protein and carbohydrate rich - in meal sized, vacuum sealed, aluminium bags wrapped in the usual double plastic liner inside the containers, she used it sparingly. Miraculously, after hundreds of years, it was still good to eat. There were clothes too, blankets, books, music machines and instruments, furnishings, toys, paper, paint, oil, medicines, seeds, tools stored similarly in other containers. A huge underground water cistern was down another tunnel. Different machines were down another tunnel. They were all hundreds of years old. Some things didn't work anymore and others were still good.

The Sunday of the Most Ripe Strawberries

Lexi and Helena spent most of their time in the growing chamber, a suite of rooms including the main growing room, lit by reflective light shafts which passed through the mountain to light sinks on the surface. It was the only area in the whole complex to receive natural light during the day. Lexi liked the smell there. The rest of the complex smelled like dusty concrete and metal and felt cold and heavy. The growing room was light and the air was soft and alive because of the plants. It was like magic to him. The thought that the whole planet was once covered in plants and trees thrilled him. When he worked with Helena in the growing room he smiled and sang and asked endless questions about how to grow things. The hours flew by and he was always sad when darkness came and they had to get ready for bed.

Helena often said, 'I have no life legend to give you Lexi and I can't give you a life story, but I will try and help you understand how to grow things.'

During the growing season, they spent all day in the growing chamber. When Lexi was little, the large, circular growing room seemed enormous but now he was

almost 6 and it seemed much smaller and he knew every inch of it. He could find his way around with his eyes shut he knew it so well. Often when he had nothing else to do, he did just that, smelling the different plants, working out where he was by feel and scent and by the vague sense of light and dark that he got near the light shafts.

That day at the beginning of July, when Lexi entered the growing room, the moist, warm air over-laden with all the smells of plants and earth, reached out like a soft caress. He stopped just inside the door, face upturned to the natural light, eyes shut. When he opened them, the reflected sunlight was scattered on the walls like his own private rainbow. It only happened in the summer and only on special days.

Helena was up a metal ladder tending to the espaliered fruit trees and vines trained around the walls. They were old and precious, their crop of fruit a treasure not to be wasted. Today it was just Lexi looking after the vegetables and herbs growing in their containers around the room, grouped to make best use of the light wells. He followed the spiralling circuit and watered each plant with the watering bucket and an old metal cup. Some plants got half a cup and some plants got a whole one.

He watered too, the bright flowers, the zinnias and marigolds, asters and dahlias and daisies, scattered amidst the food plants. They were there for their herbal properties and to discourage disease and the odd bad insect that survived the bomb blast, and they were there too just because Lexi and Helena loved them.

It was the 'Sunday of the most ripe strawberries,' Lexi's favourite day of the year. Later they would have a mini festival, celebrating summer, but first he had to finish watering the plants.

They very rarely had cakes because Helena had only a very small supply of flour and sugar but earlier that morning, she used the stored battery power to make some special little apple cakes and when she took them out of the oven Lexi had never smelt anything so good.

That morning he asked her if she got the flour and sugar from his father.

'Yes, I did,' she said.

Lexi finished his watering and called Helena down from her ladder. She washed her hands and then slung on her large shoulder bag. The cooled apple cakes were in there already, with a drink for later.

‘OK, I’m ready,’ she said.

Lexi took his little scissors and looked around. He snipped several blossoms of the orange and yellow marigolds first and put them in Helena’s bag. Then a few sprigs of lavender, sprigs of all the herbs in fact. He hated sacrificing the tiny, fragrant violets and chopped two, only at Helena’s prompting. Then on and around the growing chamber they went with bits of this and bits of that, until they had something from all the plants and Helena’s bag was beginning to bulge.

When they got to the strawberries, Lexi counted 12 into a special strawberry container, all the ripe ones and popped that into her bag too.

Then he put on the warm jacket and hat and boots Helena had ready for him. She put warm clothes on too and pulled a knitted blue hat over her head that matched her eyes.

‘You look very beautiful,’ said Lexi.

‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘You look beautiful too.’

And he did, she thought taking a moment to have a really good look at him. His skin was creamy white – impossible to escape that whiteness when you were a tunnel dweller – but there was also a healthy pinkness in his cheeks and he was tall with big green eyes and dark, straight hair. Totally different to her own blonde, wavy mess, but that was hardly surprising. She loved his straightness. There was something unimpeded about him, something that reminded her of a healthy, young tree, fresh and new, strong and supple.

Lexi, all jacketed up, had no time for long searching examinations. He was getting hot. ‘Let’s go,’ he said impatiently.

‘All right, all right, Mister Hurry,’ Helena said, checking her shoulder bag. ‘It’s all right for you, you’re not carrying anything.’

They walked down the tunnel to the living room where there was a small drum on the table, a recorder and Helena’s violin. She helped Lexi sling the drum on its strap across his shoulder, attached a small headlamp on a band over his hat, and did the same herself. The recorder went in the shoulder bag and she picked up her violin and started to play.

Lexi had the drumsticks poised waiting for this moment. Helena started out with ‘Twinkle, Twinkle’ and Lexi tried to follow her rhythm and they sang at the same time.

What a delightful racket, thought Helena.

When they were done, Lexi reached into her shoulder bag and pulled out a few sprigs of plant.

‘Summer’s here,’ they both yelled as he scattered the plants on the floor.

Then it was off down the dim, cold tunnels, banging the drum and singing and playing the violin.

It took hours to leave an offering in all of the thirty storage rooms and to go to the very end of all the five main tunnels. Lexi liked getting to the end of a main tunnel. They said to each other, ‘Here’s to the Sunday of the most strawberries,’ and then they ate a strawberry.

Half way through, they stopped and ate lunch, surrounded by machinery on a bench in Storage Area 16. Helena, with the lack of technical prowess and knowledge inherited from her mother, rarely went there. She looked around at the metal containers which tended to be larger in there and the odd hulk of unused machinery, utterly ignorant of what she saw. Lexi, equally disinterested in his surroundings, ate his share of the apple cakes slowly, blissfully engrossed, licking every crumb. Then he had a drink of mint freshened water out of the container. He was full and totally happy. Helena had already finished her cakes and drunk her water. They rested a little longer after finishing their food, but without any movement the cold began to seep into their bones.

‘Let’s go now,’ said Lexi.

Helena stood up stiffly and put her shoulder bag on.

‘That’s a bit better,’ she said.

‘Was it heavy?’

‘Was it heavy? Was it heavy?’ she teased. ‘Yes it was. Lucky you’re such a greedy, little potato.’

‘Lucky you’re such a greedy, big potato.’

They laughed. Helena started a cheerful jig on her violin and Lexi joined in on drum. Their music echoed satisfyingly up and down the tunnels, getting into all the dark and dusty corners like a fresh breeze.

They had celebrated this festival every year that Lexi could remember. Helena said they had to wake up the last of the old spirits that hadn't realised it was summer yet. She said that with just her and Lexi there, they needed all the help they could get to keep things in order.

That year when they get back to their alcove off the growing chamber, Helena was utterly exhausted. She had saved some apple cakes and she did something unprecedented. She didn't make any vegetables for dinner. They ate the last apple cakes and she said, 'I don't know about you Lexi, but I'm really tired. Let's go and lie down in bed.'

They put on their night-clothes and she read him two stories. Lexi slept like a log that night and so did Helena.

Helena Feels Sick

The next day Helena was still tired. It was as though something had come and sucked every last drop of energy from her. She woke early when the sun began to shine down the lightwell, but when she went to get up, a giant fist of weariness, centred in her chest pulled her back down again. So great was the force of it that it scared her.

Did we really wake the spirits yesterday and now they are retaliating, she wondered, frightened by the ominous feelings overtaking her. She lay in bed staring at the minute blemishes in the smooth plaster ceiling above her, feeling her body with all her senses. When she went to get up again her heart pounded furiously. A wave of coldness, starting with a tingling in her fingers and toes, inched its way over her whole body. She began to pant and then it was like she couldn't get enough air and she was drawing in big lungfuls of it. Her heart raced. She lay absolutely still trying to calm the fear, trying not to let any of it seep from her mind to Lexi's.

'Help me Grace,' she whispered.

Gradually the feelings lessened, the breathlessness which had her gulping down air began to ease. She forced herself to stand, and felt nausea which steadied and diminished when she was finally upright.

Relieved and shaky, she looked at herself in the mirror. Pale but normal. She pulled on her clothes and went to the bathroom and then, feeling disconnected and floaty, made her way to the living room. One wall was lined with bookshelves and she located the heavy, well-thumbed, white book with the red print easily. It was called 'Common Ailments – the Layman's Guide', a misnomer in that it also included the not so common.

A sense of déjà vu was settling around her like mist. She looked up heart conditions, then lung conditions and had worked her way on to diseases of the blood when she heard Lexi calling. She started, guiltily put the book back on the shelf and deliberately erased all the worrying thoughts clamouring to be heard.

'I'm here,' she called and hurried back to their room.

The Day They Harvested The Apples

That year, in the summer and autumn growing season, the chamber nearly burst with all the life and colour, food and flowers and they were rushed off their feet tending it all. Helena had grown potatoes and onions, carrots and cabbage to store for winter and every other vegetable that she had been able to cram into the soil. Although it was Helena who tended the fruit trees, Lexi always watched closely so that he could learn how to look after them. The fruit was important, especially the apples because they could be rationed to last through to the next growing season.

Two years ago Helena's favourite apple tree had been infected with a disease and died. She battled for weeks to save it, but then one day her face had gone hard like stone and she cut it down. Lexi remembered her reading one of the gardening books and then they went to the inventory and hunted for a special chemical to make sure the other trees didn't get the same disease and die. It was one of the only times Lexi could remember seeing her cry.

One morning it still seemed dark when they got up and had their breakfast. The cold weather was starting in earnest and Lexi could see the shadow of snow on the big

light well. It was September 12, time to harvest the apples, and two days before his birthday. They had left the fruit to ripen as long as possible and now the apples hung on the trees like shiny Christmas ornaments, with lovely green and red stripes on them.

They harvested four boxes to take on the handcart to the storage area. Usually that was Helena's job, but today she became puffed after just a few metres.

'You pull and I'll push,' offered Lexi.

Helena held the handle of the cart and Lexi leaned over the back like a little engine and that way, they managed to take all four boxes in one load. It took them a while to get there and when they arrived, Lexi loaded the boxes onto the shelf while Helena sat getting her breath back. Then she gathered some of the dried apricots she had stored a month earlier and some of the special treat, flour and sugar.

'I'll make apple and apricot cakes for the apple festival tomorrow.'

'Okay.' Lexi's stomach felt all funny and his chest was tight. He didn't know what she meant about having a festival when she couldn't even walk anywhere without breathing like that.

All they had done lately was work in the growing room. Lexi had asked for treasure hunts and she had said no. At first he had been disappointed and then angry. Now he felt tight and worried all the time.

When they were ready to return to the living area she said, 'Let's just walk back slowly. We can take in the scenery better that way.'

'Helena,' said Lexi, he called her that when he was annoyed, 'there isn't any scenery here in the tunnels.'

Helena looked in his eyes. 'Yes there is,' she said taking his hand in hers. 'Come on and I'll show you.'

He agreed reluctantly and they walked slowly and stopped often. She showed him the spot where she fell off her bike and broke her finger. The spot where her mother dropped a bag of sugar and then they took that day and all of the next, sweeping it up and sieving it and brushing through it to get rid of all the bits of dirt. She showed him how the shadows by Room 5 made you think there was a wolf. They stopped and she made him smell the air by the auxiliary shaft.

'Does it smell like flowers, like metal or like nothing,' she asked.

'A tiny bit like metal,' he said, screwing up his nose.

'That's good. It shows that the air is still pumping through the filter.'

Lexi had a thought. 'Did those filters come from my father?'

'Yes,' she said. 'Look,' she pointed at the metal rungs of a ladder. 'That's the access to the air filters. You can change them from inside –never have to go outside, never have to touch the old filters. They self eject when the new ones go in.'

'That's new Earth technology,' he said, perking up.

'Yep. The new filters are in this storage room here.' She took him in and showed him the containers. 'You have to change them every 4 months.'

She had written a list with dates on it. He saw the first date –it was September 2353- that was when he was born and the last date September 2359.

'What else did my father do here?'

A faraway look came over Helena's face and it softened. 'Let's see,' she said and then she began to tick things off on her fingers. 'He put in a new solar energy system for our battery power, gave us a new recycling unit for our compost, gave me you,' she said. 'He set little robots loose in the place to clean up all the dust in case there was any radiation and he put in a different system for our water recycling.' She paused to think. 'I'm sure there was more, but I can't think what just now.'

'That was good,' said Lexi, musing on it.

'He was a tech. They know how to do all sorts of things. And he brought four friends. They stayed for a week and did all that.'

'Wow, I never knew other people had been here.'

Helena laughed. 'I know. It seems a bit like a dream –our old tunnels and six people in them all at the same time.'

'Was it fun?'

'I was still a bit sad about your grandmother dying, and I was shy - I wasn't used to lots of people. But looking back it was a very happy time really. And I was so relieved because so many things needed fixing and I didn't know how.'

'Well that's because you're not a tech, you're a gardener,' said Lexi. 'And so am I.'

When they got back to the living area Helena found two pieces of the precious paper to make cards. Lexi had been learning to read and write since he was four and his card said 'To the best mother in the world. Happy apple harvest day. Love Lexi.' And he had drawn trees on it with apples.

Helena's card said, 'Happy Apple Harvest 2359.' She had drawn apple blossoms on it. When Lexi opened the card there were pictures of other flowers around a great, big, apple cake and a mother and boy smiling and going yum, yum. Love you lots, from Helena, she had written.

The next day they had their apple festival and if it was not as raucous and noisy as the strawberry festival, it was still fun. The apple and apricot cakes were the most delicious things Lexi had ever eaten. They went to bed that night as happy as they had ever been.

For Lexi it was the last of the very happy days.

Helena Tells Lexi About Life And Death

The day following the apple festival was Lexi's birthday and it started out normally. They were preparing for winter and there was a lot to do. All day Lexi was engulfed in an aura of happiness. At lunch there were more delicious apple and apricot cakes saved from the day before and he got a little present of sweets that Helena had made for his birthday. Then they continued tidying the growing room, cleaning and getting ready for the dormant season. They only grew a few very hardy plants over the winter but the important thing was to leave everything clean so the soil could rest and so any bad micro-organisms would not have a chance to grow. They worked hard and when they finished for the day Lexi had his shower.

Later, he was watching Helena prepare potatoes for their dinner, when she said to him, 'If anything happens to me Lexi, if you are all alone, you must come to the growing chamber and you must mindshout as loudly as you possibly can.'

At her words, a cruel, cold greyness came creeping into his warm little world. He looked sharply at her as though he doubted his own ears, as though his eyes could confirm the mistake his ears had just made.

'Why will I have to come here?' he asked. 'What's going to happen to you?'

She was looking down at the knife chopping the potatoes. There was a calmness emanating from her that partially soothed his fast beating heart.

She looked up, 'Just in case Lexi.' He could see into her eyes. There was sadness, but still she soothed him and then she smiled and reached out and pulled him close.

'Just in case,' she said.

From that time on, he watched her. He wanted to go with her wherever she went. He never let her go to the food storage areas alone anymore, he hung around when she was cleaning, he hovered if he thought she was doing anything out of the ordinary.

Over the next few weeks, as the chill of September moved into cold October, Lexi noticed that Helena seemed to be thinner. She ate very little herself but fed him always as much as he could eat.

'Why don't you eat some more,' he said to her again and again? 'It tastes really good.'

He constantly offered her bits of his own food.

She said, 'You're a growing boy, Lexi. You need lots of food. I'm full, honestly.'

One day Lexi woke before her. It wasn't often that he did. He lay there listening to her breathe. She always breathed more quickly than him now. Her face, always thin compared to his own, now looked even thinner. He reached out and touched her skin and it was cool. She always felt cool to his touch. Her arm was lying on top of the covers – he was shocked by the thinness of her wrist. He was only a child but his wrist was so much heavier and stronger looking. He stroked her cold hand and she opened her blue eyes and smiled.

He asked the question he had been thinking of asking for months now.

'Are you sick?'

'Yes.'

'Are you dying?'

'I think I may be.'

'Why?'

'I don't know Lexi, but I'm losing weight and I can't breathe properly.'

'I don't want you to die.'

'I know.'

‘What will happen to me?’

‘You must mindshout Lexi and someone will come and help. Come here to the garden chamber where there is glass above you and crystal. It’s more open to the ether in this room and if you come here and mindshout they’ll hear you.’

She spoke softly, her hand stroked his dark little head lying on the pillow next to her own, but her eyes were intense. Inside his mind her voice said, you must do this Lexi.

Inside his mind he agreed.

She made him practise mind-shouting. When she went to the food storage area he was not allowed to come –instead he practised calling her there.

He had thought about it and he said to her, ‘Why can’t we mindshout now? Why can’t we call someone in the colonies to come and help you?’

‘Because I don’t want to.’

‘You did it before when your mother died.’

‘That was different.’

‘Why?’

They argued about it. It was the only time he could remember disagreeing with her. When she went down to the tunnels he tried to mindshout to the colonies but nothing happened. Except her voice in his mind.

- I heard that. I told you not to do it.

He replied – I’m gonna keep trying, and heard her mental sigh.

Helena Worries About Lexi

Helena felt the strength ebbing from her. When she looked in their mirror her skin was whiter even than the pallor conferred by tunnel living. Her hair still flew around her head in a soft, yellow cloud but the face looking out at her was almost skeletal. Her blue eyes seemed to have developed a dark depth, as though the gradual extinction of life was taking away all her inner light.

She dreaded the thought of her own death and Lexi alone in these tunnels but there was nothing she could do. She couldn’t even think of it in case he heard her. She

took those thoughts and encased them in their own little seed kernel. She hid them behind a hundred little daily practical tasks and utterances.

So she said. 'Look at the beautiful orange colour of these apricots Lexi,' when her heart was twisting and panic threatened to engulf her.

'Come and show me how you will open the airlock,' as though there was no doubt in her mind that it would happen. That was a good one that she found herself using often; knowing that he thought her anxiety was at his inability to do this important thing.

Every night now, she talked to Grace.

*It's hurting, she said. I'm trying but I don't know if I can hold on much longer.
Every night she said, help me. I need help.*

Occasionally when Helena could not contain her fears and she was sure he was deeply asleep, she went into the main growing chamber and mindshouted. Her mind ricocheted off the walls around her but never broke free. She had her own theory about this and hoped that when the time came she would be right and Lexi would be able to call. She had to be right – and she lived the bluff, telling it to Lexi with never a flicker of an eye, never a tremor of doubt in her thoughts.

'When I die Lexi, shout and they will hear you.'

He was very stubborn when he wanted to be. He kept trying to mindshout over the next weeks as she got sicker.

'I can't do it,' he said. 'I keep trying and no-one hears me.'

Helena said, 'I told you not to do it, dearest, stubbornest boy, Lexi.'

'What if I can't call them when you die?' Why wouldn't she help to call them now?

'I won't help you,' she said 'because I don't want them to come now.'

'Why?'

'I'm afraid they'll take you away from me.'

'Why would they do that?'

‘Because I’m not one of them and you are perfect and you have been brought up differently to the other children. I’m afraid they’ll think I’m not good enough to have you.’

‘That’s ridiculous.’

She laughed a lot when he said that.

‘Why are you laughing?’ he asked grumpily.

‘Because you sounded just like your grandmother.’

‘I wish I had known her.’

‘She would have loved to have known you.’

That night in her diary she wrote:

I want to run but there is nowhere to run to and anyway I don’t think I can run anymore. The distance is so small here. It matters to me and it doesn’t because all that matters now is Lexi and the plants. I guess the view to the mountains is a big one but if I added up all of those two hours that I’ve spent outside, how much would that be in the lifetime of a normal person? Although what is a normal person in this world?

The Wind

Helena spent several hours during the day resting. She shivered and heaped the covers on so that it was way too hot for Lexi but it was still cold for her. They got up and had breakfast, did a little tidying and then hopped back in bed so she could try to keep warm. Lexi drew pictures and they read and played board games and cards. Often Helena played her violin, usually happy music or songs that Lexi knew. Sometimes she just made up tunes and played for herself where the mood took her. She had begun to spend a lot of time writing in her diary.

‘What are you writing there?’ Lexi asked.

‘Just stuff.’

‘I hate it how you can’t breathe.’

‘I’m not too happy about it myself.’

‘You know I love you,’ he said.

‘That’s supposed to be my line.’

‘You have been the best mother I could imagine.’

‘Idiot, you’ve never seen any other mother.’ But she was smiling.

‘I don’t have to. My heart tells me this.’

She was laughing and crying now.

‘Damn you, Lexi. Stop sounding like my mother.’ Their arms were around each other. She put her cheek on his and they went to sleep.

The next day she said she was going for a ride to the storage area and he had to stay behind and work in the growing room. He could practise mind-shouting her.

She left on the bike, pedalling very slowly. Instead of the straight tunnel to the mountain store rooms, she took the long, curving tunnel that led to the main entrance.

When she got to the airlock door, she mindshouted him. - How’s the cleaning going?

- Good.

- I’ve got a bit to do but I won’t be too long. See you soon.

She shielded then and took the balaclava out of her pack. Leaving the bike, she went through the airlock to the outer decom room and struggled into the suit and gloves and boots. She put on the balaclava and looked at herself in the mirror. Then she tooled open the shield door and stepped out into a clear day. The door shut behind her.

There was white snow all around and the sun was shining and for a minute or two, it hurt to look, other than through tiny slits in her shading fingers. She saw a pale blue sky, finally lowered her fingers, and it was such a beautiful colour. The cold air breathed on the skin of her face and it was like being caressed softly by a cold hand. She raised her face towards the sun and howled and felt it launching out at the sky. She was too breathless and weak to do it as loudly as she would like. After a few seconds she found anyway that she was laughing too much. The laughing just made her more breathless which strangely made her laugh more.

She struggled away from the shelter of the shield door, a few metres out through the snow which came over her knees. Each step was as though the snow was sucking her foot into itself and then refusing to give it back to her. She wavered and felt like falling but her snowbound, heavy feet kept her upright for one more step and again one more. Then she felt a hard lick, a blast of cold against her face, trying to force its way

into her. The wind. It defined the boundaries of her lips, her eyes, her nose, her skin. When she breathed, it hurt her teeth and made her ears ache. She laughed some more, wrenched off the balaclava and threw it onto the snow where it lay for a few seconds like some small, brown animal before being whipped away, further up the mountain. The wind took her hair and wrapped it around her face until it clung to her lips and threatened to obliterate the view. It whistled in her ears and was excruciatingly cold but she was absolutely fascinated by the intensity of it. She felt as though it was asking her a question.

‘Yes,’ she said. Then she was laughing and hugging herself.

‘Yes,’ she shouted as loudly as she could. Her arms opened – her body stretched out. ‘Yes.’

Then she took one last look across the valley at all those mountains, waved to them and waded slowly back to the shield door and entered the code. The door slid open and when she went in it seemed very dark inside and colourless.

She went through the side door into the detox area, slowly removed her boots and suit and hung them in the anti-rad closet, then stepped into the decom shower. For the first time ever, she washed her hair there and then took twenty minutes drying it with the machine. She pulled the rad-check tube from the wall and breathed into it until it beeped. It barely registered. Then she put her clothes on and released two robots. She watched them, as they scuttled beetle-like up and down the wet slick of the shower walls. Her legs felt heavy as the rock beneath them.

When the airlock door shut behind her and she was back in the tunnel she was exhausted but she felt like singing. The beginning to Handel’s Messiah came to mind – she sang a few bars then tried humming a little. Breathless. No breath to sing or hum. She imagined the tune soaring. She saw Lexi’s small suit hanging on the wall and a lump formed in her throat and it was still there as she rode slowly back to her son.

When she walked into the growing chamber, his dark head was bent over the watering bucket getting a cup of water for the overwintering lavender.

‘Wow,’ she said. ‘It feels so clean in here.’

‘I know.’

‘And you haven’t just done the cleaning. You’ve watered as well.’

‘Almost finished,’ he said, his eyes fixed on the cup in the bucket, carefully judging the right amount of water.

‘You are the greatest. I love you Lexi,’ she said. ‘More than anything in the whole, wide world. I love you.’

He looked up and smiled at her. ‘Me too,’ he said and poured the water onto the plant.

Last Days

Two weeks later and they communicated now only with mindspeech because she was too breathless to talk. She could hardly get out of bed to go to the toilet. Lexi looked after the plants alone but it was no longer a pleasure because every minute he wanted to spend with her, lying with her, touching her, talking to her.

He made food that she couldn’t eat and that he had no appetite for.

Her voice in his mind said - Eat! And so he did.

He spent hours trying to mindshout for help but none came. He knew no help would come too because he could feel his shout bouncing off the walls of the room back at him.

His mother’s voice was in his mind.

–Don’t worry, Lexi. When the time comes you will be able to do it.

He woke on that last day when it was still dark. Her voice spoke inside his head, weak but very clear. Lexi, Lexi, Lexi, she called.

‘Yes, Mother?’ he said softly out loud.

- I love you.

- I know you do. I love you too. His hand reached out and took hold of hers.

- I’m sorry. You’re so young to go through this. I was twenty and it was still so difficult for me. I’m sorry.

His stomach twisted inside him.

- Are you dying today? He had to know.

- I think I might be. Something feels very broken inside me.

He was tense and silent and breathless beside her.

Sadness, sadness, sadness. Ah Grace is this how you felt? Are these the thoughts you had for me? Is this what you were feeling that day?

- I love you, he said finally. His anguish and the unvoiced fear in his mind were barely held at bay.

There was nothing she could do but she did still what she could. He lay there with her arms wrapped around him, inside the embrace of her warm body for the next few hours. Until she died he heard her voice in his mind. All she wanted to say was, I love you, and she did - again and again until his heart was full of it.

He felt her absence the second she died. It was like a whisper, then a silence inside his mind that he had never experienced before. He smelled fresh flowers around him and he was flooded with a breathless sorrow. His young body shook, racked by sobs. And he lay there with her until her body began to go hard and then he could no longer bear touching its coldness. He got up and began to tend the plants and tears streamed down his face. He found then that he could not bear to be away from her. He lay on the bed again, looking at her pale face, her beautiful cloud of blond hair, her lovely, long fingers, trying to commit everything to memory. When it began to grow dark, he went to the middle of the garden chamber and mind-shouted. His anguish broke through some invisible barrier, he felt his shout launching out into the ether and then someone heard him.

* * * * *

2 - Rescue

Transcript from: Alicia's Story: The History of Tau-cen- Dataplas 316

In 2065 when Joshie was 14 he started to have nightmares.

Michael saw him at breakfast one morning, looking tired and sick and asked him what was wrong.

Joshie said, 'I'm having bad dreams. About these little kids. They're always crying because they have no parents.'

The dreams didn't let up. They were haunting him. One morning it occurred to Michael that maybe they weren't dreams and the next night he had one of the psychologists fit Joshie with electrodes. The parts of the brain that fired when Joshie was dreaming were not to do with dreams or sleeping. Michael began to suspect that Joshie was hearing real children – orphans calling. Our son could not escape hearing them and Michael worried that they would drive Joshie mad.

That was when he first had the idea for the rhoroom - an underground shelter which would prove impervious to the calls. Two years later they developed the laser technology that would make its construction possible but when Michael explained what he was going to do, Joshie told him no.

'I want to keep hearing them,' Joshie said. 'I've had another idea. Why don't we try and rescue them. If we try and rescue them it'll make me feel different.' From then on, Joshie didn't feel so bad. I think he had hope.

That's when Michael started investigating the lay lines and shamen and crystals. I think he had started to wonder whether the orphans would be a resource for genes. They were calling out psychically to his son. How? What would those sorts of genes do for the human race – or at least what remained of it?

It was when the worst of the nuclear winter was taking its toll. The trees had mostly died and we were managing, but it was a struggle to grow and distribute the food. It took five years before things improved enough for Michael to instigate the building of the farsense tower. All those big trees lying around dead. At least there was plenty of timber.

At the same time he was still trying to work out how to create a room that would allow some peace for Joshie. Finally, the Think Team came up with a concept for the rhoroom and they built it as an adjunct to the farsense tower, in its own underground area. It was one of the first structures in the colony to use the laser tunnelling apparatus. They carved the spherical room out of the rock and dumped a giant chunk of clear quartz on top for a ceiling. They didn't have the machinery to lift or transport the rock from the mountain where they found it, and they had to renovate one of the old logging trucks. I remember them having to convert plant oil to biofuel to run the truck.

It was relatively simple to lift the rock and lower it in place using a series of basic pulleys and chains. Fitting it was the problem and involved a permanent metal scaffold, lasers, computers, a sophisticated 3D scan of the boulder and all of us standing around giving advice.

Nothing was ever perfect in those days. When the rock was lowered into place it was judged to be close enough. The last tiny gaps, they plastered with concrete. Michael was pleased and Joshie called it Michael's Folly. They made an underground passageway then, linking the rhoroom to the farsense tower and then they used the laser to tunnel out the rest of the underground living complex. The place had always been called Thorson's up to then but it got so big that we changed it to Tau-cen, named after the lake. It was a political move, I guess. Then Joshie started calling us a colony and the word stuck.

Sena Hears Lexi

The farsense tower rose from amongst a grove of tall trees. Marooned in a sea of leaves, it looked like one of the many lighthouses sprinkled around the coastal waters and in essence and design it served the same function, a rescue for the foundering soul. Near the tower, was a cluster of cyst domes and a narrow river ran past them and joined a much larger river at the bottom of the valley. From the tower, for as far as the eye could see, crops and orchards flourished in the flat surrounding countryside and in the south was the blue shimmer of a lake and further back, foothills and mountains.

The top room of the tower was circular with windows facing out in every direction, white plastered walls and a wooden floor. A continuous wooden awning that ran around the outside of the tower helped to protect the room from the heat of the long, hot summers. On the cooler, southern side of the room a bowl of fruit and a steaming mug sat on an ancient wooden table, which was flanked by two matching chairs. There were wooden shelves above the table containing rows of dataplas and the com-u was under them, a blank screen on the wall. A comfortable sofa draped in russet coloured linen angled into the room from the western wall and opposite on the eastern side, was the wooden railing of the round stairwell.

The rest of the room was bare apart from a greenstone slab which formed a simple altar under the north facing windows. A candle burned there and a single pink camellia blossom, exquisitely formed, floated in water in a small white bowl.

The farsensor knelt on a cushion in front of the altar, her eyes focused on the camellia, her mind far away with a crying child. She had been listening for a while now but he did not know yet that he had to listen too, so that he could hear her. It was just a matter of persevering. She knew this.

-Mother, he sobbed. -Where are you?

She soothed him, a gentle pulse of a mindtouch. – Don't cry little one. Don't cry.

There was a break in the sobbing, a shuddering gasp. Finally she had his attention.

-Who are you?

It was a mere whisper.

-My name is Sena. Who are you?

-Lexi.

-What's wrong? Why are you so sad?

-My mother died.

She already knew that. The mothers were always dead.

- I'm sorry little one.

There was more sobbing. She linked her nanocu to the main data patch and rising stiffly from the floor, began to pull on her overtunic. He was too upset to continue.

Gently, she prompted. -Has your mother just died, Lexi?

- No. It was a long time ago.

His mental image felt like hours.

- Is someone else looking after you?

- No. I'm all by myself.

A flood of fear and anguish.

- It'll be all right Lexi. Hold on now and we'll come and get you.

Panic. -Don't leave me!

Crying. His mind reaching for hers. Clinging.

- Don't worry. I'm good at this. I won't lose you now. Do you know where you are?

-In the tunnels, in the Cascade Range.

-Where's that, Lexi?

-Its where our tunnels are ... in the Northern Wastelands.

The Northern Wastelands.

- We'll come and get you. Don't worry. She sent soothing mindtouches as another part of her sought help.

-Estar.

-Sena? Important?

- It's a call – a young one.

-Meet me in the rhoroom.

The Rhoroom

Joshie had been the first farsensor to use the rhoroom, Sena was the latest in a long line of them. She thought about that heritage as she walked down the round staircase on her way to the adjoining tunnel. When she went back through her life legend there were several genetic links to Joshie and therefore to Michael; each one of those links reinforcing her own ability as a redactor.

It was as though the genes hung in the ether. She sometimes imagined the spirits of their contributors did as well, looking over her shoulder at everything she did. Nowhere was that feeling greater than in the tunnel and the rhoroom. The air was cooler underground but she felt that the ether there was also cooler and more spacious, as though more room had been created than physically existed and the extra space allowed sanity and calmness and space for the spirits. Her fingers skimmed the silk like smoothness of the tunnel wall as she walked to the round room at the end.

Estar was there, working the screen. Slim and olive skinned, his long, dark hair pulled up into a topknot, he stood light footed and intense, awash in patterned light from the crystal ceiling above. His hands conducted data on the large wall screen, words and symbols flitting across it far too quickly for her to register their meaning. She wondered for the thousandth time how he came by such a brain.

‘So who?’ he said still looking at the screen.

‘A little boy called Lexi.’ She twisted her blonde mess of hair into a high knot like his. ‘He says they live in the Cascade Range in the Northern Wastelands.’

He shot an interested glance her way then all his attention was on the screen again.

‘Hmmm. The Northern Wastelands. That’s a long way, darling. Even for you.’ He finished the data probe and there was a delicate, commanding flick of the hand. ‘Couch.’

She took the closer of two padded recliners which faced the screen. The glittering mass of the solid, quartz ceiling loomed above her. It was beautiful but its rough mass intruded into the round space, making her feel the opposite of vertigo, as though it was falling and about to crush her.

She shut her eyes and tooled the control pad and the sensenet flattened and flexed, moulding itself around the back of her head and onto her forehead. Electrodes

leeches themselves to her temples and to the base of her skull, the electric messengers they sent out, cold threads in her brain. She tasted metal. It felt alien and part of her shied away from the necessity of it. An unpleasant, barely perceptible hum of machinery vibrated in her ears and teeth. Her fingers gripped the handrest.

- It won't hurt you.
- I know it shouldn't.
- Estar will protect you from the big, bad electrodes.
- Thanks, she thought sarcastically.

His laughter tumbled into the room. She opened her eyes and saw him settling gracefully on to the other recliner and seconds later he triggered the download. A satellite image of the Earth lit up the wall screen and the augmentation effect phased in.

The urge to journey to the young one became irresistible and her mind moved, a thing apart, as though it was an organism in its own right; a liquid-metal conductive flow, ranging effortlessly like some giant, sea bird soaring towards the call. Estar, followed mindlinked, and the images on the screen changed in quick shifts, growing larger and more precise until she felt the pull as though it was the strongest magnet, and she the smallest iron filing.

She saw ocean, then land, mostly bare and brown, occasionally criss-crossed by lines of old, unused roads or cut by the irregular paths of rivers and streams. There were grey plains and then hillsides which lay crumpled and barren beneath a dusting of snow. Then the whiteness of snow was everywhere, mountains looming, their peaks stretching endlessly into the distance. One particular west-facing slope stood out, halfway up the side of a mountain, the call so loud there, that it reverberated in her whole body.

- I have him, she said.

The com-u identified the Cascade Range. The image changed. A metal shield door grew on the screen, a dark arch against the snow, and a green readout began to track numbers.

- It's cold and look at that rad-count.
- I know, she said. - What's he doing here?

Sena saw darkness, and heard sobs, his gasping breath, his heartbeat. She felt sadness, a thousand times magnified.

- It's all right, little one. We've found you, she said
- And then she made him sleep.

- Estar, you know where he is?

- Yes, I have the coordinates.

She withdrew and the image on the screen faded to nothing. The electrodes slithered away from her skull. A dull ache thumped in her head. She closed her eyes.

- What next darling? A whip? A few stakes through the heart?

- Funny. I'll need you to pod me to Tautech.

- This is Estar, darling. I know what you need but you're too tired to go right now. Relax, and stop being such a black hole of responsibility.

- I can't relax.

-You are not a trader of orphaned children.

-They have no choice.

-You give them the choice of life or death.

-And then what?

-Stop being so melodramatic. Then they have a hundred choices, a thousand choices. Go and eat, get some warm clothes for you and the young one. Rest. He'll sleep for hours. Come.

His hands smoothed her forehead, pulling her back into herself, back into the rhochamber. Coolness soothed the bruised pathways. A softness entered her mind. She opened her eyes and he was bending over her with his hand held out. He helped her up.

'You're a very fine redactor,' she said,

'I learned from the best.' He kissed her forehead. 'Now godmother of mine, go and get something to eat.'

Sena and Pods

She didn't go back to the tower, but went instead to the storerooms to pick up a few supplies, and then back to her cell. It was going to be cold there, she thought, dressing carefully in a lofted linen undersuit and she packed an insulated coverall constructed from cyst leather to put on later. She saw herself in the mirror, so plain, and thought Estar would probably add a flower or beads, a bit of colour darling. But she was not Estar.

No, I am Sena - and she shoved extra clothes in her pack and added clothing for the boy and a supply of food treats and sweet drinks. Sweet things seemed to work with the young ones. The bag bulged. She shook it and pummelled it into an easier to carry shape. Then she drank a protein concentrate, guiltily aware that it wasn't what Estar had in mind when he told her to eat.

Face it Sena, there will be sadness, grief, despair. Another orphan, another ending that you'll feel bad about, another beginning for you to worry about. The panic welled up and she programmed it away. There was a familiar, tight, fast breath feeling in her chest.

The transtunnel was empty apart from one of the newer model pods waiting in a priority lane to Tau-tech and she glared at it, loathing the speed of the thing. .

When she climbed into the tear-shaped cyst structure the door closed automatically behind her and when she sat, the cyst leather seat conformed to her body shape. Why the techs and the cystmasters wasted such time on these over-designed showcases, was beyond her? How did the door know you were ready for it to close? She hated to think. How did they decide what was important these days? Maybe it didn't matter. No, she thought, it did matter.

She put her pack carefully into the carrier compartment beside her seat and clicked her chest harness in place. Many people chose not to use them but she was older now and why take chances? And the speed – 300 krs! She remembered when pods travelled at 150 krs –they got there fast enough.

So thinking, she i-printed the director and tooled Tau-tech. The pod vibrated as it began to move and then there was that feeling of no movement peculiar to pod travel as it sped down the softly lit tunnel, travelling so fast that all she saw of her surroundings was the blur of the different tunnel entrances. They were all numbered in Roman script, an affectation of the artists that she liked, and each was surrounded by elaborate carvings which grew periodically, a symbolic, pictorial record of each branch of the colony's history. Sena, travelling at an obscene speed down the tunnel, couldn't see the carvings today but she believed in such things. Rock was rock, it would be there a long time. She clung to the certainty of it.

Tau-tech

Sena walked up out of the transtunnel into the quadrangle. The clear, white sunlight streaming through the plastocarb dome made her eyes water and her hand went up automatically to shade them. The place was busy with people, most of them techs, walking purposefully on their way somewhere. Noisy children played on the grass and gardeners were pollinating in the groves of fruit trees.

Concrete and glass buildings, several stories high, surrounded the square, rising uniform and hard edged above the blossoming trees. From the top of each building, white metal struts like butterfly wings soared overhead acting as supports for the clear dome.

She walked quickly along an avenue of olive trees to the transway on the far side of the square. The pod was waiting, a tall relaxed figure in tech gray leaning against it. When she got closer, he straightened and turned towards her and her breath caught. It had been a long time.

She reached the pod and held out her hand. 'The disappearing man.' 'What a pleasure, Marco.'

'And how are you Sena?' His voice was unusual, masculine but soft and low pitched.

I am ridiculously polite, considering, she thought. 'A bit stuffed in the head actually. And you?'

'I'm okay.'

'Good for you.'

A promising beginning. Sena, having rehearsed a similar conversation many times in the past thirty years couldn't help but be pleased.

They looked at each other longer than was polite. His face had grown a bit soft about the edges, a bit dissipated. Even then, he was still radiating laughter and fun. She had never been able to resist the laughing ones

Eventually, he ushered her into the pod and tooled the direction for the port. They slotted into the traffic, moving northwest along the transway into the mid-afternoon sun. Ahead in the distance, beyond the buildings, were the clumped domes of the skyport.

‘I didn’t expect to see you today,’ she said.

‘I was here when Estar came. I volunteered to come with you.’

‘Why?’

‘I heard Lexi call this morning.’ He glanced briefly in her direction. ‘I’ve been there before with Leon,’ he said, as if that was explanation enough.

- Ah, Leon. I should have known.

- I’ll tell you more on the carrier.

His mental tone vibrated with concern and grief.

The Carrier

The carrier squatted in the load-up, a flattened, metal, windowless oval, streamlined and efficient - its shape resembling the body of a cockroach a little too much. They had been designed to be useful and not for beauty. Sena loved them.

Marco carried their bags into the containment zone. They put on radiation suits, then she followed him through decom into the extender arm and into the carrier airlock. Her mind drifted, mush, and she moved robot-like through the routines, the effects of the rho room accumulating like plaque on her tired brain cells.

The main cabin was warm - dim lights, humming engine.

I am safe here, she thought. This is my resting place. The job must be done but for now I will sleep. The boy will sleep. No fuss, I am the redactor and useless here. I don’t have to be me again until we get there.

Her crew came in from the cockpit and Sena went to introduce Marco but Stefanie forestalling her, put out her hand in the tech greeting.

‘It’s okay, Sena. We’ve known this bad boy for a while now.’

‘Good to see you too, Stef. Tessla. See you’re still limping along in the same, old, rust bucket.’

Stefanie looked at him with frank, appraising eyes. ‘Some things don’t change. Where’s your carrier?’

‘It is, wherever Leon is –and that could be anywhere. I stopped flying six years ago. I’m back on the coast now, just drive the odd boat these days.’ He looked around the cabin. ‘Haven’t left the sea cyst zone in almost four years.’

‘I thought the ether was a bit quieter, lately,’ Stefanie said. ‘It’s good to see you. We’ll have to catch up later when we get to the mountain, exchange notes.’ A lingering smile softened her face.

He smiled back.

‘The flight’ll be about 3 hours 30,’ she continued, ‘but you’ll know that already. Usual drill, help yourself to refreshments and com us if you need anything.’ With another slow smile she turned away and Tessla followed her forward to the cockpit.

‘We’ll be fine.’ He watched them until the hatch slid shut

Sena was doing up her harness. ‘These seats have the same contour technology as the pod.’

‘Technologies change.’ He eased himself into the seat next to hers. ‘It’s a good thing. Adjust.’

She clicked in the catch and it snapped shut. ‘Why? I’m not the one who left the redactor institute and chose to be a tech.’

He fastened his own harness and sat back. ‘Because technology responds to change,’ he said. ‘Needs change, technology meets the new need.’

‘I don’t need the seat to conform to my body. I’m happy to conform to it. When there’s technological change for no real purpose it scares me. I worry that we’ll blow ourselves up again.’

She stared at the flight data on the viewer.

‘We’re a long way from that,’ he said.

‘Are we?’

‘Don’t you think it’s technology that’s been saving us for the last 300 years?’

‘Technology has allowed us to claw our way back to something that’s still less than before the war. I don’t feel saved.’

‘I didn’t think they were providing food and water for the whole planet before the war.’

She turned towards him. Her eyes flashed. ‘You’re right,’ she said. ‘Sorry. It’s just that it hadn’t occurred to me that 2000 fewer species of animal life meant that we’d saved them.’ The viewer was an explosion of numbers, scrolling nowhere.

He stared at her. ‘You’re frustrating,’ he said. –Still beautiful, but still frustrating.

Sena decided to shield and like an echo, he did the same.

The carrier taxied through to the take-off dome and went immediately into the jump. Pressure pushed down through her spine, forcing her into her seat. Seconds later it eased off as they entered the cruise programme. Her head felt like a drum was playing inside it.

‘I need to talk,’ Marco said.

She sighed. ‘The sensenet is hard on me.’

‘I know. It’s important.’

It’s important. She hated that phrase. ‘If it requires for me to think, you’re wasting your breath.’

– It’d be easier if I could just give you a download.

‘No. Just tell me.’

-Forgive me, he said.

All she could see in his eyes was sadness.

‘I can’t think of how to say this any differently. I’m sorry. Lexi’s mother, Helena...she was one of your embryos.’

The serotonin hit her brain and flooded the receptors. ‘I guess a few of my embryos are out there now,’ she said, pleased at the neutral tone of her voice.

‘There’s more.’

‘Save it, Marco. I’m too tired.’

‘It’s important.’

-I’m too tired Marco. She closed her eyes and programmed sleep.

The com woke her. Stefanie’s voice said, ‘ETA in 45 minutes. Anyone that wants to eat, better have it now,’ and Sena opened her eyes. Marco was looking at her.

‘Feeling better?’

The headache had gone. ‘Yes.’

‘Want food?’

‘I guess.’

He went over to the dispenser and came back with packaged food and hot cha.

‘It’s not fancy. I think it’s a pro-carb cake of some sort, but I’m willing to be wrong.’

She unwrapped her cake and took a bite.

His eyes met hers. 'Did you wait for me?' he asked.

'For a while.'

'You didn't marry?'

The packaging slipped off her knee and he picked it up.

'No,' she said.

'I heard you had children.'

'The requisite two. Paolo and Madonna.'

'Interesting names.'

'Their father had Italian genes.' She finished the cake and brushed the crumbs off her suit.

'I'm sorry...for not coming back.'

'Don't be. It was better that way.' Her eyes challenged him but there was a hint of a smile. 'It's strange the way the tides have washed you up on my beach again,' she said.

He laughed. 'Poetic, but not I think entirely complimentary.'

Then Stefanie's voice was on the com. 'We've got visual.'

On the viewer, everything beneath them was moonlit silver. Above, in the purple black sky, dark feathery cloud shapes moved slowly beneath a sprinkle of stars and a huge pale moon. The bare, treeless slopes of the mountains glowed in the distance and everything was covered in snow.

'Why would anyone want to live there?' Sena wondered out loud. Yet she knew better than most that happiness was not a thing which manifested just because you lived in a perfect environment.

'The complex was state of the art 300 years ago when the war broke out. Helena's ancestors felt lucky to be there. It's been their home for a long time.'

'How do you know that?'

He looked at her and then back at the screen. 'Leon sent me there a month before Lexi was born. The complex needed some work. Helena told me things.'

'How long did you stay?'

'A couple of months in the end. There was a lot to get done and he didn't need me back until Lexi was a month old. I had a work team with me for a week or so. There was a medic there for the whole time helping her.'

'And...' she said.

‘She looked like you. I kept thinking how it would’ve been if she was our daughter.’

‘I see. And Lexi?’

‘I was there when he was born Sena.’

‘This is what you wanted to tell me earlier.’

‘Yes.’

‘And you left them there?’

‘I tried to get her to come. She said she had to stay to look after the plants.’ His face was grim. ‘Another story,’ he said.

‘You haven’t been back?’

‘She said it was easier that way. I believed her’

‘And now you feel guilty.’

‘Wouldn’t you?’

She knew all about guilt. ‘But she must have had a good reason,’ she heard herself say. ‘Trust her.’

‘She’s dead, Sena.’ His face twisted with grief.

‘Many people die young these days.’

He shook his head. ‘Don’t give me that meaningless, redactor crap.’

She snapped, ‘It’s not meaningless, Marco. I find orphans. I deal with death and suffering most days. She chose her life here. Don’t negate the meaning she brought to her own life by feeling sorry for her, or guilty for your own supposed inaction.’

Their eyes locked.

She said, ‘I know how you feel. I understand. Helena did have a choice and she made it. Your guilt won’t help Lexi and if he senses your anger that won’t help either.’

She turned back to the viewer and worried had she said enough or too much? His breath gentled, slowed. She took a quick glimpse and the hardness about his jaw had softened. He was looking away at something on the wall and then his attention shifted back to the screen.

The image of the mountain grew more distinct. The snow glowed with areas like slightly bluish veins reflecting in the moonlight, shades of white and silver, the odd patch of dark rock. Marco changed the viewer to a wider setting and the mountains were everywhere and Sena thought, yes it’s barren, but how beautiful. And the space - she forgot sometimes how big the world was.

The alarm sounded and the viewer became full of pre-descent prompts. She fastened the harness and sat back in her seat. That tightness was in her chest again. Her shoulders were heavy and stiff. Her brain was like grey mud. Estar had been right, damn him. She should have taken longer to rest, eaten properly.

Stefanie commed, 'Landing now.'

The carrier dropped out of the cruise programme. There was the slight pressure of the antigrav phasing out, then stillness and the strange, falling feeling of the vertical landing as the carrier descended. It stopped, suspended in hover. The viewer flicked on. They were just metres in front of the shield door.

'Cascade Range as requested,' said Stefanie over the com. 'What now?'

'Erect the dome and we'll go straight in,' said Marco.

'Okay. Tesla will see to that. She'll wait for you down there.'

On the viewer, they saw a flexible tube of cyst shoot out from around the hatch and burrow into the snow in front of the shield door. Then Tesla, fully suited, slid down the tube to activate the expansion module.

Marco turned to Sena. 'This is it then. I guess we'd better get ready.'

Waking Lexi

The heat setting was on in her suit. Looking outside of the dome it seemed relentlessly hostile – bare rock, deep snow, ice and radiation. No hope for redemption there. Why was Hell supposed to have been hot, Sena wondered?

Tesla had lasered the opening in the cyst to form a seal around the door, shiny black like tech moulded plastic. That seemed so easy compared to what she, Sena, had to do.

I don't want to wake him, she thought. I don't want to be needed.

She gave herself a mental shake and reached out with her mind.

- Lexi. Wake up Lexi.

For a few seconds she sensed the joyous surge in his thoughts.

- Mother!

Sena saw through his eyes the body of a thin, pale woman with flyaway blond hair, looking just as she herself had looked twenty years ago – unmistakably of her line. His sadness, his panic, his fear surged through her. There was that tightness again, a breath-catching, swallow it down urge to burst into tears. She shut her eyes and willed calm.

– I'm not your mother, Lexi. I am Sena. We've come because you called us.

– You sound like her.

- I'm sorry, Lexi, it's just me. We've come to help but you'll have to let us in.

Can you open the door?

- Yes. I can open the airlock.

- Good boy. Do it now, Lexi. There are three of us by the shield door. I'll be here in your mind and you can keep talking to me if you want while you do it.

He didn't reply for a while and then he said –It's strange. When you speak to me in my mind, you sound like my mother.

- I think that she was of my line, Lexi. I think you're part of my life legend

He was quiet again, not believing.

- I don't have a life legend.

- Everyone has a life legend, Lexi. You haven't had a chance to discover yours yet.

Sena, feeling his empty hopelessness, realised that in his universe where there were once two, he was now the only one.

- You're not alone now, she said firmly. - Open the door. We will look after you.

Inside Lexi, courage reasserted itself. - I'm coming now.

He reached out and touched Helena's face, gently smoothed the long, blond hair back from the pale forehead.

'I'll be back soon.'

He climbed off the bed and put on warmer clothes, boots and headlamp. His bike was outside the living quarters. He switched on both lights, the one on the bike as well as his headlamp, then rode down the tunnel to the airlock. His radiation suit was hanging next to the door. It took him a little while to put it on because his fingers didn't want to work properly. Finally he tightened the helmet, tooled the keypad that opened

the inner door and stepped forward into the air lock. It seemed way too small in there. His breath began to race. He toiled the inner door shut and his fingers were weak and trembling when he keyed in the code for the second door. It opened and he went through, into the exterior chamber and shut the door behind him.

When he entered the code for the final time, the big shield door slid aside. He almost fainted when he saw the three figures in their radiation suits. Then he heard Sena's voice warmly and firmly in his mind.

- It's all right, Lexi. I'm Sena, this is Tesla and this is Marco.

Finding Helena

Marco scooped up the small figure in the radiation suit and felt the rigidity of the child collapse in onto his shoulder. A shudder and then tears, arms clutched tightly to him as Sena and Tesla followed them into the first airlock.

He mindspoke Lexi - What's the code?

- 7222

He entered the number and the shield door closed, then carrying Lexi, he opened and shut the remaining doors until they found themselves in the tunnel. Squatting down, he unfastened first his own and then Lexi's helmet and he smelled the air and was flooded by memories. He removed their radiation suits and hung both by the door then picked Lexi up again. Sena and Tesla had taken off their suits and he mindspoke Sena to push Lexi's bike.

They could barely see and the cold sucked the heat out of Marco's bare head. Lexi still sobbing, flicked on his headlamp and wriggled out of Marco's arms to go and switch on the bike light.

'I can take it now,' he said to Sena.

So they followed his sobbing figure like a procession, walking slowly, not talking. Every doorway was a darker area of grey, and dull lights came on automatically in the tunnel as they walked past and went off again when they moved out of range. The air they breathed chilled their lungs. The floor was hard and unforgiving under their feet.

Eventually, when they reached the living quarters the lights were a little brighter and Lexi dropped his bike and ran ahead to the growing suite. Marco and Sena followed through the swinging, double doors and found him in the strangely exotic room off the main growing room, sitting on the bed beside his mother, facing the door.

Marco went to Lexi's side. He touched Helena's face. She was cold, her flesh solidly resistant.

Lexi had one hand on Helena's shoulder. His other hand he reached out and Marco took it and looked into those big green eyes.

'Are you my father?'

'No.'

'She said you were.'

'I'm not.' Lexi's hand was rougher than he expected and Marco looked down and noticed the tiny star shaped birthmark on the back of it. Exactly like his own. He looked at the eyes, they were green. Should have been blue if, he thought...interrupted by a sudden wakening of intuition.

'No Lexi,' he said. 'I'm not your father or you would have blue eyes like mine. I think maybe I'm Helena's MSD1.' The anger threatened to overwhelm him. He tried to stay calm but his breath felt like it wanted to explode out of him. Helena had been his and Sena's, and Leon hadn't told him.

'What's that?' asked Lexi.

'In a special way, that means I was Helena's father. I think the genemaster made Helena from my sperm and Sena's egg. Then he gave Grace, Helena, as a tiny baby in her tummy.' He thought, Leon, why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you tell me?

Sena was hammering at his mind. – That's why we both heard his call!

'What do you think of that,' he asked Lexi.

Lexi looked uncertain. 'I guess that's all right.'

'That's all right with me, too,' said Marco.

'Will you look after me?'

'Yes.'

'Will you take me to the colonies?'

'Yes.'

Marco put his arms around him and Lexi's face crumpled. 'She said someone would hear me. She said someone would come. I was worried because I couldn't do it. I couldn't call. Why didn't she help me call before?'

'Maybe she couldn't,' said Sena.

Lexi sobbed, 'She did it before when Grace died.'

Sena knelt next to the bed. 'When people die something happens to the ether, Lexi. It's easier to farsense then. That's what it's called when you mindshout a long way. Most people have to be trained to farsense. They can't just do it when they want to. You may never be able to do it again.'

Lexi looked at her. 'Why didn't she tell me that?'

'Why do you think?'

Lexi kept looking at Sena.

'I don't know,' he said, his voice breaking. Then he laid his head on Helena's chest and wept and wept.

Helena's Funeral

One of the rooms in the tunnel complex was a chapel and the adjoining room was the crypt. The following day they held a service there for Helena.

Marco had shown Lexi the cremation bag and explained how it worked.

'That's what Helena told me would happen.'

Lexi gave Marco a gold locket on a woven string. 'This is for some of Helena's hair.'

In the chapel, Sena read the liturgy for the dead and when she finished, Marco said, 'Are you sure this is what you want Lexi?'

'Yes. Then her spirit will be free to look after the tunnels with Grace and the others or she could come with me to the colonies if she wants.'

Lexi scattered dried lavender over Helena's body. Tessla and Stefanie fastened the bag and set the control. The bag inflated a little as the current began to run through it and then went rigid.

Lexi's sobs echoed off the stone walls. Marco took the letter out of his pocket that he had found in Helena's diary.

‘This is for you.’

He read,

‘To Lexi.

‘I give you to Marco. I think he will be the one who hears your call.

I give to you the sea, the stars, the sun. All those trees I showed you that day, the sand, the moon, the blue sky, mountains. People, Earth, the open air, the colonies. Thank you my little gardener boy. I could not imagine someone I loved more or who loved me better.

Go and live your life and remember that I will be with you.

I love you.

Helena.’

Sena was looking at him curiously. Marco folded the letter and put it in Lexi’s hand.

Later that day Sena said, ‘But you have never worked with children. You have never had a child of your own.’

He stared at her. Damn her and damn Leon.

‘I have had a child, Sena. I just didn’t realise it at the time.’

He left, storming out and down the long main tunnel towards the storage area. It was so cold compared to the sea colonies, 8 degrees compared to the 30 plus he was used to. So sucking cold.

Mental note, he thought. When in tunnels dress appropriately for times of dissent, especially when Sena is around.

His feet ate up the distance. His body warmed and he found himself thinking, if only I had a hat. My head’s gonna get frostbite. He laughed. The cold was taking away his ability to think of anything else.

Sena could not escape being the redactor. It infuriated him. Damned if he was going to get like that someday.

The cold heaviness of the rock pressed down on him; there was too little light to disperse it, not enough clothes. His feet carried him forward.

Lexi’s bike was propped against the tunnel wall. Inside, lights flickered, candles burned in ornate holders. The chapel felt quiet and sacred. Lexi sat crying, talking to

the golden icon on the wall above a carved box that was filled with Helena's ashes. Marco listened from the doorway then went over and the boy put one hand on Marco's leg. He had the locket in his other hand.

He said in a small voice, 'Marco's here now, Helena.'

Marco put his arm around Lexi.

-I love you, Lexi said to his mother. - Don't worry, I'll be back.

Marco and Leon

Lexi rode towards the growing chamber and Marco jogged behind him. They could smell food cooking.

Tessla came out of the kitchen.

'What's for dinner?' Lexi asked.

'Vegetables, seaweed that we brought with us, apple and apricot cake. That good enough?'

Lexi's face brightened. 'Yummy.'

Tessla winked at him. 'Good on ya, Lexi. Go wash up.'

When he'd gone she said to Marco, 'Stef just commed. Leon's arrived.'

Marco returned to his room, looking for warmer clothes. He saw Helena's diary. He put on the thick jacket and hat that he and Lexi had found in the storage containers earlier, and started the long walk back down the tunnels.

He heard the footsteps and saw the grey haired figure emerging out of the darkness, the slow, swinging stride. Leon stopped and they stood face to face. Leon looked slumped and tired. Marco stared at him. They didn't move.

'It's been a while,' said Leon.

'I read the diary. She told him I was his father.'

'You aren't.'

'But I'm her father aren't I?'

'Yes.'

'Why didn't you tell me?' It burst out like a child would say it.

Leon's hand came out halfway towards him. Marco ignored it. The hand dropped.

'It was an experiment –it's been going on in these tunnels for hundreds of years. If I'd told you, you wouldn't have left her here. She wouldn't have stayed.'

Marco could see the apology in Leon's eyes. 'I was your friend, your only friend I might add.'

'You have every right to be angry.'

Marco shook his head. 'Thanks for the permission, but stuff you Leon.' He turned and they began to walk back down the tunnels. Their steps matched, it felt like old times.

'In the diary she said that you came every Christmas Eve.'

'Yes?'

'Why?'

Marco stopped and Leon shrugged.

'Why not?'

'She said you turned up like fuckin' Santa Claus. With food and presents.'

'Is there a point, Marco?'

'She says that you gave her a com unit every year and every year she drowned it in a bucket of water. If she hadn't said that I think I'd kill you.'

'Metaphorically ... or literally?' Leon shrugged, 'It's the scientist in me. Murder is so rare these days.'

'Don't try and change the subject. You didn't tell me. I don't know if I can forgive you.'

'I don't know if I can forgive myself.'

Leon

The boy sat next to Sena. She looked so much like Helena that Leon had to stop for a few seconds. All of the adult eyes turned to him accusingly, and why not he thought.

Tessla gestured to a heaped plate opposite Sena and Lexi. 'Come and sit down.'

'Thanks.' He took the seat and said across the table to the boy, 'I'm Leon.'

‘I know. I’m Lexi.’

‘How are you?’

‘My mother died.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Me too.’ Lexi looked down into his lap and his eyes began to glisten.

Marco took a seat at the end of the table. ‘How’s dinner?’ He gestured towards his plate. ‘Is it all right or shall we give Tessla the boot?’

Lexi tried to smile. ‘It’s good,’ he said, directing a shy, grateful glance at Tessla.

Tessla’s eyes met Leon’s and she said, ‘He had to put up with their sorry effort the first day, Leon. Stef and I didn’t realise that neither of them knew how to cook real food.’

‘It was okay,’ said Lexi. ‘I think they’d have been better if they knew where everything was ...and how the stove worked.’

Leon thought, he’s kind then and he has manners, Helena.

‘You just keep thinking that, Lexi,’ said Marco, directing a playful look at Sena. ‘Got a favourite recipe?’

She smiled. ‘No, it would be fair to say I don’t have any recipe. Sorry Lexi, I’ve never learned how to cook. What about you, Marco?’

‘Sure I can cook. You tool a button on the machine and the food pops out.’

Lexi laughed.

Marco said, ‘Leon can cook though.’

‘I travel a lot,’ said Leon. ‘I never seem to arrive in time for meals.’

‘Who showed you?’ asked Lexi.

The question was unexpected and the boy was looking at him and he didn’t have a lie prepared. ‘My mother.’

Sena cast him a scornful glance and he shrugged.

‘My mother showed me too,’ said Lexi. He was quiet again, looking at his plate.

No-one spoke and then Sena said, ‘What did she say about eating, Lexi?’

‘She said I always had to eat my vegetables.’ Tears were rolling down his face.

‘What do you think then? Do you want to give it a go? It was hard for you yesterday with me and Marco cooking, but I think it’ll be okay this time to eat it all up.’

A look passed between her and Lexi. Leon saw the warmth in her eyes and the

unhappiness on the boy's face seemed to drain away replaced by a stoicism out of place in so young a child. Leon had seen it too many times before.

'I guess so.' Lexi started to eat.

Leon had been holding his breath. He breathed out slowly and heard sighs and the scraping of utensils as the others began to eat too. Lexi was tucking in now and Leon realized the poor little fellow must have been hungry. His own appetite drained away but he forced himself to eat a little and it was good. He hadn't eaten properly since getting Marco's message on the other side of the world. All of that hurrying to get back and he'd still missed the ceremony.

He thought of other times he'd eaten at this table. The birthdays, Helena on April 5 and Grace on March 11. They were both spring babies. He should have made a date for Lexi's birthday too, but he'd cheated all the time when Grace was alive, wanting to see her. Although again he wished he'd cheated more and he might have saved her.

Too late for that. He'd needed to get more in line with the scientific protocols by the time Lexi turned up. His stomach clenched. How could he keep making the same mistake?

So it was just Christmas and April 5. Christmas Eve with Lexi asleep. Christmas cake and nuts, roast vegetables and fish. Packets of flour and sugar for Helena, the compulsory com unit wrapped in a scarf or something else to disguise it – their annual joke. The last time he had given it to her hidden in the blue hat and tried to insist that she keep it.

Guilt gouged its way through him.

Grace, I'm sorry.

He missed her. He missed her. His Grace - tall and strong with that dark hair, those liquid brown, dark eyes, that incomprehensibly stubborn streak –tenacity like she'd invented it. That's where the com-u thing had started. Her annual ritual of drowning the com-u had become one of Helena's rituals too.

Sena looked at him curiously across the table.

'Couldn't help thinking about my own family,' he said because, curse the woman, she couldn't read his mind but she was far too astute where grief was concerned.

‘Yes. I did have one once,’ he said softly, challengingly, coldly and saw her flare of annoyance and withdrawal.

Leon Tells Lexi Things He Needs To Know

Later when dinner was cleared away, Marco said, ‘Why don’t you read to Lexi, Leon? We have packing to finish.’

Leon hesitated. Sena was staring at Marco.

Lexi said, ‘It’s all right. I know how to read most of my books myself.’

Leon looked down at him. ‘No, I’d like to. It’s just that I’ve never actually read to a child before. I’m not sure I’ll know how.’

‘I’ll help you,’ said Lexi, reaching out and taking his hand. Leon almost choked on the sudden lump in his throat. Not since Helena was a child had he held such a small hand.

They walked down the dark corridor away from the living quarters.

‘Why doesn’t Sena like you?’ Lexi asked.

Leon laughed shortly. ‘That’s an unexpected question, Lexi.’

‘Why doesn’t she?’

‘She doesn’t actually know me that well. But I think mostly she doesn’t like me because I’m a tech and because I’m a genemaster.’

‘Marco was a tech once and she likes him.’

‘She knew him before he became a tech.’

‘What about Tessla? She’s a tech.’

Leon was forced to laugh again. ‘You’re right. Maybe it’s just my charming personality she doesn’t like.’

‘What’s a genemaster?’

‘A genemaster gives people babies that haven’t been damaged by radiation. He tries to make sure that the plants and animals will be safe too so that we can make the world better. That’s the theory anyway.’

Lexi asked, ‘Did you give me to Helena?’

‘Yes. How did you know that?’

‘I just figured. Helena said Marco was my father.’

‘I told her something that made her believe that.’ And we agreed she should tell you that lie and she told it for me. What did I do to you? Oh, Helena... and it was all he could do then to keep breathing.

Lexi said, ‘It’s not true though.’

‘No. Marco is Helena’s father.’

‘Why aren’t his eyes blue, Leon?’

Lexi had been two at the time. It was Christmas and Lexi was in bed. They were eating the dinner Leon had brought from the colonies.

It had been a relief. He’d said, ‘I guess I lied.’

‘So Marco isn’t his father.’

‘No.’

‘Why did you let me think he was?’

‘I wanted the match.’

‘How could you lie to me?’

‘I didn’t lie exactly. I said he would have Marco’s genes.’

‘And...’

‘Marco was your father, Helena.’

She had stood up and gone to her room.

The next day while Lexi was awake, Leon had worked out in the carrier. That night he’d faced up to her in the kitchen - those hurt, angry eyes.

‘How could you lie to me like that?’

‘I didn’t like lying. ‘

‘Explain.’

‘I had the embryo. I was a new, young genemaster. I loved Grace and wanted her to have the best embryo that I had. That was you. Marco was the sperm donor and one of the best of the young redactor’s, Sena, was the egg donor.’

‘But why did you let me think Marco was the father of my baby?’

‘I thought you’d taken a shine to him and that you’d say yes. ‘

‘How could you manipulate me like that? I almost fell in love with him when he was here – I almost told him it was his baby. How could you ...’

‘I am a genemaster.’

‘You’re crazy. Leave. I never want to see you again.’

The next time he'd seen her, it was her birthday, four months later. When he walked into the growing quarters late that day, she took one look at him and said, 'Get out.'

He'd expected it. He'd left a parcel of her birthday gifts on the table. 'I've written it down,' he said, 'why I did it. It's not to make you forgive me – it's so you'll feel better. It's in here,' tapping the parcel.

'Get out.'

He said, 'I'll be in the carrier. Read it,' and he placed the com-u on the table. 'Com me if you want me to come in tomorrow.'

The next day she'd commed.

'Don't ever lie to me again.'

That night he'd talked to her about everything, the way he used to talk to Grace. She agreed to tell Lexi if he ever asked that Marco was his father. Partly because Helena knew him and could answer questions more truthfully that way, but mainly because Leon had already recorded it on the life history.

'It protects your rights more that way,' he told her.

Before he'd left in the morning, she'd said, 'You know that you are the most father I'm ever likely to have.' She had hugged him. 'I'm glad I'm doing what I'm doing. See you at Christmas.'

They reached the growing suite. Lexi pushed open the door to the main growing room and the light came on. It was warmer than in the rest of the complex but still winter cold and very clean and tidy. There was the smell of healthy soil. The bare trunks of the fruit trees and vines were silhouetted against the wall and empty of foliage, the space seemed very large. Lexi lead Leon to one corner where an area had been sectioned off for plants in pots. It was noticeably warmer.

'They're overwintering,' said Lexi. 'The pipes under the floor in this corner keep it warm. Wait here.'

He fetched the watering bucket.

'This is my job,' said Lexi. 'I always do it.' He half filled the bucket at the tap and then carried it back with two hands and put it on the floor next to the plants. Then dipping a battered, tin cup into the bucket he began to water the lavender.

‘We always measured the water this way,’ he said. ‘She looked after the trees and I helped her with everything else.’ He looked up. ‘If you gave me to Helena then you must know who my real father is.’

Leon eyed Lexi, the set-up and the question. Clever. ‘Yes. His name is Abdullah Ben Hussein. He lives in North Africa and he’s like you - very good at growing things. He’s growing a forest in the desert.’

‘Helena would’ve liked that if she’d known.’

She did know, Leon thought. ‘Yes,’ he said.

‘Why did she have me?’

‘I had the feeling she was lonely. That was part of it and I asked her if she would like to have you and she said yes. I also thought your father’s genes would work well with Helena’s, to make someone special.’

‘That was me. Am I special?’

‘I think so.’

‘Why didn’t you tell her who my father was really?’

Leon hesitated. He had to support Helena in her lie to Lexi. ‘I’d already made her think you were Marco’s baby. You have a birthmark on your hand just like his.’

‘I’m of his line and Sena’s line, aren’t I?’

‘You are from the very best lines I know, Lexi.’

Lexi smiled. ‘Did you come here to see Helena? I never saw you.’

‘I didn’t want you to. I always came at night when you were asleep.’

‘Why did you come?’

‘Grace was a very good friend of mine. After she died, I came to make sure Helena was all right.’

‘She wasn’t all right.’

‘No. I should have come more often. I’m sorry.’

‘Did you like her?’

‘I thought she was the best person I knew.’

Then Lexi asked, ‘Why did me and Helena live here?’

It’s enough, thought Leon. ‘You ask a lot of questions. What did Helena say?’

‘She said we were here to look after the plants, but I think we could’ve done that somewhere else.’

‘Both things are true. I’ll tell you the reason later?’

‘When?’

‘When you’re fourteen I’ll tell you. That’s when I told Helena.’

‘Did she think it was a good reason?’

‘Yes.’

Lexi took the cup and bucket back to the tap. He turned the cup upside down on the edge of the stainless steel sink and put the bucket on the floor underneath.

‘Time to read my books now.’

Leon Talks To Sena

Later when Lexi was asleep Leon couldn’t bring himself to leave. He had been in this room many times before. He could remember it the way Grace had it, white and airy and spare as was her style. He liked what Helena has done with it though, loved the way she purloined the best of everything to make it warm and exotic for Lexi.

He looked at the collection of books on the shelves, non-fiction and lots of poetry and children’s books. She was like her son. He wondered how well she’d have read the gardening book that Lexi had just subjected him to and smiled wryly - funny what growing up in the tunnels could do to a child.

They had come through to the bedroom and chosen the book. Lexi, exhausted, had nestled up against him. When he started to read, Lexi reached up and touched his throat. Leon stopped reading.

‘Keep talking,’ Lexi said.

‘Why?’

‘You and Marco, sound different. I can feel it too, here,’ and Lexi gently tapped his fingers against Leon’s throat.

Lexi had fallen asleep soon after. Leon had seen him asleep before - many times. Always Helena would bring him to have a look at her sleeping child. Each time he would reassure himself that if love could make you happy, then she really was happy and she wasn’t wasting her life.

There was no ethics committee for this experiment. Sometimes he imagined that if they asked him if he would subject his own daughter to an experiment like this, he would reply that he already had. Because just as he was the closest person to a father for Helena, she was the closest he would ever come to having his own daughter.

Walking back to the living quarters, he saw the light on in the kitchen. Sena was fiddling with the stove control, struggling to heat water. Her tan, cyst leather suit reflected back at him from the stainless steel bench tops. He stood in the doorway and looked at her for permission and then got the pan, poured out half the water, and changed the power setting.

‘What would you like?’

She folded her arms across her chest. ‘I’m hoping for cha.’

He found the flavouring, put it into a ceramic cup, then leant back against the bench while the water heated.

‘I’m glad I found you,’ he said.

She stiffened. Her eyes angled up at him.

He sighed. ‘On Lexi’s life legend, I’ve registered Marco as the MSD1 – as Lexi’s father in effect.’

‘Why?’

‘It allows Marco to claim him. Lexi won’t have the same choices in the orphan pool.’

‘Won’t the other genemasters know?’

‘They might find out later but he’ll be grown - it won’t matter. The genetics are still similar. I’ve swapped the order of primogeniture and told a few lies about eye colour.’

The water boiled and he poured some into her mug and gave it to her.

‘Thanks,’ she said. ‘He should be mine –I should have farsensor right to take him back to Tau-cen.’

‘This was a genemaster experiment - a secret project. I can over-ride any ruling.’

She raised her eyebrows. ‘Pulling rank?’

He shrugged. She looked at him with as much disrespect as anyone ever had.

‘So what was this experiment,’ she said, ‘this secret project?’

He shrugged again, which he could tell, exasperated her.

‘You can always lie,’ she said softly. ‘The way you did about Lexi’s MSD1. I know you only told me because of the eye colour. Because Marco can’t possibly be his father.’

He shifted against the bench and fixed her with a hard stare. ‘I very rarely lie,’ he replied coldly, needled. ‘This is an exception. As it happens, the experiment is to see what happens to children who are reared out of the main stream of society. Genemasters believe that a healthy society should question itself.’ How pompous that sounded.

‘That’s interesting,’ she said. ‘I guess I’m wondering where you were when your experiment was having her baby.’

He kept his voice neutral. ‘I was where I needed to be and I sent the person I trusted most to look after her.’

‘It’s all about being the genemaster with you isn’t it?’

He said, ‘And you can escape being the redactor can you Sena? You never feel guilty about what you do? Rescue orphans. What for? Farsensor right? Where do those orphans end up?’

She said softly, ‘They end up where men like you put them.’

He concentrated and his jaw relaxed.

She smiled politely. ‘Shall we change the subject?’ She took a sip of her cha. ‘What did your experiment show?’

He frowned, surprised that she’d beaten him at his own game. It was probably just as well to go along with her. ‘It showed that children who grow up in places like this seem to have more special talents than children from the normal population.’

‘Am I going to be mind-wiped or something when we get back?’

‘Is that a genuine option do you suppose?’ He made it sound serious and then grimaced at her outraged expression. ‘A joke.’

‘I wasn’t expecting it.’

‘Thanks.’

She cradled her cup in both hands, took a sip. ‘There was just one other thing.’

‘Yes?’

‘How many of my embryos are out there now?’

‘None apart from your own children that you’re ever likely to come across.’

‘And do the others live like this?’

‘No.’ He could tell she didn’t believe him.

She turned to leave and saluted him with her mug. 'Thanks for this. I'd better go. I told Lexi I'd be along to keep him company.'

'He's already asleep...'

'I've still got his packing to do. I won't tell.'

'Thank you,' he said, and believed her. He watched her go. All these years they had known each other, she had never liked him. But neither had she exhibited particular regard for any figure of authority. Some consolation. In one of her spats with the agency he'd heard her say she was fighting for the rights of the individual. It annoyed him that she couldn't see that he was doing the same, yet in that whole, do-good redactor mass she was one of the few he could stomach. She still got angry. She still wore the old redactor uniform, those plain, red linen robes when the others were switching to the tech style outfits. She didn't believe a word he said and showed it. He smiled briefly, his hard eyes softened and his jaw relaxed, as he admitted to himself that he couldn't help liking her for it.

They said she was going crazy. A crazy farsensor was hardly a novel idea, but she seemed far from crazy to him. He'd heard her theory on the interstices in the ether, that much of a farsensor's ability was fuelled by the connective capacity of the newly dead. Is there some sort of displacement of ethics she had said, to prey then on the orphans? She must be going crazy they said because everyone knew that good humanitarians had to rescue orphans.

But she looked too much like Helena. Today, her most grievous fault.

He turned out the light. The corridor was colder than the kitchen. He shivered. Time for bed. Time to think about Helena dying here in the tunnels with no one to help her but Lexi.

His shoulders slackened, his head fell forward a little. He walked to his room passing the light from the living area on into the next pool of darkness. His feet dragged. The door of the bedroom was open and his crew had left his bag there. Helena had always given him this one when he visited the complex because it was further away and Lexi rarely went down this particular passageway.

As he undressed, he folded his clothes and then lay them on the chair beside the bed. He shrugged on a sleeping tunic over his long underwear. It was so damned cold, not just a temperature thing - clammy cold.

Sitting on the bed, he went over the latest data on the com-u and then made a quick, bare foot dash to the bathroom. His image in the mirror surprised him. He looked the same as always. Grey, longish hair swept back from a tanned, tired face. Eyes clear and emotionless, full decisive mouth, nothing happy or unhappy about it. The face of someone that nobody really knew.

Back in the bedroom he turned back the covers. The sheets on the bed felt aired, smelled like lavender. He picked up the pillow and buried his face in it and some lavender sprigs fell out onto the floor. He stared at their fresh vibrant colour - they had been put there recently. She had prepared the room for him. He put the pillow down and went to his bag and took out a sleeping capsule and placed it on the chair. Then he sat on the edge of the bed, hunched over, elbows resting on his knees, his eyes fixed on the picture on the wall above the chair. A golden woman, elongated and barely suggested, innocent and happy walked in a place, coloured golden and lavender, with the animals who loved her. Forms barely suggested, spirit-like in the background. Even in that ephemeral depiction it made him feel that they were grounded and on Earth.

The picture blurred into a blob of colour. His shoulders shook. Tears dripped down onto the lavender sprigs on the floor. He cried silently, the grief waves surging through him and breaking in his gut. He began to retch and broke open the sleeping capsule, inhaling the sharp gas inside. He lay down in the bed and then imagined he heard Grace's voice. She was saying, I love you Leon.

The drug overpowered him.

* * * * *

3 – New Beginnings

Lexi Goes to Owai

The shield door closed and he stopped.

It was his first sight of the sky, the first time he had seen snow properly, as something other than a blue-grey shadow on the lightwell. It looked sparkly and clean. There were mountains everywhere. It was funny thinking that they had always been there. He wondered if Helena had seen them and then knew that she had.

He shivered. He felt all that space above and around him through the thin yellow dome. The light was sharp.

Marco pulled on his hand, 'Better get inside, Lexi. The radiation here's not that great.'

Lexi's mouth shut tight and he followed Marco up the ramp. When he entered the carrier his breath started to rush in and out of him, hah, hah, hah, hah. His heavy boots scraped on the lines of metal set into the floor. Walking in was like going into a great, big, metal mouth. He was so tired that he couldn't even lift his arms and legs when Marco was helping him out of his suit.

It was warmer than he had ever felt before. A strange, soft, humming came from under the floor. Soft, white-yellow light lit the cabin. The carpet was soft. Everything smelled different and he realised he couldn't smell concrete, which was part of it. He didn't know the other smells.

Marco pointed at the seats. 'Sit there Lexi, so you can get a good look at the viewer.'

Lexi wriggled back onto his seat and Sena sat behind him. Marco sat next to him and reached over and did up some straps and it was tight on his tummy.

'We only have to put this on for the initial jump,' Marco said.

'Have you got my stuff?'

‘Yes,’ Marco said. ‘We loaded it all this morning.’

‘Did you bring my books and my clothes?’

‘Yep.’

‘Did you bring my blocks? Did you bring the cards?’

‘Yep.’

‘Have you got the seeds and the lavender and the violets?’

‘Yep.’

‘And the strawberry plants.’

Marco nodded. ‘You know we have. You saw Tesla carting it all out.’

‘I just want to make sure.’ Lexi’s hand went to the locket around his neck. His eyes darted around the interior of the cabin. He put his other hand on Marco’s knee.

‘What about the violin?’

‘We brought everything you wanted us to bring.’

‘Where’s Leon?’

‘He’s staying behind to talk to the crew that are coming to look after the place for the next little while. You know all this.’

‘I’m just making sure.’

When they took off, there was a loud whine and then a heavy feeling pressing Lexi down into the big seat. He gripped the handrests and turned his head sideways. Marco reached out and Lexi felt that big, strong hand around his small one. A little later the heavy feeling stopped and Marco let go his hand and ruffled his hair.

‘There you go. Your first carrier jump. What’d you think?’

‘It was all right,’ Lexi lied.

He heard himself breathe through the tightness in his chest. Inside, it was like he couldn’t stop sobbing but actually he made no noise and he wasn’t crying. His throat felt like something was there and he couldn’t swallow it. Marco talked to him sometimes but although he heard the words and talked back, afterwards he didn’t remember what they were talking about.

He was remembering her and missing her. She was with Grace now. And she had someone she loved and he had no-one. His stomach tightened. He looked at Marco’s face next to him and felt for the locket. He shut his eyes. Darkness was good.

For a little while he slept because the next thing he knew, Marco was saying, 'Look Lexi! The sea domes!'

Marco's excited voice dragged him back from the dark quietness into the cabin, although when Lexi first saw the colony through the viewer, he thought it was just dirty bubbles floating on the ocean. The carrier flew over them and he realised how big the colony was. On the sides of the domes were places where boats were tied up and then in a huge circle in the water, all around like a length of lumpy rope, were the cysts. Some were bunched like grapes. Some were single. In the open water inside the circle of cysts were more boats, more cysts and other things that he had no understanding of. He could not conceive of the size of things.

'My eyes don't know how to look this big,' he said to Marco. He wriggled on his seat closer to the viewer.

'That's where I live,' Marco said.

'I won't be living there will I?'

'Not yet. Later when you're bigger.'

'Where does Sena live?'

'At a place called Tau-cen. It's on the land, quite a long way from here.'

'Would you like me to mindspeak you where I live Lexi?' she asked.

'No it's all right. How long 'til we get to the place where I'll be living?'

'About 10 minutes by the time we land,' said Marco.

'How long is that?'

'A very little while now Lexi,' said Sena.

'And you're going to stay there with me?' Lexi's eyes were on Marco, Lexi's hand in his.

'Yes, my little mate, for the thousandth time, yes I am.'

Arrival

When they landed Lexi couldn't bring himself to climb off his seat. 'I feel sick.'

'Just hold on,' said Marco. 'We'll be out of here in a minute.'

'I feel sick,' said Lexi again. His hand was hot. He could feel it sticking to Marco's.

'Here.' Sena was kneeling in front of him with a small bag. A gush of vomit erupted out of him burning and sour and then his stomach squeezed everything out and he kept being sick into the bag until there was nothing left. Tears leaked out his eyes and ran hot down his cheeks. Sena washed his face with a cold cloth. Marco was standing there watching.

'OK,' she said. 'How do you feel now? Do you think you'll need to be sick again?'

'I don't know,' he sobbed.

'It's all right. If you need to, you can use this.' She showed him a clean bag and then he felt her cool hand on his forehead. 'You're hot.' She unfastened his top and tugged it off him. 'You're not used to our heat.'

Her arms went around him and he melted into her.

'It'll be all right,' she said. 'It'll be all right, Lexi.'

He sobbed, 'I don't want to stay here. I want to go home.'

'I know you do,' she said. 'But be brave, Lexi. You can't go home so you'll have to do the next best thing and stay here and be brave.'

'Come on,' said Marco. 'You'll like it once you get out there and see what it's like.'

He took Lexi's hand again. Lexi looked at Sena.

-No I won't, he mindspoke her.

-Try it, she replied. You won't know until you try.

Everything was too big. Everything was too light. His eyes hurt. Nothing looked like anything he had ever seen before and he couldn't seem to stop the tears coming out. He wanted Helena and he couldn't have her. He could never have her again. The sobs forced their way out of him. Sena and Marco were on either side, each holding one of his hands as they all walked out into the long, metal corridor. The light made him squint and his eyes looked down at the silvery grey, metal surface of the floor, looked at Marco's big, brown boots walking beside him.

They reached a room at the end of the corridor and Marco let go his hand.

'Just go through decom with Sena, Lexi, while I help Tesla unload our stuff.'

‘OK.’ Marco walked away and Lexi stood and eyed the large metal doorway in front of them. ‘It looks a bit like the shield door when it’s open.’

‘It does a bit.’

The doorway kept beeping while they walked through and into a small chamber. Lexi felt a cold stream of air on his face and body. It felt good. Sena made him stand there until the cold air and the beeping stopped and then they walked through to the next room which was empty apart from a few yellow, plastic seats.

He looked around. ‘There’s nothing here.’

‘This is just a place where we can wait for the others,’ Sena said. ‘This whole area is an entry port. Everyone who comes to the colony has to go through a port like this.’

‘Why?’

‘It scans for radiation and germs – anything that might hurt people.’

He sat down on the cold, plastic seat and stole glimpses of her. She didn’t look like Helena –he knew about Helena. He could see only otherness when he looked at Sena, a jerky sharpness inside where Helena was smooth and calm. But when Sena spoke in his mind, it was Helena’s voice he heard. It scared him. It made him want Helena too much.

In a little while Marco came. ‘We can leave now.’

‘Where are my things?’ asked Lexi.

‘Everything’s going through decom. They’ll send it on tomorrow.’

Lexi tried not to, but his face started to screw up and he couldn’t stop the feeling in his throat or the noise coming out.

Marco said, ‘Aw come on, Lexi, it’s not as bad as all that.’

They didn’t know.

Sena said, ‘Lexi don’t cry. What Marco says is true. We’ll get it tomorrow.’

Lexi couldn’t get his breath right to stop crying.

‘Lexi, son of Helena,’ she said and he looked at her. He liked being called that. ‘I’ll give you ten seconds to read my mind and see that it’s true. You will get your things tomorrow and not a minute before.’ Something was pushing him to look into her mind and when he did, he saw his things going through a big machine like the one he and Sena had gone through.

-It takes longer to do lots of little things than it does to do people, she mindspoke.

He felt her mind pushing his again and there was also a warm feeling that made him feel a tiny bit better.

‘What you’re doing is called whining and your mother would not have liked it. Be brave!’ Sena said.

Lexi looked up at her. Her eyes looked nice. He wiped away the tears. ‘You’re more like Helena than I thought,’ he said.

First Days At Owai 5

He slept for a long time and when he woke he saw the colour gold, instead of white or grey, and felt too hot. He threw off the bed cover and lay there a few seconds listening to the sounds coming from the next room and then got up. The floor felt funny and the room was tiny and empty. So was the room he walked into.

Sena was sitting at a very small table, eating. Her bare arms poked brown out of her loose flowing dress which came almost to the floor, almost covering her bare feet. He had never seen Helena wearing almost nothing like that, except when she was getting changed.

Sena smiled, pulled out a chair and patted the seat.

‘Hello, sleepy one. Want something to eat?’

‘I need to go to the toilet.’

‘Okay.’ She held out her hand. ‘I’ll take you there.’

They went out a door into a corridor which had a blue floor and golden walls. He walked with her past two other doors and then she opened the next door and he could smell something nice. They went into a big, light blue room. He saw a line of five metal basins and opposite them five doors. She opened one of them and he saw a white toilet. The day before he’d been there, but had been too tired to notice anything.

He went in and she shut the door. ‘I’ll wait for you.’

When he finished she came back in and pressed a button. There was a noise and when he looked into the toilet everything was gone.

‘There’s a machine which sucks stuff out of the toilet into a central composting area,’ she said.

That was interesting.

She took him to the basin and turned on the tap. Too much water ran out. It was a waste. He looked at her, then turned the tap off while he lathered his hands and then turned it on a little bit to rinse them. Then off. She handed him a towel. He dried his hands and followed her back to the room.

Breakfast was bread and fish and fruit juice. He was very hungry and everything tasted strange but good. When he was full Sena helped him get dressed in a long top called a tunic and some loose white trousers.

‘That won’t be enough,’ he said.

‘Yes it will. You’ll be hot.’

He frowned. ‘What are we going to do?’ he said, looking around the bare room.

‘We’re going with Marco for a walk around the colony.’

Marco came later dressed in a tunic like Lexi’s and the same sort of trousers. He handed Sena a parcel.

She unwrapped it. ‘Wonderful. You got some sandals.’ Then she knelt in front of Lexi, ‘Hold my shoulder and give me your foot,’ she said and he realized the things that she held were some sort of shoe. When they were on his feet they felt light. He took a few steps in them. Strange. Then she got a white hat out of the parcel too. It poked out the front and hung down the back of his head when she put it on him.

‘Let’s go,’ said Marco holding out his hand.

They walked along the blue corridor to some steps and it was very bright and hurt Lexi’s eyes. The stairs were made of clear plastic with blue squares on it and they climbed around a big, square, clear, plastic column with holes in it that seemed to go up and up. A small garden was tucked next to the stairs full of healthy looking plants. They climbed up the stairs and they were in a corridor which was lighter blue with its own small garden by the side of the stairs. They climbed another level and were in a corridor that was a very pale blue. Big glass doors were at the other end of it. Light was pouring through them and he could see green through the glass.

They went outside into a huge, clear dome which covered a great, big area full of plants. Scattered through the dome and holding it up were tall grey, metal things rising from the green like some sort of strange, shining tree trunk. Above, the sky was very blue.

‘What’s this called,’ said Lexi.

Marco said ‘We call this the PD, the park dome. The children play here in the afternoon and the adols generally come here later.

Lexi said, ‘What’s that called?’ and he pointed to a sloping area.

‘Do you mean the hill?’ asked Sena.

‘I thought it might be a hill.’ said Lexi. The hill was smallish and biggish and it was covered with plants that Lexi realised were probably grasses. There were trees in scattered groups growing out of the grass, some of them blossoming fruit trees. Just like one of the places in the colonies that Helena had mindspoke him that day. His eyes saw something moving quickly in the air and his heart started to beat fast as his head followed the movement. Birds, he thought. He pointed. “What’s that?”

‘Sparrows,’ said Marco, ‘they’re a type of bird,’ and Lexi nodded and followed the tug of Marco’s hand as they took a concrete path away from the glass doors and up the hill to another path made of short grass.

‘This is the circuit track. It’ll take us around the whole park. Do you want to walk it?’

‘I’d like that,’ he said, ‘but it’ll be funny walking on plants.’

They went slowly. Lexi walked with his head bent looking at the ground, stopping often and bending down to feel the grass and look at the flowers. He started to pick them and Sena who was carrying her com-u in a belt pouch took it out so that he could put his flowers in. He picked one of each type until there was a selection of many white, orange, yellow, pink, purple and blue flowers as well as many sorts of grass heads.

‘I’ll draw these when I get back to the cell,’ he said.

They came to the thickets of tall trees which circled the outer edge of the park dome. Marco guided them off the grass track and onto a dirt path which sloped down gently into the cool shade of the trees. Lexi stopped now to smell the leaves and to touch the bark and to try to put his arms around the fat tree trunks to see how big they were. They followed the path down and came to a small trickle of stream. Lexi squatted

and ran his fingers through the cold water and breathed deeply and he could smell the Earth. Green leaves rustled above him and he looked up and the blue sky was on the other side of them and the sun sparkling like diamonds through the leaves. A small, green bird flitted and flew down to where he sat. He didn't move and it flicked around him. When it flew away he stood up and left the water and went over to Marco and Sena and burrowed between them. Marco reached an arm around him and kissed the top of his head.

They got up and walked on the dirt path out into the hot sun and back to the grassy track which wrapped around through long grass and lead them across the high part of the hill. At the top were some big trees that seemed to almost lie on the grass in places, their branches reached out so far. Their trunks were grey and huge and fat. Marco slapped them happily and said they were 200 years old.

'We used to play forts here when I was a sprat,' he said, 'and this is where we came when we were adols. I still come here sometimes with my friends and talk.' He lead them around the trees to a place where some worn trunks lay in shade in a rough circle on the grass. It felt cooler and they sat and looked out across the rest of the park which seemed very big. Lexi looked up and the dome over them seemed too big to be able to stay up there although he guessed all the tall things holding it up were very strong

Sena said, 'Only the tech areas and the places where there are lots of children can have a dome like this.'

'Do the children only live in some places?' said Lexi.

'Yes. We have special places so we can protect children from radiation. Adults need to go out in the world and we can't protect them as much.'

'Why do just the children get protected?'

Marco said, 'We need to protect your genes, Lexi.'

'Why?'

'When you're older they'll be shared with people from high rad zones who can't have babies themselves.'

'Do you give away babies and children?'

'No. The genemasters give away sperm and eggs and embryos. When I was Leon's pilot we travelled around the world and he'd give the genetic material to other genemasters.'

‘Did you like that?’ asked Lexi.’

‘Yes I liked it. Most places are not as good as it is here. The children give people hope. That’s special.’

‘Why did you stop?’

‘I wanted to come back to Owai to try to be a redactor again.’

Lexi looked out on the flower heads, tall in the long grass. They were blobs and shapes of colour in the green. Birds sped in and out of the grass. Lexi had never seen such fast movement. Birds, he decided, had a good life. He and Helena had a good life too, but it was often so still and slow, especially at the end. He looked at Marco.

‘You left us there.’

Marco’s mouth tightened. He looked away out over the grassy hill and then turned back to Lexi. ‘I tried to get her to come. She wouldn’t leave.’

‘Why?’

‘She said she had to look after the plants.’

‘That’s what she told me.’ Lexi looked around the Park Dome. ‘There are lots of plants here,’ he said. ‘But I think she loved our plants best and that was important wasn’t it?’ His eyes were blinking. He couldn’t seem to stop it.

‘Yes,’ said Marco.

Sena said, ‘You’re looking tired Lexi. I think it’s all the heat and bright light. Shall we go back to the cell now?’

Lexi was watching some small brown birds in the long grass. There were at least ten eating the seed heads. ‘They’ve got a nice big family,’ he said. ‘That must be nice for them - everyone playing in the sun like that and eating the grass.’

‘Yes,’ said Sena. ‘Come on. Let’s go and have lunch. They might like the sun but you’ve had enough for today.’

First Time At The Foodhall – Lexi Meets Iessa

That night Marco took Lexi and Sena to eat in the food hall. It was a short walk away, in the red area. Many people were in the corridors. Lexi held onto Marco's hand tightly. So much people noise! Lexi felt as though if he didn't hold onto Marco's hand all those people wouldn't even notice him and they'd walk all over him.

The food hall was bigger than he could ever have imagined. People were everywhere and still more were pouring in through the different entrances. Marco lead them to a table where other adults and children were sitting and laughing and talking. Everyone had brown skin. The children stared at him and when they talked Lexi couldn't understand anything they said. There was food on the table and people were eating fast and way too much and Lexi found he couldn't eat anything. The light was bright, almost like day and yet the sun was going down. It was a huge waste of everything. Then someone at his table said something and everyone laughed. It was loud and unexpected. Lexi toppled off his seat.

Sena caught him before he hit the floor. Where her hand touched him he felt a jolt of warmth.

'It's scary isn't it,' she said and he nodded.

She got up and said to Marco, 'We need to go back to the cell. I forgot something.'

He was talking to someone across the table and he looked up at her blankly.

'You need to take us there,' she added. 'I don't know where to go.'

'In a moment,' he said. 'I'll just finish what I was saying to Maika.'

Sena looked at the man across the table. So did Lexi. The man smiled at him and said, 'No, go now, Marco. I'll see you tomorrow.'

Sena held Lexi's hand firmly and Marco rose from his seat.

'I haven't finished eating,' he said.

'We haven't started,' she said.

'You should have.'

'Perhaps. I think I'll feel happier in the cell. And I assume there will be food in the dispenser?'

The man across the table smiled again. 'There will most assuredly be food. Sit down Marco and I'll take them there.'

He got up and the child next to him said, 'Where are you going, Maika?'

‘Just showing these people how to get back to the blue quarter. You stay here, spratling.’

‘No, I want to come.’ She wriggled off her seat and took his hand.

‘I’ll be back soon,’ he said.

‘Then I’ll be back soon too.’

Lexi and Sena followed Maika and the girl outside the hall into the corridor. Away from the people it was quieter although Lexi could still hear all the voices. He took a deep breath and held Sena’s hand. Further away from the food hall it became very quiet.

The girl looked over her shoulder. ‘Who are you?’

‘I’m Lexi.’

‘I’m Iessa, daughter of Lara, Trainer-Coercer of Owai 1 and Maika Cystmaster.’

Sena said, ‘He is Lexi, son of Helena, Gardener of the Cascade Range Tunnels.’

Iessa said to Lexi, ‘Can you swim?’

‘No.’

Maika said, ‘He looks a big, strong boy. It won’t take him long to learn.’

She looked up at Maika. ‘He’s very old to not know how to swim.’

Maika smiled and said, ‘No my little spratling, he is still young.’

‘My feet are sore,’ she said. ‘Carry me.’

He swung her up easily in his big arms. She put her arms around his neck and nestled her head on his chest and smiled down at Lexi. Maika smiled too. ‘She’s been swimming all day, Lexi, and playing, but a little walk and her feet are too sore.’ He kissed the top of her head.

They reached the blue corridors and Sena said, ‘I know where to go now.’

‘That’s all right,’ said Maika. ‘We’ll take you all the way.’ They walked down the stairs to the third level and to the door of their cell.

Maika said, ‘I’ll go and tool you two dinners. Unfortunately I can’t stay, too many people I have to talk to.’

‘I can get them. You’ve already done too much,’ said Sena.

‘You are the Farsensor and a friend of Marco’s - I haven’t done enough. Go in and I’ll bring them to you.’ He put Iessa down and strode off down the corridor and Sena ushered the two children into the tiny cell.

Iessa looked around. ‘There’s nothing much here, is there?’

‘No,’ said Sena, ‘But Lexi’s only staying here a few days while the builders get a cell ready in the living quarters.’

‘Yes,’ said Iessa. ‘Maika told me that Marco will be living in our corridor soon.’ She put her hand on Lexi’s arm.

It felt hot and he shied away.

She looked surprised. ‘We can play then,’ she said.

Maika came back with two dinner packs, gave them to Sena and then swung Iessa up onto his shoulders.

‘Come sprat. I’ll see you again in a few days, little Lexi,’ he said and he gave Lexi’s shoulder a little rub. He turned to Sena.

‘It was a pleasure to finally meet the Farsensor.’

‘Likewise,’ said Sena, ‘to meet the Cystmaster.’

After Maika and Iessa had gone they ate their dinners. Fish, seaweed and vegetables again.

Sena took a mouthful of food and grimaced. ‘If I eat any more fish, I’m going to end up looking like one.’

‘I like it,’ said Lexi.

‘Just as well. I think you’re going to be eating a lot of it.’

Day 2 - Owai 5

They went to the PD on the second day too. Lexi smelled the air with no hint of concrete, air which was sun warmed and full of the scent of the wildflowers. Marco showed him honeysuckle which smelled like honey and flower together should smell although Lexi had never tasted honey. They bit off the green end and sucked out the sweet nectar inside while Sena lay in the sun, relaxing.

Later Lexi just sat on one of the old smooth logs in the log circle at the top of the hill looking out at the sky and all the space and sunshine and trees in the park dome. He reached around the fat trunks of the trees whose branches shaded the log circle and tried to work out which one was fatter and felt their rough, crumbly, hard bark and hoped he'd never scrape himself on one accidentally.

He squatted by the stream and ran his fingers through the trickling water and looked up at the blue sky through the lacy foliage of the tree ferns. His sandals made dents in the cool mud on the edge of the stream and mud oozed on to his feet through the holes in the sandals and everywhere he could smell things growing and living. He saw the bird again, the little dark green one. It flew down from the tree and talked to him with its bird voice while he sat by the stream. And when he saw the bird he felt happy but then something twisted and turned inside of him and he had to go over to where Sena and Marco were sitting.

He clambered onto Sena's lap.

'What's wrong?' she said, pulling him close.

'I don't know.'

She rubbed his back and he watched the bird until it flew back up into the treetops. It had looked happy.

Lexi wondered if people and animals and plants in this place ever looked unhappy. He hoped some of them did or else it didn't seem fair.

When they got back to the cell, Lexi's things were stacked in the corridor by the door - a pile of things in bags. Lexi ran over to them.

'My plants, my plants,' he cried.

The plants were devoid of soil, their roots wrapped in soft, yellow, cyst bags. Where they had once been heavy and bulky now they were light and Lexi picked up

first one little bundle and then another. The leaves were growing and soft and supple so his cries gradually diminished but still he looked at Sena and Marco with hard, untrusting eyes.

Lexi gathered up each of the light bundles until his arms were full and took them into the sleeping room. Then he came back out and got the rest of the plants.

Sena went to help but he snapped, 'Don't touch anything. They're mine!'

When the corridor was completely cleared, Lexi shut the door of his room. Sena heard him moving around and when it had been quiet for a little while, she went in. His plants were arranged upright near the light well. His other things were in a careful pile in the corner. He was lying on the bed asleep and she could see the trace of tears on his cheeks.

About Rats And Cats And Plants

Lexi saw it on his third morning in the colonies. Black and furry, sauntering down the blue passageway outside their cell. He stood and watched fascinated, until it turned the corner and then he ran inside, shouting, 'Sena! Sena!'

She came rushing out of the sleeping room, half dressed, with a tunic in her hand. 'What!!'

'I saw a cat!'

'Oh.' She sat down on the lounge in their tiny living area and ran her hand through her hair and laughed. 'You shouted so loud I thought you must have seen a ghost.'

'I wouldn't do that if I'd seen a ghost,' said Lexi, 'I'd just talk to it.' He gave her a look. 'I didn't know there'd be cats,' he said.

She patted the lounge and he sat next to her, moving close when she reached out her arm to him.

'There are cats because there are an awful lot of rats.'

'You have rats too!'

Sena smiled. 'You're not supposed to be happy about the rats, Lexi. They're a nuisance. We can't get rid of them.'

'But they're animals!'

‘They chew holes in the cells and go everywhere they shouldn’t. They survived the war very well. The geneticists have tried to breed sterile rats, the techs have spent years inventing devices to get rid of them but they’re still here. And so we have the cats.

‘What’s wrong with cats?’

‘The cats eat the birds in the park domes and in the wild spaces if they get out there. They need to go to the toilet, so we have to have litter areas for them all through the tunnels.’

‘What’s a litter area?’

‘Those little gardens that you see everywhere in these tunnels.’

He wriggled out from under her arm and twisted around so he could look at her properly. ‘I thought people liked having gardens.’

‘They do like them and they help oxygenate the air but the cats have to go to the toilet in them too. It’s a lot of work for the gardeners.’

‘You sound like you don’t like cats?’

‘I do like them. We need them to get rid of the rats.’

‘Do you know what Sena? You’re lucky and you don’t even know it.’

He got up off the lounge, walked past her into his room and quietly shut the door behind him.

Sena watched the door close. He was finding fault with her about all the little things. She understood that adjusting to his new life was hard. All the same she couldn’t wait for Marco to get everything sorted and for him and Lexi to move to the family quarters. Then she could take the carrier back to Tau-cen and get on with her own life. This rescue was leaving her all askew. Nothing was normal about it.

Her mouth twisted. Why? She thought of Lexi’s little face looking out at all those new things, trying to be brave. And Marco. He’d do a good job loving Lexi –even though he didn’t really know anything about children. She didn’t have to worry about anything there. It was the thought of going to Tau-cen that was making her feel uneasy. Why didn’t she feel even a little bit happy about going home? She didn’t know. Anyway, being unhappy was not an unusual state. It didn’t bear thinking about. She programmed some serotonin and felt better.

Later Marco came to get them and they took Lexi’s plants up to the garden dome

packed inside six yellow cyst buckets. When they got to the small cyst dome that was the entrance to the big, plastocarb garden dome Sena dumped the buckets she'd been carrying down on the ground and flopped onto one of the seats.

'I'll go and find Sandy,' said Marco. 'You two wait here,' and he went striding off through the glass doors into the garden dome.

Lexi sat next to Sena and stared up through the gaps in the trees above him looking for birds and looking at the sky which was a beautiful blue. The sky was not always blue they had told him. Sometimes it was grey. Or so stormy it was almost black or sometimes even pink. So far he had only seen blue. There were no birds in this little dome. Everything was still except Sena's foot, which was crossed over her leg and jiggling up and down.

Marco came back. 'Sandy's ready for us.' Picking up his share of the buckets, he lead the way into the garden dome.

Lexi Meets Sandy

It was big and warm and moist feeling. The air felt soft and light. Lexi could see sky through the dome. Paths of small, red stones crunched under his feet. And the plants! He was used to the colour green, but here under full light, the green of the vegetables shouted at him. The smell of turned soil and the sweetness of compost soaked the air. Lexi's eyes rose again to the top of the dome and saw the yellow ball of sun and that blue sky.

A man was holding a very long hose spraying a huge bed of plants with water. Lexi thought, what a waste. He looked out past the man, through the dome and not very far away, he could see huge trees and then further back more trees, getting smaller and smaller on the distant hills.

Marco walked off to talk to the man and suddenly everything began to whirl in Lexi's head. He clutched at Sena's hand and turned to look at her, then looked back at the man, who was coming towards them with Marco. The man's face was a funny, red colour and full of wrinkles. He had a strange, red hat on.

Lexi's ears were buzzing. There was too much colour. The warm sun ate him, felt hot on his dark head, was a warm, hungry lick on his arms. Everything he looked at

seemed too clear. He shook his head and shut his eyes and opened them again. He reached out a hand to touch a leaf of crinkly, green beet, glossy in the sunlight. It felt warm and he shuddered. His head swivelled this way and that, surveying the wide arc of dome. Too big. Too many colours. The sky was too beautiful.

Marco and the man were looking at him. Sena was behind him. Inside himself something was bursting to get out. His face crumpled and he tried to straighten it out again, to make it smooth and good. He thought, got to be brave Lexi. His stomach clenched. Plants flew through the air out on to the stone path and Sena was shoving the bucket in front of his face. The breakfast he had eaten so happily all came up out of him. And to his horror, after the food, a scream built inside him and forced its way up from his stomach and came ragged out of his mouth. He stood taut, and screamed at the sun. His hands formed fists, his neck went stiff.

He screamed for his mother, for the last months, the dread, the hoping that he hadn't been able to stop doing, the savouring of every uneasy moment. He screamed for the watching he had done of her, and her becoming a person whose body was getting smaller and smaller in front of him until only the glow of love was there, and then just those empty tunnels.

Why? He didn't understand why. And so he stood there and bellowed at the sun and the blue sky and the lush warmth everywhere. He bellowed and wanted the cold and the grey and the concrete and the cool dark. All he was aware of was the wanting. He wanted everything with his whole heart, he wanted everything that he couldn't have. He screamed his want until he was hoarse and then he cried it and all he could think was why? Not, why Helena had to die, but why they had lived in the tunnels at all? Why had they been the only ones? Why had his mother had no-one to sit with in the warm sun and talk to? Because he had seen lots of people here, sitting and talking and laughing and eating too much. Why?

And Sena didn't shield, and his thoughts and feelings raged through her. She stood beside him and said, 'Let it out Lexi. Let it out.' Then she turned and snapped at Marco who was planted on Lexi's other side, 'Go and get the letter!'

'What?' he said.

'Helena's letter. Go back to the cell and get it. Hurry!'

But Lexi didn't hear that. He just screamed. Even when his voice was ragged and it was just a hoarse whisper

And then Marco was pulling him onto his lap. They sat on the edge of the garden bed and Lexi's body was stiff and hard. He tried to pull away but Marco held him tight and said, 'Lexi, I'm going to read you Helena's letter.'

Lexi heard Marco's voice and some part of him wanted to listen and the buzzing sound in his head got quieter.

'To Lexi,' Marco read. 'I give you to Marco. I think he will be the one who hears your call. I give to you the sea, the stars, the sun. All those trees I showed you that day, the sand, the moon, the blue sky, mountains. People, Earth, the open air, the colonies. Thank you my little gardener boy. I could not imagine someone I loved more or who loved me better. Go and live your life and remember that I will be with you. I love you. Helena.'

'Lexi, she wanted you to be here. You came here and she's saying that her spirit was going to come with you.' Marco talked slow and at the same time his hand was smoothing the hair back from Lexi's brow and a cool, shady feeling crept into Lexi's mind. The coolness swept through him. His body went soft. He sighed. The hoarse screams stopped. He reached for the locket around his neck.

The other man had gone somewhere and now he came back with a jug.

'Nothin' like lemonade to drive away the demons.' He put the jug down on the stone path and went and returned with a pile of stools which he unstacked in a rough circle before walking off again.

The man came back with some glasses. He poured a glass of lemonade and gave it to Lexi. 'There y'are, little mate. Get that down ya.'

Lexi looked at the cloudy liquid and smelled it and took a sip, then another. It was sweet and fresh and tangy and cool.

When Lexi had finished his drink, the man said, 'Want more?'

Lexi nodded. 'I was too hot.'

The man poured him another half glass.

Lexi said, 'The sun scares me.'

'The plants like it, most of 'em.'

'I'm not a plant.'

‘But you like plants, Marco says. And ya brought some with ya to plant out didn’t ya?’

‘Yes.’

The man said, ‘Tell ya what. Let’s just you and me go find a garden bed where ya can put ‘em in a bit of soil. ‘Cause they’re bare rooted now aren’t they? We can plant ‘em all together while they get used to it here and in a month or so, we can move ‘em ‘round a bit’

Lexi nodded.

The man stood up. ‘You two just make ya selves at home,’ he said to Marco and Sena, ‘while me and the boy go and do some real work. Something you head people wouldn’t really enjoy.’ He beckoned Lexi, ‘Come on, mate.’

Lexi looked at Marco.

‘Go with Sandy, Lexi. He’s the best gardener in the whole world.’

Sandy was bent over picking up the plants Sena had thrown out of the bucket.

‘Nice lookin’ lavender that,’ he muttered, ‘one of the old varieties, I’m thinkin’. Well siree, just look at the roots on these strawberries.’ He said to Lexi, ‘Ya must’ve come from the Northern Hemisphere with those doozies. Yid put ‘em to sleep for the winter, by the looks.’

‘Yes,’ said Lexi. ‘I came from the Northern Wastelands.’

‘Did ya now?’ said Sandy looking at him. ‘Well, that explains it then.’ He shoved the last of the retrieved plants into one of the other buckets and picked them up, all but one.

‘Well,’ he said jerking his head in the direction of the last bucket.

‘Huh?’

‘Ya don’t expect me ta carry everything do ya? You’re not one of those Northern Wasteland boys are ya?’

‘No.’ Lexi scurried to pick up the bucket.

‘Just as well,’ said Sandy, striding off. ‘Hurry up boy. I haven’t got all day. How’s a man meant ta do a honest day’s work when the boy’s so slow. What’re ya like with a spade boy? If yer that slow with a bucket, I hate ta think what yer like with a spade.’

Lexi ran to catch up. ‘My mother said I was just wonderful with a spade.’

‘Did she, mate? An’ who was she?’

‘Helena of the Tunnels in the Cascade Range. And she was the best gardener in the Northern Wastelands.’

‘Ya don’t say. Flash name that. Well, we’ll see, boy. We’ll see. The proof’s in the compost I say.’

‘Our compost was very good.’

‘Won’t be good as mine,’ said Sandy. ‘Won’t be good as mine.’

They came back later and Sena and Marco had cleaned up the vomit bucket and were wandering around the garden beds.

‘The boy knows a bit about plants,’ Sandy said. ‘He seems ta know how ta handle a spade as well.’

‘Are your plants all right, Lexi?’ Marco asked.

‘They’re all in and they’ll do really well here,’ said Lexi.

‘Course they will,’ said Sandy. ‘But don’t expect me ta look after ‘em for ya. I hope yer not one of those Northern Wasteland boys - think ya can just put a plant in a bit of soil and then ya leave it.’ He glared at Lexi.

Lexi shook his head. ‘I’m not one of those boys.’

‘I’ll be expecting ya to turn up everyday and water and weed those plants. Ya can’t expect me ta do it.’

‘I’ll come everyday,’ said Lexi.

‘Swimmin’ and stuff is no excuse. I’ll be expectin’ ya. When a man says he’s gonna do somethin’, then I expect ta see him.’

‘I’ll be here everyday,’ said Lexi.

‘Right then. I’ve got work ta do. I’ll see ya tomorra.’

Sandy walked off and Lexi watched him go.

‘Helena would have liked him,’ he said. ‘Helena would’ve really liked him.’

They took Lexi back to the cell and Sena made him lie down and rest. Later she paced in the tiny living room. ‘I can’t go back’, she said to Marco. ‘I don’t think I can rescue one more orphan. I think it would kill me. I can’t do it anymore.’

‘Everyone feels pain, Sena.’

‘It’s not pain, it’s guilt.’ She stopped pacing and stood looking down at him. ‘I have rescued at least 3,000 orphans. That’s 3,000 reasons to feel guilty, maybe more.’

‘You saved 3,000 orphans. You have no reason to feel guilty.’

‘They have no homes, no parents, no status. We assess them and they go where we say and are trained to perform the role we think they’ll be best at.’

‘Everyone has to work,’ he said.

‘What choice do they have, Marco?’ Her eyes bore into him. She spoke slowly. ‘We trade them for our own safety. So that we may pay our debt to the people in the ‘badlands – so they’ll let us live here in a one dobler environment while they have to battle on in environments of 100 dobler or more like Helena did. The orphans have no place which is theirs to nurture them. If they have no genes to contribute, we send them out to high-rad zones to work. We keep the best unless we can trade them too for a skill we need. They are currency. One good orphan can be worth five tonnes of fish or fifteen tonnes of apples.’

‘You save them.’

‘I didn’t save Lexi. Helena did. Her spirit held open a space in the interstices so her child could call. She stared at him. ‘I didn’t save him then, but maybe I can do something now. Today, I thought ... he needs me.’ She began pacing again. ‘Helena was our embryo. We’re told it shouldn’t mean anything but it does mean something and it should mean something. The way he felt today and the things I saw of his life in the tunnels...’ She stopped and stood in front of Marco. ‘There’s a voice in the ether telling me I should look after him. I want to stay.’

Marco stared at her and then looked away. ‘There’s someone I’m in love with in the sea cyst zone.’

She laughed. A light flutter of laughter. Suddenly the room felt brighter.

‘Lucky it’s Lexi I’m falling for then,’ she said, reaching a hand towards him. He took it.

‘I’m a bit crazy you know, but you’d still be the last one I’d choose to love.’

He smiled. ‘I’m just as irresponsible as you probably imagine me to be.’

‘I’m a lot crazy,’ and she smiled too.

‘I’m a lot irresponsible. We’ll make a good pair.’

Sharks And Dolphins

Two days after Lexi went to the garden dome he and Sena and Marco moved into a cell in the Family Quarters. The corridors and stairs were all green and their cell was off a corridor which was so wide it was more like a huge room. Piles of large, coloured cushions lay along the walls of the corridor. There were two lots of bathrooms at either end of it.

Their cell had three small sleeping rooms, all opening off the living area which was big enough to fit a big lounge and a big table and four chairs. The walls and floor and ceiling were all cyst yellow and on the floor in the living area was a soft red rug made of woven linen scraps. Each of the sleeping rooms had a low bed, a chest and a set of shelves which took up all of one wall. There were hooks on the back of the door to hang clothes. In each room, two long pointy plants sat in pots under the light-wells. Marco said they were there to oxygenate their cell.

‘Not that it really needs it,’ he added. ‘We get plenty of oxygen from the air wells.’

‘What’s an air well?’ said Lexi.

‘The plastic column the stairs climb around,’ said Marco. ‘Fresh air’s sucked from the shady areas in the PD and it goes to the bottom level of cells. Then it’s sucked up by hot air rising in the stairwells and it comes out into each level through those holes you see in the plastic column.’

Lexi breathed. ‘The air smells nice too,’ he said unable to keep the hint of sadness out of his voice.

Marco looked at him, ‘Didn’t the air smell nice in your tunnels?’ he said.

‘It smelled nice in the growing room.’

Marco ruffled his hair. ‘I’m sorry that you and Helena didn’t have such nice air to breathe. Truth is, radiation’s a bitch. Where you were living, there’s no getting away from it.’

‘What’s bitch mean?’

‘It means someone or something that’s really mean.’

‘That’ll come in useful sometime.’

‘Bound to, mate. Just try not to say it in front of Sena.’

‘Ulululu.’ The noise erupted outside. Sena opened the door and Lexi saw children everywhere, running and screaming, tearing down the corridor past their cell and around the corner, chasing each other and yelling at the top of their lungs.

“What...?” said Sena.

Marco came out of his room, ‘They’re just playing Sharks and Dolphins,’ he said.

‘Ululululululululu.’ Iessa sat on a pile of cushions in the hallway. Three triplets of children came around the corner, a pair of children on the outside holding a struggling child between them. The captors dragged their prisoners to Iessa.

She climbed down off her cushions and stood in front of the first group of children with a flax whip in her hand.

‘Kneel,’ she said to the captive girl in the middle.

The girl knelt.

‘How dare you come into this harbour, this sanctuary, shark? Were you hoping to eat one of us?’

The girl replied, ‘No, oh great chieftaness, I’m just a mother shark hoping to lay her babies in these beautiful and calm waters.’

Iessa flicked the child lightly with the whip. ‘You may go then back to the sea.’ The girl and her two captors raced back down the hallway.

Iessa turned to the next group of three. ‘How dare you come into this harbour, this sanctuary, shark? Were you hoping to eat one of us?’

The captive boy said, ‘No, oh great chieftaness. I am just a dogfish hoping to find a little food, so that I may grow big and strong like you.’

Iessa flicked him with the whip and his group of children ran away too.

She turned to the last group of three. ‘How dare you come into this harbour, this sanctuary, shark? Were you hoping to eat one of us?’

This shark was a girl, small and thin with blonde, frizzy hair. Iessa had barely said the last word when the girl leapt on her, wrapped her hand around the tendril of whip and yanked it around Iessa’s throat.

Sena gasped.

Iessa grinned. ‘I cede,’ she said and released the whip.

The little girl said, 'For I am the great white shark and I will eat all who do not give me my due.' An eerie wail came from her mouth. All of a sudden the corridor was full of children again.

Iessa said, 'Hail Ruth, the new chieftainess of the seas.' Then everyone knelt on the floor with their eyes covered. When no one was looking, Ruth walked amongst them and gave six children each a grey button. Then she climbed up onto the precarious pile of cushions.

'Go forth and find my foes,' she said.

There was a rush down the corridor and the same wild explosion of noise that had lead Sena to open the door.

She looked at Marco.

He raised his eyebrows and shrugged. 'It's just a game.'

'Isn't it dangerous to wrap the whip around someone's neck like that?'

'No-one usually gets hurt. I played it when I was a little. I turned out all right.'

Sena stared at him. Marco shrugged again and went back into his room.

Lexi said, 'Will I have to play that?'

'Not if you don't want to,' Sena said.

Marco called out, 'Don't tell him that. If he doesn't play the game the other kids'll think he's a nema.'

'What's a nema?' she asked.

'A sea-lice. They clean up all the leftovers in the sea. They're only tiny but if they bite you, it itches for days.'

Lexi said, 'I think I'd like to play.'

When Sena went inside he stayed by the door watching. A couple of the kids got hurt, but most had fun. He couldn't understand why it was fun but it looked exciting, especially if you were a boy from the tunnels. It made his heart beat fast, even if it looked mean. He hoped Helena wasn't watching and if she was, that maybe she wouldn't mind too much.

The next day, after he had gone up to the garden and looked after his plants with Marco, Lexi tried to play dolphins and sharks. He knelt on the floor and hid his eyes when the other children did and he ran when they did and he screamed when they did. It

wasn't fun and the dolphins never tried too catch him. He fell over a few times and he ran hard into the wall once and hard into Iessa another time, standing on her foot.

'Ow! Watch where you're going.' She pushed him and he wasn't expecting it. He found himself sitting on the floor and she was running off down the corridor, chased by two dolphins.

After an hour of the game the children got tired and everyone went home. He went back to Sena and Marco.

'Did you enjoy that?' Sena asked.

'No', he said. 'But I got practice, that's the important thing.'

'How'd ya mean?' said Marco.

'I'm not like them,' said Lexi. 'Nothing about me is like them and I don't know how to be ordinary. I have to learn, I have to teach myself so I can do the same things.'

'It's supposed to be fun,' said Marco.

'I'm not ready to have fun,' said Lexi. 'Nothing feels funny.'

'That's a bit sad, mate.'

Lexi looked at Marco, then went into his room and shut the door.

4 - Battlelines

Sena Gets Lexi With The First Coercive Block

It took a while for Sena to move her things from Tau-cen and for Marco to get them totally organised in the family quarters but then one day Marco said he had to go out to the sea cyst colony.

‘Why?’ said Lexi.

‘They need me there.’

‘I need you. You said you’d be here with me.’

‘That’s before Sena said she was moving here.’

‘You said.’

‘You are one person Lexi, and Sena and I are going to look after you really well. We could both stay here with you but then other people who need us won’t get any help. Do you want that?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, you can’t have it. I’m going back to the sea cyst zone and I’ll be back in four days.’ Marco picked up his bag. Lexi tried to cling to his leg. Marco peeled him off and walked out. Lexi sat looking at the closed door, then tipped his head back, opened his mouth and screamed. Sena came out of her room and looked at him but then she went back in and didn’t come out again.

He screamed some more and dragged himself across the floor to her door. She was working on her com-u with earplugs in. He ran at her and swung his arm to hit her and then froze solid. It was the first coercive block she had ever used on him. He sat down and stared at her, feeling betrayed.

-I hate you!

-Good.

She walked out of the room and left him there, powerless. It seemed like forever before she mindspoke him from the other room. -Finished hating me?

-No.

- Finished hitting me.

-Yes.

She removed the block and he stormed in.

‘What did you just do?’

‘I read your mind and inserted a neural blocker.’

‘How?’

‘I can mindspeak like you, but I am a redactor - my genes and my nanocu allow me to align my neural impulses with yours. I can target the biochemistry in your brain and direct chemicals to different receptors. I didn’t want you to hit me so I blocked and you couldn’t move.’

‘That wasn’t fair.’

‘Did you get mad at me when you were actually angry with Marco? Was that fair?’

‘You were wearing ear plugs.’

‘You were screaming. Want me to go deaf?’

He mindspoke her –I was sad and you didn’t care.

-Do you think Marco loves you?

-Maybe.

-Is it possible that he could help and love other people?

-Mmm.

-Do you think I can’t look after you or make you feel happy?

-You always make me feel ok.

-Then what are you whinging for?

-He said he’d stay.

-You’re being greedy. You’re not thinking of the people he can help. You’re not thinking of Marco either.

-What about me?

-We both love you. You have two lots of love always, be satisfied.

Lexi stared at her and then went over and sat next to her on the couch. When she patted her lap he settled himself in it and felt her arms around him. He sank into her and she kissed the top of his head and rubbed his back.

-Do you always win your arguments with Marco like that? he asked.

-Of course I do. And don’t you forget it.

Lexi and Iessa and Fighting

Lexi sat by himself on the edge of one of the alcoves stacking wooden blocks into large, complicated buildings and then when all the blocks were used, knocking them down again. Every so often he stopped building and his eyes were drawn to a small, fast moving group of children. The group surrounded a small girl with dark, brown eyes and wavy, long, black hair. Iessa.

‘ In the game ...’ she said and then the other children ran to do what she said, always following her rules. Their play swirled in and out of the different areas of the playroom, noisy and worrying for Lexi.

They darted past him and Iessa kicked over his blocks. His hand shot out and grabbed a twist of her hair and he hauled on it and she landed flat on her back on the tumbled blocks. Her face looked up at him, full of surprise. Her cheeks went red and her eyes burned into his then her hand lashed out. Her nails dragged down over his face and it hurt. He punched, snapping her head back onto the blocks and her eyes became brown pools full of tears. She snarled and threw herself on top of him and he fell backwards. Her fingers slashed at his face and he twisted desperately.

-No!

Sena’s mindshout echoed in the ether. Lexi could feel Iessa fighting to push off the coercive block. He humped his body and she fell off. Rolling over, he grabbed her hair again but then felt the same mindshout and couldn’t move.

-No!’

He didn’t bother trying to resist. -I’ll get you later.

- No you won’t!! Sena and Iessa said it at the same time, echoing in his mind. One sounded firm and unyielding. The other was an angry storm.

Shield Lexi, shield. He slipped inside his mind-cyst and squeezed the valve shut. Later he thought –he didn’t mind waiting.

Iessa got up and ran crying over to Lara, her mother. Then Lara started talking fast and angry to Sena who stood straight and smooth and calm, quietly listening to everything Lara had to say. Every so often they looked at him.

Iessa's face changed from tears to a mean smile. How he hated her. Sena said something to Iessa and the smile disappeared. Lara was looking at Iessa angrily now. Iessa turned and stared at Lexi. His shield was still up and she couldn't speak in his mind but he'd been here long enough to know what that stare meant. I'll get you later. He let his eyes go hard and stared back. Just try it, his eyes said. Just try it.

Sena and Lexi left early. She fumed on the way home. Later when Lexi was on his bed reading she couldn't keep it in any more. Marco was in his room playing the guitar. She went in.

-Lara acts like she owns the place.

He looked up at her and then put the guitar down. -What happened?

She gave him a download.

-Iessa is spoilt. Everything she wants she gets.

-Not by Lara and Maika.

-She told Lara that Lexi started it when I knew she'd knocked over his blocks on purpose.

-Did you see her?

-No. I asked her.

-Ask or coerce?

-I did both. She was busy lying her head off. What did you expect me to do?

-You coerced a child. People here are very tolerant of children. They are less tolerant of adults. Remember that.

-They treat Lexi like he doesn't belong.

-These people are good people, Sena.

-I can't swim like them. They judge everybody on how well they can swim. Lexi is smarter, kinder, more determined than the whole lot put together but he can't swim properly so he's nothing.

-That's not true.

-It is. But while you're not believing that, you might as well not believe this. The kids call him orphan. They treat him worse because he's an orphan.

She had been pacing backwards and forwards. Now she stood there, hands on hips, glaring down at him on the bed. He swung his legs to the floor and patted the bed next to him.

‘Come sit. I’ll talk to Maika, he’s due back tomorrow.’

‘If you cared about Lexi, you’d go now.’

‘I do care about Lexi. That’s why I’ll talk to Maika. Come and sit down.’

She sat reluctantly. He reached out and massaged the base of her neck, slid both hands up to rub her shoulders and felt her beginning to relax.

‘Do you want to tell me what Lexi did to Iessa now?’ he asked softly.

She looked at him out of the corner of her eye. ‘He grabbed her hair and pulled her over on to the blocks and then when she scratched him, he punched her in the face.’

‘Hmmm.’

The smug look on Sena’s face changed to a more penitent one.

‘Stop that. I know you’re not sorry.’

‘Not about Iessa. But I was wrong about you. That thing I said about you not knowing about children.’

‘Yeah?’

‘You know what makes people tick, Marco.’

‘So do you.’

‘I’m starting to think I only know the way sick people work.’

‘You’ll get used to it here.’

‘Will I?’ She reached up and took the hand that was rubbing her neck and gave it a gentle squeeze. ‘I think I’ll take a quick walk before dinner.’

She went out and he saw her putting on an overtunic. The passdoor closed behind her. There was nothing he could do and he had to talk to Lexi now as well.

‘Lexi mate,’ he called. ‘Come here.’

Lexi came slowly into the room. Marco patted his knee and Lexi hopped on, eyes downcast.

‘Boys are not supposed to punch girls,’ Marco said.

There were four livid, blood encrusted lines running from Lexi’s forehead, just missing his eye, and down over his cheekbone.

‘But,’ continued Marco, ‘in this case, I understand why you did it.’

‘I hate her,’ said Lexi. It was forced out. Marco heard the quiver of hurt in the child’s voice.

‘Course you do.’ He rubbed Lexi’s back and felt him slowly relax and he gathered him up, taking hold of the boy-sized feet and pulling him all in, like a ball of child into the protective embrace of his own body. Lexi sighed. A warm buzz of happiness emanated from him. Marco’s heart skipped a beat or two. His hand rubbed Lexi’s back. Every now and again he kissed the top of the little, black head. The room began to darken and after a little while, sitting in the half light they heard the conch calling them to dinner.

Lexi jerked up at the sound and wriggled.

‘You hungry?’

Lexi nodded.

‘Me too.’

They got up to go and as they were about to leave the cell, Marco said, ‘About hating people, Lexi.’

‘Yes?’

‘Some people are worth hating forever. Others aren’t. Just keep remembering that.’ He looked down at Lexi, expecting an answer. He waited.

‘OK?’ prompted Marco.

Lexi gazed up out of stubborn, rebellious eyes. ‘I will always hate Iessa,’ he said finally.

Marco knuckled Lexi’s head.

‘Owww.’

‘That’s what I thought you’d say. Let’s go eat dinner.’

Two days later Marco invited Maika up to the PD for a smoke. When he got back to their cell he said to Sena, ‘It should be all right now.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I told him that I’d known Helena quite well, some time back in the past.’

‘How’s that going to help?’

‘Wait and see.’

Lara Teaches Lexi To Swim And Iessa Gets Jealous

Eventually, someone noticed that Lexi and Marco had the same birthmark. The rumour that Marco knew the mother better than they had been lead to believe, did its work. Lexi had some more relevant connection to the colony after all. Maybe he had a bit of shark in him they said which was their way of accepting his cold aloofness and his vicious battles with Iessa. And after a while even the most fervent of Iessa's adult supporters admitted that she always started it. It galled her when he wouldn't follow or when he wouldn't get out of the way. She needled, he hit, they fought. Lara and Sena stayed out of it and one of the other adults stepped in before too much blood was shed. The children stood firmly behind Iessa. Lexi with some adult mopping up his bleeding nose or his scratched face, would stand there and stare at them and then he'd shrug and turn back to what he had been doing as though he couldn't care less, always shielding.

Iessa with her own adult in tow tending to her wounds would watch him contemptuously. Sometimes she'd smile at him in a particular way, sometimes one of the other kids would mouth, 'Orphan,' so that he would see. They'd never say it in front of an adult.

At the Pool Dome it was different. The children had been swimming since birth. They tore around like seals, swimming for minutes underwater without a breath, swimming almost as fast as Lexi could run. They sent disdainful looks in Lexi's direction, there was a little laughter but his attempts at swimming were so hopeless that there was no need for anyone to prove their superiority. It would have been a waste of time and interfered with their own play. So he was left alone to swim with Sena and Marco. Marco having grown up in the colony, was a good swimmer. Sena was from a land colony and merely competent. Having helped teach him to float and the basic strokes she had to leave the rest up to Marco. He had shown Lexi how to swim using the swim-belt, which was the way Owai parents taught their small children to swim but Marco was not always there.

It broke Sena's heart to see Lexi at the pool. The other children had spent their whole lives learning to swim by playing at the pool. There was no formal teaching at Owai and yet Lexi spent the whole four hours that they were there, and they went every second day, doggedly teaching himself how to swim, building on the lessons he'd had

with Marco. He had realised that Sena couldn't teach him anything more and told her not to come into the pool with him.

'They think I'm a baby,' he said, looking at the other children.

So Sena watched from the side of the pool and tried to make conversation with the other adults and wished she was back at Tau-Cen.

Lexi jack-knifed and glided under the water. It had taken a lot of trying but he had finally worked out how to stop himself bobbing up to the top again when he didn't want to. He followed one of the lines on the bottom until he was completely out of breath then rose to the surface.

'You're working hard, Lexi.'

He turned and Lara was there, so tall that she blocked out the sun. 'Yes,' he said.

'Do you like swimming?'

'It's all right.' He looked across at a group of the other children. They were playing a game where four of them were seals and two were sharks and the rest were dolphins.

'Come with me to the deep end.'

He looked again at the other children.

'Don't worry,' said Lara. 'We'll just go someplace by ourselves and I'll help you practise your diving.'

She had a swim belt on, with two handholds for him to hitch a ride. 'Hold on,' she said and he grasped the loops tightly.

'I'll tow you underwater because it's faster and easier that way. Open your mind to me so I'll know when you need to breathe. All right?'

'Yes.'

'When you're holding on, let your body go a little loose, so you move with me as if you were a baby dolphin with your mother. But at the same time you have to swim like me too.'

He nodded uncertainly.

-Don't worry. Open your mind and I'll help.

With his two hands on the belt she moved slowly away.

-Deep breath, Lexi.

He breathed.

-Hold.

He held his breath and she dived.

-Move your head closer to my waist.

He brought his head down and felt an easier movement through the water.

-Going up.

They surfaced.

-Breathe, she said. -In...out. Now, deep breath. Hold.

They dived again. He automatically brought his head closer to her waist.

-Good.

There were more dives and she sent not just the words but vivid images to his mind, a feeling that his body should try and have. When he began to move the right way or he positioned himself very well, he'd get a warm feeling. It was a very easy way to learn.

After a while she surfaced for the last time.

'That's enough for today, Lexi. You did very well.' She smiled and towed him back to the shallow end.

-You'll be a good swimmer, she said. -You have a lot of strength for a little boy from the Cascade Range.

He tried not to look as proud as he felt. 'Thank you, Lara.'

'Don't thank me, Lexi. You're one of us now. We'll all teach you how to swim.'

Lara swam away and climbed out of the pool and watched him for a minute from the edge before going off to talk to Sena.

Lexi dived down and pulled himself through the water amazed at how much easier it was. When he surfaced Iessa was there.

'What were you doing with my mother?'

His face went tight. 'She was helping me dive.'

Iessa glared at him. 'You know, you're the only child here that's ever needed help. You're the worst swimmer that Owai's ever had. Lara's only helping because she's embarrassed that Owai could have such a bad swimmer, Lexi.'

Her hair was plastered wetly to the sides of her head and tendrils draped like seaweed around her shoulders. Her eyes stared at him coldly. Lexi's ears started to buzz and he couldn't think. There was a splash and Lara surfaced near them.

Iessa seemed to shrink.

‘What did you just say to Lexi?’

Iessa shook her head. ‘Nothing.’

Lara’s eyes were dark. ‘You mustn’t lie to me,’ she said softly. ‘I’ll always know.’

–What she said wasn’t true, Lexi. I’m helping because you’re one of us now. You belong here and you’re very strong. You’ll make a very great swimmer one day. Now, go to Sena.

Lara’s mind compelled him to leave the pool. As he hauled himself out he heard Lara say, ‘Give me your hand.’

Lexi looked back. Iessa had both hands behind her back looking up at her mother. ‘No, Lara. Please, not at the pool.’

‘Give me your hand.’

Iessa stood very straight and held out her hand. Lara bent down a little and bit it.

Iessa gasped. Tears came to her eyes. Her face was very still.

Lara let go her hand and said, ‘Never talk to Lexi like that again.’

‘No, Lara.’

Lexi turned and walked away.

Lara swam to the deeper part of the pool, angry at herself but appalled by Iessa’s behaviour. Why would she speak that way to Lexi? The old fear grew in her, the fear of the strangeness that she sensed in her daughter, the fear that Iessa wasn’t normal. Lara didn’t know how to respond to it. How did you celebrate a difference which was unnatural and untried, completely unique when all of the time you were worried that the difference was some aberration – that there was a possibility that the geneticists had made some fatal error?

Maika was special they had told her, a key in the breakthrough to achieve water dwelling humans who also had metapsychic abilities – more of Michael’s genes in the crosses than anyone, although some of the abilities were latent, more cetacean genes. And Iessa had that too, they said, but less so because they were using the strength of Lara’s unmodified genes to stabilise Maika’s. Engineer too far, breed for the hybrid vigour.

Iessa had been born ten years after Tanya, the youngest of her sisters. She was an experiment that the geneticists hadn't been able to resist. They asked Lara if they could do the implant and Lara had asked how much fish was it worth. Fifteen tonnes they said and she'd said she'd do it for a hundred- it was a joke almost. Then they said yes. And she had looked at them and worried. What had they done to this embryo? But a hundred tonne was too much to turn down

She hadn't realised how different it would be, raising Iessa, that being the coercer-trainer for Owai 1 would leave her depleted of the energy and time to mother her fiery, young daughter. That raising an embryo not of their own making – an embryo that the geneticists had slaved over, that had not been conceived with their love, would for her make it a duty to love, rather than a natural thing. She had held the suckling baby in her arms, exhausted from the labour, and felt nothing. Maika was grinning and pleased and she had felt relieved at that. She had thought it would come later and it had a little - but never enough.

But it was still love, she told herself. I still do love her.

Sena saw Lexi walking towards her. In the pool Lara left her daughter and swam rapidly towards the deep water. Iessa stood there a moment and then she went to the edge and climbed out of the pool and walked to the changing room. Her head was held high, her shoulders were pulled back and she walked with careful, slow steps. Sena looked off out of the dome. One lone cloud drifted slowly in the blue sky.

Lexi came and she put her arms around him. He was pleased with his swimming. In the midst of congratulating him, Sena felt a shaft of sadness pierce the ether, then saw Lara haul herself out of the pool and walk to the changing room. A little later Lara came out with her arm around Iessa's shoulder. Iessa's face was shining. They stopped walking and Lara knelt and hugged her daughter. Iessa's eyes shut and she clung to her mother. Then they separated and a soft smile played about the child's lips. Sena looked down at Lexi and kissed the top of his head.

Lexi and Iessa Call A Truce For The Night

Sena asked Marco why Lara bit Iessa's hand, if it was common in their colony.

‘No,’ he said. ‘I think it’s maybe what dolphins do. Lara’s got a temper - although you’d be hard put to find someone more hardworking or dedicated. She can’t see things as other than black or white. That’s why I said you were wrong about them spoiling Iessa. Everyone else does, but they don’t.’

‘Maybe they should spoil Iessa a little more,’ said Sena.

Lexi came in from getting their dinner and put the basket on the table.

‘Why don’t we take that up to the PD and have a picnic?’ asked Marco. ‘Maybe we could see if Maika and Lara want to come.’

Lexi pulled a face.

‘Good idea,’ said Sena.

So they took rugs to sit on and food and juice and Marco took his guitar and his pipe.

By the time they arrived at the bottom of the hill in the PD, smoke was already rising up from the fort area. They climbed the hill to the log circle and Maika was kneeling by the side of a fire feeding it small twigs. Rugs were spread out to sit on and food was on a cloth. At the side of the fire were apples and bananas to cook later in the embers.

Sena lay out their food and Marco sent Lexi off to the drying rack to get some emja. He sat down and tuned his guitar and when Lexi got back Marco spent a good amount of time packing his pipe, then lit it and took a long draw to get it burning and passed it to Maika. He picked up his guitar and kept playing as it got darker, stopping occasionally to help himself to food or another puff of the pipe. The others ate or sang as the mood took them.

Lexi sat by Sena for a while and watched Iessa running along the branches of the big tree. Then he got up and strolled casually over to where she was straddling the branch and swung himself up and walked away from her until he found a comfortable place to sit. Everyone waited but nothing happened. The children played separately, each quietly giving the other space. Some sort of truce had been called for the night. On some songs they would hop down off the tree and join in the singing and then one and then the other would gravitate back to the quiet game in the tree.

When it began to get dark Lexi came and snuggled up to Sena. Maika and Lara were sitting together and Iessa came and stood expectantly in front of them. Maika reached out an arm and she settled onto his lap. Just then Sena happened to notice

Marco looking at Iessa and Maika. His eyes moved and for a moment she glimpsed something else there. Just for a second she glimpsed complete disinterest and she followed his gaze and realised that he was looking at Lara - a look so out of context, so needless, that it must be a lie. She pulled Lexi close on the rug and closed her eyes. Marco played a song they all knew about love. When it got to the chorus you realised the song was about the love a shark had for the gorgeous underbelly of a passing fishing boat. They roared that bit.

Above them there were stars. Sparks rose from the diminishing fire and the smell of woodsmoke and the roasting apples and bananas saturated the air.

By the time the fruit was cooked and eaten it was getting cold and Lexi and Iessa were asleep. Maika stacked rocks on the embers, the women gathered the gear and the men picked up the two sleeping children and carried them back to the living quarters.

The Kids Are Mean And Sena Teaches Them A Lesson

The next time Lexi went to the pool, another one of the adults helped with his swimming. At the end of the lesson he was still practising by himself when a boy called Tobias suddenly surfaced in front of him.

‘You’re such a bad swimmer, Lexi,’ he said. ‘We’re all so sorry for you cos we all remember swimming better than you when we were only two.’

Tobias laughed and then ducked under the water and swam back to a group of children who were playing around Iessa. Tobias said something to her and she laughed and looked over Tobias’ shoulder at Lexi. Her eyes were sparkling and she looked too happy. He shielded.

Marco was there for his next swimming session. That day no-one bothered him, or the following time when Marco took him. The time after that he went with Sena and one of the other fathers taught him some new tips for holding his breath underwater. Lexi was feeling very pleased with himself. A girl called Jasmine swam past and then stopped. She had blonde hair and a sharp face and he had often watched her swim because she was almost as fast as Iessa.

‘Poor Lexi,’ she said. ‘You’re never going to be as good as us, you know. You don’t have the right genes.’ She held her hand up in front of him and he saw the webbing between her fingers. He didn’t reply and turned and swam away closer to the shallow end. She was laughing. He shielded. If they didn’t know they’d hurt him, he was the winner.

He jack-knifed under with a lungful of air. Marco said he should be good at holding his breath because he was raised in the mountains at altitude. He’d keep practising and he’d show everyone.

He did that for a while then went to the side and pulled himself out. He stood on the edge of the pool and dived in and then out again, over and over. Each time he hurt his stomach. He surfaced one time after he’d made a really big splash, and stood bent over. It felt like someone had punched him. Someone laughed and he looked up and saw Maika at the side of the pool.

‘Good splash.’

Lexi grimaced. ‘Was it really big?’ he asked.

‘Tidal wave,’ said Maika.

‘That’s good,’ Lexi said, ‘but I wasn’t really trying to make a splash like that.’

‘Sore?’

Lexi looked down at the red blotchy mark all over his stomach.

‘Just make sure your hands go in first and your feet go in last.’

Lexi got out and did what Maika said. Each time Maika mindspoke him as he was diving, until magically, he dived and it didn’t hurt. The next time didn’t hurt either or the time after. Maika held out a hand from the side of the pool and hauled Lexi out.

‘You got that Lexi. Now let’s get on to the interesting stuff.’

‘What?’

‘Let’s go make a really big splash.’ Maika jerked his head in the direction of the children at the other end.

Lexi eyed Maika. It was just asking for trouble and he sort of liked the idea of it. Maika ran hard along the edge of the pool to the deep end and launched himself from the side, drawing his feet up so he was like a big ball, plummeting into the pool. Water arced through the air making a huge, dark patch on the concrete. Maika’s head surfaced. Children were laughing. Lexi took a good run at the edge and drew his feet up and jumped the same way. When he landed in the pool one of his legs went splat on the

surface of the water and it hurt. It was a big splash and he expected the kids to be annoyed but they were all laughing and swimming for the side. For hours everyone was clambering out and jumping in and splashing everyone else.

Finally Maika hauled himself out and said to Lexi, 'Come on mate. Let's go and smoke emja in the PD.'

Lexi laughed and got out. Sena popped his tunic on and made him sit and eat lunch. Later he hopped back in the water for more practice and she insisted on getting in too. One of the other kids swam over and Lexi prepared himself but nothing happened. It was Tobias again, but when he was getting close he seemed to change his mind and swam away. Lexi looked at Sena but she was just lying on her back floating in the water. The same thing happened the next two days he went with Sena.

He went home thinking about it and when she was reading to him in bed that night he asked what was going on.

'Those kids are bullying, Lexi. It's mean. They should be feeling guilty.'

'I can look after myself,' he said stubbornly.

'And I can get in little children's minds and stop them doing bad things.'

'I can look after myself.'

She smiled. 'I know you can Lexi, but I'm having fun. I could never have done this before when I was farsensor at Tau-cen. I'm finding my dark side.'

He stared at her. 'I don't need your help.'

She put the book down and sat for a few seconds on the side of the bed looking at him. She stroked his hair back out of his eyes and he stiffened aware that when she touched him sometimes, the funny, warm, good feeling was because she couldn't stop herself from redacting. Her look was reproachful.

'I haven't redacted you for a long time. Anyway it's not as if you didn't need it.' She gave his head a quick, rough rub and then got off the bed and began to pick up and fold his discarded clothes. She went on, 'After I get them feeling guilty, I make them imagine that a big, old shark is coming to get them. Sometimes it's a great white, sometimes it's a mako.'

His face screwed up and he tried not to smile. The best he could do in the end was look at her and sigh. 'You can be a bit mean sometimes.'

She laughed, light and happy. 'I know.' She tooled the light off and went out.

Lexi fell asleep and dreamed of seals.

Lexi Goes Too Far

Lexi looked proudly at the clay shark he'd made. He'd given it a really mean face and scraped the clay with a pointy bit of wood to make huge teeth.

'That looks like a worm.'

Iessa was peering at his shark with a mean smirk on her face.. She was bad on the days when Lara wasn't there.

He stopped himself from hitting her and carried his shark carefully over to Sena.

'Look at my shark.'

'Yuck. I'd hate to be swimming with a mean shark like that around.' Sena kissed him.

Iessa was watching so he smiled at Sena, put his arm around her neck and kissed her back. When he glanced over his shoulder Iessa looked grumpy.

Later he wandered over to where Iessa was playing with some of the others, seeing who could stand on their head the longest. He stumbled and accidentally stood on her finger and she fell.

On his way back to the clay table something flicked him on the side of the head. He spun around. Iessa had a flax whip in her hand.

'You did that on purpose,' she said.

'What?'

'You stood on my hand on purpose.' She flicked him again with the whip. His arm rose automatically to protect his face and the tip of the whip bit his hand.

'I didn't,' he said. 'It was an accident.'

'Liar. I can read you.'

He shielded. The whip snapped through the air and stung the side of his face. He picked up a stone sized lump of clay from the table and threw it at her. Dropping the whip, she scrabbled on the table and then jumped at him, screwing a huge lump of clay into his face. He grabbed her hair, twisted it around his hand and yanked. Off balance, she started to fall sideways and as she fell her elbow hit him hard on his left cheek bone.

Pain jabbed from his eye to his ear. She went thud on the floor and then, his leg hurt. She had her teeth clamped to his leg biting so hard he could almost imagine a shark doing it.

‘Ow! Let go, bitch.’ His other foot swung back and kicked her.

The biting stopped and she curled up, clutching her stomach. He kicked her again, this time in the face. She screamed and blood poured from her mouth. Suddenly, they were surrounded by adults.

‘She’s got two broken teeth.’

Iessa was crying and trying to clamber up so she could hit Lexi.

Someone else said, ‘They’re only baby teeth, Iessa. They were going to fall out anyway. Open up now and we can ...’

Lexi couldn’t move. Sena was blocking. It felt cold and hard.

-I can’t believe you did that, she said. -I am disgusted that you did that, Lexi.

Blood ran out of Iessa’s mouth and splattered her tunic. Iessa’s Nonny patted her back and held a cloth to her mouth. A shower of tears rained down onto her Nonny’s hand where it was holding the cloth and stuff came out of Iessa’s nose.

She wasn’t pretending. It had really hurt. Good, thought Lexi.

One of the mothers said, ‘Went too far that time I think, Lexi.’

-Yes. For the first time ever, I’m ashamed of you, said Sena.

Lexi shielded.

She overrode him. - Get your things we’re going. She turned away.

‘I’m sorry Iessa,’ she said.

Lexi waited for Iessa to tell him she hated him, but she didn’t. He got his bag and was waiting by the outer door when Sena swept past, indicating with a jerk of her head that he had better follow quickly.

Iessa had still said nothing and Lexi thought, serve her right, but he felt flat and gray as he hurried after Sena.

Later that day Sena took him up to the garden dome to water his plants. She was quiet walking through the tunnels and she wouldn’t look at him. Lexi followed with his head down watching the floor. There was a sick feeling in his chest.

If Iessa hadn’t wanted to be kicked she shouldn’t have bitten his leg, he thought bitterly. There was the shape of her teeth on his leg, big and purple, two lots of teeth

marks. He hadn't bothered to show it to Sena. A bite on the leg was nowhere near as bad as a kick in the teeth - and all that blood. Iessa hadn't even bothered to say she hated him.

He scowled down at the floor as he hurried after Sena. She always walked really fast but usually she slowed down a bit so he could keep up. Not today. And Marco wasn't home for another two days. Two days of Sena being mad at him. He didn't think he could stand it. His feet began to lag and he fell behind.

She looked back and snapped, 'Hurry up.'

His eyes filled with tears. He ran to catch up.

When they got to the dome she didn't sit down on the shady bench to wait for him. Instead she pushed open the double doors and stormed off along the stone paths.

'Aren't you waiting outside today?'

'Does it look like I am?'

He couldn't talk past the lump in his throat.

'I'm going to come with you to Sandy and you're going to tell him the awful thing you did. After that I don't know if he's going to want you to come here. He thinks you're a nice, little boy. I wonder what he'll think after he finds out what you did to Iessa?'

Lexi swallowed. Sena's face was so hard. He shielded and followed her along the red, stone paths under the hot sun.

Sandy was sitting outside his shed. Tobacco smoke rose from his pipe. He looked up at Sena and cleared a coat off the spare chair. 'There Sena, sit yerself down. Don't often see you round here.'

'No I've come today because Lexi has something to tell you.' She turned around. The hard, fighty eyes stared at him.

Lexi looked down. 'I kicked Iessa.'

'Uhuh,' said Sandy. 'Had another fight did yiz?'

'Yep.'

'Where did you kick her?'" asked Sena.

'In the stomach and in the mouth.' Lexi kicked some stones around and banged his foot against the edge of the shed. His toe hurt.

'What'd she do ta you?' asked Sandy.

'She was biting my leg.'

‘Uhuh,’ said Sandy and he took a puff of his pipe and his eyes crinkled a little more as the smoke curled up out of his mouth. ‘Was it fair, do ya think,’ he said, ‘ta kick her like that?’

Lexi scowled. ‘No.’

‘Why’d ya do it?’

‘She said my shark I made was no good. That was the start. Then I stood on her finger and she hit me with the flax whip, and I threw clay and so did she and then I pulled her hair and she fell over and then she bit me.’

‘Sounds like war,’ said Sandy. ‘That’s probably how the big radiation war started 300 years ago, with some little thing and then someone thought it wasn’t fair and the next thing ya know boom, kapow, the end of life as they knew it. Not right was it?’

‘No,’ said Lexi, although he didn’t think it was the same.

‘So, do ya think I want a boy here who kicks little girls in the stomach and the mouth?’

Lexi’s mouth screwed up. Here it came, this was it and he felt all bitter. One of the only places he felt truly happy and it was going to be taken away from him. He stood up straighter and stared Sandy in the eye and then looked away. ‘No,’ he said.

‘No,’ said Sandy and Lexi’s heart sank but Sandy continued, ‘so it better not happen again, mate. If I hear yiv kicked Iessa again or done anythin’ truly bad to her, I won’t have ya here.’

‘She’s mean to me.’ He said it quietly. ‘She says mean things and she’s always hitting me and stuff.’ Sandy’s eyes were on him. Lexi kept looking down at his feet.

‘I don’t mind a little hit every now an’ then ta keep things fair. After all, life’s tough in the sea cyst zones and I hear Iessa’s a pretty strong, little girl. But ya know when yiv over-stepped the mark, Lexi.’

‘I guess.’ Lexi scuffed the red stones with his sandal. His toe was bleeding.

‘Look at me,’ said Sandy.

Lexi looked up and Sandy’s face was serious.

‘Ya can hit Iessa just a little bit - if ya have to. Mostly yiv gotta stop. It ain’t good for little boys ta kick little girls like that.’

It was so unfair, thought Lexi.

‘And I think ya should spend two of ya playroom days here workin’ in the gardens,’ said Sandy. ‘Remove ya from the temptation of whackin’ Iessa.’

Lexi smiled and Sandy winked.

Sena said, 'He's supposed to go to the playroom three days a week.'

'What's the point? He'll be happier here, he'll learn more here and he doesn't like bein' there. Do ya mate?'

'No. The kids are mean.'

'And I could do with his help. He's a real good little gardener.'

Sena stood up. Her face was tight. 'I didn't bring him here for you to reward him.'

'Ya brought him here ta help him learn somethin' he needs to know,' said Sandy. 'About bein' gentle and fair, about doin' the right thing. He'll learn about peace better with me and the plants than he'll ever learn it in that playroom. It'll be better for both of 'em,' he said. 'Trust me.' His squinty eyes crinkled at the corners.

She stared at him and then sighed and sat down. 'You're right,' she said. 'Thanks.'

'Yeah, thanks,' said Lexi.

Sandy looked at him and said, 'But no more bein' mean ta Iessa. A little hit might be all right. Anythin' else - I won't have ya here. Got that?'

'Yes,' said Lexi.

'All right then,' said Sandy. 'Now run along and look after ya plants and leave a man ta have his pipe in peace.'

* * * * *

Part 4- Settling

Transcript from the meeting of the Genemasters –Dataplas G1792- Ethics

Vid- From the Life history of Lara, Trainer Coercer –Year 2344

There is the sound of a woman sobbing and the vid scene jerks. Someone is running along a beach. There are the bodies of five marine mammals in the distance and a figure squats over them. The running person comes closer.

The marine mammals are pilot whales.

She cries now, the sobs intensify. ‘Are they ours?’ she asks.

‘Yes.’ The squatting man stands up.

‘What happened?’

‘I won’t be sure until after I’ve studied all five, but this one....’ He indicates the animal in front of him. Its stomach has been slit open and the entrails lie on the beach. The woman gags.

‘This one,’ he continues, ‘has no fat and the digestive tract is ulcerated. The teeth have been worn down. The teeth on the other four are similar.’

‘So they starved?’

‘It appears that way.’

‘What can we do? What can we do?’ The woman’s voice sounds desperate.

The man looks up at her. ‘We’ve discussed it. Take some of the tithe and feed it to the adols. Increase their fertility and the extra genes will compensate for the lowered tithe.’

‘But our children...’

The vid is stopped.

Leon: That was I think, when they decided to implement the gene/fish trade.

Andre: And the outcome.

Leon: The fish have increased exponentially and so have the numbers of mammals and sharks.

Andre: So a good decision then.

Leon: Perhaps. I worry...

Andre: Don’t.

Leon Comes To Owai 5 For A Visit

Sena sat on the grass under the peach trees and watched Lexi in the pool with Maika. Lexi was trying to swim slowly and Maika was helping him with his stroke. When Lexi began to speed up Maika would say, 'It's the rhythm, Lexi, the rhythm that's important. Forget fast.' She'd heard him say it ten times that morning already. And fancy a cystmaster taking the time to teach Lexi how to swim.

Maika had thighs on him like tree trunks, broad shoulders, large hands and a wife who was more beautiful than a woman had the right to be. She was in her late thirties and Maika was late forties – the same generation as she and Marco and they had a six year old daughter which was unusual, and four other children who were grown now and all in other sea cyst colonies. Iessa ran around the outside of the pool with her friends and Sena thought, therein lies an experiment of the genetic engineers.

There was a seabird Sena had become aware of since moving to Owai, a shag. It sat for hours it seemed, looking at things before it decided to do something. She was like that bird except there was nothing to do after she had sat and looked except care for the child. She had been at Owai for three dragging, excruciating months. Yes she had four days a fortnight back at Tau-cen being a farsensor. But she no longer went on the collection trip. Others did that and she stayed in her tower listening and taught in the afternoons about ethics and it was easier - less crazy and she didn't feel as guilty and had not self redacted lately other than very occasionally.

And Lexi was a delight. His determined little figure was in the pool, learning to swim so that he could go into all the competitions at the Owai Autumn Festival. Even though every other child there would leave him in their wake, he was determined to do it. A stubborn, occasionally arrogant, little bundle of delight he was turning out to be. She saw Iessa jump in next to Lexi, the joyful flash of impudence on the girl's face. Maika stood with his hands on his hips and stared at her. She grinned and Maika said something and wagged a finger at her. Lexi had stopped swimming and was wiping the water out of his eyes. He looked mutinous. Iessa laughed and Maika wagged his finger again. Lexi started swimming and Maika reached out and tousled his daughter's hair. She took off then in the water like a seal, past Lexi and over to join her friends. Sena could hear their delighted laughter from her peach tree.

Later when it was time to go Sena called Lexi out and helped him to get dry. The tree had peaches on it and while she was drying him, he kept reaching up and feeling for a ripe one.

‘Stop that and put your clothes on.’

‘I wanted to find a peach to give to Leon. He’s coming today. Maika told me. We could give him some peaches when we see him.’

She looked down at his happy, expectant face. What nonsense was this? ‘Leon will be busy Lexi. He’s the Genemaster. He won’t have time to spend with you.’

‘You’re the Farsensor. You have time to spend with me.’

I was the Farsensor she thought but not anymore, not really. Was it a loss or had she finally found the pathway to sanity and calmness?

She held out his tunic and said softly, ‘It’s different. Don’t expect to see him. You’ll be disappointed. Put your top on.’

Lexi looked at her and then turned away and kept feeling peaches.

‘Here’s a nice, soft, ripe one,’ he said. He picked it and continued moving around under the tree feeling the other peaches. Sena counted slowly. By the time she got to 137 he had found three and the waiting was more than she could bear. She calmed herself with a little burst of serotonin, picked up his things and put them in her basket.

‘I’m going,’ she said.

‘I haven’t got my clothes on.’

‘Too bad.’ She walked away and heard him follow. She looked back and he was cradling the peaches carefully against his tanned stomach.

He smiled at her. – I don’t mind if you’re grumpy.

- Just as well.

- Anyway, when I visit Leon you can have time by yourself to relax then.

She gritted her teeth.

They had dinner in the food hall and stayed until the end so that Lexi could join in the singing. He drummed the table the way the other boys did, in time with the main drum and sang the words of the songs which he’d picked up very quickly. They sat as usual at the same table as Maika and Iessa and two other families from their part of the complex. Iessa and Lexi sat at either end of the table, as far apart as possible.

After dinner they were walking back to the cell and Lexi said, 'I think Leon will be arriving soon. I'll have a little lie down and then when he gets here you can take me to visit.'

She turned and stared at him. 'No,' she said. 'Leon is coming from tides knows where and he will not want to be seeing some little boy from a sea cyst colony.'

'He will. He'll want to see me.'

'He won't.'

'He's probably here now. Call him on your nanocu.'

'No.' - Why are you being so difficult about this?

- He likes me. I know he'll want to see me.

She shook her head. Damn the tenacity of the boy. She'd do it and then he'd learn himself the hard way.

'Okay,' she said. 'When we get home I'll call him on the com-u. But I warn you Lexi, he won't want to see you.' Especially, she thought, when he sees that it's my com sign.

But when she called, he answered and she saw that calm, inscrutable face on the screen and tried to put their last meeting out of her mind.

'Sorry to bother you, Leon. Lexi wants to come and see you. I told him you'd be too busy but he asked me to call anyway.'

'It's not a bother. Bring him over.'

'Now?'

'Yes. I'm in Level 3 of the blue quarter. Cell 2.'

The screen went blank and she was left staring at it a few seconds before it registered.

'I told you.' Lexi was standing in the doorway to his room with a gardening book under his arm.

She put her hands on her hips. 'He won't want to read you that, Lexi.'

'Yes he will. It's the one he read me last time, back at my tunnels.'

Breathe in, breathe out, she thought. Breathe in, breathe out. Damn that meditation mantra stuff. She zapped herself with serotonin – it's what would happen eventually anyway. She felt the happy, calm feeling of self-redaction and sighed. He'd been right so far. Anyway, so what if Leon didn't want to read that gardening book. It'd

be funny to see how he'd handle it. She smiled at the thought. 'You're probably right Lexi. Let's go - and don't forget the peaches.'

'They're in your basket already.'

Leon opened the door. She looked in his eyes and saw what the com-u hadn't shown. Pain.

'You look awful,' she said.

'It's just a headache.'

'Do you have medicine?'

'Yes, but it's rather strong. I'll take it after Lexi goes.'

He looked thin as well. She said, 'Have you eaten?'

'I got a procarb cake from the dispenser.'

'Would you like some juice?' she asked and surprised herself.

'Yes.' He seemed surprised too.

Lexi said, 'Yes. You get him some juice,' and he took her basket from her and gently pushed her out the door and shut it.

She went down the corridor to the dispenser and found that at Owai she could not get juice at will at any hour of the day or night. Seaweed she could have or cha.

She called on her nanocu and someone told her that if she came to the kitchens, of course she could have food and juice for the Genemaster.

'Can no-one bring it to him?'

'No,' the person on the nanocu said. 'There is no one to spare.'

She walked quickly to the eating hall. Out back in the kitchens she found at least a dozen people at the stoves and benches, some of them adols. Rage flared and just as quickly died down. She would never understand these people who based hierarchy on how well you could swim and very little else.

The closest one was big and Polynesian. He raised his eyebrows - the Owai way of asking what you wanted.

'I commed. I need some juice and food for the Genemaster.'

He knew nothing about it but told her to wait and disappeared into a storeroom, emerging a few minutes later with a bottle of juice and a big bag of food. He gave it to her and waved away her thanks with a shy shrug.

They were always so generous here. She made her way back to Leon's room feeling ashamed at her earlier petulance. When she went in she was struck by the sense of contentment.

'Sorry. I had to go to the kitchens.'

'That's all right,' said Lexi. He was curled up on the lounge and his head rested against Leon's arm.

Leon asked, 'Do you have any idea how many species of cactus used to exist in the world?'

'No, but I do believe I have read in that very book, how many species of mushroom there used to be.'

Lexi said pointedly, 'You can go now and come back when we've finished reading.'

She fixed him with a stare and looked at Leon. 'I could do that, but I think I might like to hear about cactuses too.'

'Cacti,' said Lexi. He was watching her with an annoyed little twist to his lips. Ignoring him, she went over to the table and poured juice for each of them and dished the food onto a plate which she put on a stool next to where they were sitting.

No genemaster should look as tired as Leon. She wedged herself onto the edge of the lounge and held out her hands. 'I know we've argued in the past. I don't apologise, but if there's one redactor you can trust, it's me. I can help fix your headache.'

He looked at her hands and shook his head. 'Thanks, but no. I can manage.'

That's what your mouth is saying she thought. Your eyes are saying something different.

'Why should you have to?' she said, and reached out experimentally and he made no move to stop her. She put her hand on his forehead. The energy was a heavy, purple mass with sharp darts of pain sizzling through it. She drew forth some of the tension. He sighed and his eyes shut. Her other hand she moved to the base of his neck and she felt the blockage and infused heat. The energy began to move up his spinal cord. With the hand on his forehead, she cooled and circulated and freed and pulled the pain into herself. Such a lot of it. Where did it come from?

'What about my book?' Lexi said.

'Leon will read to you in a little while,' she said. 'Drink your juice.'

The hand at the base of his neck began to cool and the rhythm of the energy flow turned soft and regular. She gently turned his head towards her and moved both hands so that her fingers spanned the back of his head. She shut her eyes and cooled the pain there and loosened it and again drew it into herself. When any sign of tension was gone she infused his aura with an orange gold energy and opened her eyes. He was looking at her.

‘I said no,’ he said.

‘I needed the practice. Do you want to fight about it? That would be fun.’

He laughed. ‘I think perhaps we’d discuss ethics.’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘We both probably know quite a lot about the theory of ethics in a supposedly ethical world.’

He smiled coolly. ‘How well you put that.’

‘Maybe I’ve thought a lot about it.’

‘Perhaps I have too.’

Lexi came and stood beside her and tugged impatiently at her hand. – You go now!

- All right. She got up and collected her basket and turned to Leon who was standing now, too. ‘I’ll go. If your head troubles you again, come and see me.’

He was very tall and towered over her. His eyes were clear now. It was professionally, very pleasing. Good job, Sena.

‘I’ll be gone in the morning. I’m just passing through.’

‘You shouldn’t have let me bring Lexi here. You must have things to do.’

‘No Sena. I have nothing else to do. I came to see Lexi.’

‘See,’ said Lexi.

They both looked down at him.

-Time for you to go now, he said.

Leon’s eyes returned to hers and they weren’t his usual unreadable eyes. She could see guilt there and penance.

He nodded. ‘I made a mistake. There’s nothing I can do to fix it but I’ve learnt from it. It’ll do him no harm to have one more person in his life reading him the occasional book.’ He lay his hand lightly on Lexi’s shoulder. His face became inscrutable again but she was certain that he meant Lexi only good – that he meant to protect him.

‘I see.’ But she didn’t.

‘I’ll bring him back when we’re done. Thanks for the food and the headache cure.’

-Hurry up, said Lexi. His mind was pushing her out the door. She found herself in the corridor full of unanswered questions. Nothing about Leon was predictable. Damn him.

The Autumn Festival

In the autumn they had the games competition over three days of April at the pool dome in Owai-port. Lexi and Sena and Marco were part of a huge exodus of adults and children that left in pods early in the morning and returned home again exhausted each night.

All of the children went and because the cyst season was almost over, most of the adults were free to go too. The Owai-port pool dome was huge with plenty of room for the ten thousand strong population from the colony and people sprawled on the grass of the natural amphitheatre surrounding the pools.

The competitions were held in a deep, high diving pool and in two large irregularly shaped pools which each had a rectangular area roped off and divided into swimming lanes, bounded at either end by long floating pontoons. Heats were run in each pool simultaneously throughout the day. At the end of the day the finals were staged in the larger of the two pools.

In the meal breaks, all competition stopped and there was dancing and singing in the squares and parks, opening off the pool dome. People ate from laden trestle tables and plucked apples and pears and late peaches from the fruit trees, and grapes from vines which grew over shady arbours. Marco met up with friends and relations from other parts of the colony and Lexi and Sena met some of his extended family.

They both felt shy.

Sena said to Lexi, ‘There’s so many people here, so many relationships. It’s different at Tau-cen. Maybe it’s all the fish and seaweed they eat at Owai. Their families are bigger, everyone’s so noisy. They seem to take up more space. At Tau-cen

we're a bit more orderly, a bit quieter. There are never as many of us squeezed into any one place.'

'Is that good?' asked Lexi.

They were sitting in the shade of an apple tree. People were singing and dancing to drum music. Children were playing chasing games. They could see thousands of people and everyone seemed happy.

Sena said, 'I don't know. Our world is only a small one. If this many people can be all together and be this happy, then maybe it is better here.'

'Yes,' said Lexi thoughtfully. 'Life is tough in the sea cyst zones but I think it's probably better too.'

On the first day, the children took part in swimming races. Even the babies had swimming competitions. In the six year olds, Lexi lined up with the other children for all the races. He came last in each one amidst taunts from the children from the other parts of the colony. His face remained stubbornly closed off as he took himself to the side of the pool for his heats. When he clambered out of the pool last each time, the adults, seeing that fierce, little face laughed and cheered. Later in the afternoon, when Lexi had to sit and watch the finals there were always children from Owai 5 in them. Iessa won every race she was allowed to enter, beating both girls and boys and everyone cheered for her.

On the second day when all the swimming races were over it was time for the other competitions. The high diving was in the deep diving pool but the breath holding and pool-ball competitions were held next to each other in the shallower pools.

When it came time for the breath holding they did it in groups of ten. In Lexi's heat he won. All of a sudden the Owai 5 colony was cheering him for winning. They kept holding heats until they were down to ten finalists. Six of them were from Owai 5 and Lexi was one of them. So was Iessa. There were two adults in the water judging and four on the pool edge.

'Tahi, rua, toru - breathe.' Lexi took a deep breath and when the starter said dive, he dived down to the bottom and hooked his fingers through a pool ring. The other children all did the same. He entered his mindcyst and imagined himself riding his bike down the tunnels and counting off the different storage rooms and then he began to count containers. One by one he was aware of children letting go of their rings and

rising to the surface. Eventually there was only one other child left. Iessa. He kept counting, secure in his mind cyst. He had been practising for the last two months since he found out about the competition. He practised in the food hall, in bed at night, on the toilet, in the pool, anywhere. It was the only competition that he had any chance of winning and he was not going to let Iessa beat him. She might have different genes and her oxygen absorption rate might be different because of them but he had been raised at altitude and he had strong African genes. He was going to beat her. His ears started to make a strange noise but still he refused to let go of the ring.

Then Iessa hissed in his mind, - I hate you Lexi, and he saw her rise to the surface. He waited to make sure she wasn't tricking him and things started to darken and then strong, adult fingers were loosening his hold on the ring.

The judge's voice was sharp and irresistible in his mind. - Let go, Lexi.

His fingers became limp and she hauled him to the surface and rolled him on his back. His mouth opened and he took a long, shuddering gasp of sweet air. Everyone was cheering.

Lara mindspoke him. - A new record for six year olds. You're a star, tunnel boy.

She was standing by Iessa who was floating holding on to the side of the pool. He smiled triumphantly. There was a flash of something in Iessa's eyes but she wasn't as mad as he would have liked.

Lara said- She cares more about the colony than beating you. Lucky you broke the record or else she would have been mad.

Later that day the six year olds played Pool-ball. The ball was heavy and the idea was that you took a deep breath and got the ball and ran with it on the bottom and tried to put it in one of the underwater baskets. While you had the ball anyone from the other team could try and take it off you and anyone from your team could try and stop them.

Lexi had never played Pool-ball before but he had watched the other children play. Although he could hold his breath for a long time, he was too slow to get the ball but just once someone threw it and it happened to fall right in front of him. He picked it up and immediately three children from Owai 3 were on him. A boy and a girl were holding him down and one boy was punching him to get him to drop the ball. At the

first punch the breath shot out of him and he breathed in water. Then something different happened. All of a sudden the rest of the children stopped playing and started hitting. Two Owai 5 children came arrowing in on the boy doing the punching and Iessa came charging across the bottom, pulled the ball from Lexi's hands and used it to hit the boy who was holding him, on the head. It was enough for Lexi to pull his other arm free and push off for the surface.

He came up spluttering. Around him everyone was fighting. Anyone from the Owai 5 team hit out at the nearest Owai 3 player and vice versa. Lexi in the midst of it, coughing and trying to clear his lungs, couldn't understand it at all. He saw Iessa trying to drown a girl from Owai 3 and all the other children were all hitting and scratching and pulling hair and trying to push people under. On the edge of the pool the adults were laughing. He hit a boy who swam close enough to be hit and felt someone grab his hair. For once it was not Iessa. It was another girl, skinny and angry. He hit her lightly but then she walloped him hard on top of the head. All of a sudden Iessa was there dragging the girl under.

A while later the adults decided it was time to break it up. When they left the pool, several children had scratch marks or bleeding noses or were squinting because someone had smacked them in the eye.

Lexi clambered out. Sena looked horrified. Marco stood next to her, laughing.

An Owai 3 boy turned and snarled at Lexi, 'Hey nema, lucky you've got the others to stick up for you.'

Before Lexi could reply Iessa streaked from Lara's side and launched herself on the boy. She knocked him down and pushed hard on the back of his head, wiping the concrete with his face. When Lara hauled Iessa off, the boy started to cry. One whole side of his face was grazed.

Iessa smiled. 'Keep your mouth shut, little cry baby loser.' Then she looked across at Lexi – I still hate you. Watch it.

That night Marco said, 'He won't forget that mistake in a hurry. Iessa won't let anyone else insult someone from our branch of the colony. Especially not someone who's broken a record.'

'But the violence,' said Sena.

Marco replied, 'Those kids were asking for it. They knew he'd only been here a short time and they picked on him. It was fair enough.'

'There was blood,' she said.

'Life on the sea cysts is tough. It ain't no place for weaklings. Anyway, if they had some inland team here, then all the kids from Owai would fight them instead. It's just a matter of loyalty.'

'I will never understand you people,' said Sena, but she looked at Lexi with pride and from then on, thought far more kindly of Iessa.

On the third day the children all sat inside in a huge dome by the port itself. Marco and Sena were there and the Owai 5 children were surprisingly well-behaved that day.

They watched on a giant com-u, waka and catamarans and trimarans racing in the bay. There were hovascoo races and people on hovascoos doing tricks.

Part way through the afternoon they saw a lone figure speeding out into open water on a hovascoo. It was Lara and soon she was joined by six dolphins. They sped beside her and did jumping tricks around her and it finished with the dolphins taking turns jumping over the hovascoo as she headed back to shore. Then when she was getting into shallower water, the dolphins all turned and swam back out to sea, back to Owai 1.

Lexi looked at Iessa. She was looking proud and he felt proud too. So did all the other children. Lara was the best trainer-coercer in all of Aotearoa and she came from Owai 5.

5 – Friends and Enemies

Seven Years Old

Lexi woke early and lay in darkness waiting for it to get light. He had lived in the colony for almost a year but it was still something very new for him, the beautiful yellow light every morning and the warmth too. Gradually the walls began to glow smooth and yellow-brown as the sun shone further into the light shafts. One wall was covered with all the pictures of plants he had drawn since coming to Owai 5 and he looked at each picture and said the name of each plant to himself. He had found the names on the com-u.

He listened to Marco snoring in the next room. Sena's room was the other side of Lexi's, as far from Marco as she could get. She had to wear ear plugs to bed every night, his snoring was so loud.

At the bottom of his bed was his chest with his books, as many as he was allowed to bring and some stuff of Helena's and his that he couldn't bear to leave behind. He got up, opened it and saw everything neatly laid out there. He took her blue hat and rubbed it against his face and smelled her on it then put it back in its place and got out the headlamp and put it on his head. When he turned it on the room was so light there was no difference. He felt inside her bag to make sure the locket was still there and the letter, then he put it back and took out her violin and plucked the strings. He grinned. It hadn't sounded that awful when Helena used to play.

He put everything back, shut the chest, then tip-toed through the living room, slipped out the passdoor and down the corridor to the toilet. When he got back to their cell Sena was up. After a hug and kiss she sent him back out with the flax basket to collect their breakfast from the dispenser. He came back with juice, fruit, bread and fish and put it all on the table.

'Go and wake up Marco,' Sena said.

It was what Lexi had been waiting for. He bounced into Marco's room, skirted carefully the piles of Marco's belongings on the floor, and launched himself onto the bed.

'Hey. Rise and shine. Wake up Marco.'

Lexi heard a groan and then strong arms reached out and grabbed him and dragged him shrieking, under the covers. Marco pummelled him softly and Lexi pummelled back. The pummels changed to hard tickles and Lexi writhed in laughing agony.

‘Think you’re allowed to wake a man from his restful repose, do you little boy?’ Marco dug his fingers into Lexi’s ribs like a burrowing rat in a mound of fish scraps.

Lexi giggling frantically, squealed, ‘Sena told me, Sena told me.’

‘Who is this Sena?’ growled Marco. ‘I think you made her up.’ Lexi laughed again. Marco gave him a skull rub. Lexi did it back and a hair pull too.

‘That’s girl stuff!’ Marco grabbed Lexi again and dug his fingers into Lexi’s armpit so that Lexi was writhing like a helpless fish on a line. ‘Say sorry, little boy.’

‘Sorry,’ Lexi shrieked. ‘Sorry,’ giggling so hard he felt his head would fall off. Marco shoved and Lexi was dumped on the floor.

‘Now tell this Sena to bring me breakfast in bed, boy,’ said Marco.

Her voice came from the living room. ‘If breakfast is a jug of cold water, delivered energetically over the face, tell him he can have it in two seconds.’

They heard the thud of the jug being banged on the table.

Marco looked at Lexi, ‘Funny how the word breakfast means different things to different people.’

He rose naked from bed and stretched like the big, black cat in the hallway, then he tied a lava-lava around his lower body and stalked out to the living area. He grabbed Sena, kissed her on her cheek and said, ‘Now woman, where’s breakfast?’

After breakfast Lexi got ready to go up to the gardens. He hummed to himself and put on his worst pair of trousers and the tunic that was already dirty from yesterday.

He came out of his room and saw that Sena had changed into a red tunic. ‘Are you working today?’ he said.

‘Yes. I’ll be in the tower at Tau-cen.’

‘It’ll just be you and me, mate, for the next three days,’ said Marco.

Lexi smiled happily. ‘Well I’ve got to go to work now.’

Sena gave him a kiss. ‘See you when I get back, busy boy.’

‘OK.’ He hovered by the door.

She laughed. ‘Off you go then.’

Seconds later he was tearing down the corridor and then hauling himself up the stairs and down the next corridor zipping and zapping through the living quarters on his way to do an 'honest days work' with Sandy. He ran past people going off to do their jobs and felt important. And free. No other children for a whole day.

It took fourteen minutes for him to run to the gardens. He used to do it in twenty one. He was getting much faster. Good. It was part of his training for the Autumn Festival. He thought everyday about what Lara had said about him being a strong boy. She was right. He was bigger and stronger than a lot of the other children even if he couldn't do the same things they could do.

He was going to have another go at the breath-holding record but he couldn't rely on growing up in the mountains anymore. His blood was getting more normal. And Iessa was good. He didn't think he could beat her but he was going to try. So he ran everyday to make himself fitter. In the pool, he spent hours practicing holding his breath underwater. Sometimes one of the adults would haul him out and tell him to stop because they couldn't relax when he stayed under so long. Iessa was practising too. He'd try and dive just when she was diving and then see if he could stay under longer. She was doing the same thing. Sometimes he'd come up without letting his breath out to try and trick her but she did that too so he really had no idea how good he was compared to her. He did know that the two of them were better than any of the others in their cohort.

He was puffed when he arrived at the garden dome. Sandy wasn't in the garden or his shed and Lexi went out the back into the storage dome to look for him. Instead of just one hovascoo being outside in the storage dome by the airlock, there were two. Sandy's old beat up hovascoo was sitting there and next to it was one of the new streamlined hovascoos. He wondered what it was doing there.

Dataplas 1

Marco packed a few clothes for Lexi in his pack and some procarb cakes and two bottles of water. Everything else was already up on the hovascoo. Sena would have probably taken other things. Marco had no idea what.

His nanocu went - Beep, beep, beep and a voice said, Dataplas 1 now playing.

Damn, he thought. I forgot. I'm going to be an hour late. It was unavoidable.

He sat down and the vid played.

The first section started with The Earth from space, blue and green. Beautiful images from old Earth. Unbelievable beauty and wildness and space, animals and plants, mountains, sparkling rivers, people and life everywhere. The unrestricted magnificence of nature.

All these things died, the voice said.

Then buildings and sculpture and art, things that people had made, the houses, places they worked in, their air machines and terrestrial transport, beautiful bridges, the amazing inventiveness and artistry of the people.

Everywhere people, walking, running, playing, laughing, talking, working, cooking, having children. In snow, rain, sunshine, wind. Hordes of people, of all sorts of shape and size, all cultures and ages.

They are all gone, the voice said.

Beep, beep, beep. Nuclear bombs and mushroom clouds. The images of destruction and when the vid zooms in, the black lumps are not lumps but the black remains of people. Dead, burnt people everywhere, everything flat, everything black, everything grey or brown. Nothing green. Nothing moving.

And then hectare upon hectare of dead trees, grassless lands, animals lying dead. Huge fields of filled trenches and some unfilled, dead bodies lying there, and rats scurrying. Dark, grey skies, brown oceans. Bloated bodies of whales and dolphins and sharks. Beaches drowning under the bodies of dead fish and seabirds.

Deformed babies, twisted bodies, eyes that looked out with no hope.

The Earth from space looks brown and grey.

They are all dead, the voice says. Beep, beep, beep.

Then the images of today. Domes and sea cysts and regenerating forests. An African savannah, still a bit empty and bare of wildlife but green with plants growing, a blue sky, a blue lake and animals at a waterhole, birds. Then more domes, a domed tech colony, fruit trees, pods. Then images of the wastelands with green oases, buildings

with rooftops smothered in plants. People working in the fields with masks on, eating in foodhalls, flying carriers, travelling in pods. The solar banks and the wave turbines and windmills.

Jungles growing. Fields of crops, orchards, blue skies and a blue green sea.

Dolphins, seals, whales, sharks. Catamarans and trimarans zipping across the ocean, domes on the sea, people growing cysts, catching fish.

Rivers are blue, mountains with green forests on their slopes.

Beep, beep, beep. This is where we are now.

End of Dataplas 1.

Marco breathed out. He was 50 years old which meant he had seen that dataplas around 65 times - twice a year since he was 18, and it was still harrowing. He had flown all over the world with Leon. He'd seen from up high some of the wastelands where it was still as it had been after the war. He'd seen the places where people were still permanently in radiation suits when they left their underground colonies and he'd seen the outlanders. People with no colony, eking out a life where they could find it in high rad zones, deformed babies, jelly babies. He and Leon had taken the genetic material everywhere, everyone had a right. Everyone was still living a life.

The dataplas didn't show all of the bad that still existed or the bad that had existed before the war either. Building a common mythology was a hard thing to do if you kept to the exact truth and who was going to define what that was.

The Wind And The View From The Mountain

Sandy said, 'Yer late. I thought yid changed ya mind.

'Dataplas 1,' said Marco.

'That explains it. The boy's in the garden. I'll get him for ya.'

'I'll come too.'

Lexi was watering the potato plants.

Marco said, 'Leave that, Lexi. We're going on a trip on the hovascoo.'

'Why?'

‘Because it’ll be fun.’

‘Where are we going?’

‘We’re going to fish in a river and go up a mountain to look at a view and we’re going to sleep in a cyst tent under the stars.’

‘Does Sena know?’

‘No. Come on.’

He dressed Lexi in a light dustproof suit and put a filter mask over his face and did the same himself. Then he sat on the hovascoo and motioned for Lexi to hop in front of him.

Sandy said, ‘If Sena asks, what’ll I tell her?’

‘She’s at Tau-cen. She won’t ask.’

‘Just in case.’

‘Tell her what I told Lexi.’

‘When’ll ya be back?’

‘Tomorrow. Right before dinner.’

Sandy held out a bag. Marco took it and opened it. There were bananas, potatoes, apples. ‘Cook them on the fire tonight,’ Sandy said.

‘Thanks,’ said Marco.

‘Hope ya know what ya doin.’

Marco rode slowly through the storage dome airlock, changed the power setting to high and they shot off down the hovatrail. Lexi held on tightly to the handholds. He was tense. Marco didn’t say or do anything to alleviate it. If freedom was going to make Lexi tense, then thank the tides he was going on this trip.

He followed the trails until he came to the riverbed and then turned inland. Now that the way was a bit wider, Lexi relaxed and started to enjoy the speed. Marco didn’t point out scenery or wildlife, just left it up to Lexi to start seeing things. He drove fast. The river bed climbed as they went inland and they passed through high hills which closed in and blocked the view. Marco kept going and once through the hills they saw a wide valley and mountains and lakes.

Lexi said -They look nice.

-Yeah, said Marco.

He aimed for a close, low mountain. The hovascoo rode the gradient, and they followed a track that circled the mountain through stunted trees, spiralling to the top of a curved, fairly flat ridge. He tooled the hovascoo off and it was suddenly quiet. Marco took his mask off and then Lexi's.

Lexi said, 'What about the radiation?'

Marco said, 'There were no bomb blasts in Aotearoa, Lexi. We just have the fallout from the other countries and now not too much more of that. Aotearoa has a radiation rating of 1 D, one dobler. It's the lowest rating.'

Lexi was silent. He'd tensed up again.

'I feel cold.'

'That's the wind. Come on.' Marco took his hand and pulled him up onto a rocky outcrop. Across the valley were mountains. Down in the valley was a beautiful curve of turquoise river. The wind blew and whistled around them.

'That is what wind feels like, Lexi,' said Marco. 'It's not scary and it's not bad but while you are a child you don't get a chance to feel it.'

'Why are we here?'

'I read Helena's diary in your tunnels. She wanted you to know what the wind felt like and the view from the mountains.'

'Can we go down now?'

'Yeah.' Marco put Lexi's mask back on.

Down by the river, Marco found a good place to camp. The mountains surrounded the valley. Wherever you looked you could see them and the wind that came off them was chilly. The river rushed past, noisy and gurgling.

He erected the cyst tent and put in the bedding. Lexi was excited now and crawled in and out of it. He followed Marco down to the river bed and they collected driftwood to make a fire and arranged a circle of rocks to light it in. When the fire was going, Lexi sat by it and when it had burned down they put in the potatoes and some of the apples and bananas. The bananas cooked first and Lexi let Marco remove the mask so that he could eat. Then they ate the apples and last of all the potatoes. They threw on more wood then and the fire flared up again.

Marco said -Look up, Lexi.

There were stars everywhere.

-How do they look to you? asked Marco.

- Beautiful. Lexi crawled over so that he was lying back on Marco looking up at the stars. – Beautiful and cold, he said.

- Your beds made, said Marco. –I'll take off your suit and you can hop in.

-OK, said Lexi. –But I worry about the radiation.

- There isn't much radiation here. Don't be afraid. There's no need.

Later when Lexi was asleep, Marco wrapped himself in his sleep sac and looked at the stars. They looked beautiful and cold and magical. Lexi had forgotten magic.

The next day, he let Lexi drive the hovascoo over the valley on low speed and at a three metre hover. Lexi drove for hours with his mask on and they didn't go fishing after all. They ate a procarb cake each for lunch and Marco tooled the power to high and they zoomed home. It was 1700 when they arrived back at the garden dome. Sandy was waiting for them.

'Thank the tides yer back,' he said.

'Why? What's happened?'

'Nothin' has happened. Can't a man worry?'

Marco laughed. 'You and Lexi have a lot in common. Never mind, I've done what I was going to do. He's felt the wind and seen the view from the mountain.'

'Lah-de-da,' said Sandy. 'Did he like it?'

'Not particularly, but he will. Sometime when he's older he'll like it then.'

Lexi said, 'Hey Sandy, I drove the hovascoo. It was really good.'

'Well at least ya did something right,' Sandy said to Marco.

Lexi told Sena where they'd been when she got back from Tau-cen.

'Why?' she asked Marco.

'Helena said in her diary she wanted him to feel the wind.'

She thought about it. 'I didn't feel wind until I was 16.'

'Doesn't that seem silly now?'

'Yes, it does,' she said. 'Are you going to do it again some time?'

'Probably.'

'Good,' she said.

A few days later, Maika came to their cell. He looked apologetic.

‘Did you take Lexi out on the hovascoo?’

Marco looked at him. What was this about? ‘Yeah.’

‘They saw you on the satellite. They’re complaining.’

‘Who’s complaining?’

‘The Agency.’

‘Fuck it. Where’s the harm in taking Lexi for a ride?’

‘They say you removed his mask.’

‘What if I did?’

‘You know genes are the unspoken currency. Our children must seem untainted. Our eggs, sperm, embryos are at a premium and we need it to be that way. If we have to keep tithing fish at the current levels the marine mammals will starve.’

‘Then say no, Maika. You’re trading children for fish. Where’s the morality in that?’

‘We’re regrowing an entire coastal ecosystem –better than anywhere else in the world and eventually it will feed and shelter many people.’

‘There is a balance.’

‘Is there, Marco?’

‘Yes, dammit there is. The children should come first’

‘They do.’

‘Only because their genes are so valuable. Why are you so obedient, Maika? Why is it just our children who are wild?’

Maika stared at him. He turned to leave and hesitated.

‘I know it’s too much to ask that you don’t do it. Jus’t don’t get caught.’

‘Don’t worry. I won’t.’

Alo

One day there was a new boy in the playroom. He was small and thin with whitish hair. He had two front teeth missing. Lexi first saw him lying under a table watching Iessa play dolphin games with her friends. They leaped around like dolphins

and made dolphin chatter, their bodies moving in waves of dolphin swim. Every other child in the playroom got out of their way.

Lexi played with his blocks in his corner and watched the boy under the table. As the others moved, the boy copied them from his lying down position. His body wriggling like a wave when their bodies wriggled, his arms stretched out to make a dolphin snout. Lexi heard an e-e-e-e-e sound coming from the boys lips. It was higher pitched than the other children's.

Iessa ran past the boys table and bent down.

'E -e-e-e-e-e,' she said.

'E-e-e-e-e,' he said. She took the boys sleeve in her teeth and on her hands and knees backed out from under the table pulling him. He dolphin wriggled towards her.

She let go of his sleeve. 'E-e-e-e-e-e-e,' she said motioning with her head.

'E-e-e-e-e,' said the boy. Iessa began to run again and the boy joined on the back of the group of children and ran too. His face lit up and his feet and legs churned under his jerking upper body.

After a few times around the room, the boy got tired and crawled back under his table. Iessa noticed and bent down by the boy.

'E-e-e-e-e-e-e,' she said.

'E-e-e.'

She got up and dolphin swam to the fruit bowl, picked up some slices of apple in her mouth and dolphin swam back to the boy's table. Kneeling down, she dropped them on the floor beside him. She made several trips with more fruit then dolphin swam over to Lara who was talking to a group of parents.

Iessa pointed with her dolphin snout arms towards the boy. 'E-e-e-e-e-e'.

Lara got up and poured some water into a cup, and following Iessa, carried it to the boy. She knelt and placed the cup where he could reach it. She gave his shoulder a little rub and then got up and went back to the other adults.

Lexi watched Iessa wriggle under the table until her body was lying next to the boy. She leant back and reached out her dolphin snout arms to tickle his tummy. The boy laughed. She did it again. Lexi knew she was being gentle but he saw the boy flinch. Iessa stopped immediately and her hands became human. She reached out and gently rubbed his head then she rolled out from under the table.

'E-e-e-e—e-e-e-e-e,' she said and the other children swam after her.

Walking home that day, he asked Sena who the boy was and she said he was an orphan called Aloysius, and that he'd been found in the Northern Wastelands.

'Like me,' said Lexi.

'He's been very sick,' said Sena 'but they say he's good with animals. That's why he's here - to see if Lara can train him to be a coercer like her.'

He found Aloysius one day standing by one of the compost, garbage chutes. He stood there trembling, looking guilty and suspicious.

'What are you doing,' Lexi said.

'Nothing.'

'What did you put down the garbage chute?'

'Nothing.'

Lexi heard a silence in Aloysius' mind –the silence of blocking.

'I won't tell,' he said. 'I haven't got anyone to tell. Marco doesn't like it if people tell.'

Aloysius shifted guiltily.

'Didn't you want to eat your dinner?' asked Lexi. 'No-one minds if you don't eat your dinner.'

Aloysius shook his head.

'What is it then?' asked Lexi, really curious.

Alo looked down at his feet. 'I put a rat down there.'

'Why?'

'It was hungry.'

'They'll get really mad if they find out you put a rat into the compost.'

'I always put rats down there. They're my friends and they want to get in there.'

'I can feel them wanting.'

'Why are you helping rats?'

'They helped me before I came here. When I was in the Northern Wastelands I was very sick. They looked after me and they loved me.'

'How?'

'I was hungry and they brought me food. And I was cold and they lay with me to keep me warm.'

‘Weren’t you scared?’

‘No. They loved me and I loved them.’

Lexi stared at Alo. ‘I came from the Northern Wastelands, too,’ he said. ‘My mother died.’

‘My mother died too.’

‘We lived by ourselves in the tunnels. It was very cold.’

‘We lived in a house in the woods, my mother and my sister and me. And then we all got sick and my mother died and my sister died. I thought I’d die too and then the rats started helping me.’

‘Why are you here?’

‘They thought I could be a coercer in the cyst domes.’

‘My mother left me to Marco. He thinks maybe I can be a cystmaster.’

‘I don’t know Marco. I’m living with Iessa and Lara and Maika.’

‘Iessa’s my enemy.’

‘She’s my friend. I love her.’

‘I know,’ said Lexi. He couldn’t stop the scowl from crossing his face.

Alo reached out and stroked Lexi’s arm and smiled. ‘But you can be my friend too.’

‘No-one is my friend,’ said Lexi. ‘If you’re Iessa’s friend, she won’t want you to be mine.’

‘It’s hard not having a friend,’ said Alo. ‘I’ll be your friend.’

‘Iessa will mind.’

‘She loves me. She won’t mind. She won’t be able to stop you being my friend. Come with me.’

Lexi followed Alo down the corridor and they stopped in front of one of the little gardens. Alo lifted up a small rock and Lexi saw a hole in the ground.

‘Squeak, squeak, squeak’, said Alo and the head of a rat poked out of the hole. Its whiskers twitched and then it ran towards them and Lexi scuttled behind Alo. The rat ran up Alo’s arm and stopped on his shoulder and rubbed its head against his ear. Alo stroked it. Then he lifted it off and put it at the entrance to the hole. The rat ran in, its tail disappeared and Alo put the rock back.

‘They’ve got hundreds of holes down here and up in the PD,’ Alo said.

‘Adults hate the rats,’ said Lexi.

‘Yes.’

‘Do they think you’ll be able to talk to the dolphins and seals the way you can talk to the rats?’

‘Maybe. I don’t know. Lara says I’m too skinny and sick to start swimming. For a long time I couldn’t walk properly but they operated and fixed that. And they did some operations on my stomach and fixed some stuff there. But the medics say I’ve got too many things wrong with my innards and they’ll all have to be replaced.’

‘Why?’ said Lexi.

‘Too much radiation and I had nothing good to eat.’

‘I lived in a high rad zone too,’ said Lexi, ‘but we had our tunnels and we had good food.’

‘You’re lucky then.’

Lexi looked at Alo, relieved. ‘Yeah’ he said. ‘Everyone acts like it was so bad, me and Helena living in the tunnels. But I was happy and I was lucky.’

He put his arm lightly around the shoulder of his new friend. ‘I hope we can be friends Alo. I hope you’ll be my friend forever.’

When Iessa found out that Lexi was Alo’s new friend she crossed her arms and stared at him.

‘Well then you can’t be my friend, Alo.’

Alo looked at her and smiled. ‘Stop tricking me, Iessa,’ and he put his arms around her.

‘I’m not tricking you, Alo. I hate him more than anyone in the whole world.’

‘I think the whole world’s a big place, Iessa. Maybe one day I think you won’t hate him. But anyway, until that day you’re my best, loving friend and until that day he’s the second best.’ His eyes were warm and soft and his hand reached for hers and he put it by his cheek and kissed it.

‘Oh Alo,’ she said, frustrated, wanting to be mad at him.

And so in the playroom the next day Alo sat down with Lexi and started playing with the blocks. Iessa scowled for a minute and then one of the other children came running over to talk to her and she went off and left them to it.

Lexi couldn't believe his luck. Over the next months he took Alo back to the cell and showed him how to play card games. He showed him his sketches of plants; he showed Alo how to draw and Alo drew pictures of rats and copied pictures of animals that he saw in Lexi's books. He lay on Lexi's bed for hours listening to Lexi reading stories. And when it was getting close to conch time, Iessa would come and knock on the door and call out, 'Gotta come home now, Alo.'

Later in the food hall Lexi would see his friend laughing with Iessa and always she would be smiling at Alo, or touching him or offering him little bits of food.

Sena would watch and smile and once Lexi heard her say, 'That boy is pure love.'

One day when Lexi and Alo had been friends for almost a year Lexi found Alo sitting quietly by one of the little gardens. Alo looked sad.

'What's wrong?' Lexi asked.

'The medics said it's time for more operations.'

'Are you scared?'

Alo nodded. 'It hurts a lot. I hate the operations.'

The next few days Lexi spent following Alo around all the little gardens so that Alo could say goodbye to his rat friends and that's when he got the idea.

'Why don't you catch a rat for Iessa while you're away? It can keep her company and she can play with it and practise being a coercer-trainer.' Lexi shielded tightly.

'She doesn't like rats.'

'I think she would,' said Lexi. 'It's just that the adults hate the rats and so she thinks she does too. If you got her one and put it in her chest, she'd probably love it.'

Alo looked at him. 'I think you might be right.'

The next day Alo came and told Lexi he had found a rat for Iessa. Then he gave Lexi half of the pictures he had drawn over the last year.

'Here, he said,' you and Iessa are the ones I love the most, so I'm giving you these just in case, to look after for me.'

And Lexi heard Helena's voice saying 'Just in case, Lexi. Just in case.' He started to cry.

Sena came in. 'What's wrong?' she said looking from one to the other of them, and before he could answer she said, 'I see.' She sat down on the bed between them. 'Alo is going to be fine. I know the medics at Tau-cen and they're very good.'

She looked sternly at Alo and said, 'I can feel it Alo. You are going to be fine,' and she reached out and pulled him to her for a hug and stroked his head. Lexi watched and felt the warmth in the ether and was happy that Sena was a redactor.

That afternoon, Alo left for Tau-Cen with one of the medics. Lara, Maika, Lexi, Sena and Iessa went to the transtunnel to see him off. Everyone kissed him and he hopped into the pod. It began to move, they waved and it gathered speed and was gone around the curve in the track.

They all walked back to the living quarters and Lexi went into the cell and into his room and shut the door. He spread out all of Alo's pictures on the bed and sorted them into piles of the ones he liked the best and the ones he didn't like as much. Then he put them together and folded a piece of cyst leather around them and put them in his chest.

Iessa And The Rat

When he had given up all hope of it happening, it happened. He heard a scream. The whole complex heard it.

'A rat! A rat!'

Finally. He ran out into the passageway and towards the sound of the screams. There was a crowd in the corridor around Iessa's cell and he edged himself through the people, squeezing past legs and pushing in front of the other children until he could see.

Now that he was close he realized the words weren't, "a rat". Iessa was screaming, 'My rat! My rat!'

The door was open and Lara was saying, 'You can't have it. There are rat droppings all through your chest. It's made a nest in your clothes, Iessa.'

'I want it. I want it!' Iessa screamed. 'I love it. It's mine.'

Lexi peeked around someone's leg and he could see Lara in the open doorway, holding up high one of the metal, wire, box traps. The rat was inside it and Iessa was jumping up trying to grab the trap and tear it out of Lara's hand.

Lexi heard someone say, 'Let me through. Let me through,' and Maika was shouldering his way through the crowd.

Lara saw him and said icily, 'Will you try and control your daughter.'

Maika bent down and scooped Iessa up in his arms.

She struggled and kicked. 'It's my rat, Maika. Put me down, put me down!' and when he wouldn't she began to cry. 'Lara won't let me have my rat. He's mine, he's mine.' She collapsed against him, wound her arms around his neck and sobbed into his shoulder, 'He's mine. I love him.'

Maika stroked Iessa's head and looked at Lara.

She showed him the cage. 'She had this rat living in her chest locker.'

'You know how she feels about animals,' he said.

'This may be an animal. It's also vermin.'

'Couldn't she keep it in the cage?'

Lara stiffened. 'I'm not going to have a rat in our cell, Maika.'

'But Lara...'

'Don't but Lara me,' she said sweeping past him with the cage.

The audience in the passageway parted rapidly and Iessa began to scream again, 'My rat! My rat!'

Lara stopped. 'You can scream all you want, Iessa. You're not keeping this rat.'

Iessa struggled in Maika's arms to be put down, but he held on to her tightly.

Lara began to walk off down the corridor but Maika said, 'All right Lara, stop. This is your fight.' He put Iessa down and she ran over to Lara and began to hit her mother. 'Put down my rat! Put down my rat!'

Maika walked over and held out a hand. 'I'll get rid of the rat. You talk to your daughter.' Lara stared at him and then handed over the cage. She bent down and grabbed the beating fists and Maika lifting the cage high, shouldered his way back through the crowd.

'Stop hitting me!' Everyone felt the coercive blast of Lara's thought and the anger.

Iessa stopped and pulled back but the face she raised to Lara was stricken. 'I hate you,' she whispered.

Lara sighed. The tightness in her face softened. 'I know you do, brave girl,' she said. Then she knelt and put her arms out.

Iessa stood unmoving, and then walked forward into Lara's arms. She stood stiff in their embrace and with her head angled back a little, she stared into her mother's face. 'That was mean.'

'I know,' said Lara. 'I'm sorry. I got angry.' A soft wave emanated from her.

The audience in the corridor relaxed and it was as though Iessa became aware of them for the first time. She looked around and saw Lexi.

'What are you looking at?' she cried. 'I bet you told her. You told her I had that rat.'

Lexi stood in shocked surprise and Lara said sharply, 'He most certainly did not.'

'I bet you did,' Iessa said. 'I bet you told her.'

'I didn't know you had a pet rat,' said Lexi coldly.

Lara's face had gone hard again. 'Stop it, Iessa. How could he know?'

Iessa lunged at him but was stopped by the circle of Lara's imprisoning arms. 'I'll get you, Lexi.'

He turned and pushed his way back towards his own cell.

Before he had a chance to block, Iessa's voice hissed in his mind -You are just a pathetic little tunnel-boy. Everyone thinks you're stupid. You'll never be able to swim like us.

He blocked happily. There was a smile on his face. It hadn't happened the way he thought it would. It had turned out way better.

The next day he was working in the garden dome with Sandy. He ate breakfast quickly and then pestered Sena until she said he could go.

He got to the garden dome and Sandy wasn't in his shed so he went out to the back entrance to see if Sandy's hovascoo was there. The hovascoo was parked in its usual spot. He wondered if Sandy was out with the goats and chickens. They were kept in a cyst dome that opened out off the main garden dome. Sandy fed them all the prunings and damaged vegetables and fruit from the garden dome and every day

someone would come from the kitchens to milk the goats and to collect the eggs from the chickens. Lexi was just going through the double doors into the animal dome when he heard a familiar voice laughing delightedly.

He couldn't believe his ears. He'd know that laugh anywhere. Iessa.

He went through the doors and saw her standing next to a bench. On the bench was a cage and Sandy was bent over looking into it. Maika was standing nearby grinning and Iessa was dropping bits of corn through the top of the cage and rattling on about all the things her rat could do.

Lexi froze and in the same instant Iessa saw him.

'What are you doing here?' she said. 'Get out.'

He was speechless. Iessa was telling him to get out. This was his place, not hers.

Before Lexi could reply Sandy said, 'Lexi works here, Iessa. He's one of me gardeners. I don't expect him to get out just because yer rat is here and neither should you.'

'He told Lara about my rat.'

Maika laid a hand on her arm. 'Stop that Iessa. Your mother doesn't lie. She found that rat because your room smelled funny.'

'I don't want him in here with my rat.'

'Maybe yer right, Iessa,' said Sandy. He picked up the cage and gave it to Maika. 'There Maika. We can't have that rat here. Iessa doesn't trust me workers. She's probably right. You take it somewhere else. I'm sure there's lots of places ya can keep a rat 'round here.'

Iessa looked at him, alarmed. She knew there was nowhere else where they would let her have her rat. Then she smiled at him. Silly her, he was just teasing. Of course he'd rather have her and her rat here than stupid old Lexi. But Sandy kept on holding the cage out to Maika. His face looked kind but it also had a kind of distant look. Astonished, she thought, he doesn't care about what I want. He would rather have Lexi here. So she said, 'That's all right. I didn't know Lexi worked for you. I just got a surprise.'

Sandy smiled at her. 'I knew yid be all right when ya realised that he's my special, little helper Iessa. Good on ya.'

Then Sandy and Lexi went off to do something else.

Iessa looked up at Maika. 'I wonder how long Lexi's been gardening here,' she said. 'He's only little. He can't be very good.'

'I don't know about that, sprat,' said Maika. 'He's been gardening for Sandy ever since he arrived in the colony. And if there's one thing I know about Sandy, he's very fussy about his garden. Lexi must be good.'

From then on, whenever Iessa came up to the garden dome she had a little look to see what Lexi was doing. Sometimes she saw him weeding, sometimes she saw him putting tiny plants in pots or putting them in the garden. Sometimes she saw him watering. A lot of the time if Sandy was there, he and Lexi would be chatting away about gardening and Iessa had to admit that it sounded as though Lexi knew a lot. And mostly Lexi was always working. He wasn't just standing around talking or watching, he was actually doing stuff. Often he'd be doing stuff and Sandy wouldn't be anywhere near. He'd just be doing it by himself.

Meanwhile her rat was growing big and fat. She had made Maika get one of the techs to make her a maze and she had trained the rat to run it in a really fast time. She had an obstacle course for it too and it could do that really quickly. Whenever Maika was home, she'd take him up to the garden dome and show him the new things her rat could do. He'd stand there and look at her proudly and tell her how clever it was. Sometimes if it was a really good trick, like when she trained the rat to climb around her body and stop when she said stop and go back to its cage when she said go home, he'd go off and get Sandy who would watch too and tell her how clever she was.

Maika kept saying that he thought they should tell Lara that she still had the rat. But every time he said that, Iessa said no. She was sure Lara would be angry that they had lied to her.

One day though, Maika said, 'I think you're wrong, Iessa. I think Lara regretted the way she reacted that day. Let's bring her up here and you can show her what your rat can do.'

'Okay,' said Iessa, trying to hide her excitement. 'Okay, let's bring her up tomorrow.'

That night, back in the cell when they were in bed and Iessa had gone to sleep, Maika confessed to Lara that he hadn't got rid of the rat.

She looked at him with black eyes and then grinned and snuggled closer. 'So you've finally told me.'

'What? You knew?'

'I'm not stupid,' she said. 'Iessa should have been unhappy for months and yet she was happy again the next day. And you've been busy shielding a particular part of your mind.' She laughed, 'Thank goodness, is all I can say.'

Maika stroked her hair and kissed her. 'I don't know how I'm ever going to survive Iessa growing up,' he said. 'You two have the worse tempers of anyone I've ever known.'

The next day they went up to the garden dome, Lara and Maika each holding a hand and swinging Iessa between them. When they got to the atrium, Iessa ran off to see her rat. They looked at each other and smiled, then heard the scream and they ran towards it, reaching Iessa just before Sandy. She was standing looking down at her cage. Her rat lay dead and mangled inside it. On the bench beside the rat were dusty paw prints. There had been a cat inside the garden dome.

'Oh, Iessa,' said Lara. She put her arm around her daughter, remembering the times one of her animals had died, and now her proud daughter would never be able to show her the rat's tricks and Maika had said Iessa had been so clever.

Iessa had opened the cage and was holding the mangled rat in her arms and stroking its damp fur. She kissed its head. Lara thought, it felt like some huge tragedy and yet it was only a rat. But then that wasn't the real tragedy. The real tragedy had been that Iessa had felt she had to hide the rat from her mother. Why am I so stubborn, Lara thought? I should never have had her.

- Stop that, Maika said. – Stop that my beautiful, stupid life-mate. You are the best mother.

- I don't love her when I should. I forget to love her when I'm angry.

-She forgets to love you then, too.

-But I'm her mother.

-Stop wallowing then, and be a mother, he said.

Sandy had left them but now he came back with a small cyst box. He showed it to Iessa. 'Your rat's dead. I don't know how it happened, but I'll find out. In the meantime, let's go around and ya can pick a whole lot of flowers to make a bed for it in

this box. Then ya can put your rat in and we can say a prayer for it and bury it under one of the fruit trees where no-one'll dig it up. You take ya rat,' he said, 'and ya mother can take this box, and all three of ya can go and pick whatever flowers ya like in the whole garden.' He gave the box to Lara.

Iessa said, 'I bet Lexi did it. I bet he let that cat in here.'

Sandy looked at her with solemn eyes. 'If he did Iessa then I'll see that he's punished some way. But it'd surprise me if he did. I get the impression that boy fights fair. He'd hurt you rather than hurt ya rat. But we'll see. Now go pick some flowers and I'll get some corn 'n' stuff so the rat'll have something ta eat in the spirit world.'

The Locket

That night Lexi opened his chest to get out some paper. He lifted his lid and stopped. Everything was messed up. The violin was there, the paper and books were still there. Helena's bag was still there but nothing was where it should be. His heart hammered in his chest as he checked each thing. The letter was in Helena's bag but there was no locket. He looked again, searching frantically. He turned the bag upside down and shook it. Nothing came out. The locket was gone. He was sobbing now, pulling everything out of his chest so it lay in a huge pile on the floor.

Sena had been in her room. She heard his sobs and rushed in to see what was wrong. Everything was scattered across the floor and Lexi was scrabbling around the bottom of his chest.

'Lexi,' she said. 'What's wrong? Stop.'

She held him firmly. - Speak in my mind, she said. -Tell me what happened.

He showed her how he had gone to his chest to get some paper and lifted up the lid and everything had been a mess and he hadn't been able to find the locket. She stroked his head as he mindspoke her and his eyes shut. She stroked his eyebrows and forehead and felt his body relax and then she inserted the last part of the block. Hopefully he wouldn't realise she'd done it. It was just a light block, nothing that would knock him out for any length of time. She lay him on his bed, pulled a cover over him and looked thoughtfully at the mess on the floor. That could wait. She went out the

passdoor and shut it softly behind her and then down the corridor to Lara and Maika's cell. She knocked and Lara opened the door.

'I heard about Iessa's rat,' Sena said, 'and I was wondering if I could have a word with her.'

'Of course' said Lara, looking surprised. 'She's in the kids' sleeping room.'

Sena knocked on the closed door and then let herself in, shutting the door behind her. Iessa was lying on her bed. She stiffened when she saw Sena and blocked, but in that second of surprise Sena had seen guilt, rapidly followed by a huge burst of anger. So, she thought.

'You took Lexi's locket, didn't you?'

Iessa looked at her resentfully. Sena felt sorry for her. It was almost impossible to lie to a master-class redactor, especially one who had coerced you in the past. Iessa turned and faced the wall.

'Where is it?' asked Sena, this time using a little coercive force.

'It's in the dolphin.' Iessa lifted herself up on the bed and pointed to a stuffed dolphin toy in the corner of the room.

There was a hole in the dolphin's stomach where the stuffing was coming out. Sena inserted her fingers in the hole and felt the locket. Thank the tides for that. She pulled it out and sent a silent prayer to the spirits. It looked fine but when she opened the heart shaped cover the inside was empty.

'Where is the hair that was inside this locket Iessa?'

'I put it down the compost chute. I was going to put the whole lot down there but the heart was so pretty, I couldn't do it.'

Sena's mind raced, wondering who she knew with that particular type of hair, wishing that her own hair wasn't going grey. Ideas raced through her mind and were discarded. What to do now?

'You know that Lexi's mother died, Iessa,' she said. 'That was her hair in the locket. That hair was Lexi's most precious thing.'

'He let the cat into the garden dome so that it would kill my rat,' Iessa's voice was tight and harsh.

'He didn't. I read him earlier. You know I'm good at that. He didn't know anything about it.'

'He did. You're just saying that because you love him.'

‘No. I saw Sandy, too. Just a little while ago. He came down here but none of you were home. He said he’d asked around and one of the kitchen staff said that the cat had followed her up when she went to milk the goats. She tried to catch it but it climbed up one of the trees and she decided to get it later. But after she milked the goats she forgot and just went back to the kitchen.’

The door opened suddenly and Lara and Lexi were standing there.

Sena thought, I should have used a proper block, and she closed her hand around the locket but Lexi had already seen it and he rushed over and prised it out of her fingers.

‘What’s going on?’ Lara said.

Lexi had opened the locket. ‘Where is the hair?’ he said. ‘Where is Helena’s hair?’

‘It’s gone,’ said Sena.

‘Where?’ said Lexi staring at the back of Iessa’s head.

‘Iessa lost it,’ she said. Lexi went to hit Iessa and Sena coerced him. No! He looked at her and back at Iessa, furious, but he couldn’t move.

‘Why did Iessa have Lexi’s locket?’ Lara asked.

Sena sighed. ‘She took it because she thought Lexi had let the cat into the garden dome.’

‘Did he?’

Sena sighed again. She almost wished she could say yes, somehow she thought, that would probably have a better outcome. Instead she told the truth. ‘No. Sandy was here a little while ago. One of the cooks accidentally let the cat in when she went up to milk the goats.’

‘I see,’ said Lara. ‘Do you think you could leave us now?’

‘I will leave,’ said Sena, ‘but Lara you have to understand how upset she was. Something she loved had died. Iessa is impulsive, she can’t help it. She reacted without thinking.’

‘I know that,’ said Lara. ‘Please leave.’

Sena looked from Lara to Iessa. ‘All right,’ she said. ‘I’ll see you in the foodhall later?’

‘Perhaps,’ said Lara.

Sena guided Lexi out, still with a firm block in place. He was going to be mad when they got back to the cell. Too bad. Even though she loved him, this was not just about him.

When they had gone, Lara said to Iessa, 'Come over here and give me your hand.'

'No.'

'I don't want to have to coerce you.'

'Then don't.'

'You stole something, something precious.'

'I don't care.'

'Well I do.' Lara coerced and Iessa fought it but then got up off the bed and came towards Lara with her hand held out. Iessa's face was stony. She was shielding. Lara forced herself to bite the hand. It felt very wrong but she didn't know what else to do. She went out then and down the corridor to the dispenser. Maika arrived just as she was going back to the cell.

'What happened?' he said.

'Iessa thought Lexi had let the rat into the garden dome and she stole the necklace with his mother's hair in it. She lost the hair but we found the necklace. I have punished her.'

'How?' he asked.

'The way I usually do.'

His eyes were on her. She looked away.

He went into Iessa's room and shut the door. She was lying on her bed facing the wall.

'I heard what happened,' he said.

'Uhuh.'

He sat down next to her and began to rub her back. 'I'm sorry that happened.'

'I was bad. That's all.'

'No spratling, you weren't bad. It was the wrong thing to do but you were upset and you didn't think.' He smoothed the hair off her brow and she gave a little sob. His heart twisted as he watched her struggling to control herself.

‘It’s all right, Maika, I understand. Lara doesn’t love me, I know that.’

‘She does love you.’

‘Maybe,’ she said, ‘but not the way Sena loves Lexi, and he isn’t even her baby.’

‘She does love you.’

‘I know, Maika.’ Her voice was very small. ‘I think this is the worse day of my life.’

He wracked his brain but he couldn’t think of anything to say. So he lay next to her and held her.

She fell asleep and for a while he lay with her. Even in her sleep he could see the hurt on her face and the troubled rumble of her thoughts whispered to him. He eased himself off the bed and went out to Lara.

‘You were wrong,’ he said. ‘Her rat had died and she never got to show you those tricks. Then we had that time collecting the flowers and we buried the rat... and then you did that to her. She thinks you don’t love her.’

Lara looked away. ‘I know I did the wrong thing and I know she thinks I don’t love her.’

‘Why did you do it? Why do you keep making her feel that way? You can’t undo it now.’

‘I know,’ she said and she got up and went into their room.

Lexi said, ‘I hate her. I will hate her forever.’

‘She was very sad,’ said Sena. ‘She did it without thinking. She thought you’d let the cat into the garden dome.’

‘Well I didn’t,’ snapped Lexi.

‘I want you to try and forgive her.’

‘I can’t,’ he said.

‘You can, but you won’t.’

‘I can’t and I won’t,’ he said and went into his room and shut the door.

A couple of days later Lexi walked in the cell, slamming the door and throwing his bag down on the floor. That morning, Iessa had been playing with a young seal in the baydome. It was living in the animal enclosure, but the others said that Lara had given it to Iessa. It was hers.

Lexi stomped into his room and read about seals and all the tricks they could do in one of his books. Then he looked up seals and trainer-coercers on the com-u. It said that usually a trainer-coercer might get their first seal when they were seventeen. He showed it to Sena.

‘It’s not fair,’ he said.

‘When you can prove to me that life is fair Lexi, then that phrase will have some meaning in this context.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘It means, get over it.’

She went in her room and came back with a lock of blonde hair. ‘It’s Helena’s. Leon had it. I wondered if he might have some and commed him. He sent it today.’

Lexi went and got the locket. He put the hair in and sat for a while holding it.

‘Why don’t you put it on,’ said Sena. ‘Maybe when you’re home at the end of the day, you can wear it for a little while, or wear it to bed. Then you can put it away every morning.’

He looked at it warm in his hand. ‘No, I like it being in Helena’s bag,’ he said. ‘It’s nice and safe there usually. If I wear it I might forget to take it off and it might get lost. I don’t want to take any chances.’

* * * * *

6 – The Cyst Keeper

Ten years old - First Time at the Tidal Pool

‘We’re going to see the stra- -ands. We’re going to see the stra- - ands,’ Iessa chanted.

Lexi wished she’d shut up. Ever since they’d gotten in the pod she’d been saying it and bouncing around on her seat.

And why did he have to be in the same pod as her? Because Marco and Sena were best friends with Lara and Maika, he thought bitterly. He hated her and yet he had the bad luck to have to sit at the same table at the food hall. He had to sit up in the PD listening to Marco and Maika laughing and singing and talking and Iessa would be there too, playing in the long grass, boasting about how when they started playing Forts her team was going to be the best. Running along the branches and bossing him and Alo. And dumb old Alo would do whatever she wanted. Couldn’t he see that it was just encouraging Iessa to be worse.

Lexi eyed the back of her bouncing head. Ten years old he was, on his first visit to the tidal pool where all the adols went, and it had to start out like this. Their whole cohort was going and the parents. It was an important day and already it was being ruined for him. He imagined whacking her the next time she bounced up but just then the pod came to a halt. Lucky for her.

He looked out. There on the wall of the transtunnel was the carving of the tidal pool. They’d been speeding past it ever since he was nine, and going to the baydome to practise kayaking. Now they were finally getting out here. Lexi climbed out of the pod onto the concrete platform on the side of the track and looked around. It was just the same as any other pod stop.

Lexi climbed up the steps with Sena and Marco. They entered the cavern and he was blasted by light. It hurt his eyes and took him back to when he’d first arrived in the

colonies. It was brighter than being outside and like the light was glinting off something metallic – super augmented light wells. He guessed he'd get used to it and that underwater, shaded by the fronds it wouldn't seem so bad.

The seaweed smell of the strands twanged in his nostrils. It was the sort of smell he associated with Sena telling him something he was about to eat was good for him but it was also a strong, wild, clean smell. His skin tingled, his breath came a little faster. His stomach felt like it was doing happy somersaults.

Gradually his eyes adjusted so he no longer had to squint and he looked around. The pool cavern was big. Laser hollowed out of the rock, its walls were smooth and it was probably at least 30 metres across in places, a slightly round shape, a bit like a flounder, narrowing to about 5 metres where the water went out through the rock opening into the bay dome. The roof was at least 10 metres above his head, and it was full of light wells. He couldn't look at it without wincing and squinting. It made his eyes water.

The pool itself was a sea blue-green colour and floating on the surface were the tips of the fronds. The whole enclosure was patterned underwater with the brown and golden shapes of the seaweed. From where he stood he would see occasionally, one of the adols breaking the surface to breathe but mostly they were underwater and hidden by the fronds.

A bell rang and his cohort was ushered into an area on the wide, sloping steps going down to the pool. At the bottom of the steps was a small sandy beach. A tutor was standing there. She waited for them to sit and quieten down.

When they were still, she said, 'Welcome Owai 5, to the tidal pool. You will be known as Sprats 5 now - the new young ones getting to learn about cyst growing. You are coming here as the small fish do in the ocean, to swim in these strands and to take shelter there and to learn from the older cohorts. At first you'll come for a few hours, one day a week. Each of the other Owai cohorts has their own day – yours will be Friday. You'll arrive each morning after breakfast and leave after two hours to go to the baydome and continue your boat skills there. When you're here you will not bother the cyst growers. You may not touch their strands unless you are invited to do so.

'We expect you to learn how to swim here without hindering other people and without damaging the strands. It is confined. You must learn to work and move in the space available. The pool is kept at a lower temperature because as you know the

strands are of the genus *Macrocystis* and it is a colder water species. The adols wear suits – you will be expected to swim with no suit for the whole two hours so that your bodies will learn how to adjust to cold. You may initially notice it, you may feel clumsier or more tired or less fluid. That is of no concern to you. Life in the sea cyst colonies is hard and physical. Sometimes things will happen, accidents. Let this be an experience to condition your spirit.

‘Underwater, we have an observation tunnel around the entire circumference of the pool. Most of the tutors are in the tunnel. We watch for your safety and for the safety of the strands. Anyone seen to damage a strand will be asked immediately to leave the pool. Anyone seen to hinder or hurt another person...likewise will be asked to leave the pool. You must not be tardy when asked to leave. We have some very talented coercers here. Again they will not be gentle with you, as the sea would not be, if you broke one of nature’s rules. Is that understood?’

She paused and Lexi stole a glimpse at Sena and Marco. Each of them worked here two mornings a week – coercing the bad kids. Except on a Sena day, Lexi thought, no one would dare to be bad and on a Marco day they would probably be too happy to be bad.

‘About the strands,’ the tutor continued. ‘As you know *Macrocystis* is why we are here. It is a giant seaweed and the products of its growth provide one of the main resources of the world today. It is a structure for the polymerisation process. We grow it and then we inject or soak the cysts and blades in a special cellulose polymer. In that state it may be shaped and moulded for an unlimited number of structural purposes. When dried and injected with air it will harden into a rigid, material structure.

‘In this pool we have only a 7 metre depth so we are using a *Macrocystis* X miniature species. When you get good, your cysts will hopefully be used for small pod structures and the like. In the sea we use a variety of *Macrocystis* X species depending on the depth, temperature and nutrient level of the zone. Those cysts will have more flexibility for use. The graduate adols, for their last summer season at Owai, work solely in the baydome growing *Macrocystis*. The species they use is a larger one.

‘Some of you may end up as cystmasters. You will work eventually with the giant species and your cysts will be the largest and they will eventually be used to provide the domed living spaces. Some of you will not end up growing cysts at all. You will leave here when you are adols knowing about cyst production but you may perform

other roles. Don't feel bad about that. Cyst growing requires a particular set of talents. We put all of you through the learning process because it is a vital function and if you have those talents, we wish you to fulfil that role. Our job is to identify those who are meant to grow cysts, to encourage their learning and to send you others off to the areas where your interests lie. At the end of the next five years, there will be far fewer of you in number but you will feel as though no other life will suit you.

'There will be no formal instruction. You will learn by playing and watching. Later when you are a little older you will spend more hours here and you will have one of the older adols as your buddy to learn from. Sometime in your twelfth year you will get your own strand to work.

'Finally. Even though the cavern entrance leads to the bay dome and you are used to swimming in the bay no sprat may leave the pool by that entrance. At the end of the session the bell will ring. You will leave the pool then and congregate here. One of the tutors will count you off and then you will change into your clothes and take the pod to the bay dome.

'Go now to the changing rooms and enter the pool respectfully. It will seem like another home to you by the time you leave it again in 5 years time. Treat it as kindly as you would your home, and we will all be happy.'

Lexi watched the others eagerly rushing into the pool. When they were all in, he pulled on his mask and waving to Sena and Marco, slipped into the cold water. The smell of the seaweed was even stronger and he could feel the change in the texture of the water soft on his skin because of the strands. It was quiet. Bodies moved more softly, more lightly, more carefully than in the baydome or the pool dome. He floated for a minute on the surface looking, being tickled by the fronds on the end of the blades, then he dived, slow and looping, down to the bottom. There were holdfasts everywhere and round stipes growing up and evolving into the graceful slow motion sway of the blades and fronds above him. There were more strands than adols. He'd have to ask Marco. Maybe the adols took turns working their strands or perhaps they had more than one. He noticed how the adols were all working at different depths so they weren't constantly in each others way. Rising to the surface, he took a breath and then dived down again to the bottom and swam examining the holdfasts. They were evenly spaced, their leathery, spread out, finger-like protrusions clinging to the rock. Some had

barnacles and lichen type growths on them. Some were clean. He wondered if it made a difference. He went up and took another breath and did not dive so deep the next time, moving instead through the feather-light caress of the fronds and hoping that it was allowable that the plants touched him. An adol looked like he was kissing his blade and then he swam away and Lexi saw the valve there, a tiny opening in the blade next to the cyst. You sucked and the valve would give you oxygen rich air that was sweeter than normal.

The adols seemed to work in long, spiralling dives. Diving down and then rising in a spiral up and around their strands. Sometimes they went to the surface to breathe, mostly they sucked air in from the valves. A girl close to him was using a valve.

-Want some? She gestured to her valve and he shrugged. She swam to him and took his hand and pulled him close to the valve.

-Put your mouth around the outside of it and suck. Be careful not to breathe through your nose at the same time.

Self consciously, he did as she suggested, sucked in, and the air was unbelievably sweet. It blossomed in his body and went straight to his head. Everything seemed more clear.

-Nice huh?

-Yes.

-You can have more.

-No, it's all right.

He swam away, not wanting to bother her and when he needed another breath he rose to the surface and took one. When he went down again he could see Iessa greedily sucking in air from someone's strand.

Another adol offered him air from a valve and then another. After a while he realised that they all wanted to share. They all wanted to help the sprats to learn. He began to accept each offer.

One of the bigger boys said to Lexi - You sprats are always welcome to take air from any valve. Don't ask. In the sea you'll need air and you must always take it where you can find it, the same way that you do on land. It's your right to be able to breathe in either environment. Don't forget that.

And so for the rest of the session, Lexi forgot manners and became like the other sprats, greedily sealing his mouth around the slippery valves. The air from the valve

made him feel different. He could think better and it almost felt as though he saw things differently, as though it even enhanced his psychosenses.

At the end of the session, he left the pool happy and determined. He was at Owai, the best cyst growing colony in Aotearoa. He was good with plants and he had a feeling that he was going to be great at growing strands.

The Shark Plays Forts

Four sparrows sat on the log watching him eat his apple. They were all patterned different shades of brown and they were fluffier than normal as though they were still young. On one branch in the tree overhead were six pigeons, not the big native ones but the grey ones that were from all over the world. Other pigeons were in the tree on other branches. They flourished in the park dome. Every now and then the rangers caught some and took them out to the wild. Sometimes there were so many that they caught them and ate them but Lexi couldn't bring himself to eat a bird.

The plumage of the pigeons was all the same as though they came from the same family. There were whole generations of them that had survived in the PD. The things which were ordinary were the survivors, Lexi thought. The unusual things were not survivors. Something helped them to be there.

He raised his head so that he could peer over the top of the log, up the hill to the fort. The flag hung there, tempting him. Today he wasn't sure whether he'd just take a big, hard run at it or try to sneak closer first.

If only I could fly, he thought. He wished Alo was there to say, 'I'll be your back-up, Lexi,' but Alo wouldn't be back again until the new heart healed. The medics couldn't seem to fix his heart, even though they fixed other things. Yet that was one of the most important things – a good heart.

He sat back down again and spat into the pile of clay dust he'd been scraping off the dirt. He mixed it around with his stick and drew swirly koru all up his legs with his finger. He did the big triangle on his forehead and five stripes on each side of his chest. He drew the teeth, big zigzags on each arm. Now they'd see what the shark could do.

He stood up and briefly scanned the fort area, then leapt over the log and started to run up the hill, hard and fast. Three pairs of sentries popped up out of the long grass

and a squad came leaping down the hill to back them up. Lexi ran hard at the pair on the left. Iessa always put the big, slow ones down the hill, big enough for him to take notice of, big enough to slow him down.

He went low and took out the one on the very left in a spearhead tackle. The other one went to kick him in the back but Lexi was already rolling and kicking out at him. He got the boy in the balls and he crumpled to the ground.

Lexi went left around the curve of the hill hoping to outrun the back-up squad. Something hit him hard in the ribs. He looked back. A stick lay on the ground. It barely registered. Another squad appeared, tearing down the hill at him. They were trying to trap him. Run, Lexi! They were almost upon him but at the last second he dived low and scrambled through their legs. Their momentum carried them a little way further down the hill and he ran up, legs pumping, his breath rasping out of him. He was almost at the tree. Then Iessa stepped out from behind the fat trunk and swung the stick. It hit him hard in the stomach and he stopped, winded.

Someone tackled him to the ground. He jabbed with his elbow and they let go but someone else was there grabbing his legs. He kicked out and then he felt the point of the stick touching his neck, just as someone else kicked him hard on the hip. He looked up.

‘Yield,’ said Iessa.

‘I yield.’ He hated that triumphant look in her eye. He hated that smile on her lips.

The others pulled back.

Aargh. His ribs hurt. He pulled himself onto all fours like an animal, then stood. They were waiting, grinning. Waiting for him to limp away moaning, waiting for him to cry. He looked around the circle of children. Keeping his face still, he turned and walked back down the hill. When he got to his tree, he didn’t stop. He kept walking, back to the atrium, the stairwell, down the corridor to the cell.

He walked in and shut the door. Only then did he touch his rib. There was a sharp pain. He winced.

Sena came out from her room. ‘I hate that game,’ she said.

‘I think I’ve got a broken rib.’

She applied ointment and wrapped a bandage around his chest. All the time she was muttering, ‘These people are savages. I’ll never understand these people.’

Lexi said, 'Then I'm a savage too.'

'Yes,' she said. 'You're a savage too.' Her eyes flashed but Lexi sensed amidst her frustration a sort of pride there, a funny sort of pride.

Eleven

-That one is yours Lexi.

The tutor pointed down and Lexi saw his baby strand, a small holdfast attached to the rock and a few floaty fronds. Not even a metre high and looking nothing like the six metre plant it would become in just a few short months.

- Go and have a look, the tutor said. – Get to know it.

She swam away and Lexi dived down to the tiny plant – his very own *Macrocystis X* species, miniature.

A genuine *Macrocystis* could grow up to 30 metres. Those plants would grow massive cysts and the cystmasters grew them. You had to know how to use the programme and how to use a thread – you had to have a nanocu before you got to grow those plants. Lexi would wait and in the end, he would be a cystmaster. For now he was delighted with his own miniature *Macrocystis X*.

He swam down and circled it. There was a rock embedded next to it with his name on it. Lexi. That would be his growing space now for the next three years. He'd spend at least half a day here every day for the next three years, more if he wanted. He was still paddling the kayaks and fishing in the baydome, still running everywhere he had to go that didn't involve taking a pod. Then there were the chores - dishes at home, his turn one week a month on kitchen duty in the foodhall and he was still doing two afternoons a week in Sandy's garden. Soon he knew that he'd have to stop that. When he was thirteen, maybe sooner, he'd be doing whole days in the tidal pool and everything else apart from the foodhall chores would go on hold.

His baby strand was nothing much to look at now. It was more fragile, less tough and leathery than it would be in a month's time. For the last six months, Lexi had been practising with his buddy, Maeli, one of the fourteen year olds. Lexi had come to the pool with him half a day each week. He'd felt the energetic flow when Maeli asked

the bud to come forth. He'd run his own hands along the laminaria and felt the warmth of the hand-mind linkage when Maeli pulled the nutrients down to the bud. Maeli had even let him call forth his own cysts. Lexi didn't know how and he didn't know why, but he was better at growing cysts than any other child in his cohort. Much better. Finally he had something at which he was the best.

It made a difference. He felt as though for years he had been holding his breath and shielding. Now it was time to breathe out and be himself.

Lexi Teaches Iessa About Calling Forth The New Cyst

The swimmers manoeuvring like seals, in and out of the rocky outcrops, very rarely surfaced. They paused every so often to touch their strands and to hide in the blades which seemed to hang suspended in a slow motion dance all the way from the water's surface to the sandy floor of the pool. Then the swimmers resumed their antics, flitting, diving, twisting, turning –always fast, always graceful.

Sena and Marco watched from the underwater room. They were not often there at the same time but Sena had come back early from Tau-cen. Because Marco and Lexi were both at the pool today, she had decided to come too for a change.

'Lexi has grown, hasn't he,' said Sena.

'Yes. I guess it's those African genes that he has.'

'Maybe. You're quite big though.'

They saw Iessa chasing one of the other girls.

Sena said, 'Iessa has so much speed.'

'Lexi has more purpose.'

'Do they still hate each other do you suppose,' asked Sena.

'They say they do. When they're here they each dominate the others thoughts.'

'In what way?'

'It seems that it's to do with power,' he said wryly.

'And is it?' she said.

He didn't reply, just glanced at her.

Stupid question, she thought.

Lexi was fuming. He watched Iessa flitting in and out of the strands with her friends. She was playing and yet her strand needed help, work. He could see the area of weakness where it had not budded yet. She needed to reinforce it there and call forth the new cyst. He watched her swimming – she was so fast. So many generations had been bred into her since the change; there had always been sea genes in her blood. Her webbing was more pronounced than that of the others, her body more streamlined and strongly sleekly muscled. Her shoulders had amazing strength for propulsion but she was not shoulder heavy the way he was. He watched the others swimming, playful like seals, dolphins and felt his own clumsiness.

-Iessa, he mindshouted

She chose to ignore his mood and it made him angrier.

-Yes, Lexi. Her thought had a teasing lilt to it. She swam towards him.

-You need to work on your strand. He sent a mental image of what she needed to do. She was near him now, taunting him with her body. When they were younger it was a ‘see how fast I can swim’ taunt. Now it seemed that she was flaunting her swimmers inheritance at him. ‘See my hands –see my feet Lexi. You don’t have what I have.’

Once when they had argued, she had said, ‘Who are you anyway Lexi? Who are your parents really? What is your life legend?’ She had turned away in disgust saying, ‘You don’t even have a life story do you Lexi? And no-one to give you one.’

He had been numbed by her attack –had not been able to say one word, offer one mental shout in return. He had been 8 years old.

Now he looked coldly at Iessa, all too aware that he wasn’t fooling her, that she was as in tune with the angry, mental heat emanating from him as he was himself.

Shield Lexi, shield, he told himself and the shield slid down and he knew from her triumphant grin that she was aware of it and happy that she’d made him do it. He didn’t care. He knew that she couldn’t breach it.

-You need to work on your strand, he repeated.

-Tell me again what I need to do. She teased him, but truthfully she was too busy goading him last time to listen.

He explained the technique and this time Iessa focused. She justified her attitude by telling herself that it would be stupid not too. He was by far the best cyst-keeper of their cohort and even her father had said that he had never seen any child like Lexi.

So she listened to him telling her that she must pull more xanthophyll to the budsites and put pressure on the union when the bud begins to push through. He talked about balancing the ions but she couldn't do that.

-Let me show you, he said.

She opened her mind to him and deftly and politely he downloaded the skill. She had done this with Lexi hundreds of times before. Although she hated him, she knew that he would never violate her mindspace. Coercion was abhorrent to him – and a download was so much easier than trying to understand.

-Lazy one. He was laughing.

She liked that, his laughter in her mind. He should do it more often.

- Should I.

- Yes. You are so stiff and heavy and steady, she teased.

- You are so light and irresponsible, he replied but he was still laughing.

- You should swim more and worry less.

- You should worry more.

- Not if I'm going to end up like you, but she softened it with a gentle mind hug and then swam away before he could reply.

Well she thought to herself surprised. That was actually fun. She turned to look back and saw him working his strand, swimming in his ungainly way with his shield all the way up. She laughed to herself. It amused her to make him shield like that – like a big old hermit crab. But she had better pay a little more attention to her strand. She swam around it and immediately located the area Lexi was talking about.

Before she began to work she found a valve and placed her mouth over it and sucked in oxygen rich air. She felt it bloom in her body. Her mind became alert and focused. When she put her hand on the bud union and sent forth the call she felt almost immediately, the bulge of the bud. She followed Lexi's download and ions in the water were drawn through the strands membrane. She felt the pulse of the new cyst. Lexi might be the most boring person on the planet but he sure knew about cysts. She drew down the xanthophyll and felt the bud vibrate beneath her hand –amazing! She ignored her friends and happily tended her cyst. By the time her session ended, her bud

had grown a half metre already and she swam away from her strand happier than she had been in a long time.

Lexi And Alo Work Together And Iessa Gets Mad

Lexi watched from behind the bushes and saw Alo walking along the path. There was a small pouch strapped to a belt around Alo's waist – his medicine kit full of the things he needed to keep himself alive – to be administered in a hurry. All of those operations and still he wasn't stable. Lexi smiled. His friend was getting there though. It had gone from a hundred things that could make him very sick, to now less than twenty.

As he watched, Alo began to weave from side to side and then he bent over and stayed with his head down stooped, hands on his knees. Lexi heard a shout from the fort tree and then children streamed down the hill towards Alo.

Alo fell and Lexi began to move, running bent over down the other side of the slope until he was directly behind the big tree and the trunk was between himself and Iessa's team. Then he stood up straight and began to run towards her fort. The fat tree trunk blocked his view and he ran blind. His arms pumped, his legs pounded a path through the long grass. He was almost there when he saw Iessa running up the slope from the other side and he took a run up the trunk, leapt out to grab the branch with the flag on it and swung himself up, the rough bark scraping his fingers. He ran along the bobbing branch and wrenched the flag loose. Iessa was almost directly beneath him. His heart pounded. Triumph pulsed through him. Iessa stooped mid-run and when she straightened, there was a thick stick in her hand. He leapt down and she was still running as he landed and turned to escape. The stick hit him on the side of his hip and he stumbled and then there was another hard whack on his shoulder and his hand opened and the flag fluttered down. He twisted to grab at it with the other hand and the stick came down again, this time on his thigh. His hand closed on the flag, he heard a crack and his leg buckled beneath him and he screamed before he could stop himself.

'You've broken my leg! You've broken my leg!'

She stood above him with the stick raised. 'Give me the flag, Lexi.'

He pulled it against his stomach and tried to curve his body around it.

'Give it to me or I'll hit you again.'

His face twisted. He bundled the flag tightly against his stomach and squeezed his eyes shut. His leg was shrieking at him. He waited for the blow but instead heard the stick hit the grass next to him and then her hands were trying to tear the flag away. He opened his eyes and she was bent over him, her dark hair a curtain around her determined face and instinctively he went to roll away. The pain seared a thousand times worse. He screamed but didn't let go of the flag. Then Alo was there.

'Iessa! Stop it!' and Lexi felt the coercion, hot like a blast of fire. His mind registered that she was no longer pulling and that his world was wavering and then it went black.

Alo knelt by Lexi's feet with one hand held up towards Iessa.

'Stop. Think about what you're doing.'

Lexi's eyes were shut and there was blood on the top of his pants leg. The thigh jutted out at a crazy angle.

Iessa's face was defiant. 'He should have let go.'

Alo ran his hand up Lexi's leg. The red on Lexi's trousers was spreading rapidly. He put his hand on the wettest patch, felt the sharp jut of the broken bone and pressed down. It seemed to slow the spread of blood.

'Mindshout for me!' he yelled at Iessa. 'Mindshout for the medics.'

'Why should I?'

'He's bleeding too much. Mindshout now!'

Iessa looked at him sullenly as though she wasn't going to do it. He was about to coerce her again and she said, 'All right. I'll do it.'

She was quiet for a minute and then she said, 'They're coming.'

'Fold up the flag,' he said. 'Hurry.'

Her face was pale. She looked at him mutinously.

He coerced. 'Fold the flag.'

She did it and handed it to him.

'I shouldn't have to coerce you,' he said angrily. He released his hand pressure to press the folded flag on top of the wound. His mind searched beneath his fingers, guiding them to where he should apply pressure. In a detached way he realised he could see the torn artery and the pink whiteness of the bone. He changed the pressure a little

and the blood stopped coming out. The other children had arrived and hovered around in a rough circle.

Alo said, 'Couldn't you let him get it just this once?'

Iessa's eyes flashed, heavy with tears. She stood alone, then turned away. He thought she was going to leave, but instead she sat down on the grass with her back to them.

Down the hill, Alo saw a single hovascoo skimming over the grass towards them. It parked under the tree and a medic called Manu ran towards them clutching a medic kit. Crouching down beside Lexi, he opened his kit and slapped a couple of sensors on Lexi's chest, then slit Lexi's pants and placed a sensor on the leg just above the wound.

'Keep the pressure on,' he said to Alo and took a plasma pak out of his kit and slipped a needle into Lexi's arm., He reached over and lifted Iessa's arm. 'Hold the pak up.'

Alo could feel the drip, drip as each drop of fluid passed into Lexi's artery. Manu injected a painkiller into the bag and Alo felt it flooding Lexi's pain receptors the same way he could feel the plasma nourishing Lexi's body. He knew Lexi would be all right now. Relieved, he looked up and met Manu's eyes.

'I thought so,' said Manu.

'What?'

'You are meant to be a medic.'

'I'm good with animals,' said Alo.

'Humans are animals.' Manu took a splint pak out of his kit. 'I'm going to straighten the bone and then it'll be safer to move him. Look with your mind and tell me when you think it's straight.'

He used the flap on the pack to pull the inflatable splint through so that the full length of Lexi's leg was resting on it.

'Are you ready?' he said to Alo. 'Look.'

Alo could see the bone and he could feel a jagged, unnatural energy around the wound site. Manu moved the leg and the bits of bone ground together. Alo was glad Lexi was unconscious. The bone moved a little more, the artery was safe and then something happened to the energy – a warmth and a surge.

'It's there I think,' he said.

‘Yes,’ said Manu. ‘You can take your hand off now.’ Manu put a pressure pad on the wound, wrapped the splint right around and inflated it.

Alo sensed the pressure on the artery and the straightness of Lexi’s leg and it all felt good. He didn’t know how but he knew he was right.

Manu went to the scooter and came back with a stretcher pack which he inflated and lay next to Lexi. Two of the other boys lifted Lexi’s shoulders while he and Alo lifted Lexi’s legs and hips onto the stretcher. He strapped Lexi in firmly and then retrieved the plasma bag from Iessa who was still sitting with her back to them and placed it on Lexi’s chest. Alo and three of the others carried Lexi to the hovascoo.

‘Don’t worry,’ Manu said as he strapped the stretcher in place. ‘He’ll be all right now.’ He put his gear away and climbed on and they watched him skim off slowly and carefully down the hill.

Alo went to Iessa. He stroked her head and she turned and looked at him over her shoulder.

‘Come on.’

‘What?’

‘We’re going to the medic centre. Sena’ll be there. You can say sorry to her and later you can say sorry to Lexi.’

She looked down at the grass. ‘I don’t want to say sorry. He should’ve let go of the flag.’

‘How are you going to be good at making animals do what you want, when you can’t even make yourself do what you want?’

‘I’m not sorry.’ She was ripping out handfuls of grass.

He took her arm and hauled her up. ‘Lucky you’ve got me to know that’s not true.’

She let herself be lead and the other children parted to let them through.

‘You’re such a do-good Alo,’ she muttered.

He was aware of the heat in her cheeks and the rhythm of her heart, beating a little too hard. He squeezed her hand.

A few tears ran down her cheeks. She ducked her head and let her hair fall across her face. ‘Don’t feel sorry for me. I don’t deserve it.’

‘I don’t feel sorry for you. I want to hit you.’ He smiled.

Her eyes met his. She bit her lip. 'What will I do without you? Who will be my conscience without you?'

'I'm going to be a medic, I think,' he said.

She took his arm and pressed herself to his side. She looked at him and nodded. 'That feels right. You're so puny it makes sense. But what will I do without you?'

'You'll grow up,' he said and hit her softly on the arm.

Iessa walked slowly and chose the longest route to the medic centre. They got to the final stretch of corridor and her feet dragged.

'Sena scares me,' she said. 'When I was little and around Lexi, I used to get this weird feeling that a shark was going to come and bite me. I never got that feeling when Marco was looking after Lexi, only when Sena was there.'

'She's all right.'

'You think that because she likes you. She hates me.' Iessa stopped and looked back the way they had come.

'Come on.' Alo tugged her sleeve.

'I'm scared.'

'Shouldn't have done it then.'

'I couldn't stop myself.'

He stared at her. 'When we were seven you used to say it was an accident. Come on.' He kept walking and when she didn't follow, went back and took her hand. 'Come on.' He had to drag her. 'You're acting like a weakling,' he said sharply. 'You did it. Front up. She'll have more respect for you that way.'

'Respect? I'm worried she'll kill me.'

'Maybe you deserve it.' He was beginning to smell the place. Disinfectants, blood, drugs, vomit, the too clean environment. His scars tingled and the blood vessel throbbed in his temple. He'd spent half his life breathing in those smells.

They went down the last, yellow walled corridor and through the airlock which existed for people just like him - radioheads, people with radioactive compounds locked inside their cells. All those blood transfusions and plasma overloads until they had replaced as many cells in his body as they could. Then the transplants – they had cloned every organ in his body that could be cloned and one by one they had replaced them. To

give him a fighting chance to reach adulthood - all because he could ask rats to do what he wanted and they would.

They didn't seem to get it, that it was just about loyalty and love. I was once a crippled little orphan. The only way I could get food was to ask rats to bring it to me. And the only way that I could get warmth was for rat bodies to lie with me. I had nothing else to give in return, but myself when I died and the warmth from my fingers when I touched them.

He remembered his bed in the big old house, a nest of rags and the rats would lie with him. Each had staked out on his body, its own territory. And the bits of food, plants and insects mostly. They would nuzzle the corner of his mouth or his hand and all he had to do was chew and swallow. Occasionally he had dragged himself out of bed, to the hole in the floorboards that was his toilet or to one of the buckets under the leaking roof that was his only source of water.

Iessa said softly, 'Oh Alo.' Her arms went around him and she squeezed him and then she stroked his arm. 'Oh Alo.'

'Don't feel sorry for me,' he said, embarrassed, 'and stop reading me.'

'Idiot, I'm not sorry. I'm proud of you – to have you for my friend is the only thing that'll ever make me good.'

He cringed. 'Don't say that. To me, you're already good. I don't think I could take it if you were gooder.' He punched her again, lightly on her arm.

Iessa Talks To Sena And Apologises To Lexi

Sena was waiting in the antechamber for the medics to finish setting Lexi's leg. Iessa stood in the doorway, watching while Alo went and kissed her.

'How's he doing?' said Alo.

'He'll be all right thanks to you. Manu says you should be a medic. He thinks you have the potential to be a master healer.'

'I didn't know until today. I could visualise the bone and the artery and I knew when the energy flow was right. It's never happened before.'

Sena nodded. 'You've grown into your talent. I never knew I'd be a farsensor until I was your age. How'd he break his leg?'

Iessa said from the doorway, 'I did it. I hit him with a stick.'

'Why?'

Sena's voice sounded less frightening than Iessa had expected. She took a few wary steps into the room. 'He got the flag.'

Sena nodded. 'I wondered if he had.' She looked at Alo. 'Will you leave us?'

Iessa met his eyes, begging him silently not to go.

'Sure. I need to pee,' he said. He smiled wickedly as he went out the door.

When he had gone, Sena said, 'Did you have to hit him with the stick?'

Iessa swallowed. It was hard looking into those fighty, blue eyes but she felt unable to look away. 'I thought so at the time?'

'Would he have done it to you, do you think? If your positions had been reversed, I mean.'

Iessa looked down at her feet. 'I don't think so. He hasn't hit me badly since the kicking thing when we were little.'

'Are you sorry?'

Iessa looked up. 'I was sorry almost as soon as I'd done it. I didn't know, though. Alo knew. He made me come here. I wouldn't have come otherwise.'

'Why do you think you did it?'

'I don't know. I've always hated Lexi – or at least I thought I did right up to when I heard his leg break.' She shuddered.

'Why?'

'When we were little Lara was always helping him and always saying how great he was and how hard he tried at everything. But he wasn't great to me. He was the only kid who was mean to me.'

'I see.'

Iessa looked at her curiously. 'What do you see? I mean everyone goes on about how you were supposed to be the greatest farsensor and you taught at the redactor school and you found all those orphans before...'

'Before what?'

'Before you came here.'

Sena laughed. 'Oh Iessa, why not say it? Before I went a little bit crazy, is that what you were going to say?'

'Us kids were all scared of you. All except Alo.'

Sena laughed. 'Good. You children deserved to be scared of something. Tides knows you were the most unruly bunch I'd ever come across.' She looked away and mindspoke Iessa who was able to see through Sena's memory, the hordes of screaming, fighting children running amok in the family quarters.

Then the blue eyes turned back to Iessa who felt caught by them. 'You said Lara was always saying how hard Lexi tried at everything and yet you were the best at everything yourself weren't you?'

'Yes.' Iessa's face felt stiff.

'And you were always trying way too hard to be the best, weren't you? But Lara didn't seem to notice, did she?'

'No.' Iessa rubbed at her eyes with her fists.

'And Marco and I were always looking after Lexi and telling him how wonderful he was.'

'Yes.'

'And you thought, why doesn't my mother love me like that, because you worked so hard to make her love you?'

Iessa rubbed her eyes hard.

Sena said, 'I could tell you what Lara said when I was taking her last two life histories?'

'Yes.'

'She said, she loved you but worried that she couldn't show it. She said you had so much talent in the water and she was so proud of you. She thought the seal loved you and did more for you than it ever would have done for her and she believed you were going to be one of the greatest coercer trainers Owai ever produced.'

'Why doesn't she tell me all those things herself?'

'She thinks she's been a bad mother. That she wasn't there when you were little - that she's away too much. She thinks it would seem hypocritical to say those things to you now.'

'Why are you telling me?'

‘I don’t know. Because I may not get another opportunity. Because Lexi did try hard and he’s now an amazing swimmer and already a talented grower of cysts because he wanted to be better than you. You and Lexi are bad for each other and you’re good for each other. You may have broken his leg today, Iessa, but over all these years you’ve helped forge his spirit the way he’s helped forge yours. And Alo loves you. And I admire your tenacity and wholeheartedness the way I admire it in Lexi.’

‘I didn’t expect to be having this conversation with you.’

‘Neither did I.’

‘You’re not mad about what I did to Lexi?’

Sena said, ‘Touch a hair on my boy’s head again, Iessa, and I may not be so forgiving. But as for today, he’ll survive and I imagine, knowing Lexi, that he would far rather have got the flag and a broken leg than not got it.’

Iessa smiled a small smile. ‘Yeah,’ she said. ‘Or at least that’s how I’d have felt anyway.’

Later Iessa saw Lexi. He was lying on the bed with his eyes shut, looking pale and not at all like himself. There was a long, log like lump under the cover where his cast was.

She felt a brief twinge of worry. Then he opened his eyes. They looked triumphant. The worry was replaced by annoyance.

‘I got the flag,’ he said.

She put her hands on her hips and stomped her foot. ‘You and Alo tricked me.’

‘You broke my leg.’

‘We’re even then.’

He laughed. ‘Only you could think that.’

She squirmed. ‘I didn’t think.’

‘Do you ever?’

‘Not ‘til after.’

‘Now is after.’

She had to say it. She didn’t want to.

‘Don’t say it if you’re not gonna mean it.’

‘I mean it – it’s just hard.’

‘What’s hard?’

‘Saying sorry.’ There was a picture on the wall of a leg and its muscles and blood vessels. She walked over and studied it briefly then turned and looked at him. He was watching her. ‘I’m sorry, Lexi.’

‘What for?’

She scowled. ‘I’m sorry for acting crazy and going too far. I’m sorry I hit you with that stick and I’m sorry for telling you I was gonna hit you again.’

He was smiling now. ‘What about that other thing?’

‘What other thing?’

‘The thing where someone else got the flag for the first time in the last two years and you failed. Aren’t you sorry about that?’

She glared at him. ‘About that? No, not sorry. Mad. You got my best friend to trick me.’

‘I got my best friend to help me. Anyway, it didn’t work properly. You came back too soon.’

‘You didn’t shield. I heard you telling yourself to run faster. I can always hear you, Lexi, if you don’t shield.’

- And I can always hear you.

-We hear each other but we don’t listen. I’m not really bad but you think I am.

-I think we should call a truce for a little while. Our war has been going on for a long time.

- OK. At least until your leg is better.

- All right. I don’t have the energy to be enemies while I’m on crutches.

She walked over, stood by the bed and pulled up her sleeve, turning so that the top of her arm was exposed. ‘Here, just to make it more even. You can punch me if you like.’

He gave her a light punch.

She looked at him scornfully. ‘What’s the point of that? Do it harder.’

‘Nope. Don’t want to.’ He pulled her sleeve down. ‘Go. When I’m better I’ll come and find you and give you a hammering.’

‘As if.’

- And I’m going to beat you in the breath-holding competition this year. I’m going to practise while I’m lying here. You don’t stand a chance.

He shut his eyes and if he hadn't been lying in bed with a broken leg, she would have hit him again.

Instead she sent him a vivid image of her getting the prize the year before. – Dream on, she said.

- That's just what I'm aiming to do. Leave. And shut the door on the way out.

He chuckled as she left the room and she smiled. That hadn't been as bad as she thought it would be.

The autumn of the broken leg was the most peaceful that the inhabitants of Level 3 of the family quarters had known. Lexi and Iessa did not scream or fight once. Forts was put on hold as Iessa's punishment for breaking Lexi's leg and all of the cohort had to take turns working in the tidal pool to keep Lexi's strand growing.

He spent his time on land, up in the garden dome with Sandy, potting up and making cuttings and pruning and watering. There was always plenty to do.

At the Autumn Festival that year in Owai Port, Lexi entered the breath-holding competition and won it but his leg was wasted after being in the cast and he did not go in any of the swimming competitions. Owai 5 almost lost the Poolball because he wasn't there and they only won after Iessa and the others attacked one of the star players from Owai 3 thus allowing skinny Jasmine to get through and score.

Lexi cheered and joined in the after match fight down at the pool edge. Someone tried to punch him in the head and because he was trying to protect his weak leg, he was too slow to avoid it. He limped away from the encounter with a black eye and the satisfaction of knowing that once again Iessa had been watching his back and the boy who had punched him was getting half his ear stitched back on by the medics.

Iessa Gets Her Mat

At the beginning of winter they had the Mat Festival in the PD. The big trees were decorated with colourful pieces of cloth, they put up the trestle tables and they lit fires to cook on and prepared a huge feast. Everyone ate and sang and then the thirteen year old girls sat on the grass in flickering torchlight under the big trees in the Fort area.

Their families and everyone else sat around them on either side of an open pathway which lead to the trees.

The drums started. One by one the mothers or grandmothers or aunties danced through the darkness up the pathway into the flickering circle of light and presented each girl with a mat. It continued until only Iessa remained, the last girl. Lexi thought she looked afraid. The other girls had mothers or female relations who spent more time in the colony. Lara was always out at the cyst domes and Iessa had not seen her working on a mat. That was all right. The girls could have mats that other people had made. It didn't usually matter but Lexi knew it mattered to Iessa.

He climbed an old plum tree. From his vantage point he saw the tight lips and too bright eyes, the way she was staring out into the darkness.

She didn't have to be afraid. For the last three months, Lara had woven the mat with Sena and some of the other women in Lexi's cell. Sena had worked on it with the others when Lara was away but when Lara wasn't working she had spent every spare moment weaving. She had even come home in the carrier at the end of a day growing strands, to do a few hours weaving, before flying back out to the sea domes that night.

Lexi thought the finished mat was beautiful. A multicoloured image of underwater life, a strand thicket with little fishes swimming through. Lara's own design.

The drum was playing again and Lara stood and began the dance. Her hips swayed, her dark hair was loose around her face, she had on a red lava-lava which clung to her tall, strong body, and she held the mat rolled in front of her. Behind her in the crowd, Maika was up and Marco and some of the other men joined him in a haka.

Lara danced to Iessa, lay the mat on the ground in front of her daughter and unrolled it. Iessa's face lit up and then Lara leaned forward and stroked her hair and said something. Tears began to roll down Iessa's face and she got up and hugged her mother. Then everyone was up and dancing to the drum music. Bottles of alcohol appeared, everywhere pipes were brought out and then the smell of emja wafted around the hill top.

The dancing and singing went on until the dome got too cold to be bearable. They began to pack up and a message came through that there had been a water spout at Owai One. The damage had not been too severe but Maika prepared to fly out immediately and the last festival goers hurried home for a few hours sleep, knowing

that the carriers would be coming the next morning to take all the cyst workers back out to the sea cyst domes.

Lara woke the next morning thinking about the festival. She tiptoed through to Iessa's room. The mat was on the floor. Her daughter was asleep. Lara bent over and kissed Iessa on her forehead. Iessa's eyes opened and her arms came up and wrapped themselves around Lara's neck.

'I love you Lara.'

Lara felt herself melt. Iessa was an adol now, in a few more years she'd be full grown. It had taken such a long time but now Lara could say it and mean it. 'I love you too, my little Iessy. I'm so proud of you. You are the best daughter in the whole of this Earth.' Lara smoothed Iessa's hair back and looked into the soft, shining, happy eyes. 'I'll see you in two days time. Be good for your Nonny.'

She kissed Iessa once more and left.

7 - Loyalty

Owai 1 – After The Waterspout

The seal turned in the green water. Nearer the surface it was a lighter, turquoise green and bubbles from the swell were caught in the light. Where the seal's limbs curved through the water, larger bubbles formed and zinged and sizzled up towards the turquoise, and burst flat on the surface.

The curve of its neck reminded Lara briefly of the breast of a bird. Then the whiskers on its questing head were visible and it became itself again. The rough, zigzag ends of its rear flippers were outlined briefly against the waters surface as it flipped and slid and slipped down into a backward, twisting turn and with a pull of its front flippers, went rocketing deeper towards the darker bottom water, off after fish.

Lara swam up to a higher, rocky shelf and inspected the healthy thicket of ecklonia growing there. Small fish held still and then darted amongst the holdfasts, wary of her presence when she got too close. She saw kina and thought that sometime in the next few weeks she'd send someone out to harvest them.

She moved deeper into clear water and swam deeper still into the first clump of strands on the edge of their underwater jungle and drifted through them. It was like being in an underwater, forest cathedral. Every few minutes she took a breath from a valve; sweet, cool, oxygen rich air that set her cells alight each time. Life shouldn't be this good, she thought. Her body buzzed. Everything looked so vibrant today. She saw Jason tending the strands. This was the edge of his territory. He was young and new but he was working them well. Everywhere, she could see the bulge of healthy cysts. She swam down and followed the stipe of a strand from its holdfast up towards the surface. So healthy. Small fish darted through the waving fronds and she saw nudibranchs and snails grazing, leaving a myriad of trails up and down the length of the blade. In midwater, schools of pink maomao hung close to the thicket. Further out that morning there had been a long line of schooling trevally passing through. She thought that the maomao probably knew that too, probably still felt the vibration of that great passing. It thrilled her how many fish they saw now, even compared to when she had first started as coercer-trainer of Owai 1 fifteen years ago. It was the same everywhere on the coast.

They were so lucky but they had worked hard to achieve it. For some reason she thought of Iessa and felt guilty.

She watched the maomao absentmindedly. Individual fish darted about nervously, and then rejoined the school and then the whole group turned as one in the opposite direction and then turned again. She hung in the darkness of the strands, looking out at them and then looking upward at the upper leaves which swayed gracefully, yellow brown green and backlit by the surface light. Occasionally she helped herself to air from a valve. It was crazy she should be so lucky. Every day was like this for her. She felt humbled and spiritual as though all her ancestors were around her singing.

Sparkie zoomed past and the maomao went into a frantic swimming ball in the opposite direction. The dolphin powered into the school. The maomao regrouped.

Lara swam away to the surface and breathed air. Despite the waterspout yesterday all seemed to be well. There was nothing really for her to do. She called Sparkie; she'd have a little ride into open water and then go back to the dome. She moved away from the strands and adjusted her rebreather. She mindspoke Maika and told him what she was doing.

-Be careful, he said. -The waterspout may have loosened some of the moorings on the shark net.'

-Yes, old worrying mother.

-Take the goad.

-Then I'll have to swim all the way back to the boat. I've got Sparkie. Anyway, when have I ever needed the goad?

-When have we ever had a waterspout before?

-I'll be back soon, she said.

-Lucky I love you, beautiful.

And she said -everyday.

Sparkie came and circled her and nuzzled. She took a fin and they went north, back where she'd already been.

-No, Lara told her. -I want to go east. I've already been that way.

Sparkie was reluctant.

-No fatty, said Lara. -You've had enough fish.

Sparkie built up speed and they headed east and then Lara realised Sparkie was veering north again and there was something nervous about her. Lara let her change course and just enjoyed the ride. After a few minutes she told Sparkie to turn, she didn't want to tire her and she let go and dived down and swam underwater. Again Sparkie seemed nervous, circling her and talking and Lara got the feeling of something ominous coming. Maybe it was a shark. She laughed at Sparkie.

-I know you don't like them silly but when have I not been able to handle a shark.

But now Sparkie was trying to push her towards Jason's strands and away from Maika and where she wanted to go.

-No, she said, - you're being silly, but it didn't feel quite right. Where there had been an abundance of fish they all seemed to have disappeared and she did something she hadn't done for years and looked nervously over her shoulder.

She mindspoke Maika -Sparkie is nervous. She's herding me towards Jason's strands.

He said – Do what she says. I'm coming now.

And now Sparkie was frantic and Lara went full speed. Suddenly Sparkie stopped and darted behind her and Lara turned and saw it – a great white, and Sparkie swimming straight for it. At the last possible moment, the dolphin swerved and arrowed her snout into the shark's gills and it turned briefly but then kept swimming forward, curious and unperturbed, its black eye looking at her.

-It's a great white.

-Nothing you can't handle then, he said. –Hold on. I'm coming. The boat's coming.

Lara hung suspended knowing she couldn't out-swim it, not really afraid and hoping her confidence would cause it to swim away. Sparkie had circled quickly and was arrowing in at it again. She hit the gills and the shark swerved away and went into a series of fast snaking s-curves that had Sparkie frantically swimming in front of her. Then the shark began to circle and Lara hung, vertically turning in a narrow column of water watching it. Sparkie darted between them and then erratically shot off to the side.

Lara thought, Sparkie is trying to distract the shark. She let her own thoughts go cold and hard like the sharks and stared back into its black eye. She moved her hand out

quickly towards it and made as if to swim away. The shark reacted and as it turned Sparkie hit it in the gills again.

Maika said - Hold on. I've seen the fin, only two more minutes.

- OK babe, she said. -I love you.

Lara thought, why did I swim so far when Sparkie didn't want to go? What sort of a coercer am I? This shark would not go away. It was at least 5 metres long and huge around its girth. Lara thought, I could swim very fast and Sparkie will distract it. I can get away. But she couldn't. Loyalty was a mutual thing, as was love. The faces of her children raced in front of her. She hung in the water and turned as she watched the shark circle. Its black eye kept looking at her. Sparkie was swimming in distracting bursts now, trying to get the shark's attention but it was looking at her. Sparkie was afraid, Lara realised and yet stupidly she wasn't. The shark's black, hard, uncaring eye looked at her. It was hard-wired for power, it had only known a life of power. It was a beautiful, beautiful animal, she thought. It circled closer and Sparkie rushed at it and hit it in the gills again. The shark's tail flexed almost brushing her as it made a fast turn, swimming fast and then she saw it turn again and it was surging towards her. Sparkie rushed through the water in front of it and it negligently opened its mouth and Sparkie's fin was dangling. Pain. Lara felt it and the dolphin's love and panic for her. The dolphin turned slowly, already behind the shark. Eyes, jaws, teeth coming for her - Lara flicked to the side - it passed her, the force of it so strong in the water and she kicked out at the eye and hit it. The shark twisted away. She pulled her leg back towards her and the shark's head moved incredibly fast. And the water clouded red. Pain and Sparkie rushing in.

And Maika's voice. - Hold on!

And the shark came back. The water was a turmoil of bubbles and the surge of body around her. Sparkie was there and the shark was there! She twisted and breathed water and the hose from the rebreather trailed in the green water like a snake of bound hair.

I must swim away, she thought, but her legs wouldn't work. Then the nanocu took over and her mind began to recite the prayer. Thank you for love, for light, for children. For sweet air and water. Thank you for my love. Maika! She cried.

-Hold on, he said. - Oh Lara, hold on. I'm almost there.

She didn't want to die. She didn't want to die. She didn't want to die. Receive me and my cells my memory of life. I don't want to die. Sparkie! Sparkie! The dolphin was a frenzy of movement in front of the shark. The water was red and too cold. It was too cold.

He said, -Lara, and his hand caught her body as it hung in the water. His other hand lunged at the shark with the goad at maximum charge. It jerked unnaturally in the water and swam away.

Lara Lara Lara. Silence.

He heard their voices but couldn't understand at first what they were saying. Then he heard Iessa.

-The dolphin, Maika. The dolphin.

It was nuzzling him and he realised Sparkie was dying too. He pulled Sparkie to him so that he could position his hand under her and help her to the surface. His other hand held Lara's arm and he swam up into the air. The sky was blue. The dolphin breathed. Lara was floating on her back. He put his arm under her and used his body to support her while he took off her rebreather. He saw the damaged hose.

Her eyes were open. She is so beautiful, he thought. His mind was empty. There was no Lara voice. A great big emptiness existed where there should be comforting warmth.

The boat arrived. Someone jumped into the water to be with the dolphin. He heard them yelling to each other to get the oxygen ready and hitch up some plasma. But he knew it was too late. He passed Lara's body up onto the flat-board.

Someone held out a hand to him. He dived.

The Funeral

The funeral, they held at Owai 5 in the big, ancient, meeting house. Hundreds and hundreds of people came and Maika talked and laughed as he sat there next to her beautiful face, her body in the coffin wrapped in white linen, just the face showing because the shark had almost ripped both her legs off, wrenched her spinal cord and left her broken.

So many faces, kisses, hugs. So many sorries. So much talking. So much aroha. None of it helped. The children were there too, although except for Iessa they were all adults now, adults with their own missions.

Estar came in the afternoon with Sena.

“Sorry Maika,” he said and he held out his hand in the tech greeting. Maika saw the forearm tatoo, the life legend, the whakapapa. Maika saw his own number in the MSD1 slot and realised that Estar was one of his embryos.

Maika thought, I am Estar’s MSD1, Sena is his foster mother. It all seemed too connected. There was not enough space to be human in this world. Not enough clear water to just swim unconnected from duty, from work, from people, from the great cause of regrowing the world. Not enough time to be with the people you loved.

They took turns sitting on the other side of the coffin. His children came and sat with him on his side and he tried not to feel separate from them, tried not to let it show, but selfishly all he could think of was his own loss. They sang for Lara, always songs filling the void and that was good because she had always loved the singing and dancing. Then they prayed and had the service and her body was placed in the cremation bag. Everyone else went and ate and the family sat there with her body until the burning was over and then there was the wake in the PD, and too much emja and who knew what other drugs and always the guitar playing and always the singing. He didn’t close his eyes that night.

The next day they went in a cat out to Owai 1 to scatter her ashes. Iessa sat up in the bow of one of the hulls, crying. She had on a breathing mask so she could safely leave the domes and he heard her wailing, caught on the wind.

When they reached Owai 1, they scattered the ashes in the cyst lagoon. It was raining. Someone said it was a good omen., Everyone sang again, and someone said a prayer, and then his children sang for her. Estar joined them.

When it was over he said he’d stay at Owai 1 that night to catch up on a few things and he’d be back the next day. He watched them sail away in the cat, then walked down to the dock. He took off his clothes and dived into the water and then he found he couldn’t move his limbs. He was paralysed. He heard a splash and Marco dived in with him and took his unresisting arm and hauled him back to the dock. Estar heaved him out of the water then and they called the medics.

‘What have you done,’ he said when he could speak again. He was strapped to a bed and he couldn’t move.

‘The colony needs you,’ Marco said. ‘Your grief is overwhelming you now, but it will pass. I know you don’t believe that, but it will pass.’

‘But what have you done to me.’

‘We’ve inserted a block to stop you swimming away and drowning yourself. You had too many suicidal indicators,’ said Estar.

‘How...’

‘When you were asleep.’

‘I haven’t slept. I couldn’t.’

‘I prepared the programme. It only took seconds to insert.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘I tracked you through the nanocu,’ said Estar. ‘When the brainwave changed, I inserted the programme.’

Maika’s blood turned cold. He said to Estar, ‘You did that to me when I was grieving for my wife?’

Marco looked uncomfortable. ‘We both thought it was the right thing to do,’ he said.

Maika said, ‘I thought you were my friend.’

‘I am.’

And Maika smiled a knowing smile. ‘I thought at least you would understand.’ He turned his head away and looked at the wall.

The Return of Sparkie

Iessa sat on the edge of the jetty leaning back against the wooden railing. She listened to the water lapping and the bump, bump noise her kayak made banging against the wooden pile and wondered what she was doing there. Sparkie was dying and the animeds were bringing her in from the sea cyst dome to see if maybe Iessa could help. But what can I do, she thought? I am only thirteen years old and my mother has just been ripped to pieces by a great white shark. I can’t heal a dying dolphin.

She didn't even want to try. It was enough just being a trainer—coercer of her seal, Nita. Truthfully, she didn't have the energy for it. She had no energy for anything. The world was not the place she had thought it was. She had thought it was full of life when really it was full of death and she had thought it was light and happy. It wasn't; it was a dark, heavy place where nothing seemed to go right anymore.

She thought back over the last two weeks since Lara had died. After Lara's funeral Maika had tried to commit suicide and when her Nonny heard, she'd had a stroke and been taken to the medic centre. Iessa had to go and live with Marco and Sena. Where once she had been protected by two parents who were leaders in the sea cyst domes, now there were only two mind people, and Lexi. She had no time for mind people, her whole life had been about swimming.

Her future had been laid down. She was going to be a coercer like her mother, with her own dolphin and seal. She was going to grow the best strands, swim in the ocean and call up the fish. Now what was going to happen? She didn't know.

It had been so fast, so unexpected. That made it harder, made it seem more unfair. What was it like for people with no mind-senses when someone they loved died? Did they feel the pain of the shark ripping open the flesh? Did they hear the anguish of the leaving soul, screaming love, screaming that it wasn't ready?

She didn't think so. The memory of Lara's death reverberated in her mind, stopped sleep. She would wake in the middle of the night hearing it. Then when she got up in the morning in that too silent cell, she'd feel tired and angry. She'd look at Lexi eating his breakfast and she'd leave and go to the food hall.

Later she'd see him working his strand at the pool and she would swim around her own strand and have no energy to do it properly. No energy to show him that he was a second rate orphan from some cold mountain who did not deserve to share the same sea with her, Iessa. No matter that he grew strands better than all the rest. He couldn't swim.

Estar said she should let Sena help her, but Sena belonged to Lexi. Iessa would rather die herself than let Sena know what she thought.

Out beyond the dome, she finally saw the cat rounding the point. The dome slid apart and the boat came through the seaway. Now it was in the bay, Iessa felt the pain of the dolphin. It brought it all back. This dolphin had fought to save her mother and been willing to sacrifice itself. Inside Iessa something stirred.

She stood up as the cat motored to the jetty and caught the mooring rope they threw her and dropped it around the bollard. A woman came out of the cockpit.

‘Come on board,’ she said, ‘and say hello to Sparkie.’

Iessa grabbed the railing and clambered on to the cat. The sad, dolphin mindspeak was coming from a rectangular tank in the middle of the deck. She leaned over the edge and saw Sparkie supported in a sling in a metre of water. The dolphin had no left pectoral fin and there were scars, some recently healed, some still more like gouged flesh all over her body.

Iessa put her hand on the dolphin’s wet back and felt it quiver beneath her touch. She ran her hand up to just behind the blowhole and then down to Sparkie’s beak.

‘Poor, brave dolphin,’ she said soothingly. She tried to do what Alo would do, tried to send love through her hand, love and hope. The dolphin quivered again. Iessa moved forward so that Sparkie could see her face with both eyes and put her hands on either side of the dolphins head. ‘Don’t die,’ she said. ‘Don’t die, Sparkie.’

The dolphin lifted its head a little as though it was taking a really good look at her and then moved its head slowly from side to side putting gentle pressure on Iessa’s hands.

Iessa didn’t know if she was right in thinking it, but the pressure felt loving and it was as though the dolphin was shaking its sad head and saying, ‘No, I won’t die then. I won’t die Iessa.’

It took more than an hour to attach the boat crane and unload Sparkie in her sling onto the dolphin trolley. The whole time Iessa was touching her and wetting her and keeping her cool. They pushed her down the jetty to the animed centre. It was a large wooden rectangular building. Inside, it had the old fish smell but apart from that it seemed too clean and empty and overly sterile.

Iessa’s nose wrinkled disapprovingly. ‘The tidal pool would be better than this.’

‘We can’t keep her there,’ one of them said. ‘There’s no pen, it’s too deep.’

‘Why not make a temporary pen?’ Iessa asked. ‘There’s children and life in the tidal pool... and strands. I think she’d like it.’

‘We’ll think about it,’ said the woman from the boat.

‘I don’t think it will work,’ said one of the other animeds called George. Iessa knew him from the old days when her seal had been here at the animed centre. He was one of the older ones and his face always looked worried.

‘We could get the cyst techs to make her a cyst pen in the tidal pool,’ said the woman.

‘I don’t like asking the tutors at the pool,’ said George. ‘They’re short of space already. We’ll be asking on Iessa’s whim.’

‘Maybe you haven’t noticed George, but this dolphin is dying. We’ve tried everything out at Owai 1 and nothing has worked. If you keep trying the same things we did, where’s the sense in that?’

George looked at her. ‘All right,’ he said. ‘We’ll com them but we need to get the dolphin into the pool anyway. So let’s do that and get her settled.’

They pushed Sparkie down a ramp into the enclosure. It was round and flat bottomed and about one metre deep. There was enough room for Sparkie to swim and then where the ramp was and at the opposite end, it sloped up gently so that an injured dolphin could beach itself when it felt too tired to swim anymore. Iessa approved it in principle but she didn’t think an unhappy spirit would find any relief in such a place.

Iessa went with George and the woman to com the tidal pool and when she left the pool area Sparkie raised her head. ‘E –E-E-E-E-E-E.

‘Don’t worry, silly,’ Iessa called to her. ‘I’ll be back soon.’

The com-u was in an adjoining room and the face on the screen belonged to a tutor called Dieter. George explained about Sparkie and asked if they could perhaps put a pen in the tidal pool for her.

‘Not a good idea,’ said Dieter. ‘We’re already short of space and the water is too deep for a sick dolphin. Then there are the children too...’

‘Yes,’ said George. ‘We’ve thought of all that but we need to try something different. The dolphin is dying. Iessa thought it might feel happier there.’

‘Well, I’m sorry...’

Iessa went and stood in front of the com-u. ‘I think she needs cheering up, Dieter. I don’t think it’s just physical. If she stays here, I don’t think it will work.’

‘But the children...’

‘They’ll love it,’ said Iessa.

‘No’, said Dieter.

‘This dolphin almost died trying to save my mother,’ said Iessa. ‘Does Lara’s death mean so little that you are unwilling to even try what we suggest?’

‘You know that’s not true.’

‘If Lara were alive do you think she’d be asking you for this same favour if she thought it might save a dolphin’s life?’

‘Possibly.’

‘Do you think she’d be satisfied with no?’

Dieter sighed. ‘Probably not.’

‘Would you have said no if she asked?’

‘I would have said yes,’ he admitted.

‘Well I’m asking for her.’

Dieter sighed again. ‘When am I to expect her?’

‘Just as soon as the techs can rig something up.’

‘Get back to me then.’ The screen went blank.

George had a wry grin on his face. ‘You’re reminding me of your mother,’ he said.

They moved Sparkie in the late afternoon, three days after her arrival at the baydome. The techs had closed off the corner of the tidal pool to the side of the little sandy beach and in effect reproduced a smaller version of the pool at the animed centre. They had also installed a pump unit in the pool to recirculate water directly into the baydome.

They put Sparkie in and Iessa hopped in too and then all sorts of people wandered by to see what was going on. While Iessa was there, Sparkie seemed perfectly happy.

That night two animeds stayed with Sparkie and the next day Iessa arrived at daybreak. Children and adols turned up later but the tidal pool was a naturally quiet place and it didn’t seem to bother the dolphin. The techs had put a clear section in the wall of the enclosure and Sparkie spent a good amount of her time in front of it, looking out at what was going on. Iessa stayed with her in the enclosure but she also swam in

the tidal pool with her friends and sat on the steps and chatted. That evening the same animeds covered the night shift.

Everything went smoothly and Sparkie became more animated. They treated her with oral drugs and used leech paks to try and encourage cell division around her wound sites. The cloned fin was growing but it would still be another couple of months before it was ready for grafting.

The days went by and everyone adjusted to sharing the pool with Sparkie and the animeds. On the third week George came by in the evening and saw a surprisingly pale, thin boy crouching by the pool. He watched as the boy stroked the dolphin and then fully clothed, eased himself on the ramp, down into the water. George was about to go over but something told him to wait. When the boy was waist deep, Sparkie, pushed herself up on the ramp beside him and with a little surge lay her head so that it was in the boy's lap. George saw the boy stroke the dolphin's head and then Iessa came down the steps. She had a pool suit in her hand.

When she saw the boy she gave a grunt of annoyance and said, 'Alo. Why didn't you wait? I've just found one that's your size. I think it must be skinny Jasmine's.'

The boy looked up and smiled at her, 'She wanted me to get in and pet her in the water.'

'That's all very well, but she could have waited, you know. I don't want you to catch a cold. You're just out of hospital.'

George watched as she berated the boy until he got out of the water and went off to put the suit on. As the boy climbed the stairs, the dolphin did the same call that it did with Iessa. The boy turned and said, 'Quiet, pretty one.'

A few minutes later he returned, wearing the suit. He sat on the ramp in the water next to Iessa and the dolphin pushed herself so that she was lying between them.

Well, thought George. Who is that boy? What had she called him, Alo? He would make a damned fine animed.

A day later one of the tutors at the pool told him about Alo and how the medics had already decided he was going to be one of theirs.

A pity, thought George. That's a real pity.

Over the next few weeks Alo became a fixture in the enclosure with the dolphin and Sparkie improved. A month before the grafting operation Alo went back to Tau-cen for his next operation and although Sparkie kept on improving and still loved Iessa, there was no-one who wouldn't acknowledge that Alo had made a real difference.

Lexi Helps Look After Iessa's Strand While She Looks After Sparkie

On the day the dolphin received the new fin graft, Iessa stayed with it in the animeds centre. Sena visited her there that afternoon and didn't come home that night. Iessa was comforting the dolphin to give it a reason to accept the new fin and Sena stayed to make sure the girl was fed and got some sleep.

The next day, Sparkie was not like new but the graft had taken and the dolphin seemed cheered by its new appendage. At Sena's urging, Iessa reluctantly returned to the cell that night and was back with Sparkie for breakfast the next morning. Although they couldn't see the dolphin, everyone sensed that the operation had gone well. The sad tenor of the dolphin's mindspeak, which they felt merely as a tone in the ether, had changed. It felt more sharp and spiky.

Iessa came home early that day. She talked with Marco and Sena and then went out to see friends. When she got back, she and Lexi argued about whose turn it was to go and get the dinner. It felt quite good, normal. They argued later about taking the dishes to the wash-up –whose turn it was to do that. Neither Sena nor Marco intervened. It ended when Lexi stalked coldly off to his room and Iessa slammed the door and shouted, 'I hate you Lexi.'

It was loud enough for all the families in the next two corridors to hear. Most of them smiled. Iessa was back.

Since that day Iessa and Lexi fought constantly at home. At the pool a truce reigned and Lexi continued to look after her strand if she was too busy with the animals. Everywhere else was a war zone. Sena sighed and accepted it, everyone else ignored it. When had it ever been different?

Crazy Maika

He came out of the trance into beta, the programme phased in and he rose to the top of the chamber. Immediately the thread closed under him, the valve above released and he felt the swoosh of new oxygen rich air. The nanocu took over and his thoughts were pulled into the mantra.

Darkest midnight, deepest blue, distant mountain daybreak, sapphire, emerald, peacock, turquoise, azure flowing, chop green, light dappled, surface shimmer, breaking through, sky.

There were 20 chambers in the thread. As he rose, his body gradually rebalanced the elemental air in his bloodstream while his unthinking mind repeated the mantra. The not thinking was a release. He could not exit the programme on the ascent and to descend was untenable now because the thread was closed and airless beneath him.

He continued to rise and in the last chamber the programme cut out. The surface appeared above him and immediately the memories switched on.

No, no, no, no, no. His limbs jerked uncontrollably. He turned and tried to escape back down into deep water.

‘Take him,’ someone said. Arms pulled him into the boat and then the block encompassed his mind and he was put to sleep.

He woke in their cell, naked, lying on their mattress. He felt the gentle rise and fall of the ocean. His eyes went to the porthole which moved in time with the sea beneath them, slowly rhythmically tilting the outside world off centre, off the level. Clouds moved slowly, grey and bleak in the sky. It was day then. He felt the intense calm from drugs and redaction. He wasn’t hungry. They must have forced some nutrition into him while he’d been out. Who’d been at him this time, Marco or Estar?

There was no point getting up. The room was empty, completely devoid of anything. Nothing was there that had been there when she was alive. No emja, no pipe, nothing with which to create fire. No knives to cut or impale yourself on, no glass or ceramics. They had even replaced the porthole with reinforced plastocarb. No tools. It would have been overkill, except if they had been there he would have tried to use them all. There was nothing with which to hang himself. No projections up high, no chairs. Nothing which he could pile onto something else to get high enough if he managed to

steal something that he could attach to the ceiling. Nothing small or hard or soft enough to choke on, although he had tried stuffing things into his mouth with that idea in mind. Hence no clothes and the bareness of the room. Just the mattress and the cover which were of a particularly sturdy linen construction, impervious to his bare hands and teeth.

The com-u had been removed too on the off chance that he could have worked out some way of electrocuting or poisoning himself. He lay there now with no other option but to lie there. He sparked his nanocu and watched their life history as he did these days, constantly. When he saw one of their children he felt guilty at what he was doing, at what he had in that split second, become. But he couldn't help himself. She called him from death as she had called him in life and the force of it was like gravity. He had no choice but to accede.

Marco in another room in the colony with a very sophisticated com-u, read Maika through the nanocu. He was his oldest friend. Maika needed to die, yet it was Marco's job to save him. It had been almost 19 months now and there was no improvement. Nothing that they had done could overcome Maika's death wish. Marco grieved constantly for his friend - every time he saw him, and when he was back at Owai 5. Loyalty. It was not just a word. He rubbed his face with his two hands, massaged the pressure points above the eyes circling his fingertips over his forehead, then the eyes themselves. He sat there staring at the com-u and admitted to himself that he was tired of it. He got up and walked around the room, stood in front of the porthole looking out at the swell of the sea. Maika wanted to swim away and die. That was all he wanted. He wanted to swim until he got so cold that his body would slip beneath the waves and he would stop breathing air.

But there was Iessa to think about - Iessa who still had hope. If he did the thing he was thinking of doing, how would she react? What would it mean to her or Sena or Lexi? Since the dolphin had recovered she was almost happy. And not just Iessa, but Sena and Lexi too. Marco gazed at the green roll of the swell. Who was he going to betray?

They travelled in the same pod to the tidal pool. It was only a five minute journey and although they sat next to each other, talking was out of the question. At the

pool stop, Lexi got out and climbed the steps to the pool enclosure and Iessa stayed behind to talk to friends, who were waiting for her in the transtunnel.

When she came in, he was already in the water circling his overgrown strand. It had several cysts which he had misjudged and left the day before and they had become too big for pods. Now he'd have to try to grow them on for some other use. His arms pulled him through the water and kicking strongly, he dived deep to suck in air from a valve and continue the lower circuit. His body relished the water, the cold feel of it, the way it grew strands, the way it fed them all. It was like air to him now, like his second home. His swimming lacked style but he almost made up for it with power. Almost. The price he paid was a lack of grace, a crablike progression through the water, when everyone else was streamlined and fluid.

Iessa entered the pool and stood in the shallow water at the edge of the artificial lagoon and called. The dolphin and the seal raced in from the outer bay dome, voicing their joy into the ether, and cavorting and speeding around her, jumping and splashing and wetting her. Her face smiled but he heard her, stern voiced, telling them to cut that out now. And magically, both animals stopped their mad antics and began to glide almost sedately through the turquoise water. Iessa slipped in with them, Sparkie swam close and Iessa reached out for her dorsal fin. As Lexi watched, the dolphin sped through the gap out into the baydome with Iessa in tow and the seal swimming beside them.

In the three months it had taken to clone Sparkie's new fin Iessa had left the dolphin only to eat and to sleep in their cell. If Lexi had wanted to insult her or be cruel to her or to exclude her it would have been impossible because she wasn't there.

At the pool everyone, including Lexi, did what they could to help Iessa. In Lexi's case, at first it had amounted to staying out of her way and being polite when she returned to the cell each night. He would have done more to ease the grieving of the dolphin but he had no gift with animals.

Instead he offered to look after her strand. Since that day he had been growing her cysts. Truthfully he liked the busyness of it. He still hated her, but he hated seeing her so unhappy more. He was used to the joy and spark of her, the forcefulness, the bubble of life when she was around. She lacked the energy to torment him. He missed the challenge of coming up against her and fighting it out. She was his enemy. It didn't

seem natural to feel sorry for her. Alo had come back and made it easier for everybody somehow. They had just gone on from there.

Lexi thought about the joy that had ricocheted around the cavern when the seal and the dolphin had been there. He still had Iessa's cyst to abscise, and then he'd have to call forth a new one for her and then he had his own strand to take care of. That was a lot of work but seeing the dolphin speeding out through the entrance with Iessa, he knew it was worth it.

Marco Is Loyal

According to the forecasters, there was a storm coming. Marco didn't doubt they were right. The wind howled noisily around the dome, everywhere there was the clack, clack, clack of metal tack on the boats. The choppy sea and the rise and fall motion of the floor beneath his feet would have told him that alone. Everyone was on storm detail, tightening ropes, fastening portholes, ensuring the storm moorings were all set. There was a concerted push to process and store the cysts and then everyone was tying down storm covers and putting away anything that could move. There was a feeling of controlled rush as people darted here and there checking and rechecking. At some time that day Marco made his decision.

He was part of the night watch and in full rain gear when he went to Maika's cell, casually unlocked the door and slipped in. He shut it behind him and locked it from the inside. Maika was lying on his mattress, arms outstretched in a cross shape as though he was in the trance. Marco stood by the door looking at his friend. He could see the outline of every rib under the taut, stretched skin. Maika's face was gaunt. His eyes had a crazy spark. Marco was well aware of the source of the craziness. Everyone, Maika had surmised, was out to thwart him and therefore everyone was his enemy. Today his head turned as Marco entered. Most days he didn't bother acknowledging his existence.

'I think I know why you're here today,' Maika said.

'Yes?'

'And I thank you for it.'

Marco shrugged. 'For what?'

‘For the gun in your belt, of course.’

Marco had hidden the weapon under his coat. Now he got it out and waved it vaguely in the air. ‘What am I going to do with this?’

‘You’re going to point it at my head and shoot me.’

Marco swallowed and said, ‘Yes. Is that what you want? Do you want the memories taken away?’

‘Yes.’

‘Shall I do it now?’

Maika got up off the bed eagerly. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘do it now.’ He rushed over to Marco and knelt on the floor in front of him. ‘Do it now.’ There was a crazy, glad expression on his face. Marco couldn’t take his eyes off Maika’s mouth, at the way the lips were almost invisible, pulled back from the teeth, half smile, half sneer. Desperate. Everything had come out crazy Marco thought.

He put the gun to Maika’s temple and tooled the charge. For a second Maika was gazing up at him and then his body was on the floor twitching and jerking. Marco watched his friend, the contortions of the body, the stretched tight features, until the convulsions abruptly stopped. Maika’s eyeballs were rolled up in their sockets. Marco bent forward and pulled down the eyelids.

He left Maika there and went out into the next room and came back pushing a handcart and carrying a cyst leather cargo bag. He manoeuvred Maika’s body into the bag and hauled it onto the handcart. Then he opened the door and looked. There was no one about. He pushed the cart out into the passage and then carried on through the complex, down to the dock area. A few people hurried past but no-one thought of stopping him. No-one was suspicious. They were all too busy preparing for the storm.

Outside when he pushed open the storm doors the wind and rain whumped into his face and he turned and backed out awkwardly into the full force of the gale. Cold spray whipped off the ocean and mingled with the needling rain, drenching him as he pushed the cart along the pier. It was slippery and the pier was rising with the choppy waves and then falling with a jerk. Marco braced his muscles, aware that he had to be careful. His cold hands clenched the handles of the cart and he pushed until it was in the slight shelter provided by a cage of stacked fish bins. He hauled the bag off the cart and opened it. Maika was lying there with his eyes open.

‘I hope this isn’t a disappointment,’ said Marco. ‘I gave you enough charge to fuse the nanocu. That was all. If you go now they won’t be able to track you.’ He leant down and taking Maika’s hand, pulled him up out of the bag.

Maika stumbled weakly trying to get his balance.

Marco said, ‘Is this what you want?’ He looked at the skeletal, naked man in front of him.

Maika shook his head, groggy from the stunner. His arms hung awkwardly at his side. Then he nodded. He reached out unsteadily and took a step towards Marco who opened his arms and pulled him in, held him and hugged him roughly. ‘I love you man,’ Marco said.

Then Maika pulled back. They stood apart and the gulf of crazy purpose separated them again. The seed of hopelessness grew and forced its acid reality on to the tiny bed of maybe that Marco still had buried somewhere in his subconscious. He took a rebreather out from under his raincoat.

‘I don’t know if you want this,’ he said. ‘You can maybe swim further, so they won’t find you.’

Maika accepted it eagerly. ‘Thanks brother.’ He put it on, years of practice in the concise movements. Then he reached out and gripped Marco’s shoulder before turning and diving into the water. There was the flick of his legs going into the dive and Marco did not see him resurface.

The storm built that night with a tremendous ferocity. Marco kept vigil through the dark hours amidst the incessant howl of the wind, streaks of lightning and thunder which felt like it was shuddering the cells in his body when it crashed overhead. He listened for any mindshout from Maika but none came. He imagined his friend in his weakened state in the ocean swimming towards his death and it seemed to Marco an unimaginable loneliness to die that way. Made bearable only in comparison to the torment of living.

He thought of the laughing they’d done, the nights spent talking, drinking, smoking emja in the PD since they were young boys - there must have been thousands of them surely. He thought of Lara and Iessa. Lara the beautiful, who had belonged to his friend. And Iessa who would now hate him.

When dawn came he contacted Estar on his nanocu and told him what he'd done. Estar said nothing. There was a silence, an empty plain which Marco's guilt and grief seeped into like a river in flood.

'I'm sorry,' Marco said. 'I had to do it.'

Then he heard Estar letting out a long, pent up breath.

'I know,' said Estar. 'I know. Thank you Marco. You did the right thing.'

Maika And The Dolphins

Maika's body slipped through the water. It was early spring, a little cold but not too bad. It would take a while then, he thought. He might as well enjoy it. So he stayed down below the surface, fluid, following the direction reading on the rebreather, putting metres and then kilometres between himself and Owai 1. It was just coming up to high tide when he left and for the first hour he swam in a current free ocean. Later when the tide turned, it served his purpose and he let himself go with it. Even without a suit he was not beginning to tire. After all those years of working with the ocean, his body effortlessly did what it had learned to do. He still had several hours left in him. He kicked effortlessly and his body slid dolphin like through water which felt slick and cold like a second skin. Visibility was low and he didn't mind. He was heading nowhere into nothing, into an unknown that was more vast than the ocean

For the first time ever, he regretted his webbing. His technique and his genes and the rebreather mask were going to prolong the inevitable. Every so often he surfaced into a boiling mess of huge, white topped, racing waves. He saw a dark starless sky, and he was pelted by needling rain and heard the wind roaring. Then he would dive down again into the muted underwater sounds which in their familiarity felt like a huge and comforting silence to him.

After five hours he began to feel a little tired. His muscles were weak from the lowered work rate since he'd 'been sick'. The cold was finally beginning to tell on his suit-less body. Of course if he stopped swimming it would all happen much faster, but somehow that didn't seem right for a cystmaster. He was sure that Lara would not approve. She would not approve of anything he'd done since the shark attack. Suicide would not have been an option for her. But he could not bear the space created by her

absence, or the grey colour of the silence in his mind where once there had been that continuous link with her. He lived in a world where there was no touching of her, no grounding of the senses. Before to have brushed her fingertips, seen how she flicked her hair away from her eyes, felt her hand on his arm it would have given a true plumb to his world. Now he felt constantly as though he was on a pitching ocean and a tidal wave was on its way. The love for his children was nothing to the chasm of sorrow in which he found himself suspended day after day. He was in a trench at the bottom of the ocean and no ray of light could reach him

More hours passed of moving and letting himself be taken by the current. Dawn came and he was truly cold now and sluggish. He thought it couldn't be long and he welcomed it but kept swimming still underwater. When he sensed that he was very tired, he surfaced to a continuous, rolling swell and a dark, overcast day. It was grey and unfriendly, but he would rather die looking at the sky he decided. He slowly stripped off the rebreather and it drifted away, carried by the current in the opposite direction to the wind. There was no break in the clouds above but he thought he saw enough of the sun to see that the rebreather was heading east. That was good. They were heading for the Americas thousands of miles away. Shutting his eyes, he lay on his back and let himself drift in the swell. He felt very sleepy.

When he heard the e-e-e-e-e he thought it was a dream. Then he felt the bodies circling him. He opened his eyes and saw fins and counted them. There were five. A snout nudged him off his back so that he became upright and was forced to tread water against his will. The faces of the dolphins popped out of the water to look at him. Faces with a perpetual grin.

E-E-E-E-E-E they said to him.

And he said, 'Go away, I'm not Lara. I don't want you.' And one of them came close and nipped his hand. Then swam on.

He was angry at that. 'Go away,' he said again.

Maybe it was the same dolphin or maybe a different one, but his hand was nipped again and again. He had never encountered that sort of hostility from Lara's dolphins. When he tried to swim away, they wouldn't let him. When he tried to slip beneath the waves one of them would push him back up again. His legs kicked out at them but he was weak and feeble and they would either evade his flailing limbs or shunt their own bodies against him and cram him so there was no space to do anything.

He was incensed by this senseless torture. Why were they doing this to him? His befuddled brain tried to think of ways to get rid of them but he was in their world, too tired, powerless and now he didn't even have the rebreather. In the end he gave up and just let them poke him and nudge him. He couldn't fall asleep because every time his eyes closed they nipped him into wakefulness and the fire of anger filled him with adrenaline and a bitter resentment that even they, were now trying to hinder him.

Eventually he became too tired and his eyes shut. He heard the roar of death approaching, heard the crash of it around him and imagined his body fathoms deep being crushed by the pressure of the ocean, being eaten by whichever creatures felt like taking the final pickings of his bones. The idea of it seemed fitting and true. He felt his body falling down to the depths, rolling over and over, tumbled breathless, until it lay on the bottom of the ocean. There was a light and he welcomed it. Soon he would be with Lara. He clawed his way forward towards death eagerly and opened his eyes to the light and to blue-green water. A grey cliff towered above him. The bottom of the ocean was the top of the ocean. His body was scoured as the wave carried him forwards. The dolphins had herded him to shore. There was no energy left to scream his frustration. His head fell down on the stony, gritty beach.

Exhausted. He slept and dreamt. In his dream there were ants crawling on him. Hundreds and thousands of them. They were biting and stinging. He tried to brush them off but he couldn't so then he got up and dived under the water and he got rid of them but his skin still throbbed and itched where they had stung him. He saw Lara then and she said there's a bush at the top of the path. If you get leaves from the bush and rub it on your skin the pain will go away. What sort of a bush? Climb up the path and you'll see it there. So he waded out of the water and followed a dirt path which angled across the front of the cliff. At the top of the path there was an opening in the rock which he thought was a cave but then he saw it was a tunnelled track leading through the cliff. He followed it and it opened out onto another dirt track which lead down through a glade of tree ferns. There was a bush there with glossy leaves. He took some and crushed them and rubbed them on his skin. Immediately the itching went away and Lara was there again and he tried to work out why she wasn't dead anymore.

What is the name of that bush he said?

Don't you remember?

No.

I can't tell you. You'll have to remember, yourself.

She disappeared and he opened his eyes. He was still lying on the beach and the tide had gone out further and the beach was washed clean of debris. No seaweed or driftwood. The high tide mark was a couple of metres up the side of the cliff and a narrow trail, barely perceptible climbed diagonally across its face. He staggered to his feet and with dragging footsteps and shaking with the effort of it, he made his way to the bottom of the trail. He hauled himself up, clinging to the cliff face sometimes, with trembling, grasping fingers and curled, numbed toes because he was cold and the path was narrow and slippery and he was afraid of falling. He needed to see what was at the top.

When he reached the end of the path he found a cave area which lead further back into the cliff. It formed a tunnel which he followed and came out onto a small ledge overlooking a valley. There was a dirt path which descended down through low scrub and flaxes to a brown river. At the edge of the path was a glossy leaved plant. He picked some leaves and rubbed them and they released a fresh scent into the air. The juice felt soothing on his skin. He didn't know what was happening. Maybe he was already dead and in the spirit world with Lara. He lay down on the soil under the bush and closed his eyes and slept.

Iessa And Bluedust

She felt unwell. There was something wrong with her arm, something wrong with her brain. She couldn't function. If that was what she was feeling now, what might death be like?

Iessa kicked out at the wall by her bed. The wall did not care and she wished illogically that Lexi was there. She wanted someone to hit, someone to scream at, someone to bring some part of her back to life. She could imagine his stubborn face and she was smashing it, punching him until he bled.

So tired. She was so tired. All she wanted to do was close her eyes and sleep but she couldn't. She saw her mother's body, white and ripped apart and the dolphin floating limbless. She saw the black eyes of the shark.

When it had happened she had felt it – heard her mother’s cry of anguish and it had not been for herself bleeding to death but for the dolphin who fought to save her. But it had been too small and only one and Lara could not make it to a strand, could not make it to Maika who was calling to her frantically telling her that he was coming. He had been too far and the strand was too far and the shark was a great white. That was the thing, Iessa thought. There was nothing Lara could have done because the shark was a great white.

Iessa had felt it, heard it, seen it. She had thought it was the worst thing that could happen. But now eighteen months later, eighteen months of watching her father turn away from life, now the worst had happened. He was gone and she didn’t even know if he was dead. She thought about Marco. It was strange. She hated him and she didn’t hate him. He had given her a download and she had seen him giving Maika the rebreather. She had seen the look on Maika’s face and his dive into the cold sea. For the first time since Lara died, Iessa recognised her father. Marco could not let Maika be that crazy stranger in the locked room. She understood that but still she could not forgive him. To look at him made her want to vomit.

Why was Maika like that? Why did he act the way a dolphin would have? She held her hands up, examined the webbing and did the same with her feet, lifting her leg and flexing her toes so the full extent of the stretched skin could be seen. She lifted her tunic and pressed her hands to her ribs. The bones beneath her fingers flexed differently to a normal human being. She needed fewer breaths because her oxygen uptake metabolism was slightly different. She reacted like fire when other people would just shrug. What did all those changes mean? Leon, what did you do to us?

She flung an arm across her eyes to block out the light. It felt like years since she’d slept properly. She got off the bed and kneeling in front of her trunk, opened the lid and slid her hand down the left side under her spare tunics. Her fingers closed around the tiny canister. She took it out and looked at it. Turned it over in her fingers. It felt hard and cold. Why was life like this? Setting the dose, she inserted the nozzle into her nostril. The drug hissed into her and then she felt good. The walls glowed golden. Her hand brushed her hair away from her eyes and she heard the sound of her arm moving. The light in the room invaded the cells of her body turning them golden too. The darkness went away.

Dancing to the cupboard, she took out her favourite tunic. It was black. It matched her hair. The smooth, soft fabric slipped like dark water over her skin. She spun around. It flared. I am the whirlpool of dark water. In the mirror, her dark eyes shone like jewels. Slowly, she smoothed her hair down over her shoulders and over the back of her neck which felt notched like a bone stairway from her body to her head. Her fingertips touched gently the outline of her heart shaped face. A lone tendril of hair caressed her cheek. She pushed it back.

Tomasi had always liked her in this tunic and she was almost out of the bluedust. Maybe he could give her more.

* * * * *

8 - The End of The War

Leon Tells Lexi Everything

Two weeks after Lexi's fourteenth birthday, Leon came.

He and Iessa got back from the pool and Sena told him that Leon had commed inviting Lexi to have dinner in his cell in the blue quarter that night. His heart started beating faster.

'What time?' he asked.

'Whenever you got home.'

He went there, jogging along the pod track to avoid all the people in the corridors coming and going from the dining hall.

Leon opened the door, and invited him in. Lexi took two steps into the cell and then stood awkwardly in the tiny space, looking around. Not that there was much to look at, just a small table covered with food, two stools, a smaller than usual lounge and a doorway going to the sleeping space. The cell Leon had been allocated for this visit was just like the one he and Sena had first stayed in when they came to the colony.

'You've grown,' said Leon and Lexi realised he was just a little shorter now than Leon, and probably just as heavy. Leon was looking thin. Lexi looked at him more closely but his skin looked tanned and normal, the tired eyes, clear and undimmed.

'I take it I pass.'

'Yeah,' Lexi said, grinning shyly, 'You don't miss anything, do you.'

'If you don't have any psycho senses it helps.' Leon gestured for Lexi to take a seat on one of the stools, then stiffly lowered himself onto the remaining one, crossed one leg gracefully over the other, and then leaned back against the wall with a sigh. 'At some stage Lexi, you finally realise that you're getting older.'

Lexi didn't know how to reply.

Leon smiled gently, 'Good move, my young friend.'

The table was spread with food, some sorts that Lexi had never seen before and the normal fish, vegetables and seaweed that he was used to.

‘Have you tried any of this before,’ Leon asked waving a hand over the selection.

‘Not that stuff.’ Lexi recognised the yellow, spiky fruit as pineapple but he hadn’t eaten it before. The dish of cold, creamy fish, Leon told him was raw fish in coconut cream. There was another large, yellow fruit that had been cut in quarters that Lexi didn’t recognise and Leon said it was a pawpaw.

‘I’ve come here from the islands,’ he said and dished some of the raw fish into a bowl for Lexi.

Lexi kept his eyes lowered and concentrated on shovelling the food in. He saw Leon only once or twice a year, always short visits because Leon was so busy and it always took a little while to find some common ground. Now Lexi was also more aware of how important Leon was and that made it harder - the oldest genemaster, the Pasifika genemaster, the caretaker of the genes for their area. Leon was the person who allowed the release of new clones, the one who chose when the land was ready for more species of plants and animals. He was the conservator of all that came before for their area. And Leon knew about Helena and the tunnels.

When Lexi finished eating Leon got up, went into the sleeping area and came back with a parcel. ‘This is what you came for. Open it,’ he said.

Lexi took off the cyst leather wrapping. There were six books inside. Six books? He opened the top book and saw Helena’s writing and the years flooded back on him in a stomach twisting rush.

Leon said, ‘It’s all there, your life with Helena. Maybe start at the end Lexi, when she was dying. You’ll find out why she didn’t call. And you’ll see how much she loved you. As for the rest - my part of it - there’s a boring story, a lecture. OK?’

Lexi nodded.

‘But before we start, I need a cup of cha. Could you get me one from the dispenser?’

‘Sure.’ Lexi got up and habit forced him to stack the dirty dishes and take them down the corridor to the clean up. He washed them quickly and then collected Leon’s cha and water for himself. When he got back to the cell, Leon was on the lounge with his feet up.

‘I flew myself here today,’ he said. ‘I don’t have a nanochip, so it takes it out of me.’ Lexi moved one of the stools closer to Leon, and put the cha on it.

‘Thanks.’

‘Why don’t you have a nanochip?’

‘It’s like psycho-senses. Genemasters are not allowed them.’ His hand reached into his belt pouch and he took out a com-u and placed it on the stool beside his cha. ‘I’m allowed one of these. It’s enough.’

‘Anyway the story. Your tunnels were built by Michael van Thorson. You’ll find out more about him at the institute next year. He was the one responsible for the way we rebuilt the world. Some say he was a monster and some say he was a saviour. I think the latter.’

‘Anyway the tunnels were for himself and his family but he didn’t go there, he came here, to Aotearoa. He was, by the way, the first genemaster. Just before his death he told the other genemasters that there were people in your tunnels and that perhaps they could carry out an experiment with them. The people agreed to take part in that experiment and they did so ever since, until Helena died.’

‘And the experiment was simply this. What happens when people grow up without the effects of the new world order? What happens when they grow up without the cooperative gene?’

‘But I have the cooperative gene.’

‘You do Lexi but it isn’t switched on. You didn’t eat the food of the new world until you were six, or at least you ate very little of it.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘All of the food plants that we grow have been genetically altered and adapted so that we were able to grow food suited to the new climates. Every genetically altered food has in its chromosomes a trigger gene that will switch on the cooperative gene.’

Lexi’s brow creased. ‘So the plants in the tunnels were different?’

‘Yes. They had very old, pure genes.’

‘So when Helena said someone had to look after the plants, that was true?’

‘They were special. So were all the seed stocks that she and her ancestors had maintained over those 300 years.’

‘I guess it didn’t need to be her and me.’

‘No, but she didn’t want to let Grace down. By then, their knowledge had become so specialized that there wasn’t anyone better able to do it. Helena was in charge of one of the most important food plant collections of the times, Lexi. And she didn’t let me down. She didn’t let you down. ’

Lexi leaned forward on his knees with his head in his hands and then looked up at Leon. ‘There were so many plants here when I first came. It didn’t make sense to me. I thought she was just attached to our plants the way you can grow attached to a person. I thought she just loved them because we had always looked after them.’

‘Plant geneticists have been in there curating them since you left Lexi. They are a very important stock.’

Lexi shook his head. ‘I didn’t understand that - why we were there, why we couldn’t be here.’ He stood up, wanting to move around but there was no room to move and he sat again. He looked at Leon.

‘And I don’t really have the cooperative gene,’ he said, disgusted. ‘I’m sick of being different.’

‘You’re not different. You’re proof.’

‘Of what?’

‘Of the importance of love. Maybe people no longer need the cooperative gene although I doubt that somehow, but in the way of life that they lived at the end of the twenty-first century they had forgotten about what life meant them to be. Humans are a higher order animal that prospers in cooperative environments. Life in the 21st century wasn’t like that. Back then it was one great competition of legalised greed. People had always tended to get greedy Lexi. And in every society where they were allowed to continue taking, that society always imploded, collapsed. Michael and his team realised that it would go on forever and we as a species would kill the Earth. They believed there was something wrong with the human makeup.

‘So the cooperative gene was invented. A complex of genes in reality – a testosterone leveller, a reward gene, it gave a bigger emotional buzz when someone appreciated you, made people want to be liked, made them want to do things for others, made them intensely loyal not just to people, Lexi, but to causes and philosophies. The thing they had to be loyal to, besides each other was the planet, to regrowing life.

‘When the war ended the viruses were rampant. For a while, if you moved outside your area you were likely to die a fairly instantaneous death. Funny how being

cooped up with others and needing to cooperate to survive – funny how that can conspire sometimes to make you a better person.

‘They controlled people initially with access to food. And then the geneticists were busy collecting sperm and eggs from those who weren’t affected by radiation. And that’s when they first introduced the cooperative gene complex – homozygous genes with dominant alleles - in each case it would be expressed also in its heterozygous form. It was incorporated into every egg and every sperm, to be distributed to the clamouring masses. You only needed to have one jelly baby to make you want a real one, Lexi.

‘So the embryos became a commodity and another way of controlling the people. And who wouldn’t want an embryo if as well as getting a pure baby you could also have a gene that resisted malaria, or one of dozens of other selected traits.

‘There was another payoff. People couldn’t select the race of their baby. They had to take what they could get –thus supposedly the end of racism which had been rampant up to the 21st century. And there was another clause Lexi. They had to prove that they were decent human beings to get an embryo in the first place.

‘Then there was the nanocu – how convenient to have your own little com-u permanently in your head –you could get life histories any fact you wanted to know just by sparking your nanocu. But the purpose of the nanocu was so that everyone would know the history of our planet. Everyone would know what it was before and how much we had lost – and everyone would have exactly the same story without the myth.

‘But all of these things were making the genemasters uncomfortable. How would they know the other effects that the gene was having on humanity? So they set up experiments around the world to see what happened when the cooperative gene wasn’t switched on. You were one of those experiments Lexi, so was Helena, so was Grace, so was I.

‘You?’

‘No genemaster has the cooperative gene.’

‘Why?’

‘We have to make decisions for the good of humanity as a whole, for the good of the planet. We have a different focus to our allegiance; it’s different in its intensity.’

‘Did she want to do it? To be there all by herself - with just me.’

‘She loved you. If you read the diaries you’ll see that on the whole she did want to be there. Sometimes she had her doubts.’

‘How did you feel about her being there?’

‘Me?’ Leon looked at Lexi. ‘That’s an interesting question. Why do you ask?’

‘Because I want to know?’

Leon looked away. ‘I felt that I was doing the wrong thing –when she was alive and especially after she died. If I had the same choice to make now I would decide differently.’

Lexi sighed. ‘Did she have a choice?’

‘Yes. But what sort of a choice. She had her mother and me - a genemaster with an agenda, to advise her.’

‘And Marco later,’ said Lexi, ‘he tried to get her to leave. About me. What did you discover?’

‘About you in particular? You were well loved, brought up by a woman who was well loved. All the way back through the generations, love was there and honesty and cooperation. You didn’t need the cooperative gene. And all of you were very talented in some way – more talented given the circumstances than theory would have predicted. Although the genemasters often gave the experiment people good genes, the way you and Helena had the best.

‘Why?’

‘The genemasters are often picked from the experiments. You could be a genemaster.’

‘Why would I want to be?’

‘Exactly. Anyway, that was why you were in the tunnels.’

‘I was all alone when she died. Why didn’t she call?’

‘She tried and she couldn’t. Read about it in the diary.’

Lexi had left the books sitting on the table while Leon was talking, although his eyes had been drawn to them, again and again.

‘It was funny,’ he said now, ‘seeing her writing like that. No-one writes these days.’

‘No,’ said Leon. ‘Between mindspeech and the com-u there isn’t much need to write. How are you getting on with Iessa?’

‘Better not ask.’ Lexi picked up the diaries and put them back in the wrapping and Leon seeing him getting ready to go, pulled himself stiffly up off the lounge.

‘Thanks for dinner,’ said Lexi.

‘I used to do that for Helena and Grace, bring food from strange places.’

‘I never had any.’

‘You weren’t meant to know I’d been there. I brought you flour and sugar so Helena could make cakes. She said you liked it.’

‘So that was you. She said my father had brought it.’

‘Sometimes she had to lie. I’m sorry.’

Leon walked to the door and opened it. Lexi felt those clear gray eyes on him and looked up.

Leon said, ‘I’m going to Tau-cen tomorrow. I may not see you again this trip. I’ll be passing through again in a month or two.’

‘OK.’ Lexi tapped the parcel of books against his thigh. ‘When I was little I asked you what you thought of Helena and you said she was one of the best people you knew.’

Leon nodded.

‘If I asked you again now, what would you say?’

Leon looked directly at Lexi. ‘I’d still say the same thing. But I would also say, she was like a daughter to me and I failed her.’

‘Sena said to me once, Helena made a choice and she would have had good reasons for the choice she made.’

‘I hope so.’

They faced each other awkwardly. In the end Leon went to pat him on the back, but Lexi did what he would have done with Marco. He put his arms around Leon and gave him a hug. Then he left, shutting the door quietly behind him.

Iessa Needs To Know

Lexi began to read the last diary when he got back to the cell. Questions which had always bothered him were finally answered. But also it brought immense sadness. Reading her writing was like switching on her voice in his mind. He remembered what it had felt like being immersed in her love and loving her back and he missed her with an intensity which had dulled over the years to a mere ache.

He cried himself to sleep for the first time in eight years.

Later he woke in the middle of the night, disoriented, nagged awake by strange thoughts and dreams. He couldn't seem to rouse himself enough to get away from them and then he realised that what was playing in his mind was a subconscious broadcast from Iessa and he lay there rigidly angry, infuriated that it was even possible for her to ruin his sleep. He went to block her, then stopped. What was she doing?

Iessa was walking down a corridor. It twisted to the right and then there were blue stairs climbing up into a different part of the complex.

'Where is he?' She stopped to listen outside each door that she passed. She was looking for a particular mental signature. Lexi didn't know who and didn't want to know. If she had to slut her way around the colony, let her.

Again he went to block. But then he heard her say to herself –Where are you, Leon?

What is going on, he thought? Iessa's mind felt predatory. It was all weird. Nothing felt right.

He got up quickly and pulled on his clothes. Then he was running towards the blue quarter, towards Leon's room. It'd take him at least 10 minutes to get there. He couldn't beat her. There were only 2 corridors before she found the right door and it wouldn't take 10 minutes.

Lexi felt her burst of triumph when she arrived. She knocked softly, and opened the door which was not locked. Lexi saw a darkened room, heard the slow, even breathing of someone deeply asleep. He ran harder, unsure of what she was going to do, aware of the unusual malevolence in her energy.

She took out a small hard object that she had been fingering in her pocket, tiptoed over to Leon sleeping on the bed. Lexi kept running, not wanting to risk mind-shouting her to stop whatever crazy thing she had going on. She wouldn't listen. He needed to be there physically to stop her. Please Leon, wake up, he thought frantically.

In the dark room, Iessa turned the canister over in her fingers. It was filled with bluedust – a pity to waste it on Leon, but without it she wouldn't be able to control him. She moved closer and stood beside the bed for a moment looking down at him. Sleeping, he no longer looked like the hawk. Now he just looked like some ordinary, soft, old man. She moved her hand carefully to his face and ejected the contents of the

canister and the noise woke him. His eyes turned in their sockets to look at her and she stepped back. His mouth struggled to work as his eyes dulled from alert to drugged stupor.

With heavy arms, she slipped her tunic off her shoulders and down over her naked breasts. It caught on her hips and she pushed it down to her feet and stepped out of it, the last vestige of normality, gone. There was a feeling inside her now, controlling her, making her do this thing that her brain screamed she'd regret. She couldn't stop herself. She pushed down the frantic upwelling inside. She needed to know the truth. For a few seconds she stood there looking down at him. He looked grey and old. Then she lifted the covers and slipped into the bed, pushing herself up against his body.

The door opened suddenly. In the light from the doorway she saw Lexi and his shout reverberated in her mind. –Jessa!

-What are you doing here?

- What do you think? Stopping you from doing something stupid.

- Go away. Get out.

-I'd love to but you're coming with me.

He strode over to the bed, pulled the covers back and grabbed her arm. Her body was taut and resisting. A head snapping thump of a slap resounded on his face. He let go and reeled back. Her eyes glistened blackly. He grabbed her hair, yanked, and she squealed and sprang out at him, knocking him back on to the floor. He writhed beneath her trying to twist away while her fingers raked the air above his eyes. Desperately, he tried to swipe her hand away. It hovered above his face and he grabbed frantically and managed to grasp it and hold her off. Her elbow jabbed his eye as she wrenched herself free and he loosened his hold, stunned by the pain. She came at him again and he swung his arm hard and knocked her onto the floor then rolled on her and pinned her down. They were both panting.

Her eyes blazed into his.

- I hate you. She screamed it into his head.

- Not as much as I hate you, you mad bitch.

He forced back the urge to hit her. Instead, he needled his mind into hers, articulating point by point how he would slap her, dislocate her arm if he had to, even break her leg if she did not come with him now. He used the heaviness of his body, his

height stretched on top of her, most of all, his open mind which told her that he was absolutely fed up with her behaviour. There was no softness. There was nothing he would not do to stop her.

‘All right,’ she hissed.

He rolled off. She got up, stooped to pick up her tunic and pulled it on.

- One of these days I will kill you, Lexi.

-Try it. He loomed behind her.

He turned apologetically to the stiff figure on the bed. ‘Sorry Leon. I’m going to get Sena to come,’ and he mindshouted for Sena as he steered Iessa out the door.

In the corridor with the door closed behind them, she wrenched herself away from his guiding hand. ‘Don’t touch me.’ Her eyes were wide and black, full of tears of anger and frustration. Her face was screwed up and ugly.

‘Stop it,’ he snapped.

‘Stop what?’

‘Stop being you – for 5 seconds even, just stop being you.’

- I hate you!

-Stop!

For the first time in his life he used a coercive block and forced the download on her. Just for a few seconds she was Lexi and Helena was dying and he was all alone in the tunnels, desperate, trying to call.

Her face stilled and then she leaned against him. Big shuddering sobs shook her body.

‘You’re not the only one, he said. ‘You’re not alone.’

Sena and Leon

He was standing in the corridor holding Iessa when Sena arrived.

She looked at them and tried to keep the angry words from spilling out. There was no time for lectures. Neither did she want Iessa to think she was forgiven. It was a shock to see Lexi comforting her though. The surprise of it helped take some of the sting out of her anger.

‘Take her home now’ she said. ‘I’ve called a medic for Leon.’ She left them and slipped into Leon’s room and closed the door.

‘It’s me, Sena.’

When she turned the light on, her heart sank. His face looked grey and slack like a stroke victim.

Oh Iessa what have you done?

She hurried over to the bed, took his hand and felt for his pulse. It beat beneath her fingers, faster than normal, but strong and regular.

‘Lexi says Iessa has given you a drug. I’ve called for a medic and he’ll be here very soon.’

He made no sign of having heard her. She didn’t want to panic but so many things had gone wrong lately. Oh Iessa.

Placing both hands gently on the side of his face, she said calmly, ‘Just let me in for a second Leon – and I can make sure the drug she used isn’t eating up your mind.’

There was no resistance. She slipped in easily and felt a differently ordered sort of mind, the rhythm of a normal brainwave, the oxygen rich shunt of blood. There was not the clamour of a brain struggling to survive. She withdrew.

‘It’s like Zen in there,’ she said, wildly relieved. ‘I don’t think she’s poisoned you, at least that’s something.’ She giggled stupidly, then apologised. ‘Leon, I’m sorry. Iessa’s been crazy since Maika disappeared, but it’s no excuse.’ Not really she thought. She saw the canister discarded on the floor and picked it up. ‘This must have been it.’

She sat silently next to him waiting for the medic. She had known Leon almost her whole life, sometimes with acrimony, never with any degree of intimacy. She looked around. The room was standard visitors’ quarters. His clothes were folded neatly on the chest beside his bed next to his com-u. There was a half empty glass of water. In the corner against the wall was a closed bag. Other than that the room was empty. She visualised Marco’s room, his guitar in pride of place in the corner, everything else on the floor.

There was a tap on the door.

‘Come in.’

It was Elias, one of the older medics. She sighed, but one of the younger ones would probably have been worse.

‘He’s been drugged,’ she said. Sena moved to make room and he put down his small medic satchel by the side of the bed.

‘Hi there, Leon.’ Taking two sensors out of the bag, he attached one to Leon’s temple and the other to Leon’s chest, then lifted up the covers and ran his hands over Leon’s body. Sena looked away but not before she had seen the network of fine lines, scars tracing routes over his chest and stomach. There were many of them.

Elias didn’t seem surprised. ‘Just testing for muscle tone,’ he said finishing with the arms and legs. Seemingly satisfied, he grinned at Sena and then sat quietly, reviewing the download from the sensors on his nanocu.

Sena waited nervously beside him. Eventually he turned to her. ‘Don’t worry,’ he said, ‘it’s just an E-gas. Something trippy. But it knocks out the voluntary nervous system if the dose is too strong. Then the person becomes paralysed. It’ll wear off on its own in a couple of hours, but I’ll give him a shot now to speed it up.’

He set an injector and pressed it against Leon’s arm. They waited. He reviewed the data on the com-u, then removed the sensors and packed his equipment back in the case.

‘How’d it happen?’

‘I don’t know,’ she replied, untruthfully. ‘I’ll find out when he can talk again.’

The medic smiled. Sena realised, he believed they were using drugs to enhance sex. She controlled her urge to put him right. What the hell – better than having Iessa involved. She forced herself to blush, leaked embarrassment.

When Elias left, she read him and he couldn’t wait to tell the others. Sena and Leon – who would have thought? Sena cheeks burned. Now there would be that too. Rumours. It was so damned unfair. She didn’t deserve it.

Leon’s fingers twitched and his eyes blinked. The blank look melted away. She sighed thankfully and buried her face in her hands. She was so tired of things going wrong. When she could bring herself to look at him again, his eyes were on her.

‘I don’t know what to say. There is nothing I can think of to excuse her. I’m sorry, Leon.’

‘She thinks I’m responsible for what happened to Maika.’ His voice was husky and muted from the drug.

‘How does that give her the right to do...this?’ Her hand gestured formlessly, over his body and past to the blank wall. Her face felt tight.

‘Apparently she was going to seduce me – at first I thought it was murder. Somehow that would have been worse, don’t you think?’

‘It’s not funny.’ And he was trying to make it funny. She picked up his hand and held it.

He looked at her with enigmatic eyes. ‘Isn’t it?’

She began to massage his hand, softly at first and then when he didn’t object, more firmly, running her fingers up the corded arm with its black, springy arm hairs. ‘To drug you was ...’

‘It was bluedust, Sena. I recognised the smell. We’ve all had it before – admittedly not as strong a dose as that.’ His eyes were deliberately amused. Don’t feel sorry for me.

She felt compelled to keep looking into them. Her fingers moved of their own accord, dragging slowly up his arm, then down again gently over the tendons on the back of his hand. ‘You sound like you forgive her.’

‘What for? Attempted death by sex? She wanted information. I admire her for it. I wonder if she would have succeeded?’

‘Why didn’t she just ask?’

‘She thought I wouldn’t tell her.’

‘That’s ...’

‘She would have been right.’

Sena put his hand down. ‘I will never understand you?’

He offered her the other one and obediently she began to massage it too.

‘Do you want to?’ He seemed to be amused.

‘It’s not that I want to,’ she said pointedly. ‘It’s just that some enigmas are like mosquito bites – you can’t stop being annoyed by them.’

‘You should say –you can’t stop scratching them.’

She put his hand firmly back on his chest and stood up and made a show of smoothing out her tunic. ‘I don’t scratch.’

‘You always scratch.’

‘You seem to be recovering quite nicely. I’ll go.’

He reached out a hand and she put hers in it. ‘Thanks,’ he said, ‘for coming and wanting to save me. Why not stay?’

‘What for?’

‘You are a pretention depressing woman if ever I met one. ‘

‘Oh,’ she said. Then, ‘that’s ridiculous.’

‘I’m lonely.’

She sensed it was true and saw those scars in her mind. She blustered, ‘You want sympathy sex?’

‘Am I going to get it?’ A gentle tug on her hand.

‘Don’t be silly.’ But she didn’t pull her hand away and when he pulled her towards him she resisted at first, and then gave in reluctantly.

There was a calm smile on Leon’s face, a warm glint in the sharp eyes looking straight into hers, and a fragile confidence that she found hard to shatter. Because it was unexpected she found it hard to resist.

Oh Iessa she thought, how could you get me into this? The unthinking part of her laughed. Liar, it whispered as she slowly slipped off her clothes. She stood by the bed.

He said, pulling back the linen cover, ‘You are beautiful and far too intelligent. Get in before you start thinking of all the perfectly good reasons why you shouldn’t be doing this.’

She laughed and saw her own reflection in his eyes as she bent down and eased herself into the bed next to him. Under the bed clothes the scars waited. She looked up at his face. His eyes were dark wells looking back at her; the firm mouth was slightly turned up at the corners.

He shrugged. ‘Alo and I had a very similar upbringing,’ he said. ‘So...is it sympathy sex?’

No,’ she said, and surprised herself because it was true. The eyes got even darker. She drowned in them.

Lexi Needs Time To Think

Iessa and Lexi walked back to the cell without talking. When they got there Iessa numbly climbed the ladder to her loft and Lexi went to his own room and shut the door.

The next day they avoided each other. Lexi woke late and found a message. Iessa and Sena had gone to the food hall for breakfast. He ate in the cell and later made his way to the garden dome, knowing that Iessa would be in the tidal pool with the dolphin all day.

It was sunny in the dome and humid. The light struck the leaves of the plants and they appeared sharply defined and intensely green. Lexi hunted for Sandy, following the red stone paths which ranged out geometrically through the beds, running from the centre like giant spokes of a wheel. He looked around and reacquainted himself with how everything was growing. Then as always, he lifted his eyes to the distant hills. He saw them through the dome, high, bush covered hills receding in waves of ridges. One day soon I'll go there, he thought.

He finally found Sandy with two of the others, laying soil on some newly dug beds.

'What? Forgotten ya way ta the pool?' said Sandy, leaning on his spade.

'Just need a day off.' Lexi looked down at his feet and then off sideways as though the red stone paths were the most interesting thing in the world.

'Girl trouble?'

Lexi glared at him. 'No!' Not like that anyway.

'I see. Wanna do some real work for a change.'

Sandy took off down one of the stone paths leaving Lexi to follow. They stopped in front of a huge mound of compost heaped on a flat concrete storage pad. It was higher than Lexi.

'5 tonne there,' said Sandy. 'That'll keep ya going 'til lunchtime.' A cyst-yellow wheelbarrow with a short handled shovel in it was parked at the foot of the pile.

'You'll be needing these,' he said handing Lexi a pair of gloves. 'You know where ta take it. Looks like they won't be needin' me there today. I'll be in me shed when ya get tired. See ya in five minutes.'

Lexi glowered at him and Sandy walked off laughing.

Loading was light, easy work and Lexi found the rhythm of it comforting. The damp compost, easy to shovel, was unexpectedly heavy when he started pushing. The barrow wheels crunched and ground into the stone paths. He was sweating after the first load.

After about twenty loads, one of the guys doing the spreading offered to swap jobs. Lexi told him no, slightly put out. What was it? Did they think he was too weak or something? They should try swimming all day.

While he worked, he thought about Iessa and Helena. There was no sameness, no resemblance between the two, but something nagged at him. He kept carting loads until the humidity got to him and he stripped off his sweat soaked tunic and stopped to have a rest. He wished it was lunchtime already but there was no way he was going to tell Sandy he needed a break.

There was a peach tree nearby with young, green, spring leaves and tiny new fruit. Some birds were hopping around in the new growth. Three mynahs and two tui. The two tui were smaller but their glossy, sinuous bodies flicked and flitted searching out the juicy young buds, totally indifferent to the burly mynahs in the branches above them. They hopped busily, pushing their beaks into the foliage, twisting under branches, never still, and then both flew off in a noisy, happy flurry of chasing, darting, black bodies. They landed on another tree and then with the same noisy fanfare flew back to the peach tree. The mynahs were still sitting - the epitome of slow dullness. He watched a while longer until the tui flew off to another part of the dome and then got back to work on the pile of compost. Even though he slogged like a machine, by lunchtime there was more than a quarter of the initial mound remaining.

The others teased him about it. 'What not finished yet, Lexi?'

After lunch his body was still in a rhythm of dig and push. It came to him when the pile was almost gone. He had stopped to have another rest, to let his body have a break from stooping and lifting. And then Lexi knew what it was. It was courage that Helena and Iessa had in common. He had never seen Helena give in because she was afraid of something and Iessa was the same.

When he finally finished, it was just after three and he asked if he could help with the planting. Sandy showed him the seedlings and left him with the other two men by a group of beds about 10 metres square. When the sun began to go down and he returned, Lexi was standing with the hose in his hand looking at the rows of planted seedlings. They were drenched.

'When the drought hits, you won't need to worry about those plants,' observed Sandy.

‘Sorry – it’s a waste.’ Lexi twisted the head of the hose and the water dwindled to a tiny dribble and then stopped.

‘Plenty more water where that came from,’ said Sandy.

‘Still...’

‘No still. Go home.’

‘OK.’

‘See ya tomorra?’

‘Probably.’

Sandy raised an eyebrow and grinned. ‘Better wear ya rain gear then.’ He turned away and walked back down the path to his shed.

Lexi meandered home slowly, taking the long route by the pod-track instead of cutting through the living zones. Every minute or so a pod went past with people returning from their days work. He should be on one of those coming back from the pool. He began to formulate excuses, but when he got home it was all wasted effort, the place was empty. Sena and Iessa were eating at the food hall. He went down the corridor to the dispenser and got his dinner. Eating it by himself in the cell felt lonely.

He tooled on the com-u and chose a dataplas about the Northern Wastelands. It was interesting but it stirred vague uneasy memories. They talked about radiation counts and serial extinctions. Lexi saw the images of wolves, coyotes, mountain lions. All gone from the North American continent and too much radiation for the genemasters to think of reintroducing them any time soon. It was depressing and he switched it off. He went into his room and stood moodily in front of his bookshelves. Then he chose two books that he hadn’t looked at in a long while, two books about wild animals, and he sprawled on his bed and began to read the first one. It was about the native American Indians and how they used to hunt the animals in order to survive. He began to read but almost immediately tears begin to roll down his face. He ground his hands into his eyes disgusted with himself and tried to keep reading. But he couldn’t. Each word echoed in his head in someone else’s voice - Helena’s voice. He turned his head into the pillow and cried silently.

The room was dark by the time he’d finished. The second proper cry he’d had in eight years. Something was happening to him and he didn’t know what but he felt more

relaxed than he had since Iessa first came to live with them. He got up feeling heavy and loose and defenceless, then took his dishes to the cleanup and went on to the washroom to shower.

Sena was there when he got back.

‘Want to talk?’ she asked.

‘No.’

‘Iessa’s spending the night with friends.’

He shrugged as though he wasn’t interested, and realised belatedly that lying body language was self defeating when Sena was around. Instead of going to bed as planned, he hung out with her playing a card game, and chatted. It was the first time they’d done that in a while.

The next day it was raining. Condensation dripped off the inside of the garden dome. The hills were a grey-green blur of shapes beyond it. Lexi spent the morning weeding. He had forgotten his wet weather gear and by lunchtime, although he was not too wet he was cold. There were four of them crammed in Sandy’s old shed with the rows of tools which hung neatly on the walls. Sandy watched Lexi wolf down his lunch and when the boy got up to go, flung him an old jacket.

‘You forgot ya gear,’ he said.

‘I don’t need it.’

‘I don’t need a hole in the head where ya brain’s s’posed ta be. But I got it.’

Lexi laughed and put the jacket on. It felt better warmer. He spent the rest of the afternoon eradicating every last weed from the stone paths and raking them over to get rid of the dead leaves that had fluttered down from the fruit trees.

When it started to get dark, Sandy came to get him again.

Lexi shrugged off the jacket. ‘Thanks for this.’

Sandy took it and said, ‘You’ve done good, boy. Now go home.’

When he got back, Sena and Iessa were there.

Iessa stared at him and said, ‘Where were you the last two days?’

‘In the garden.’

‘Your strand needs you,’ she said. Then, ‘I never thought I’d hear myself saying that.’

‘I know. I’ll be there tomorrow.’

He went off to the washroom.

When he returned Sena said, ‘Are you coming to dinner?’

‘Yeah.’

He followed behind them. Sena was thin and straight, upright when she walked, fast stepping. Iessa was taller and she walked slowly with long strides. Her shoulders were slightly hunched as though to deny their swimmers strength. Lexi thought that the only time she looked remotely humble was when she was walking.

As they neared the eating hall he heard the babble of happy voices. It was like being able to hear warmth. Inside, Sena weaved her way to their table greeting people as she passed and after a long moment Iessa followed and sat down next to her. Lexi sat opposite. They had missed the thanksgiving prayer. When Sena held out her hands, Lexi took the right one and Iessa took the left and then reached out for Lexi’s other hand. He was too surprised to refuse it. Her grip was strong and warm.

‘Thank you for the sun that shines, thank you for the rain that falls, thank you for the earth that grows. Thank you for this food.’ Sena’s voice was low and calm with a hint of a smile in it.

Lexi, self-consciously let go of their hands, helped himself to a huge serving of the hot vegetables and fish on the table and started to eat. He deliberately kept his eyes on his plate and Iessa did the same with hers.

The two days of gardening had made Lexi realise that he had lost something. After all those years of hating Iessa, in the moment of forcing his download on her, he had seen inside her own grief, and realised that her emotions mirrored his. He had seen her imprisoned by it, and in the last two days he had thought about that and realised that in his own way, he was just as imprisoned. The links between people seemed like the overlay of some music being played. The same patch of tune for each emotion, each hurt inflicted, each love shared. He understood, and now he could no longer feel contempt. He felt no guilt about hating her because she had returned it in kind –they had been experts at it. He had no idea what would happen now.

They continued to eat in silence and when she had finished, Iessa got up to go. She said, ‘I’m just going to Melio’s, Sena. I’ll be back tonight though.’ Then, ‘See you Lexi.’

‘Bye,’ he said. She left and he and Sena stayed in the hall and joined in the singing.

The next morning when Lexi got up, Sena had breakfast spread out on the little table with a place for each of them. It was the first time in a very long time, that they had all eaten breakfast together in the cell.

Iessa sat down, and said, ‘This feels nice.’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you always so quiet?’ she asked him.

Before he could reply Sena said, ‘No he’s not. But I guess you’ll see for yourself one of these days.’

‘She’d see it a lot sooner if you’d let me speak for myself,’ he teased.

And Sena thought, thank you. Thank you Helena or Maika or Lara or whoever it is I have to thank for this.

Then Iessa said, ‘I’m sorry Lexi.’

‘Me too.’

They ate. There was nothing left to say.

Sena couldn’t sit still. She got up, barely able to contain her joy, knowing that it was important that she try. ‘I’ve got to go,’ she said. ‘I’ll see you both later.’

She grabbed an overtunic and outside in the corridor, didn’t know where to go. She kept walking and ended up in the trans-tunnel where an empty pod was waiting on the track. On board she tooled Owai-tech and then thought, live dangerously Sena, as the pod gathered speed and she still hadn’t done up the harness. Halfway down the track she realised she was supposed to be working soon in the tidal pool and what was she doing. She sparked her nanocu. *Sick. Gone to Owai-tech to see medic. Sena*, and laughed, having finally found a decent use for modern technology. It was called lying. For the rest of her journey she thought about Leon.

Not Being Enemies

For Lexi and Iessa not being enemies was not the same as being friends, although it was something akin to that. There were small shifts that caused them to relax

their approach to one another. First there was breakfast, which they now ate in the cell every day. Then there was dinner each evening in the hall with conversation and no hostile grimaces or biting remarks. Then magically after two weeks they began almost accidentally to leave together in the morning. Because it would have seemed churlish not to, they travelled in the same pod, sometimes talking and sometimes arriving at the pool with no words exchanged but in a relatively companionable and friendly silence.

At the pool Iessa played with the seal and the dolphin and laughed with her friends and Lexi still spent hours working and fine-tuning his strand. The difference was that now when he noticed something that she could be doing for her strand, he mindspoke her without frustration and she listened without seeming to ignore or mock him.

If she asked for a download he gave it but often she just asked him to show her and explain it some more. Then he swam with her around the strand and showed her how she could do it if she wanted and she always did want to.

One day, he heard her mindspeak.

– Lexi, look up.

He saw Iessa and the dolphin silhouetted against the turquoise surface.

-Come and have a ride.

-Do you mean it?

-Yes you nema, come up here.

He swam up next to her.

‘Sparkie, she says you should come with us to the big dome and she’ll give you a tug around the bay.’

‘Can she really talk to you like that?’

She rolled her eyes. ‘She doesn’t speak English to me, idiot, but she’s been looking over here and I can sense she’s interested in you.’

‘Really?’ He couldn’t believe it.

‘No, not really. What did I just say? Are you coming?’

‘Sure.’

They swam single file towards the cavern entrance following the dolphin who with two flicks of her tail was already outside. Lexi freed on Iessa’s hip in her slipstream. It took all his power just to keep up with her.

Outside, through the gap, the light blasted them. The sky was clear and blue and the bay shimmered emerald. The rocks were almost covered. It was high tide and on the shoreward side only a thin sliver of silver grey beach remained, with the bush behind it.

They reached the wide open water away from the cavern entrance and she called to the dolphin, 'Sparkie,' just once with a mental prompt, and it came arrowing back across the bay, grey fin slicing through the water until it got close and then it slowed down and circled within hands reach.

Iessa mindspoke Lexi. – She knows she's taking you. Hold her dorsal fin here.

Lexi reached out for the fin and felt the tremor of energy emanating from the dolphin.

Iessa said - Let her pull and steer. Relax and streamline yourself to go with her.

The dolphin started to swim. It felt the way he used to feel holding the swim belt with Lara and the other adults and he realized where that idea came from. Sparky was undulating up and down. He let his body follow hers and it felt easy. With each shallow dive the speed built until the power rippled through her and they were tearing around the bay chasing their own bow wave. It was calm and the dolphin pulled him effortlessly. His blood sang inside him.

-How's that, Iessa said and he let her feel the joy coursing through him.

The dolphin made two circuits of the bay. When it took him back to Iessa, she said, 'Well?'

'I loved it.'

'You weren't holding her quite right. Come here and let me give you the download.'

He hesitated. The only people he'd ever trusted to give him a download were Sena and Marco.

'Come on,' she said, 'you're always giving me downloads. And if you're going to ride poor old Sparkie again, you should know how to do it properly.'

That decided it. He swam close and she put her fingers on his face. She said softly, 'It's like this,' and he began to understand how it should feel holding Sparkie and opened happily for more information. Then suddenly more forcefully she was feeding something else in, hammering it in when he was exposed and couldn't block.

Fool, he thought, angry with himself, powerless beneath the onslaught of her thoughts. Then the alignment happened and he realised what she'd done. She let go of

him and flicked away out of his reach. He flicked after her, her face cheeky and taunting in front of him, and caught her.

-I can't have a useless swimmer for a friend, she said, gliding away. He followed effortlessly and caught her again. Her eyes laughed at him and he laughed back because finally – finally – he was fluid.

- You could have told me what you were going to do.

-You might have said no.

-Probably, I would have.

-My way was better then.

He didn't say thank you. He said – Race you to my strand.

They raced and he couldn't believe how his body felt, how his mind felt. Sparkie raced with them, a cylindrical curve of perfect swim, diving and leaping her way around them, excited.

Iessa didn't let him win but he almost got there first.

-Late Happy Birthday, she said. -See you later.

He watched her swim away and began to work again. He had always enjoyed everything to do with his strand, but now he was buzzing with the joy of it, because now he was like them, darting and diving like a seal, swimming smoother and faster without having to use all his power. He felt like bursting with the freedom of it.

At the end of the day when they were all getting out of the water, he mindspoke her. -Thank you Iessa.

-We're even now, she said. -No more favours.

Iessa Invites Lexi To A Party

When Satday came they went to the pool but like the other adols, Iessa stayed only until lunchtime –only long enough to check on her strand. She played briefly with the seal and the dolphin, gave each a few fish during a brief training stint, knowing that they could catch there own dinner in the bay dome.

Lexi saw her leave the water and waved goodbye. Twenty minutes later, she mindspoke him from the transtunnel.

-Why not come with me. I'm going to a party later, you can come too.

-I don't do parties.

-I know. You should.

He didn't want to go and yet part of him was curious. Having been the outsider for eight years now, some stubborn part of him didn't want to relinquish exile while another part of him wondered.

-You are only young once, she said.

-Thanks, Sena.

-Not funny.

-I'm not finished here.

-Get finished and I'll wait for you at the cell. I'm leaving at 1700. We're taking food to the PD and having it there.

-I don't know.

-Be there.

He agreed reluctantly. He'd just invited a new bud and if he left it too soon it wouldn't grow to full size and yet just the fact that he couldn't make up his mind was an indication in itself. One, he thought, they'll probably treat me like shit when I get there, two I feel bad about the bud, three I'm curious.

It occurred to him to try the trance, which was risky - he'd only begun to learn about it. But if he could use the oxygen more efficiently, he'd work faster. He swam away from his strand to the pool entrance and did several circuits, fast swimming the pool. Back at the strand and only a little breathless, he took up the cross position, hanging vertically in the water and let himself slip backwards, rotating around the axis of his waist and up again. A focus evolved. He did it slowly at first and then more quickly trying to maintain the posture until it no longer felt like trying, it was just doing, and mindless as he could make it. He rose to the surface for a breath and then swam down to a valve for more oxygen rich air feeling alert and aware – more open to his strand. Running his fingers down the blade, he felt the slight slipperiness of the surface. With his hand on the bud site, he encouraged the nutrient flow with his fingertips, looking for the warm buzz in the hand-mind linkage that would tell him it was working. He felt it faintly and decided to try for more juice, swimming back to the valve for another hit of oxygen rich air. Then hand on the bud site again, he encouraged the nutrients with his fingertips and felt the flow. Not too much though, he thought, not wanting to starve the other parts of the strand.

He wished he had a hose, then he could really speed things up, but he wasn't allowed one in the pool, only in the baydome. He gazed up at the surface wishing for more light. The shafts and light wells going to the pool were the best in the colony, but it was nowhere near as good as in the baydome.

All very well to wish like that Lexi, he thought to himself but it wouldn't get him anywhere fast. Needing to hurry, he robbed chlorophyll and fucoxanthin, drawing them from other parts of the strand, and directed it to the bud. He went to the valve for a breath, then back to the bud site to pull more carbon dioxide from the water.

The bud began to grow, erupting at the base of the blade, expanding in front of his eyes, faster than normal, faster than it should. Lexi, he thought, it doesn't matter if it's not a perfect cyst, no one but you will care. But he did care. And he knew as well that he'd be lucky to get it finished in time to go with Iessa. He gave up and let himself slip out of the trance, aware of everything again, not just his strand. It didn't feel right to force everything so unnaturally.

He mindspoke Iessa back at the cell. - My cyst isn't going to be ready, I can't come.

-When will it be ready?

-Not sure. Not till 1800 probably.

-I'll wait for you.

Lexi continued growing the bud, feeling the unusual pressure of having to be somewhere at the right time for recreation. Maybe he should have told her to go without him but there was an implied friendship in her offer to wait, a sort of trust which he couldn't refuse. He didn't try the trance again, just worked in the way in which he knew, which felt honest and not like cheating. At the end of the afternoon the cyst was a good size and strong. He was happy with it.

It was just after 1700 when he left the water. By the time he got back to the cell it was just after 1800.

She was curled up on the lounge, viewing dolphins on the com-u.

'Sorry I'm late,' he said.

'You're not late. Go and get dressed.'

'I'm tired.'

'You're young. You'll survive.'

‘Where’s Sena?’

‘Out.’

‘She’s out a lot lately.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Right,’ he said. They didn’t talk about it but the truth was Sena had been shielding for the last four weeks, ever since the Leon night. And she’d been distant. It was pretty bad what Iessa had done, but Sena wasn’t talking about it and Lexi knew it was making Iessa feel more guilty. He wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

She said, ‘OK, let’s not go there. Get ready.’

Lexi sighed. She had read him so easily. Shield Lexi, shield.

When he came out of his room, she looked at him critically.

‘What have you got on?’

He looked blank. She came over and undid the top two buttons of his tunic, then loosened his belt and took it off.

‘Hey.’

‘You look like a boy.’

‘I am a boy.’

‘You’re a sperm donor now. You’re a sex dog.’

He blushed.

‘And I’m not really kidding,’ she said. She reached up and tousled his hair.

‘Hey,’ he said, more forcefully, batting her hand away and glaring at her. ‘I’m not a baby.’

‘No? Then stop looking like one. Come on sex dog. Let’s go.’

He found himself following her meekly out the door. He said to himself, Sex dog. Hmmm.

They were walking quickly, side by side. She turned and looked at him, one eyebrow raised, a slightly sardonic but not unfriendly look on her face. Shield Lexi, he thought. Shield. She laughed, and he resolved to go into his mindcyst and not leave it all evening.

The others were gathered around a fire in the old fort area. Some sprawled on rugs and others sat on the old tree trunks. Lexi remembered running around on those logs when he was little. If your feet touched the grass a shark would get you. It was where Iessa had broken his leg.

Their eyes met.

‘Yeah, I know,’ she said. ‘But, don’t complain, you still got the flag.’

Lexi recognised all the faces glowing in the firelight but some of them didn’t have strands so he didn’t see them at the pool and some were from a different branch of the colony. Iessa unrolled her mat and Lexi sat on one side of it and leaned back against the tree trunk. One of the boys played a guitar, the others were singing sweetly, the way they did in the hall.

Iessa got two meal packs out of her flax basket and passed one to Lexi with a fork. He peeled back the lid and began eating. He was ravenous and ate quickly. She did the same.

‘You shouldn’t have waited for me,’ he said.

‘I wasn’t hungry then. Anyway I like eating here.’

Lexi remembered the first picnic with Sena and Marco. He remembered the last one, just before Lara died.

-Don’t think about it, she said.

-Why not? It was a happy day.

-Too happy.

-I think it’s better to remember.

-You remember then. I don’t want to.

They finished their food and she put the empty packs back in her basket. A pipe was being passed around and Lexi could smell the emja. Most of the others had a puff or two. Marco always smoked it in the park but Lexi hadn’t tried it before. Sena was always telling him it was no good for the adolescent brain. If Marco was there when she said it, he’d start to squint and breathe funny and pretend he was having convulsions and then he’d say that he’d been smoking since he was 13 and there was nothing wrong with him.

Lexi smiled and then frowned. It had been three months now that Marco hadn't been home. He remembered playing on the tree while Marco and Maika both played their guitars and smoked. The emja grew everywhere and there were drying racks in different spots in the park where the little ones couldn't reach it. His job had been emja boy, running to the racks to get the emja when they arrived. But even though the adols were welcome to use it, he'd always been scared of the look in Sena's eye and hadn't tried it.

He watched as the pipe was passed to Iessa. She had one puff and passed it on to him. He shook his head, no, and gave it to the girl next to him. Iessa rolled her eyes.

The boy playing the guitar sat hunched over it staring at the fire. The music filled the night and the voices rose around it, embroidering the basic melody with free ranging harmonies. All the favourite songs. Lexi joined in. Iessa looked at the fire and didn't sing. Lexi thought the emja smelled good, it brought back all those Marco and Maika times.

-Stop thinking, Iessa said.

-No, he said, it's good for you. Anyway if you don't like it, stop listening.

She didn't shield. Her eyes were bright. He had the urge to put out a hand and rub her back but he didn't.

When the pipe came around again, he had a small puff, self-consciously, before passing it on. Nothing happened. He still felt the same. Thinking of Marco and how he enjoyed a smoke, Lexi felt sort of disappointed. When the pipe came back he had another puff and then took a little more each time it came around the circle. He was feeling very relaxed and lay back and saw the leaves on the trees and the branches as a black clotted web above him. The firelight flickered on faces, on tree trunks. His knees were warm from the fire. The ground felt almost soft. The smoke from the fire mingled with the smell of the emja.

Lexi turned on his side. One of the boys, Josef looked up and caught Lexi's eye.

'What are you looking at orphan?'

'Nothing.' Lexi looked away. It was starting.

'I said, what are you looking at?'

Lexi looked back. 'Nothing.' He said it more deliberately, making it an insult. His eyes went hard. 'Nothing.'

'Leave him alone, Josef,' Iessa said quietly.

‘He was looking at me.’ Josef rose to his feet and pointed a finger at Lexi.

Iessa got up. She walked awkwardly around the fire avoiding people’s legs and feet and took his hand. ‘Come with me.’

Josef let himself be lead away through the trees. ‘What’s that orphan doing here anyway?’

Lexi was left by himself on the mat. The singing resumed. He felt lonely, and angry at Iessa for going with Josef. He hauled himself off the rug and made to leave, but Bella the girl on the next mat said, ‘Don’t go Lexi, it’s still early.’

‘No,’ he said. ‘I’m going.’

She reached her hand out. ‘Don’t go. I want to go for a walk. Help me up.’

Lexi stood there. It was probably just another trick. Her eyes smiled at him and she continued to offer him her hand. ‘Just walk with me a little while.’

He pulled her up. She held his hand and pulled him away into the darkness, away from the flickering fire, away from where Iessa had gone with Josef.

Her fingers felt small and delicate. She had long blonde hair and she was shorter than Iessa and thinner. He saw her at the pool quite often but she didn’t work a strand. They walked on soft grass through a small citrus grove and Lexi could smell lemons.

‘This is better,’ she said. ‘Too much emja starts to give me a headache.’

‘I haven’t had it before,’ he said.

‘Did you like it?’

He smiled for no reason. ‘Yeah.’

She laughed. It was a nice laugh, soft but free as though she had truly found it funny him saying yeah like that.

They kept walking until they were on the open knoll at the top of the hill.

They sat and then lay down in the long grass looking up at the stars and then Bella rolled onto her side and pressed her slightly open mouth against his. He was surprised. She kissed him again and his own mouth opened slightly and he returned the pressure and a fire began to burn inside him. When the kiss finished she pulled back and her face was defined by shadows.

‘Was that nice?’ she asked.

‘Uhuh,’ he said, then cursed himself for sounding stupid. Uhuh, Lexi?

Her mouth broke into a wide smile. ‘I don’t think you’re stupid, Lexi.’

Shield Lexi. Shield.

She touched his lips lightly with a silken finger. 'No, don't shield.' Then she leaned forward and kissed him again. He kissed her back. Her lips were the sweetest thing he'd ever tasted. She shifted her body so that the full length of her was pressed up against him. Her hair fell across his face. The smell of it reminded him of honey. Her hand caressed his cheek. He turned on his side and pressed his body hard up against hers. They melted together and the kisses were like a drug, way better than the emja. At some stage she pulled away and sat up and looked at him. He burned for her and the physical separation felt like an endless, cold gulf. She shrugged and pulled off her tunic and peeled down the white trousers.

'I wasn't going to do this tonight,' she said softly. She moved closer and lay next to him and kissed him again, long and lingering. She moved so she was lying on top of him. His hands moved slowly over the silken skin of her back. She felt so perfect. They kissed and then she was pulling his clothes off and he was touching her everywhere. She was beautiful and perfect and when she moved on top of him and he slipped inside her, the world stood still around them and it was like he was swimming with her in the most beautiful lagoon and then it was like riding through space and stars were exploding around them.

She gasped, and he was feeling what she was feeling, an explosion of sensation in his body and in his mind.

Much later they went back to the campfire but the fire was now just a few glowing embers and everyone had gone home.

He said, 'I'll walk you back to your cell.'

'Walk with me to the transtunnel. I live at Owai 2.'

She pulled his arm around her waist and they began to walk. After a few steps he stopped and kissed her again. His heart sped and drummed in his ears.

She pulled away. 'Transtunnel.' Her mouth curved up. Her eyes smiled at him.

When they got there she asked, 'What are you doing tomorrow?'

'I have to go to the pool.'

'Oh. I was hoping we could spend some time together.'

He heard himself say, 'I'll be finished at lunch-time,' even though he usually stayed there all day.

Her face lit up. 'Great. Meet me in the PD after lunch. I'll wait for you by the stream.'

She reached a hand behind his neck and then moved her fingers through his hair before pulling his head down to kiss him. His eyes shut as her body moved against his and fire shot through him.

She pulled away, he looked in her eyes and he didn't ever want to look anywhere else.

'OK,' he said.

She climbed into the pod and the door shut. He watched it speed away and then he turned and ran, taking the long route home.

Iessa Helps Lexi

He was late waking up the next day and late getting to the pool. He hurried into his suit impatient to get into the water and get working. But with the late start he realised he was going to have to leave the pool early again and the pod he'd worked at so hard yesterday wouldn't have time to grow properly if he was going to meet Bella in time. That pod just wasn't going to work. The first bad one since he was a new learner in the pool.

But he couldn't wait to see Bella again. Just the thought of her and some vital structure in his brain seemed to melt away. Thinking flew out into the ether and it was just feeling left. And it felt good and irresistible. His body strained in the suit. All he could think of was being with her again.

Out in the pool everything looked beautiful. The cavern sparkled with the light reflecting off the turquoise water, the lightwells glinted above like small suns.

He dived in and the coldness seemed to calm him a little. He swam over to his strand and heard Iessa's voice in his mind.

-You're late.

-Yeah.

-What were you doing last night?

He ignored the laughing tone. She knew very well what he'd been doing. He had a shocking thought and hoped the others didn't know too.

-Of course they know, she said. –You didn't come back. She laughed some more as though she was delighted and it was the best joke.

He ignored her and swam around the strand trying to work out what to do with the half grown cyst. If he left it to its own devices it would be overgrown by the next day. If he worked it all day he could get it perfect for abscission by the end of the day. But he knew he wasn't going to do that. He hovered in front of it, a mass of indecision.

-What's wrong?

How did Iessa always know what he was thinking? - I said I'd meet Bella in the PD after lunch.

-What are you panicking for?

-I'm not panicking. My strand needs me to finish the cyst off.

-Let it go, Lexi. One misshapen, overgrown cyst. What a disaster. Wait till the cystmasters find that Lexi the perfect has wasted one cyst. They'll point at it in the recycling pool and say, that one was Lexi's.

-That's not the point.

-What is the point?

-I feel like I'm letting my strand down.

- Get used to it. No-one's perfect all the time. It's a waste of time trying.

-But...

What's more important –Having sex with Bella or your strand?

-Who says we're going to be having sex?

-I can sense the testosterone.

-Will you do it for me?

-Have sex with Bella?

-No. He ground his teeth. -Finish my cyst?

-You're asking someone else to help you with your strand?

-Not someone else. You.

Iessa didn't reply and Lexi realized she was too surprised. He was surprised himself. He had never asked anyone to help him with his strand, not even the tutors after those first lessons so long ago.

-OK, she said. – But don't complain if it isn't the way you want it.

-If you finish it tonight you'll be abscising it anyway, so I won't even see it.

- Nice one Lexi, nice.

-Sorry.

-Yeah well, I hope you're a bit more on to it with Bella. Leave now tunnel boy, before I change my mind.

-I didn't mean it that way. I trust you. I was just saying...

-Lexi, the insults I can handle. Leave. Go home and get changed... and don't wear a belt.

-Thanks.

An image of his cyst with ears and a nose on it and other appendages at jaunty angles flashed in his mind along with her laughter. He swam to the edge of the pool and hauled himself out. The big clock said 1132. If he hurried he'd be exactly on time.

Life Is Not Always Like A Fairy Tale

Bella was waiting by the stream with a basket over her arm. Her tunic was wide necked and it had slipped down over one shoulder and on to her upper arm. Her exposed shoulder was tanned and smooth and he wanted to run his hand over it and up to the base of her neck and the fine bones of her spine.

'Hi, she said.

He felt shy. 'Hello.'

She held up the basket. 'I've got lunch.'

'Great.' He shielded. Lunch was not what had just been playing through his mind.

She took his hand and began to walk. 'I thought we could eat by the river.'

'What river?'

'The one this stream runs into.'

He stopped, puzzled. 'But then we won't be under the dome anymore.'

She looked equally puzzled. 'Everyone goes down to the river this way Lexi.' Then she said, 'But I guess you don't know that. Come on,' and she followed the path beside the stream and then when it got to a thicket of bushes instead of following the path away and up the hill, she pulled back two branches in the most dense part of the thicket and Lexi saw a new path. She held the branches back while he walked through and they wound down to the edge of the dome where the stream disappeared under the

plastocarb. They walked on another five metres and she leant forward and pushed at the dome and a door shaped opening appeared and swung open. The path was well worn. Lexi let go her hand to examine the door. It fitted perfectly, opening just with hand pressure and shutting likewise. When not open it appeared seamless with the rest of the dome.

‘How long has that been there I wonder,’ he said.

‘Forever I think.’ She laughed and led him down the pathway which was very well worn but concealed from view on the inside of the dome by dense planting and likewise from the other side by more planting. It was as though they were in a tunnel of plants, obscured from view from every angle. The path followed the stream. After ten minutes or so the stream met a small river. It was perfectly clear water and the bottom was covered in smooth, round stones. Lexi heard water rushing and tinkling over rocks. The air felt cool and moist. Above them, the leaves rustled in the trees and he could hear birds.

Soon they came to an area where the river widened a little and there was a large, freshwater swimming hole. Bella looked back at him and smiled and her fingers caressed his. ‘Almost there.’

She climbed up over a tree trunk that blocked the path and then they were in a wider, flat area by the river. Large trees formed a rough circle. Bella went over to one of them, knelt down and took a large rug out of her basket. She spread it on the ground and then took out two lunch packs and a bottle of water. When everything was laid out she asked, ‘Do you want to eat now or would you like a swim in the waterhole first?’

He wanted neither.

She stood up and came over to him.

‘Maybe we should swim first.’ Her eyes laughed and she reached up and took off her tunic and pushed her trousers down. ‘Now you.’ He waited breathless as her hands slid down to the bottom of his tunic and then she pulled it off over his head. She stood in front of him loosening his trousers and his hands went to the waistband and he pushed them down and reached out and held her.

She pushed him away. ‘No,’ she said. ‘Not yet. First the swim.’ She took his hand and he followed her into the water which came up to her neck.

She bent her head slightly and drank and he said, ‘Don’t. You shouldn’t do that.’

She looked at him mischievously and drank more. ‘You should try it,’ she said.

‘It hasn’t been filtered.’

‘Has the water in the Bay Dome been filtered?’

‘Sort of. Anyway I don’t drink it.’

She laughed. ‘Oh, Lexi.’ She let herself fall backwards and then floated. The water lapped around her body. Every part of her was beautiful. He wanted to touch her.

‘Not yet,’ she said and rolled onto her stomach and dived under.

-Swim with me, she said.

He followed her underwater. She reached out and they swam holding hands. When they surfaced his arms went around her. Her body was cold and wet and when they kissed she fitted herself against him and he slipped inside her.

-Swim with me now, she said. They went under and he held her and they made love underwater and it felt like magic and addictive and he didn’t want to stop ever.

Later she made him get out and go and eat lunch. They lay in the sun naked and he reached over and stroked her breasts and her flat stomach. Then he rolled over and kissed her. She smiled at him, a happy, relaxed, sexy smile.

‘I don’t know how I’ll be able to wait until next weekend,’ he said.

Her smile faded. ‘We can’t next weekend Lexi. It’ll be some other girl’s turn.’

‘Whatta ya mean?’

‘I can’t go out with you again until all the others have a turn.’

‘But I don’t want to go out with the others. I want you.’

She shook her head. ‘No. I can’t. That’s not fair on everyone else.’

‘I don’t understand,’ he said.

‘Ask Iessa ...or Sena,’ she said. ‘I thought you knew.’ She sat up and began to pull on her clothes. He watched her for a minute aware that the mood had changed and then he pulled his clothes on too.

He helped Bella pack the rug and the containers into the basket and they stood there looking at each other.

Finally he said, ‘I don’t understand. I thought you liked me.’ He amended it, ‘I know you liked me.’

She looked at him with unhappy eyes. ‘I like you a lot, Lexi, but that’s not all there is to it. Go home and talk to Sena. It’s not for me to explain. I thought you already knew.’

The walk back along the path was depressing. He walked her to the transtunnel but when she hopped into the pod there was no feeling of explosive excitement. The pod disappeared and he walked home slowly. The corridors seemed dull and airless.

By the time he reached the cell he felt like crying.

Sena asked, 'What's wrong?'

'Why can't I go out with Bella again?'

'Is she the little blonde girl? You can, but not until you've gone out with all the girls.'

'I don't understand.'

'You know the girls have to have two children by the time they're twenty. They are looking for a life partner –so they can be like Maika and Lara were. Some of them won't find that and they'll have to ask someone for sperm to make their children. If they don't have a donor the genemasters will choose the donor for them.'

'So why can't I keep going out with Bella. Maybe she will be my life partner.'

'Maybe she will Lexi and maybe she won't. Maybe you'll go away to learn about being a cystmaster and you'll meet someone else and you won't come back. Then what's she supposed to do if she hasn't already tried out all the boys she knows. It's not just about sex, Lexi. It's about knowing someone well enough and liking them and being able to ask for their sperm if you need it. All the girls are stuck with the same dilemma. This is the way it's been solved for the last hundred years.'

'It stinks ,' he said.

'Who for? You? You don't have to give birth to two children by the time you're twenty and then raise them by yourself and contribute to your colony with whatever work skill you have. Some of them may have to do that.'

'I didn't know it happened that way.' He stalked around the room. 'It's not like the fairy tales you and Helena read me.'

'What?' said Sena.

'You know, the fairy tales. Cinderella, the Little Mermaid, Puss in Boots.'

Sena laughed. 'No it's not and you are no Prince Charming, little Lexi.'

He looked sideways at her. 'I don't know about that. You should ask Bella. I think she found me charming enough and not that little either.'

Sena stared at him and then burst into peals of laughter.

Iessa came in then and looked from one to the other. 'What's up?' she said which sent Sena into more peals of laughter.

Lexi felt his ears growing hot and then his face.

Sena began to tell Iessa what he had said and he figured it was as good a time as any to go to his room. He had only just shut the door when he heard them both laughing. In future he thought bitterly he should learn to mind his tongue a bit more. The laughter went on and on and eventually it brought a smile to his own lips. Okay. He'd asked for it. And the time with Bella had been so great. He sighed. He wondered who it would be next week and couldn't imagine anyone as good as Bella.

Best Friends

For the next six months Lexi spent each weekend with a different girl. On the whole he found that he had been right. Not many of them were as nice as Bella, but some of them were almost as nice and it confused him. After that first weekend he worked his strand on the Saturday to a stage where he could do a minimum to it on the Sunday leaving himself free to spend most of the day with one of the girls.

He was popular with them. After that disastrous comment he'd made to Sena which she had then told Iessa, he kept the reasons for his popularity to himself. They were not what he had initially thought. It seemed that talking and joking were as important to the girls as the sex, and all those years spending solitary time with Helena and later because he had no friends, with Sena, had a pay off in that he liked talking to girls and knew what to say to them and how to listen to them. And because he could mindspeak, then with the girls who could mindspeak him, the sex was fantastic.

He had begun to create an informal mental list of what he would like in a partner. At the top of the list was, must be able to mindspeak and because of the swimming sex with Bella in the waterhole, the next one was must be able to hold breath for a long time. Those two things stayed pretty much constant, the rest of the list changed weekly depending on who he'd just been with. So big breasts was on the list briefly until he realized that big breasted girls didn't seem to be such good swimmers which was likely to negate his second requirement of breath-holding. He tended to prefer blondes but not always. He tended to like them to find him smart and charming

but not if they always agreed with him. He liked the ones that laughed but not if they were having sex at the time.

Often Iessa would stagger home late just as he was getting in and they'd get cha and talk. His list would come up in these discussions sometimes and she would look at him with laughing eyes as he extolled the importance of a particular point which was at complete variance with what he'd said the week before.

Then those early hours of the morning conversations came to an end.

Iessa turned fifteen and there was a huge party in the PD, full of adults and adols and children and singing and dancing and drinking and eating. The air reeked of emja, and alcohol, the drums were brought up from the food hall and the beat got into everyone's blood and the moon shone down on them. Around ten most of the parents disappeared with the children. The adols stayed smoking and drinking until much later and then began to leave in dribs and drabs. Marco and Sena helped to clean up and then they left and it was for a while, just a few adols and then only Lexi and Iessa. They lay under the moon looking up at the stars. It was early winter and although the dome insulated them from some of the late night cold, it was still chilly.

'I have to go tomorrow.'

'Yeah,' and all of a sudden he realized how much he'd miss her. The thought pierced his emja induced, mind fog. He wouldn't be seeing her for the next two years. It seemed so unreal, to have seen her almost every day of his life and then to have no Iessa. His stomach felt hollow. The sky seemed a long way away, full of unknown stars glittering white and cold in the dark, blue blackness. He couldn't speak, couldn't think, could only lie there feeling like the world was spinning off somewhere and he couldn't keep up with it.

She said, 'I don't think Maika's dead.'

'Where did that come from?'

'I'm always thinking about it.'

'Everyone said it was a really bad storm.'

'He was a cystmaster.'

'He wanted to die, Iessa.'

'Did you know when Helena died?'

'Yeah.'

“I knew when Lara died too.”

He shut his eyes to stop the world spinning. ‘Where do you think he is then?’

‘I don’t know... but I keep dreaming about a river.’

The ground should have felt hard but it was delightfully comfortable. ‘I think I’m wasted.’

‘You used to be such a pain – so I never smoke emja - up yourself.’

‘You’re still a pain.’

She said, ‘Lara never thought of me when she died. I feel like she never thought of me.’

He opened his eyes and turned to look at her. Her face was in perfect profile. She looked just like Lara.

‘She loved you.’

Iessa flung an arm over her eyes and went to turn away from him and he rolled over and pulled the arm away and pushed his face up close to hers. ‘Yeah you nema. Your mother loved you.’

She hit him off, an elbow to the side of his head and he was on his back again on his own patch of soft grass looking up at stars which whirled in their orbit above him. She shoved her hand against his mouth. ‘Bite it.’

He kissed it and she forced the fleshy part inside his mouth. He turned his head to the side, spat it out and sat up. ‘Now you’re being a psycho. Stop it.’

‘I am a psycho.’ Her eyes glittered black.

He stared at her, then picked up her hand in both of his and placed his mouth gently over it and licked the saltiness of it and kissed it. ‘If you’re a psycho,’ he said, ‘then I’m the best friend of a psycho. But put your hand in my mouth again and I warn you - I’ll throw up all over you.’

The crazy look faded. She giggled and then sighed. She put her hand over his and briefly squeezed it and then lay back with her hands under her head and her elbows out looking up at the sky. ‘OK. Should we go to sleep now?’

‘Yeah, but I’m too drunk to walk home.’ The stars were spinning. He shut his eyes and flopped back onto the grass.

‘Shall we sleep here?’

There was no reply.

She heard a snore and looked over. His mouth had fallen open, both arms were flung wide at his sides. She smiled. If there was one thing she was still better at than Lexi, it was holding her drugs and alcohol. She curled up against him with her head on his shoulder and slept.

Lexi Discovers The Truth About Being A Girl

After Iessa left for the collection centre, Lexi felt that life had lost some of its zing. At the end of the week the centre commed. He was out at the time but when he got back he found Sena sitting on the lounge with a pile of their tunics - mending, stabbing the needle into the fabric and pulling the thread through with vicious tugs.

‘What’s wrong?’ he said.

‘That girl.’

‘Who? Iessa?’

‘Who else?’

‘What’s she done?’

‘Hasn’t been to one class yet and she’s been disappearing off each afternoon to tides only knows where.’

‘So?’

Sena stared at him. He looked away and shielded.

‘I gave my eggs, every other girl and woman I know who could give, has given her eggs. That’s her life for the next two years Lexi and that’s the way it should be. She has to take the medicines, she has to stay away from males, she has to be available for the medical staff when the eggs are ready for harvesting. What she’s doing isn’t fair. She can make viable babies, she has no right not to cooperate.’ Sena flung the needle and tunic down and glared at him.

‘Don’t get mad at me,’ he said. ‘This is Iessa we’re talking about. Cooperation is not a word that comes to mind.’

‘She has to learn.’

Why he thought suddenly? Why does she have to learn? But Sena was pacing now and he didn’t say that. ‘Iessa is loyal,’ he said calmly. ‘Once she makes up her own mind to do something, she’ll do it. They need to explain to her.’

‘That’s what the classes are for but she’s not going.’

‘It just takes one person to explain to her and then she’ll do it.’

Sena stopped mid-step and smiled at him. ‘I was hoping you’d say that. Will you do it?’

‘I don’t know anything about egg collection.’

‘Look it up on the com-u.’

‘Why me?’

‘Who else is there? Alo is too sick just now. And you can farspeak her and explain.’

‘She won’t listen.’

‘Just try Lexi. Just try this once and I won’t ask again.’

Lexi spent the afternoon watching the egg collection procedure on the com-u. It scared him – the drugs they used, the way they reinterpreted nature, the images of the girls in white gowns with their legs spread and hands holding medical instruments doing weird things and blobs of mucousy cells in glass collectors. It made him look away and want to throw up. His own collection procedure was so much quicker and so much more natural.

Then there was the other story - the jelly babies and the deformed children and their parents - hostile environments, not enough good water, not enough good air. He had been lucky to be with Helena in the tunnels.

Strangely it was the mothers that got to him the most. When they had given birth, their faces became more human and they held the babies close as though nothing in the world was more precious.

He had read Helena’s diaries many times now, delving into them whenever the urge took him and he recognized shades of Helena in these people. They wanted a baby to love and they weren’t about to waste the opportunity that had been given them.

It was complicated he thought, the life girls had to lead. The sacrifices they made were hard. He understood why Iessa was not cooperating. She felt she’d already sacrificed enough.

But it was not enough. There was an equality of sacrifice, of gifting required and in the Pasifika region the gifting was higher because the suffering was less. The adols here were the Earth’s main store of healthy, human, genetic material and the Pasifika

region yielded the highest quality food. And both were gifts that needed to be freely given to buy the world stability.

He looked at more dataplas of the people in the wastelands. The rebreather was standard everywhere for everyone, the moment they left their dome enclosures. Water purification was essential and soil was a thing of the past. All food plants were grown hydroponically to reduce the risk of contamination. Still they would die younger and their children, their embryos from foreign lands would die younger, because the dust was impossible to eliminate. No matter how many anti-rad robots they released to absorb it all, their lives were the sacrifice they made to regrow their part of the Earth. Lexi finally realized that what had happened to him and Helena was a part of the sacrificial process –not an isolated tragedy but part of a tapestry of mindful giving.

In bed that night he farspoke Iessa.

-Dolphin girl.

- What?

- Wotcha doing?

- Nothing that would interest you.

- Bluedust?

- What if I am?

- They need to collect your eggs. You need to co-operate.

- Why?

- Because you have viable genes and most of the world doesn't.

- What does that mean really, Lexi?

- It's like this. Helena loved me.

- So?

-She couldn't have had me without a sperm donor.

- I'm being asked to lie with my legs apart so they can suck out my eggs with a machine, after they've filled me with drugs and hormones. It doesn't stack up against a pleasurable squirt into a bottle.

- I know it doesn't and I know it's hard.

- How do you know, Lexi?

- I have an imagination and I've been watching dataplas on egg collection methods all afternoon.

- Be thankful you're not a girl.

- I am thankful. But you've still got to do it.

- Why?

- They live hard lives in the wastelands. They need the babies to love and feel normal... and they are made sterile so they can't have their own. They have so few choices compared to us. Their worlds are so small.

- I'm scared they won't love the babies my eggs make. We're not just giving away cells, Lexi. We're giving away children.

-I know.

-I want to be good but I feel like I'm being asked to do something that's wrong. The way Alo has to suffer is wrong. If my eggs go to a place like that, it'll be wrong.

- I know, he said. -It is wrong. But not to do it, is maybe more wrong.

- When I was little, life felt like a game. But it's not. It's hard.

- Yeah.

-I don't like it here.

- Why?

- Everyone tries so hard to be good. It makes me want to be bad.

- Don't be bad. And don't do bluedust. It makes you weird. Go and get some emja.

- Most of them don't even do emja here. But what makes me want to be bad is because their goodness doesn't seem real, not the way Alo is good and that seems true. They're good because they want someone else to notice them being good.

- Is that why you want to be bad? So people will notice you.

- Maybe. I don't know. I don't think so.

- Try and be good.

- OK. But I'm not happy.

- Sometimes we're not meant to be happy.

- Sometimes I think I'll never be happy again.

And the ether was empty. She had gone.

Lexi And Marco Chat About Women

A couple of days later Sena said, 'The centre commed about Iessa. She's going to most of the classes now and she's cooperating with the drug regime.' Her voice was light, she looked relaxed. She was ready to go to Tau-Cen again and looked so happy that Lexi guessed Leon was going to be there.

'Good,' he said. 'When's Marco getting here?'

'Tonight, I think.'

'I'll see him when I get back from the baydome then. I'd better go.'

Lexi went to go out the door and she said, 'Don't I get a kiss goodbye?'

He went and put his arms around her and hugged her.

'You're so big now,' she said.

He kissed her. 'Say hello to Leon for me.'

She smiled mischievously in a way he would have not thought possible a few months ago. 'OK'

Her smiling face lingered in his mind as he walked to the transtunnel. She was happy but he worried about Iessa. She was doing something that she thought was wrong. He didn't want her to get all screwed up. On the other hand she was tough, a survivor. And all the girls had to do this, it wasn't as though she was being singled out.

Some of the other adols were at the transtunnel. Four of them got into his pod. One of them, the girl he'd seen at the weekend.

She smiled. 'Lexi.'

'Tia.' He smiled back. His mind went blank. Fortunately she couldn't mind-speak although she was a great swimmer.

She was sitting next to him and her leg pressed against his. He couldn't move.

'I had a great time swimming with you,' she said.

'Me too.' She had her hand on his leg. He looked out the window. It was only a five minute trip. He met the gaze of the boy on the opposite seat, one of the younger ones, someone he didn't know. The boy was trying not to laugh.

She whispered in his ear, 'I hope we can go swimming again sometime.' Her tongue licked lightly against his ear lobe.

He stopped himself from shuddering and pulling away.

'Me too,' he said.

The pod arrived at the baydome and he smiled and hurried out. 'I'm late,' he called over his shoulder as he leapt up the steps. There was a little too much of that possessive girl stuff lately. In some ways he couldn't wait to go off to the Institute.

The hose snaked its way up from the bottom of the strand and when he tooled the panel on his wrist com-u, the hose stopped by the cyst and flooded the blade above with nutrients. He swam around the fronds on the strand inspecting the five other cysts he was working towards finishing that day and then tooled the com-u to programme the hose to feed them. Diving down he investigated the stipe and then with his hand on the union called forth two new buds. The hand mind linkage was fixed into him now. It happened without thought, the intention causing the heat to flow from his hand to the bud and then some nameless magic pulled the nutrients from the other parts of the plants. He didn't question it –the tutors had told him it would happen if he was going to be a cystmaster and it had happened. Iessa had said she saw his eyelids flicker as though he were in the trance. That was part of the explanation apparently –an involuntary shunt to his subconscious mind.

He was caught in the multi-focus zonal shunt, when someone put their hand on his shoulder. He spun in the water expecting to see Tia but saw instead a pair of crinkly blue eyes looking out from a rebreather mask.

- Marco!

- I got here early.

-I'm so glad to see you. Come see my strands.

- That's why I'm here.

Lexi lead Marco through his thicket. They swam in a golden cathedral of stipes and fronds. He was working fifteen strands. The only other person at their colony to have worked fifteen as an adol had been Maika. Most of them worked eight, a couple of the others had ten. Iessa in her last summer season had worked nine, more because she was the cystmaster's daughter and it was within her capabilities, than because she enjoyed or was particularly good at it. Although she hadn't been bad either, he thought. The less that she settled for had been adequate but not good enough for him.

He directed his hose as he mindspoke Marco and it followed them from strand to strand like a pet snake and spat nutrients onto the blades. He called forth more new buds

and told Marco about Iessa and also about his weekend with Tia and how he was now having trouble because the girls were getting far too pushy.

The laughing eyes looking at him didn't change and Marco didn't offer advice. When they had been through the entire thicket and Marco had admired and listened, Lexi said – What about you?

Marco shrugged. –Nothing about me. I'm just the same.

And because he sounded sad underneath the matter-of-fact mental tone, Lexi said – How's the colony?

- Good, and there was more sadness.

This man had been his father in all the ways that counted. Lexi reached out and gave him a gentle punch on the arm.

- Hey old man, he said, – race you to shore and the first one there has to go and get lunch from the cart.

Marco darted off, surprisingly fluid for a redactor and a fifty eight year old man at that. Lexi tooled off the nutrient mix and set the hose to recoil and then swam after him and overtook him just as they reached the beach. Marco staggered out just behind him and Lexi went to the pile of towels and got one for Marco and then spread an eating cloth on the sand beneath the shade of a kowhai tree. He picked out two lunch packs and juice from the cart and took them back. Marco had peeled off his suit and put on a wrap and was lying on his towel with his eyes shut.

Lexi saw that the face had a few more lines. The hair was definitely gray now and it was thinning. The body beneath it was getting that dry, wiry look that men got when they worked on the sea all the time.

- Here,' said Lexi and he opened the pack and lay it with a fork where Marco could reach it.

'Sena's at Tau-cen, then?' said Marco opening his eyes and sitting up.

'Yeah.'

'Is Leon there too?'

'She didn't say.'

Marco reached for the lunch-pack and his eyes laughed. 'It's all right Lexi. I don't mind. They're both good people. They deserve each other.'

'What about you?' asked Lexi. 'You deserve someone good too.'

'Do I?'

‘Yes,’ said Lexi. –Yes, you do, idiot old man.

- Watch who you call old.

- Gotta woman out there?

- Got a few women. No-one in particular just now. I’m not in your league you see, Lexi.

Lexi had heard of all Marco’s girlfriends over the years, heard the other men gossiping and the rumours. Marco had never been short on women, quite the opposite. Still, Lexi worried. Sex wasn’t everything. But he decided to leave it there and they talked about cysts and the weather until it was time for Lexi to go back to his strands.

That night back in the cell, he said, ‘Iessa thinks Maika might not be dead.’

‘Oh,’ said Marco, ‘Why’s that?’

‘She said she hadn’t felt him die.’

‘He didn’t have a working nanocu.’

‘Neither did Helena and I felt her die.’

Marco reached out and gripped Lexi’s shoulder. ‘Don’t let her get her hopes up, Lexi. It was a hell of a storm.’ His face was bleak. Lexi wanted to hug him and tell him he had done the right thing.

Instead he said, ‘Let’s go to the food-hall. This blonde woman with big breasts has been asking after you. I get the feeling that if you don’t go see her soon, she’s gonna try and jump me instead.’

Marco grinned. ‘Can’t have that happening. Let’s go,’ and he slung his arm over Lexi’s shoulder and pulled him close and planted a kiss on his cheek. ‘We’ll give her a choice,’ he said. ‘Youth and good looks, versus experience and skill.’

‘Who says I don’t have skill?’ said Lexi.

‘Who says you do?’ Marco looked at him and laughed.

Lexi smiled smugly. ‘A good guy doesn’t gloat.’

‘And a bad boy always gets the girl.’

Lexi let him have the last word.

Last Night At Owai

Four months later, Lexi had his own going away party up in the PD. On three separate occasions over the evening he got cornered by a different girl under the big tree. Each one clung to him and cried and said she'd wait for him. He peeled each girl off and got her a drink and looked beseechingly at Sena and Marco. Sena rescued him twice and Marco came and got him the third time saying that he had to take Lexi off to meet an old friend.

They went down the hill and found a quiet place to sit under some blossoming apple trees and Marco lit his pipe and passed it to Lexi.

'Last smoke before you go,' said Marco.

Lexi took a small pull at the pipe and passed it back. 'It better be,' he said. 'The only other time I've been this wasted was at Iessa's leaving party.'

'How's she doing?'

'All right, I think. She says it's very different there. I don't think she likes it that much. Apparently whatever it is that Leon did when they made her, has made it harder for her when they take her eggs. She's always feeling sick, while the other girls are looking fine.'

'What does she mean about Leon doing something to her?' Marco's face was in shadow but he had stiffened and become more alert.

'You know, whatever the genetic engineers did to her when she was an embryo.'

'They might have done something. Leon wouldn't have knowingly done anything bad.'

'Are you sure?' asked Lexi.

'More sure than I am about most things these days.'

'How do you know?'

'I was his pilot for more than twenty years. He didn't approve of unnecessary genetic manipulation of the human genome. It's the genemaster's role to conserve humanity and all of the species as they are meant to be. He worked every waking minute of every day in that role. I never met another genemaster to match his dedication.'

'He lied to Helena about who my MSD1 was, and he didn't tell you she was your embryo.'

‘Yes, he lied about those things.’

‘What makes you think he didn’t help them make Iessa different?’

‘I know he didn’t.’

‘How do you know?’

Marco sighed. He took a long draw of the pipe and lay back on the grass. ‘I’ve never told anyone this,’ he said. ‘Iessa is the reason I came back here. Leon sent me so I could keep an eye on her and help Maika and Lara in the sea-cyst colony. Maika had been my best friend when I grew up – Leon was worried about what the geneticists were trying to do. I guess I was his informant.’

‘So Iessa is different?’

‘Yes. Iessa is the most genetically manipulated human being in the Pasifika region.’

Lexi had been lying down. Now he sat up. The floaty feeling from the emja evaporated. ‘No wonder it’s hard for her.’

‘Yes,’ said Marco sadly. ‘No-one has made it easy for Iessa.’

The music and laughter from the party seemed to recede into the darkness. Lexi put his hand on Marco’s shoulder. ‘It’s not your fault.’

Marco looked at him with bleak eyes. ‘I haven’t helped.’

‘You did what you thought was right.’

‘No, I did what I thought was less wrong. It’s not the same.’

Lexi said, ‘You’ve been a father to me. You’ve done nothing to make me wish that wasn’t so or to stop me feeling proud of you.’

Marco said, ‘I wish that was true.’ His voice caught.

Lexi said, exasperated, ‘Tides what is it about leaving parties and this hill?’ He punched Marco on the arm. ‘Stop wishing old man – it is true.’ He grabbed the pipe and took a long, desperate draw and the smoke curled hot in his lungs and made him cough. Then he stood up and grabbed hold of Marco’s hand and hauled him to his feet.

‘Enough sitting here and getting depressed, old man. It’s my leaving night. Come and play the guitar and sing and get drunk.’

Marco tried to smile. ‘Enough of the old, little boy.’ He put his arm around Lexi’s shoulder and gave him a kiss on the cheek. ‘Maybe that blonde woman is here tonight.’

‘Maybe she is,’ said Lexi, ‘so hurry up and put a smile on your face. If she sees you looking like that you’ll sleep alone tonight.’

Marco laughed softly. ‘We’ll see. Obviously you still don’t know everything, Lexi. A pensive man will always be popular with a certain sort of woman.’

‘And what sort of woman would that be?’

‘Any woman, little boy. Any woman with eyes and enough imagination to wonder.’

The next morning they hugged him goodbye at the transtunnel and Lexi hopped into the pod with two other boys from Owai, bound for Owai Port and then for the Van Thorson Institute at Tau-Tech. He had packed all his personal gear into a storage container the day before and Marco and Sena had finished packing their things. His childhood was over and he would not live at Owai 5 again unless he had his own children. Marco would be full-time now at the sea cyst domes and at Owai Port, Sena was going to be Leon’s companion and assistant on his carrier. Another family would have their cell in the family quarters.

The pod took them all the way to the sky-port and the carrier left as soon as they were on board. Although Lexi had travelled by carrier from his mountain when he was six, the memory of that trip was dim and this next trip although interesting, was a bare ten minute journey. They disembarked at the Tau-Tech sky-port and a tech was waiting to take them by pod to the Van Thorson Institute.

They were inland now, and watched agog all the pod traffic on the transway carrying people and produce, roles which would have largely been performed by boat or hovascoo at Owai. There were people everywhere and hard, square concrete and glass buildings rising up to interconnected plastocarb domes that seemed to go on for klick after klick. Between the buildings they could see blossoming fruit trees. Through the domes in the distance were solitary mountains and ranges of hills.

Every now and then the boys would catch each others eye and grin. Life was opening up in front of them, big and hard edged and they were from Owai, the best colony in Aotearoa. They could grow cysts and probably one day all three of them would be cystmasters.

Lexi, seeing the blossoms on the trees, thought, all the big changes in my life seem to happen in the springtime. He was ready for this one. Tau-tech looked exciting.

* * * * *

9 - Rescuing Maika

Michael's Cave

Maika swam with the incoming tide up the estuary to the flat landing rock. He put his spear on the rock and hauled himself out and the two blue moki on the flax waistband slapped against his thigh. He trotted over the rocks to the track and followed it around the bottom of the hill through the bush along the side of the river. After 15 minutes of running he reached a spot where the hill was stepped back further and the track widened, curving in and out over flat ground through a stand of tall kanuka. Dappled sunlight shaded the path and on his right the river turned away to the north and he ran instead by a stream which climbed gently for five minutes until it reached a small ponded area. The track curved around the back of the pond to a cliff, leading him to a crevice in the rock face.

Dropping his fish onto a rock, he went to the pond to wash his hands and rinse off the fish slime. Then he slipped in through the crevice and followed the narrow entrance passage and it opened out into a good sized cave probably twice as big as his and Lara's cell had been on Owai 1. The bed was in the corner and the fireplace was on the wall opposite. A rough rock slab lying across two other hefty rocks was the table. A wall of shelves was stacked with various sized, stainless steel containers, metal boxes containing concentrated pro-carb powder and other items. On the top shelf above the metal boxes were three pottery bowls and two pottery mugs. The third mug had the handle broken off and the cutlery, three forks, three knives and two spoons was standing in it.

A solar lantern glowed dimly on a stand by the bed. Maika switched it to high, and stood it on the table. He dried himself on a rough rag of a towel, then pulled on dry clothes to protect himself from the sandflies.

The guts he put in a small hole he had dug earlier and covered them with soil. Then he returned to the cave for the metal smoker and carried it out into the sunlight. He lit some wood and charcoal in it and when it had burned down, he put in the fish and shut the lid.

Then he went back into the cave and got the book and brought it back outside to read while he waited for the fish to cook.

It had taken a while to work out how to read again without the nanocu. He read much slower than before, but it was different reading with his own will rather than with a computer chip and he found it a deeper experience. The book was a copy of Michael's diary. He had found it in one of the metal containers and it had confirmed what he had already begun to suspect, that this was Michael's cave; the place Michael had chosen as his hideout before he'd been found and killed as a war criminal. Although that particular piece of history had since been retold and he was now thought to have been a hero.

When he first found the cave, Maika had breached the procarb powder in the bins and got out the old fashioned, woollen blankets and slowly nursed his way back to health. He had felt only a smidgeon of guilt at sacrilegiously plundering a significant, historical site. He was sure that Michael would have approved, that it was something Michael would have done himself, more sure after he had begun to read the diary. Nevertheless, once he'd nursed himself back to some sort of sanity and put a few more kilos on his bones he had used the powder only sparingly. At first he had existed mainly on eels from the stream, which were good because they had a lot of fat and then when he had felt well he had braved the tidal estuary for cockles and seaweed and even gone as far as the open sea. There was a good mussel rock at the point that marked the opening to the bay. When he had felt really well, he had swum out there, wondering also if he would see the dolphins. Of course he didn't see them. He had begun to wonder, when he had recovered enough to realise that he was still alive, whether the dolphins had existed at all or whether his nanocu blasted mind had hallucinated that whole thing and he had brought himself here.

Away from everybody, and close to death and free of the nanocu he had realised he didn't want to die. But neither did he want to go back yet. For the first time in his life, his time and his thoughts were his own and he let them float on a current of memory. Now he could look at the memories without pressure. They were all loose and dim inside him, freed from the pathological order imposed by the nanocu. They drifted, and he drifted, in and out of the days. Sometimes they blazed clear and laden with detail and significance although he felt as though if he looked for some special meaning he would not find it, that there was something he was meant to understand but the time had not yet come. He thought of Iessa often and dreamed of her sometimes at night. Other

times his dreams were full of Lara and in some way she was pleased for him although at those times he almost felt like drowning himself. He had not yet found a salve for the grief and longing for her. This hit him when he was asleep. During the day it was as if his spirit had manufactured some sort of numbing device to take the edge off, to help him skirt around things.

He read his book now lying on a blanket in the sun with another blanket wrapped around to protect him from the sandflies and leaves from the dream bush rubbed onto his face and ears and hands.

“Alicia never forgave me for the viruses back in 2061, 2062 - that I would have chosen to let innocent Americans die she said, rather than give them the shelter of this land. She would not accept that they had started it and would merely want to continue the process from a new headquarters – that they could have chosen not to come, and yet came again with their soldiers, thinking they had the vaccines only to discover there were new viruses. And they came a third time, again thinking they had inoculated themselves. I had many viruses at my disposal and I told them that right from the beginning. They chose to believe that their military scientists were better than my civilians.

“If their cause had been innocent I think they would have listened the first time. I told her that. Joshie told her that. I lost her way back then and of the many regrets I have, that is the major one because she was the only true love of my life.”

Maika had been pondering the morality of the viruses for the last few days since he had first read that passage and had come to the conclusion that the war crimes tribunal had come to – that they were a defensive measure and the opposing forces had been forewarned but chose to ignore the warning. Michael’s memory had emerged vindicated but because he had been shot and killed when the troops arrested him it had been too late.

Then Maika read the last lines of the entry.

“If I look around me now at what the world is setting itself to become – I can only hope – and don’t know if everything I’ve done, the way I chose to spend my life, was worth it. I hope it was. The possibilities exist now.”

He put the book down and went to the fish box and lifted the lid. The moki was steamed through rather than dry smoked but it smelled too good and he didn't have the patience to wait longer. Back inside the cave, he got a bowl and a knife and fork and went out and cut himself off a rough chunk of fish. He tasted it, added a little salt and then lay back down on his blanket and ate looking out over the pond.

It was flat and a brown-green colour in the afternoon light. Insects skimmed the surface and every so often birds swooped down and ate them. There had been a flock of seven ducks here when he first arrived but after a while he had not been able to resist trying to catch one to eat. He had caught two before the remaining five had fled. They had tasted good and he had saved the feathers. During the day when he was in the mood for it, he had taken to weaving. On those days he would go down river to where there was a stand of flax and cut himself a few leaves. These he would take back to the cave and sit outside with a mussel shell and muka till they were just soft linen strands. Then he would roll them to a firm thread and half plait half weave them into the cloak he was making himself. The quality of the cloak was intermittent. At first he had lacked technique and the initial weaving was strong but rough and clumsy. Later he had developed the knack of it but he had experimented with different stitches, impatient, trying out different ideas to make the cloak grow more quickly. Eventually he had realised that quicker meant rougher or gappier. He didn't have all the time in the world but he had some, so he chose to slow down and the result was smooth and dense and he hoped almost waterproof. It was now down to his waist and he was aiming that it would be beneath his hip. When the total fabric was complete he would experiment with attaching the feathers.

He went inside and got his weaving and brought it back out to work on in the good light. His fingers surprisingly, were good at it – he almost felt something akin to the hand mind linkage of working the strands. He wondered if he would still be any good at that now without the nanocu, but figured he probably would, having learnt the skill as a child. They were right to delay the nanocu until 18. Your body learnt differently to your mind. If he ever went back he wouldn't have another nanocu and he wouldn't be a cystmaster again either.

He kept weaving until the light began to fade and then gathering up his things and the smoke box he went back into the cave. He latched the metal box firmly so the

rats wouldn't get in and took off his clothes and lay down on the bed and pulled over himself one of the rough, woollen blankets.

Although he could not farspeak and it was just a fantasy thing like a prayer of thanksgiving, he sent a last of the day message out to each of his children.

I am alive and well. There is a cave here and the river and the estuary for food. I have everything I need. I am alive and well.

And then he slept.

The next day he slipped into the tidal river on the outgoing tide and it carried him down to the beach. He walked along the crunchy, white shells on the foreshore and out across the firm grey mudflats to collect cockles in his flax kete. His second effort at weaving and he was proud of the gappy basket and the way he could use it for virtually anything.

When the kete was full he walked back to the tidal river and waded out to wash the mud off the cockles. He took them back to the dry bank and took the glass bottle out to fill with the day's allotment of salt water that he'd use to make salt. He waded upriver a little, to a clearer patch of water and felt the moving animal underneath his foot and simultaneously felt the sharp searing pain in his leg and the wrench as the animal pulled away. And he thought, I have never felt such pain. It was a black, hot-cold rip, a sharp, endless, twisting, grinding plunge into pain.

He half fell, half hopped to shore, because his leg seemed not to want to work. Collapsing on the bank, for a moment all he could do was clutch the leg and roll around with the agony of it; grinding out cries although he could have shrieked them to the ether here with none but himself to hear. When he had recovered enough to stop the mindless clutching and had begun to swear instead at the gods and at life, he pulled the leg which no longer felt like his own, under him to look at the wound. It was just a small hole. He could barely fit the tip of his little finger in it, although the agony which had his whole self screwed up with the wound at the centre of it, told him not to. He tried to look at it, past the blood seeping out and thought he could see almost translucent, small pieces of something there. That was bad news and he'd have to clean it. The river had now become a menacing thing and he was loathe to go back in, but he thought, the quicker the better. Hauling himself back down the bank, he made a lot of

noise and eased himself into a bit with relatively deep, clear water and felt like he might be dying.

The river steeped the wound for the next hour. It was so painful, it felt like it was killing him. It probably wasn't, but it felt like a lesson for the man who had wanted to die, delivered by the gods and Lara's spirit. See you didn't know what you wanted, well now what do you want? Oh you want desperately to live, do you? Yes I do.

When he felt that the river had done the best it could, he decided to make for the cave but could not bear the thought of staying in the water. So he half hopped, dragging his leg which still did not seem to want to work, up onto the bank where his kete was. Casting the cockles down into the river, he stashed the kete and knife under a bush, then followed the track on the left bank, hobbling along the dry, hard packed bit between the mud bank and the tussock grass on the high side. He found a branch lying across the track and fashioned a walking stick by swinging it erratically against a hard rock. It helped but it still took him an hour to get to the place opposite his flat, hauling out rock when normally it would have taken him maybe fifteen minutes to walk it and seven to swim. The pain in his leg was a black, heavy thing, throbbing and searing with the poison from the sting as he slipped down the bank and back into the water. He swam across to the other side with his stick and hauled himself out. It took another hour to make it back to the cave.

When he got there, he lit the fire and put the big, stainless steel pot on filled with water. Then he limped outside and got bark off the rimu and totara trees, having heard sometime in the past that they had been used long ago as a sort of antiseptic. He put half the bark in the pot with the heating water. Then he got a linen shirt off the shelf and cut it into strips. By then the water in the pot had boiled and he carted it to the side of the bed with a rudimentary medical kit which contained a few 300 year old bandages. He kept testing the water with his finger and when it had cooled enough for him to stand it without thinking it would give him severe burns, he dipped a piece of the linen in with a fork then fished it out and placed it dripping on the wound; which was its own teeth gritting lesson in pain. When it seemed to have cooled enough to be pleasantly bearable he removed it and did the same with the next piece of cloth and the next and the next until the water was too bearable and he put it back on to heat. He continued the process after that until he had only one piece of unused cloth left. He steeped that in the hot water and wrung it out and folded it into a pad which he placed on the wound and then

bound it with one of the old bandages. His discarded strips of linen lay in a wet mess beside the bed. Something told him to reboil them now. He got fresh water and rinsed them and then refilled the pot and boiled them. He removed the cloths, limped outside and threw away the boiled water and got fresh and put that onto boil. Then he took his cloths outside and lay them out over a bush to dry in the bright sunlight. He'd come and get them in an hour or so and they'd be good to use again.

Inside the cave, his pot was boiling. He took it off the fire and left it to sit and lay down on the bed to rest. The leg throbbed like hell. He knew he'd never be able to sleep but closed his eyes and immediately and surprisingly felt deeply tired, which even his befuddled brain knew was a bad sign. He was too feverish to resist. When he woke he didn't know how much later it was, but the leg was so sore he almost vomited with the pain of it. He switched on the solar lamp. The leg was swollen solid and hot and the bandage was cutting into it.

So much for rimu and totara bark.

'I like this lesson you've sent me,' he said into the darkness of the cave. 'I believe it's going to be a very thorough one.'

His head felt groggy. He bent down to loosen the bandage and the cave swirled around him. He paused and the world stilled and he removed all the bandages. The wound site, so small, looked purplish and bruised around the outside. A hard lumpiness had formed in the surrounding muscle. It still hurt like hell but now in all probability, he thought, there is some sort of rampant infection in there. Images of digging out the wound with his sharp knife flashed through his mind only to be discarded. He was no medic and it might do more harm than good. He eyed the small pile of bark still sitting on his table. He had nothing else and the theory of it seemed sound. He fed the few embers still remaining of his fire and put the pot back on. When it was boiling he put a little of the water in the three mugs with a small amount of bark to steep and put the remainder of the bark back into the pot. Then he went outside where it was almost dark and rescued his white linen strips from the bush.

This time he cut some of them in half. They didn't need to be so big to wash the wound and he felt too weak to stay up and rinse and sterilise them again. He filled all three of his buckets with water from the drinking pool, in case he got so bad he couldn't do it later.

Then he went through the wound sterilising process again. When he finished this time, he got a small strip of the steeped bark and squeezed it out into the puncture wound. Then he laid another strip across the wound before putting on a clean linen pad and retying it with the bandage. He drank one of the cups of bark water. It was bitter. He lay down again exhausted and went back to sleep and dreamt surreal and unnatural and harrowing dreams in which Lara was inviting him to eat with her at her place only there was no food, only the cold stars. When he woke he looked hopefully at his leg and the purple coloration had spread and his knee was now swollen and stiff. His brain felt wrong and he was too hot with the blanket on him. Do I deserve this he thought? Yes, in all probability I do.

He closed his eyes knowing that he should try and call because he had a feeling that things were only going to get worse. So he emptied his mind –that was so easy to do - and imagined Iessa.

He said - Iessa. I have a stingray wound. I'm in Michael's cave. I'm sorry I was such a bad father. I need help. Don't tell Estar or Marco.

He felt it fly off unimpeded into the ether which did not surprise him. The spirit of his dead wife did not want him to die. Rather, he figured, he was just learning the lesson well and truly so that it would not escape him. He still did not know properly what the lesson was, but he felt that he was clawing his way towards it and it would come to him soon.

He was too tired to get up and treat the wound. He shut his eyes and went back to sleep, secure in the knowledge that she did not mean for him to die.

The Call

Iessa woke from the dream in which she had seen a man in a cave and she had heard her father's voice telling her he was in Michael's cave and he was sick, that a stingray had stung him. The man had not looked like Maika.

Was it a dream or a sending? She had dreamt about Maika before. He would be there with her doing something and she would think, I thought you were supposed to be dead and he would smile and continue to do whatever he was doing. She would be

relieved because she needed the help he was giving her but even in her dream she would be thinking, I thought you were supposed to be dead. And when she woke up she'd be disappointed.

This time it was different, the texture to it was different. She found herself listening for something, anything - but the night was quiet and still and normal. And he had not been helping her. He had asked for help.

Iessa sat up in bed. She needed to talk to somebody and thought about her sleeping friends, which one of them to wake. But when she ran over them in her mind the only one she wanted to talk to was Lexi.

So she tried. - Lexi, Lexi, Lexi.

Nothing.

-Hey tunnel boy, cyst boy, wonder boy, sex dog.

Nothing.

-OK. Hey Lexi, son of Helena, plantswoman of the Cascade Range.

-What?

-Don't be grumpy.

-I deserve to be grumpy. What time is it?

-Don't know.

-Which drug have you been taking now?

-None. I received a calling.

-So.

-From Maika maybe, I think.

-What do you mean you think?

-I was asleep and I don't know if it was a dream. How do you tell?

-How should I know?

-He was sick, he said. He'd been stung by a stingray and he was in Michael's cave.

-Michael's Cave?

-Yeah. Do you know it?

-I know of it. It's where Michael van Thorson died. Down south on the coast.

-Who's Michael van Thorson?

-You know *the* Michael – the founder of the new Earth. You learnt about him last year. Didn't you?

-Of course I did, or at least I would have if I'd gone to those classes.

-Iessa...

-Well, why would a coercer-trainer need to know all that boring 300 year old history - especially when it's going to be loaded on the nanocu anyway. What's the point?

-Why am I not surprised?

-I'm sorry. I'm lazy.

- About everything you don't care about you are the laziest person I know.

About the things you do care about, you are unstinting.

-That, Lexi, feels like the first nice thing you've ever said to me.

-It's not. Asking you to work my strand that time was the first nice thing I ever said to you.

-How could I have missed it? Anyway... about Maika.

-Tell Sena. Com her.

-In the dream, Maika said not to tell Marco and Estar.

-Com Sena. What other choices do you have?

-None, I guess. Shall I do it now?

-Yep.

-Can I call you again when I'm done?

-You'd better.

-Go back to sleep. It might take me a while - and she broke the connection and stared at the cyst walls around her trying to make sense of it. Then she got out of bed and went through to the com-u in the living area and entered the code to call Sena.

Leon's face came on the screen, 'Yes.'

He looked wide awake and she thought, damn, maybe they were on the other side of the world somewhere.

'It's me Iessa. Is Sena there?'

'I can see it's you. Yes, Sena is here. Is everything all right?'

'I need to talk to her.'

'She's coming,' and he moved away and almost immediately she saw Sena's face, looking calm and happy, and Iessa realised how much she missed her.

'I think Maika sent out a calling to me.'

'What happened?'

‘I was asleep and I dreamed I saw a man in a cave and then Maika’s voice said to me that he’d been stung by a stingray.’

‘Was it a dream do you think?’

‘No.’

‘Did he tell you where he was?’

‘Yes.’

‘And...’

‘I don’t know if I should tell you.’

Sena sighed. ‘Have you told Marco?’

‘He said not to tell Marco or Estar.’

‘That doesn’t sound like it was a dream. He must be very sick or he wouldn’t have called, he is latent for farsensing. Who was the man in the cave?’

‘I don’t know, but he was just standing there so that might have been a bit of dream. I think it got mixed up. Where are you?’

‘Africa. Something important’s happening. We can’t leave yet. If he’s sick you’ll need help.’

‘Lexi and I can go. I farsensed him before I commed you.’

‘Lexi’s not a medic.’

‘Are stingray stings fatal?’

‘I don’t know, not usually I think, but they can be.’

‘I want to go and find him.’

‘You’ll need a carrier and a medic.’

‘Won’t Estar find out if we have a carrier and a medic?’

‘Not necessarily.’

‘What if just me and Lexi go by kayak or boat from somewhere nearby with a medical kit?’

‘That’s risky. If he’s very sick you may not have the skills to help him.’

‘I got the feeling that he didn’t want other people to go there.’

‘That may be so, but it’s too risky.’

‘We could take a com-u and call for help if we need it.’

‘Neither of you have done the boat course yet.’

‘We’ve been paddling kayaks since we were 9.’

And then Leon came back on screen. 'I'll arrange the carrier to take you where you want to go and there will be a medic on board but you can take a kit in yourself to Maika and try and treat him.'

'Then everyone will know where he is. No.'

'We'll fly you close and let you out. '

'They'll track us.'

'Not if you don't want them to.'

'Fly us to within 50 clicks and we'll kayak the rest of the way ourselves.'

'OK. Where will that be?'

'I don't know the best place. I'll have to talk about it with Lexi. Put Sena on.'

Sena's face.

'I'll get back to you soon. I miss you.'

'We'll be waiting. I love you Iessa.'

Iessa swallowed and logged off. She sat a moment and thought back over the years. The blonde, skinny, mind woman who couldn't swim, loved her.

She mindshouted Lexi. -Hey, tunnel boy.

-What, dolphin girl?

So clear his mind in hers. It always had been, she thought with surprise and she relayed her conversation with Leon and Sena. When she got to the bit about kayaking in from 50 clicks out, he said - That sounds all right.

-Of course it sounds all right. They just want to get their claws back into him.

-They just want to save him.

-From what? From not being a productive member of the colony?

-From dying, you nema. You swim in a whirlpool sometimes. Swim straight.

-How else can we get there? Can we get them to drop us off somewhere and then we take another route?

-I have the com-u readout on Michael's cave in front of me. The troops who got him came over the pass from the other coast, but that'll take too long for us. I think you're being paranoid. Even if they follow us and find him he is still a man. He still has choices. And he didn't say, don't tell anybody. He said, don't tell Estar and Marco.

-They'll find out straightaway. As soon as we find him, someone on the carrier will com that information to someone else.

-Do they know we're going to look for Maika?

-We'll have a medic with us – you and me who are supposed to be at school right now so that the gene merchants can suck our genes out while they fill our brains with all their crap about how to love the world. I'm sick of being milked for my eggs.

-Be thankful they're worth milking. You talk like you haven't got the cooperative gene.

And they both went silent.

Then she laughed. - That would explain a lot tunnel boy. Let's change the subject. What are we going to do?

-Take the 50 klicks drop off

-OK. We'll take a double kayak. Then they won't think I was trying to drown you if your kayak goes down cos you do such a useless job paddling.

- Ignoring that. We should do 50 klicks pretty fast. The weather report is good. There's a south going current which will make us even faster. We can use the com-u for a navigation fix.

-No they might be tracking it.

-Let's try for a visual, then. Look up Michael's cave on the com-u and view it from the east. Try and get a good idea of what the coast looks like and I'll do the same. Tell Leon and Sena that after the carrier picks me up tomorrow I'll tell them where to go then.

-OK. Thanks, tunnel boy.

She coded in Sena's call sign and got Leon.

'What's it to be?' he said.

'We'll take a double kayak in from 50 klicks out. Lexi says he'll tell the carrier pilot where to go when they pick us up.'

'OK. So I'm organising a medic on board with a kit and a kayak and a survival pack for each of you?'

'Yes.'

'The carrier pilot will be the one who worked with me after Marco. I trust him. The medic is someone I've known for a long time too. There will be no other crew. Sena will talk to the people at your school and explain that your best friend Alo is very ill and asking for you and she has given permission for you to go to him. Lexi's school will get the same story.'

‘Is it true?’

‘No. It is 0415 roughly your time. I will arrange for the carrier to come for you at 0700. Pack a few clothes. Everything else will be provided. Tell Lexi the carrier will come for him at 0800.’

‘Aren’t you worried that our genes will be damaged or something if me and Lexi go out into the big bad world?’

He raised his eyebrows. ‘You know as well as I do Iessa, that we already have plenty of both your genes should there be any likelihood of damage. Would you like to talk to Sena?’

‘Yes. And thank you,’ she said. ‘I’m really sorry for that other thing. I was stupid.’

‘You were just a bit crazy at the time and we’ve all been there. Here’s Sena.’

Sena’s brow was wrinkled and the blue fighters’ eyes were looking worried.

‘Don’t worry, me and Lexi can cut it.’

‘I know you can Iessa.’

‘I miss you. So does Lexi.’

‘I miss the two of you too.’

‘I’m glad you’ve got Leon.’ Iessa logged off.

She mindspoke Lexi. - The carrier will be here to get me at 0700 and we’ll pick you up from the flight dock at 0800. Leon said to just pack a few clothes and everything else would be provided.

-I looked up Michael’s Cave and got a good visual and a bearing for satnav. I’ve had another idea how to get there. I’ll tell you about it later but com Leon back and ask if we can have two hovascoos as well. Got to go.

The ether was suddenly silent. Iessa commed Leon and asked for the hovascoos and he said yes he’d arrange it. He looked distracted and she signed off quickly.

She went into her room and took a couple of pairs of trousers and two tunics out of her chest and some underwear and sandals. So much for packing.

Sena had not thought it was a dream just as she herself had not thought it. So her father was alive and ill. The possibility of him dying before she reached him crossed her mind, or the possibility of him dying just after they reached him. She would hold him in her arms, his eyes shut for the last time.

She shook her head. No. Her father was not going to die. Not this time.

Leon and Truth

Sena said, 'You organised that very quickly. Thank you.'

Leon looked up from his com-u. 'That's all right. I wanted to help.'

'Why?' she said.

'If Maika's alive it's important that we find him.'

'You could have just told Estar or one of the others. Why didn't you?'

He put down the com-u and swivelled in his chair. 'Why the questions?' He leaned forward and took her hand in his. 'Why all these questions, my suspicious, little redactor?'

'I've been with you now in this carrier for 18 months. I've seen you do the things you do. There is always another reason Leon.'

He brought her hand to his mouth and kissed it. 'Don't you love me anymore?'

She pulled her hand away. 'Don't manipulate me. You know I love you. You know it the way you know the sun will rise in the east.' She got up. 'If you aren't going to give me a straight answer, I'm going for a walk.'

'Don't,' he said. 'It's not safe by yourself.'

'Why?'

He rubbed his face with his hands, and smoothed his hair back. He breathed out deeply and looked up at her. 'Because you're with me.'

'I don't understand.'

'Lexi's MSD1 is in charge her.' 'They found out that I lied on Lexi's life legend and they want to indict me. I want Lexi to be out of the way while I try and sort it out.'

She had paused in the doorway. Now she reached into the closet for a scarf and overdress.

'Where are you going?'

'Out. I'm not stupid Leon. I am, or was a master-class redactor not a dizzy, love struck fool. When you want to tell me everything come and find me.' She tooled the keypad and the airlock door slid open.

'Stop,' he said. 'It's too dangerous.' There was an authoritative note in his voice that he had never used on her before.

She went through into the airlock and he swore and tooled a tab on the com-u. She was working the keypad to the outer decom chamber. The door wouldn't open. He came up behind her and took her hand. She gestured at the door. 'You?'

'I over-rode the code.'

She looked away from him. 'All this rather than tell me the truth. Don't you trust me?'

'I do. But you have a nanocu. Anyone can download that memory.'

'What anyone, Leon? What anyone would violate my rights and do that?'

'I want to protect you,' he said, pulling her resisting body close to him. 'I love you, I have never been happier. If anything happens to you I won't be able to bear it.'

'I don't want protection. I've looked after myself for the last forty years. I need truth.'

'There are some dangerous people out there.'

She stared at him. 'I trust you now. If I lose my faith in you, that'll be it. We'll have both lost our chance at happiness.'

'You may not love me anymore.'

'I can't trust you if you don't.'

He looked into her eyes. She kept staring at him and hoped he realised that truth was his only option. If she walked out that door she was not coming back.

He sighed.

'You know I was in love with Grace. When I first met her I was young. I couldn't stay away from her and I violated the boundaries of the experiment and continued to do so until she died. One of the Pasifika geneticists came to me a few months before her death and asked me to authorise an experiment on an embryo. It went way past the limits but he said he'd expose me. If I lost my role as genemaster I wouldn't get to see Grace again. Knowing that it was not a legitimate gene-change, I authorised it. Some parents were asked to have one more child –told that we were seeking another cross and they acceded because they trusted my judgement.'

'You're talking about Iessa?'

He nodded. 'While all this was going on, Grace got sick but I didn't know until Marco and I were flying back from a meeting with the African genemasters and he received a farsense call from Helena. Grace had died.' Sena went to put her arms around him but he waved her away.

‘I spent several days with Helena, then got a medic to go and stay with her. I’d had an idea. I had sperm from an African donor that was purely human. You and Marco and therefore Helena, similarly had genomes that were purely human.

‘I flew myself back to the mountain and offered Helena a male baby. A medic helped me perform the procedure and Helena became pregnant with Lexi, the boy I hoped would grow up to be a mate for the embryo that I had authorised. So that their children would breed more truly human. And basically you know the rest.’

‘So Iessa was right. You did do something to her.’

‘Not me. But yes, she has more animal genes than anyone else I know of in the Pasifika region and she doesn’t have the cooperative gene at all. The geneticists decided to put all their experimental ideas into this one child.’

‘Why?’

‘You know they’re trying to breed a race of humans who can live most of their lives in the water. The world is becoming more stable and they’re getting impatient. The more stable the Earth, the less likely they are to be allowed to go ahead with their experiments.’

‘Why not give her the cooperative gene?’

‘It’s instability that gives them the power to do what they want.’

‘I see,’ she said. ‘So Lexi and Iessa go to find Maika and....’

‘They have a living experiment in Iessa. They have been stripping her ova while they can. They want them all. They’re now three quarters of the way through.’

‘So you’re hoping they’ll mate before the geneticists get all her eggs.’

‘Yes. Do you hate me for it?’

‘No. You’re a genemaster, I knew that when I decided to come with you. But I don’t understand the way you manipulate the people you love. Where does loyalty come into it?’

‘I have been trained to be loyal to the Earth. The logic, the ethics of a genemaster, the life – I am in thrall to this planet.’

‘What about me?’

His face was bleak. ‘I love you and I’m afraid I’ll lose you. Believe me. The things I do aren’t always what I want to do. I am trying to sway an outcome which will be good for all life on this planet. Genemasters must try and create tracks and paths

where none exist in the hope that people will follow them and eventually they will become a well travelled route.'

'Where is that route meant to take them?'

He smiled cynically. 'This is going to sound tacky,' he said.

'Tell me.'

'It's what Michael wrote. I would hardly have phrased it this way myself.'

'What?'

'He said it is meant to take us back home to Eden.'

The Carrrier Trip

Iessa carried the light bag onto the carrier. It was cool inside after the walk through the dome to the take off zone. The u-shaped, valley faced east and was a funnel for the summer sun of the early morning. It would be 33 degrees by noon an unbearable 40 by mid afternoon. A day exactly the same as the one before. Too hot in this stupid valley with the river that was too far from the sea and the rock radiating that endless heat. Too hot with all those other stupid girls who wandered to the egg collection centre, chatting and fanning themselves with puka leaves that they had hand woven themselves, in boring weaving classes while they watched the lessons on the big com-u. Iessa had refused to make a fan. Instead she cut her tunic short so that it came just below her breasts and her tunic pants she cropped too and her long brown legs stood out against the others in white trousers when they queued for their dinner in the eating hall. They had told her off at first – you must all look the same, then they had said as some sort of attempt at punishment, that she must do her own washing if that was the way she was going to treat her clothes.

She was wearing the little short trousers today even though, thank the tides they would be flying south to colder weather and the salt sea. She craved the smell of it – craved the feel of salt water against her skin. Craved being with others she knew and wondered how she could possibly have hated Lexi before, when against the insipidity of the girls in the centre he stood out sharp like the sharks fin on the surface of the sea, like the rock that jutted out of the blue waters of the baydome. She missed him understanding her and correcting her and telling her she was an idiot. She needed

someone to do that straight and hard out. The condescension of the girls here, mostly from the north, mostly not from cyst cohorts, their soft manners and their condescension, wore away Iessa's patience. A lot of them she could read and they looked down on her southern, hard physicality. They used words the way Iessa had grown up using her fists or her teeth. When Iessa had hit one girl, the girl had told one of the mentors and Iessa got in trouble for it. It hadn't stopped her doing it again and they had threatened her with redaction. Iessa had smiled then, repentantly, said sorry, said she wouldn't do it again. Two nights later she had found someone who had a little bluedust. She got high and later that night she farspoke Lexi, who told her not to let herself drift into that stuff again.

It wouldn't do her any good, he had said, and she would just end up doing something stupid. Go and find some emja, he said, and stop acting like a spoilt idiot.

By all rights she should have been mad at him, but instead she was relieved. She found some emja and smoked it outside, looking across the big, flat plain to the rugged brown mountains on the other side of the wide valley and marked on a big flat rock there, a single stroke. Her first week over and done with. It had become a routine to go to that rock at the end of every week. A lonely vigil looking across the valley, as the emja smoke rose around her. Now there were eighty marks on the rock.

Eighty lonely weeks in which she had been as unpopular as she once was popular at Owai 5. She understood that they had deliberately separated her from the rest of her cohort by sending her here. The only reason for it that she could see was that they were trying to break her, trying to mould her into something that she wasn't. There was no one here that understood her. Some girls were trained for the ocean but not for working cysts. Like her they were the ones that spent hours everyday when they weren't actively involved in the procedure, swimming in the pool or the river although none of them could swim as well as she did. There was no other coercer-trainer of her stature and it showed. They were so obedient that it made her more rebellious than she otherwise might be.

As for the procedure, it hurt her. It hurt her mind to think that more of her eggs had been taken to store, perhaps for years for the right recipients. People who she would not know, girls and women who might not even be born yet, who she could not be sure of to mother a baby with her genes, who she could not be sure of loving a baby with her genes.

Yet Lexi had been right. She was lucky to have them. For everyone's sake she had to share. Did she want everyone to have deformities and be a genetic dead end like Alo? No. She had seen the physical pain he suffered. Her genes were special, she was an evolutionary step towards a race of people who could live and work in the water without equipment. She was also at times a nightmare, mad person. It was a glitch in the genetics, a miscalculation on the part of the genetic engineers. The physical can not be taken in isolation. The emotional is linked to the physical. Her emotions did not mirror those of a true human. One too many cetacean genes, the crossover a little off key. To do with Maika, not Lara.

She had met Estar for the first time at Lara's funeral – he is your half brother Sena had said. Marco is his MSD1. And he was skinny but they had read each other and she realised that the cross had given him a little of the metapsychic, cetacean mind, the spatial mind –something she had realised more after working with Sparkie–the alien logic, and she had the alien emotion.

The main cabin of the carrier was empty. The pilot came out of the cockpit. He was short and he limped and he had an eye patch. She stared at him and he stared back.

'Iessa?'

'Yes.'

"I am your pilot. Take a seat and we will get going to pick up your friend.'

He turned and went back into the cockpit. She sat down and fastened her harness. If Leon hadn't organised this carrier she would get off right now. That was the weirdest looking pilot she'd ever seen.

Lexi stood in the skyport and watched the carrier landing. The extender arm pushed out from the dome and one of the techs came through.

'You can go on now.'

Lexi walked along the cyst and metal corridor of the extender into the carrier decom and tooled the keypad for the airlock. The door slid open and he went in and through the next portal into the cabin. A thinner, older Iessa was standing leaning back against the viewer. Her face had become guarded in the 18 months since he'd last seen her. The impetuous spontaneity was masked.

She was wearing a very short tunic top that came just beneath her breasts and very short trousers that showed off most of her legs. Her exposed midriff was deep brown. The smooth overlay of flesh over her ribcage didn't have the same look of strong musculature that she'd had when she left. The fabric of the shorts was uneven and frayed as though she'd cut it off herself.

'You've grown tunnel boy.'

'You're thinner.' And he thought, you look wired and you look sadder and you look too alone.

He opened his arms. 'Pretend I'm Alo.'

'No good. I know you're Lexi.' She stayed where she was and the smile she gave him was fleeting and sweet.

'I'll pretend I'm Alo then.' He went and put his arms around her. She felt stiff, all bone and very little muscle.

She pulled away and tilted her head back and he looked into her eyes and saw defiance there.

'I'm not one of them,' he said.

She stared at him. 'No you're not.' Her taut body relaxed and she leaned her head against his shoulder and let out a shuddering sigh. He stroked her hair. It seemed thinner and he wondered what had happened to the wild mane.

-Hormones and drugs. You're not supposed to see us until the last cycle's finished and we're back to normal.

'Back to abnormal you mean.'

She sighed again and burrowed her head into him.

He ran his fingers through her hair and smoothed it down around her shoulders and waited for a reply.

'Aren't you going to say something smart? Maybe you should just hit me now and get it over with.'

She looked up. 'They don't let you hit where I came from.'

He laughed.

She put her finger on his mouth. 'I'm not joking. They said they'd send me to be redacted.'

'Why?'

'They believe in peace.' Her eyes were hunted and angry.

‘So do I. But I like you wild.’

‘Oh Lexi.’

He held her tighter. ‘It’s all right Iessa.’

Her voice broke. ‘No-one liked me there. No-one wanted me to be myself.’

The pilot’s voice came over the com. ‘Leaving as soon as you are ready.’ It was an order.

She pulled away. ‘We’d better harness up.’ She went to her seat and he sat next to her.

The pilot commed again. ‘Just a short flight, 10 minutes at most to pick up the medic then I understand you’ll tell me where to next.’

‘Yeah,’ said Lexi.

‘All right then. Taking off now.’ The engine hummed louder, and the carrier went into the jump.

They talked a little but it seemed as though they had barely taken off and they were landing again. They didn’t bother to remove their harnesses and when the airlock door opened they both turned in their seats and looked over their shoulders. Alo walked through – a tall, thin Alo with a thatch of blonde-white hair. Iessa shrieked, ripped her harness undone and running to him, launched herself into his arms.

‘Alo, Alo, Alo!’

Alo grinned at Lexi over her head. ‘Stop that,’ he said as she bounced up and down. ‘Be gentle with me. I’m still recovering from the last time you were happy to see me and that was a year ago.’

She stopped jumping and pulled back. ‘Did the stitches heal okay?’

‘Yes. But they’ve just replaced a stupid valve that wasn’t working properly – nothing major, but you have to be careful when you touch my chest.’

Before he could stop her, she’d lifted up his tunic. Alo’s torso was a map of intersecting scar lines. On the left side was a new line of pink – less than a finger’s length, healed, but still tender looking.

‘How long ago?’ she asked.

He batted her hand away and pulled his tunic down. ‘Boundaries, Iessa. Your body,’ he pointed at her, ‘my body.’ He pointed at himself. ‘Three weeks. It’s fine. They put in a valve made of plas-cell. It should last way longer than the piece of me

they took out.’ There was no trace of bitterness in his voice. ‘50 years the surgeon said, an improvement on the cloning I think.’

He grinned at Lexi and held out his hand in the tech greeting. Lexi walked over and took it.

‘You ended up tall,’ Lexi said.

‘Who’d have thought, huh?’

‘What’re you doing here?’

‘Leon thought if I came, you might take me with you. Just in case Maika needs more than the basics.’

‘Leon always thinks he’s so smart,’ said Iessa.

‘Could that be because he is?’ said Lexi.

Alo said, looking at Iessa. ‘So whatta ya think? Can I come?’

She frowned. ‘Yes, damn Leon for the know it all that he is’.

The pilot came through. Lexi had never seen a pilot like this one before. He was younger than Marco and short and slightly built. His clothes draped his body in an unusual way and were not regulation tech or of a design that Lexi had seen before. He had deep brown skin but did not have Pasifika features. His left eye was covered with an eye patch and his face was battered and scarred as though he’d been in an accident. He walked with a limp.

‘My three special passengers,’ he said.

Lexi couldn’t place the accent.

‘Leon said to ask no questions except about where you’ll be wanting to go and I’d appreciate it if you’d lend me the same courtesy. This is a legitimate carrier but it’s borrowed for today and will be mine on stand by as long as I need it.’ He gestured at his eye and leg. ‘I myself am no longer a legitimate pilot but don’t let it worry you. Leon never does.’ His face twisted into a smile. His one eye twinkled. ‘So...the destination?’

Iessa and Alo looked at Lexi.

‘Taha Lagoon. Somewhere on the flat where we can unload the kayaks and hovascoos.’

‘Don’t know it. I’m not from round here.’

‘It’s about 100 klicks south of Owai,’ said Lexi.

‘Which is....’

‘Southeast coast.’

‘Which island?’

‘Big South.’

‘Got it.’

They were all looking at him.

‘Don’t worry,’ he said. ‘If I don’t get you there, the com-u will.’

‘Where are you from?’ asked Iessa.

The pilot winked. ‘Like I said little sister – not from round here.’ He went back through to the cockpit.

Iessa watched him go. When the door slid shut she turned to them and said, ‘He called me little. He’s got an eye patch on one eye and he’s blind in the other one. The sooner we get there and get rid of him the better.’

Hovascoos and Wind

They were flying across the lagoon. It filled the viewer screen - a huge half moon harbour with groups of small islands, looking like floating disconnected cones, at either side of the entrance to the open sea. Directly inside the harbour in the lee of the islands were the buoys of a large mussel farm. A barge was moored near the mussel farm and sacks of mussels covered its deck. There was an empty patch of water and then running along and out from the shore was an extensive area crisscrossed with the gridded network of a seaweed farm. People in flat punts motored up channels formed between the different planted areas. Others worked standing in the shallow water.

Onshore there was a cluster of cyst domes and nearby a big, rectangular, wooden building which had the look of a processing centre. A long jetty jutted out into the harbour. Several cats were moored off it and one, fixed mast tri was tied up to the jetty and people were loading sacks onto it.

A large fan of river flats dived back into the low surrounding hills and drained the land into a green, slow moving river which passed through a filter dam and entered the bay at the northern end of a white, shell beach.

Lexi directed the pilot and they landed on the flats further up the valley beside the river, out of sight of the people at the seaweed farm and just down river from the

dam. The ground was rough and rocky with patches of tussock. Further up the valley they could see gardens and orchards and another cluster of cyst domes.

They unloaded their gear and the kayaks from the cargo bay and then the pilot drove out the hovascoos.

‘Not that I don’t trust you to do this.’ He parked the second hovascoo and got off awkwardly. ‘Do you people know how to drive these things?’

‘I do,’ said Lexi.

‘Yeah,’ said Alo.

‘I’ve always wanted to know how to drive one,’ said Iessa.

‘I could give you a lesson or two right now if you like.’ The pilot smiled.

Despite the scars, his face had a certain charm.

Iessa smiled back and Alo walked over and stood beside her.

He eyed the pilot. ‘I drive one of these everyday. She can ride with me for now and I’ll give her a few lessons myself when we get there.’

The pilot tilted his head. His eyes worked their way lazily over Alo’s tall, thin frame from his feet up to the top of his head. He smiled. ‘Well you look like a big enough man to do the job. I’ll leave you to it then,’ he said.

The tips of Alo’s ears went red.

The pilot looked at him a second longer and then he turned towards Lexi and limped over and handed him a miniature com-u in a waterproof pouch.

‘The call will come directly to my nanocu. I’ll be on standby for the next ten days. After that if I don’t hear from you, I’ll go back home.’

‘Where’s that?’ said Iessa.

His eye roved over her body suggestively and then flicked cheekily to Alo.

‘I know I’m a handsome fellow,’ he said, ‘and I can see you’d like to find me some time in the future for a few ...piloting lessons...’

Iessa laughed and flicked her hair and it swished down around her face. Alo scowled.

Lexi thought, keep cool Alo. This pilot’s doing it on purpose. He doesn’t really want her.

The pilot continued, ‘But I don’t tell people where I live. Here, there and everywhere, that’s where you’ll find me. Some place just before nowhere.’

He waved and limped up the ramp onto the carrier. A few minutes later while they were getting their gear sorted, the engine whined and the carrier jumped and became a silver oval streaking across the sky. In an eye's blink it was gone.

All the gear was packed onto the hovascoos. The kayaks were tethered high on the dry bank under a willow tree and Lexi had left a message attached to the single kayak saying they were on a plant collection mission and would come and pick them up in a few weeks time. It seemed a lame explanation and he wished he could think of something better but he had chosen the lagoon because they might need the inland river route. He hadn't factored in the people living there.

When they were ready, he said, 'I don't have a plan other than to get on the scooters and ride down the coast 'til we get there. Whatta ya think?'

'If they're tracking us it'll be awfully easy to see where we're going,' said Iessa.

Lexi looked at Alo. 'What do you think?'

'If he was injured badly enough to call we should get there as quickly as possible. What are the options?'

'We could take the kayaks which would be way slower and I can't see any advantage...or if we want we could take an overland route on the hovascoos, following the river up into the hills and then come back out to the coast further down. But I reckon that we need to get there fast and the trouble with the river idea is that we could get lost when we leave it to go overland. Also the river route'll be way slower.'

'If they're tracking us I think they could have put all sorts of miniature com-u technology in any of our gear,' said Alo. 'The pilot was weird. He looked like he shouldn't have been flying at all. Maybe Leon chose him because of that - because he wouldn't be the type that talked. Anyway, Maika is injured - that's all we really know. The quicker we get there the better.' He reached his hand out to Iessa and she took it. 'I think we should take the coastal route.'

She nodded.

'Also the hovascoos are solar powered,' he said. 'We'll be in good light the whole time, it's a shorter route. We'll be recharging. It'll be faster.'

Lexi said nothing.

Iessa nodded again. 'I think you're right. I think it'll be tempting the gods to make something bad happen if we go the other way.' Then I might lose him.

Lexi said – No you won't. I think it will turn out well.

- Course it will, she said. She forced a smile and ran a hand over the seat of the hovascoo, looking longingly at the controls. 'I wish I could have a go at driving though.'

'Later.' Alo got on the hovascoo and patted the seat behind him. 'You will. When we get there I'll show you how.'

She climbed on. 'Do you realise we're actually out in the real world with no dome and no mask and we'll feel the wind and the rain if there's any?'

'The wind'll make you cold,' said Alo.

'I don't care. Some things are worth being cold for.'

'Yes.' He looked back at her.

Lexi tooled the starter and his hovascoo powered up. 'We're going to Michael's Cave,' he told Alo. 'It's a 50 klick journey, just following the coast south.'

'Michael van Thorson's cave?'

'Yeah.'

'OK. That'll be exciting.' Alo turned to Iessa. 'We'll be going fast. Put your arms around my waist. You'll be warmer that way and less likely to fall off.'

'I won't fall off.' She encircled his waist gently.

'Hold on tight.'

'I don't want to hurt you.'

'Hold me down low and you won't hurt me.'

'That could be kind of interesting.'

His face coloured and she hugged him. He winced.

'Sorry.' She carefully placed her arms around his waist and leant her head on his shoulder. Her face was alive with anticipation. Her eyes sparkled.

Lexi watched them, shielded. - You ready dolphin girl.

- Uhuh. You ready tunnel boy?

- Yeah. Let's go.

He set the hover at two metres and the distance at 45 klicks and tooled the forward button. The fast setting was too tempting and when he chose it and released the power surge, the hovascoo shot out and he was almost to the other side of the river before he got control and turned downstream. Two minutes later he was skimming across the bay following the main channel to the entrance. Looking back he saw people

on the seaweed farm looking in their direction and hoped that two hovascoos was not an unusual sight, although even if the people talked he didn't share Iessa's paranoia.

- This is fun, she said.

He looked back and they were riding behind him on his right side, both grinning like maniacs. He realised that his own face was grinning too.

- Happy huh?

- My two favourite people, away from the collection centre, riding a hovascoo in the real world, going to see my runaway, crazy father soon. Yes, yes, yes, I'm happy.

- Good. Tell Alo let's race to the entrance.

Alo's scooter leapt out in front. Lexi tooled the variable speed control and tried to catch up. Blue-green water turned white with the spray from the hover jets as they headed closer to the northern point marking the harbour entrance. There were two islands there - no longer just shapes, but decent sized hunks of land, covered in bush, with the white wash of the sea surging against the brown rock of the tide line. They raced past and the islands fell behind and Alo and Iessa were first to reach the rolling swell of the open sea.

Lexi powered down a little as they came out of the lee of the islands and the full force of the wind hit them. He took a deep breath. It felt like more oxygen than he was used to.

Iessa turned and waved. – We beat ya.

-Yeah. I'll get you next time.

- That was fun! The hovascoos were such a great idea, Lexi. I know I should be worried about Maika but I can't help being excited about everything. The sea, the wind, the sun, the clouds, you and Alo. The speed.

- I know, he said. -It feels truly wild.

- Yeah.

- It feels like you, he said spontaneously and immediately he felt embarrassed and shielded.

Her face turned and gazed back at him, a heart shape in a tangled cloud of dark hair. Their eyes met and held over the gap between the two hovascoos. Then she turned to the front and buried her face in Alo's shoulder.

Lexi leaned forward and tooled the speed to its highest setting and his hovascoo went hurtling past theirs, buffeted by the wind. He continued for another censec then cut

back to cruising. His pulse was racing. He looked behind and Alo was trying to catch up.

He stayed in front, speeding past bays and points and the outlets of rivers. In most of the bays there were farms of some sort, mussel or oyster or seaweed. There was one cyst colony, just a small one tucked inside the entrance to a large harbour. It took a while for their hovascoos to get past the harbour mouth. He saw several masts speeding across the bay and kept looking back to see if any of the boats were going to come and investigate but nothing happened.

There was a sharp focus to the seascape. He could see a long way with no dome to distort the distance or filter the colours. There was no sea wall to slow the flow of water and current. Seabirds circled the cliffs. Off one big, long beach he passed a small group of penguins swimming towards shore. Often he saw clumps of seaweed floating on the surface and he would automatically identify them as he passed over.

When it had been almost an hour they rounded a point and some white cliffs came into view. He powered down and waited for the others to catch up.

‘We’re getting close,’ he called to Alo. ‘I’m going to mindspeak Iessa a picture of the piece of coast we’re looking for. I imagine we’ll see it in the next fifteen minutes or so.

He looked at her across the gap. -OK lazy one, he said. - Did you look it up on the com-u?

-No.

-I thought you wouldn’t.

-I thought you’d give me a download.

- That’s what I thought would happen too. His mind found the images from the dataplas and packaged it into a tight ball of information and he imagined himself swimming across the pool dome to give it to her. He visualised her swimming towards him and when they met she took the ball and it turned into light and travelled through her hands up to her brain. And she smiled.

-Got it?

-Yes. I liked that visualisation.

- Just trying to make it easy. I thought it’d be nice too, old times.

-I was always trouble for you. I’m sorry.

- I could handle it.

- I'll make it up to you some day.

- Don't. You owe me nothing.

He turned away from her and with the power setting on high hurtled out across the water, south towards the far arm of the bay. Alo powered up, his hovascoo was hanging just on Lexi's right rear. They continued down the coast and rounded a point and Lexi recognised the headland.

Iessa said – This is it.

They skimmed through an opening in the cliffs about 50 metres wide, into a small amphitheatre of bay which narrowed in again before opening out beyond that into a flat expanse of water. It was a floodplain bay, the original bay now more extensive because the flat floodplain next to it had become permanently inundated in the big warm.

Lexi aimed the hovascoo for the southern end. It was almost high tide and he was way up the side of the valley before he came to the brown feeder river. They followed it through a narrow gorge like area between two low hills and for about 500 metres before it turned north. He drove up on to hard ground and climbed off. Alo and Iessa were right behind him.

A stream fed into the river. 'See that stream' said Lexi. 'We follow it and it should take us to the cave. It's not supposed to be very far.'

Iessa nodded. She was looking pale. Lexi had heard her mind shouting to her father as they travelled down the coast. There had been no reply.

Alo came up behind her and rubbed her shoulders. 'It's going to be okay,' he said.

Lexi nodded.- I think he's right. Aloud, he said, 'Let's go.'

They set the hovascoos to low and began to follow the stream, coming upon a well worn track, wide enough for the hovascoos to travel single file. It wound through a grove of tall kanuka and lead them to a pond which was backed by a tall cliff. The scooters stopped and Iessa leapt off and ran into the cleft in the cliff wall that lead into the cave.

Alo sat on the hovascoo. His face was white.

'You go,' he said to Lexi.

'What about you?'

‘He’ll be all right or at least he will be now that we’re here. I’ll wait.’

‘You’re not well?’

‘I got cold.’

‘Do you need to take something?’

‘I’ll be okay. You go in.’ Alo turned and opened the medic pak and took out his old pouch. He unfastened the flap and took out the medicator and pressed it to his inner arm. Gradually the colour returned to his face.

‘The valve operation was bigger than you made out wasn’t it?’

‘Yeah, emergency stuff. The cloned heart was faulty.’

‘Why did they let you come?’

‘I was recovered enough to come.’

‘You mean you could walk.’

‘Yeah.’

Lexi shook his head. ‘You’re an idiot.’

Alo shrugged. ‘As long as I take the medication and rest up it should be all right. I couldn’t let you have all the glory.’

They looked at each other.

‘The glory of finding Maika?’ said Lexi.

‘That as well.’ Alo turned away from Lexi’s probing eyes and then turned back. ‘Dammit,’ he said smiling softly. ‘Why not talk about it? I think she’ll only be happy with you or me. It should be you, I have no genes worth passing on and I don’t know how long I’ll be around to protect her. But at least I want her to know...’

‘Maybe I don’t want her,’ interrupted Lexi.

‘You should want her,’ said Alo shortly. ‘You were made for each other.’

‘What about you?’

‘I just love her. I’ve always just loved her.’

They stared at each other.

‘This feels like a woman’s conversation,’ said Lexi.

Alo laughed. ‘Maybe it didn’t need to be said but I’ve said it. So it exists now, out here where we can feel the wind.’

‘They tried to stop you didn’t they, and you refused to stay.’

Alo grinned. 'Yeah. And when the genemaster is on your side what can they do?' He hauled the medic bag off the back of his hovascoo. 'Shall we go in, tunnel boy?'

Lexi hung back. 'How long have you got here?'

'About two days. Maybe three.'

'It's as bad as that?'

Alo smiled. 'It's not as bad as that, Lexi. It's as good as that.'

The cavern was dark. It smelled of sickness. Maika was lying on a narrow bed in the corner of the cave, lit by the weak light from a fading solar lamp. Iessa leant against a stone table watching him. It's hard edge cut into her thigh. She didn't move. The rise and fall of his chest was fast like a bird breathing. He was sleeping, eyelids flickering, sweat on his face. He had on some ragged shorts and there was a bandage around his leg that was looking dark coloured and tight.

You left me, she thought. I needed you so badly and you left me. Her hands clenched. She wanted to hit him, to scream at him. The dark cave was like the black space inside her where her angry heart beat the rhythm of the words, there was still me. Why didn't you think of me? Why didn't you love me?

Alo came in and she felt his warm touch on her arm. It earthed her a little – soaked up a nanogram of the anger, left a tiny residue of calmness. Then he moved past and sat on the edge of the bed. He put the medic kit on the floor next to him and lay his hands on Maika's leg and kept them there steady for a few seconds before untying the bandage and dropping it to the floor. Iessa moved so she could see. The wound site was swollen and puckered almost closed. Puss oozed out.

Alo's fingers travelled up the leg and explored the hot, swollen hardness around Maika's groin and moved back down again to the toes. He rummaged in the medic kit and took sensors out and attached one to each of Maika's temples and to his chest and stomach area and to the injured leg. Then he took the com-u from the kit, and put it on the narrow ledge of bed next to him and sat motionless, reading it.

Iessa couldn't move. It was too quick, the transition from the collection centre to this cave, from being an orphan to having her father again. She was barely aware of Lexi coming to stand beside her. But he had his hands on his hips and as he stood there

watching, she was reminded of all the other times in their lives when he'd stood just like that, off to one side, not included. She felt ashamed that she could remember so many.

Alo took a plasma pak out of his kit and injected a drug into it. He inserted a needle line into Maika's arm and attached it to the pak and motioned for Lexi to come over and hold the pak up. Then he took out three small plasma leech paks and lay them on Maika's leg spaced evenly from just below the wound site up to the groin. They self attached and immediately began to deflate. He stood up and injected another drug into the plasma pak that Lexi was holding and looked at the com-u again and grunted, as though he was satisfied with something. Then turning back to his kit, he hinged open another compartment and took out a cyst-struct which he inflated and it morphed into a stand. He wedged the stand against the bed then took the plasma pak off Lexi and hung it on the stand.

'I'm guessing he won't die,' Iessa said.

'No. He would have without us. There's an infection in his blood. It's treatable though. He won't die.'

'He won't die,' she repeated tonelessly. The words hung in the cave air like bats. They fluttered around in her head. A volcano of rage surged up from her stomach and she felt like it would blow her head off. He won't die, he won't die, he won't die. She looked down at her sleeping father, his chest rising and falling fast, breathing like a bird. What about me? Why didn't you think of me? Why didn't you rescue me?

The anger threatened to overwhelm her and she forced herself to leave before she said or did something that she'd regret. Outside the sun burnt. The murky pond was smooth like glass and she could see green bush and blue sky reflected in it. She was standing in a flat, cleared, grassy area. A few tree stumps sat on the ground nearby under a tall kanuka. Well worn tracks lead off through the grass into the bush. She followed one and found a toilet shed set a little bit back under some droopy rimus. There was a bucket of large leaves there and another of forest floor litter. It smelled clean. She went back to the clearing and took another track which lead to a small rocky stream in which had been scooped a deeper pool about 2 metres in diameter. His fresh water supply she thought, and felt like throwing dirt into it.

She went back into the cave. The ragged pants were gone and Maika had on clean, white, loose shorts. Alo was bathing him with a cloth and a bowl of something that made the cave smell the same as the medic centre at Owai.

‘What is that?’

‘It’s just a cleansing, soothing wash.’ He held out the cloth to her. ‘Would you like to do it?’

She shook her head. No, no, no. I cannot touch him without wanting to kill him. She turned away from Alo’s outstretched hand and watched Lexi putting food on the table. He was really big now. His movements were precise and coordinated. So Lexi. His face was calm. He looked up at her and she couldn’t read his shielded mind. She was shielding too. It was all she could do, control her own rage. She felt like she should be doing something else but couldn’t.

Just have to leave it all to Alo she thought, turning back. The cloth moved slowly and gently over the exposed parts of Maika’s body. Alo was loose and relaxed, totally engrossed in what he was doing. His tall body leant forward and sponged Maika’s face and then he lifted and wiped each arm and bent to rinse the cloth in the bowl of solution. Then he did Maika’s chest and the good leg and finally the injured leg. Alo bathed her father and she watched his fingers, which were long and white and slender the way he was, and they seemed so sure of themselves. They did not act as though they belonged to a fragile body, and he had filled out a little, but still there was so much fragility about him or she corrected herself, at least about his body. They had put out a new lamp and Alo’s face shone in its light, strong and focused and gentle. He looked up and his eyes found hers. He smiled and his face changed from angelic to grinning normal.

‘If I’d known you were just going to stand there I wouldn’t have bothered with the plasma stand.’

‘I’m mad at him.’

‘Maybe you should go for a walk,’ he said.

‘Maybe you should go fuck a toadstool.’

He laughed and then clutched at the place on his chest where the scar was.

Oh Alo, she thought, stupid Alo. ‘Don’t tell me what to do,’ she said more softly. ‘I’m too angry to do anything except be angry.’ She bent and draped her arms around his shoulder and kissed the top of his head. ‘I know you’re sick, idiot. You shouldn’t be here. Not for him.’

Alo’s face was pinched. He reached up and took one of her hands and kissed it. ‘Yes I am here for him. He was like a father to me those years I lived with you... but I’m

not here just for him,' he said. 'Go for a walk, Iessa. I need to treat myself. You distract me.'

She wanted to ask, how do I distract you but didn't and felt unreasonably proud of herself for this one instance of self-control.

'OK.' She kissed his cheek. It felt cold. She lingered, holding his shoulders, rubbing them. He gave her leg a firm push and she let go.

'Take Lexi,' he said.

Lexi was kneeling stacking the extra food from the pack onto one of the shelves. He stood up and dusted his hands against his trousers. 'Why?'

'I don't need you here. You can go and scout around.'

Lexi stared at them. 'OK. It's a good idea,' he said. 'I'd like to walk back down and see where I can camp.' He walked to the entrance and looked back at her.

'You coming?'

'OK.'

He held out his hand. There was a gleam of understanding in his eyes. She walked over and reached out and he towed her unresisting, out into the light.

When they had gone Alo took another plasma pak out of his medic kit and hauled himself up off the bed and hung it on the stand. He pulled his sleeve up. A lure was strapped to his inner arm. He flushed it and then connected the pak line. His own current prescription of painkillers, electrolytes and heart stimulants. The life began to drip back into him. Collapse averted. He sat back on the bed and then eased himself down onto the comforting floor and leaned back. The edge of the bed was just the right height to rest his head. His eyes shut. He didn't want her to see him like this but he was so tired. He set the timer on the com-u and closed his eyes and woke a short time later because a hand was rubbing his head.

He heard Maika's voice, hoarse and dry from the fever.

'Is that you Alo? It must be you. You're the only one I know who'd be here and be sicker than me.'

Alo pulled himself up onto his knees and leaned on the edge of the bed. His heart went kaboom, kaboom. Maika was a better colour than he was. He sank back down to the floor. 'I'm feeling stuffed, Maika.'

'You gonna die?'

‘Not if the drugs start working soon.’

‘Am I gonna die?’

‘You’re awake. Your drugs have started working.’

‘You kidding ‘bout you?’

‘I hope so.’

Maika laughed and Alo tried not to. It hurt too much.

‘You reckon you should have the bed and I should have the floor?’ asked Maika.

Alo shut his eyes ‘Down here I don’t have so far to fall.’

‘What is it? Your heart?’

‘Yeah.’

‘You should go to sleep boy. Who else is here?’

‘Iessa and Lexi.’

‘Does she hate me?’

‘Yeah.’

‘I deserve it.’

“Maybe. I dunno.”

Maika patted him on the shoulder. ‘You go to sleep Alo. She’s like her mother. You don’t want to be awake when she sees I’ve got my eyes open. She’ll be wanting to kill me.’ Maika’s voice was surprisingly cheerful.

Alo didn’t reply. He was tired in every cell in his body. So much for her not seeing him like this. So tired, so tired. Anyway, if she sees me asleep maybe she won’t yell as much. Yeah, he thought, and rocks can swim. He couldn’t keep his eyes open. His head slumped back against Maika’s arm. Seconds later he was asleep.

Lexi’s View of The River

Lexi and Iessa walked silently back down the path to the river and then followed it downstream for a little way until they came to a straight stretch of water with a small island in the middle of the current. It looked deeper there. On their side of the river there was about eight metres of cliff and what looked like a flat area on a hummock of hill. They scrambled up a narrow trail and found a small clearing, floored with a dusting of

fine leaves from the surrounding kanuka trees. A few metres back from the cliff edge an old circle of stones formed a campfire. Tufts of grass grew out of it and there were gaps where stones had fallen out.

There was a view of green, silk surfaced water and across to the other side of the river where a grove of eucalypts covered the opposite hillside. Exotic trees. Lexi wondered what they were doing there.

The view was bigger than he was used to and the sounds of insects and birds made everything feel full inside him. No dome made a difference to the feel of the air, the smell, the sounds, the perception of sun on skin. Everything seemed more. The unlimited distance excited him. He wanted to run and swim without stopping and see where it took him. He wanted the lack of knowing, the uncertainty of it.

Iessa's face was masked. Her eyes looked black, the way they used to when she was thinking about doing something crazy.

'What are you thinking?' he asked.

She gestured back the way they'd come. 'Why'd you want to come all this way from the cave? There's plenty of room there to camp.'

'I've never been in the open like this before. I don't want to waste it.'

'We might need you.'

'I'll be there. I just want to sleep somewhere different. Wake up somewhere different.'

She looked out over the river. 'I might try and kill him,' she said. 'I don't trust myself.'

'I trust you,' he said. 'And anyway Alo will be there.'

She looked at him and he thought her eyes lightened. 'You think he can stop me?' she said.

'He always has before.'

'I don't know if I've been this mad before.'

Lexi said, 'You've grown up a lot. You didn't scream and yell back there the way you would have in the old days.'

'I wanted to.'

'But you didn't.'

'I don't know how long I can be good for.'

Lexi said -He left you.

She looked at him.- Yeah. I needed him. He wasn't there.

- We were there. Me and Marco and Sena. All the rest of us.

She looked as though she hadn't thought of that before. - Yeah. You were.

- Marco said to me once, some people are worth hating forever and some people aren't.

- When the people you love aren't there for you, when they leave you, it hurts too much. Maybe you shouldn't forgive them.

- Maybe he hurt too much to stay.

She stared at him. 'That's what I keep telling myself. It's not really enough of an excuse but it's the thing which is keeping me sane.'

'The thing which is keeping you sane, Iessa, is yourself. You have courage,' he said. 'My mother was the same, I think. It's the thing I like best about you.'

She looked away and down at the campfire. She knelt and picked up one of the tumbled out stones and put it back. Then she replaced the others. Standing up, she rubbed her hands against her shorts.

'It'll be nice for you to have a fire here tonight,' she said. Her eyes met his. 'Maybe tomorrow if Maika's not still looking like he's dying,' she didn't try to mask the bitterness, 'maybe me and Alo can come down too, for a little while.'

'Maybe,' said Lexi. 'But you might have other things you need to do.'

She looked across at him. All this eye contact and shielding. It wasn't the usual way they communicated these days.

'Let's go back,' she said. 'You put out that food and we didn't eat any yet.' She took the path back down the bank. When she got to the bottom she started running. 'Race ya. Last one there has to do the dishes for the next two weeks.' She heard him pounding up the track behind her and as he went to pass he grabbed her hand and slowed down and ran with her.

He was smiling. 'Nice try, but uneven race. If it was swimming it'd be fair. We'll both do the dishes for the next two weeks.'

They jogged and he held her hand all the way back to the cave. When they got to the big cliff face he lifted their joined hands and touched the rock.

'There,' he said. 'It's official. I'll do them today and you can do them tomorrow.' He let go her hand and went into the cave.

Crazy Mad Iessa

She was left looking at the cleft in the rock face. It just looked like some crack in a rock. You'd never guess that there was a cave back there. She ran her hand over the smoothness of the stone and it felt warm because of the sun. She entered the cleft and felt immediately cool and couldn't see in the abrupt blackness of the first bit of tunnel. A few tentative steps later and the darkness eased as her eyes adjusted and the light from the solar lamp reflected back at her off the walls of the cave. She entered the main area and her eyes were drawn to the lamp and the man propped up on his elbows looking towards her. Lexi was leaning against the table and his head was turned towards her too. Alo was slumped on the floor by the bed asleep and she realised he was connected to a plasma pak.

'How cosy,' she said, staring at her father.

He stared back.

'So you've been here the whole fucken time,' she said.

'Yes.'

There was no hint of apology in that blunt yes, or of excuse either, which truthfully would have made her more angry. She stalked across to where Lexi was leaning against the table. A small wooden stool sat next to his leg. She picked it up and brandished it at her father where he lay on the bed.

'I feel like taking this and bashing your brains out.' He didn't say anything and she hefted it higher and felt the strength of her arm, the rush of wanting to throw it, of wanting to hurt him. It was the way she'd felt when they'd played forts and Lexi was running up the hill. He didn't move and neither did Lexi. She stopped herself and ground the stool back on to the floor. An old fashioned, glass water bottle stood on the table. She picked it up. It felt satisfyingly heavy and she hurled it at the wall of shelves. It smashed. A dark stain of water and glass patterned the wall and floor. Then she

picked up the stool and hurled that too at another wall. It bounced off unharmed onto the floor.

Alo stirred and opened his eyes.

She looked down at him accusingly. His white, sick face made her want to hit him.

‘What are you hooked up to that for?’ she snapped, gesturing wildly at the plasma pak. ‘Did you come to help my useless excuse for a father and you’re so sick that you have to have one of those as well as your medicator?’

He leaned his head back and shut his eyes and didn’t reply.

‘Leave him,’ said Maika. ‘He hasn’t hurt you. Scream at me.’

There was a sharp knife on a board on the table. She picked it up and waved it at him. ‘I don’t want to scream at you,’ she said. ‘I want to kill you.’

‘Do it then,’ he said. ‘What’s stopping you?’

‘What’s stopping me, you useless excuse for a father, is knowing that it’s the wrong thing to do. It’s knowing, you gutless worm, that it’s wrong. It’s knowing more than you knew when you decided that you had to commit suicide, you slime... and you didn’t even do it, anyway. You fucken coward.’

‘I tried,’ he said. ‘I was drowning and the dolphins found me. They wouldn’t let me do it. I wanted to. They herded me to a beach near here. And then I dreamed about your mother and she told me there was a path. I woke up and found the path and it lead me here.’

She threw the knife and it bounced off a wall and ricocheted back on to the table. She was aware of Lexi ducking with his arms around his head.

‘Don’t lie. Don’t bring her into it,’ she screamed.

‘It’s not a lie.’

‘It is a lie,’ she screamed. ‘It’s a lie just like everything is a lie.’

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I love you Iessa.’

‘That’s another lie. If you love me why didn’t you look after me?’

‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘I was missing your mother so badly. I was crazy with it. And then I had the nanocu and I couldn’t forget anything the way people are supposed to forget.’ He shrugged. ‘And I guess I wasn’t used to having to look after you. I didn’t really realise that you needed me. I thought the others could do it better.’

‘What others?’ she snapped.

‘Marco and Sena – everyone else.’

She stared at him. ‘Why would I want them?’ she said. ‘You useless, stupid fuck. Why would I want them when I still had a father to look after me and protect me? When I still had a father to love me.’

She turned and ran out.

The sun was bright. She ran down the track and at the river she dived in and swam downstream. She was sick of all the lies, sick of everyone telling her to do things that didn’t feel right. She didn’t know what was right anymore.

She swam with the river current until she came to the bay and then swam out until she was almost to the headland. The current was strong, pouring out into the open, choppy sea. She was almost out through the gap when three fins broke the surface.

They circled and she felt a sharp pain in her left hand. She brought it up out of the water and saw dotted, purple points along the fleshy part of her palm. The dolphins were still circling. She dived down and they dove with her. One of them swam under her hand and she felt its dorsal fin and grasped it tight. The dolphin began a series of shallow dives building up speed, beginning to head for land. She let go and surfaced. Another dolphin came shunting into her. Her hand was bitten again. She dived and a dolphin came close, offering its fin. She hooked her hand around it and this time when the dolphin began to build up speed and turned for shore she held on. It took her in until the water began to get shallower and then she let go because she was afraid the dolphins would beach themselves if they came in closer.

She swam towards the beach, her feet touched the bottom and she walked up onto the sand. The dolphins were still off shore. She watched them and they turned and swam for the northern point. They dived and their fins disappeared. She kept watching but they didn’t reappear in the bay.

She couldn’t think but maybe the time for thinking was past. Turning, she walked until she got to the river and there was a path along the top of the bank that she followed upstream. A little way along she found a flax kete with a knife in it. She stooped and picked it up and took it with her. The path lead all the way to where they had stopped earlier on the hovascoos. The river had dropped a long way with the outgoing tide and was chest high when she waded across holding the kete above her head. She climbed out and followed the path under the kanukas back to the cave.

Inside Alo and Maika were asleep. The food was still on the table and Lexi was wearing a different tunic. His hair was wet.

‘Did you follow me?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why didn’t you mindspeak me?’

‘I saw the fins and figured you’d be all right.’ He turned to look down at the others. ‘They needed me here.’

‘So you couldn’t catch up?’

‘When you’re mad, you’re fast.’

She laughed. ‘Nice to know some things don’t change.’ She looked at the food on the table. ‘Have you eaten?’

‘I thought I’d wait for you.’

‘You’re an idiot to put up with me.’

He sat down on a stool and pushed another one towards her. ‘I know. Careful how you sit on that. For some reason it seems a bit wobbly.’

She laughed. ‘Better it’s wobbly than me.’

He nodded. ‘Can’t argue with that,’ and he reached for the bread, broke off some and passed the rest to her.

Everything is Crazy

~~Later after~~After they’d cleared the dishes and tidied up, Lexi went outside to ~~see about putting~~put up the cyst tents. Iessa watched him go. He was leaving her alone with Maika and Alo. She looked at the sharp knife on the table but the anger had ~~drained out of her~~gone when she’d swum with the dolphins and realised Maika had been telling the truth.

Alo still hadn’t woken up but that was normal for him when he was sick. She felt guilty ~~about yelling at him~~. Even in the midst of her screaming she had sensed that feeling she always got from him – reserved for her and any animal that he happened upon. A feeling of total love and commitment. And she repaid it by screaming at him. She ~~turned away from him and~~ began to clear the table, disgusted with herself. Her lack of self-control could have hurt him. She picked up the knife and hefted it in her hand. It

was heavy. She eyed Maika's sleeping form, unwilling to believe that she'd actually threatened him with it and lay it carefully back on the table. What was wrong with her? She felt so thin and stretched – full of holes. She couldn't contain herself, didn't know who she was or what she was or who she was meant to be.

Alo stirred and she knelt down beside him. His eyes opened. They were grey and solemn.

'I'm sorry,' she said.

'I know. Don't apologise.' He brought his hand up slowly and brushed back a tendril of her hair. His face blurred and she took his hand and kissed it and her tears fell on it.

He lifted her hand and kissed it and then let go and reached out and stroked her forehead. She pushed her head against his hand. It felt like she was being bathed in cool water. His hand moved down to the back of her neck and he pulled her towards him. When he kissed her it felt like she'd received an electric shock. The other girls had talked about being with Alo, said it was amazing. She'd tried not to listen to those conversations, the same way she'd tried not to listen to them when they said how exciting Lexi was. Those guys were like her brothers. It had felt all wrong to listen and now Alo had kissed her, that way.

'What are you doing?' she asked.

'Kissing.'

'You're not supposed to kiss me like that,' she said. 'You're supposed to be like my brother.'

'Am I? Says who?'

He smiled and stroked her forehead again and she looked at him. Everything was crazy.

'I am not your brother, Iessa and I don't want to be.'

He shut his eyes. His face was beautiful. She got unsteadily to her feet.

'I'm going outside to see how Lexi's getting on with the tents.'

'OK.' He opened his eyes briefly. 'Maika's going to be all right,' he said. 'I need to sleep though.'

His eyelids fluttered shut. He had long eyelashes. His face was very pale. A brown hand reached down to stroke the mess of blonde hair. Iessa looked up at her father.

‘I’ll keep an eye on him,’ Maika said, ‘if you want to go out and see Lexi.’

‘He was stupid to come,’ she said.

‘He doesn’t think that.’

She looked at her father. He was already looking way better. ‘Sorry about before,’ she said.

‘I deserved it. I’ve been selfish.’ His eyes held hers.

‘I may do it again. I’m feeling a bit crazy.’

‘I’ll cope.’

He still looked big and strong. She remembered him swimming, the only one she knew who was faster than her. ‘Yeah,’ she said and turned and went out.

There was still light in the sky but dusk was falling and almost immediately she heard the whine of mosquitos. Lexi had erected a tent in the clearing by the tree stumps. She crawled in through a netting door and fastened it behind her. The two beds lay side by side, two cyst-struct inflated mattresses with sleepsacs on top. Each had a small pillow. There was a solar lamp positioned in the tiny gap between the two bedrolls and her bag and Alo’s bag were at the foot end by the entrance. So Alo and I will be here, she thought. Lexi must be downriver putting up his tent on the knoll. She tried out one of the bedrolls. It wasn’t too hard. She and Alo would be cosy tonight.

She thought about that kiss. They’d be cosy but she felt off centre and disturbed by the things that were happening. Everything was a bit loose and a bit crazy and maybe she was the loosest and craziest thing there. All of a sudden she felt like crying and the tears flooded out and wet the pillow. She cried silently as it got darker. Lexi come back and she heard him calling out something to Alo and then lights come on outside, but he left her alone in the tent. She felt cold and crawled into the sleep sac and with the tears still seeping out, exhausted, she fell asleep.

Alo checked Maika one last time, left the solar lamp on low and walked tiredly outside. There was no moon and no stars. It was chilly and he suspected it might rain that night or the next day. He saw the tent in the clearing and sat down on one of the cut logs with his legs stretched out in front and looked out over the pond and then back at the tent. Iessa was sleeping in there and soon he would go in too. He loved her, he had always loved her, but rightly, he didn’t feel that he had anything to offer. He had no genes. He couldn’t give her children. He couldn’t protect her in the sea, and yet he

could give her all of himself, willingly and unreservedly – he knew that. And he sensed that he could make her love him the same way. It seemed love was his gift. But he didn't think it was the right thing to do.

He heard the buzz of a mosquito and then saw, two, three, a mob of them descending on his exposed skin. He swiped them away and rose to his feet and went down the path which was lit by two solar lamps to the toilet and then he washed briefly in a bucket at the water pool which was also lit by solar lamps. They were the latest design. Lexi had put them there.

He walked back to the tent and stooped to unfasten the opening, crouched down to crawl inside and fastened the opening behind him. The mosquitoes were buzzing hungrily outside. A dim lamp lit the inside of the tent. Iessa was a cloud of dark hair and a mound of womanliness, asleep in her sleep sac. He could smell the sweetness of her. There was another sleep sac unrolled next to her. He rummaged in his pack for a sleeping tunic, undressed and pulled it on carefully. He couldn't really stretch his arms out at all and he shot a look at her sleeping face glad that she hadn't been witness to that awkward performance. Unfastening his sleep sac he slipped into it and lay there for a little and gradually his cold body warmed. It was an opportunity to watch Iessa and although he was tired he didn't know when he'd have the chance again to just look at her, so he studied her in the light of the lamp.

She was classically Polynesian and beautiful. In Alo's mind, beautiful did not really come close to describing her, didn't capture the uniqueness of her. She was unmistakably Lara's daughter but her face didn't have the certainty that Lara's had always exhibited. Lara had always done the right thing – Iessa had often done the wrong thing. The mixture of vulnerability and toughness which showed on Iessa's face was there because she had been wounded but survived. Lara had not done the dumb stuff and Maika had been there almost all her life protecting her. She had not known the same degree of hurt, and hurt built something inside of people. Alo had realised that long ago. It built barriers but it could also build a depth of understanding and empathy that was impossible to generate just by thinking. Alo liked the wounded souls better than the whole ones.

Unable to resist, he ran a finger over her sleeping face, traced her eyes and nose and then her lips. She woke and sleepily took his hand and kissed it and lay his palm on her cheek and held it there. Her eyes were soft. He could see love there and knew that if

he wanted he could have her. Just out of gratitude she would let him have her. But he didn't know if he could bear just gratitude, and he didn't think sex and love between him and Iessa would be the right thing for her although he knew without a doubt, that it would be the right thing for him.

Still he had to say it. 'I love you.'

'I love you, too.'

She meant it but Alo could not sense any degree of desire in her. There was uncertainty and worry. The world had thrown too much in her direction and she couldn't handle anymore. He leant over and kissed her on the cheek - it was unbelievably smooth and soft. Then he switched the lamp off.

'Sleep well,' he said.

'You too.'

Alo shut his eyes, thankful for once, that he was sick and it would be impossible for him to stay awake.

Alo is Sick

When Alo woke the tent was empty. He gave himself a jab with the medicator, then rose wearily and walked down the path to the toilet and washed at the pool. Everything was an effort. He needed his medicine. He went into the cave and Maika was there alone, sitting up on the bed looking a hundred times better. Everything looked clean and tidy. Alo walked carefully over to the bed and sat down on the edge of it. His medic kit was on the floor and he had no energy to do more than look at it.

'Feeling sick?' asked Maika.

'Yeah.'

'What do you need?'

'Another plasma pak.' Alo felt everything beginning to go black and leant down and put his head between his legs. It all came right and then Lexi came in.

He took one look at Alo. 'Where's your medicator?'

'In the tent. But I need the plasma pak now.'

Lexi came over and knelt down next to him and searched in the kit. 'There's six different ones here. Which one?'

‘It’s got a blue tab.’

Lexi took one and hung it on the stand and unfurled the tubing.

‘Here.’ He held the end out to Alo and Alo looked at it but he felt as though if he reached out he’d collapse.

Lexi said, ‘Right. What do you need me to do?’

‘You’ll have to flush the lure.’

Lexi lifted the sleeve of Alo’s sleep tunic and exposed the lure. ‘How?’

Everything went black.

Alo collapsed. Lexi cursed and looked at Maika. ‘Do you know how to do it?’

‘No.’

Lexi rummaged quickly in the medic kit and found the com-u. He tooled it on and then searched for instructions for flushing a lure. He watched the vid and simultaneously followed the instructions, taking out saline which he used to fill an injector. He slipped it into the lure and released the vacuum, then forced in saline until the buffer was full and connected the line from the plasma bag. The fluid began to drip. He and Maika sat watching Alo and gradually the white face began to show a little colour and his breathing became a little more regular. Alo’s eyes opened.

Maika said, ‘How sick are you?’

‘Pretty sick.’

Lexi said, ‘Not an acceptable answer.’

Alo said, ‘I should have been all right. What time is it?’

‘1030.’

‘That’s the problem then. I should have had this three hours ago.’

‘You idiot. You should have told me.’

‘I don’t usually sleep this late. I thought I’d be awake.’

‘What does it mean, you collapsing like this,’ Lexi asked.

Alo smiled wryly. ‘It means maybe I overstated the two or three days. We’ll see but I’m not going to last the three.’

‘All right. What do you need.’

‘The sensors. Get out two red ones and a blue. Put the red ones on my chest and the blue one on my temple and hold the com-u for me.’

Lexi placed the sensors and then held the com-u for Alo who tooled a tab and flicked through several screens. When he had finished, he sighed. 'It's not looking good. Give me two hours. If I stabilise in that time, I'll be all right for tomorrow. If not you'll need to call the carrier for today.'

'All right,' said Lexi. 'First thing though, I'm going to make you up a bed in here.'

He brought in one of the sleeping pads and bedrolls from the tent and put it by Maika's bed, then helped Alo to lie down, propping him up with spare blankets.

'Can you eat,' Lexi asked.

'No.'

Alo's eyes shut and Lexi jogged him awake. 'Is it dangerous for you to sleep?'

'No more dangerous than if I was awake. Relax. I won't die but I've got to sleep.' Alo's eyes shut. Lexi stared down at the pale face. He hated the way Alo was breathing, fast and ragged like that.

Maika said, 'Don't worry, Lexi. I'll watch him, too. It used to sound like that when he was younger. It's not desperate yet.'

'I feel like calling the carrier now,' said Lexi.

'Okay. Good idea. But just put them on stand by. Otherwise make it definite for tomorrow morning and tell them to bring a medic.'

Lexi realised Maika was acting like the cystmaster again. It felt like a relief not to have to make that decision himself.

Maika patted him on the back. 'Off you go, boy, and give them a call. I'll watch Alo.'

Lexi commed from outside in the clearing. There was no screen on the little com-u but he recognised the accent of the pilot immediately. He explained what had happened and said he'd com back in two hours. The pilot said he could be there very quickly and told Lexi not to worry.

He added, 'That boy is very sickly. He has not got the look of someone who will amount to much.'

Lexi replied hotly, 'If you've survived growing up in a high-rad area in the Northern Wastelands, then feel free to speak. If not, don't. He's the best person I know.'

The pilot was silent and Lexi broke the signal.

Back in the cave Maika was resting with his eyes shut and one hand on Alo's shoulder. Alo was breathing a little easier.

Iessa came in with a stack of fish fillets on a large leaf.

'You did well,' said Lexi.

Maika opened his eyes. 'Did you go out to the point where I told you?'

'Yeah. It was good. I just had to put in the line and I caught one pretty much straight away. Then another four.'

Maika rubbed his hands together. 'Let's have some for lunch. Later when the tide goes out, you could get some cockles too.'

'Maybe.' Iessa had noticed Alo. 'This doesn't look good.'

'He slept in and missed his morning dose,' said Lexi. 'He may have to go back early.'

'The idiot. He should have told me to wake him up.'

'We're waiting to see if he improves. I've put the pilot on stand by.'

'Damn,' she said. 'I guess all we can do now is wait.' She looked at Maika.

'This reminds me of when he was little.'

Maika rubbed Alo's thatch of white hair. 'I was thinking the same thing myself.'

Two hours later they woke Alo and gave him the com-u. He flicked through the screens again and they could tell by his face that the news wasn't good.

'I need to go back,' he said. 'The drugs are working partially but the heart muscle is weakening for some reason. I can't risk it,' he said apologetically.

Maika ruffled his hair. 'Alo. Look at me,' he said. 'I'm a thousand times better already. You did that. Don't apologise. Be proud boy. We love you. We want you to get better.'

'Sometimes it's hard being the sick one,' Alo said. He looked gratefully at Maika. 'Thanks for saying that anyway.'

'It's true,' said Maika.

'Shall I com the pilot, now?' asked Lexi. 'And what should I say for the pick-up?'

'Same place of course,' said Alo. 'That trip out on the hovascoo was fantastic. Another one of those.... and I could almost bear going back early.'

'What about Maika,' asked Iessa? 'What should we do for him?'

‘There are leech paks in the kit,’ said Alo. ‘You just need to put a couple on his leg every morning, space them at his groin and just below the wound, and he’ll come right. They have a mixture of drugs and tracker cells. It’ll get into his bloodstream and remove infection from the whole body.’ Alo looked at Maika, ‘Stay off the leg for the next four days. Lie down most of the time, walk a little but no further than the toilet. Got that?’

Maika smiled and nodded. ‘Yes, Alo. I have got that.’

The Sea Lion

Lexi had loaded Alo’s things onto the hovascoo. They had taken a few supplies out of the medic kit but were sending most of it back with Alo. If anything went wrong, he’d need it more than Maika. Alo’s arms were around Lexi’s waist and his head rested heavily on Lexi’s shoulder. An oxygen line ran from a small cylinder to two feeder tubes that fitted into Alo’s nostrils. A blanket was strapped around him and a harness attached Alo to the seat and clipped to a band around Alo’s waist.

Iessa had brought Maika out to say goodbye.

‘Look after yourself,’ Maika said. He wrapped his arm around the blanketed figure and hugged him hard. ‘And may the blessings of the Earth be yours.’ The formal thank you, and then he kissed him. ‘I’m worried I won’t see you again,’ he said.

‘You’ll see me.’

Iessa held Alo’s face with both hands and kissed him on the lips.

‘I’ll see you soon. I love you,’ she said. She stepped back and his eyes met hers.

‘I love you, too.’ He leaned his head on Lexi’s shoulder and Lexi started the hovascoo and skimmed in a wide, curving loop slowly over the pond and down the path.

Iessa said, ‘I hope he’ll be all right.’

Maika was looking down the path. He turned and met her eyes, smiling softly.

‘Don’t worry,’ he said. ‘Lexi will take good care of him.’ He went to go back inside and then he chuckled.

‘What’s funny?’ she said.

‘I don’t know how you did it Iessa, but you’ve got the two best boys in the whole of Aotearoa after you.’

‘I do not,’ she said, blushing.

‘Oh yes you do.’

The trip back to the drop off point was uneventful. The sea was flat and the day was windless. Alo thought everything looked even more beautiful than when they had arrived. But then he had been with Iessa and although he loved Lexi, there was really no comparison as far as hovascoo companions went.

The oxygen had made a difference and by the time they got back to the two kayaks under the willow trees, he had perked up and was wondering if he’d made the wrong decision.

He told Lexi what he was thinking and Lexi said, ‘You’re such a nema, Alo. You don’t look well, you sound funny when you breathe, you were unconscious a couple of hours ago. Of course you should be going back.’

The pilot was late. Alo stayed by the hovascoo and Lexi wandered over to the kayaks. Apart from a light covering of willow leaves they looked just as he had left them. He dusted the leaves off the single kayak and went over to the other one and stopped. There was a sea lion lying up against it. It raised its head and looked at him.

Lexi backed away and ran back to the hovascoo. ‘Hey Alo. There’s a sea lion here’

He helped Alo out of the blanket and led him over to it.

They stood off to the side watching.

‘I don’t think its well,’ said Alo.’ He moved closer and knelt down beside it. The sea lion raised its head briefly then lay back down again and shut its eyes. Alo put his hands on it. ‘Very low in energy,’ he said. ‘Like me.’ He rose onto his knees and ran his hands over its body. ‘Go and get me the medic kit,’ he said completely absorbed by this fascinating and worrying creature. Lexi brought the kit back and Alo said, still with his eyes and hands on the sea lion, ‘Open it and get out the com-u and two blue and two red sensors.’

Lexi followed Alo’s instructions, not unaware of the humour in the situation. Alo’s breath was still rasping out of him, he was a deathly white but his hands were steady and Lexi sensed that something akin to the hand mind linkage was telling Alo what to do next and everything else was irrelevant for him.

In the midst of Alo reviewing the information from the sensors the carrier dropped out of the sky. Lexi went over and the hatch lowered and the pilot came out with the medic, who was young, pretty and curvy. Lucky Alo, thought Lexi. The pilot looked at Lexi keenly as he explained about the sea lion.

The medic said, 'Maybe I should go and see if he's all right.'

'He's not all right,' said Lexi 'but unless you're going over there to give him stuff to help the sea lion, you won't get any response from him.'

'All right, I'll do that then,' she said and strode off.

They watched her disappear into the willow trees and the pilot said, 'I'm sorry about that remark before.'

'He's very good,' said Lexi.

'I'm sure he's a very good healer.'

'No,' said Lexi. 'He's a very good healer, yes, but what I was meaning is that he's a very good person.'

'Ah,' said the pilot. 'You are speaking of the soul.'

Lexi guessed a soul was like Grace and the spirits wandering around the tunnels.

'I guess that's what I was meaning.'

'Let's go over and see what they are doing,' said the pilot.

The first thing they saw was an empty plasma bag hanging from a branch of the tree. When they got closer they saw Alo lying with his arm buried inside the sea lion. The medic was looking at the com-u and slowly depressing an injector into the side of the sea lion.

She looked up when they approached. 'She has a stuck pup. We've infused her with a nutrient pac and we're trying to get her going with an adrenaline compound.'

'Be careful,' said the pilot. 'She might come around and get dangerous.'

'She already has come around,' said the medic. 'But he has good hands. She likes him. She trusts him. I mean we're trying to give her a boost so that she will push with the contractions.'

Just then Alo moaned and said, 'Now!' She pushed a little more of the adrenaline in through the injector and suddenly there was a plop. Alo rolled backwards and a fat, glistening pup was nestled against his white tunic. The medic backed away from the sea lion and over to the kit. Alo lay there exhausted and the sea lion looked over her shoulder and then carefully she rolled and manoeuvred her body so that she

could reach around and nuzzle her pup. She gave it a few sniffs and then she swung her head and open mouth towards Alo.

‘Careful,’ yelled the pilot rushing forward.

Lexi grabbed his tunic and pulled him back. ‘It’s all right,’ he said.

The sea lion had given Alo’s forehead a brief nuzzle and was turning back to her pup.

‘Amazing,’ said the medic.

‘Yes, amazing,’ said the pilot, his eyes on Alo.

Alo’s eyes were shut. Lexi said to the medic, ‘He probably needs you to look after him now.’

‘Right,’ she said cheerfully, taking another plasma pak out of the kit. She manoeuvred around the sea lion and connected the pak to his lure. ‘I got this ready before,’ she said. ‘Let’s move him away from the sea lion. Lucky he’s not very heavy. We’ll move him over there further and then I’ll struct a stretcher so we can carry him inside.’

For the next little while, she told them what to do and they did it, lifting and carrying and helping to get him comfortable. When Alo was safely strapped in the carrier, Lexi prepared to leave.

‘See ya, man,’ he said to Alo. ‘Good job with the sea lion.’

‘See ya, Lexi. Look after her,’ said Alo.

‘The sea lion,’ Lexi teased.

‘You know who I mean.’

The pilot went outside with Lexi.

‘I am staying at a colony not too far from here. Leon has instructed me to take Alo there, initially. The medic centre is very good and Leon and Sena will be arriving there themselves tomorrow.’

‘I thought you’d be taking him back to Tau-Cen.’

‘We will if the medics there say it is necessary. Leon assures me they are very good, but don’t worry, if Alo needs to go there, despite what Leon says, I will take him. I promise you that.’

‘All right,’ said Lexi doubtfully.

‘Don’t worry, little brother,’ said the pilot. ‘You have my word. I will take the same care of your friend that you would.’

Lexi looked at the pilot, the one eye and the twisted face. For some reason he looked completely honourable. Lexi believed him.

Lexi And The Kayak

The carrier took off. Lexi put the hovascoo into storage mode and covered it with a tarp. The sea had been so calm on the way out that he had decided to take the single kayak back. When Maika was better he could use it if he wanted to go fishing in the bay and he could paddle up river instead of swimming it. Maika no longer felt good about swimming in the river, especially at low tide. Besides Lexi hadn't had any decent exercise in the last two days and one kayak and one hovascoo seemed a more useful combination than two hovascoos.

He thought fifty clicks with the current would be a reasonably quick journey for him on a flat sea. Maybe five hours at the most although he couldn't really say because he'd never had the opportunity to kayak so far before. He ate a couple of procarb cakes and dragged the kayak down to the river. Before setting off, he mindshouted Iessa to tell her what he was doing.

-I hate the idea of you doing that by yourself, she said. -What if something happens?

- Nothing will happen.

He set off downriver and the tide had turned and was on its way out. It was fast, easy paddling. He waved as he went past the people working. The kayak was gliding like it was on silk. It was way better than the ones they used in the baydome. The rudder metabolism was smooth instead of clunky, he had no idea what the hull was constructed of but it felt as though there was reduced friction. He paddled hard and it felt good. He'd get there much faster than he'd told Iessa.

It took him only three hours to reach the entrance to the bay. The kayak was a dream, some special, genemaster kayak. A half hour earlier he had mindshouted Iessa and said he was getting close. She was going to meet him at the beach. He paddled past the point and stopped to have a look at the view. He looked down through the water and

a dark shape moved under the kayak. It was big and at first he thought he was going over a submerged rock or seaweed but then it moved again and something bumped the bottom of the kayak. The fin broke the surface and swam away and then the shark turned and began to circle.

Lexi's heart pounded. It was a great white. He kept paddling and it swam out of his way and then under the kayak again and he felt it bumping along the bottom. The paddle dipped into the water and he kept expecting any minute that the shark would take a chunk out of the kayak or the paddle but nothing happened.

-What's wrong?

-Nothing, he said.

- You're feeling scared.

- Don't go crazy,—but I have an escort. A great white. I'm just going to keep paddling and hope it goes away.

The shark did not leave. It kept circling and bumping. He got the impression that it was trying to work out what his kayak was.

Lexi could see Iessa on the shore looking out to sea. He gradually got closer, the shark began to swim faster and the bumps got harder. One almost rolled the kayak. He righted himself and then saw Iessa in the water, thrashing madly. The shark arrowed off and began to swim towards her. He paddled like crazy after it and started doing his own mad splashes with the paddle.

- Get out of there! he mindshouted. The shark was almost upon her and when it seemed that it was surely going to be too late she began swimming rapidly for the shore. The shark stopped and turned back towards him but he was close now and he reached shallow water and the kayak grounded just as the shark came charging across. For a few minutes it circled in deeper water and then turned towards the entrance and disappeared under the water.

Iessa was running along the beach towards him.

He was furious. 'Why'd you do that? You could have died.'

'Don't be mad,' she said, grinning. 'There was a sand bar. I knew it wouldn't be able to get me.'

'You're crazy,' he yelled. Images of Lara flashed through his mind.

'No Lexi, I'm faster than her and I'm smart. Don't be mad. We're both all right.'

He wanted to yell at her. He wanted to grab her and shake her. He took hold of her shoulders and looked in her eyes and kissed her. She kissed him back.

When it ended he could hardly breathe. He turned away and hauled the kayak high on the beach and tied it to a tree. Then he walked away, back to his tent on the knoll.

Lexi and Iessa

All night long in his sleep, Lexi was aware of the sound of the river. The birds woke him, all sorts of birds, calling to him firstly in his dreams and later when the sun hit the cyst tent they called him into wakefulness. Opening his eyes, he lay there just listening. He heard insects amidst the birdsong, the trickle flow sound of the river going past. All the sounds filled all the gaps in the air. It was like looking at trees in the forest, all the textures, no gaps.

He pulled back the flap of the tent. Small, almost impossible to see birds, flew across the empty break over the river to more trees on the other side and disappeared into the foliage. Butterflies climbed on the rays of early morning sun. The leaves of the gum trees moved in the breeze like water rippling.

He watched a bird drifting slow and spread out over the tops of the trees. Large. A hawk.

Lexi got up and headed down a narrow path in the kanuka to a knoll where he could see the river. Flaxes and a few spindly trees grew on a tiny midstream island and the river flowed brownly green around it in two channels before rejoining. Just below where he was sitting it deepened where the fresh water met the salt and there was a waterhole. Just above, it was shallow, and freshwater. A small waterfall which spanned the river was the sound he could hear from the cyst tent.

He wondered how Iessa was getting on with Marco. He wished he was there too but it was important she have time alone with her father. It was lonely though, here by himself. He went back up the path to the cyst tent and rummaged in the pack for a procarb cake. He bit into it and stood eating, looking upriver. It was no good. He couldn't bear being away from her. He walked back down to the river and took the path that would lead him to Michael's Cave.

They had already had breakfast, some of the concentrated invalid mix from the medic kit, all the vitamins, minerals, protein and carbohydrates that healing bodies needed. Lexi had tried it – it tasted awful in a nourishing sort of way. Maika had left half of his bowlful. Iessa was berating him for it when Lexi arrived.

‘That stuff would grow hairs on a woman’s chest,’ growled Maika. ‘I’m not eating any more. I’d rather starve.’

‘If I have anything to do with it, you will,’ she said. ‘How are you meant to get better if you don’t eat?’

‘I will eat if you get some proper food. Even better – let me up and I’ll get my own food.’

‘Alo said, four more days of staying off that leg. There are still three left.’

‘I’m a fast healer. I’m getting up tomorrow,’

‘Yeah?’ she said, eyebrows raised.

‘Yeah,’ he said.

‘We’ll see about that,’ she said. Her hands were on her hips and Maika did not reply.

Later she and Lexi did the dishes by the water pool. ‘I don’t ever want to go back,’ she said.

‘We have to.’

‘Why?’

‘I want to be a cystmaster. I’ve been training for it my whole life and it’s a meaningful thing to do. The world needs cysts. Besides I love growing them.’

‘I love swimming with Sparkie and herding fish. But I hate the way everyone expects me to do it. I haven’t been this happy in such a long time.’

‘You have your father back. The dream came true for you.’

She took his hand and entwined her fingers in his. ‘I know. I’m lucky.’ She looked up at him. ‘Let’s go for a swim in the river. I feel grubby and hot. Maika’s fine in there and it’s close to high tide now.’

‘Do you think we should?’ he said.

‘Why not?’

He looked at their linked fingers and then into her eyes. Her face had softened since they'd arrived. Her hair had more bounce, more vitality. Her eyes were dark and warm and full of life.

'That thing that happened on the beach after the shark. You used to be like my enemy, then my sister, then my friend. Now I'm not so sure what you are, what you are meant to be to me.'

'We should go for a swim,' she said. 'That's all.' She tugged his hand and he hung back.

'Come on.' She pulled at him again.

'Is this one of those times you're hearing but you're not listening to me?'

'No. I'm listening but you're worried about something you shouldn't be worried about. Come on.' She tugged.

He didn't budge. She turned back to him and smiled, mischievous and cajoling. 'Come on, nothings going to happen.'

He raised his eyebrows. She wasn't shielding well enough.

She smiled again. – Stop worrying. Come swim with me.

He shrugged. He'd tried.

They followed the track to where it joined the river and wandered downstream to the tidal swimming hole. Lexi walked behind, careful not to touch her. Every so often she turned to smile at him or make a comment about the scenery. He replied briefly, needing time to think but they arrived too soon and everything was still an unprocessed jumble inside him.

The water lapped onto a tiny patch of sand on the edge of the swimming hole and bushes and reeds and flax lined the bank. There was nowhere to lie down and barely enough room to stand.

'I feel so hot,' she said. 'I need a swim and there's so many mosquitoes by the pond at the cave.'

It was hot. Lexi was sweating. Iessa began to take her clothes off and he looked away.

'It's not as though you hadn't seen me naked before, Lexi.'

'It's different here,' he said.

'Why? Because we're alone?'

'Partly.'

She moved closer and put her hand on his arm. He watched the webbing flex between her long, thin fingers.

‘Is it because of what happened at the beach?’

Her face was open and vulnerable and her hair was a dark rippling mass around it, lifted by the faint breeze. ‘Yes.’ His eyes travelled down over the rest of her body. She was beautiful and tall and strong and incredibly sexy to look at. He dragged his gaze away from her breasts and looked into her eyes. There was a question there, but she was blocking and her mind was closed to him. He knew her too well and everything he knew about her was wild and untamed and courageous. She cared too much about the people and animals and things that meant something to her and too little about what didn’t interest her. She never thought about the consequences.

- What terrible thing will happen? she asked.

- You and I are good friends now. I’m worried that we’ll feel strange –that it will drive us apart again.

- You are like a timid little rock cod. Where has the shark gone, Lexi? When have I ever been disloyal to my friends? Never.

-You might get pregnant.

-I’ve just completed a cycle. I don’t think I can get pregnant straightaway. Lexi if we don’t do it will you go back to your tent tonight and regret it?

-Yes. But maybe I won’t regret it tomorrow.

- Maybe you will. Her hand moved under the sleeve of his tunic up his arm, feather light, then down again. She stroked his palm briefly and when he made no response she turned away.

‘Well, I don’t care what you do. I’m going for a swim before the mosquitoes find us.’

She waded into the green water. Her shoulders were wide and the straightness of her spine was beautifully balanced by the curve of her hips, her legs long and leanly muscled beneath them. She reminded him of the tall, white-trunked gum trees in the bush behind her. When she dived under he missed the sight of her. His breath was rushing in and out. It was impossible for him to breathe more slowly. His body was tense, full of hormones which zapped through him like a nest of irritated wasps. Would he regret it if he did it or regret it if he didn’t? Each choice would have its regrets but every cell in his body yearned to be with her.

He swore and pulled his clothes off and took a running dive into the opposite side of the waterhole. The cool water did nothing to calm the fire. It felt soft as though the mingling of salt water and fresh created its own unique texture. Soft the way she was, underneath all that toughness and craziness he knew she was soft. His eyes were open and the visibility was hopeless, less than a metre. He turned underwater and swam, sensing her like a beacon. When his hand reached out in the green water and she took it and kissed it he was not surprised. When she pulled him and he drifted against her and felt her lips against his, it was like finding home in a snowstorm. Her mind was open to him and he realised she felt the same way.

-I feel as though I know you so well, he said.

-No-one knows me better.

-Not even Alo?

-He's known me at my worst – but he's never had to forgive me for it.

His arms enfolded her. –Swim with me.

And they kissed and held each other and swam underwater until they needed a breath and then they surfaced and breathed and dived again. Their faces were close. She pushed away from him so that they drifted connected only by his fingertips on her back and her hands resting on his shoulders. She trailed above and he lead her spiralling slowly through the water.

They came up for another breath and her arms and legs wrapped around him. She rested her head against his shoulder and he held her. Her dark eyes looked up at him. -You are the only one for me, Lexi.

His hands cupped her face, smoothed back her wet hair. They raked over the strength in her shoulders, down her back and rested on her hips. He pulled her tight against him . – I feel like I need to look after you, to protect you.

She laughed. 'Is that what they call it now?'

'I mean it.'

She kissed him. His eyes shut. He couldn't get enough of her mouth, kissing her was like connecting to the source of the ocean.

-I know, she said. –I know.

They dived again.

Lexi walked with her back to the cave. They held hands and every so often he pulled her or she pulled him close. Then they would kiss and then pull apart and start walking again. They reached the pond and he hesitated.

‘I don’t think I’ll come in with you. Maybe it’ll be best if I just go back to the tent now.’

‘Why?’

‘If I go in he’ll know.’

‘If you don’t go in he’ll know anyway. Are you ashamed?’

‘No. But I feel self-conscious.’

‘Don’t be,’ she said and pulled him with her into the darkness of the entrance way.

Maika was lying on his bed with the solar lamp on his chest reading Michael’s diary. He put the book down when they came in. ‘Been swimming?’ he said.

‘Yes,’ said Iessa. ‘In the waterhole.’

Maika’s eyes were on Lexi. ‘Have a good swim?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did Iessa have a good swim?’

‘I think so,’ said Lexi.

Maika picked up his book. ‘I always thought the two of you would swim together well.’ He began to read again.

Lexi waited for him to say something else but nothing happened. He began to prepare their dinner, relieved, but it felt as though there were huge questions hanging in the air.

Later when they were eating Iessa said, ‘Maika.’

‘Yes?’

‘You know that Lexi and I weren’t just swimming don’t you?’

Lexi almost choked.

Maika said, ‘Yes darling. I presume you were diving and floating too.’

‘You know that’s not what I meant.’

Maika looked at her. His eyes were warm. ‘I imagine I know exactly what you were meaning.’

Lexi kept his eyes on his plate and chewed the next mouthful of food very thoroughly.

‘I think Lexi and I will be life-mates.’

Lexi choked again. Maika passed him a mug of water. ‘This might help, Lexi.’

‘I see,’ he said then, looking at Iessa. ‘Did you by any chance talk about it with him before you told me that, Iessa?’

She smiled. ‘No, I didn’t.’ She looked in Lexi’s eyes. ‘Shall I talk about it with you now, Lexi?’

‘No,’ he said. – Stop teasing me like this! He took another forkful of food and began to chew.

‘That’s not very communicative of you, Lexi,’ she said.

‘No, Lexi,’ said Maika. ‘I would have said, no you tormenting, troublesome wench. Wait until we’re alone.’

Lexi grinned. ‘Would it have worked?’

‘No,’ said Maika. ‘But don’t you agree that it would have been more communicative?’

‘Yes,’ said Lexi. ‘But not necessarily constructive.’

‘Do you think you want to be her life-mate, Lexi? I don’t have to tell you that she’s bound to be hard work and an awful lot of trouble.’

‘No, I imagine I know that better than most.’ Lexi took another mouthful of food and began to chew. He chewed it very thoroughly and then swallowed and had a sip of water.

Iessa was sitting calmly next to him eating her food. –You didn’t answer the other part of Maika’s question, she said.

- No, I didn’t.

- Don’t you want to be my life-mate?

-No.

She smiled. ‘So as well as being uncommunicative Lexi, you’re a liar too.’

‘Yes.’

‘I know you love me.’

-Yes.

‘He said he wanted to protect me and look after me,’ she said to Maika.

‘Maybe he’s had a chance to think about it and he realises that it’ll be a thankless job,’ said Maika.

No,’ she said. ‘He’s had a chance to think about it and realise it’s the one job he couldn’t bear not to do.’

Lexi continued to eat.

Maika said, ‘You have my aroha, Lexi. Lara was difficult but Iessa is so much worse.’

Iessa smiled as though it was a huge complement. She looked very beautiful Lexi thought. She took his breath away she was so beautiful.

-Thank you, she said and took his hand.

He gazed into her dark eyes. - I love you.

She kissed his hand. - I know.

Lexi smiled. ‘Worse definitely,’ he said. ‘But there is no-one else for me I think.’

Maika reached out and patted Lexi’s shoulder. His hand gripped briefly as his eyes held Lexi’s. ‘That’s the way it should be then.’

He got up from the table and limped over to his bed. They watched him lie down and then he picked up his book and balanced the solar lamp on his chest. When he was ready to read he said, ‘After you’ve done the dishes, Lexi, I think you two should go back to your tent. She snores and she’s keeping me awake at night. You have her for a night or two and let me get a good night’s rest.’

Iessa said innocently, ‘But maybe Lexi won’t get a good night’s sleep then, Maika.’

She had a smile on her face and Lexi found himself blushing.

Maika said, ‘No? Well the two of you are young. You don’t need much sleep. I on the other hand am old and injured and weary.’ He turned back to his book and then looked up again. ‘And I don’t want to see you until after breakfast. I can make my own. I’ve had enough of that invalid mush. I’ll make me some of that leftover fish we had for dinner tonight.’

‘Yes, Maika.’ Iessa smiled at Lexi.

His heart was beating fast. He got up to do the dishes and for once she didn’t argue but came and helped him clear the table. While she finished tidying the cave he carried the dishes outside to the bench beside the water collection pool. He was

squatting there rubbing them with sand out of the bucket when she came and knelt behind him. She put her arms around him and kissed him on the neck and then hugged him. He turned his head and they kissed.

They drew apart and looked at each other.

‘This seems very strange after all those years,’ he said.

‘Does it?’ She looked at him critically. ‘Do you love me as much as you hated me?’

The question seemed fitting. He thought about it a while before answering. ‘Yes,’ he said seriously. ‘Probably. But it’s such a long time since I hated you that much. Not since before I got the flag. How ‘bout you?’

‘Definitely. But I trust you way more.’

‘I will always try to look after you,’ he said.

‘And I, you.’ She smiled. ‘If I help you do those dishes we can go to your tent sooner.’

He laughed. ‘Yes, impatient one. Yes.’

They were inseparable. When she was with Maika, he was with Maika. If he was down in the bay fishing or collecting sea food, so was she. They spent their nights together in Lexi’s tent and they swam often in the waterhole. Maika got his own breakfast and then they spent the rest of the day with him or finding food in the estuary.

After six days Maika declared that his leg was healed enough to go to the estuary again. They swam down the river on the outgoing tide and Maika untied the kayak from under the totara tree on the sandy spit and fished in the bay while they tried to spear fish in the shallows. They all caught fish.

That afternoon Maika cooked the fish in the smoker and Lexi unearthed some emja and a pipe from his pack. He gave them to Maika who was sitting under the trees draped loosely in blankets to keep the sandflies at bay, and then he settled back and watched as Maika filled the pipe.

‘I wish Marco was here,’ Lexi said.

Maika took a drag of the pipe and passed it across to Lexi and lay looking out across the pond. The birds were busy swooping and catching insects. Every so often the reflection on the water would be broken by a rising fish. They could smell smoke and fish cooking.

Lexi passed the pipe back to Maika who took a slow pull of it and then lay there watching the smoke drift lazily up into the air. 'Actually, so do I,' Maika said. 'So do I.'

Sena Says Leon Needs Help

Two days later Lexi got the call. He and Iessa were in the tent by the river and he woke at dawn with Sena's voice in his mind.

- Lexi, we need you to come back, she said.

- Why?

It was a funny way to wake up. He reached out and caressed Iessa's smooth brown shoulder and curled around her and kissed her.

-Leon is going to be indicted for lying about your MSD1 and for having a relationship with Grace earlier.

He rolled away from Iessa and rummaged for his trousers, then pulled them on and left the tent. The chorus of birdsong echoed up and down the river. He still wasn't used to it and he stood there feeling the thrill of all that life.

- What can I do? Why are you calling me now? he said. Iessa was in the tent, his Iessa. He could smell her on his skin. He could feel her inside himself content and protected. Something cold and worrying anchored itself in his chest.

- The African genemaster is willing to drop the indictment if you will go to your MSD1 in Africa and work for him as a plantsman for the next nine years. For the amount of time that you would have given him if you had gone there as a six year old.

- Why am I that important?

- I don't know. Maybe because you have the psycho-senses. Maybe because you will be a cystmaster one day. I don't know.

-Iessa needs me, he said.

-I see.

And he knew that Sena needed him too.

-Does Leon know you're calling?

- No. He thinks he deserves to be indicted, that it's some sort of repayment for Helena dying. He wants to protect you. He doesn't want you to go.

- Why are you calling me then?

She said –I love him. He’s a good man – maybe a great man, but really it’s just that I love him. He doesn’t deserve to be indicted or dishonoured in this way. I don’t want him to suffer. He hasn’t had much love and the last two years have been happy for both of us.

He said – I’ll have to think. There’s Iessa. We’re going to be life-mates.

She was silent and he thought she’d gone. Then she said - That’s wonderful, Lexi. I’m really happy for both of you. I’m sorry I called. Don’t think about us, Lexi. Be happy.

The ether was empty.

He walked down the track to the river. The tide was out and grey, damp clay was exposed on either side of the main channel. The waterhole was still deep enough to swim and he jumped in and tried to wash the worry out of his system.

When he got out, it had worked a little. He felt fresh and cool. His initial impulse had been to run away from the responsibility of caring for Sena and Leon, to just stay with Iessa and love her. Now he wondered if he could do both. And he wondered about the faceless man in Africa who was growing a forest in the desert – his MSD1. The man who could have been his father.

He went back up the hill to the tent. Iessa was still sleeping, lying in exactly the same position. She was happy. He knew that. Stable, happy, content, in love with him. She would be his for life. Maybe they could both go to Africa. Africa where there would be no sea for her to swim in. One of her feet was peeking out at him from under the blanket. Webbed, its structure was less stable on land than a normal foot. She had never been able to run fast, had never looked as graceful walking. She had always stayed in the fort, never been the one to chase him or anyone else. She was always wanting Maika to carry her even when she was six years old.

Making love to her had made him aware of it. When they walked on the tracks, he had begun to notice that for her there was always an undercurrent of discomfort. She no longer noticed it and took it for granted. But for Iessa, walking on her own feet was painful and the water was a release from that pain. She was a hybrid human in that sense; no longer best adapted to a permanently, terrestrial existence. They could operate and change her feet but then she would no longer be herself, Iessa, Trainer-Coercer - his

sea witch. She would lose her identity. The thing which she had been bred to be, had become the thing that she loved to be. In a way he thought the geneticists had got it right. But it would not be right for nine years in Africa growing a forest in the desert.

He woke her with kisses.

She turned in his arms and said, 'What's wrong?'

'Nothing is wrong,' but his mind was unguarded and she delved in there and read it all in seconds.

He sighed. 'Not your brain.'

'Should have told me then.'

'Not your problem.'

She smoothed his hair back and ran her hands over his shoulders, then leaned forward and bit him hard on the top of his arm.

'Ow!'

'I love you. You are mine. I am yours. If you have a problem, it's my problem too. Don't forget.'

He was rubbing his arm. 'Your teeth have bitten me so many damn times!'

She kissed the bite mark. 'Stop whining. What are you going to do about Leon?'

'I don't know.'

'Do you want to go to Africa?'

'Maybe. I'm not sure.'

'What aren't you sure about?'

'I'm not sure whether you'll want to come with me.'

'I will come with you if you decide to go but I'm wondering what it is with you and him. Why should you help Leon?'

'Helena loved him and he's lied to protect me. And Sena loves him too. It's complicated.'

'He changed me from what I should have been.'

'Not Leon. The genetic engineers did that.'

'Same difference.'

'Not the same but I'm not going to argue about that. I think he hasn't known love very much. He hasn't been loved.'

'Neither have I.'

‘Yes you have, greedy one. You’ve been loved your whole life but you thought it wasn’t enough.’

She went to argue but when she thought about it he was right. ‘I never really realised,’ she said.

‘I want to take the hovascoo and go back to the pick-up. They can get us from there and we can talk about it with them.’

‘It’ll mean leaving Maika.’

‘It’s something I need to do.’

‘Okay,’ she said.

Maika said he understood.

They spent the rest of the morning taking down the tent and tidying up.

When they were ready to go Maika said, ‘Go well, you two. Look after each other.’

‘I don’t like leaving you,’ said Iessa.

‘I’m good now.’

‘You’ll be lonely. You should leave now too.’

‘I’m not ready,’ he said.

Lexi had the hovascoo already turned towards the track. He came and kissed Maika.

‘You are right for her, Lexi,’ said Maika. ‘More right even than Alo. I love ya, boy.’

‘I don’t know what’s going to happen about Africa,’ said Lexi. ‘If we go we’ll see you first. If you don’t see us we’ll probably go back to Owai or something. Iessa doesn’t want to go back to the collection centre. Maybe Estar and Marco can help, I don’t know.’

Maika thought, it should be me helping. But he wasn’t sure if he was ready to leave yet. He needed more time to think.

‘All right, Lexi. I know you’ll look after her and do the right thing,’ he said.

‘You’re not a boy anymore. You’ll know what to do.’

He kissed them both. They climbed on to the hovascoo and then they left, Iessa on the back, waving until they disappeared into the trees. Maika was alone again. He went in and got his weaving. If he was going to wallow in guilt and loneliness he

figured he might as well be productive. He wove until it started to get dark. His fingers were stiff and tired. It was so quiet without them. Quiet and cold. For dinner he ate cold fish and didn't bother lighting the fire, but went to sleep in his cold cave.

* * * * *

10 - Finding Home

This time the carrier that landed by the willow trees, was Leon's. Lexi couldn't believe how happy he was to see Sena.

She hugged them both. 'I missed you.'

Leon came out and helped them load the hovascoos and the double kayak and all their gear and then they barely had time to strap themselves in before it seemed they were at the colony.

Lexi and Iessa walked out of the carrier and they were in a big valley. Another carrier sat near Leon's.

The landscape was empty of cultivation - just valley, river, mountains and a small cluster of domes and gardens up on a higher terrace.

'Is Alo all right?' asked Lexi suspiciously. It didn't look like there'd be a good medic centre around here.

'Yes, Lexi,' said Leon. 'We have landed on the outskirts of the colony.' He pointed downriver. 'I can assure you that there is a very good medic centre that you will find in a ten minute ride on your hovascoo if you so desire. Although, if you want to see Alo we should go up to those domes. His medic is now caring for him there.'

Lexi walked with Leon up a track running from the carrier up to the domes.

'How's Maika?' asked Leon.

'Good. I think he'll be lonely without us though.'

'Is he going to come back?'

'He didn't say, but I think he will. I think he's better.'

They walked a little further and Leon said, 'I think you've come to rescue me Lexi, but believe me when I say, I do not want to be rescued.'

'Maybe I want to go to Africa.'

Leon smiled gently, 'Maybe you do but it's not your destiny, I think.' He glanced across at Iessa, talking volubly to Sena.

Lexi followed his gaze. 'She'd come too.'

‘It’s not her destiny, either.’

Lexi couldn’t argue with that. Instead he said, ‘I was thinking about Helena. She gave her whole life to the plants in the tunnels. I would only be giving nine years. It’d be interesting.’

Leon stopped walking. ‘Listen, Lexi. I don’t know what Sena said, but I won’t have one more person sacrificing any part of their life for me.’ His eyes were hard and direct.

Lexi stared back. ‘Have you sacrificed your life for anyone Leon?’ he said. ‘Have you sacrificed your whole life for this planet?’

‘No,’ said Leon. ‘It was no sacrifice. It was my vocation.’

‘Neither will this be a sacrifice for me. It will be my nine year vacation.’

Leon laughed. They walked on up to the domes through vegetable gardens and fruiting trees. When they entered the first dome, there was no airlock, just an atrium like entrance which lead to a central, round, living space, rustically and minimally furnished. Doors opened off the central area into other alcove like rooms. There was a delicious smell of food cooking and a feast awaited them on a large wooden table. Two men were standing off to one side and Alo was sitting on a faded, blue lounge with the pretty medic.

The unknown man looked vaguely familiar, the other man was the pilot.

‘Ya must be Lexi,’ said the unknown man. ‘I’ve heard a lot about ya.’ He had a reddish, lined face and rough, work hardened hands.

Lexi grinned. ‘You must be Sandy’s brother,’ he said.

‘Yeah, unfortunately. My name’s Martin and this here’s Fidel. That’s not his real name by the way. I believe he made it up but we won’t worry ‘bout that.’

‘Hello, Lexi,’ said the pilot.

Martin gestured to the food on the table. ‘Come and eat. I killed two geese yesterday, and they smell mighty fine, if I do say so myself.’

Iessa had gone over to Alo and was talking quietly to him on the lounge. The medic looked jealous, Lexi thought.

Soon after, they squashed around the table on cyst boxes and other improvised seats. Everyone said the Thanksgiving Prayer and there was not a great deal of conversation because the food was so delicious.

Later, the pilot asked, ‘Did you learn how to ride the hovascoo, Iessa?’

‘No,’ she said, looking at Lexi. ‘I didn’t seem to have time for it.’

‘I’m leaving tomorrow but maybe I could give you a few lessons this afternoon.’

‘Fabulous,’ she said. Her eyes were laughing at Lexi.

- Rather he taught you than me, said Lexi.

For some reason the conversations continued in little spurts and bursts as though everyone was keeping secrets. Lexi didn’t care. He was ravenous and the food was good.

After dinner he went outside to talk with Alo while Iessa went off with the pilot for her hovascoo lesson.

‘Are you well?’

Alo smiled. ‘Yes, they had very good drugs at the medic centre and Anna’s a very good medic. Iessa’s looking good.’

‘Yeah,’ said Lexi. He looked off to where she was riding across the valley. She was steering and the pilot was sitting behind her. He looked back at Alo. ‘We’re going to be life mates.’

Alo smiled. ‘I’m glad. She’s pregnant you know. Maybe with twins.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes. I sensed it immediately.’

Lexi sighed. Another complication. ‘We were thinking of going to Africa.’ He paused and then confessed, ‘I want to help Leon but I’m also curious about what my MSD1 was like.’

Alo said, ‘You have the choice of being a father or finding a father, Lexi. I can’t help thinking that you’ve been lucky with father figures in your life. To sacrifice Iessa to a life away from water doesn’t stack up.’

‘Did you know about her feet?’ asked Lexi.

‘Of course.’

‘What don’t you know about her?’

‘How to make her love me more than she loves you.’ Alo smiled wistfully.

‘She’s yours though. It feels right.’

Later, Lexi saw Alo talking firstly to Leon and then to the pilot. Lexi wandered over to join them. Alo said, ‘0800 then.’

The pilot nodded. He turned to Lexi, 'I am going to take the carrier to Africa tomorrow. Your friend is coming with me.'

'I thought maybe Iessa and I could go to Africa. My MSD1 is there you know.'

'Yes Lexi, I know. But I think you have responsibilities here. Alo is a great animed. We could use him there.'

The conversation ended. Lexi and Iessa talked for a little with Sena and then Martin showed them where they could sleep. In bed, Lexi told Iessa about Alo and Africa and she said, 'Why don't we go down there with our stuff and we can all work it out in the morning. If we're actually there, maybe we'll all think about it better.'

They arrived at the field with their things at 0700 and only Leon's carrier was on the landing area. The hatch opened and Leon came out and handed Lexi a scrap of cyst,

Alo had scrawled the message with a char stick and at first Lexi had trouble deciphering it. When it was clear in his mind he read it to Iessa.

"We lide to you abot the time. The ending to the littul mermad is to sad. It dusnt hav to be that way. I love you both. Im off to be with lines and tigas and elefunts. Be jellus."

'What's the little mermaid?' asked Iessa.

Lexi said, 'It's a story. I'll read it to you one day.' He huigged her then looked at the note again. 'That idiot Alo's got his continents mixed up. There's no tigers in Africa!'

Leon And Sena Make Decisions

When Lexi and Iessa had gone back up the valley to the cyst domes Sena said to Leon, 'You didn't know that would happen when you asked Alo to go with them?'

'Know what?'

She examined his face. Her voice was unnaturally calm. 'That they'd want Alo instead - that a trainer-coercer ani-med was more valuable in Africa than a cystmaster.'

'No, I didn't think about it. Why do you ask?'

She stared at him and he stared back.

'You have to trust me,' he said. 'I didn't know. Alo was so sick that it didn't occur to me that they could possibly be interested in him.'

Her eyes met his. She ran her hand up his arm and moved closer and rested her head on his shoulder. He shut his eyes and stroked her hair.

She pulled away and looked at him.

'It's true,' he said. 'I didn't know.' The tone of his voice was without apology. His eyes were clear and grey. They did not waver.

'I know.' She kissed him. His lips were soft and the kiss was reassuring. He pulled her hard against him and they kissed until she was breathless. Then she gently pushed him away and moved out of his arms.

He said, 'Believe me. As I love you, I didn't know.'

'I believe you,' she said. 'I have to go for a walk though. Alo is on his way to Africa. I have to think about it.'

She put on a visor and went through to the airlock and tooled the code for the outer door. It slid open and she went out into the midmorning heat, Aotearoa hot, not African hot. It felt quite cool.

Their carrier sat on a clear area that was reserved for landings, in a big empty valley with a river running through it. Sena picked her way through rocks and waist high scrub, following an old path down to the river. She reached an open, cleared area and looked out over the river to where it swept around a big curve of cliff. The noise of the water was loud and the air was cool and moist. She heard birds and saw flocks of grey pigeons rising in the air and then landing across from her on the cliff face. It was studded with large, round, grey rocks, a sort of camouflage for their grey bodies. Below her, the turquoise, blue-green river swept around the bend on its journey to the sea.

She knelt and picked up a scraping of soil and cast it into the air. For a few seconds it drifted with the upwelling air from the river before she lost sight of it.

She hoped it would go well with Alo. She hoped it with all her heart because she had needed to save both her men. Leon must never find out – but really that was up to

her and she resolved that he'd never know the one time she'd coerced him. So much was at stake. The men she loved or the price she was prepared to pay – the love itself.

And of course Alo.

He was not a sacrifice she told herself. All she'd done was make sure he was there on the trip to rescue Maika. Everything else unfolded of its own accord and he chose to go of his own free will.

She heard the sound of a carrier and looking back up the hill, saw the vertical fall of it landing. Now what was happening? She started back up the track.

Sena stood in the clearing and eyed the second carrier. It was bigger and carried the Genemasters' insignia. When she walked into Leon's carrier he was wearing a civilian tunic and their cabin was crowded with four other genemasters; an unheard of event, four in one place. They assembled only on very important occasions and Leon's clothing signified the intent of this one. He had been indicted after all. There was now no sense in Alo going to Africa. Guilt flooded her and then sadness, and anger for her man. This good man, who had betrayed him now?

He looked weary but not entirely unhappy.

'You all know Sena,' he said.

They turned to her and muttered greetings but there were no signs of welcome. Obviously she was interrupting.

'I'll wait outside,' she said.

'That might be better,' said the one closest to Leon, the South American Genemaster. Her eyes looked angry. Anger and impatience were radiating off her. Still young, Sena thought. No-one could read her mind but there was certainly no mistaking the emotions. She was one of the new, tech generation - dark glossy hair and white teeth. She hadn't grown up in a high-rad environment. No scars were hidden under that pristine uniform.

Sena went back outside, walked to a rise in the valley going up to the next terrace and found a rock where she could sit and still have a good view of the carriers. She waited.

‘I had to do it,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry. We have rehashed this for almost an hour. There’s no point. It’s done.’

They were all registering varying degrees of disapproval – not for the actual act but because he had reported himself to the Agency.

Camilla said, with tears in her eyes, ‘You made me. Later you came back and found me and took me away from that place. You rescued me. You are too good for this end.’ Her hands gestured wildly, fluid, angry with Latino emotion. Tears spilled out. She dashed them away and they fell onto her grey uniform and left dark marks.

Andre said, ‘I concur with Camilla, Leon. The Roll of Dishonour? You have spent your whole life saving this planet. Indictment! Was that necessary? Was it fair? We’ve all transgressed in some way - after all we’re not Gods. Humans weren’t meant to be perfect. It is such a human thing that you did Leon, such a little thing in the scheme of things.’

It was a sort of balm – they all understood that sometimes you did things for love. Nevertheless, the day before, a burden had lifted when he filed the report with the Agency. He’d checked the com-u two hours later and his name was on the Roll with an edited version of the transgression and a short biography of his life’s work. A balanced, ethical summary, as befitted an organisation that called itself The Agency for Ethical Empowerment. He smiled cynically as he said the name to himself. Later the names of two genetic engineers had been added. There was some satisfaction that their transgression, including the blackmail, read worse than his own.

He regarded his colleagues now with affection and sadness. ‘It’s too late,’ he said. ‘Thanks for letting me keep the carrier a little longer. We have said all that needs to be said. My friends, my colleagues, it’s been an honour working with you, but it is over. Go with my respect, my compassion, my love for this Earth.’ It would be the last time that he said that phrase – the salutation of one genemaster for another.

One by one they took his hand in the tech greeting as they each spoke the salutation back to him.

Camilla was last. ‘Go with my respect, my compassion, my love for this Earth,’ she said. She took his hand. ‘I honour you Leon. Genemaster or not, I will always honour you.’

They had all shared so much. Eyes looked into his and he saw only kinship. But it was time. He tooled the com-u and the hatch slid open. He gestured for them to go and they left without looking back.

Soon after, their carrier lifted off. That was it then. It was done.

Sena gazed out on the mountains and the valley and the river. From where she sat on her rock, it was a curving ribbon of light hugging the foothills of the mountains. She saw the Genemasters leave and their carrier take off, and she got up off her rock. Now she would find out what had happened.

He was in the cockpit, sitting at the controls. The screen was retracted and he was looking out through the glass panel at the landscape.

‘Ah, there you are,’ he said, holding out a hand to her. She had rarely seen him in civilian clothes. She had never seen him just sitting, looking at a view.

He pulled her down onto his lap. His eyes looked clear and calm.

‘You’re not a genemaster anymore.’

‘No.’

‘Who betrayed you? Do you know?’

‘No-one. I told them myself.’

‘Why?’

‘I wanted Iessa and Lexi to be safe. I wanted her genes to be safe. I wanted them to have a future. Iessa herself is evidence of what the genetic engineers had done. So were her ova. Murder is rare these days, I don’t think she was in too much danger but I thought the geneticists should stop. They had gone too far. The only way to stop them was to discredit them. I needed to tell the truth about what had happened.’

Her head lay against his chest. She could hear the steady beat of his heart. ‘What will happen to you, now?’

‘I have the carrier to take me to my retirement quarters and then my time as genemaster is over.’

‘And where are you planning to retire?’

‘I thought we could go back to Owai and perhaps live somewhere near Marco.’

She sat up and twisted around to look at him. ‘We?’

‘Yes. If you can bear to come with me.’

‘What will you do there?’

‘Dangle Lexi and Iessa’s children on my knee. I hope to be a grandfather of sorts.’

‘And me?’

‘I’m hoping you’ll be there to keep me company in my old age and work on my headaches when they come.’

‘It might be a long time before Lexi and Iessa have children.’

‘Alo said she is pregnant already...maybe with twins.’

Sena gave a snort of exasperation. ‘Why am I always the last one to know things?’ She got up off his lap and stood glaring down at him.

‘Alo told me this morning before he flew out. Things happened so quickly I didn’t get the chance to tell you.’

‘Is there anything else that you haven’t told me? Anything else that I should know?’

‘Alo said he was in love with Iessa and he knew he couldn’t have her. Africa excited him. He said it would be an adventure worth trying and really he preferred working with animals. He thought he was born to be an animed, that it was his gift.’

Sena said, ‘Why are you telling me this?’

‘I thought you’d like to know.’

‘Is there anything else I should know?’

‘Just, that I love you. I love you and I want you to be with me.’

‘I have to go for another walk,’ she said. ‘I have to think.’

He tooled on the viewer and watched her walk back down the track to the river.

For him there was no more being the genemaster, no more living in the carrier, no more travelling the world. The constant plotting and deceiving and worrying could stop. Everything was becoming more complex. It was hard being a genemaster in such a world.

The Earth was heating up again. The warming process had been put on hold by the war and by the nuclear winter that followed but all that carbon was still in the atmosphere and it had taken too long to regenerate the Northern hemisphere forests. The glacial melt had accelerated in the last five years. Last summer’s temperatures had been a record high in the Southern hemisphere and had mirrored the record low of the

Northern hemisphere winter. There was going to be another bout of rising sea levels and diminished land area. More sea domes would be needed and more cystmasters and the new race of humans, the sea-dwelling race was needed too, more so now than ever.

There was already a new Pasifika Genemaster and he now had Iessa's ova. Every viable ovum would be fertilised by Lexi's sperm. Michael's vision of humans who could live in the sea was one step closer, and still they would be truly human. Leon had fulfilled his task as Pasifika Genemaster.

The Roll of Dishonour had been a distasteful necessity and yet he felt there would be no honour for him without dishonour, that it was not undeserved. He had protected Lexi in the final instance and sacrificed Alo. There was a brief twinge of guilt although he honestly thought the African life would be fascinating for Alo, a new beginning. All in all, he felt that some sort of retributive payment had been made to Helena. Perhaps now he could forgive himself just a little.

Owai and obscurity and the birth of the twins had a fascination that he was looking forward to. It would be a normal life. He'd never known normal and he was greedy enough to want love too. He hoped Sena would come with him, that she would forgive him this one last instance of manipulation and deceit. He loved her more than he could ever have imagined loving someone after Grace, but loving a redactor meant that even if she didn't know what the lies were, she would know that you had lied.

Forgive me Sena, he thought, I need you. Come with me.

He saw her coming back up the track and went outside to meet her.

Before she could speak, he said, 'Whatever you've decided, it's all right and I'll understand.'

She glanced at him and kept walking. 'As it happens,' she said. 'I like Owai. It can be a tough life in the sea cyst zone but people there are more generous than most and they're definitely more honest than any others I've known. It should do you good living there. However, living with you is lesson after lesson in manipulation. I don't know if I can stomach even one more instance of being lied to.' She stopped at the bottom of the ramp and glared at him.

'There will be no more lies,' he said. He went to take her in his arms. Touch was important to her. It would give him an unfair advantage but damned fairness when you were fighting for your future happiness.

She pulled away. 'Don't', she said. 'You don't have to do that. I know you, and after 18 months I'm starting to get a feel for what it means to be a genemaster. Lying and manipulation is part of the territory for you... and yet you are still the best man I know. Leave it at that. I love you.' She walked ahead of him into the carrier and into the cockpit and sat in the co-pilot seat.

'Does Marco know we're coming?'

'Yes.'

'Let's go then.'

Staying

Lexi watched the carrier leave. He turned to Martin. 'So how long'll we have to stay here?'

'The babies won't attain human status 'til Iessa's three months pregnant.'

'Three months seems a long time.'

'By then Maika'll be back p'rhaps an' Leon 'n' the others 'll 'ave some local support.'

'Will we need support?'

'Iessa' has an altered genome. She was the only one of the embryos able to be bred an' there were many hundreds that the geneticists tried. Yer babies will not be normal.'

'Perhaps we should abort now.'

'If they're healthy an' whole, if their minds are human, then we'd like ya to have 'em even if there are abnormalities.'

'Who's we?'

'There's a group of us. We've been 'round a good while now – over 300 years.' Martin's eyes twinkled. 'Yer right –yiv prob'ly never heard of us before – but that's ta be remedied now. We call ourselves Edenites. We mean no harm. Trust me if ya can or trust Leon for leavin' ya here if ya can't trust me.'

'Do we have a choice?'

'Everyone has a choice. In this valley ya choice'll count more. Back at Owai y'll 'ave ta fight fer it... but yiv both been bred ta be fighters. I believe y'll prevail.'

'Who are you?'

'I'm jus' the caretaker of this valley.'

'And there's more to the valley than the river and the mountain and these few cyst domes?'

'Maybe. Maybe. Although isn't the rivers 'n the mountains what it's all about 'n the end? Seems ta me there's always more 'n meets the eye ta everythin'. Doesn' it seem that way ta you?'

'Unfortunately, yes,' said Lexi, scowling. 'Seems like it's the story of my life.'

Martin smiled and gazed out on the mountains. 'It's everyone's story, Lexi. Yer just lucky enough ta realise it.' He patted Lexi's shoulder. 'Don't look so depressed boy. Let's go an' have some cold goose for lunch. That'll cheer ya up'

Lexi sighed. His stomach rumbled. Cold goose sounded good. Cold goose and Iessa and eventually Owai and babies and being a cystmaster. It all sounded good. It all seemed warm and whole – more than he could have hoped for if he had just been a cystmaster alone.

'I'll go and get Iessa,' he said.

'You do that boy an' I'll get the lunch ready.'

Maika and Michael

I'm waiting here inside this cave where Joshie can't find me. I don't want to be saved. The soldiers are on the pass. They will kill me, rather than take me live - then they can start afresh in the new relationship with the colony and use me as a scapegoat. So I will die today and they will lose because the world court will vindicate me. They no longer control it. They will have invaded our territory - they are the ones who will be found guilty. Maybe that will be the final act. Maybe then they'll finally learn – I don't know. These things will happen. I'm never wrong when it's this close.

I'm thinking of Alicia, if she'll ever forgive me, if she could possibly still love me - because I still love her.

They're getting close. The sun will be up when it happens and I find that comforting. I'll go outside and they'll kill me by the pond. I have less than an hour to kill, which is strange to write. I will be killed in less than an hour. More accurate but I prefer the first version. It's strange to be thinking about it like this.

If anyone finds this diary, I loved my children, I loved this Earth. I feel as though I had no choice. That the Earth turned and I spun with it, and did the best I could. But once it started, it was inevitable - everything was out of my control. I did the best I could.

The words blurred on the page. Maika shut the diary. The last words - that end of it. Michael had sacrificed himself. Maika had thought about it before and he needed to think about it again. He walked outside into the half light of the early morning. The moon lingered in the sky but there was that pale yellow of dawn coming and the birds were calling. Now, it was the sun's turn.

He felt out of sorts - hadn't felt right since Lexi and Iessa had left three days ago. He wandered down the track to the toilet and washed in the bucket at the stream, then walked to the river. The kayak was floating tethered to the old tree stump. It was the turn of the tide and the kayak was pulling down river as though impatient to leave. Maika watched it, then turned in a slow circle looking at the river and up at the bush covered hills. A brown path on his side of the river led to the tunnel in the cliff and the

dream bush. He decided to walk up there now. He could get more leaves and the walk would probably do him good.

The path meandered under a well developed canopy of tree ferns. The rangers kept it clear so that people could see the route the soldiers had taken to get Michael. Not that many people bothered; only six groups of people in all the time he'd been there and four had been rangers' work parties. The visitor's book in the cave had told him that the rangers usually came in early summer and in autumn, so at those times he kept a pack ready with a few things so that he could leave quickly when he saw them coming.

Their last visit had been two months earlier and the track was looking good. Maika followed it along the side of the river and tree ferns gave way to flax and the track climbed south up through scrub to the top of the hill where the dream bush was. He plucked a pocketful of leaves and then wandered through the tunnel and stood on the narrow ledge at the end of it, overlooking the sea. There was a bit of chop from the early morning breeze and the dawn light reflected off the white crests of low waves as they rolled in. He kept watching and as the sun came up, the water turned a deep blue and now the wave crests were much whiter and the yellow sun reflected pure off the water. Everything was very clear all the way to the horizon and the sky was cloudless. A good day for kayaking. The thought arose. Maybe it was time to go home.

He shook his head. His sanity had been hard won and he couldn't bear sacrificing the clarity of thought –the feeling inside himself that everything was as it should be. He stared a little longer at the horizon then walked back through the tunnel and came out onto the path. The brown river in the valley below looked much as he remembered it from that first view, and beyond it were the hills. On the side of the path, the glossy leaves of the dream bush shone in the rays of sunlight that were just slanting through the tunnel. He had shown Lexi the leaves and asked him if he knew the name of the plant. Lexi said all he could come up with was the ice plant – so named because when you rubbed it on your skin it cooled as if you were rubbing on ice. Maika wondered why Lara had wanted him to know the name of the ice plant. And then he thought – How could I be so stupid? Ice sounds like Iessa.

He took the last of his things and stowed them wrapped in a double layer of plastic bags, in the gear locker of the kayak; not that much but more than he'd arrived with. A fire-starter, knife, mask, a few clothes, a sleep sac, a water bottle, six dried fish,

his unfinished cloak, the pipe Lexi had left him. He'd stolen Michael's diary. It was only a copy and they could replace it.

He looked back up the track. Michael's cave had been a good place to shelter, a good place to get sane again.

Taking the paddle he climbed into the kayak, pushed off and the kayak glided into midstream, nosing itself with the flow of the outgoing tide. He gave the odd flick of paddle to maintain steering and the familiar landmarks went past for the last time – the old tree stump on the river bank, the little island, the eucalypts, the little stream, the bigger stream, the narrow path at the top of the bank. He doubted he'd ever come back.

When the river hit the bay it was dead calm as he knew it would be for the entire trip home. It'd take him three days going slow to get to Owai. He could do it faster but he wanted to call in places and catch up.

Who'd been working his thickets he wondered? Growing cysts with a wrist com- u wouldn't be as good probably, but he'd get used to it. He wasn't having a nanocu again. He'd earned the right not to.

Strange he was feeling this way, excited to be going back, planning again, but something in the ether was telling him he had to be there, the cystmaster for when Lexi and Iessa come back to Owai.

Every so often he turned to look back at the hills from the water. When he reached the point, he stopped and let himself drift facing the land. Then he plunged in the paddle and turned the kayak for the open sea.

He rounded the point and three fins broke the surface and circled the kayak and then began swimming with him. He smiled. They'd be there for the whole trip back or he didn't know his Lara.

'Tahi, rua, toru,' he said. One, two, three. The Trinity.

'Ka haere tatou ki te kainga. Nei?'

The paddle bit into the sea, the kayak surged across the water. They were going home.