



The Starlight REBEL

The most
underestimated
person on the
planet . . .

. . . may
be the only
one who
can save it.



LISETTE AUTON



About the Author

Lisette Auton is a northern disabled and neurodivergent writer, activist, poet, novelist, spoken-word artist, actor, film- and theatre-maker, and creative practitioner. She's an award-winning poet who has performed at Northern Stage, ARC, the Southbank Centre and the Glasshouse, in pubs, in a crypt, at festivals, indoors, outdoors, on a bridge and in a launderette.

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

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



Prologue

Earth year 3886

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

She was definitely awake.

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

‘Well then, wide-awake little one, we need to go off-plan here. Any thoughts?’ Fluro folded the list carefully back into his pocket and bent his head over the crib. ‘Hey there, stop pulling my moustache! It *is* a fine specimen, but it’s not to be mauled.’

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

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



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

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

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

Malls. The buildings and the sky above bathed them both in a fluorescent glow.

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

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

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

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

She yawned in response, and he pulled out his pocket watch to count down the seconds. 'Centuries ago, people would *choose* to come on holiday to places like this, with its glittering neon and flashing lights. But cities like ours were few back then – in most of the world there were quiet fields and trees and deserts and everywhere a night sky ...' Out of habit, Fluro glanced over his shoulder. 'Who would have guessed then that today most of us don't give any thought to the fact that we are a planet, and have no idea that it means we are part of something bigger, an entire galaxy! And the unspeakable horrors we have committed to be *safe* in that secret.'

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

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

Fluro snorted. 'Well, it *would* be visible, if it wasn't for that blasted shell.' He looked down at the baby. 'This is a once-in-a-lifetime experience,

and though you are exceedingly wriggly I'm very glad I get to spend it with you. According to my calculations, this is the very moment that Halley's Comet will be closest to our planet.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

Stars? Why did he think that?

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

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

'That's going to take a bit of explaining when I hand you back to your parents, and a lot of omission. Do you know how rare freckles are these days? I'll simply pretend I didn't notice anything when they ask me,

bumbling old fool that I am. I'm sure we can convince them that freckles sometimes manifest in the first few weeks of life, right?'

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

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



CHAPTER ONE

Earth year 3897

Today was the day.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It wasn't because of the shiny jumpsuit I'd put on with the ridiculous epaulettes (modelled on those the Neon Government wore) that looked like

they could balance breakfast, a small child *and* a zonk-ball on each of my shoulders. And it wasn't the fact that I was still shorter than Blaze.

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

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

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

I sat on the edge of my desk chair and began to count the attempts. The first was laser treatment. The freckles popped back on my face before I'd even left the room, which meant an immediate refund and befuddled reactions from everyone at the clinic. The second attempt was burnt sage scent and a chant in a tent in the alternative district of the shopping mall. The tent was set on fire. My freckles stayed. I'd had three different attempts at three different clinics with the latest permanent make-up machines. *Just pop in your ideal look from these millions of images and we'll make a blend that suits you!* They had to send for an engineer each time when their machine malfunctioned. In one of the most bizarre efforts, I had my cheeks licked repeatedly by a 'sacred cockatoo' at the city zoo on the seventy-ninth floor of the Freedom Complex and, as I'd predicted, my freckles remained. Then I tried genetic treatments that used DNA from Blaze. Zip. Nada. Nowt. Still freckled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Blaze Nova, just wait until I –'

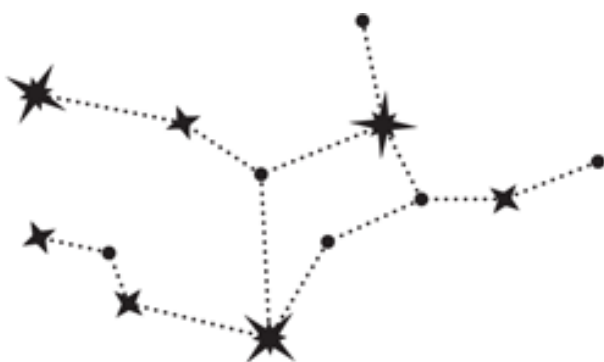
My foot caught in the other leg of the jumpsuit and I hurtled across the room as I desperately tried to stay upright. I crashed into the wall with my shoulder and the mirror mode pinged back on. I looked up at my freckles.

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

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

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

After all, how bad could it get?



CHAPTER TWO

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Look at this, Ava.’

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

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

Ex-best friend, I mean.

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

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

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

'Birthday breakfast first,' said Mam.

I stopped thinking about Rainbow by focusing on Uncle Fluro instead. He wasn't actually related to us, but was a close friend of the family. Mam said he was lonely because he didn't have a family of his own, so making him part of ours and calling him uncle was the right thing to do. He was the President of the Seed Research Society, the SRS, based at the Museum of Trees, which was my favourite place. Blaze thought Uncle Fluro's work was deathly boring. I mean, there *was* that time when Uncle Fluro talked so much about seed propagation that I fell asleep in my soup and nearly drowned. Most of the time, though, I thought it was really interesting to listen to him talk about old weird things from the past, if you could stop him going off at tangents.

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

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

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

Dad had made pancakes for breakfast, a special birthday treat. My stomach was doing nervous flips even before I thought of food, but I sat down at the table and gamely poured syrup over my stack anyway.

Remember your positive mental attitude, Astrifer! Today is going to be great.

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

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

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

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

'There's no way they'll give me anything but athlete,' he said in his massively irritating, smug voice as he poured on syrup, then squirted bright-pink strawberry canned cream and rammed it into his mouth.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Until her dad stepped in.

'It's not that I'm opposed to their friendship,' Rainbow and I heard him saying to my parents as we pressed our ears up against my bedroom door so we could listen to them in the hallway on the other side, our hands tightly gripped together. 'I'm sure you understand the spotlight that Rainbow is

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mam coughed.

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

Dad grinned in response, saying nothing.

'Show me!' exclaimed Blaze.

I knew how much Blaze resented being made to hang out with Uncle Fluro, but even he couldn't deny how brilliant Uncle Fluro's birthday presents always were. The memory of the ancient nautical compass he gave me, which mariners would have used to find their way at sea, made me nearly forget about Rainbow, and what day it was, and the thought of seeing her dad. Instead, I got all fizzy inside, and clicked my fingers repeatedly in anticipation of what this year's present might be.

‘Outside on the balcony,’ said Dad.

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Check this out, Azzy!’

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

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

I looked around hopefully for my present, and Mam handed me a small plastic protective envelope that contained something hard, that couldn’t be bent. I ripped open the parcel, knowing that if Blaze got that bike, this must be special too.

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

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

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

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

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

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

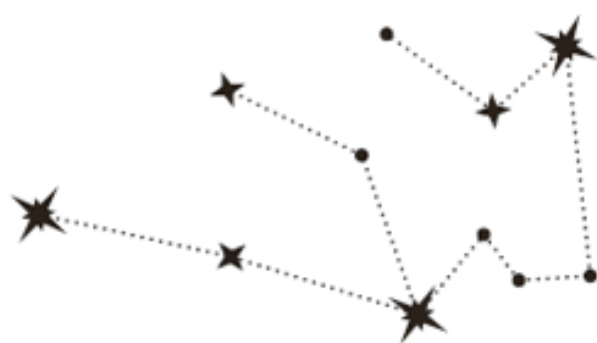
‘Race you to the elevator!’ said Mam.

‘Race you down the stairs!’ countered Blaze.

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

The others raced off, leaving me behind. I traced the edge of the shiny disc with my finger, wondering what it could be. Then I walked to the elevator, pressed the button and took a puff of my inhaler as I waited for it to arrive. Could Blaze be right, and it was just a Frisbee?

That would pretty much sum up the day so far.



CHAPTER THREE

I mean, I knew it was an important day and I should be at school with my brother and parents and about a billion other people, waiting in breathless anticipation for the main event. But with the weird present, the Rainbow memory and mostly the thought of the Work-path Allocation Ceremony ahead ... Well, it all got a bit much, so I headed to my calming place instead: the Museum of Trees. I always walked to school solo, so it wasn't like my parents would be worried; they'd know that I would show up in time.

No one had ever missed their Work-path Allocation Ceremony. *No one*. What would even happen if you did? I shuddered at the thought of being Unallocated. It was something we talked about a lot in school in hushed whispers. No one officially knew anyone who'd been Unallocated, but there was a rumour about an uncle of a person who once went to a school far away, and it wasn't the uncle really, it was a sort-of-cousin, and what happened to them was 'officially gruesome'.

Must remember to show up on time. I knew I could very easily get absorbed in stuff and lose track.

I stood on the marble steps outside the museum, looking up. It was once a cathedral, built hundreds of years before our neon skyscraper city sprang up around it – a tall, pointy building made of white stone, with a beautiful round rose window that had coloured glass on its front. It must have seemed gigantic centuries ago, but now it was dwarfed by the angular steel-and-glass buildings that were covered in fluorescent, pulsating light.

Every time I visited, I'd stand here, with all the blare and glare, until it was always almost too much to take, and my body and brain would feel as if they were about to explode. Then I would put my hand on the enormous arched wooden door, and the smooth cold would suck all the spiky overload out of my body, and I could leave it behind me as I pushed the door open and stepped inside.

The moment the door closed behind me, it was as if I could be properly the real me, without all the startle and chaos that usually kept me trapped

inside, on mute. I took deep breaths of the humid air and filled my lungs with pale green and mossy scents, and I got a rush of pure zip-zapping energy.

I barged straight through the hologram curator who made his introduction every time the front door was opened.

‘Welcome to the Arboretum, our Museum of Trees, carefully gathered from across the globe to give you the true and authentic feel of a forest. We are proud to present eight floors of botanical gardens, with each zone devoted to different tree varieties. I am your personal guide. Download me to your smartwatch and I can accompany you and identify every species, in both Latin and your language of choice. You will find the cafe and gift shop on the third floor ...’

Smartwatch. Well old.

The hologram always began to glitch at that point, repeating ‘floor’ over and over again.

I walked up the no-longer-functioning escalator to the atrium at the centre of the museum. There was an elevator at the back, but I liked the climb right up through its heart. More escalators zigzagged back and forth across the circular space below the domed glass roof, taking you up a floor at a time. On each open circular level, there were doors that led you to the various rooms of the museum. It was like having square walls outside and a doughnut hole in the middle.

The further up you climbed, the more the walls of the rooms had crumbled. The trees had taken no notice of where they were supposed to live, their roots and branches tumbling everywhere, and the cafe was long shut, now an overgrown jungle instead. Vines of ivy wrapped round the halted escalator rails like garlands.

As I made my way higher into the museum, I passed Uncle Fluro’s Seed Research Society HQ on the third floor, with its old plaque on the wooden door – fastened with actual screws, not bonding agent. I would have stopped to say hello and thank Uncle Fluro for my weird present, but there was no time to waste if I wanted to get back to the ceremony on time.

Which I didn’t want to do, of course. But I had no choice.

I paused on the fourth floor to use my inhaler; I was annoyed, because usually I made it to here without taking a puff. Stupid homebot must have malfunctioned this morning. I took a peek into the conifer zone to make sure that the irrigation system was still functioning; there had been a leak

last week that I'd fixed. All good. Apparently this was what Christmas used to smell like: pine needles and mud, rather than the regular artificial scents of luxury lime and marshmallow Christmas pudding, and antibac cleaning agent.

Once my breathing settled, I began climbing higher. Schools had brought groups here since the beginning of time, but they mainly stuck to the Amazon on the second floor with the robotic parrots and crocodiles, since rainforests were on the curriculum. Above? That was all mine. And Uncle Fluro's and his band of SRS geeks.

On the seventh floor, I walked along the inner gallery, until I reached the door with the brass-fist handle. I opened it, remembering to give it my signature fist bump first, and stepped into my territory. I didn't need the broken hologram curator to tell me the names of my trees; I knew them all by heart – *Betula pendula*, my silver birch with its shiny bark; *Cornus sanguinea*, the dogwood with its bright red stalks. There were also a few here that weren't meant to be, that I'd hauled from other floors because they were pretty, or they smelled good, or they had looked a bit lonely where they'd been before.

I knew that feeling.

The floor was mostly covered in springy meadowsweet grass that gave off sickly scents of bright-coloured bubblegum when I bounced along it. The tree roots from the giant sequoias on the floor above reached through the cracks in the ceiling and down towards the grass, where they formed a twisted, reddish climbing frame. Stone arches lined either side of the room, and a red maple stood guard at the base of each one. I greeted them all in turn, told them about my rubbish morning, and showed them my baffling birthday present.

I made my way towards my den in the old sycamore with the stunted branch, its trunk still growing and strong despite its withered arm, and I noticed that more of the stone bricks in the nearest arch had crumbled since my previous visit. If I could find some cement, maybe I could repoint that too. I supposed I could be given 'bricklayer' in the Work-path Allocation Ceremony. I loved getting my hands dirty and being responsible for fixing things. But no ... It was probably my luck that these days bricklaying was fully automated, done only by drones.

My den was in a tiny glade, the entrance disguised, hidden by a grove of hawthorn and purging buckthorn trees, all of which had evil spikes, with

holly entwined to make them doubly dangerous. I ducked as I made my way through. If you didn't know the path, like me, you'd never reach it. The only other person who knew about it was Uncle Fluro, because he was the one who'd shown it to me, at a time when I'd really needed it. And Rainbow, too, but I didn't want to think about that.

I first discovered the old sycamore on my seventh birthday, on a school visit downstairs. Of course, I'd been to the museum many times before with Uncle Fluro, as he always sensed when I needed to stretch my lungs and breathe. On this day in the Amazon zone, all the kids were either saying they were bored or cheering on Blaze, who was trying to drown a robo-croc. All their noise was spoiling my calm place. I couldn't understand why they didn't love it as much as I did, and it was making me have huffy cries that I didn't want anyone else to see.

No one took any notice when I silently wandered away from the rest of the class.

As soon as I spotted the trail of conkers in their spiky cases, I knew they'd been laid by Uncle Fluro. I followed them, and twigs he'd fashioned into arrows, all the way up the broken escalator to the seventh floor, and then followed a line of fuchsia flower heads like little pink-and-white ballerinas through the spiky maze to the old sycamore – within which was a little den strewn with pillows. They were the sort that Uncle Fluro had in his house, not the adaptable memory-tech ones we had at home that mould to your head, have an in-built temperature system, play white noise and release calming scents. The pillowcases on these were covered in a faded design of mauve and deep yellow flowers. Later I would discover that they were stuffed full of the down from a plant called Old Man's Beard, softer than anything you could get in the mall, and I'd learn how and where to forage it in the museum when they needed replenishing. The most magical thing was the stash of ancient paper books I found waiting for me there, including *The Cartographer's Guide to Map-making*. The nut- and dairy-free chocolate, packed neatly in a little metal treasure chest, was the icing on the cake. I mean, there wasn't actual cake; that was another weird olden-day phrase Uncle Fluro said later that day when he popped his head into the den to let me know that the rest of my class had gone, and that he'd told my teacher I was with him. I hurtled towards him and flung myself into his arms.

It was just the sort of magic that I needed.

Just the sort I needed now. I settled myself back on to one of the pillows and held up the shiny disc to the light. Maybe it was a hanging decoration? It was beautiful, sure, but there had to be something more to it, knowing whom it was from.

I placed the mystery present beside me and picked up the map-making book. I had to sit upright to read it because I'd given myself a giant lumpy and bruised forehead in the past from when I'd tried reading it lying down, with the book on my chest, and fell asleep and it crashed on to me. (That's certainly not an issue when you do a direct information transfer ... Maybe that's why they phased out real books? The danger aspect.)

I addressed the one-eyed grizzly stuffed bear who sat in the tangle of roots by my feet. 'Leopold the Great, any word on the dragons?'

When cartographers, the map-makers of old, illustrated a place that hadn't yet been explored, they would write 'Here Be Dragons'. I wanted to be a cartographer – which was a bit hard when everyone knew where everything was and there was nothing left to discover, so I supposed I wanted to be a cartographer *and* live in the 1600s or 1700s. The 1800s, even. Not fussy. I just wanted to *explore* and not have a map with the route the AI algorithm knew I needed appearing right in front of my eyes. Everything here was tightly controlled, with no room for discovery ... unless you became part of the Neon Government, because they were the ones who did the science, developed the technologies and dreamed everyone's future into being. Join them and an entire world of exploration would open up to you. Or so Rainbow had promised me.

But that was her future, not mine.

My body began to tremble and I struggled to hold the book open. Everyone else knew exactly what they wanted to be – that's why they weren't terrified about the ceremony today – but what I wanted to be wasn't possible. Blaze would get to be an athlete, no doubt about that, his face plastered on billboards everywhere. Even with the best PMA mindset in the world, it wasn't going to change the bare fact that I wasn't special. I struggled to get good grades; even though I was clever, I could never get my answers to fit in the boxes or say them exactly the way the teachers wanted. As soon as I saw an exam paper, everything I knew melted out of my brain. I had no obvious talents, not like Blaze had for athletics, and my family wasn't from the right area to enter the elite. Never mind my asthma and freckles and my clicky brain. Everyone constantly told me how all this

amounted to me being insignificant in the grand scheme of things. That meant the Neon Government, science and any possible discoveries were barred from me.

Dad wondered about me becoming a teacher; it was well respected and he said I was really patient at explaining things ... but there wasn't a subject I wanted to teach, because I didn't want to teach what was already known. I wanted to be discovering new exciting things, so that people who were great at being teachers had new exciting things to teach! The only place I could imagine working was here, joining Uncle Fluro in the SRS, but they only had a volunteer post available for retirees, which counted me out, and there was only so much seed cataloguing I could take.

I nipped at the skin between my fingers and tried to contain the vast emptiness swirling in me, to poke it back inside.

There was nothing available to me that I wanted to do.

And a whole heap of that nothing would soon be presented to me in front of thousands of people in a giant auditorium and beamed around the world, and my arch-nemesis and ex-best friend's dad would be overseeing my day of doom.

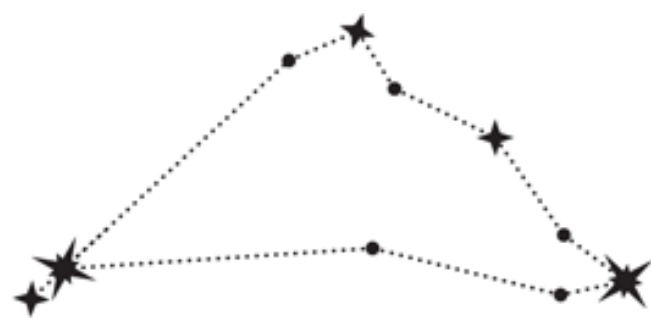
My alarm – implanted as part of my wrist tech – pinged and broke me out of my misery. I had to leave, otherwise I was going to be late! Or I would make history for the worst possible reason – being Unallocated.

I looked over at Leopold the bear for encouragement, but he just stared back. Useless.

That's when I got startled by some movement and I dropped my book. A few metres beyond the matted curls of Leopold's fake fur was what appeared to be undulating, fast-flowing ... moss? I panicked, suddenly getting all the clenched-jaw and wide-eyes feelings.

I tried to scurry backwards.

The moss was burning everything in its path, and it was racing across the floor ... directly towards me.



CHAPTER FOUR

I leaped up and grabbed Leopold out of its path. I scrambled backwards, my arm darting out automatically to save my shiny Frisbee present. In my haste, I tripped over a root and went sprawling, landing on my back with a thud that stole my breath from me.

I propped myself up on my hands and crawled backwards as fast as I could move, away from the bubbling moss. Was it acidic? Everything burned in its wake! Leopold the bear and the shiny Frisbee wobbled precariously on my tummy where I'd put them. But what was *that*?

I gasped and then groaned as I thumped the back of my head into a tree and came to a complete stop, splatting against the grass. I lay there for a moment, my head spinning, and there were sparkly freckles behind my eyes, the edges pointy like stars.

Stars? Famous people? Why had that popped into my head? *Concentrate, Astrifer!*

I sat bolt upright, hugging my legs close, nowhere to go with the tree trunk behind me. I'd wedged myself into a V-shape of its roots, while the moss raced towards me. My feet were going to be burned!

I closed my eyes and clutched Leopold tight until ...

Nothing.

I opened my eyes and tried to steady my breathing, which was high up in my throat rather than deep down in my chest.

The moss had come to a standstill a millimetre from my toes. I then noticed that behind it trailed a carpet of tiny, twinkling blue flowers. I moved into a crouch, popped Uncle Fluro's gift into my pocket and placed Leopold carefully beside me.

'You keep watch.'

The moss was burbling, making belching noises as bubbles popped within it, releasing a burnt smell that was not unpleasant. It was a little bitter and sweet at the same time, as if grapefruit air freshener had been set on fire. It was all the colours of green I'd ever seen – and lots I hadn't – all

mingled together. Minute, delicate fronds waved up and then melted back into the mossy mass, like a continuing pattern of growth.

It's a living thing, I whispered to myself in awe. No way Uncle Fluro would have ever seen anything like *this* before up here. I was discovering something brand new, right now! Me! I knew I should probably have felt scared, but that wasn't the emotion making my heart race and beat in my chest. It was *excitement*.

I knew I should go and get Uncle Fluro. He'd know how to deal with a new find like this, and we could share the credit. *Surely this could have some bearing on what I'd be assigned today*, I thought.

But ... no. It wouldn't be me who got to investigate; the Neon Government would take it, to study it themselves. They'd never let someone like me, or even Uncle Fluro, explore this alone. Only the elite got to make discoveries and experiment, and I knew that was definitely not me.

Just one more moment with it.

It was as if I was being enchanted by the moss, with the rippling, undulating, delicate fronds growing, changing, rebuilding, melting away. I knelt down, so I could get a better view.

As soon as I brought my face close, my hands leaped to my cheeks.

My freckles were on fire! Burning! Worse pain than any of the treatments I'd endured trying to get rid of them. My whole face was aflame!

And then, just as quickly as it started, the pain in my cheeks dropped to a tingle, and, like the moss, I swear my freckles were *undulating*, each individual freckle caressing my face in a pattern I couldn't fathom. They thrummed and crackled, not painful but powerful and spiky, as if they had plugged themselves in.

I drew back and the tingling in my cheeks faded. Bent closer, and there it was again.

The only way I could describe it was that something in the moss was *activating* my freckles.

I needed to record exactly how it felt – it could be important later. I was about to trigger the note-taking app in my wrist, but then I got scared that it might be *classified information*. I knew about this stuff from the Neon Documentary Channel: the government read all our messages and data. Well. Not personally – AI tech did it, but still.

And, of course, the information was only ever used to keep us safe.

But I needed to keep this to myself, only for a little bit longer.

I wanted this just for me.

Suddenly there was a loud buzz from my wrist, and I nearly fell into the moss but righted myself in time – though a bit of me did want to see what would happen if I plunged my hands deep inside, to its very core.

Another buzz came. I took a look at the screen that was embedded in my inner wrist. It was a word note from Blaze.

AZZY, WHERE ON
EARTH ARE YOU?
HURRY UP!

The message crashed me back to reality. I had to tell someone about this and leave, or else I'd be late.

No one had ever missed their Work-path Allocation Ceremony. *No one.* I would come back after the ceremony.

But what if the moss wandered off and someone else found it when I was gone? The museum might get cordoned off ... and I might never see it again.

I looked back at the moss, and I could have sworn it had got bigger. It took up more space, and the blue flowers in its wake sparkled in a rippling sequence. I could feel that same sequence faintly playing out across my face.

Then there was yet another buzz and this time Blaze's face on my wrist-screen. He was bright orange like a tangerine; only I could make him so angry that he went that colour.

He was yelling: 'Astrifer Nova, you are in soooo much bother! GET HERE NOW!'

'Cover for me, Blaze, *please?*'

He shook his head. 'You've got five minutes and then you're for it. Hold on ... Are you at the boring Museum of –'

I ended the call and turned to the toy bear.

'You're in charge, Leopold. Anything changes, let me know. Stay put.'

My bear didn't move. Clearly he was taking his assignment seriously; I knew I could count on him.

I took one last glance at the moss, then I raced out of my secret glade.

Work-path future, for better or for worse, I was coming for you.



CHAPTER FIVE

As soon as I stepped into the cacophony and chaos outside, the neon took over my brain.

Street taxis bore hologram images of the latest blockbuster films. One car advertising *King Kong 247* with a gorilla reaching out its arm hurtled past and made me take an involuntary step back. I saw Rainbow's face yet again in an ad for the *Highlighter Kids* TV show and spin-off video game. It was so unfair that they didn't have to be allocated; they got to be famous just because of who their parents were. Rainbow said she didn't want to be famous, that she was going to protest and fight; she was brilliant at data and hacking, and wanted to work in tech. She soon gave up on that, though, didn't she?

Noises and lights assaulted me from everywhere, the strong scent of fake strawberry from the fifty-four-storey Waffle Mansion over the road sucker-punching my nose. Other land-based transport raced up the street, cars and vans and bikes that weren't equipped to fly on the skyways but had been souped up with super-shiny panels and epic exhaust pipes that blew out luminous smoke. I coughed and took an antihistamine.

Merchant skyscrapers blared out their adverts, all of them competing with each other. 'No Advertising, No Life' was one of the jingles that clamoured with a million others from the speakers on the sides of the skyscrapers.

The buildings flashed sequentially in our school colours to mark the day; it was a great honour for our school to be selected for a presidential visit. Bet they wouldn't think that if they knew what he was really like.

Actually, I bet they still would.

I looked at a big clock shooting out fireworks and ticking down the minutes until our ceremony was beamed around the globe. It would take too long to wait for the Sky Shuttle, and it would be packed at this time. I had no choice but to run.

As I raced along the streets, merchantbots clamoured at me to enter their buildings – one of them was handing out balloons that changed shape and

morphed into their latest tech products. A feeling of dread washed over me and I thought I was going to have to stop running to be sick.

I had to stop running anyway. I'd managed a few minutes but my body, unlike Blaze's, was not built for athletics. I took a puff of my inhaler and tried to steady myself. Just walk fast, that would do it.

I was going to be so late!

I stuck my head down and power-marched as fast as I could.



When I hurtled to a halt outside the metallic doors at the school entrance, miraculously just before the ceremony was about to start, I took two puffs of my inhaler and pressed the button on my wrist that delivered an antihistamine straight into my bloodstream. My lungs constricted with dread, which made breathing harder than if it had just been from the fast walking.

Ceremony or not, school was not my favourite place to be.

But PMA! Surely someone who had discovered a mossy specimen new to science would be destined for great things, right?

I slammed my hand over my mouth, because sometimes when I got excited I accidentally spoke my thoughts out loud, and I didn't want my big mouth to give away what I had found.

But what *had* I found?

Even though all I wanted to do was find Uncle Fluro and show it to him, the thought of being Unallocated terrified me, so I drew my shoulders back into a power stance, deactivated my hair from its bobble and stepped forward, through the doors.

I sneaked along the corridor and darted between the cases filled with holograms of famous alumni who'd gone on to play basketball for the Strikers, zonk ball for the Rangers, and cricket for Cawlington Heights. The holograms bragged about their achievements in bold brassy voices as I walked by their sensors. As I passed the last case, I could hear the roar of the audience on the other side of the auditorium doors at the end of the corridor. I stopped and took a couple of deep breaths, readying myself to open the doors, but then crouched down and closed my eyes. I wanted to enter, but it seemed that my legs did not. My stomach loop-the-looped at the thought of going in.

I could hear the international cheerleading squad that accompanied the Neon Government on official business ramping up the excitement levels to maximum mayhem. The audience was whooping and cheering, and it wouldn't just be them but also all the people around the globe who were watching our ceremony being beamed to them.

I frantically tried to think of a credible excuse for being late, and to guess how high the probability was of me being able to turn myself invisible – when I heard the door right behind me in the corridor swing open. I turned to see a sign stuck on it that said: NO ENTRY – DRESSING ROOM. Then the door slammed shut and a familiar face stared down at me where I crouched.

Rainbow Attack.

My once best friend.



CHAPTER SIX

I stared up at Rainbow from my crouching position.

I knew I shouldn't have been shocked to see her. Whenever President Attack went out on official ceremonial business, so did the Highlighter Kids – the world-famous megastar children of Neon Government leaders from all across the world that represented the Neon mission of global unity – but I hadn't prepared myself to run into Rainbow. Not like this. With me *still* crouching!

She should have been on the stage by now. I'd imagined that I could just pretend to myself, when I saw her, that she was an advertising billboard, not my in-real-life ex-best-friend.

They were all staring at me while I stayed crouched beside the auditorium doors, because Rainbow wasn't alone.

A group of four other kids had followed her out into the corridor. They were our age and older, all taller than me, their clothes cutting-edge new and shiny, like the ones advertised at the designer malls which I couldn't even get a pass on my wrist to visit. The core group of Highlighter Kids – I knew them from their TV show that I pretended not to watch. The girl to the left of Rainbow was Diamond. She was wearing a bling-encrusted, colour-changing jacket that must have been worth more than my family's entire apartment. Rainbow's outfit was super sleek and holographic, and her hair was epic, not only rainbow-coloured as it had always been, but there were tiny lights embedded in it that blinked on and off. The five of them – Diamond, Jewel, Rainbow, Platinum and Helium – stood in formation as if they were posing for one of the digital posters of them that covered the insides of the Sky Shuttles. Paparazzi drones floated around them, presumably recording their every move as possible footage for their show.

'I didn't think I'd ever see you again,' I tried to choke out to Rainbow, but it came out garbled and I started to cough. A bit of spit landed on my chin that I had to wipe off as they all continued to stare at me.

Rainbow looked as shocked as I felt and tried to shape her mouth into a response when Helium (in a jumpsuit that had tiny clouds of bejewelled

gases floating around her) said, 'Look how starstruck she is! Awww! You know, little girl, our parents might be Highlighters, but we're actually like you, deep down.' She threw her glittering hair over her shoulder and winked at Diamond, who laughed. 'Do you want an autograph?'

My head pinged at the word *starstruck* and my face gave a faint tingle. There was something just out of grasp ...

'Oh look, she's so overwhelmed! Here, let me help you up.' Helium stepped towards me. 'Wait ... what's that on your face? Ugh!'

She leaped back in revulsion and the other Highlighter Kids copied her dramatic look of horror. I shrank into myself as much as I could, and I held up my hands to try to shield my face. That's when I remembered the sensation on my cheeks when I got close to the moss. I must have rubbed off all my concealer!

They all held their horrified poses, clearly aware of the drones filming them, then they began to point and laugh with each other about how good their disgusted reactions were.

Everyone but Rainbow, who stood there, frozen. She didn't stop staring at me as the others waved their arms at the drones and did another take, making their poses look even more frightened.

It was like something out of my worst nightmares. I couldn't breathe. It felt as though the corridor was listing at an angle and getting smaller and they were getting bigger, taking up all the space and all the oxygen.

My legs began to wobble and I couldn't hold my crouch any longer. I slid down the wall and cowered to the floor, curling myself up into a ball, my hands hiding my face. I could hear a low moaning noise, and I realized it was coming out of me, but I couldn't stop it.

I glanced at Rainbow. Surely she'd say something to defend me?

She wasn't laughing at me like the others. But she wasn't trying to help me either. I desperately mouthed her name, but she didn't move, not even a fraction.

The old Rainbow would have leaped to my defence. What had happened to her?

One of the doors to the auditorium suddenly burst open, releasing the ear-splitting roar of all the people inside, and Blaze – in his replica blue Strikers basketball strip and his wavy, thick hair the right shade of red – came marching through the Highlighter Kids, pushing them aside.

'There you are!'

He took in the scene, with me on the floor, backed up against the wall, and the others standing around me. He came to my side and whipped round to glare at them.

‘Let her be!’ he shouted.

‘We were only having a laugh,’ said Platinum.

I could see Blaze’s face do a flicker of recognition and fear as he realized who he was shouting at. Then it was immediately wiped off his face before anyone else but me would have noticed and he was back in scary-big-brother mode.

‘Hilarious,’ said Blaze, helping me up, his arm muscles bulging. He stepped forward to stand in front of me.

Diamond looked like she was going to protest, but then did the signature hair flick that all the others copied. Apart from Rainbow – she was still frozen to the spot.

‘You’ve got us all wrong, but I like your vibe,’ Jewel trilled with a wink as she stared at Blaze’s arms. ‘Here’s my card if you want to get in touch.’

Blaze’s wrist pinged as she sent her deets over to him. Then she turned and sashayed through the auditorium door with her gang at her heels.

Rainbow gave me a brief look that I couldn’t read – I thought she was going to say something – but then Helium grabbed her arm and she was gone too.

Once we were safely alone in the corridor, I asked Blaze how he knew I was there.

‘Twin-dar. No one else gets to pick on you but me. Come on, Mam and Dad are going spare. I told them you were doing your breathing to get ready for the crowds. Sounds like you, eh?’

I gave him a shaky grin and, hand in hand, we walked to the auditorium door, but he quickly dropped mine before we went in, hurrying to make sure he was a few steps ahead.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Blaze had to say my name twice before I could register his voice above the trumpeting of a digital electric-jazz band. The parents and guardians filled the rows of seats at ground level, which were strung with neon tubing that pulsed and changed colour in time with the cheering. Mam and Dad were sitting front left, blowing whistles and waving hologrammatic banners that belched out glitter illusions.

I could see that the sold-out audience extended up and up as Blaze and I made our way to the front; the queue at the side of the stage moved each time someone got allocated. There were seven rows of balcony seating above the ground level, and the Highlighter Kids were in the middle of the front row of the first balcony, with bodyguards flanking them. Rainbow was positioned dead centre, looking straight ahead as if she was oblivious to everything going on around her. Members of the Neon Government filled the rest of the seats in the first balcony – they weren't even watching the ceremony, just trying to take the best possible selfies and vids for their socials.

A huge cheer erupted as Henry Short got a position as a Financial District intern and he fist-pumped the air. Obviously the rumour we'd spread about him killing the class cyber-hamster hadn't made a difference. *We*. I purposefully chose not to look up at Rainbow. I focused instead on the walls covered with hologram streamers that floated in a fake breeze.

In the rows above the Neon Government were all the important people from our city, no doubt hoping they'd get a chance to ingratiate themselves with President Attack.

Drones buzzed around everywhere, a director in one of the boxes in the upper balconies herding them in formation to get the best close-up and wide-angle shots.

On the stage ahead, waiting to greet us, one by one as we were called up, were superiors in the Neon Government – all seated in rows of floating bubble seats – and Field Marshal Firework stood at the flashing podium, welcoming the candidates.

And there, next to her, with his wasp-stung face and shock of neon-pink hair, was a person I recognized all too well: President Attack, the head Highlighter and Rainbow's dad.

As the programme continued, my mind felt like a digicopter, whirring and unsettled. It kept flitting and zooming off; it wouldn't focus, not helped by all the cacophony of light and sound. *Moss, Rainbow, allocation, moss, Rainbow, allocation.*

Eventually Blaze nudged me in the ribs. 'They're calling for you, dingbat.'

He poked me again, and I tried to rouse myself, moving forward on to the stage in a daze.

It seemed like it took me a millennium to reach the podium. I could feel all eyes on me with each footstep; I wanted to shrivel up and die. I tried to picture Uncle Fluro in my head. *Breathe*, he mouthed at me, and I focused on imaginary him and pretended I could hear his voice ... and it somehow got me to my spot under the flashing screen.

I looked out across the sea of faces and quickly stared back at the floor. *Pretend they're not there. Concentrate on facts, Astrifer.*

The ceremony was based on historical accounts of the twenty-first century, when children would decide their careers on the advice of a device called the 'Magic 8 Ball'. But they also wore jeans, ate fried potatoes and did something called a TikTok, so I wasn't sure we should have based our entire vocational system on the 'good old days'. But no one consulted me, so here I was.

Electrodes were placed on my wrists by Field Marshal Firework and I glanced up again. I honed in on my parents. Mam waved at me and Dad looked ill and fidgety. He gave me a wobbly thumbs up. The drone for the live stream buzzed around me and I wanted to swat it away, every fibre of me bristling, and I longed to run screaming from the stage, back to the Museum of Trees. To the moss! To a future of discovery!

But I was good and fought the urge. I stood still.

'Commence the allocation process for Astrifer Nova,' Field Marshal Firework said into the microphone.

Close up, her face was more lined than it looked on screen, and her make-up was all powdery, with a bead of sweat on her forehead that I was suddenly scared would drip on to me. She flinched as she spotted my

freckles, her diamond-encrusted headdress of feathers jerking back sharply. I pretended I didn't notice how the corners of her mouth curled in disgust.

I could see Rainbow's dad out of the corner of my eye. He was doing a time check and yawning. I was so insignificant to him; he didn't even remember who I was. I could hear the jazz trumpets build in pace and strength, and I knew it was because the Magic 8 Ball on the giant screen behind me had begun to rotate slowly. It gathered speed and sent out sparkling light like diamonds across all the faces in the auditorium.

The chanting began:

‘Who are you? Who are you? Who are you?
Eight Ball! Eight Ball! Eight Ball!’

The digital Magic 8 Ball burst into hologram fireworks that showered down the names of all the possible paths before me into the chanting audience: *doctor, athlete, choreographer, video tech, infrastructure mechanic, data driver, AI logarithm engineer, teacher ...*

The chant became excruciatingly loud as the spinning ball gradually slowed down. My future was nearly decided. I took shallow, quick breaths that made me feel dizzy, and I had to stop myself from slamming my hands over my ears.

The ball stopped, and the letters of my destiny formed on the ceiling above us all. I couldn't make it out – the letters were swimming, my eyes were pulsating in time with my runaway heartbeat. But I could tell by the huge intake of breath in the audience and then the sudden deafening silence – even the jazz band stopped – that it wasn't good. I looked over to Mam and Dad, desperately seeking out their faces. Dad still had his thumb up, but, as I watched, his hand drooped and turned into a thumbs down.

‘Well, this has not been granted in at least twenty-five years. In fact, I didn't know it was still on the system and a possible allocation,’ Field Marshal Firework said into the microphone. ‘Does it even still exist? Is this correct?’

Technicians in their bright yellow ponchos scurried across the stage and tapped into the Magic 8 Ball screen with their data sticks. Hush remained as the audience awaited the verdict. I still couldn't make out the words; everything felt so distant and unreal.

‘Correct!’ yelled the technicians, then they saluted and raced back to the edge of the stage.

President Attack made the announcement with abject disdain in his voice. That was the first time I heard what everybody else already knew – my destiny, my place in the world for the rest of my life.

‘Industrial District: sock factory.’

His face was scrunched up into a mixture of pity and revulsion. I wrenched the electrodes off my wrists, dashed down the steps off the side of the stage, raced through the auditorium, passing all the faces that stared at me in horror, and threw myself through the doors. I exploded into tears as I sprinted down the corridor and burst out of the main entrance. Even the blare outside couldn’t compete with the noise and chaos inside my own head.

The sock factory? Industrial District? What?! It was worse than anything I had feared. I shuddered at the thought of all that noise, trapped in a stinky, hot, clanky building. I didn’t think anyone still worked there – surely it was all automated?

On one of the skyscraper screens opposite, my horrified reaction in the auditorium was being repeated over and over. It had already been turned into a GIF for the whole world to laugh at.

The rumbling roar of the crowd leaked out to where I sat on the steps outside the school as Blaze was assigned ‘athlete’, the ultimate allocation.

I wished I’d never gone this morning. Being Unallocated, even if that was officially gruesome, would have been a fate better than this one.



Back at home, I got through our birthday tea with a fake smile on my face. I nodded and laughed, said it would be a great opportunity to learn historical production methods, I just wasn’t feeling well in the moment, you know, all that adrenaline from the day ... I desperately tried to make my parents think I was OK. I could see the worry etched on their faces, and, even worse, I thought I could sense shame.

I’d brought complete disgrace on my family; they didn’t deserve this. I’d even managed to take the shine off Blaze. It was me everyone was talking about, not him.

It felt like I was underwater. And even with a worldwide humiliation to obsess over, I kept reliving the scene in the corridor and the way Rainbow didn't stand up for me.

I wanted to be alone in my room.

Blaze and I blew out the eleven hologram candles on our joint birthday cake. It had clearly been in the shape of the Magic 8 Ball, but Mam had hastily tried to turn it into a sort of abstract splodge so it didn't hurt my feelings. Her care made me feel even worse.

I'd let them all down.

I told Mam I had a headache and was off to bed. She gave me a kiss on my forehead but didn't trace the upside-down saucepan on my cheek as she had always done before. She knew I was lying, but she let me go.

From my room, I could hear Blaze going on and on about which athletics jersey he might wear tomorrow and what he'd buy with his first wages, and where he'd buy us an apartment when he made it big.

I sat on the edge of my bed and took the shiny disc out of my pocket, my present from Uncle Fluro. I stared at it, hoping that its purpose would become clear. I spun it round my finger, rolled it across the floor. Nothing happened, apart from me getting an actual headache. That reminded me about the moss and the way it had made my freckles tingle.

No, I'd been imagining that – nothing that exciting could ever happen to someone like me. And anyway, even if it was important, and it probably wasn't, there was no way they'd let someone who had been allocated to the sock factory investigate.

I threw myself back on to my fluffy blanket and began to cry, pressing my face into my pillow so that no one could hear me.

Not for the first time, I wished with all my heart that I could be more like my twin.



CHAPTER EIGHT

‘Do you need a croggy?’ Blaze asked the next morning as he screeched to a stop beside me outside the door to the lobby of our skyscraper. He was wearing his lucky Strikers strip, the team he hoped would sign him up for basketball one day.

I shook my head. Blaze was actually being nice to me, offering a lift on the back of his new electro-bike. Sock-factory allocation was worse than I thought.

‘We’re in different directions now, aren’t we?’ I said, and it came out more bitterly than I had intended.

He tugged on my ponytail, to balance out his unexpected kindness. ‘I’ll see you tonight, yeah, Azzy? You’ll be OK. Sock it to ’em!’

I groaned as he clicked the turbo and zoomed off towards the arena.

I rolled my eyes at his shrinking back – the adverts that blared above me were right: it was the fastest electro-bike on the market. With a sigh, I set off in the other direction, towards the Industrial District, which was packed with huge buildings made of glass and metal, hundreds of storeys high and covered in soot and grime, belching out smoke.

As I walked, digital 3D hoardings above me announced the next tour of the Highlighter Kids, including Rainbow, with the slogan ‘United for the Future’. The Neon Government ensured that we looked forward to the future, not back, and for once it was helpful that they encouraged everyone to forget yesterday – *tomorrow is what’s important* – so the GIF of my face would be old news.

The next skyscraper presented an image of President Attack in full military regalia with a glowing sword and breastplate made of iridescent peacock colours. It was really hard to forget all the upset he’d caused me when his massive head was everywhere. His motto was ‘Ignite our future!’ In other words: *make everything fast and big and loud, and you must buy the latest, and have you got the gadget that ... yes, but have you got the NEW and SHINIER gadget that ...*

I tried to keep my breathing steady and my bottom lip from wobbling as I made my way to the Industrial District. I couldn't help remembering the looks of pity Mam and Dad had tried and failed to keep off their faces this morning.

'PMA. Just one day at a time, just got to get through the day,' I said to myself quietly as I walked through a hologram of President Attack and Rainbow with their arms around each other, calling out, 'Have a productive day and future!'

Not just one day, my brain unhelpfully added as the sock factory came into view. *The rest of your entire life.*



A queue of people stood at the entrance to the sock factory. Something about the area felt weird, and I realized it was a lack of advertising hoardings; the companies must have known there wasn't much point in trying to sell things here. I guessed that my wage would be nowhere near as good as Blaze's, which was something Mam and Dad had pointedly avoided talking to me about last night. One of the other ways I'd let them down.

Everything was dingy and grimy. Nothing blared or featured neon or was new.

I crouched and spotted a tiny little purple flower clinging to a wall, and reached out to touch its delicate petals. Seeing it made me make a connection, and I started to think about my moss. The way my brain worked – if something wasn't directly in front of me, sometimes it didn't stay inside my brain. It drove my dad spare that I forgot apparently unforgettable things, like birthdays, what day it was, and that I'd put a Pop-Out meal in the toaster oven and that's why the apartment ended up being full of lime-green smoke. He was constantly filling my wrist calendar with reminders.

'Beautiful, isn't it?'

Startled, I screamed into the face of a woman who had suddenly appeared beside me. It took me a moment to realize she was looking at the plant too.

'Sorry, I knew you were in your own little world,' she said, 'but I didn't want to leave you behind on what I assume is your first day.'

I stood upright and realized the entire queue had gone and we were alone outside. How long had I been thinking for?

The woman was a lot smaller than me. She didn't even look tall enough to ride any of the good attractions at Zany Beach Park. (I could tell because I hadn't been tall enough for a long time, and I had to just watch and hold Blaze's jacket for him while he went on.) I took in her wrinkly, smiling face – including a tooth that stuck out – and her mass of straw-like hair that a robo-crow could happily make its home in. She was at least as old as Uncle Fluro, possibly more ancient, and wore a knitted red pom-pom hat that looked home-made and very wonky, and a necklace possibly self-assembled from milk tokens.

She said, 'That's a fringed gentian – isn't it beautiful? Not everyone spots that; in fact, most don't. You've a good eye. I'm Doris – not a very glitzy name, is it? My parents never believed in all that sparkle stuff. *Our Doris*, they used to say. *She may be small, but she will be mighty. What a brain, what a voice!* They also never believed in saying what I was out loud, in case it hurt my feelings, but I don't believe in that one bit. Shame never got us anywhere, did it, pet?'

I felt as if she could see right into my brain and could tell exactly what I was feeling. I didn't like it.

'You may have noticed I'm a person of short stature; my type of dwarfism is proportionate. It's what everybody spots first and, when they do, they often don't know what to do with their mouth.'

I quickly checked that mine was closed.

'What you will have not yet noticed but is equally important is that I love baths, I'm very clever and I sing, you see.'

As I stood there, she burst into song – something that was part way between an advertising jingle and an opera from the Arts Channel. It went on for a lot longer than I was expecting and hit some excruciatingly high notes that made my ears hurt. When she finished, she gave a little curtsy and I felt I had to clap.

'I wrote that myself. Isn't it magnificent? You must be Astrifer. Fluro asked me to keep an eye out for you. Said you'd be the one who was younger than any of us by at least three decades and possibly lingering somewhere in a distracted manner.'

'That's me.' I smiled shyly and sort of wafted my arms around to show her that I was indeed me. 'How do you know him?'

'Seed Research Society,' she said with a proud grin.

'That explains everything,' I said.

She took my hand and led me to the door.



Inside, the reception area was cavernous and echoey. The only thing in the empty space was a little metal table with an ancient tablet on it, by a steel door. Doris showed me how to press my thumb on the actual screen – it didn't automatically scan my biometrics.

'Nowt here has been updated in the last twenty years or more, hanging on by a wish and a prayer. We all are, pet! This is how you'll sign in –'

'Every day,' I finished for her.

My name popped up with a black-and-white ID photo that made my freckles stand out even more, and my wrist pinged as I got the health-and-safety download and employment contract.

'Just scroll right to the end and tick the check box, then you're done,' Doris told me.

One thumbprint on a manky old tablet and one tick in a box and that was it. This would be my life from now on.

My thumb hesitated over the flashing rectangle on my wrist.

Doris smiled at me and said kindly, 'Nothing's ever as bad as you think it'll be.'

I didn't dare look at her, nor try to speak, in case she saw me cry, so I nodded and pressed my thumb, signing my life away.



CHAPTER NINE

I zoned out through the welcome presentation that was played for the only new starter, me, in a grotty room where there wasn't even a proper ceiling to cover the electrics. Before she left me to watch it, Doris said that they'd spent all evening after the ceremony looking for the induction reel as it had been so long since they'd needed it, but not to worry because Slugger had found it in the bread bin. I didn't know what a reel, a slugger or a bread bin was, and I didn't ask.

They had no digi-screen, so they had hooked up a thing called a projector that threw the film on to a wall. Wires and bare bulbs dangled from above, and my brain couldn't take anything in. I just concentrated on staying upright in my seat, staring at a smudge of dirt in the corner of the room that looked like a laughing face.

The recording ended, and I stood up, expecting to trudge out to join a formation of misery in whatever noisy, hot hell awaited me. I dropped my head, ready for the onslaught.

'It's Astrifer, isn't it?' a deep voice asked from behind me. 'Heckuva name, that one!'

If they were that funny about my name, what would they think when they saw my freckles? I braced myself, then held my head up high, ready for the look of shock on their face.

It didn't happen.

A man wearing all-black cowhide covered in patches and zips, like an exhibit in the Fashion Museum, came to stand before me and smiled in welcome. He didn't even blink funny to try to disguise his shock. In fact, I don't think he *was* shocked.

'I'm Slugger. Would you like some cake? We all pulled together and knocked up a buffet for our new intakes. Intake. I mean, you're the only one we've had in forever, and we never thought we'd get another because ... well, I'm not meant to discuss that.'

He winked at me, and I tried not to notice that he had just one arm; the right sleeve of his cowhide jacket was pinned up at the elbow.

‘One of my many out-there theories that get me into trouble! When will I learn? Never, probably. Do you like pineapple?’ he asked as he started walking out of the room. He was really tall and I had to do little skips to keep up. ‘It’s called upside-down cake, but I don’t think it tastes any different because it’s upside down, and it doesn’t make you say *el-pan-ayp* either, because I guess that’s not upside down, it’s backwards, and –’

‘If you’re Slugger, who’s bread bin?’ I asked in a high-pitched voice that didn’t feel like my own, then I ground to a halt in the corridor. I couldn’t work out how to use my legs, and it felt like his words were bubbling towards me. Bubbling like moss.

‘Are you feeling OK? Doris, can you come here and help?’



When I came to, I was sitting in an armchair that was not made of any synthetic I’d ever seen before, and it was all patched up. Little puffs of dust shot out from stitches as I shuffled myself upright from where I’d been slumped.

A man with a crutch and a bright yellow flower brooch handed me a glass of water, and then Doris and Slugger came over. The height difference between the two of them was spectacular. Lots of the water slopped over the side of the glass because my hands were still shaky.

I peered beyond the two of them and my jaw dropped.

We were in a big hall strung with paper streamers in pastel tones. The space was divided into different areas: a desk stacked with actual paper books that I wanted to run to and sniff and read; a half-finished wooden boat, upside down with tools laid about; a desk heaped with loads of knotty bundles of wool and different-sized spiky sticks; glass jars and bottles filled with different-coloured liquids; one desk was covered in tiny, wibbly-edged cardboard shapes that were sorted into piles by colour, and some of them had been interlocked to form the edge of a forest image, like I’d seen in the Museum of Trees. And at each of these many different stations were lots of people who had bits of them missing, or were in chairs with wheels, or wore headphones, or who rocked or clapped.

‘It’s rude to stare,’ said Doris gently. ‘But I can understand why you are doing it. I did too when I first got here.’

‘You’re not ...’ I stumbled over my words.

‘Yes?’ said Doris.

‘This is not ...’

‘Yes?’ said Slugger.

I blinked at the two faces that stared at me with kindness and care. But they also had a guarded, wary look that I realized was the same one I had whenever I met new people for the first time and didn’t know how they would react to me and my freckles, and I had to hold all my wriggly brain bits deep inside me, along with the fear of accidentally saying stuff out loud or the wrong thing.

I’d never seen anyone have that same look before.

‘Everyone’s like me!’ I said, and then I began to giggle with relief and awe. This seemed like a place where I could belong – more than anywhere I’d ever been before. My hands went all clicky and flappy with joy, and I didn’t care who saw.

‘Please may I have some *el-pan-ayp* cake now?’ I asked, and I snorted so hard with laughter that water came out of my nose right at Doris.

But instead of being absolutely disgusted, she laughed so hard I thought she was going to keel over. Slugger had to prop her up, then we were all laughing, and it felt like a massive weight had been lifted.



CHAPTER TEN

By the end of my first day at the sock factory, I was excited and overwhelmed, but in a good, new way. I needed to run round all the different stations in loops for a bit, and the man with one crutch and a brooch, who I now knew was named Matty, held his hand out so that I could high-five him every time I passed. Then I had to use my inhaler, and no one batted an eyelid when I did. It wasn't just that I could show all of me in front of them; it was that I didn't even have to think about not doing it – which was *immense*.

So many different people – I lost count and forgot their names, but that was OK – invited me to their stations to introduce themselves and tell me about what they did all day, their hobbies and special interests, and Doris asked a little about me and the things I liked. I shyly told her about the maps I made, but she didn't roll her eyes, or not understand, or look bored, or drift off, or interrupt me. She listened! *And* asked questions ...

She gave me the *perfect* quiet spot near the calligraphers – one of whom gave me a dippy ink pen and promised they'd teach me how to use it – but far enough away from the knitters so that the clicking wouldn't bother me. That's what the sharp sticks were for: weaving wool into garments like Doris's hat. She let me choose my favourite colour of ear defenders, just in case I wanted to come see her at the other end of the factory where she was working on building a small bathtub, the perfect size for her, next to Slugger who had put a hook attachment on his stump and was building a boat (even though he admitted that he was scared of water).

Doris and Slugger were both members of the Seed Research Society. When I asked them why I hadn't seen them at the Museum of Trees before, they both looked a bit shifty and said something about in-depth research, away from the public eye. Public eye? You couldn't get anywhere less public than there.

'But ...' Doris said with a grin when I joined them both for a break – one of lots of breaks. There was actually more break than work. 'We both have a feeling we'll be seeing lots more of you at the SRS now.'

‘Yes, now that we’ve vetted you,’ said Slugger with a wink.

Doris raised her eyebrows at him. ‘Oi! Slugger! What did we say about not —’

‘That’s down to Fluro, I know, I know, I know ...’ Slugger cut in.

‘Well, button it, then!’ admonished Doris.

‘What’s down to Uncle Fluro?’ I asked.

‘Never mind,’ said Doris. ‘Back to work. Can’t sit around yakking all day.’

I looked at all the different stations in the factory.

‘Doris, what work?’ I asked as the thought suddenly hit me. ‘Where are the socks?’

She pointed to a tiny grey cupboard in the corner of the hall. ‘Did you know that the sock-making process is completely automated and there isn’t much call for manually applied footwear whatsoever when you can get it laser-printed at the malls? We set up a small auto-loom in that cupboard years ago. It makes a few socks, fills the occasional box; means we can check off a quota. Occasionally we have a peek in to avoid a disaster, like when it only made lefts.’

Slugger laughed, then choked, bending down so I could slap his back. I wasn’t laughing; they could obviously tell I was worried.

Once he’d recovered, he said, ‘No one cares what we do. The system had even forgotten we existed until you were allocated.’

‘They don’t just want to forget about socks,’ said Doris. ‘They want to forget about us.’ She slammed her blowtorch down and the ring resonated around the room.

Slugger gently took her arm and she eventually smiled at him.

‘I get on my high horse about this, pet, and poor Slugger is the one who has to get it in his earholes.’ Then Doris went back to welding, taking her fury out on the piece of piping clamped in front of her.

Slugger said, ‘We don’t fit the Neon Government’s ideal look, do we? Why do you think this felt odd and wonderful at first? It’s because you don’t see many people like us, like *you*, around.’

He looked at me as if I should have a response, but this felt like a big think for my brain, so I just nodded.

Slugger gestured at the stations around us with his hand. ‘We utilize the rest of the space that should be making socks so that everyone can work on whatever *really* interests them. The areas have been allocated in noise order,

which makes perfect sense for us: metalwork and engineering pursuits at this end of the factory, working down to cross-stitch and silent reading at the other end. There are people here making beautiful art, ingenious new algorithms, and others just using the time for a chat and a rest. We're on a rota to check over the socks at the end of the day and make sure they're in the crates to ship out each month.'

'Doesn't anyone ever check on *you*?' I asked.

'Nah, not as long as we don't bring attention to ourselves!' Doris yelled in reply, pulling down goggles that left her with a panda face from all the welding-iron soot. 'I don't think we've had a visit for the last fifteen years. Isn't that right, Slugger? They've accidentally-on-purpose forgotten we exist. Or, at least, they had until you were allocated yesterday! We're not exactly a photo opportunity for the Highlighters, are we?'

Slugger went back to working on his boat.

Doris nodded at me. 'Just make sure you don't tell people too much about this place. A *hmm* and a *yeah, it's all right* will do. We need to keep under the radar. Can't have anyone thinking we're actually having fun here!' she said, though it was more like she sang the last bit with a flourish. Then she yanked her goggles back on and returned to welding.

Slugger looked me directly in the eye, which I usually avoid, but this felt like it would be very important.

'There are people here that rely on us to keep them safe. Do you understand that? What that means?'

I looked around the workspace where everyone was being themselves, exactly the way they were. I thought about the bead of sweat on Field Marshal Firework's forehead and how her lips had curled in disgust. I thought of President Attack wrenching me from Rainbow, and the way she couldn't look at me yesterday. I nodded.

'That's your responsibility now too ... Hey, Astrifer, you OK there?'

My freckles had suddenly started itching while he was talking – so bad that it felt like I needed to scratch my face off.

'Hey, go careful – you'll hurt yourself! Doris, Doris! Help me!' Slugger yelled for her, looking really worried as I clawed at my face and freckles.

It was like the itchy sensation I had when I encountered the moss in my glade, but it was building in intensity. I couldn't focus on anything but the overwhelming sensation that my face was on fire.

'Slugger, grab her hand!' I heard Doris shout.

‘I can’t! The heat coming off her – she’s burning up! I can’t get near!’

I tried to think beyond the pain. My eyes rolled back in my head and, instead of the inside of the factory, I could see ...

I gasped in wonder. I didn’t have words to describe it. Instead of the ceiling, there was ...

Just.

Vastness.

An emptiness that went on forever and ever, and it was overwhelming and magnificent. I looked down and couldn’t see my feet, couldn’t see any of me. It was as if I had become something else and I was soaring, swooping up and up into – nothingness.

Except it wasn’t nothing! It was full of light, prickles of light, sparkles, flashes ...

And that word ... That word from before that had startled me.

There was no air, but I could breathe, and the cold penetrated deeply, but I had a shield of ... a shield of moss! It burbled and bubbled and protected me as I flew through the nothingness that was lit up in *real* neon colours, not the fake kind that hurt my eyes. These lights gently glowed and pulsed, flashes of incredible colours, pinks that made me gaze in awe at the ...

... that word!

Helium had used it.

Starstruck.

These jewels in the sky beyond. I was hurtling towards the outer layer of the shell. Wait ... What *was* the shell?

The layer that kept us trapped inside, away from the wonders beyond.

How did I know this stuff? What did it mean?

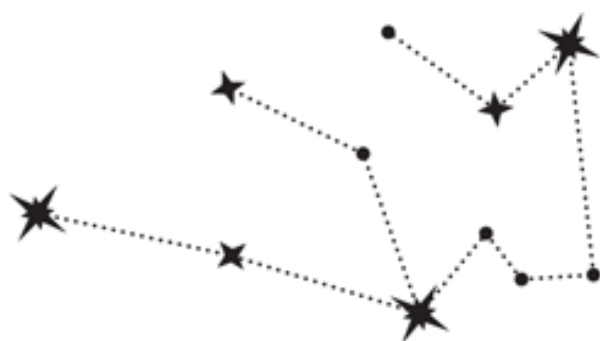
But now I saw there were magnificent galaxies, an aurora flaming into existence, meteors burning across the night sky. What were these words? This vision! All this knowledge was seared into my brain as my freckles burned.

My eyes rolled back to normal and I could once again see Slugger and Doris as they stared at me with worry etched across their faces. I was back in the sock factory, but where had I been?

‘It’s happening,’ Slugger said. ‘We thought it would all begin with her freckles – that had to be the sign. Astrifer, have you seen anything unusual recently? Anything at all out of the ordinary?’

‘Hush,’ Doris interjected in a quiet and frantic whisper. ‘Not here, not yet – it’s not time!’

Moss, I thought in my head, but instead my out-loud voice said, ‘Stars, I saw stars.’



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Uncle Fluro watched me in puzzlement from the inside of his car as I wobbled on the pavement outside the sock factory, Doris and Slugger each holding one of my arms.

‘Hop in!’ boomed Uncle Fluro, his voice, as always, as big as the rest of him. ‘Thought you could do with a lift home on your first day. Didn’t realize you’d have reinforcements.’

Doris gave him a tight smile and bundled me in the back with her as Slugger sat up front with Uncle Fluro. His car was old, like a slow-moving dumpster; in fact, he’d been banned from driving it on any of the high-speed skyways because it would break down every five minutes. I picked off peeling bits of seat cover as I tried to wheel my brain back into line.

‘Strap yourself in,’ instructed Uncle Fluro – which always seemed like a joke, considering the crawl speed his car was capable of.

I clicked my belt into place. But then he looked over his shoulder, put his foot down, and my head slammed back in my seat from the acceleration, my face stretching into a gurn as he jetted up to the skyway. He pressed a button on the front dash that I’d never seen before, which did something to level out the G-force, and I felt myself float forward from my seat.

‘What just happened?’ I squealed.

‘Upgrade,’ he said with a grimace. ‘Because of the SRS, and the timing, you know. The –’ his voice dropped to a whisper – ‘*stars*.’

What did he know about them?

‘Astrifer had a bit of a peculiar moment that seemed to be triggered by her freckles,’ said Doris. ‘Did you feel it too, Fluro?’

Uncle Fluro nodded. What was happening?

Doris looked back over her shoulder at the way we’d come. ‘We need to get to SRS HQ, stat!’

‘The museum? How’s that going to help right now?’ I yelled at them. ‘What’s happening to me?’

No one answered. They just stared grimly ahead and gave occasional frantic glances over their shoulders.



We dropped down and parked illegally outside the Museum of Trees.

‘Won’t someone spot this old banger and report it?’ I asked.

‘Not when I do this,’ said Uncle Fluro, and he pressed something on the wing mirror and his car suddenly disappeared.

‘How did you ...?’

‘Technology conceived at your new place of work. Keep shtum! Now, hurry up,’ he said as he stomped up the steps and Doris dashed behind him.

‘Slugger, would you be so kind as to ...’ Uncle Fluro pointed back at me. I had frozen in position as I sometimes did when everything was too much to compute.

Slugger picked me up and slung me over his shoulder, then he followed them into the museum.



Doris held open the HQ’s wooden door for Slugger, who carried me in and plonked me on a wheelie seat next to one of the wooden benches where they sifted and sorted seeds before cataloguing them. I always had a few different seeds in my pocket, and not just for planting. Uncle Fluro had taught me about their medicinal qualities: that if you ground down the seeds and popped them in hot water or food, or simply swallowed some of them, they could help with sleeping, make your skin brighter, help your tummy if it was sore. He said that was one of the many reasons synthetics with all their side effects and expense were so ridiculous, because we already had everything we needed from nature. I wasn’t allowed to make my own tinctures yet, in case I accidentally poisoned myself, but having the seeds rolling around in my pocket made me feel grounded. I could touch them if I needed to, and no one had to know.

There were shelves all around the rectangular room, so not a spare bit of wall was visible. Each shelf bore rows and rows of boxes and packets, everything labelled by hand with names of plant species. It smelled earthy, of warm mud and water, which was not a smell you got anywhere else. I usually found it very calming, but today it would take a lot more than that to settle all the thoughts running through my brain.

A couple of other people whom I'd met here before popped out of one of the propagating rooms, carrying watering cans and forks – Flash with his streak of blonde hair and easy-going Bolt.

'Hi, guys. Could you two go up to floor eight for me, please?' Uncle Fluro said to them. 'Doris spotted an issue with one of the ancient redwoods.'

Doris looked to Uncle Fluro, whose eyes widened at her.

'Yes, possible fungal infection,' she said, stumbling over her words. 'Must be tackled with haste!'

Flash nodded and headed towards one of the store cupboards. 'Well, we must get the –'

'No time! It's *that* urgent!' exclaimed Uncle Fluro, and Slugger manhandled them both out of the room and into the corridor outside.

'A thorough inspection, please,' yelled Doris. 'All the trees on that floor.'

I could hear them both groan outside the door that Slugger had now closed and locked behind them.

'That'll take them a couple of hours at least, especially with Slacker Bolt on board,' said Slugger.

'You really shouldn't call him that,' said Doris as she tried not to laugh.

Uncle Fluro had worry etched all over his face as he went over to the 'W' section of the shelving. 'Are they definitely gone?'

Slugger listened, then nodded.

Uncle Fluro turned to me. 'This bit is for security purposes, Astrifer. We'd hoped it would be more of a celebratory event for you, inviting you to be a member, but things appear to have hastened beyond our control. Grab those seeds, would you, and pop them in your pocket?'

'What?'

'Just do it.'

I took a packet from the box near me that he pointed to.

'Now you'll always be prepared for emergency situations. I'm worried you might need them ...'

I shrugged and popped them in my pocket. 'I mean, it's all very nice of you to invite me to join the Seed Research Society, and I've now got some lovely seeds, but I'm not sure how that's going to help the si–'

And then I stopped speaking as Uncle Fluro traced the letter 'W' on a shelf and a tablet shot out of the wall at the same time that a recorded voice barked out words, making me jump.

Doris wheeled my seat over to the tablet and pulled it down to my level. I was too flabbergasted to move myself, and I eventually realized the voice was giving me instructions.

I followed them, completing a thumbprint scan, a retina scan and a spit test. I wiped the dribble off my chin as it asked me to hum a jingle from a common cereal advert. I looked around self-consciously, wondering if I really did have to comply.

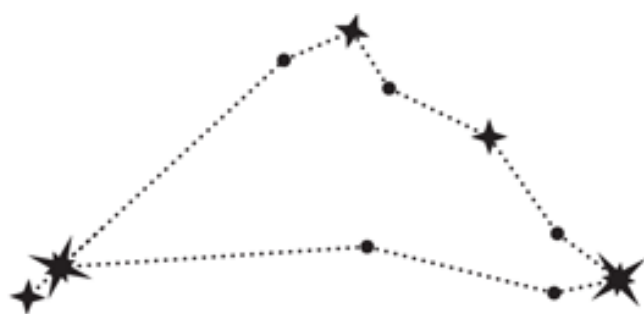
‘This addition was funnier in my head,’ said Doris. ‘You know, when I’d imagined it panning out *before* –’

‘Before what?’ I asked.

‘Hum first, answers after,’ said Uncle Fluro gently as Doris at least felt embarrassed enough to look away.

I felt ridiculous – this whole situation was ridiculous. But everyone else was taking it incredibly seriously, so I leaned towards the tablet and hummed. When I reached the final note in the jingle, the entire ‘W’ section of shelving and seeds slid across to reveal a hidden room.

‘There’s more to us than a love of seeds,’ Uncle Fluro said. ‘Astrifer Nova, welcome to the *Star Remembrance Society*!’



CHAPTER TWELVE

I stood up from my wheelie chair and gasped, then immediately plunged my hand into my pocket to roll the new seeds between my fingers, through the packet. Before me, where the wall of shelving had been moments before, was a small space about the size of our living room at home and it was rammed with stuff. The walls were covered in printouts and maps and annotated diagrams, some of them yellowing and curling with age. The arched ceiling above was divided into thirteen rectangular panels of deep blue, and on each one was painted a different pattern of stars in silver. Somehow, I knew the word for the patterns, and I tested it out loud:

‘Constellations.’

I looked to Uncle Fluro, and he gave me an encouraging smile, but not before I spotted him raise an eyebrow to Slugger and Doris, who both looked shocked.

I tentatively stepped inside, and the three of them followed. The room smelled of coffee and damp paper. Right in the middle was a wooden mechanism the size of a small car, sort of like a merry-go-round at a retro funfair. It had a handle to make it turn, but instead of having places to sit for a ride, there were spherical objects of different sizes and colours secured on poles that attached to a central, chunkier pole with a sphere on top. Some of the outer spheres even had smaller spheres dotted around them.

Uncle Fluro motioned for me to take hold of the mechanism’s handle. I turned it clockwise and the spheres all began to rotate, in different directions and at different speeds.

It was beautiful.

‘This is an orrery,’ said Doris as the orbs danced round each other in repeating patterns. ‘It’s a clockwork set-up of the solar system. This one is heliocentric, which means *sun-centred*, just like our actual solar system is, behind that blasted artificial sky. If we didn’t have permanent neon on the shell –’

‘If we didn’t have the shell *full stop!*’ butted in Slugger angrily.

‘... the sun would light up the daytime for us as we spin towards and away from it every twenty-four hours,’ finished Doris.

‘Sorry, what? Shell?’ I said. I obviously didn’t have all the knowledge I needed in my head to unravel this. I knew the word had appeared in my vision, but I was struggling to piece everything together. ‘When my freckles burned, it was like I was flying in the ... I don’t have a word! It was dark velvet and – Uncle Fluro, it was the most extraordinary thing I’ve ever seen! The –’ I hesitated over the word – ‘*constellations*? The stars? They were magnificent and then I was tumbling towards this hard outer layer. Was that the ... the shell?’

Uncle Fluro crouched in front of me and I watched his walrus moustache quivering as he spoke, and that helped me concentrate on processing the words that he was saying, because they sounded so fantastical that I struggled to take them in.

‘The images in your head are real,’ he said calmly. ‘They exist beyond the false sky we live under, kept imprisoned beneath the purpose-built shell. We don’t know what has triggered your visions, but we have been expecting something like this. Our data told us it would be soon, but we thought we had more time.’

‘More time for what?’ I asked.

‘To prepare you,’ Doris said.

She came over and stood next to Uncle Fluro, their heads at the same height while he remained crouching, and they both smiled at me.

‘For *what*?’ My hands began to flap.

‘Did you bring the DVD with you?’ Uncle Fluro asked me. ‘Watching that would help.’

Slugger nodded, but I just looked confused.

‘Your birthday present,’ said Uncle Fluro, looking into my eyes. ‘Doris said she thought you would think it was a squashed metal doughnut. Slugger bet you’d think it was a Frisbee. I knew you’d have worked it out, though!’ He looked dead proud of himself. And me. ‘*I* told them you’d know immediately that it was a DVD. I’ve told you about them before. You *have* worked out what it was ... haven’t you?’

I laughed at how accurate Doris’s and Slugger’s predictions were. ‘Not in the slightest! What’s a deeveedee?’

Uncle Fluro shook his head. ‘Not deeveedee. A DVD.’

‘You’re saying the *same thing* as me!’ I threw my hands up in exasperation. ‘How am I supposed to know what a deeveedee is?’ I took my shiny Frisbee present out of my pocket and held it up. ‘So what does it *do*, Uncle Fluro?’

He walked over to a small rectangular metal contraption and pressed a little button. There was a whirring noise as a tray popped out with a shape moulded into it that matched my deeveedee.

‘Pop it on there,’ said Uncle Fluro. ‘No – t’other way up ... There we go!’

I had to speedily wrench my fingers away when there was a sucky noise and the tray shot back inside.

Doris flipped down a seat for me that was built into the wall and stood next to me, leaning her forearm on my thigh. Uncle Fluro wheeled over a trolley that held a black box with a dark screen the size of a Sky Shuttle window, and Slugger pointed a black rectangular device at it.

I jumped as the screen crackled into life.

‘Old-school TV,’ said Slugger.

‘Old-school teeveeee,’ I said to myself. ‘Rhymes with deeveedee!’ Then I had to stop myself from laughing when everyone threw me a *really* worried look.

At first I thought it must be broken because the screen was just a velvet-black background covered in pinpricks of light. Maybe the image was frozen? Then slowly I noticed the pinpricks swirl and gather into whirlpools of pale, orange light.

I gasped.

They were what I’d seen in my vision.

‘What are those?’ I whispered. I needed someone else to say the word to make them become real.

‘Those, my dear,’ said Uncle Fluro, ‘are *stars*. Watch.’



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

When the deeveedee came to an end, I asked Uncle Fluro to play it again. And again.

The four of us watched in silence as I attempted to absorb all the information and make it match what was in my head. The beauty and the magnitude that we were part of a galaxy and gigantic cosmos full of other planets bulging with life! The way we'd once travelled. We'd *explored* beyond our planet! And how the Neon Government had built and fixed the shell around us, to keep us trapped inside. How the light was controlled by Neon Government HQ, and the term 'daylight' was stolen from the word we used for when we were lit by the sun. How the sky wasn't controlled by people, but by rotations and air and light and clouds and ... how in summer we'd get more light and less in winter, and that affected the weather too – we had seasons!

'So, once upon a time, we could have sat outside and looked up and seen all that ... *space*?' I waved my arm upwards to the constellations on the ceiling panels above, then at the orrery of our planetary system in the middle of the room. 'But only at night? *But* it was out there all the time, constantly – just living out there? Under the *real* sky! And there was weather and shooting stars and satellites and a moon! And I could have gone anywhere? But now we're trapped by a *shell*. Why? How could people let that just happen so easily?'

Slugger scoffed and moved across the room, his hand balled into a fist.

Doris carried on standing at my side. Uncle Fluro flipped down a seat on the other side of me and sat down. He took his monocle out and wiped it on his waistcoat.

'If you had been born two hundred years ago, that would have been exactly right. You could have been an interstellar explorer, creating those maps that you love so much.'

'So what happened? Our rulers, the Neon Government, they built the shell. Why? Why do that?'

'Fear,' said Slugger from where he leaned on the big old box TV.

Doris nodded and gave him a wan smile.

‘Fear of the other species that were out there ... in, erm, space?’ I said.

Uncle Fluro nodded. ‘Exactly that. They were the epitome of difference. They breathed, spoke, moved, learned in different ways, and instead of seeing the good and what those connections could bring to Earth, the Neon Government closed it off and pretended that all other beings didn’t exist. They said it was to keep us safe. That “aliens” were a threat to our safety and way of life. That’s why that word is one of the biggest insults you could ever hurl, and it makes you pop up on the Neon Government’s watch list.’

Slugger took over as Uncle Fluro shook his head in disgust. ‘They cleared our planet of any outsider who had already arrived, sent them packing, and did the same to anyone who objected. Any Earthling who supported the aliens, they got shipped off this planet too. The Neon Government used the opportunity to get rid of quite a few people who didn’t fit what they thought a “perfect” human looked and acted like. We have no idea what happened to those poor souls.’

‘How come no one knows about this?’ I asked. ‘It didn’t happen that long ago!’

‘Oh, some people do know, pet,’ said Uncle Fluro with a wry smile. ‘But we’ve learned to stay quiet, or investigate under the radar. The Neon Government was built on lies and fear and hate, and that means their foundations are not as strong as they would like. They have to keep everything under tight control. Everything is new and forward and now and tomorrow. No one looks back. And if you do, there are consequences.’

I gasped. This was a peaceful world. Not in colour or noise, but there was no war, no fighting.

‘But no one hurts each other here,’ I said. ‘It’s banned!’

‘There were riots,’ Doris said quietly. ‘Lots of people were killed.’

Uncle Fluro took my hand. ‘Anyone who speaks out or who questions the Neon Government disappears. The same goes for those who try to talk about what once was, or what could be! Including the riots. More people know than you would think; they’re just scared. And that keeps the lie we are told living and growing, until at some point there will be no one left who ever knew. That shell ensures that we are living a lie, under a lie. We have lost many friends over the years.’

‘So, do all of them know? In the Neon Government, I mean?’ I asked, thinking about Rainbow and her dad, President Attack.

‘We don’t know how deep the conspiracy goes,’ Uncle Fluro replied. ‘That’s something else we’re trying to discover. But we have to tread lightly.’

I looked at the three grown-ups in turn and could see the exhaustion written all over their faces.

‘So, do you want to be a member of the *real* SRS?’ Doris finally broke the silence. ‘You know, I always imagined asking that in a much more party-style atmosphere, possibly with a fancy hat and a whistle. We should have had cake! I would have definitely sung a song.’

Even Slugger managed a little grin at that.

‘Of course I do!’ I imagined how I might introduce myself as a member of the Star Remembrance Society and how cool that would be. But then I quickly realized I couldn’t, and having a secret like that was even better. ‘How many of you are members? Is it a big organization?’

‘It’s on a small scale at present,’ said Slugger.

‘How small scale?’ I asked.

‘Us,’ said Uncle Fluro.

‘Oh.’

‘Other people know, like we said – lots of the older generation especially – but it’s too dangerous to bring them in officially,’ Uncle Fluro added.

‘And this room is really quite small,’ said Doris.

I looked to the printouts of faraway galaxies: one was shaped like a unicorn; another, a bear. The colours were muted sapphires and emeralds. Uncle Fluro followed my gaze.

‘Those were some of the first images sent back by the James Webb Space Telescope.’ He pointed to a printout of a flat, almost triangular, layered metal object, which had a metal arm and a sail that looked like a honeycomb made up of giant gold hexagons. ‘It went out and sent back images of far realms that we didn’t know existed. Then it travelled further and found life. And that life lent us technologies far beyond any of our means to create ...’

‘And our thanks,’ spat Slugger, ‘was to steal the tech and send them packing, wrecking their planets in return. How do you think we were able to make that blasted shell? The Neon Government stole that knowledge from other beings and kicked them out. Wouldn’t let them back in. Our planet once relied on the sun for energy; we’re self-sufficient thanks to those they dare to term aliens and traitors!’

Slugger was really worked up now and paced back and forth. He came to a halt and took a deep breath, then he looked in the opposite direction as he spoke so he thought I couldn't see him wipe away a tear.

'And then the legacy of that was to look upon anyone different here on Earth with fear and scorn. That includes you, me, Doris and all your new friends at the sock factory. We live with the consequences of that action.'

I brought my fingers to my cheeks and touched my freckles. They were what made me noticeably different, never mind all my brain stuff. My freckles were what people first spotted and put them on alert. They made my life hell. And all because of an irrational fear of an entire galaxy far beyond our shell that they didn't even know about! The disgust had been subconsciously stuffed into them from all the advertising, and the things to buy that kept everyone in line.

I looked down at the tight neon Lycra jumpsuit I was wearing and wanted to rip it off.

'If it's so dangerous to know,' I said in a whisper, 'why tell me? Why now?'

Uncle Fluro sighed. 'We have ways and means of monitoring the shell –'

'He means me hacking their systems,' interrupted Slugger with a grin.

Uncle Fluro shook his head at him and continued. 'Just because *we* don't have access to beyond doesn't mean the Neon Government is without access. There has been heightened activity recently; something has happened to trigger it. Something that mirrored an event that occurred not long after you were born.'

Suddenly my nose started to tickle and I was reminded of the moss upstairs in my glade. I must check on it! Oh, that could be it – that could be the trigger! I bet it was, and it was *my* discovery! I'd found it!

I was about to open my mouth and tell them all about it when Uncle Fluro spoke and everything I knew crumbled.

'Numbered with the stars,' he said to me in a distant voice.

'Pardon?'

He pointed at my freckles. 'That's the meaning of your name. *Astrifer*: star-laden, placed among the stars.'

I shook my head in bewilderment. How come I had a name that was about *stars*?

'We gave you the name after the night I looked after you when you were a baby,' explained Uncle Fluro. 'The night you got your freckles. Your mam

and dad didn't have a name for you before that, and then nothing else would fit. I offered them Astrifer; it was perfect, and a secret nod to your destiny. Astrifer, we don't understand why, but you are very important.'

'Hold on,' I said. 'I wasn't born with these?'

'Of course not!' Uncle Fluro laughed. Actually laughed! The hairs on my arms stood up. 'It was the stream of spores. They chose you.'

'The stream of what? And you were there when they happened? And you never thought to tell me? My freckles are ... *your fault?*'

'Calm down, Astrifer – don't shout at your uncle,' said Doris.

I couldn't stop my voice from rising, my confusion turning to anger. '*Calm down?* Do you have any idea how my life has been because of these freckles? And Rainbow ... my one and only friend. Her dad made her leave cos of these!' I crossed my arms tightly over my chest to stop me lashing out and I furrowed my brow, to make sure my face definitely told them I was angry.

Uncle Fluro put his hand on mine. 'Astrifer, my darling. I am so sorry. I –'

I shook him off, leaped up and backed away towards the door, tears rolling down my cheeks that I hastily tried to wipe away. Uncle Fluro took a step towards me.

'Don't you dare follow me!' I yelled, and then added in a small voice: 'I trusted you.'

'Please, love, you are so important to me. To this. To everything! You can trust me, all of us!' Uncle Fluro frantically gestured around the room. 'Stay! Something isn't right. We've got some more investigations to do, but –'

I turned my back on the three grown-ups. By now I was almost shimmering with rage. Everything was electric and the colours in the room sparked at me.

'Please, Astrifer,' Uncle Fluro pleaded. 'I'm sorry.'

I whirled round to face him.

'No, you're not,' I spat out through my gritted teeth. 'I'm just another mystery for you to solve. You don't care about me, how these *things* make me feel! I don't want to see you ever again. Any of you!' I roared at them all.

The look on Uncle Fluro's – *no*, I thought ... Blaze was right; he wasn't our uncle – *Fluro's* face was like I'd slapped him. I could see the tears in his eyes.

‘I’m so sorry, pet – let me explain.’

‘Let her go,’ I heard Doris say to him as I stormed through the secret door. ‘She needs time.’

‘Meet me here tomorrow morning, first thing, as soon as daylight settings come on, and I promise I can explain –!’

His words were cut off as I slammed the door to the SRS behind me.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Later that evening, I was back at the apartment and we were eating dinner. It was the second night in a row I'd had to pretend that nothing was wrong and I was really struggling to keep it all inside. My foot tapped on the floor under the table. Blaze was gesticulating and excitedly shouting, 'And then, after I'd made my *seventh* dunk shot, the coach said I was the best new allocation he'd ever seen. Astrifer, quit hogging the bread rolls!'

I chucked one at his big head, and he caught it in his mouth and carried on speaking without pausing. '...e 'old 'e I was 'efinitely 'oing to 'o all the 'ay.'

Mam and Dad gazed at him in awe, even though he was huffing bits of bread roll over the table.

'Hopefully a *really* long way,' I mumbled.

'What was that?' Blaze turned to me, swallowing at last. 'Have a lovely time at the *sock factory* today?'

I remembered that Doris had told me to be vague, so that no one spoiled the fun – to lie. Well, she and Fluro certainly knew how to do that with their little society, and my freckles. And Mam and Dad, too!

'Does Blaze know?' I asked, my voice purposely low.

'Know what, dear?' asked Mam. 'You look very pale. Are you feeling OK? Oh, honey, you haven't said a word about *your* day. Was it *that* bad?'

They all looked at me with pity.

'Does Blaze know the truth about me?' I whispered.

They still stared at me, uncomprehending.

'Was there a lot of dust at the factory today, Astrifer?' asked Mam finally, as I could feel myself vibrating again with all the emotion I had kept in since storming out of the museum. It was ready to explode. 'Do you need an antihistamine or perhaps a lie-down?'

'I do not!' I spat out as I stood up violently and my chair fell over. One of the housebots immediately came over to right it and I kicked out at it.

'Hey!' said Blaze in shock. 'What the heck has got into you, Azzy?'

'I just need you to tell me the truth about how I got my freckles!'

There was silence. Blaze looked back and forth between me and our parents, who just stared at me, completely still.

Blaze's jaw sprang back to life. '*Got* them? You were born with them, dingbat.'

I stared at Blaze until the penny finally dropped.

'Wait,' he said slowly. 'Are you saying you weren't *born* with the freckles?'

'No,' I said, hands on my hips as I stared daggers at our parents, my voice now low again, cold and cutting. 'I ruddy was *not*. They *left us* to be babysat by Unc- *Fluro*, and he let me get infected by ... by ... *alien spores*!'

There was another long pause.

'Whoa,' said Blaze, finally, breathing out slowly. 'What's *spores*?'

'Tiny cells!' yelled me, Mam and Dad at the same time.

'And *alien*?' whispered Blaze, frantically looking at each of us in turn. He had a bit of butter smeared on his chin.

Mam stood up and reached out, taking first my finger and then my whole hand. 'Let's just us two go and sit on the balcony.'

I didn't want to, but when Mam put on that quiet, steady tone of voice it was impossible to ignore her. I followed her, and before I knew it we were curled up together on the swing chair on the balcony, underneath all the blankets. She tried to trace the upside-down saucepan on my cheek with her finger, but I brushed her hand away.

'It's absolutely not your Uncle Fluro's fault, and I've got no idea what you mean about spores,' said Mam. 'Also, pet lamb ...' She looked around the balcony and then whispered, 'There's things we can go into when you're a bit older, but you really can't yell the A-word. Anyone could be listening.'

'We can stop pretending he's our uncle; he's just Fluro,' I muttered.

I felt Mam stiffen beside me. 'Astrifer, that man is more your uncle than any of your blood family, who we hardly ever see. He's done so much for you two! He didn't even notice your freckles at first, not until we pointed them out. He said they must have developed overnight – which sometimes can happen, you know?'

I allowed Mam to hug me, to buy me time to think. Fluro had kept the truth from my parents. Played the bumbling old fool when I knew he was anything but.

A little voice I didn't want to hear piped up in my head: *Maybe he told them that to keep them safe.*

I heard Blaze cough, and I realized he was listening in at the balcony door. Mam held her arm out to him and he also snuggled up with us on the swing chair, even though he was so tall now he could barely fold himself in. Dad stuck his head out too. He smiled at us, and then took a seat in one of the angular chairs that were as uncomfortable as they looked.

'It just so happened that the freckles developed while he was babysitting you,' said Mam. 'It could have happened at any time. Then he paid for all those treatments to try to get rid of them.'

'That didn't work,' I countered.

'That didn't work,' she softly agreed. 'But we couldn't have afforded to try without his help. He sold most of his favourite antiques for you.'

'Your freckles are just as stubborn as the rest of you,' said Blaze, pinching me, and the two of us ended up spilling out of the swing chair and tussling on the balcony.

'Well, that wholesome moment was over fast,' Dad said with a sigh as he watched us wrestle.

Blaze squished my face into the balcony floor until I yelled, 'Surrender!' Then he and Dad went to fetch us all some ice cream.

'Mam,' I whispered, still lying face down on the balcony floor. It was easier to confess without looking at her.

'Yes, pet?'

'I was really mean to Uncle Fluro. I mean, like, *really* mean.' My voice got smaller. 'I'm not sure he wants to see me any more.'

Mam crawled on to the floor – *ouch*-ing when her knees crunched – and lay down next to me. 'Oh, love. You've been unkind to *me* before, but I love you, so I've always forgiven you. And so will he. I promise. You just have to go and see him, and the two of you will make up. Did he say he didn't want to see you again?'

'No,' I said. I remembered back to when I slammed the door. 'I think that bit might have been me, actually. He said I should meet him at the museum first thing tomorrow.'

'There you go, then! He'll be waiting for you. Take him something special. Maybe something old, or something unusual?'

I laughed. 'I know exactly what,' I said, thinking about how impressed he'd be if I showed him the moss.

Mam got up on to her knees, which cracked again. ‘How was the rest of today, love? Was it really horrible? I’ve been so worried about you.’

‘Mam, you’ve got to promise you won’t tell anyone, but it was honestly the absolute best day I’ve ever had! Until it wasn’t.’

‘I hoped it might have been,’ she said with a wink. ‘Uncle Fluro popped in to see us this morning and told us not to worry, that things aren’t always what they seem.’

‘Mam, I know I loved it, but I’m so sorry about getting allocated there. I really let you and Dad down.’ I could barely glance up at her, and Mam was someone I could always easily make eye contact with.

‘Astrifer Nova, you look at me right now,’ Mam demanded, and when I did, her face was shining with the fiercest love I’d ever known. ‘You could *never* let us down. You hear me?’ I nodded at her. ‘I also know that anywhere you go, you take a bit of your magic with you. Tomorrow can be the best day again. Even better! You just need to say sorry and put it right.’

I closed my eyes and hugged Mam tight, knowing exactly how I could do that.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Before daylight settings began, I was out of our apartment and scrunched into one of the doorways of a skyscraper, waiting round the corner of the Museum of Trees for Uncle Fluro's car to pull up. I'd barely slept all night and I wanted to do my apology the second he arrived so I could immediately show him the moss.

I looked up at what I'd once believed was the sky, and now knew was the shell. I had to learn more.

I scanned up and down the street, up to the skyway – I mean, his car was not exactly hard to spot.

Nothing.

Then I remembered the button he'd pressed. His car could already be here; I just might not be able to see it! Blaze was right – I was a complete and utter dingbat.

I made my way past brightly flashing street vending machines, all jabbering on about how brilliant their items were and how you desperately needed them, otherwise your life would be rubbish. My head was almost vibrating and my vision was super bright.

I suddenly felt as if there was a presence behind me and I turned round, checking over my shoulder, but no one was there.

Hold on ... who was that?

Not far along the street towards the museum, on the opposite side, was someone in a camel-coloured anorak and a dull, muddy-coloured beanie hat peering out from behind a vending machine selling turbo-charged light turtles. They were wearing big sunglasses, and I noticed they seemed to be using the reflection of the skyscraper windows to stare at the museum entrance, rather than look directly at it. That was clever, but the lack of neon made the disguise too obvious. They were spying on something, but what? Me?

I glanced behind me, down the street, and back to the stranger – but they'd gone! Where they'd stood was just a beige sack of deliveries.

Clearly, my brain was going to ludicrous levels to make this morning seem more exciting than it actually was. I'd managed to turn a delivery sack into a spy.

'You're losing it, Azzy,' I said to myself in a mimic of Blaze's voice.

I made my way to where Uncle Fluro's car had been parked yesterday, and, as discreetly as possible, I sort of waved my arms around, pretending to look for something I might have dropped and attempting to feel if the car was really there.

Nothing. Perhaps he'd come by shuttle today. He could already be inside. He wanted me to come as soon as daylight settings came on, so that would make sense.

Does any of this make any sense, though, Astrifer? I thought to myself.

Then there it was again – that feeling of being watched! Was it *just* a delivery sack next to that vending machine? Maybe I hadn't imagined the spy!

I got a shiver of excitement. Well, I could beat them at their game. I could be a *better* spy. If I could pop to their side of the street, then *I* could sneak up on *them*! Tables turned, ha!

I continued doing the wafting movement and then darted behind the bright pink cargo drone parked on the kerb. I shot along the pavement, hidden from view from the spy's lookout position by all the drones that were queued to top up the vending machines. I nearly tripped over a stackbot that was sorting replica keychain Magic 8 Balls in plastic orbs, but managed to right myself. I got to the end of the row and peered round the edge of the last cargo drone.

If I could just ... *One, two, three!*

I timed the traffic, dashed out of my hiding spot and raced next to a small delivery-bot. It was heading in the same direction as the spy, so if I could crouch and keep pace with it ... then ... *there!*

Keeping the vehicles between me and the spy, I zipped through the gaps and made my way across the street. In my head, I played an old retro arcade game theme song as I leaped the final bit of pavement and hurtled to a standstill behind the LED side wall of a Sky Shuttle stop.

I tapped my leg in time with the music still playing in my head and popped my head round the wall ... but the spy wasn't there! They'd gone! I'd lost them!

I peered at the delivery sack. It was beige. Yup, I had made it all up; no one had been there.

Dingbat! I heard Blaze in my head again – and at that precise moment there was a tap on my shoulder and I screamed.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

‘Shhhhhh!’ the spy whispered as I continued to scream directly in their face. If they were going to kidnap me, I was going to make sure everyone could hear!

‘It’s me!’ They took off their sunglasses and beanie hat, and their hair exploded outwards, the lights within it twinkling.

‘*Rainbow?*’ I gasped. ‘What on earth are *you* doing here?’

She frantically looked around to make sure she hadn’t been spotted, then took my arm and started dragging me towards the Museum of Trees.

I wrenched my arm away from her. ‘Why are you here? What do you want? And what’s with *the disguise?*’ I stared at the beige boringness of the camel anorak, which was covering her neon Highlighter Kids outfit. ‘We’re not friends any more; you can’t just show up like this!’

‘That’s not *my* fault!’ she hissed as our argument started attracting the attention of passers-by.

Suddenly it was too much: Rainbow being here, the shouting, the growing light from daylight settings activating, the epic clashing noise from all the hustle around us, the eyes staring, and the fact that this wasn’t the plan. My brain turned to compost when unexpected things happened, and there had been too many of them and –

‘Here, just come with me – you’ll be OK,’ said Rainbow as she took off her anorak and draped it over me to shut out some of the light and noise. She gently bundled me towards the museum.

Inside the lobby, we both told the hologram curator to shut up at exactly the same time, and we both said, ‘Jinx!’, and I stuck out my hand with my pinkie outstretched from within the safety of Rainbow’s anorak. I was still wearing it like a tent, with my head as the pole in the middle, and it felt like we were back to how the two of us had been when we were little and first became friends.

‘Do you think you can come out from there now?’ asked Rainbow as she took my pinkie finger in hers.

I popped my head out like a tortoise, then draped the anorak round my shoulders. 'Why are you even here? And at this time?'

'After the allocation, I knew if you were sad and upset, you'd come here. I was going to wait all day if I had to. That's what friends do.'

'We're not friends. You ditched me.'

'My *dad* made me do that. I never wanted to leave!'

I looked at her, my brain spinning wildly.

'It's true,' she insisted, holding my gaze. 'You do believe me, don't you?'

I didn't answer, but I realized I was desperately *wanting* to believe it was true.

'Astrifer, I miss you!' said Rainbow, and I concentrated on the toes of her diamanté trainers. 'And ... after, well ... I really wanted to say sorry, and I wanted to see if you were OK. I hadn't seen you in so long, and I knew you'd be at the ceremony and there was a chance I would run into you, but when I saw you ...'

'Well, you didn't say any of this when all your friends were being horrible to me about my freckles.'

'The Highlighter Kids? They're not my friends! They're just people I have to work with.'

'OK,' I said, 'but you could have stuck up for me.'

'You're right,' said Rainbow. 'I'm sorry. And I felt awful about it! It wasn't for want of trying – I had all these brilliant things in my head to say out loud, but it was just ... seeing you. It sort of knocked the wind out of me and put me on mute. I wish I could turn back time and have said something. I was ...' She paused and let out a big sigh. 'Ever done something that you regret?'

I didn't say anything, but it was as if she had read my mind, and it made me remember that the reason I was here was not to make up with Rainbow but to apologize to Uncle Fluro. I marched ahead to the broken escalator and made a point of not even checking behind me to see if Rainbow was following.

I could hear her footsteps behind me, though, and I tried to ignore the happy flutter in my heart.



No matter how hard I pounded on the door to the SRS, there was no reply.

‘You don’t have a key?’ asked Rainbow. ‘I miss it here, you know. And I miss Fluro. He always had time for me when my dad didn’t. I hung out here lots whenever Dad was away, and your uncle always welcomed me in.’

‘I didn’t know that,’ I said quietly, and stopped banging.

‘There’s lots you don’t know,’ said Rainbow.

And there’s lots you don’t know, I thought to myself but didn’t say in my out-loud voice.

‘I really, *really* am sorry, Furry Head,’ she said with a little smile, and I could see how scared she was that I might throw it back in her face. That was the name she’d given me after our science teacher had failed to pronounce my name correctly for an entire year. ‘I’ve missed you so much. I’ve been super lonely without you.’

There were tears in her eyes, and I realized I had them in mine too.

‘Lonely like you wouldn’t believe,’ I whispered, almost to myself. Then I beamed up at her and grabbed her hand, dragging her back towards the escalator again. ‘Can you keep a secret?’



When we climbed to the seventh floor, I immediately knew something was different, unbalanced. I tried to concentrate on what I needed to do, to be alert, while I was also dealing with the warm joy fizzing through my body that Rainbow Attack, my best friend, was back in my life!

I took a deep, calming breath, and I heard Rainbow take one too.

I marched over to the door to my room, with Rainbow close behind, and I reached out to the brass handle in the shape of a fist. I froze, uncertain, but when Rainbow gave it a fist bump, exactly like we used to do together, it snapped me back into the moment and I knew I had to be brave for both of us. I did a fist bump too, then slowly opened the door, hoping that it wouldn’t squeak, and peered round it. Nothing looked out of the ordinary.

Rainbow tiptoed in my wake as I navigated the thorns that guarded my secret glade. That had once been *ours*.

‘I’d forgotten how beautiful this place was,’ she whispered. ‘I couldn’t hold it in my memory, because there’s nothing like it anywhere else. I began to think I’d made it all up.’

I tried to imagine what it had been like for Rainbow. I still had the oasis of this place to come to, Uncle Fluro, my family. She’d been swooped up

into a whole new public life, one she'd always dreaded and had hoped she could keep at bay.

Maybe it wasn't only me who had suffered.

'The thorns have grown more since you were last here,' I said as we made our way to the den, 'and there's also now –'

Rainbow walked right into a springy, sticky branch that pinged round, spraying her with gunky amber sap.

'– that!' I finished the sentence too late.

She stopped stock-still and threw her hands in the air, her rainbow-sequin Highlighter Kids jumpsuit all gooey.

I tried not to laugh, but it exploded out of me.

'Do you have any idea who I am?' she said in an exaggerated voice as she struck one of the Highlighter Kids poses that I'd seen on the billboards. Then she rolled some of the goo into a ball and flicked it at me.

I looked at famous Rainbow Attack completely at home with me, back in my den in the Museum of Trees, covered in goo and laughing her head off – with not a camera or press drone in sight. Any doubts I'd had about sharing my secret discovery with her vanished immediately. My best friend was back.

'Come on, we're nearly there – there's something here you won't believe ...'



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

‘Are you sure we’re in the right place?’ asked Rainbow for what felt like the hundredth time as I frantically moved branches aside and kicked leaves.

‘Of course I’m sure!’

I’d paced round my den umpteen times and ended up, every time, where I was positive I’d last seen the bubbling puddle of moss. Except it was no longer there, just the small flowers that had grown in its wake.

I’d tried to explain to Rainbow what had happened as it had raced towards me, how it had pulsed and made my freckles itch.

‘Look,’ I said. ‘These are the flowers!’

She seemed a bit doubtful and I was about to tell her off for not believing me when I heard a rustle.

‘Shh!’ I barked at her.

‘I didn’t say anything!’

‘SHHHH!’

I crept out of the glade of hawthorn and buckthorn trees, and located the sound, which seemed to be coming from the flowing branches of the weeping willow.

‘Someone’s here!’ I whispered.

Rainbow and I ducked low, and we made our way to the base of an old beech tree, where the roots were wizened and huge, all gnarled and knotted. I hoped we wouldn’t be seen as we lay down between its roots and peered out towards the willow.

There was a gloopy noise, and it had a rhythmic pattern. *Splodge. Sploosh. Click. Splodge. Sploosh.*

I realized the sound was of footsteps – footsteps that were heading towards us, though whoever was making them was still covered by the cascading branches of the willow tree. I could hear that Rainbow’s intakes of breath were shakier than usual and they matched my pounding heartbeat.

Splodge. Sploosh. Click. Splodge. Sploosh.

I tried to concentrate on deciphering the intruder’s sounds. There was a *splodge* that sounded like it could be a foot hitting the floor, then a sucking

splooosh as it rose back up. Then a *click* that I couldn't place.

Nearer and nearer.

Splodge. Splooosh. Click. Splodge. Splooosh.

Rainbow grabbed my hand and I closed my eyes tight.

Splodge. Splooosh. Click. Splodge. Splooosh.

The noise stopped.

Silence.

Maybe we'd imagined it? I raised my head and opened my eyes and stared at ... what? Who?!

Frozen to the spot right in front of me, with their head bowed so I couldn't see their face, was a stranger wearing a tight, bubbly, pulsating jumpsuit. A costume? But it was the best costume I'd ever seen. It was as if there were pieces of bark and moss embedded in the bits not covered by the jumpsuit – all in so many different hues of green that it was almost like a forest coral reef. Bizarrely, in their right hand – well, *glove*, with giant globules for fingers – was a bundle of wool in pastel pink and a pair of knitting needles, just like the sort that would have made Doris's hat.

Doris! Where were the SRS when you needed them?

'Show yourself!' I said to the intruder, putting on a much louder and braver voice than I felt, considering that I was lying on my tummy with my head popped up over a tree root.

'What are you doing?' Rainbow squeaked at me, then yelled at me to come back as some weird bit of my brain took over and I got up and marched towards the intruder.

I heard her gasp behind me – I guessed she must have seen the stranger's outfit too – and that was followed by the sound of her crawling over the tree roots towards us. She crouched by my leg, her hand clamped on my ankle.

'Show yourself!' I demanded again. 'Lift your head – slowly!'

My heart yammered so loudly in my chest I thought it might break free from my ribs.

Slowly, slowly, the intruder began to raise their head. Rainbow grasped my ankle so tightly I worried there were going to be fingernail-shaped crescents there for weeks.

Then the stranger began to speak, in a strangely accented voice that sounded as if their mouth had been filled with tart marmalade and dry cotton wool: 'Plentiful salutations from I, your loyal servant Opi, who comes across galaxies far to claim an audience with Your Highest of Highs,

our star-laden ultimate leader and glorious one destined to be adored by the masses, who is placed among the stars, Astrifer Nova.'

Then they raised their chin and at last we could see their whole face. Their two eyes bulged on either side of their head like giant, speckled wheel trims, and when they blinked, it was like automatic blinds sliding shut from top and bottom. They looked like a walking tree frog, but not a tiny one like in real life; this one was just a bit taller than me! Their enormous, grinning mouth reached round the full width of their face, which was itself the shape of a rugby ball.

They were definitely not wearing a costume.

They had to be an alien from beyond the shell!

They were the most brilliant thing I had ever seen!

And when they began to bow, Rainbow began to scream.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The creature was screaming back at Rainbow, who was still screaming at them – at least, I think it was. It was making a sort of burbling burst of high-pitched noise, and its eyes were wider than seemed possible; its wide grinning mouth had changed shape to a terrified *O*.

I slammed my hand over Rainbow's mouth as she scrabbled in the dirt to get up on her feet.

The tree-frog alien dropped its hands to the floor and ran, but not just on its legs; it used its arms to help it to leap over logs and hurtle over tree roots, still doing its high-pitched, bubbling scream.

Without thinking, I chased after the creature through the plants, my mind frantically trying to make sense of what was happening.

The creature was soon beyond me and had made its way to the oldest beech tree in the museum, which had a trunk as wide as Uncle Fluro's car. The frog creature, now climbing halfway up the tree, was using its globule gloves – no, its hands? feet? – to stick to the bark.

Rainbow dashed up behind me, still shrieking.

'Will you shut up!' I yelled. 'I can't think!'

My voice shocked both of them into silence and stillness; the frog creature – the Opi, it had said? – was upside down on the trunk, head dangling.

I walked over to the base of the tree, Rainbow following, and stared up at the creature frozen above us. The Opi's huge eyes on either side of its head blinked like a lizard's.

It's a fro–' started Rainbow.

'It's an *alien*,' I finished, and Rainbow gasped.

This snapped the creature back into life. 'I think you'll find that's a discriminatory turn of phrase, a much maligned mentioning – one that, if you would be so kind, you would desist from uttering,' said the Opi, hugging the tree as lime-green bubbles popped at one side of its mouth.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'We didn't mean to offend the Opi.'

'You're *sorry*?' screeched Rainbow at me.

At the shock of Rainbow's voice, the Opi took a step backwards, climbing further up the tree. 'This is not how the expectation was for this encounter that hath been foretold, forsooth, for which itself to unfold. And I am not *the* opi, I am *Opi*. It is my name, not my race or creed.'

Rainbow was now in full-on blabbering-nonsense-and-shaking mode. I patted her on the shoulder, and gently sat her down at the base of the tree, her back towards it, snug in the roots, never taking my eyes off the creature above me.

I walked slowly towards Opi. I took in the multitude of greens in their skin, how they were camouflaged here among the trees. I realized they definitely weren't wearing a costume, nor any type of clothes; the forest and moss were their body!

They were frightened, shaking as they spoke. 'We need your help but I didn't know there would be such shouting! You did bomb! Then you did shut us out! We did never do a hurt on you! Galaxies beyond need your help, your fortitude and assistance. We are dying, brave *Astrifer*. We're dying! And you are the one who will save us!'

Too much was going on in my head, and the only question I could think to ask was, 'How do you know my name?' at the same time as Rainbow asked the better question: 'You think *Astrifer* can save you?'

There was a snot-filled cry, and Opi leaped up the tree and hid in a leafy branch.

'We need to report this,' said Rainbow. But she looked unsure as she was saying it. 'They're dangerous!'

'Dangerous?' I scoffed. 'They're crying and hiding!'

I turned to Opi, trying to coax them to come down from their hiding place with a bar of dairy- and nut-free chocolate I'd had in my pocket, which I had to admit wasn't the most tempting offer.

'I am not hiding,' said a muffled voice from the tree. 'I am currently assessing the situation, taking notes and measurements, being of a scientific persuasion.'

'And what is your assessment?' I asked.

'That I want to go home forthwith!' Opi wailed.

I turned to Rainbow. 'Are you telling me you're scared of *that*?' I asked, pointing up into the tree.

Rainbow was less certain. She mouthed, '*Forthwith*,' at me and shrugged.

‘If you just come down, then maybe we can help you to get home?’ I called up into the tree.

‘Do you know where it comes from?’ asked Rainbow, hugging my arm. ‘Is it from one of the zoos?’

‘There’s a *lot* I need to get you up to speed with,’ I told Rainbow as a mournful voice sang out of the tree: ‘*I can’t go home!*’

‘I’m really sorry,’ I said, ‘but we’re both a bit confused and I don’t think I’m understanding you at all well. Do you think you could maybe come down and talk to us? I’ve got this chocolate. Admittedly it doesn’t taste much like actual chocolate, but it’s the best I’ve got, and it’s still very nice. I’d love to share it with you.’

‘The prophecy is true!’ The frog alien – no, *Opi*, sorry – hurtled down the tree head first and sprang on to the ground, holding its knitting aloft in triumph. ‘Astrifer Nova fulfils her destiny. She will be the one who shares!’



‘Run this past me again,’ said Rainbow, wiping the not-quite-chocolate from her mouth. She’d done surprisingly well as I filled her in about space and stars and aliens, though I didn’t call them that in front of *Opi*. Especially considering that her dad was now in charge of the same Neon Government that had caused everything.

‘But that was two hundred years ago, way before his time,’ she’d said when I told her. ‘If he knew something like that, he’d do something about it! Of course he would.’

I didn’t agree, remembering how he’d dragged her from our house. But maybe she was right: just because he was awful to me, it didn’t mean he was responsible for the way everyone thought. That attitude had developed over centuries.

I snapped out of my thoughts as Rainbow said to *Opi* again, ‘You think *Astrifer* is your hero?’

‘I don’t know why that’s the only bit you’re having a hard time accepting,’ I said, which only made her try not to giggle.

The three of us were sitting together at the base of the beech tree, sharing the fake chocolate, and Rainbow and I were trying to take in everything that *Opi* had told us. It became increasingly hard to be wary of them as their knitting needles clacked away while they spoke and I held the wool around

my hands for them. They seemed to be making a long thin bit of material; I wasn't sure what it was but it felt rude to ask. And probably not the most important thing to focus on right now.

Opi told us how the galaxies beyond, including their home planet, desperately needed Earth's help. Since the Earth had closed itself off two hundred years ago, the other planets had been slowly dying – and Earth, too, had been running out of energy. Then, eleven years ago, the Neon Government had stolen vital energy sources from the heart of Opiuchus, Opi's planet, and retreated behind the Earth's shell. It was how the Neon Government could keep this planet blazing. Slugger was right, but it was worse than even he could have imagined: not only were we stealing technology, our theft was destroying other planets. Opi's planet's final act of hope had been to sneak some special material on to the Earth ship that had stolen their energy source. It would mark the one who could save them all.

'The spores,' I whispered to myself.

'And you think that's Astrifer?' asked Rainbow.

'We knows it. Some planets are starving, hungry tums shrivelling, others overheating – oh, the hot, the hot! My planet, Opiuchus, the thirteenth –' But Opi was so upset they could barely talk, and we had to tease out from them that their planet, with all their family still on it, was slowly dehydrating, the ground becoming barren, the liveable areas slowly shrinking, until soon there would be nothing left.

It took a lot of questions to get us that far, because Opi's language was very confusing and a fine example of why-use-one-word-when-seven-billion-would-do.

'The Neon Government knows what they're causing and they still is choosing to doing!' Opi shuddered, and their teeth clattered together.

'But that doesn't mean everyone!' said Rainbow frantically. 'My dad definitely doesn't know!'

'OK,' I said gently, not completely convinced, 'but let Opi speak.' I smiled at them, encouraging them to go on.

'There was great elation when interplanetary travel began with Earth. The creation of friendships, sharing of knowledge and resources. But it was a tale as old as time, on both our planets and yours, that there will always be those who seek for the bad, align themselves with outrage and wrath, do not want to share, look for ways to take power and control. That is what the

Neon Government does. Ours is not the first planet it has stolen from, the ultimate consequence of which is destruction. And you destroyed some of your own with a boom bomb almighty!’

‘Don’t you say that,’ said Rainbow, standing up suddenly. ‘That’s my dad you’re talking about! A *bomb*? Astrifer, are you listening to this?’

‘Not your dad, necessarily!’ I said soothingly. ‘Your dad wasn’t in charge eleven years ago, and this began *two hundred* years ago. Didn’t it, Opi? Your dad couldn’t have had anything to do with it, Rainbow!’

‘We’re going to take the word of some jumped-up tree frog that everything we believed is wrong?’ cried Rainbow.

‘Not just them,’ I said, thinking of the SRS.

‘You’re right,’ said Opi, and they pressed their fingertips into the earth. ‘Hark! The mycelium will tell you.’

‘What?’ asked Rainbow, absolutely baffled.

‘They’re the roots of mushrooms, sort of,’ I said, smiling at Opi. It was something I had read in Uncle Fluro’s books. ‘The roots – *mycelia* – have huge networks of underground threads that link into tree roots and connect everything together. Trees can tell each other when they’re thirsty in times of drought and send water to each other.’

‘Just like our planets need to do,’ Opi said with a sigh. ‘Once, when we were all connected, we were in balance – you broke that with your shells and wotnots.’

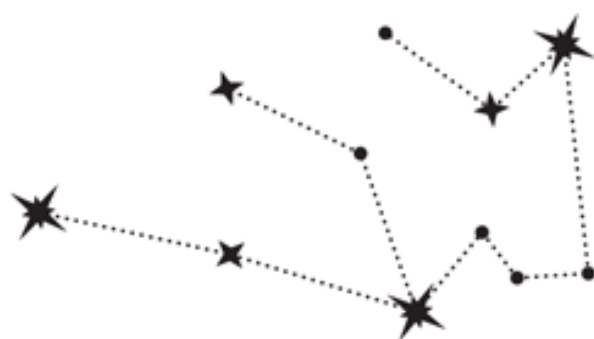
‘And the networks don’t just transfer water,’ I continued, ‘but nitrogen and carbon, and all the other minerals that things need to survive.’

‘And data,’ said Opi. ‘Otherwise known as stories, history, tales. Truth. Listen!’

We both stared at Opi as they dug in the soil, scrabbling until they found a fine fibre. They looked around and sighed. Then Opi slid the needles out of their knitting.

‘Here, hold these as conductors,’ they said, holding out a needle to each of us, making sure it touched the tiny organic thread in the soil.

Rainbow looked at me uncertainly, then we both took a needle and my brain exploded into light.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Suddenly images burst into my brain, as if I was watching a film inside my head. But it wasn't like the hazy visions from before; there wasn't just stuff to see – I could smell, hear, *feel*. It was like I was *actually there*, two hundred years ago. I was in Central Square, outside Highlighter HQ. There was a big hubbub of people, all with placards, all shouting, 'No shell! No way! We must stay together!'

I could wander around, get up close and see things, but not affect anything. I was witnessing shared memories.

I looked around. There was no rioting. Yes, people were shouting, but it was peaceful; they were helping each other. And there weren't just people. Among the crowd were beings like Opi, and lots of others that I presumed came from other planets. Some were huge and feathered like giant eagles; others were slender and willowy, covered head to toe in crystals. They stood side by side with people like us. And people like me, and like those in the sock factory. Everyone was getting on, with children of different species playing in the fountain together. I looked up beyond the skyscrapers – oh my days! Light! *Natural* light. The real sky was a pale, light blue, and wisps of clouds rolled across it. I could feel a breeze!

I wished it was night-time. I wished I was seeing the stars.

Then the scene jumped and it was dark. I was in a basement with no natural light, but it was torch-lit. No, not a torch ... Headlights from a vehicle, a robotic remote-controlled arm on tank tyres that rolled towards a metal switch on a crate-sized box in the corner of the dark basement. I moved with it and saw slabs of explosives, a liquid detonator in the hourglass at its centre.

A tinny voice came out of a speaker on the robot: 'Mission command, we are in position. Awaiting authorization to detonate.'

A reply came from the same speaker: '*This is General Highlighter of the Neon Government. Permission granted in three, two, one.*'

An ear-splitting explosion erupted, and everything flashed white. There was immediate silence for a few seconds, then the screaming above began.

Slowly the image faded and I was back in the Museum of Trees.

‘And so that is why we sent out the seeker, eleven years ago, to find the Chosen One who would recover, protect, rescue, deliver us,’ said Opi as they took the knitting needles out of our hands and we blinked ourselves back into the present. ‘Forsooth, not just us, also those of Earth who live in fear of shadows and lies.’

‘You were telling the truth,’ whispered Rainbow in horror. ‘The Neon Government planted a bomb.’

Opi nodded at Rainbow and gave her a sad smile. ‘Your High-on-Highs blamed it on *aliens* and delivered us to banishment including those of your variety who did seek to help or protest, and then they erected the shell. Those who had knowledge of the great unspeakable lie tried to yell the honesty to the world! They were made to be silenced, oftentimes with killings. And the records of time before of yore, they were slip-slap-sealed up tight. As your planet became richer and of greater and greater magnitude with the more it stole, for the stealing was before the shell time and after shell time, even in the now! The easier it was for them to slink and bribe their way into a newfangled untruth truth, change history. The lie became the reality.’

‘The arrow of spores!’ I said. ‘Eleven years ago. That was you? You sent it?’

‘Not me, I, but *us* – we, yes,’ replied Opi, nodding seriously. ‘We needed to find a way to rescue our planet. To make you have the utmost belief! I was but a mere tadpole then. They used some of my DNA to create the spores. See, Astrifer, we are both of us entwined, inextricably linked, with our destinies to fulfil!’

Opi threw their arms into the air as if they were expecting a fanfare – but there was none. Suddenly their expression changed to one of horror and I noticed their globuley toes rooting in the earth.

‘What is it?’ I asked.

‘Oh, woe betide us! It is far worse than we could have ever imagined! It is not only our great planets beyond on a path of doom but yours too. The mycelium network is crying out in great pain – feel it!’

Opi shoved their knitting needles into our hands and a jolt shuddered through me. I began to cough, struggling to catch my breath. Opi gently slid the needle out of my hand as they realized the power of our planet’s pain was too much for my lungs to take.

‘Have you noticed your breathing apparatus wearing down, our leader and great warrior, O Astrifer?’

I could only nod in response; if I spoke, I’d cough again.

‘Your Earth planet is perilously close to extinction – not your generation if you have luck but the next tadpoles will be all out of fortune! All this energy blurring into the false sky, no escape – the shell keeping all your cough juice lurking. It’s not just our planets you need to save ... It’s your own too!’

I started to shake with terror and Rainbow put her arm round my shoulders.

‘Why wait until now?’ asked Rainbow quietly, her trembling voice full of fear. ‘Why didn’t you send someone as soon as the arrow found her?’

‘Maybe we would have, if we had knownst your imminent peril. But, without that knowing, two occurrences needed to coincide. Astrifer needed the time to grow and gather people around her who believed the truth, stepping into her allocation at the age of eleven as leader. And we needed me, Opi, to develop and grow, modified to atomize to dust and reform, to be able to be so minusculed that I could flutter-flatter through the shell undetected.’

‘You were the mossy puddle!’ I shouted. I was so excited to make the connection that, even though we were all doom and gloom, my hand shot up for a high five.

‘It was I,’ said Opi with a nod of their head.

‘Don’t leave her hanging,’ said Rainbow, completely used to my inappropriate timing and pointing to my still-raised hand. ‘That’s really rude. Here. On our, erm, planet.’

‘Forgive me, Your Grace!’ said Opi, and flicked out their extraordinarily long tongue, which slapped into the middle of my hand with an echoey *plop* sound, then immediately retracted back into their mouth.

‘Ewww!’ exclaimed Rainbow. ‘Sorry, backtracking to something you said a few times before both that mistimed grossness and our new terrifying knowledge of our planets’ impending doom, could we take a moment to linger on a point that I’m *really* struggling to understand? Did you say *Astrifer* was a leader? And that she knew about this already?’

‘Yes, she has been gathering those around her as she disseminated truth from lies and found proof to reveal. Her eleventh birthday brought her high

acclaim. That was when the stars aligned between her and I for the rescue mission.'

I took a puff of my inhaler. 'Erm, about that, Opi ...'

'Sock factory,' coughed Rainbow.

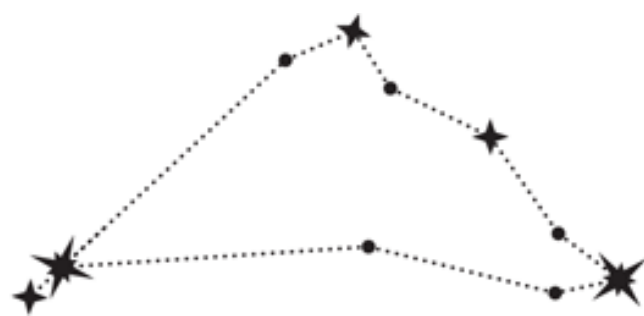
Opi looked around. 'Where are your followers, Astrifer, your army? I thought you would have used an incredibly awesome summoning device by this hour in the day to call them to your side. What is your plan? Behold your wonder!'

Rainbow and I both looked around too, Opi's certainty making us believe a sudden stream of people might suddenly come flooding through the door.

No one came. Of course they didn't.

Opi waited, checking an imaginary watch on their wrist. They stared at me. Rainbow and I grew increasingly more uncomfortable.

Finally Opi said in a very small voice, 'There is no one coming, is there?'



CHAPTER TWENTY

‘You’re a lot easier to understand now, at least,’ said Rainbow to Opi as we went up in the elevator to my apartment.

We’d tried banging on the door to the SRS but no one had answered, and when I tried ping-ponging Uncle Fluro on my wrist, it wouldn’t connect. We were all hungry and didn’t know what else to do, or where else to go. We had bundled Opi up in Rainbow’s beanie hat and camel-coloured anorak to disguise their incredibly tree-frog-like body that one hundred per cent definitely wasn’t from this planet.

Opi wailed, clutching their head in their hands. ‘I have made such an epic twit of myself in front of our hero. How will you ever forgive me? I spoke that way because extensive research told us that is the way to communicate with the powerful one on Earth. I don’t know how it went so wrong ...’

‘Shhh,’ said Rainbow, frantically looking at the apartment doors as we exited the elevator. ‘Someone will hear you and come out!’

I couldn’t help but feel bad about not being what Opi had expected.

‘They spoke sort of like that in Shakespeare’s time,’ I said, trying to make them feel better, but knowing that unless I pulled an army out of thin air, nothing was really going to help.

I used my palm print to open the front door, and Opi stopped crying and looked impressed.

They muttered to themselves, ‘Magic, she is.’

‘If you think *that’s* magic, wait until you see this,’ said Rainbow, going over to the fridge in the kitchen once we got inside. She pulled out a canister of batter. ‘Do you have doughnuts on your planet?’



Opi lay slumped on the couch.

‘Sugar coma,’ Rainbow and I said at the same time.

Rainbow stared at Opi, who was snoring and had yellow bubbles popping out of their nose. ‘You definitely think that what they’re saying is true?’

‘You don’t?’ I asked, feeling my breath tighten in my chest. I was sure that all the horror they’d told us *had* happened, and would happen *again* if we didn’t do something about it.

‘No, I do,’ she replied. ‘I just really wanted you to say it wasn’t. We can’t go out again with Opi looking like that, though. They’ll be spotted immediately.’

‘Wearing beige only attracts more attention,’ I agreed, looking at her sparkling sequinned jumpsuit and my neon-blue leggings and silver T-shirt.

I went to Dad’s basket of fabric on the living-room floor that he used to make costumes for his kids at school and started to rifle through it. Everything was luminous and stretchy and glittered or sequinned or both. Perfect.

I couldn’t help but think, though, that nature was muted and much less flashy – and so much more beautiful for it. I longed to wear pastel colours myself, but my freckles already made me stand out and I didn’t need any more help with that.

‘Think we can adjust something from here to disguise Opi?’ I asked, holding up a ripped sequinned pink-and-gold jumpsuit.

‘Not if you do it,’ said Rainbow. ‘It’ll be more bloodstained than gold if *you* try. Pass me that needle.’



An hour later, we gently woke Opi and got them to sit up with the promise of more doughnuts, then helped them into their jumpsuit. It was a bit lumpy over their mossy and twiggy bits, but it did the trick.

‘Very wowing,’ said Rainbow as she finished sewing the jewelled headpiece together round Opi’s head so that it was more like a balaclava.

Rainbow pinged up a mirror, and Opi shrieked in delight when they saw themselves.

‘I’ve also made a sort-of visor, so that you can see out,’ she told Opi, ‘but no one can see your eyes.’

‘And she’s left little gaps open, so that your fingers can still do their sticky thing,’ I added.

‘And we made you a bag for your knitting!’ finished Rainbow as I draped it round their shoulder.

‘This is amazing! Scintillating! Bubbletastic! I wish my family could see me like this,’ said Opi.

‘Your parents? Do you have any siblings?’ Rainbow asked.

‘Not a particular mam and dad like humans sometimes do. We are brought up communally. I’ve got over one thousand siblings,’ they said proudly.

‘Wow, I’ve only got one brother, and that’s bad enough,’ I said.

‘Did someone mention me?’ said Blaze as he barged through the door and wheeled his electro-bike towards the balcony. He stopped the second he saw that I wasn’t alone. ‘What the spark is going on? What the heck are you doing here, Rainbow? Astrifer, are you OK with this? And who’s your very shiny friend?’

‘Nobody,’ I said at the same time that Opi said, ‘That is many questions. The answers in order are: a whole heap of stuff it will take hours we don’t have to explain; Rainbow and Astrifer are now friends once more; yes, Astrifer is OK with this; and I am Opi. I take it you are the unchosen twin?’

Blaze stared for a drawn-out moment, then carried on wheeling his bike. ‘Nice to see you’re finally hanging out with people as weird as you are, Azzy. Though I’m really not sure one of them should be Rainbow.’

Rainbow looked crestfallen.

‘Astrifer is not weird!’ shouted Opi, thrusting their bag of knitting in the air. ‘She’s the saviour of stars and galaxies!’

‘Of stars and galaxies? What? Uh, sure, of course she is,’ said Blaze.

‘You mock her? You mock me, Opi?’ shouted Opi, and before we could stop them, they sprang from their back legs and landed with a splat directly in front of Blaze.

‘Whoa, even I can’t jump that far!’ Blaze exclaimed, stumbling back in shock. ‘Who did you say you were? Are you on a team?’

Rainbow and I exchanged nervous glances, then we both dashed towards Opi, trying to get to them before they could speak again.

‘Team? Team Universe!’ Opi said, arms outstretched.

Blaze shrugged. ‘Not heard of that one. International? On loan here?’

‘You should join us. We are just a band of three – but once Astrifer gains her followers, we will save the galaxy together!’

‘Riiiiight, yes. Of course you will.’ Blaze grinned. ‘Not got a clue what you’re banging on about, but nice to meet you, Opi. I’ll just ...’

Blaze went to push past them, but Opi reached into one of Mam's plant pots nearby, a present from me and Uncle Fluro, and yanked the whole plant out. Then, quick as a flash, Opi attached a knitting needle to the roots and shoved the entire thing into bewildered Blaze's hands.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

‘But wouldn’t that be going too far, stealing his birthday present?’ asked Rainbow, propping the slumped and dazed Blaze upright as Opi took back the plant from him.

‘It’s not like he wouldn’t do the same to me if he got the chance,’ I replied with a shrug. I grabbed the handlebars of the electro-bike and wheeled it towards the door. ‘We can’t be sure whether Blaze will dob us in. Opi has just told him *everything*.’

Opi had the decency to look a bit guilty. ‘I thought he could join us!’

‘We have to be *really* careful about who we choose to tell,’ said Rainbow.

Opi considered it for a moment, then nodded in agreement.

‘We can’t stay here,’ I continued. ‘We need to get Opi to the SRS. If they’re still not there, we’ll wait for them. I don’t want to risk going to the sock factory; it’s too far away and we could be spotted. Uncle Fluro, Doris and Slugger will know how best to help.’

Blaze was already starting to come round. He was shaking his head and trying to stand up.

‘We don’t have any more time!’ I exclaimed. ‘Hurry!’

We ran out of the apartment, me pushing the electro-bike, and zipped downstairs in the elevator, hoping we could get a head start on Blaze if he followed us – which was likely, now that I had his electro-bike. I tried not to imagine how he would retaliate. Opi tried to keep their headaddress from wobbling off and had to be dragged away from every single mirror we passed.

Outside, there was a bit of a muddle as I realized my legs weren’t long enough for me to climb on to the bike – never mind pedal it – so Rainbow took over, and I climbed on the pegs on the back wheels, while Opi balanced on the handlebars, using their fingers and toes to stick themselves on.

Rainbow was about to push off when we heard Blaze burst out of the front doors of our building.

‘Oi! You lot! Stop! Thieves! ALIEN!’ he shouted, then frantically looked around to make sure no adult had heard him yelling the world’s biggest swear.

‘Go now!’ I yelled at Rainbow.

She stepped on the pedals and we shot off along the street. Opi cheered and gurgled in delight as we zoomed off, and they desperately tried to keep their headdress on in the wind. Some of the crystals pinged off and it felt like I was under attack as they hit me in the face at top speed.

I looked back at Blaze who was running after us, his cheeks the same colour as his hair, until he finally gave up and slowed to a trot as street traffic beeped and overtook him. I couldn’t resist pulling a mega-smug face and giving him a wave.



I banged on the door to SRS headquarters, and finally an alarmed-looking Bolt let us in.

‘Emergency!’ I yelled. ‘The roof of my den on floor seven has completely collapsed!’

‘Are you hurt?’

‘No,’ I said, feeling awful that I was lying to someone who obviously cared about me. ‘But someone might be – you need to go check!’

‘On it!’ Bolt yelled, and dashed out of the door – which I swiftly locked behind him.

‘Nice work,’ said Rainbow in surprised admiration.

Opi glowed, as if it was finally proof that I was the chosen one. They took their headdress off and carefully placed it on one of the benches, then gave their face a good lick-clean all over with their tongue. It was hard to watch *and* hard to look away.

At the ‘W’ shelf, I didn’t get as far as humming the advert jingle because the tablet kept rejecting my fingerprint and buzzing hideously at me.

‘This is some serious-grade tech for a hideout for geeks and nerds,’ said Rainbow in awe. ‘What have they got hidden here?’

I was about to tell her off and say that must make me a geek and a nerd too, but I realized she was merely stating a fact, not being mean. They – we – *were* geeks and nerds! I’d forgotten what it was like having someone like

Rainbow around: not having to fight back or second-guess everything that was said.

‘Just wait till I show you! That’s if I can ever get in ...’ I tried the scanner once more. It blared at me again, and, admitting defeat, I resorted to simply knocking on the ‘W’ on the shelf.

Nothing. I knocked again.

Opi stepped up and began to knock with pauses in between, like an ever-lengthening Morse code.

‘What are you doing?’ asked Rainbow.

‘The Fibonacci sequence,’ I replied in awe as Opi kept on going. ‘It’s found in nature everywhere.’

‘And exactly the sort of thing that only geeks and nerds would know about,’ said Rainbow, smiling at me as the secret door slid open in front of us.



‘How come you didn’t let me in?’ I asked Doris and Slugger, who were in the Star Remembrance Society’s inner room.

‘We were scared! Fluro hasn’t shown up, even though he said he would be here. And we could see on the camera a person who very much looks like a Highlighter Kid, one whose dad is the president of the Neon Government! We thought you were being held hostage!’ said Doris as she focused on Rainbow in disgust.

‘And you didn’t think to *help* me?’ I said.

Slugger shrugged and continued to stare at Rainbow. ‘Not until we heard the code.’ Then his eyes fell on Opi and, despite everything he’d taught me, his jaw literally dropped and his eyes bulged almost as much as Opi’s.

‘Erm, Doris ...’

‘I’m not being held hostage,’ I said. ‘This is my best friend, Rainbow. And this is ... Well, Slugger, close your mouth – and, Doris, I think you might need to sit down.’



It took far too long to tell them everything. Slugger kept muttering, ‘I was right! An alien! Sorry, Opi!’ on a stuck loop, and Opi gave permission to Doris to examine their eyes and sticky fingers, and her oohing and aahing

was cringey. It would have been quicker to bung Opi's knitting needles in their hands, but they both wouldn't stay still long enough and kept shrugging me off when I tried.

The bit when I yelled 'EARTH IS DOOMED!' *finally* got their attention.

When we finished telling them everything we'd learned, Slugger leaped up.

'I *knew* it wasn't a conspiracy theory! The Neon Government planted a bomb? And you have proof?'

Opi nodded and held up their knitting needles.

'I can't believe this! I mean, I can – you're here in front of me!' said Doris, and Opi gave her hand a squeeze. 'It's just that when something you know, that you believe in every fibre of your being, is suddenly there ... We knew that *something* had happened, but we didn't know that something was *you*! Opi, you are magnificent. We will do everything within our power to save your family, your planet and everyone out there. We will ensure that the truth is told. I can promise you that.'

Opi gave a little bow.

'And we can trust you?' Slugger said to Rainbow. He had his raised-eyebrow sceptical look.

'You can! I want to help Opi too! I trust everything they've told us,' she said. 'I promise my dad knew nothing about this either. If he did –'

I shook my head at her to stop – just getting Slugger to believe in her was enough for now. And I didn't have the confidence in President Attack that Rainbow had.

'Opi's connection to the mycelia – that's the kind of information we can get out there, to finally make people believe!' Doris said to Slugger in a quiet voice, though her eyes were wide and bright with excitement. 'But where *is* Fluro?'

'Who knows?' said Slugger. 'He'll have got caught up in something seed-related. No doubt someone grabbed him about something untoward growing in their neon flower beds. Remember the last time he was late, because the zoo needed advice on making hologrammatic conifers that looked real?'

'When they could have simply used real ones,' Doris replied with a sigh.

'Do you need to go?' I asked Rainbow as I spotted her looking at her wrist.

‘No, it’s just weird that my dad hasn’t messaged me to find out where I am. I should be at the academy and he’ll have been alerted that I’m not there.’

We were interrupted by Doris asking Opi, ‘What is that, love?’

Opi was fondly sticking their stretched-out, globby finger on to a speck on the thirteenth panel in the ceiling.

‘Home,’ said Opi, and promptly burst into tears.

Rainbow spotted a brightly coloured box on a bench and brought Opi a doughnut that they accepted with a sobbing thank you.

‘Opi, how long have we got?’ asked Slugger quietly, crouching in front of Opi to make his size less intimidating.

‘I thought we had lots longer, but maybe the clock is ticking faster for your planet too! I can feel it gaining pace; the water is drying out, lakes, soon ...’ Opi dropped their head and took a big breath, then raised it again and looked at Slugger. ‘Two Earth days,’ said Opi. ‘Then everything I know and love will be –’

‘That soon? *Really?* How can you tell?’ I asked.

Rainbow nudged me. I think she thought it sounded a bit mean when they were obviously distraught, but facts helped my head when my feelings were all big and messy.

Opi made a sort of shrivelled noise and stroked their cheek. Dust floated down from it and one of the twiggy bits fractured. They were dehydrating in front of us, just like their planet, and how everyone on it must be doing back home. And we all knew what that meant.

Suddenly there was a pounding at the main SRS door and Opi squealed.

Everyone froze in position, then Doris shouted, ‘Someone’s there!’

I moved towards the screen where Doris could see them on the camera, but before I could take a look, she yelled, ‘Operation Biscuit! Slugger, it’s the authorities! We can’t ignore a knock like that. We knew that this day could come. We need to destroy the evidence!’

There was a paused moment of shock, then Slugger sprang into action and started heaving at the orrery in the centre of the room. Doris opened a cupboard and handed us a whole kit of saws and axes and shovels. We joined Slugger, breaking down the orrery into unrecognizable chunks of wood as Doris yanked charts off the wall and dumped them into a metal bin.

‘No,’ I softly cried as she struck a match.

‘Better to lose this than each other,’ she said, and I could see the tears that rolled down her face.

Slugger flipped a switch on the wall and the thirteen panels above self-destructed with a flash of light. When I was able to look back, they were all blank.

‘That will have to be enough, and we’ll just have to hope they don’t find this space,’ said Doris. ‘Back into the main room – hurry!’

We ran through the gap in the secret panel and shut it behind us, then sat around trying to look as boring as possible with cups of tea and biscuits in our shaking hands as the thudding continued on the door.

With a last look back at us, Doris went to answer it.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Blaze burst through the door, dripping with sweat. 'I knew you'd come here! Where's my electro-bike, you thieving –!'

He stopped when Slugger marched over to him, hook raised threateningly. 'You need a permit to come in here!'

'It's OK!' I said. 'Leave him be.' I wished I'd looked at the camera before ... 'He's not with the Neon Government.'

'Where's the rest of you?' asked Doris, peering round the doorframe.

'He's not with anyone – he's my twin,' I explained.

'Really?' said Slugger. 'You two look nothing alike.'

'What are you doing here?' I hissed at Blaze, thinking of the destruction we'd just carried out because of him.

'You lot nicked my bike! What did you think I'd do? Let you get away with it? And that ... that *thing* filled my head with stuff that's terrifying!' He pointed at Opi, and then I watched the fight fall out of him. 'Azzzy, what they showed me. It can't possibly be real, can it? The bomb, the shell, all those deaths. Galaxies beyond! And their planet ... and ours.'

'Yes,' I said, and in that moment I realized I had finally accepted that all of it was true. 'You know our twin-dar? Where we just *know*? And we can't explain it but it's always right? That's what I have with Opi.' They sidled over to us. 'Whatever happened, when my face got freckled, linked them to me. The things I can feel in them – it's exactly like I feel with you. And when I need help, whatever it is ...'

'I always come running,' said Blaze. He looked Opi up and down. 'I guess that kind of makes you my twin as well? Need a big brother to look out for you?'

I had never felt more proud of Blaze as he held his hand out to Opi for a high five. Opi looked smugly at me and Rainbow, and before we could yell at them to stop, they'd splatted Blaze's hand with their tongue.

'Gross,' Blaze said, and wiped his hand on his shorts. 'You need to sort that out, mate!'

I tried not to laugh, but failed. Slowly, everyone joined in, and the strain in the room transformed into hysterical giggles.

When we'd finally all calmed down and Doris yelled that she'd pulled a rib and we really needed to stop, the tension hung over us once more.

Blaze was the first one to speak. 'We need a plan, and I'm no good at those. Coach always comes up with them and I just carry them out.' He looked at us in turn. 'Come on, one of you!'

I stared at him. 'Wait ... so you believe us?' I asked. 'But you never listen to anything I say, never mind want to do something about it. How come you'll listen to an *alien*? Sorry, Opi, no offence.'

'None taken,' said Opi with a haughty look that made me think they had felt a bit offended.

Blaze turned to me. 'Because, Azzy, in the nicest possible way, I nearly always want to fall asleep when you're talking. It's always so dull, like about fermenting yoghurt or sourdough starters or something about maps that I can't understand.'

I should have been cross at him, but actually I was pretty impressed that he'd taken in that much.

'And, sis,' Blaze went on, 'Opi has a much better way of telling stories. That was *real*. Surely if other people can see that, they'll believe it?'

I stared at him as my brain whirled. 'I think ... maybe that's the plan! Slugger, didn't you say you could hack into the Neon Government's systems?'

'Yes,' he said, grinning as he moved towards a shelf. He clicked a switch hidden by a pot of nasturtium seeds and the wall flipped back to reveal multiple screens and an epic keyboard with flashing lights and symbols I didn't recognize. 'A small hobby of mine. Make sure you don't tell your dad,' he said, glancing worriedly at Rainbow. 'Sure we can trust her?' he added, glancing at me.

I nodded, and Rainbow said, 'I'll *show* you that you can trust me. Top of my class in algorithms and bioframe mech before I had to leave it all behind for posing and cheerleading.' She rolled up her sleeves, pulled up a chair and sat down. Then she yanked another one over and patted it for Slugger to sit. 'Show me your in, and I'll follow. I'll build a wall behind us so that no one can track us down.'

Slugger stared at her for a moment, weighing her up, then nodded and began to type. 'You're in!'

Rainbow started to type at super speed, her fingers zooming over the keyboard, then huffed and pressed something on her wrist, doing away with the board entirely as hologram keypads appeared from nowhere and she started tapping them instead.

‘Much faster this way. You’re seriously out of date on tech, Slugger. Keep up!’

Slugger looked on with wonder and delight, then sat down next to her. ‘Can you adapt it for —’

‘One hand? Sure – on it,’ said Rainbow, and Slugger’s hologrammatic keypad morphed into a different set-up.

‘What are we going to do?’ asked Blaze.

‘Keep up, this was your idea,’ Doris said, beaming at him.

‘It was?’

‘Yes!’ I said. ‘We tell Opi’s story, *their* way. If you believe it,’ I said to Blaze, ‘well, in the nicest possible way, anyone will! So we transmit it directly on to all the hoardings and billboards, the side of street taxis, LED walls, even the big screens in the square outside Neon Government HQ. We beam it to every advertising source around the world!’ My voice wavered, and I added, ‘Though I don’t know if it’s actually possible.’

‘Course it is,’ said Rainbow, her hands feverishly flying over the hologrammatic keys. ‘With us on your team, it’s definitely possible.’

My team, I repeated in my head.

‘And then maybe we can save our planets!’ yelled Opi.

They grinned and held out their palm up close to Blaze’s mouth – to compensate for his short tongue – for their version of a high five.

‘That must never happen again,’ Blaze told Opi as he recalled the previous ‘high five’ and wiped his hand on his basketball shorts. I couldn’t help laughing.

Doris clapped her hands in delight. ‘You and Rainbow, and Opi, you can all join us in the Star Remembrance Society!’

‘No offence,’ said Blaze, picking up a biscuit, ‘but that name doesn’t exactly fill me with hope. And I’m not sure that you lot alone can save an entire galaxy full of planets, including ours, any time soon.’

Doris marched across to us and batted the biscuit out of Blaze’s hand.

‘Oi!’ she snapped at him. ‘I am sorely sick of being underestimated.’

‘And I have unswerving faith that, with you in charge, nothing is impossible,’ said Opi, looking at me with their massive eyes.

My stomach did a flip. I wasn't who they thought I was.

Doris stared at Blaze, her hands on her hips.

'Sorry,' said Blaze, his hands up. 'I didn't mean to cause offence.'

'No one ever does,' said Doris as the door opened and everyone screamed as Bolt and Flash walked in.

'That's one helluva reception, folks. You were mistaken, Astrifer. No catastrophe up there – just one Flash watering petunias. Who's this?'

They both looked at Opi, who I realized too late hadn't put their headdress disguise back on. Opi wasn't facing them, but their eyes swivelled towards Flash and Bolt, which really didn't help. And there were Slugger and Rainbow very obviously hacking into the Neon Government mainframe as a red warning flashed up on one of the screens and Rainbow waved her hand to dismiss it.

'I knew it!' Flash said to Bolt, completely unperturbed. 'I told you they were up to something, sneaking in and out of that room that they think they're so clever at hiding.'

'What you on about?' said Doris in a bad attempt at feigning incredulity.

'I think it's time we showed them,' said Flash, his streak of blonde hair glittering in the light.

Bolt nodded; his tight black curls didn't flash, but his wrist did as he held it up to the UV light they used for propagating seeds and a string of stars appeared around his wrist.

'How else do you think tides work?' Flash continued. 'There had to be a greater substance out there, a gravitational pull. We deduced there were other orbs beyond. A bit of hacking – nice new tech, by the way, Slugger – and it turns out we were right.' Flash pulled down his shirt at his neck and under the UV light appeared a tattoo of the moon.

Questions gushed out of us, unfinished as we bumbled to find the right words to fit our thoughts:

'How did you ...?'

'What the ...?'

'Have we ...?'

'You knew too ...?'

Slugger laughed. 'I *knew* other people knew too! I just didn't think they would be under the same bloomin' roof as us!' Keeping his eyes firmly on the screens in front of him, Slugger chuckled again and added, 'Slacker Bolt – who would have thought it?'

‘Who knew, eh, Substandard Slugger?’ Bolt retorted evenly.

There was a moment of pure ice and I wondered when they were going to start to actually fist-fight, before both of them burst out laughing and I could breathe out again.

Flash turned to Opi. ‘There are lots of us out there who believe,’ he said. His hand shook as he held it out to Opi. ‘It is a true pleasure and honour to meet you.’

Flash and Bolt jumped back as we all screamed ‘*No!*’ at Flash, trying to get his hand out of the way in time.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Five hours had passed. It was now afternoon and Fluro still wasn't here. Five hours was a big chunk of the two days that Opi said we had left. Time was counting down and I had to believe that we weren't wasting it.

I tried to put my growing concern for him to the back of my mind. I was doing my best to keep order in the room as we devised and built a system to transmit Opi's story to the entire planet. We were trying to find a way to work with Opi and the mycelia to relay the story via a digital model. It had to be as convincing as when Opi projected the story directly into a person via their knitting needles.

'It has to come straight from the heart,' said Doris, who was relishing her role as story director. 'And it has to start with neon. It can't begin with softer, natural tones. That would be terrifying. We have to give people what they expect. Lead them in gently before we hit them with the facts.'

Blaze stood next to me. 'Do you think this will work?'

'Of course!' I said – more optimistically than I felt. 'It has to, right?'

I looked over at Opi, who was gently showing Flash and Bolt how to manipulate the knitting needles in a heap of soil that Blaze had wheelbarrowed in from one of the other rooms – while also having a simultaneous conversation with them about biofuel and giving them tips on how to get more out of their composting process to increase nutrient values. Opi was freely giving away precious knowledge to a bunch of strangers that they now trusted with their life. That generosity and bravery in the face of what they knew was happening to their planet had to be reciprocated.

This had to work.

I tried to imagine what people would do once they knew the truth, and I hoped it would show that, despite everything, we were a world filled with kindness and hopeful curiosity.

Then I thought about the reaction I always got to my freckles, and an icy chill ran down my spine.

'Where is Fluro?' I asked, more angrily than I intended.

‘Don’t you mean *Uncle Fluro*?’ said Blaze, smiling at me. ‘He’ll get here when he can, and when he does, imagine how proud he’s going to be of you.’

‘Hopefully that will make up for how mean I was to him yesterday,’ I said glumly.

‘Course it will, Azzy.’

I had to look away. Blaze being this nice to me made me nearly cry.

‘Oi!’ yelled Slugger. ‘We need more fuel over here.’

‘I’m slacking at my Very Important Job,’ said Blaze with a wink, before he picked up a plate of biscuits, which he took over to Rainbow and Slugger’s station.

I braced myself – *PMA, Astrifer* – and went over to ensure that the story team would be ready soon to hand over to the hackers.



An hour later, I felt a bit redundant. I couldn’t do the hacking bit, and I couldn’t do the animation. Blaze had monopolized tea-making. I was excellent at checklists and keeping it all moving, but when they were doing the actual, meaty job bits ... Well, I felt a bit daft.

I ensconced myself under a bench in the corner and pulled out my little notebook and an HB pencil, and started sketching the day, just like the ‘life-story maps’ on the wall in my bedroom. I put the Museum of Trees and the sock factory near each other; even though that wasn’t technically the case, they *felt* close together in my heart. And then I drew moss and stars as a border, all entwined. I was about to give it a title when I realized I had company and I quickly shut the book.

‘Please don’t stop, hero Astrifer,’ said Opi. ‘That is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. Have you got actual magic in your fingers?’

I could feel my cheeks burn as I blushed, and I stared at Opi, who was on their hunkers leaning over me, as if they were ready to spring.

‘How long have you been watching, and are you taking the mick?’ I asked.

‘Twelve minutes – you were very absorbed – and no. Should I be? And what is a mick?’ Opi met my gaze, wide-eyed, and I felt bad for thinking that they’d been making fun of me.

‘Please may I be delicate and not gloopy and have a proper look?’ they asked.

I kept repeating what they’d said in my head: that it was the most beautiful thing they’d ever seen. How could that be true? I looked carefully at Opi, but I couldn’t see any trick in their question.

‘Here you go,’ I said, handing over my notebook hesitantly.

It felt as though I was giving someone an actual piece of me, and I wasn’t sure how kindly they would treat it. Once, at school, kids in my class had found me sketching one of my maps in my precious paper drawing book. I’d been foolish to think I could take something so rare and treasured into school and that it would be safe. They’d grabbed the book and passed it back and forth and round and round, yelling about how it belonged in a museum, with *me*, and I had to run to try to get it, and then I had to take my inhaler, and when I finally did get the book back, there were greasy fingerprints all over it, three pages were scuffed, and another one was ripped. They’d destroyed something that had been a gift from a tree.

I didn’t take my drawing book to school again after that.

Opi held my notebook up to one side, so it was nearer their left eye, and they moved the page around, rather than move their eyeball. They took a long time on each page, turned them ever so gently, and sometimes made little *gurgle-pop* noises. By the time they had closed it carefully and handed it back, I realized I was clenching my jaw super tight and I was giving myself a headache.

‘Why do you do this?’ Opi asked.

Usually I’d just say *Dunno*, or *Cos I like it*, but the way Opi looked at me with their big eyes and their head cocked to the side made me feel as if they would really listen and it gave me the confidence to say the truth.

‘I think it’s the way I make sense of my days, how I process what’s happened and remember. I love details – seeing and overhearing the tiny things that no one else thinks are important, and recording them so they’re not lost. It calms me; I disappear when I do it. And if one day I can be really good at it, well, some examples of maps out there are the most wonderful things I’ve ever seen! And I want my job to be one where I discover new things and, from them, make things like this. Then people would say, “That is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”’ I paused and added quietly. ‘Like you just did.’

I took a deep breath, because I'd talked a lot ... and then doing that made me need my inhaler.

Opi regarded me for a long time, until it was nearly awkward. 'Astrifer, two things. Thing one: my planet would be good for your lungs. I wish on frogspawn that one day you will travel with me and I can say to everyone, "This is the famous Astrifer who saved us!" Thing two: if I tell you about my home, would you draw me one of your wonderful maps? I think it would make me less worried and homesick and other words that mean sad.'

I grinned at him. 'My first commission! That's how cartographers made money. People would pay them to chart new territory. Yes, I could do that for you. Just without being paid.'

'What is *paid*?'

'Sort of a swap. You give someone some digital cash, and they give you something in return.'

'Does it have to be digital?'

'Here, yes. There's lots of stuff here that doesn't actually exist but everyone agrees is real. But not for me. I'm an analogue gal. That's Uncle-Fluro-speak for someone who likes paper and pencils.'

I reopened my notebook so I could start making a list; it was how I began all my maps. 'Tell me everything – your most important bits, details and specifics. The names that you give things as well as their proper names ...'

Opi looked a bit bamboozled and their eyes twitched.

I tried again. 'Tell me what you love.'

Opi grinned and began to talk.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

About five o'clock in the evening, we all came to a stop. I'd finished preliminary sketches of Opi's map, and the teams had finished their assignments.

I popped out from under the bench with my checklist. 'Are you sure that's everything done?' I asked. 'Slugger, the entryway is secured for upload?'

He nodded at me.

'Rainbow, the back door is secured to get you out once transmitted and ensure no one can trace anything back to us?'

'Aye aye, cap'n!'

'Story team, have you implemented those final changes I suggested?'

Doris gave me a thumbs up, and Flash and Bolt nodded in unison.

Opi leaped out from under the bench and came over to stand beside me, grasping my hand in theirs. It was warm and sticky, though not unpleasant. It pulsed, its rhythm changing to match my breathing.

'Thank you,' they said, beaming up at me.

'Don't thank us yet,' I said, the sick feeling in my tummy returning as I remembered how much was at stake if we were found out.

Then I felt even more sick as I realized it was nothing compared to what was happening to Opi's home. One that I now knew was beautiful and vast and – like the Museum of Trees – had been allowed to grow wild. There were huge valleys covered in those blue flowers, and pockets of places where extensive families lived and went to school, and there were two moons in the sky – one pink, one orange – and beaches around lakes where they spawned. The beach that Opi had come from would be the same one to which they'd eventually return, when it was their time to lay eggs.

I so badly wanted to see it. We *had* to save it! And we had to save our planet from suffering too. We only had a day and a half left now; time was disappearing scarily fast. This had to work!

'Stations ready?' I asked.

'Yes!' everyone called in unison.

‘On my signal. Three ... two ... one ... upload!’

Rainbow flipped a switch, and our eyes followed the loading bar as it raced along the screen until it reached the other side.

‘Done,’ she announced. ‘Now we watch and wait.’

Slugger turned a dial and all the screens in the room showed different streams from around the world – news channels, CCTV from skyscrapers, the inside of people’s apartments.

‘It’s happening,’ I murmured as the film we’d created from Opi’s story uploaded and played out across buildings, on screens all over the world, taken over by us for the collective good of the universe.

We stared at our bank of monitors, which flickered to show a constantly changing range of surveillance camera feeds as everything gradually came to a standstill: people, the skyways and shuttles, rides in amusement parks. Even sports matches were abandoned, with zonk balls dropped and electro-Frisbees flying into goals as goalies didn’t even try to stop them.

‘It’s working,’ I murmured. ‘Rainbow, how is the firewall holding?’

She flicked some more hologrammatic switches and pivoted a dial. ‘The Neon Government internal code team is frantically looking for a source, but this attack was so unexpected they’re scrambling all over the place. At present, no coordinated fightback is occurring.’ She tapped something and one of the screens showed us a room where half the people in neon suits were staring blankly ahead, while the other half scrambled to stations and helplessly pressed buttons and switches. ‘They have no clue how to proceed ...’

‘We’re doing it!’ Blaze shouted. ‘We’re only ruddy doing it!’

We *were*. We were showing the world what had happened, and in two minutes, when the film was over, the Neon Government would have no option but to confess. Everyone would know who was responsible, and the shell would have to be opened, so the planets could be connected again. Earth would be saved and able to breathe, and to finally open once more. Opi’s planet would be saved too, along with the rest of the galaxy!

Doris cheered and we all joined in.

‘Hold on,’ called Rainbow. ‘Hold on!’ she repeated louder above our racket. ‘Slugger, can you see what I’m seeing?’

I leaned over her shoulder, trying to interpret the code that flashed across her screen.

‘Darn it,’ said Slugger. ‘They’re fighting back.’

‘What do you mean?’ wailed Opi.

‘They must have had a backup for a possible attack,’ said Slugger.

‘Of course they would have,’ I said, crestfallen. How could we have been so naive to think they wouldn’t have prepared for something like this?

‘And *that’s* who’s leading it,’ said Bolt, pointing to a new live stream that he’d just brought up.

I expected to see President Attack, but it wasn’t him. I shivered as I saw a small room with metal walls like a bunker, and in it, instructing two yellow-lab-coat-wearing Highlighters, was the woman who had looked at me in disgust when I’d stood onstage a couple of days earlier: Field Marshal Firework.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

We watched on in horror and dismay as WARNING: FAKE NEWS alerts were beamed on to every skyscraper around the world.

Field Marshal Firework's face popped up. 'We are aware that the Neon Government's mainframe accidentally broadcasted directly into worldwide channels a short excerpt from a dystopian fiction film that had been deemed too disturbing for public display. Those responsible for this grave error will receive retraining, and, as compensation, please find four thousand digibucks deposited into your account to spend at any Neon Government-regulated Sky Mall of your choosing.'

The jingle for NG Sky Malls PLC burst out of speakers around the globe. The screens showed people cheering at the offer of the cash, overlaid with GIFs of pinging bank accounts. Then, as if nothing had happened, transport restarted, as did all the sports events, and people went back to their mundane lives, exactly the same as before.

Nothing had changed.

'Very flippin' clever,' said Slugger as he leaned back in his chair and began to slow-clap.

'But ... why didn't they blame terrorists? Or say it was an attack?' asked an incredulous Blaze, pointing at the live stream of Field Marshal Firework, who was ordering about the people in the room with her, now joined by three more Highlighters.

'Because if they did that,' said Doris with a shaky voice, 'they'd be admitting that *someone* really believes in what we shared, so it might be worth considering seriously. It would undermine their authority and cause fear. This way, it gets dismissed as a minor little accident with no consequence. If there's no drama, there's nothing for people to worry about.'

'And since we focus on the future and not the past ...' said Flame.

'It will be forgotten immediately,' concluded Rainbow, slamming her fist on the desk.

'Can they track us?' I asked.

Rainbow shook her head, but then suddenly all our screens turned to black and neon-purple lettering scrolled across the screens: WE HAVE A TRACE ON YOU.

‘Shut it down!’ yelled Slugger as he started to frantically wrench cables out of the wall.

We sat in shocked silence, none of us able to say anything; there was just the sound of Opi weeping. I’d tried to console them, but they were beyond that, and their wailing keen broke my heart.

‘You tried,’ they said, and looked at me with their big bright eyes, which made me feel even worse.

We couldn’t have failed. We couldn’t give up.

I stood up and announced, ‘We have to go right to the top.’ I looked over at Rainbow. ‘Your dad. If we convince him of the truth, he’ll have to do something about Field Marshal Firework!’

‘I’ve been trying to get in touch with him,’ Rainbow said as she checked her wrist. ‘I’ve been sending a message on auto every twenty minutes, but I haven’t had a reply.’

‘There has to be *something* more we can do!’ I said.

But what? I didn’t know. I wasn’t cut out to lead. This had all been an awful mistake.

Then I remembered what Uncle Fluro had said when the SRS first showed me the deevdedee; it felt like a lifetime ago, but it had only been yesterday. *How had there ever been a time when I didn’t know all this, a time before Opi?*

‘Uncle Fluro said other people know about this, though they can’t let on that they know. And, Flame and Bolt, before you knew what was going on in that secret room, you believed that there was more out there. Surely this broadcast will make those people realize they’re not alone? We can call them to action!’

Doris looked at me doubtfully. ‘People like us, you mean? Disabled, older, with differences that make them vulnerable?’

‘You told Blaze you were sick of being underestimated,’ said Rainbow, standing beside me. ‘Well, that’s true for a lot of people, me included.’

I thought about Rainbow’s tech skills, how they had never come up on the Highlighter Kids show – the Neon Government just wanted her to be colourful and smiling all the time.

Rainbow's eyes lit up with determination. 'This is the time for us to show everyone that we can all do this!'

Slugger turned in his seat. 'We can't expect anyone to follow us. They're all terrified! That's what they've lived with their entire lives: the fear of being singled out. This would be the ultimate way of doing that. We can't ask that.'

'Why can't we?' I pleaded. 'I know what that's like, and it's horrible. But I still want to help.'

'You're willing to risk everything?' said Doris. 'What we did here was protected, behind a wall of anonymity. You're saying you're willing to leave that behind?'

'Anonymity might not be for long,' Bolt muttered, and we all thought about the warning message that had flashed up.

'I can't just sit here and do nothing and hope we don't get found, not while Opi's planet and ours – *and* the galaxy beyond – are in danger!'

'You'd risk everything for me?' Opi burred through tears.

'Of course,' I replied, running to hug them.

Rainbow followed and gently wiped away their tears. Blaze came over too and without hesitation took their hand.

'You're our friend,' he said gently.

I looked up at Rainbow. We grinned at each other as I said, 'And friendship is the most important thing in the whole universe!'

'I hate to break up this delightful scene, but there's an incoming message,' said Slugger.

'I thought we weren't plugged in?' squealed Doris.

'We're not,' said Bolt, wide-eyed.

We all looked on as the screens lit up with the same crackly CCTV stream.

Blaze tilted his head and squinted. 'Is that ...?'

'Uncle Fluro,' I whispered.

We watched Uncle Fluro walk down the street towards the Museum of Trees. I noticed that the timestamp stated it was minutes before I arrived and found Rainbow. I was right – he *had* got here before me! So where was he now? A cold prickle started to work its way up my back and I shivered.

The recording showed a car pull up to him.

'That's my dad's official motor,' said Rainbow in a small voice as she peered at the screen nearest her.

‘I knew it!’ shouted Slugger. ‘The conspiracy runs deep!’ Doris put a hand on his shoulder to quieten him.

A window wound down and Uncle Fluro bent to see who was inside.

‘That’s not my dad!’ exclaimed Rainbow.

We all recognized the face that had just been beamed on to our screens: Field Marshal Firework herself.

At that point, another car screeched to a halt behind, and four balaclava-wearing Highlighters leaped out and surrounded Uncle Fluro. I gasped in shock as they threw a bag over his head and bundled him towards their car. Field Marshal Firework’s car screeched as it accelerated and shot up towards the Officials Only lane of the skyway.

‘Can you make it pause?’ asked Rainbow.

Bolt tapped a few buttons and the video froze, showing my uncle being thrown into the back of the second car. I could scarcely look at it.

Rainbow suddenly slumped in front of Blaze with a cry, and he lunged forward to support her. Opi squished themselves close to me as I bent towards the screen, to see what had made Rainbow react like that.

There, in the back of the car, was a man with a matching bag over his head, kidnapped like Uncle Fluro. Unmistakeable in his breastplate and epaulettes, it was President Attack – Rainbow’s dad!



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Slugger was the first to break the silence. He walked over to where Rainbow was slumped on the floor, looking totally miserable, and squatted himself down next to her.

‘I am so sorry I ever doubted you, and your dad. What can we do to help?’

Rainbow wrapped her arms around his neck with a sob, and Slugger looked shocked, but then leaned into the hug and cradled her, his hook gently resting on her back.

Doris, Flame and Bolt were sat close together, discussing something in low voices and tapping at the keyboards in front of the screens, but I couldn’t hear what they were saying.

That left me, Opi and Blaze.

‘I know I always moaned about having to call him uncle,’ said Blaze, ‘and when he went off on one, I thought I’d have to take my own ears off, but, Azzy, I really loved that guy.’

‘*Love*, Blaze. Not *loved* – use the present tense. Uncle Fluro is still OK, and we have to rescue him.’

‘Yes,’ cried Opi, leaping up. ‘It is known throughout the galaxy how he cared for and protected the star-laden one. We must rescue him.’

‘But ... what about your planet?’ I asked Opi in a small voice.

‘I don’t think you’ll have to make that choice,’ said Doris as she came out of her huddle with Bolt and Flame.

Rainbow shifted herself out of Slugger’s arms. ‘What do you mean?’

‘We’ve tracked the car,’ said Bolt, pointing to the screen in front of them.

‘They’re at Highlighter HQ,’ said Flame.

Doris nodded. ‘Now if you can just penetrate the most locked-down building with the highest security on the whole planet, rescue Fluro and President Attack, inform the president about what’s happened – especially with Field Marshal Firework no doubt making an attempt to overthrow him – tell him about the shell and make him take it down, thus saving our

planet, Opi's planet and the galaxy beyond ... then we may still stand a chance.'

'Dead easy,' finished Bolt and Flame at the same time, both adding, 'Jinx!' in unison.

'It's impossible to get in there, though,' I said, then I glanced at Rainbow. 'But maybe not impossible if you're one of the Highlighter Kids ...'

Opi bubbled with glee and leaped in the air, landing on their knees and with their arm held out.

'You're doing the pose!' I laughed, and joined in, sort of wobbling into position behind Opi as I tripped over their feet and tried to remember the image from all the posters of the Highlighter Kids.

'I'm in!' yelled Blaze, and he struck a pose like he was dunking a basketball hoop.

We all looked at Rainbow. She wiped her eyes, stood up and joined us in front, striking her signature pose: arms raised to the sky in a power stance.

'And I can get us in there!' she declared.

'Star Rescue Society!' I yelled.

'Dingbat, don't you mean *Remembrance*?' asked Blaze.

'No, Astrifer is right,' said Doris, beaming. 'Blaze, you're right too. Star Remembrance Society is dull as dishwater – that's just for us oldies. We needed a hit of action, and you young 'uns are it – it's time to *rescue* the stars!'



'We wish we could come with you,' said Slugger at the door as Blaze, Rainbow, Opi and I were leaving, 'but we're not the right demographic to make it inside Highlighter HQ.'

I looked at Doris, who came up to Slugger's waist, and the hook he had for a hand, to Bolt and Flame beyond with their wrinkled faces and knew that he was right. But maybe along with everything else we were about to try to transform, we could change that too.

'You were correct, though, Astrifer,' said Doris. 'We can't hide. No matter the cost. Opi was willing to lose their planet for friendship, so we have to make a stand.'

She reached up and lightly tugged Opi's visor, making sure it was firmly in place below their headdress they'd put back on, to cover their eyes.

‘We’re going to head over to the sock factory and tell them the truth,’ said Slugger.

I gulped. That was a massive deal. All those people they’d kept safe for so long.

‘It’s up to them to make a decision as to what they believe, what they want to do,’ Slugger continued, ‘but we’ve got to start speaking up about the truth. All of it. And they have so many skills we can use, skills that we *need!*’

I thought about how the tech that made Uncle Fluro’s car invisible had been invented by someone there. Slugger was right. It was a big ask, though. Then my bottom lip did a little wobble when I thought about Uncle Fluro, and I bit it to try to make it stop.

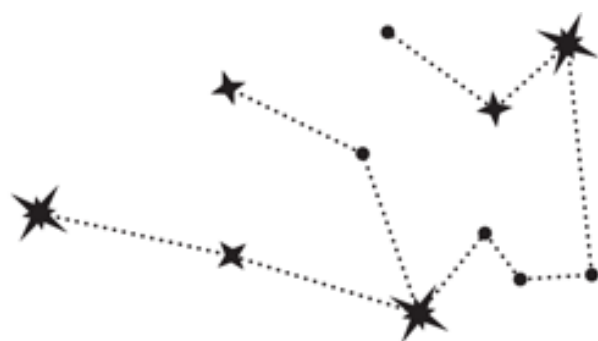
Flame and Bolt grinned at us from their station.

‘We’ll stay here and monitor the situation, and keep comms open,’ said Flame, tapping his ear. ‘We’ll warn you about anything if we can. Keep your wrist implants open and dialled in to us, so we can be your backup by listening in.’

I gave Doris and Slugger a huge hug, one arm up and one down, holding them close.

‘Go bring Fluro home to us, Astrifer,’ Doris mumbled into my middle.

‘Star Rescue Society is go!’ yelled Opi.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

‘There’s no zappin’ chance we’re getting in there,’ I said as the four of us crouched behind a low wall on the edge of the square in front of Highlighter HQ.

Security guards paraded back and forth outside the entrance, with stun guns slung over their shoulders. A water-fountain display, timed to music, burst out of the centre of the square that stood between us and them, spraying us in a fine mist of rainbows. The area was full of folk and their kids enjoying the end-of-year Allocation celebrations by wearing even brighter and more sparkly clothes than usual, which also meant that Opi fitted in well.

‘There’s no chance *you* are,’ said Rainbow.

With that, she stood up and marched across the square while the rest of us looked on in awe. Blaze was bouncing on his hunkers – he couldn’t bear to keep still – and Opi was delightedly rubbing the water mist into their eyeballs under their visor.

‘Is that ...?’ yelled one of the family members playing in the fountains as Rainbow sauntered past, hips swaying, arms waving, making sure all eyes were on her.

‘*It is!*’ yelled a kid who was soaked. ‘It’s Rainbow Attack!’

At the mention of her name, a drone swooped down and started filming her sashaying across the square. If anyone hadn’t spotted her before, they all did now as the images were beamed on to the LED billboards on the surrounding skyscrapers.

The crowd began to cheer and shriek, swarming towards her.

‘Look,’ said Blaze, pointing. The guards with the guns had abandoned their post to surround Rainbow, keeping her safe from the growing crowd. ‘Now’s our chance!’

The three of us hurtled over the wall. Well, Opi bounded with a squeak, Blaze took a giant step, and I got sort of stuck with one leg dangling either side. Blaze hauled me off and dragged me along beside him, my legs struggling to keep up.

We ducked and dashed, using the fountains as cover, along with the hedges that were trimmed into the shapes of key members of the Neon Government.

Ten paces from the entrance we saw that not all the security detail had left their post. A giant, burly guard with a huge purple beard kept watch and was talking into his wrist.

‘Well, that’s us scuppered,’ I said.

Blaze’s wrist pinged, and he glanced at it.

‘Don’t be so sure,’ he said as my wrist pinged too. ‘Here goes nothing,’ he muttered, then stood up straight and walked from behind the last batch of hedges.

Opi and I followed, trying to look both *casual*, because we were absolutely legitimately allowed to be there, and also *excited*, because thanks to Rainbow’s genius idea, we were supposed to be competition winners.

‘Hi,’ Blaze said to the security guard with the purple beard. As we got nearer, I realized just how tall the man was – so tall that he made Blaze look small. (I really wanted to tell Blaze that, but knew that this was probably not the right moment.)

Purple Beard grunted at us and went back to observing the shrieking crowd with Rainbow at its centre as it moved across the square towards us.

‘We’re the competition winners,’ continued Blaze. ‘You must be expecting us. We thought there’d be a laser show. That’s what the details promised. There’s not even a balloon! And where are our goodie bags?’

I kicked Blaze in the ankle – he was going over the top – but then I had an idea. The one thing that would scare a massive security guard might be a kid who looked like they were going to cry. I burst into fake tears, wailing that we weren’t going to get our prize, and Opi really helped by having no clue I was pretending and trying to comfort me.

‘Competition?’ asked Purple Beard, desperately looking around for someone who could help.

‘Yes, we won a competition to spend the day with Rainbow Attack!’ I said through bubbling snot. I held out my arm and pressed the project button on my wrist. The fake invitation that Rainbow had pinged to us beamed up, but not for too long, as I hastily shrank it once I realized she’d spelled her own name wrong, a typo from when she’d been walking.

‘She’s just coming now, and she’ll be cross if we’re not inside waiting for her, per the instructions,’ Blaze said as I blubbed and blew my nose.

Purple Beard leaped back in horror. ‘This way – follow me. They never tell us anything! I’ll be on to my manager about this, mind ...’ he muttered as we scurried behind him. Blaze and I gave each other an on-the-down-low fist bump in victory.

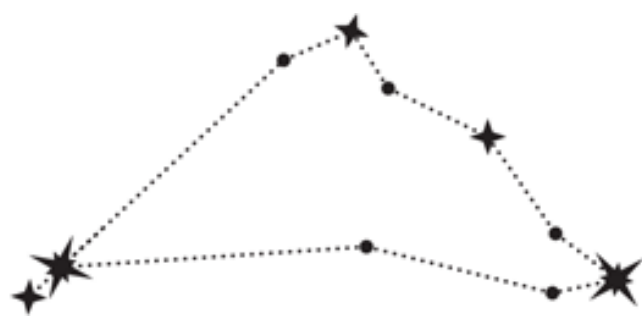
The guard pointed to the scanner at the door, a security precaution in all buildings, just like at the sock factory, so that everyone was always checked in. My insides lurched as I realized that these security measures meant that the Neon Government knew where everyone was at all times, including us, right now.

I placed my thumb on the scanner and my hideous black-and-white photo pinged up. Then I moved through the turnstile, safely into Highlighter HQ.

But Opi didn’t have an ID. If they were caught, it would be a disaster!

My heart beat rapidly as Blaze did the same, but he coughed right in Purple Beard’s face just as he held up his thumb. The guard leaped back and clawed at his face.

Quick as a flash, Blaze squished Opi next to him to get them through the turnstile at the same time, to bypass the scanner. But there was one thing we’d forgotten about: Opi was amazed by all the light and noise and glitz. They were absolutely thriving on it, squeaking and squalling and pointing at everything new and shiny – which really was *everything*, including the thumbprint scanner.



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

‘Blaze!’ I yelled, and he went to grab Opi’s wrist ... and *just* made it in time before Opi’s finger hit the scanner.

Next thing I knew, Blaze had whizzed Opi through the turnstile and was dragging me and Opi across the fluorescent-green marble floor towards the ultra-state-of-the-art hologram waiting for us at the reception desk. My feet zoomed along under me as if I was ice-skating.

I glanced behind me and saw all the screaming crowds of fans outside the building and the security guards flanking Rainbow as she approached the entrance.

‘Remember,’ whispered Blaze to both of us, ‘we have to act like we don’t know her.’

That wouldn’t be hard, I thought as I watched her sashay through the turnstile while Purple Beard fawned all over her. It was as if she had transformed into a completely different person.

She joined us at the reception desk, where Opi was far too excited about being given a security pass and some hastily grabbed goodies to make up for no one knowing about our arrival. I became all shy with Rainbow and couldn’t get my words out right. She could tell straight away.

‘It’s still me, you know,’ she whispered, rolling her eyes. ‘All this ridiculousness is just stuff I have to do because I’m a Highlighter Kid. I don’t enjoy any of it.’

I thought about the way she strutted across the square. ‘Don’t you?’

‘Well, this SRS stuff is pretty cool, don’t you think? Now, let’s ditch these guards and find Fluro and my dad!’



With the superpower of Rainbow enfolding us, we rode the elevator to the top floor. The inside of it was encased in coloured water that sloshed into luminous patterns as it zoomed us upwards.

‘We’ll start from the top and work our way down,’ stated Rainbow, exiting on the floor where she said all the executives worked.

I trailed behind, watching how at ease she was in this world, opening and peering round doors, signing autographs, posing for selfies. It only brought into stark contrast how awkward I found it all.

We entered a room that turned out to be a posh canteen, nothing like the one at school, with loads of fruit and pastries stacked in the centre. Opi made an absolute beeline for the stickiest-looking treats. Blaze made small talk about the Strikers when someone asked him about his shirt. Meanwhile, an executive asked me something, possibly to do with what I had to do to win the competition to get here – but I suddenly had absolutely nothing going on in my head that I wanted to say in my out-loud voice, so I just sort of stared away from him until he looked around for someone else to talk to.

Rainbow, though, was the centre of attention, her hair rhythmically flashing its rainbow lights, and people were hanging off her every word, giggling and simpering at the same time. I had to admit I was jealous about how easily this came to her.

‘Ah, yes,’ she said. ‘All part of the job, meeting young people from every walk of life.’

I couldn’t hear what someone said to her in response, but I caught her reply: ‘Oh, I don’t mind. It’s good for me to mix with others I wouldn’t usually get to meet. My dad, yes, President Attack, he supports it completely.’

Rainbow met my eye, and she added, ‘In fact, that’s who we’re here to see. These lucky competition winners get a meeting with the Top Guy!’

Everyone laughed even though it wasn’t funny.

‘Though I seem to have misplaced him,’ trilled Rainbow. ‘How silly of me! Would anyone happen to know where I might find him?’

It was barely perceptible, but I thought the room went slightly quieter as soon as she asked that, and I definitely, possibly, maybe thought I saw some quick, surreptitious glances.

‘No one?’ Rainbow said lightly. ‘Ah, it’s because we have to keep him safe. No one knows his itinerary but his guards!’

‘Have you tried pinging him?’ asked a woman with luminous yellow wings flapping on her back.

‘What a clever idea! No, I hadn’t thought of that!’ said Rainbow, and rolled her eyes at me behind the woman’s head.

Rainbow made a show of fiddling with her wrist implant for a few more minutes, and I started to get the feeling that we’d stalled in our search,

almost as if ... we were being held up on purpose?

My mind began to whirr and make new connections. Maybe that's what *was* happening? Wouldn't that be a brilliant plan? Field Marshal Firework and her Highlighters would know we were here by now. They'd be monitoring our progress. Stalling us. The kidnappers had worn balaclavas, so one of them could even be the woman who'd suggested pinging him!

I tried to get Opi's attention, but they'd found the syrup dispenser and were pouring it straight into a glass without bothering with the coffee. Meanwhile, Blaze seemed to have attracted more Strikers fans.

I marched over to Rainbow, newly emboldened by what I'd worked out, and pushed through all the people who were crowding round her. We had to get out of here before Field Marshal Firework arrived!

'We're running out of time!' I told Rainbow.

She nodded and extricated herself, taking a last group photo and giving a triumphant high kick before we headed out. Realizing that we were leaving, Blaze dragged away Opi, who was using their mega tongue to slurp up the syrup from the bottom of their glass.

We got out into the corridor and Rainbow led us off in one direction, when suddenly my face felt as if it was burning up and swirling. Each freckle was a pinprick of blazing fire, like tiny molten pins were being pressed into my skin. I grabbed my cheeks and dropped to the floor. Blaze crouched beside me, yelling for Rainbow and Opi to stop.

'Hey, Azzy, what's wrong?' he said. 'The heat coming off you – you're burning up! Rainbow, Opi, don't come near!'

I couldn't see him – the pain was so white hot and electric – but I could hear the worry in his voice. Then, clear as anything, I got a sudden image beamed into my head of Uncle Fluro being held somewhere really dark. There were no windows; his moustache was out of control – he'd hate that – and his hair was all mussed up. His shirt was torn and grubby, and he was pressing the tip of his index finger against his thumb. There were stacks and stacks of Highlighter merchandise around him.

As soon as I could make sense of the image, it was gone.

I opened my eyes and whispered to Blaze, who was dripping with sweat: 'We need to find the storeroom. Now.'



‘It’s one of these down here ...’ said Rainbow as she scanned the list next to the elevator for the floor number of the storeroom that matched the description I gave her. Then she strode to the elevator doors at the very end of the bank. ‘This is the only one that travels below ground.’

‘Going down!’ said Opi as they pressed the button to call the elevator. They were absolutely obsessed with all the shiny stuff, and even more bouncy than usual because of all the sugar. Blaze had to stop them pressing every button and they were in the middle of arguing, with Blaze grappling to hold back Opi’s flailing hands, when they suddenly stopped still and pointed. ‘Uh-oh!’

At the end of the corridor, racing towards us, was a bunch of guards led by Purple Beard – all with their stun guns pointing at us. ‘Stop them!’

‘Basement levels, minus twenty-four!’ Rainbow hissed as the elevator arrived and the doors pinged open.

We leaped into it, and Opi and Blaze frantically banged the ‘-24’ button on the panel. The doors swished shut just before the guards reached us.

‘I think they may have realized the competition was a lie,’ said Blaze as he bent over in relief.

‘You don’t say,’ retorted Rainbow.

‘Will I have to give these back?’ asked Opi, pointing to the T-shirt they were now wearing with the Highlighter Kids logo, and the rainbow-covered sunglasses from their cobbled-together goodie bag.

I couldn’t speak as we plummeted down hundreds of floors. I was steeling myself for what would be waiting for us when the elevator doors opened.



On basement levels, which neither the public nor the executives visited, the Highlighters obviously didn’t keep up appearances as much. We peered out of the elevator, taking in the dingy corridor. Despite the tension, I couldn’t help but giggle at the thought of what we might look like with our heads hanging out, like a knock-off Highlighter Kids poster.

‘Weirdo,’ whispered Blaze, but I tilted my head up and saw the smile on his face.

We sneaked forward and Opi turned up their nose at the bare concrete floor and light bulbs, the grime on the walls. There was no glitz down here.

The elevator was about to close and head back up when I had an idea. I leaped back in and did Opi's trick of swiping my arm up the wall to press all the buttons. They lit up like a miniature version of the tower. It wouldn't help on the upper floors where they had loads of elevators to choose from, but it would buy us a bit of time as it crawled its way up through the lower floors.



CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

‘The room you saw in your vision – it has to be the small one at the end of the corridor. All the others have screens that act like fake windows,’ said Rainbow as she marched along.

‘How do you know?’ I asked. This didn’t seem like the sort of area a Highlighter Kid would be familiar with.

‘Great for playing hide-and-seek.’

‘I’m so sorry I didn’t see your dad in the vision,’ I said to her as I struggled to keep up. ‘I’m sure he’s OK.’

Rainbow did a little nod. I could see she was holding herself together.

‘Hurry up,’ said Blaze, striding on ahead with Opi boinging along beside him down the gloomy corridor. ‘We don’t have much time before those guards catch up with us.’

I gave Rainbow a smile that I hoped said everything it needed to, and then I dashed after them.

‘It’s locked,’ said Blaze, shoving the door.

‘Of course it is,’ I replied. ‘Did you think they’d just let him wander out? Uncle Fluro, are you in there?’

‘Astrifer, is that you?’ came a small voice from behind the door. Although the voice was weak and nowhere near its usual impactful level of decibels, it was definitely Uncle Fluro’s.

There was a beep and my wrist pinged – a message from Bolt.

We’ve got you up on our screens. Hold your wrist to the lock and we’ll hack it.

I held my wrist up and waited a few moments.

Nothing seemed to be happening.

I looked behind me for Rainbow, but she was nowhere to be seen. Where had she gone? But then I remembered her face, and realized she was probably having a moment in a nearby doorway – her dad had been

kidnapped, after all, and we didn't know if he was being held with Uncle Fluro or somewhere else. I wouldn't want to be disturbed if I was feeling like that, so I left her to it, knowing she would join us when she was ready.

Opi followed my gaze. 'Where's –'

'She'll be with us as soon as she can,' I answered as I brought my other arm up to help support my wrist against the digital lock.

We waited some more, and I was starting to worry that Bolt couldn't hack the lock, but then there came a big *click*. Blaze shoved his shoulder against the door, barging it open. I had to blink lots to make sense of the dark shapes in the room. I tried waving my hand over the light sensor, but nothing came on.

I could see an outline of someone moving around. Was that him?

'Hey, Uncle Fluro! Call out and we'll find you!' I shouted.

There was a muffled yell. A chill moved through my body. Had this all been too easy? To get inside, to find this place?

'Run!' Uncle Fluro suddenly hollered out of the darkness.

The lights flashed on and Opi squealed.

'Seize them!' yelled Field Marshal Firework as balaclava-clad Highlighters charged forward and made a grab for Opi.

Blaze leaped into action and tried to fend them off. He kicked one and they sprawled out of the way, but there were too many Highlighters and they overpowered Blaze, pinning him to the floor.

One of them grabbed my wrist to hold me in place, but as I was frozen to the spot, still in shock, there was really no need. I watched as two Highlighters seized Opi, who had made it up on to the side of the wall, and they both wrenched Opi off. Opi cried out as their toes were ripped from the wall, and they kicked and flailed, but it did no good.

Field Marshal Firework beamed at me in triumph, as she stood next to trussed-up Uncle Fluro who was desperately trying to get himself free.

They had captured my brother and my friend – and I'd just stood there, doing nothing to help them.

While my brain was still trying to make sense of what had just happened, a tornado of security guards streamed into the room and stood in formation, led by Purple Beard. They were so vast in number that they crowded out the room.

My brain snapped into action. Rainbow must have met them in the corridor and told Purple Beard and his guards what was happening. That

Field Marshal Firework had kidnapped President Attack, committing an act of treason. Good old Purple Beard would stop the traitorous Highlighters!

The guards immediately overpowered Field Marshal Firework and her balaclava-wearing team, and she shrieked in dismay, 'Fight back, you oafs!'

Opi had slipped free in the tussle, and now skipped across the wall and down it, landing – *plop* – in my arms. I fell to the floor in a heap, with Opi trying to burrow into my neck.

'You'll be OK now, Astrifer!' called out Rainbow as she appeared in the doorway. She shoved through the guards and ran towards me.

Firework was dragged away, kicking and screaming, and her Highlighters were marched out. Purple Beard grinned at me as he went past.

'What happened?' I asked Rainbow as Blaze groaned and sat himself up, before he went over to untie Uncle Fluro.

'I was thinking,' said Rainbow, 'that it was weird how we got down to this level, and this corridor, without any guards stopping us. It all felt too easy. Something was off. I –'

'I thought that too! You were just having a moment,' I finished for her, and held out my hand.

She took it, and said, 'Something like that. I heard yelling from the doorway I was hiding in – no, *leaning* on. My retina scan must have still worked to open the door. Field Marshal Firework is not as clever as she thinks she is, because inside I found ...' She stepped back so I could see who was behind her.

I looked up. Standing directly above me was President Attack.

Luckily Uncle Fluro broke the most awkward moment the world has ever known by stumbling towards me and gathering me up in his arms.

'I'm so sorry,' I cried.

'Me too, kiddo. This old-timer has missed you!' He gave me a giant squeeze and lifted me up. His moustache tickled my forehead. 'Hey, Blaze, that looks like it's going to be a shiner. But don't worry – I've got some arnica balm that would do well for that. I think it's in my pocket; it comes from a specimen on floor five and I make it by –'

'Please stop,' said Blaze, beaming at him, and he came and joined in the hug.

'Are we all doing this? Is that what we do?' asked Opi, and their springy arms boinged out and encircled all of us, including Rainbow.

Uncle Fluro stared at Opi with their outstretched arms, until I quietly told him he was being very rude.

‘You’re right – where are my manners?’ said Uncle Fluro, smiling. ‘Must have lost them when I got kidnapped. But, hey, if that’s going to happen, make sure you have a trusted team to rescue you! I’m sorry,’ he added, turning to Opi. ‘I don’t know your name. Do you shake hands?’

‘NO!’ we all yelled, and Uncle Fluro looked at us like we’d lost it, but slowly withdrew his hand.

Opi shyly took off their sunglasses and headdress, and said, ‘I am Opi. Here to help rescue the one who has always protected the Chosen One.’

Uncle Fluro beamed. ‘You are ... *incredible*, Opi! It’s a pleasure and an honour to welcome you. I’ve been waiting for your arrival ever since Astrifer was freckled. I knew someone would come one day. *We knew!* Didn’t I tell you, Astrifer, that you are special? Wait until I tell the St– erm, Seed Research Society about this!’

‘We need to get you up to speed,’ I told him.

There was a cough from behind us, and we all turned to look at the man who we’d forgotten was watching us, in all our excitement to be reunited once more.

‘*You* need to get *us* all up to speed,’ said President Attack, ‘and quickly, before you present this to the Highlighter Council.’

President Attack was staring directly at me. One of his epaulettes was torn and he was missing his breastplate – and he looked like he was trying very hard not to let his upper lip curl. He still made me shudder, but then I remembered his negative reaction to me was a learned fear response; he couldn’t help it, and he probably didn’t even realize he was doing it. Also, he had just been kidnapped *and* had encountered an alien!

‘Hold on,’ I said. ‘What do you mean by “present it to the Highlighter Council”, and why did you look directly at me when you said it?’



CHAPTER THIRTY

‘You have to wear it,’ barked Rainbow. ‘It’s the only way they’ll take you seriously!’

I gave her a look. She only ever yelled when she was scared. We all were.

‘But it itches!’ I complained as Rainbow and Blaze helped me to put on a crystal-covered cape.

‘It’s a huge honour to wear that, and to address the Council,’ Uncle Fluro said from the other side of the 360-degree mirrored dressing room that we’d been left to get ready in.

‘I can’t address the Council! I couldn’t even talk to one man in the canteen earlier without him desperately trying to leave in a matter of seconds!’

Opi took one sniff of all the doughnuts that had been laid out on a side table, and shook their head and shuddered.

‘I miss flies. Just simple bluebottles – or even a moth. I’m not too fussy.’ They looked at me with their big, swivelling eyes and their globuley hands writhed together. ‘Astrifer, I miss my home. I’m scared!’

I walked over to comfort them.

‘What if this doesn’t work?’ Opi asked. ‘There’s barely any time left! It’s nearly night-time already, and then tomorrow is the last day before ...’

‘It’ll work! *It has to!*’ I said firmly. ‘President Attack needs you and me to stand before the Council and explain everything. Then he can get their permission to open the shell, and everything will be OK.’

‘Everything is going to work out, tickety-boo,’ said Uncle Fluro, joining us and helping Opi to get back into their disguise. ‘Just think, Astrifer, once the shell is opened, you can explore the vast beyond. There’s a wealth of undiscovered, uncharted space waiting for a cartographer to record it all. You could even accompany Opi on their way home!’

‘Oh, yes!’ said Opi, grinning now. ‘What my family would say if you came back with me! They’d put on such a spread for you.’ I must have seemed confused, because then they added, ‘A banquet! We’ll have flies and spiders. One of my mams will make earwig pie! It’s such a delicacy –

you'll love it! Don't stare at me like that – I'm joking, of course.' Opi trilled out a laugh. 'It would be earwig *cake*! You'd never waste something as fine as earwigs in just a pie!'

My eyes widened at Uncle Fluro, who laughed.

'I've always said you had a *taste* for exploration, pet.'

Before I could groan, a Highlighter popped their head round the door.

'It's time, we're ready for you.'



We stood together, waiting outside the huge chamber doors. Opi was splatting their tongue on and off the walls, presumably something they did when they were nervous. I took a puff of my inhaler, which was my thing to do.

Then I turned to Rainbow next to me. 'Thanks.'

I didn't know what else to say. She was the best friend I could ever wish for, and I was so grateful that she was back in my life again. She gave my shoulder a squeeze. A loud sound of a gong reverberated through the door and my insides turned to jelly.

'I take it that's our cue,' said Blaze in the least assured voice I'd ever heard him use. 'Rainbow, you leading the way?'

She shook her head and took a step back.

'What do you mean, no?' I asked her.

'I'm not being big-headed, but my dad says if I walk in there first, everyone's eyes will be on me, and I'll steal too much of the spotlight. Don't worry – I'll go round the back entrance and make my way towards my dad instead. I'll still be in there, cheering you on.'

Opi stopped splatting the wall and bouncing on the spot and leaped over to us.

'It's your time to shine, Astrifer,' Rainbow continued, her eyes glistening. 'You and Opi together. That's what you predicted, didn't you, Opi? You knew before any of us, but now we all believe.'

I looked at the faces staring kindly at me: Blaze and Opi and Rainbow and Uncle Fluro. I thought about Doris and Slugger and everyone at the sock factory; Bolt and Flame at SRS HQ.

'We all believe in you!' added Blaze. And he didn't even mime being sick afterwards.

That was all very good, I thought, but what if I didn't believe in me?

'OK,' I said. My voice wasn't as wobbly as I thought it would be. 'Let's do this thing!'

Rainbow gave me a quick hug and ran off. I think it was before I saw her cry.

As soon as she left, my resolve crumbled and all of a sudden I couldn't remember how to breathe. I stood with my forehead pressed against the cool of the chamber doors. I sensed Blaze next to me, and I glanced over to see that he'd mirrored my position, leaning his head against the door too.

He stared straight ahead as he began to speak: 'Astrifer Nova, you absolutely do my head in and have done for my entire life apart from the first three minutes, when I had peace before you were born. I'd have more use playing catch with a housebot than with you, and you can never understand when a question is rhetorical, can you?'

I burst out laughing. I couldn't help myself. 'No?'

'But, Astrifer, I've never known anyone more determined once they put their mind to something. The way you make connections between seemingly unrelated things astonishes me, and for some reason that part-frog standing over there thinks you're their hero. I obviously think that they're completely and utterly luminous-bananas, but I also know what they say about you is true.'

He extended his fingers towards me and I interlinked mine with his.

'We've come this far,' he said, 'and this is about something much bigger than us. I'll stand beside you every step of the way, always. I mean, goodness knows I've tried often enough to get rid of you, but I can't seem to, and you can't get rid of me. For some reason that neither of us understands, the stars landed upon you, and it's you who has to do this right now. Do you think you can?'

Still leaning against the door, I shook my head.

Then, slowly, I lifted it off and stood up straight.

I looked back at Opi and Uncle Fluro, who were holding hands too.

I nodded. Sometimes you just had to do icky, awkward, terrifying things and be bad at them, because there would be people who could catch you afterwards.

'Ready?' asked Blaze.

'Ready,' I said. 'This is for everyone who has ever been underestimated.'

'Oh, and Astrifer?'

‘Yes?’

‘Tell any one of my mates about this conversation and I’ll squish your face into the floor so hard it’ll finally wipe your freckles off,’ he said, and winked at me. Then he stepped aside for Opi to come forward.

With Opi linking my arm, and Blaze and Uncle Fluro behind us, we pushed open the doors and entered the chamber.



CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The Highlighter Council sat in two horseshoe-shaped rows of fancy velvet seats, with screens behind them showing viewing figures and images from around the world. They wore earpieces so that they could listen to the immediate translations of the other Council members. The rest of the room was packed with delegates, press and important businesspeople, and in front of them was a sleek Perspex podium and microphone where the Council could be addressed.

A strikingly tall black woman with flashing flowers in her hair that tumbled down and formed her dress was standing at her place in the Council horseshoe, in the midst of an impassioned speech.

She stopped speaking as we approached the Council. I could hear a sharp intake of breath as we walked down the aisle, through the middle of the audience as they looked at me and my freckles, and then the badly disguised and still very twig-like, lumpy Opi.

I could see President Attack in the very centre, with an empty seat on either side of him. As we walked, I tried to think of what to say, but my brain was full of scrambled egg and sour candyfloss. And by the time we got to the front, it still hadn't thought of anything good.

President Attack nodded and, as he'd explained to me before, I took my place at the podium, with my friends gathered around me.

'I'm not very good with words,' I said as I held on tight to the podium. My knuckles were white and I had to stand on my tiptoes to be seen over it.

'It's see-through,' whispered Blaze. 'They can see you. Drop your shoulders – you've got this.'

I really didn't think I'd *got this*, but I looked at Opi beside me and knew I had to speak up. I could hide in my den afterwards, in the green and cool, reading my favourite maps.

Don't get distracted – speak, for goodness' sake, out loud, back on track, speak!

'I beg your pardon, esteemed, erm, Royal Highness? I'm so sorry to interrupt, but, you see, my name is Astrifer Nova and two days ago I

thought it was the worst moment of my life when I was assigned to the sock factory.'

I could hear the crowd whispering to each other, restless, and could see the Council exchanging glances. The GIF of me being allocated helpfully popped up on one of the screens.

Time is running out! Get to the point!

I focused on my breathing and continued. 'But I met some really cool people and I learned, well, then I met ...' I took a big gulp of air. This wasn't going how I'd planned it – well, I hadn't planned it. That was the point, but if I had –

'You're doing great, Astrifer!' whispered Uncle Fluro behind me.

I took another deep breath and garbled out, 'What the whole world saw on the advertising hoardings was *true*. We are in terrible danger, as is the rest of the galaxy.'

The Council started talking to one another. I had to keep their attention.

'And the reason you were told it was a lie, and that the truth has been hidden from you, is because you have a traitor in your midst! Now they've been stopped, but they have been selling you a lie for a very long time. As my Uncle Fluro told me: you are living under a lie! My friends and I, from the Seed Research Society based at the Museum of Trees, *we* were the ones who hacked the system and showed you that film. But it was all true! Opi can prove it. We just need some soil – has anyone got any soil? A handful will do. No, I don't suppose you do.'

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Rainbow make her way from the back of the hall towards the front, along the side. Seeing her face was the encouragement I needed to carry on.

'Two hundred years ago, a bomb was planted and detonated by this very government! And because of that terrible explosion, Planet Earth was sealed off with a mechanical shell.'

There was now frantic talking and pointing.

'But there are stars out there – beauty we can scarcely imagine – and this wonderful creature, Opi, came here because they thought – no, *knew* – that I, *we*, could save their planet – the whole galaxy, in fact! Bolt, Flame, if you're out there watching, it's time to roll that film again!' I said super quickly, so that my words tumbled over each other without gaps in between.

Opi took off their headdress and visor, and the Council gasped.

The flowery woman was still standing. ‘Is this some kind of joke? Or performance art? Are they wearing a costume? Their headdress appears to be home-made. I really don’t understand. That’s slander you’re uttering, young lady. Maybe she’s not well? She doesn’t look well.’

I felt frustration course through me and I slammed my fist on the podium so hard that it wobbled – and the flowery lady sat back down in shock.

‘I *am* well,’ I said loudly and clearly. ‘Never been better, thank you, but I don’t know what that’s got to do with any of this? I need you to listen, because people never do. You’re all so busy looking to the future and all that it can offer that you don’t spend one moment examining the past and seeing what *that* can tell you. Who gained the most from the bomb? Not those who allegedly planted it! It was the Neon Government who consolidated their power for years – hundreds of them, even to today – and silenced anyone who got in their way and anyone who dared to tell the truth. Those who were the most different were sent away to their home planets to die, along with any people from Earth who supported them! That’s what’s happening out there, beyond the shell. They’re all dying! Good creatures, like this one, my friend Opi beside me, who are kind and have so much to teach us! If only we would listen!’

The whole room was a burbling cauldron of muttering and pointing and double-takes.

‘And it’s happening here too!’ I shouted. ‘That damned shell is keeping all the neon and energy inside – it has nowhere else to go. I’m your canary! Sometimes, I can barely breathe outside. My lungs are telling you it’s dangerous to keep it closed. We’re in real trouble!’

‘Doomed!’ warbled Opi in distress.

‘And who is the traitor?’ I heard President Attack’s voice prompting me to continue.

‘Field Marshal Firework,’ I said, directing my voice out to the audience.

I was expecting gasps, but there were just puzzled faces.

I glanced behind and above me, up to the screen, and gazed at the graph showing the viewing figures as they climbed steadier and steadier, and then spiked and escalated right off the chart. *Do not think about the millions of eyes on you right now!* Couldn’t think about that. Mam and Dad would be watching – what would they think of all this? I dropped my eyes to find Rainbow standing next to her dad, and I was about to smile at her – until I saw who stood on the other side of President Attack.

‘Er, Astrifer,’ Blaze whispered. ‘I think we have a bit of a problem.’
It was Field Marshal Firework, looking triumphant!



CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Blaze gripped my hand, tight, almost hurting me, and he was doing the same to Opi. I could see the veins pulsating in my brother's arms, in his forehead. Uncle Fluro stood behind the three of us.

I turned as I heard the rumble of people standing up and the crowd behind us began to surge towards us, shouting, 'Traitors!'

Security guards rushed in from the main doors and surrounded us, dragging me and Opi from the safety of Blaze and Uncle Fluro, separating us into two pairs. Purple Beard looked delighted to grab Opi's arms, wrenching them behind their back. Opi cried out in pain. Blaze aimed a kick at Purple Beard, but he was pinned down by another guard before he could make contact.

'What's going on?' I called to Rainbow, but it was as if she hadn't heard me. 'Rainbow?'

Blaze struggled against a guard who had their knee in his back, and Purple Beard had forced Opi down on to the floor. All the while, the crowd kept surging towards us, trying to reach us, but several guards held them back.

'Order!' shouted President Attack, standing to attention. 'ORDER! I bring this session to order!'

The spectators slowly retreated back to their seats, but they remained standing, ready to surge once more.

President Attack walked slowly towards us, statesmanlike, his chin raised. Rainbow followed a few paces behind on one side of him, and Field Marshal Firework on the other.

He pointed at me and smiled.

Nothing made sense to me. I couldn't work out what was going on.

'*This* is your traitor: Astrifer Nova,' declared President Attack. 'The leader of the terrorist Star Rescue Society, who, thanks to the brilliance of my daughter, has revealed herself and her motley crew directly to you all! And she has brought into our clutches *an alien* – yes, that much is true! It is no performance art. That *creature* is a terrifying alien from a far-flung

planet, sent here to destroy us all! You have been deceived, but only for your own good! There *is* a shell that surrounds this planet, but its purpose is to keep us safe, to keep the aliens out!’

A video appeared on the screens, showing the erection of the shell as members of the Neon Government fought off terrifying creatures who were trying to attack Earth. It was all swish and Super-HD and 4D and glowing and exactly what the audience wanted to see, to understand – Opi’s sepia-toned mycelia film seemed like a hoax in comparison. But this gaudy on-screen spectacle was all a lie. A lie everyone was buying into.

‘Alien! Traitors! Liars! Terrorists!’

My head was whooshing with all the shouting from the crowd, my hearing fading out and back in as panic took hold of me.

President Attack leaned over to me and whispered in my ear so that no one else could hear. ‘Brilliant idea, thank you, Ms Nova. I thought we’d have to try to keep the shell hidden, but, no, this way we can be honest about it. Use it even more in the anti-alien rhetoric that’s sure to follow. Keep ’em out! Future-facing as always! Who knew a mutt like you could be so clever?’

I glared at him. ‘What about the fact that our planet is in danger too?’

‘Not in our generation. I’m sure we can steal some other technology before that comes to pass, and if not ... Those of us with money can always fly away, leaving you and your *different* friends to rot.’

He looked at the crowd and held his chin higher, so a dronebot could capture his best angle.

‘The harbourer of an alien, who is a terrorist from another planet!’ shouted President Attack, pointing at me, and the crowd booed. ‘This girl has been contaminated by the alien, spreading its treachery, but look at her. Isn’t it obvious that she would be so easily led? Look – look at her face!’

The audience gasped in disgust as my black-and-white security photo, the one that made my freckles even more prominent than they were in real life, flashed up on the giant screen.

‘My name is Opi!’ I heard a small voice cry out, one that was bubbling on the brink of tears, their voice filled with terror. ‘I didn’t do anyone any harm. None of us did. Especially not kind and gentle Astrifer ... Astrifer the hero!’

‘See!’ cried President Attack, raising his fist in the air. His cheeks were bright red now and sweat ran down his temples. ‘The alien in disguise calls

the freckled girl *hero*. What more proof could you need? Watch!’

The screens relayed footage from hidden cameras in my lovely glade, my den that I thought was secret, showing the first time I met Opi, and them revealing their beautiful body of undulating moss and twigs.

The crowd screamed in horror.

‘We defeated an alien uprising in the past, which we all agreed to banish from our collective memory to ensure our safety when we built the shell, and we will do it again. Whatever it takes to protect our precious planet!’ roared President Attack.

The audience of delegates, and the faces that now peppered the LED screens, beaming in from their cameras around the globe, all stared at me – at us.

‘On the very eve of the two-hundredth anniversary of the first incursion, we triumph in capturing a new breed of terrorist – children! That’s who the terrifying aliens are recruiting now. *Our children!* And as we celebrate our new knowledge that there is a shell that protects us, we must also move on, so that we don’t get mired in the past – a weakness that would only be a victory for them.’ President Attack’s voice was shrill and full of venom. ‘To the future!’

The room erupted into a blast of white-hot noise as the Council, delegates and other attendees cheered, and the sound on the screens was turned up, so that we heard the voices of those myriad faces as they cheered too.

What had happened? How had this gone so wrong? It wasn’t just my hearing wobbling; my legs buckled and the guards helped me up.

‘Take the traitors away to rot!’ commanded President Attack.

‘My pleasure, sir!’ said Field Marshal Firework.

She clicked her fingers and the guards started to drag us out. I managed to spot Rainbow in the crowd, and realized it wasn’t just me who’d found Opi. She had been there too ... but she’d been airbrushed out of the film! *Rainbow, what have you done?*

I’m so sorry, she mouthed before I was dragged from the chamber.



CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

‘Your parents will be excruciatingly worried about you both – they’ll be absolutely frantic,’ muttered Uncle Fluro as he paced back and forth in the metal-barred prison cell he shared with me and Blaze. He had lost his monocle and waistcoat. His shirt was ripped and his hair tufted out at odd angles where he had pulled at it. Our wrist chips had been removed – no one knew where we were.

I still had my notepad and pencil – they hadn’t seen the point in taking away something they deemed completely useless – so I worked on Opi’s map while Fluro went on and on.

Opi. We had no idea where they had taken Opi, or what they had done with them. I could only hope that Opi was still alive – by working on their map, I felt I was doing my bit to make sure they were. It made no sense, but it was all I had to cling on to.

And rage. I was trying to work out the moment Rainbow had betrayed us all. Had she been in on it right from the start? I didn’t think so. Or was that me wanting to believe in her so badly that it was clouding my judgement? She’d seemed genuinely afraid when she thought her dad had been kidnapped ...

That was it! When she’d stepped away and I thought she was having a little moment, she’d then come back with her dad, President Attack, and *that’s* when she’d started behaving oddly. He must have said something to make her doubt us!

‘They’ll have seen you on their screens!’ Uncle Fluro mumbled. ‘I should have worked it out, had the sense to be more suspicious, but as long as I can still feel them ...’

He had been talking like that since we’d been put in the cell, clicking the fingers of his right hand, making very little sense. I tried again to make him stop pacing, and begged him to tell me what he was going on about.

‘Preferably in words of no more than two syllables,’ added Blaze from where he lay on the floor, his hand over his eyes.

‘I’ve been *trying* to tell you!’ Uncle Fluro exclaimed. ‘It’s not my fault you’re not listening properly!’

He caught my eye and saw that my face was beginning to crumple into tears.

‘Oh, Astrifer, I’m sorry, pet lamb – I’m not angry at you. This rage isn’t directed towards you; it’s at *them* and everything they stand for! Come here.’

He sat down and patted the floor next to him and I curled into his arms. Blaze sat up and leaned against him too.

‘I should have known the Highlighter Council would manipulate us into doing whatever they needed,’ said Uncle Fluro. ‘I went along with putting Opi in such danger! I thought we were clever enough to outwit them, that the truth would win out. But what do I know? I’m just a bumbling old man.’

‘No, you’re not,’ I said, my voice muffled against his chest.

‘You are old, though.’ Blaze managed a half-wonky smile as he said it.

‘Oi, young ’un,’ said Uncle Fluro, and he ruffled Blaze’s hair.

It broke the tension, and when Uncle Fluro spoke again his voice was almost back to normal. ‘You and Opi are entwined.’ He held up his hand and pointed to the three star freckles on the tip of his index finger. ‘Just like we are. You told me the star spores that gave you your freckles were made with their DNA, right?’ I nodded and Uncle Fluro continued: ‘The truth is, I was with you when those spores appeared from the sky. I touched some and got my own freckles. We’re connected through them. That’s why you could see where I was being held. You can see through Opi’s eyes too. That’s what happened when you had the vision of the stars; you were in Opi’s body as they made their way to this planet. You could feel it!’

I remembered how magical that had felt, and how that feeling had lingered ... until it had evaporated when my best friend betrayed us.

‘And because of my tiny link I can feel them too,’ said Uncle Fluro. ‘But the feeling’s growing weaker, Astrifer – just like their planet, and like ours. But I can still feel them, can’t you?’

I closed my eyes, felt for the bit of me that was made from stars. Then I opened my eyes and nodded.

Uncle Fluro smiled. ‘And while we can still feel Opi, we still have hope.’



CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

I must have dozed off in Uncle Fluro's arms, but my head jerked up when I heard footsteps approaching our cell. I looked up to find President Attack and Rainbow peering through. Her hair no longer flashed, her clothes were dishevelled, and her eyes were puffy and red, which only happened when she'd been crying.

'You didn't think for one minute you'd get away with your ridiculous plan, did you?' crowed President Attack through the bars. Up close I could see how his hair was dyed black, with grey roots poking through. 'Our radar sensors were triggered the moment their spores first made their mark on poor little Astrifer Nova eleven years ago.'

I blinked in surprise at this revelation.

'We've been monitoring you for years,' President Attack went on. 'And, I admit, I was curious. Why else do you think I'd let my daughter get close to the likes of you? I had to come and check on you on Allocation Day, in case the Eight Ball's decision would give me any reason to worry about you. I needn't have bothered; the sock factory was perfect for a nobody like you. Or it was until you decided to lead this pathetic little rebellion!'

'You knew about all this?' I said to Rainbow, and she shook her head silently. 'No? Well, how can I believe you now?'

President Attack spoke before she could respond. 'We thought it would be the ragtag group of space nerds who would cause us issues, led by this ridiculous Fluro figure. We never guessed it would be you, Astrifer Nova. Yes, we certainly did underestimate you.'

'Where's Opi?' I cried out.

'Oh, don't you worry yourself,' sneered President Attack. 'He's safe. Safe from prying eyes! But you, Astrifer, you are the surprise package of the day. We knew we'd capture him eventually; we just didn't realize you'd deliver him to us like a present!'

'*They!*' Blaze and I yelled, and surprisingly Rainbow too. Her dad turned and glared at her, and she immediately apologized and cowered away from him.

‘But it’s all lies,’ I whimpered.

President Attack laughed. ‘Who cares? It’s a perfect opportunity for the Neon Government – and you lot with your silly games played right into our hands. Why did you think everything was so easy? And of course I had my insider with you, not that she knew her part until the last moment. I never expected her to be so easily swept up, but we have had words since, haven’t we, dear daughter?’

He reached his arm out and pulled Rainbow closer to his side. Her face was expressionless, as if she’d zoned out to somewhere else. I almost felt sorry for her, but then I thought of her letting us go in front of the Council, knowing what awaited us, what it had led to, and I immediately scratched that sympathy out of my brain.

‘You lot could not have made things better for us, handing over the alien,’ said President Attack. ‘What do you call yourselves – the Star Rescue Society? By tomorrow, everyone will have forgotten that you ever existed. We’ll drop some digibucks in their accounts, unveil a new gadget, bring out a new viral advertising jingle, and – *poof!* – you’ll disappear into the past. And anyone who *doesn’t* forget you ...’

‘Will disappear, like we inevitably will. And it begins all over again,’ said Uncle Fluro with no trace of emotion in his voice.

Without warning, Rainbow sprang back to life and she stared directly at me as she leaned into the bars of the cell. ‘I didn’t know! Not everything, Astrifer, I promise you. Our friendship was real! I wanted to help! Astrifer, please!’

I stared over the top of her head, my face a mask.

‘My dad told me that Opi had manipulated you all, and by working with him to make you do the speech, I would be saving you!’ said Rainbow.

‘That’s what best friends do – they look out for each other! That’s what I was doing! I know I shouldn’t have trusted him, but he’s my dad! I thought he was doing the right thing – I *wanted* to believe him, that for once he was on my side! I know I got it wrong, but please tell me you can understand that? I need you to understand! Dad said he’d be easier on you, and Blaze, if it ended this way. I did this for you, Astrifer! It would have been so much worse if I hadn’t –’

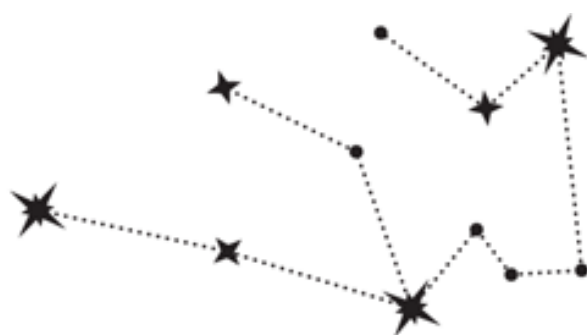
‘SILENCE!’ screamed President Attack, and Rainbow jerked back, as if she’d been hypnotized – he had so much power over her.

He turned his angry glare on me. ‘See? If you can do this to *my daughter*, a Highlighter Kid, imagine what damage you could wreak if you were left unchecked.’

Blaze went to speak, but President Attack continued spouting out his bile: ‘Yes, yes, I know, dying, our planet is doomed, we don’t want war, aliens are welcome, unfair world. Blah de blah de blah. But the people out there don’t know that, do they? What happens beyond the shell isn’t on their radar. And even if it were –’ he narrowed his eyes at me and my freckles – ‘do you even think they would care?’

President Attack straightened up and turned to Rainbow.

‘Let’s go. Let us leave them here to the only fate they deserve: to be forgotten.’



CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

When I woke up, there was a split second when I didn't remember where I was, and I half expected Mam to yell to check if I'd got up yet, but instead I saw the damp-stained walls of our cell. Mam – she'd be terrified by now.

'How long have I been asleep?' I asked Blaze, who was staring at me. I could see, and hear, Uncle Fluro curled up on the floor behind him, snoring.

Blaze shrugged. 'I tried to count seconds for a while, but then I'd get distracted and have to start again. I gave up. You've been out of it for at least four hours, maybe five, maybe more?' He pulled a face. 'I definitely think it's tomorrow now, which means ...'

'We're absolutely running out of time!' I moaned. 'Opi said their planet wouldn't last beyond today!'

'Don't you think I know that?' Blaze snapped.

I sighed. 'Please, let's not argue. I couldn't cope with that, not now.'

Blaze's face went red; he hated being told what to do. He was about to speak – when I suddenly cried out in pain and grabbed my cheeks.

'Azzy, what's wrong? Stop tearing at your face – you'll hurt yourself!' He tried to grab my hands, to pull them away. 'Wake up, Uncle Fluro! It's happening again!'

My freckles were on fire, as if knife blades were jabbing into my skin – just like when I first found the moss, and in the sock factory, and when I got my vision of Fluro in the storeroom. I could feel the patterns of the constellations pulsating across the bridge of my nose, up into my hairline.

Suddenly an image of Opi flashed on to my retinas, like when you've looked at a day-lamp bulb for too long and you blink and you can see things on your eyelids.

'Astrifer,' Blaze said in awe. Then he repeated my name louder when I didn't respond. 'Azzy, look!'

I held the image of Opi in my head and at the same time ... I could also see what was happening in the cell.

I gasped in wonder. 'Am *I* doing that?'

‘Yes, you are,’ replied Uncle Fluro as he drew himself up into a sitting position.

On the walls, on the ceiling, the floor, and reflected back and multiplied over and over, seemingly going on forever, exactly how I imagined they would look, the constellations on my face had become burning pinpricks of light! Somehow, I’d brought the stars from the galaxy beyond into our cell, and the three of us gazed around in complete delight and wonder – no one more surprised than me.

‘What does it mean?’ asked Blaze.

‘I don’t know,’ I said ... but maybe I did. I remembered Opi staring fondly at the star on the thirteenth panel in the ceiling of the SRS – home, they’d said. I navigated the sky with my mind, like I was following the map I’d been sketching but in my head, twisting and twirling the landscape of stars, until ... *there!* I thought I could spot it – Opi’s planet, Opiuchus! I honed in on it, and it began to swirl, then the view bounced back out to Earth, to the exact coordinates of where we – and Opi – were being held, and then back to Opiuchus, as though showing the view of a comet careering along a pre-ordained path through the sky.

‘It’s the connection,’ I muttered, concentrating on holding everything in my head. ‘With Opi.’

‘It’s beautiful,’ whispered Blaze. ‘I’ve never seen anything like it!’

Coordinates danced in my head, and I groaned – I couldn’t hold this much longer. The vision faded before I was sure I had managed to send out a message. I could only hope that I had somehow transmitted our location, not just to Opi’s planet, but to the SRS too.



Time ticked inevitably and desperately onward.

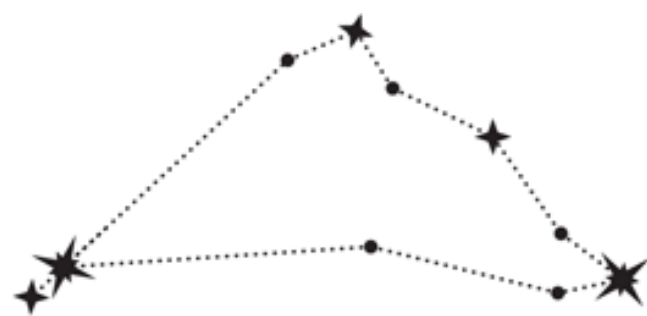
After the wonder of my freckles becoming stars, and the SOS message I thought I’d managed to send, we were giddy at first, letting ourselves wildly imagine that a rescue team would arrive at any moment. But as the hours ticked on, hope faded and, instead of elation, our mood turned to despair. I felt an ache deep inside, right where my shoulder blades met.

I focused on a spot on the wall, desperately needing to concentrate on something to stop my mind spiralling out of control. One of my tricks was to focus on my senses. I started by counting five things I could see.

One: the perfect ninety-degree angle where walls and ceiling met.

Two: Uncle Fluro's moustache, which could do with a good comb.

Three: the burning orange line that was moving steadily up the middle of the wall.



CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

‘Blaze, Blaze! Wake up!’ I leaped over to him and shook his shoulders.

At last, he sat up, cross and bleary-eyed. Uncle Fluro was up too, staring at me.

‘Astrifer, leave me alone,’ Blaze said groggily. ‘Why don’t you – *Whoa!*’

‘So you can see it too?’ I said.

The three of us watched, transfixed. Once the moving burning orange line reached about a metre high, it turned to the left in a wobbly right angle, then continued across for another metre or so, and then dropped back down towards the floor. The wonky glowing square pulsated for a moment – then sparks flew and we dived out of the way as the section of wall flashed blinding white and disappeared into dust without a sound.

Through the smoke, I saw someone enter the cell, goggles on, blowtorch in hand. As soon as the air cleared, I saw her face beaming at me. *Doris!* She held a finger to her lips, motioning us to be quiet.

I ran straight into her arms. She caught me and barely managed to stay upright; something solid held her up. Built like a wall of bricks, Slugger was there, poking his head through the hole and holding out his arm to support her.

‘If you’d let me use the torch, at least I could have fit through properly to say hello!’ he grumbled.

‘My friends, you came!’ Uncle Fluro whisper-shouted with sheer joy.

‘Me too,’ said a voice I knew well, even in its current timid and hesitant form.

‘What’s *she* doing here?’ I growled as Rainbow Attack poked her head underneath Slugger’s through the hole.

‘OK, everyone out!’ hissed Doris.

Slugger and Rainbow backed away and everyone crawled out – everyone but me and Doris.

She gave me a hard look. ‘You and me need a *quiet* word, hinnie.’

‘No,’ I replied. ‘What we need to do is rescue Opi and open the shell before the galaxy is destroyed!’

Doris nodded. ‘Aye, that’s true enough, but you’re no good to anyone in this state, all wide-eyed and fingernails at the ready.’

I went to protest but realized I was holding my hands as if they had claws, and I quickly hid them behind my back.

‘Want to know how we found you?’ said Doris.

‘Because of the SOS I sent to you! Come on, let’s go! You’re wasting precious time!’

Doris looked blankly at me. ‘I have no idea what you’re going on about. We found you because Rainbow had the courage to run away from her dad, to come and get us, even though she knew we would be furious at what she’d done. She smuggled out blueprints to this place on a data stick. Do you know what they would have done to her if they had found that on her? We came up through old tunnels, from the olden days when underground Sky Shuttles ran. Earth Core Shuttles? Underground Shuttles? I’m losing my thread! Anyway, she risked her life for us, for *you*. There are guards with guns – *real guns*, not stun guns – stationed at the end of this corridor and they have no idea we’ve busted in here. And I’d like to keep it that way.’

I couldn’t take in this new information about Rainbow. ‘But I ... we ... I – she *betrayed* us!’

‘You’re right – she did,’ agreed Doris. ‘And she’ll have to live with that for the rest of her life. Rainbow betrayed us, but *her father* betrayed *her*. Imagine your dad doing that to you.’

I thought of the pancakes Dad made us on our birthday morning, and how he cheered me on at the Work-path Allocation Ceremony, how he’d always loved me and always would, with his whole heart, exactly the way I was.

Rainbow had never had that.

I tried to understand what Doris was telling me. ‘President Attack is a bully and a tyrant to the world around him, even his own daughter. He had her terrified, but still she overcame that fear and gave up her only family to save her friends. That’s something, isn’t it? Something a little bit wonderful?’

Doris grabbed my elbows and looked me in the eye. ‘Yes, indeed it is wonderful. People like President Attack think that people like us can’t do anything of merit, can’t achieve anything, so they hide us away. But we can and *do* achieve, quietly, without fanfare, often with help and doing things in

unexpected and different ways. Ways that work for our bodies and brains, not ways that have been forced upon us by a world that's been taught not only to overlook and neglect us but to actively fear and hate us. Rainbow has broken away from that, and that takes courage, Astrifer!'

I went to interrupt, but Doris stopped me.

'Hey, pet,' she said. 'It's not often I get to spout off like this, so wait until I'm done, and if you still want to say whatever is hurtling round your brain, you can do so then. Deal?'

I found myself nodding, realizing that what she was saying made perfect sense. How I'd finally felt like I had found a home at the sock factory, a community, being in a place where I was understood and valued. And Rainbow had never had that, not for who she really was: a mainframe-hacking legend and a great best friend who had always stuck up for me.

'You've made some mistakes, right? Said some terrible things that you thought you could never come back from?' said Doris.

I thought about how quickly Uncle Fluro had forgiven me, and nodded.

'Rainbow made the only choice she thought she had, and it was to try to make the outcome better for you. Her whole life she's lived with her father's views, yet she made friends with you anyway. In you, she found a friend she could trust, not someone who was only hanging out with her because of who her dad was. Poor lass, I wouldn't swap my life for hers in a heartbeat.'

I felt the same way. I loved my wonderfully messy and ridiculous family, and my wonderfully messy and ridiculous body and brain – and then a thought thundered at me like an oncoming Sky Shuttle in a head-on collision, *kapowing* my brain cells into life.

'That's how we win,' I whispered.

'What's that, pet?' Doris held her hand to her ear.

'That's how we win. We show the world exactly who we are.'



CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

We were all back outside the Seed Research Society HQ door, in the Museum of Trees, which now had a ruddy gigantic hole in the ground floor and direct tunnel access to Highlighter HQ. Or at least it did until Slugger backfilled it to stop them finding us.

I noticed that the words SEED and RESEARCH on the sign had a line through them and STAR RESCUE had been written above them in pink marker pen, in writing I recognized. Rainbow had done that.

No matter what Doris had said, I couldn't bring myself to completely forgive Rainbow, nor trust her entirely yet, not until Opi was back safely beside us.

'Did anyone from the sock factory come?' I asked. 'Are they inside?'

'Yes,' said Doris, but she didn't go to open the door. 'So ... a few people came when they saw your address to the Council. And then they told us about others they knew who supported you, or – like Bolt and Flame – had worked out the truth in their own way, or at least some of it. And then more arrived who'd noticed that either they or their family members were having breathing difficulties. You being their canary really resonated, Astrifer! Your words were far more powerful than you knew, more convincing than President Attack could ever have imagined – they really made a difference!'

I couldn't take in everything Doris was saying and I went to open the door.

She continued. 'They came here to help save our planet, to save Opi's planet. They came because of *you*. They wouldn't all fit in there. They've been waiting for you to get back.' She turned me round and behind me, standing in a line along the inner gallery, there were so many people! Some that I recognized from the sock factory, and many I didn't.

'Matty!' I exclaimed, spotting his bright yellow flower brooch and glad of a face I knew to focus on.

'Matty designed the blades for the digger we used. Couldn't have got to you in time without his help,' said Slugger.

'Thanks, Matty,' I said shyly.

‘I did it because you made me feel brave, part of something bigger,’ Matty replied, and he beamed at me. I didn’t know where to look.

I was flabbergasted. I’d thought maybe ten people would come if we were lucky; there were at least one hundred people here.

‘How the heck –’

Before I could say more, I was ambushed in a two-sided hug as Mam and Dad pelted over to me, grabbing Blaze in the process. I practically got what little breath I had knocked right out of me!

‘We are *so* proud of you,’ Mam said, before covering my forehead in kisses. For once I didn’t shove her off. ‘Look at all these people,’ she added, gazing round in wonder. ‘Here because of you! Oh, and Dad made you this.’ She handed me a gold sequinned pillow.

I tried to hold my face together but I was horrified by the shiny sequins.

‘No!’ said Dad. ‘That’s not the present – that’s the wrapping!’

I unfolded the gold sequinned fabric and inside was a T-shirt, hand-sewn, big and baggy, no Lycra in sight. I could see the stitches, unlike the laser-finished stuff in the Sky Malls. It was in the softest shade of lilac I’d ever seen and sewn on the front, emblazoned on the chest, was a four-pointed silver star.

I finally looked up, tears running down my face. ‘Dad, you made this?’

He nodded, wiping a tear away. ‘Your mam learned how to make dye a while ago, before you were born; Uncle Fluro had shown her which plants to use. Then we saw you all over the screens and we didn’t know what to do or what had happened to you, so, well, I started making this to keep myself calm.’

I handed Mam the gold material and pulled the T-shirt straight over my head. ‘Thank you, Dad! How does it look?’

‘Made to measure,’ said Dad, beaming.

‘Perfect, it couldn’t be more you,’ said Mam.

This time it was me who ambushed them in the hug, leaping on them, yanking my arms round their necks and gathering them towards me. I never wanted to let them go.

Blaze gave Dad a fist bump. ‘It suits her.’

Then Dad dragged Blaze into our second hug. Uncle Fluro looked left out, so I called him over to join in too.

‘I’m really proud of both of you,’ Mam said to me and Blaze, and then turned to Uncle Fluro. ‘And *you* are never to do anything so dangerous

without telling us beforehand ever again!’

She let us go and turned to a random stranger next to her. ‘That’s my daughter and son – aren’t they brilliant? Are you a hugger? We’re a family of huggers. Bring it in!’

‘Mam, you’re mortifying!’ Blaze and I said at the same time.

Pretty soon, there was a gigantic hug occurring as strangers and people from the sock factory all piled in and said hello and introduced themselves to one another.

I noticed Rainbow standing by herself, and I thought again about what Doris had said.

Dad saw me looking over at her and came to stand beside me. ‘Hard to find, aren’t they? Friends. When you do, you should keep them close. We made an extra T-shirt. Thought you might like to give one to someone important.’ He handed it to me and walked back to Mam.

I took a deep breath and sidled over to Rainbow.

‘People came,’ I said. ‘I thought Doris and Slugger might get a couple of people from the sock factory, but I wasn’t expecting this.’

Rainbow nodded. ‘Loads of people saw you struggle with your speech at the podium, saw you fighting on, regardless. I think they knew that if you could be brave, then they could too. You mentioned the SRS was at the Museum of Trees –’

‘Did I?’ Everything I’d said on the podium was a blur.

‘So that’s where they came, in the hope they’d find other people like them, who believed you too.’

‘And they did,’ I said, still taking it all in.

‘And they did. Hey, what’s wrong?’ asked Rainbow.

‘But it’s not enough, is it? Opi came here thinking I was a leader, that I could gather an army. A hundred people against the whole world? I’ve let Opi down.’

Rainbow turned to face me. ‘Astrifer, you really are brilliant, you know. If anyone can work this out, you can. This is not nothing! This is a *beginning*!’ She dropped her gaze to the floor. ‘And I am so sorry, Furry Head.’

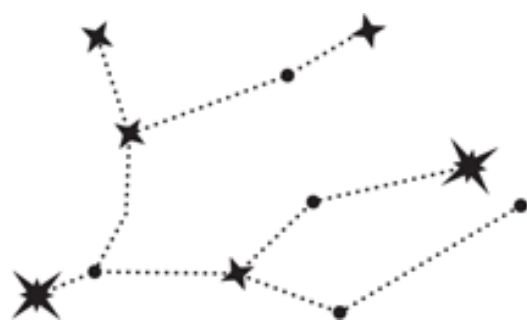
‘I know.’ I couldn’t help laughing. ‘Dad made us matching T-shirts.’ I handed hers over.

‘This is AMAZING!’ she said, yanking it on straight away.

When we saw each other, we both yelled, ‘Jinx!’

Doris came over. ‘I hate to break up the official reunion – nice T-shirts, by the way – but we’ve got lots of people here now. We busted you out of a prison and that’s not going to go unnoticed for long, so we should really think about doing, well ... something.’

‘And I know exactly what that is,’ I said with a grin.



CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

‘Come on, everyone,’ I yelled. ‘It’s time to move out! Our friend Opi needs us.’

‘What is she doing?’ Doris asked Rainbow, who pulled a don’t-ask-me face in reply.

‘A peaceful protest,’ I said. ‘We’re going to march through the streets to Highlighter HQ!’

‘You sure?’ asked Rainbow.

‘That’s what Doris made me realize, how we win. We show the world exactly who we are.’ I nodded with utmost certainty.

‘Sure thing, then, cap’n! Anything you say. You heard her, folks!’ Rainbow shouted. ‘Let’s get to it – we’ve got our planet to save!’

‘And Opi!’ I added.

‘And their planet!’ said Doris.

‘And the whole galaxy!’ said Slugger.

‘The Star Rescue Society is go!’ shouted Blaze as he joined us and put his arms round both me and Rainbow.

‘Best get a move on,’ said Uncle Fluro, rolling up his sleeves. ‘But first ...’ He scanned the crowd, then yelled out, ‘Has anyone got any moustache wax?’



‘Do you think this will really work?’ asked Doris as we left the museum.

‘I have no ruddy clue,’ I said, and put my arm round her. ‘This was the last of my ideas.’

‘Where on earth did you get it from?’

‘Those dull old history books she reads all the time finally came in handy for something!’ said Rainbow as she linked arms with me and grinned.

‘In history when people wanted – well, *needed* change to happen, they’d peacefully protest,’ I replied. ‘This way – no more hiding! We show the world who we are, how brave we are and what we believe in. Or who we believe in – namely Opi.’

‘Will it actually make a difference?’ asked Rainbow.

‘I have no ruddy clue,’ I said again, and clenched my jaw tight. ‘But we have to try.’

This was a big ask and I could feel the tension in the group. We were a timid bunch, marching along the street outside the museum, heading in the direction of Highlighter HQ.

‘This isn’t going to make enough of a scene, and that’s what we need,’ yelled Slugger. ‘Come on, Blaze, you’ve got some lungs on you!’ Then he started bouncing around and yelling, ‘Save our planet! Open the shell! Save our planet! Open the shell!’

Blaze looked at Slugger as if he was a complete dingbat, then shrugged, threw his arms in the air and started yelling too. I could hear Mam and Dad taking up the chant at the back of the pack.

Oh well. Here goes nothing, I thought ... and Rainbow and I started yelling too.

Soon, the whole group was chanting and that speeded us up, spread us out, made us brave enough to take up more space.

No one in living memory had seen anything like this before. People were stopping on the streets and filming us. Drones whirled above, and we soon had loads of people on the pavements racing along beside us, trying to work out what was going on. For each block we travelled, the crowd following us doubled in size, shouting out:

‘That’s the girl from the Council meeting!’

‘The one who did the speech!’

‘What was the word? *Alien*?’

‘Follow them!’

They started to chant too, and a newcomer held up a home-made placard with dribbly still-wet painted letters that proclaimed: LET OUR FUTURE BE INFORMED BY THE PAST – WE MUST REMEMBER!

And – oh my stars! – we were joined by even more people, many with their own chants and holding up banners they’d made. I couldn’t believe it!

Then we turned a corner and I gasped. Three streets converged at this point, all of them filled with crowds of people chanting.

Someone holding a potted plant came right up to me and yelled above the roar of the crowd, ‘Not all people can be so easily indoctrinated. We’ve been waiting a long time to feel safe enough to be ourselves. You’ve made us feel that way, thank you!’ Then they ran off, whooping.

‘I wish Opi could see this,’ I said to Rainbow.

‘This is what they predicted!’ she said. ‘I bet Opi can see it through you. Can you still feel them?’

I nodded, but the connection was getting ever more faint. Time was running out. I didn’t dare work out how long their planet might have left.

Rainbow snapped me out of my worry. ‘If you can still feel Opi, then they *can* see this, Astrifer! They know we’re coming for them, and that you’re bringing an army!’

More and more people holding more and more placards came. One declared: ALIENS ARE OUR FRIENDS! And another said: OPEN THE SHELL ... WE ARE AT RISK!! And my favourite was one that had been misspelled and said: OPI NEENS US! (The second N had been crossed out and they’d tried to change it into a D.)

Quite a few people wore T-shirts that had ‘TSR’ custom-printed on them.

‘What does that mean?’ I asked Rainbow, who’d now taken my hand to make sure we didn’t get separated.

‘No clue,’ she replied, but she tapped one of the T-shirt wearers on the shoulder and asked them.

‘We support the Starlight Rebel!’ they replied above the noise of the chanting.

‘The what?’ I yelled back.

‘OH MY GOODNESS! LOOK, LOOK, EVERYONE! IT’S HER – ASTRIFER! THE STARLIGHT REBEL IS HERE!’



CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

I couldn't compute what everyone was calling me. I couldn't get away from stares and points and hugs. My head was pounding from all the noise of the chants and cheers, as well as the usual blare and glare. Like always, I wanted to run and hide, but I carried on. This was our last hope to save Opi.

Uncle Fluro huffed and puffed his way over to me, his moustache once more super sleek. 'This is incredible, Astrifer! Huge congratulations!'

'Don't congratulate me yet,' I said to him. 'Anyway, it's all down to you.'

'Me?' He looked puzzled.

'If you hadn't encouraged me with my maps and research and history and old weird things, well, I would never have known about protests, would I? You've always been there for me, and I ...' I ran out of words. 'Thank you.'

Uncle Fluro nodded and took a deep breath. I couldn't work out whether it was from emotion or from walking.

'I don't want to upset you, pet,' he said at last, 'but I have to ask ... do you think Opi is still alive?'

I nodded. 'The connection. I can feel them still – just. But if they weren't, then ... I would know, right? I would feel something *break* or feel an emptiness?'

'Do we have much more time?' he asked gently.

'I don't think so.' I shook my head in despair. 'Not long. I can feel that the light beyond the shell is growing faint. It's not as strong inside me – that's all I know. We have to open the shell soon,' I said, hoping my eyes conveyed the urgency of the situation.

Uncle Fluro nodded again, his face pained. I'd never seen him so worried. He rushed off to confab with Slugger, Bolt and Flame. Slugger put his arm round Uncle Fluro and looked over at me and smiled, as if to say he'd watch Uncle Fluro. Doris, on the other side of them, waved.

Blaze came over and took my other arm, so that he and Rainbow were on both sides of me. 'Think we'll be like that lot when *we're* old and crusty?'

‘I hope so,’ Rainbow said, then she eyed Slugger’s jacket. ‘But with less cowhide.’

Blaze grinned at me. ‘Azzy the Starlight Rebel, eh? Do I have to make an appointment to speak to you these days? I thought I was going to be the famous one!’

I rolled my eyes. ‘Seriously, bro, you can keep it.’

‘No security so far,’ he said, looking around the jam-packed streets. ‘Think that’s odd?’

I gave his question some thought. ‘If the Highlighters do anything, they risk turning this into an even bigger spectacle, if that’s at all possible. They’ll be hoping this runs out of steam.’

Blaze looked puzzled.

‘That we’re a damp squib,’ I said.

‘Stop talking in riddles,’ he replied, exasperated. ‘Why would they be hoping we’d turn into a soggy octopus?’

‘It’s a historical term for a dud explosive device,’ I explained. ‘One that failed to go off.’

Blaze nodded. ‘Course it is, sis. How could I ever have assumed anything else?’ Not waiting for a response, he mussed up my hair and leaped forward to march on.

I thought about how this could multiply. If there were people like us here, then surely there might be people like us all over the world! And if there were enough of us, the Neon Government would have to listen.

I looked to Rainbow next to me, yelling her head off – so different to her dad, despite how he’d brought her up. Not *everyone* in power thought the same as President Attack and Field Marshal Firework, surely? I had to believe that there were good people in the Neon Government who saw opportunity and hope, not fear and hate. And if they could see that there were many people on their side, it could give them the chance to make their move.

When we reached the block leading to Central Square, security guards were waiting for us. There was a momentary hesitation, as if both sides were taking a breath, then we funnelled and streamed into the square. The guards didn’t stop us entering, like I’d feared, so they were obviously taking the don’t-make-it-bigger-than-it-already-is approach.

I lost hold of Rainbow’s arm and I could make out her hair twinkling in the distance, but I couldn’t get to her. There were so many people. Lots of

people.

I took a puff of my inhaler. Tried counting things. It was getting to be A LOT. Especially now that we were in more of a confined space. We took up the whole of the square and all the routes leading to it. The huge crowd directed their chanting towards the front of Highlighter HQ, which loomed up in front of us.

More security guards appeared and they lined the perimeter of the square, creating a barrier between us and the other crowds that were amassing down the streets, sealing us off.

This amount of people had to be having an impact here and all around the world. I felt boosted by the energy around me. We could do this!

My head ringing, I chanted louder – this was worth it!

‘Bring out Opi!’ I yelled. ‘Open the shell!’

The people nearest me took up my chant and soon we were shouting it out as one. *We were one!* A community brought together out of difference and love. All these people together in a shared mission – it was powerful and electric. I could feel the atmosphere almost crackle.

Then I looked up and my face fell.

None of the screens in the square were showing what was going on. No news stream. No feed from people’s phones and wrist tech.

A media blackout.

It was as if we didn’t exist.

I could feel the people next to me encroaching on my space, stealing my air.

Yes, there were people around us watching, but with the attention span they had, we’d be put out of their minds by the next advertising stream to appear on the skyscraper screens. If this didn’t go worldwide soon, we’d lose power and momentum.

An elbow rammed into my side, and my head was spinning from all the chanting. I tried to find Rainbow, but I couldn’t see her, and didn’t recognize anyone I knew in the sea of faces.

I’d brought all these people – who’d lived under the radar – to the attention of the Neon Government. I’d endangered all their lives! And for what?

The fight was over before it had ever really begun.



CHAPTER FORTY

I could barely see or breathe. Everyone was crowding in. The noise ... I couldn't make sense of it, couldn't pick out individual words. Colours swam together. My head felt like it would float away while my legs were so heavy I could barely lift them.

I pushed and shoved, couldn't even think to say sorry – *I had to get out!* I worked my way back through the crowd, trying to find pockets of space. I needed to escape!

When I finally opened my eyes, I had to blink to stop my vision from blurring. I wiped the sweat off my forehead. I was dripping, and my face pulsed with heat.

Pulsated.

I was at the back of the square, and there were fewer people here. The noise was less ... dull, as if everything was underwater.

I wasn't quite with it.

My face was pulsating! It wasn't from heat. My freckles – they were burning again!

I looked around, and it was like when you stand up too fast and you see specks. Brightness was everywhere; I was on the brink of fainting. I focused on my breathing and fixed my eyes on the ground in front of me.

I'd been wrong. The brightness wasn't everywhere; it was coming out around the edges of a manhole cover! It was twinkling.

Like stars.

There was no security here. The guards had moved round to the front of Highlighter HQ, where most of the crowds had ended up: the hardcore believers, rather than the hangers-on.

I glanced around to make sure no one was paying attention, then grabbed one of the poles off a street-cleaner-bot and wedged it into the edge of the sparkling manhole cover. I heaved with all my might.



I'd trekked along stinking tunnels for what felt like hours, but a time check told me it had only been a few minutes. The further I got from the noise, the more my breathing calmed, but as it calmed, it allowed my brain to think again.

Failure. Putting all those people in danger. For what? My friends ... The people at the sock factory ... Slugger had told me that people were relying on us to keep them safe.

And now I'd just abandoned them! My fizzy wrong brain had made me scared and I'd run away. What kind of rebel and hero does that?

Head down, I scrunched up my shoulders. Astrifer Nova getting too big for her boots. The Starlight ruddy Rebel? Who did I think I was, getting all their hopes up?

I'd let them down. Let them *all* down. Like I always did.

Mam and Dad – they'd been so proud, and look what I'd done. What I'd led them into!

I glanced up and the sparkles were back. I lifted my head further and saw there was a rectangular grille above me, and it glowed! There were metal rungs embedded in the tunnel wall and I climbed them, then took short, shaky breaths as I let go with one hand and used it to push and heave the metal grating above me. I managed to shift it enough that I could poke my head through to look round into the space above. The grille was on the edge of a rectangular room, one with no windows – then I spotted them.

Opi! I slammed my hand over my mouth before it came out in my out-loud voice, and I quickly crouched back down.

The tunnel must have led to under Highlighter HQ. Opi was in a secure Perspex box, just big enough for them to sit cross-legged. They still had their knitting, and I knew they had seen me because of the excessive eye-blinking, but they did a very good job of pretending they hadn't, and carried on clacking away.

My heart fluttered. Opi *was* alive – I knew it! But they were slumped against the side of the box and, almost like a tree losing its leaves in autumn, it was as if they were fading away.

I took a deep breath and raised the cover again, just so I could peer out.

Any hope I had faded instantly. At each corner of the Perspex box, Opi's prison cell, was a guard, and one of them was Purple Beard.



I was losing time. I paced back and forth in the tunnel below Opi. How could I be so near to them and yet no closer to busting them out? Frustration boiled inside me.

I climbed the rungs for the umpteenth time, desperately hoping to figure out a way to breach the box. Nothing! The four guards were there. No way I could sneak past them.

I was going light-headed again. *Five things you can see, Astrifer*, I told myself. *You're no good all stressed out. Mam says you can't think straight when you get like this!*

One: Purple Beard.

Two: strip lighting.

Three: Opi's scarf, all higgledy-piggledy, but much longer now. I could finally tell what they'd been knitting. I guessed they'd had lots of time to work on it, trapped there. *Don't think like that!*

Four: snack and drink table for the guards.

Five: oh, this was hopeless!

I climbed back down and paced some more. I bet if any of the others were here they'd know what to do. I got here by accident because I'd abandoned everyone, and I didn't bring anyone with me to help when I spotted the star glint.

Poor Opi, stuck with me! Why did they pick me? Out of all the people in the whole world, they chose me!

What a damp squib. What a mistake.

I shoved my hands into my pockets in despair and felt the little packet of seeds that Uncle Fluro had made me take when I was first granted access to SRS HQ.

I rolled the seeds in my fingers through the plastic, trying to ground myself.

No, it wasn't working. I needed to feel the seeds for real. I cursed myself for being a wussy person who needed to hold seeds to feel better. How unheroic could you get?!

I opened the packet and I heard something fall out. I scraped around on the floor to find it. My hand brushed a piece of paper. When I saw Uncle Fluro's handwriting, I stepped under the grille to get some light to read it.

POTENT – HYBRID SEEDS – DANGER

Experimental hybrid: Cucurbita maxima, Ziziphus spinosa, Salvia hispanica, Eschscholzia californica
Not to be used in tinctures. Knocked me right out and only came to when Doris shook me awake four hours later.

I laughed at his note and pictured the scene.

Hold on.

Four: snack and drink table for the guards.

Oh my stars. Could it work?



CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

I stamped on the seeds in the bag until they were all ground up, then hurried along the tunnel to the next grille and crept up the ladder, hoping against hope that finally my luck would change. I shoved the grille up a little so I could see.

Yes! It was just to the other side of the table for water and snacks. If I went up slowly, I'd be out of the guards' sightline.

No, that wouldn't do it – they'd see! It was too open.

I was so useless!

Hold on ... the connection. Opi had blinked; they knew I was here. Could Opi distract them?

I closed my eyes and thought about them as hard as I could. An image pinged into my brain and I held on tight, bursting it into colour and filling it with all the emotion in that moment. We were in the storeroom and Opi had leaped off the walls and into my arms. They knocked me to the floor and then they bundled up tight into my neck to be safe. I clung to the memory – how safe we'd felt for just that moment, connected to each other. My freckles began to burn. I got a tickle in my throat, but it wasn't my throat ... Then I heard Opi start to cough.

They were really going for it, choking. Opi was too weak for this, but I had no choice! I was worried, and so were the guards. They were moving towards Opi, distracted and far from their posts, all eyes focused away from me. This was my chance!

I took a deep breath to steady myself and then pushed the grille up, a little bit at a time. Each time I moved it, I was terrified they'd turn and I'd be spotted.

Purple Beard scratched his nose and I froze. My head and chest had already popped through – if he looked my way, I was done for! He'd see me!

He didn't look. *He didn't ruddy look!*

As quickly as I dared, without making any noise, I managed to get my whole body out. I crawled to the table and reached up for the bottle of

Lightfantastic, a sickly bright blue fizzy drink that Blaze loved. I knew the flavour was so strong that it would overpower the seeds.

Or at least I hoped it would.

My hands were so sweaty that I struggled to get the top off, but I couldn't be defeated by a bottle top, could I? I wiped my palms on my T-shirt and tried again. Success!

I carefully poured the crushed seeds from the bag into the bottle and gently swirled the mixture around. I placed it back on the table, then slunk back into the hole.

As soon as I made it back inside, Opi stopped coughing and the guards returned to their posts.

I waited at the top of the ladder, the grille balanced on my head, my eyes poking out.

I really hadn't thought this through. They might never have a drink. Or there might only be one of them who did, and then when they keeled over, the others would know something was wrong and they'd reinforce the guards and ...

What was that noise? A steady rhythm.

I knew that code! The Fibonacci sequence clacking on knitting needles. Opi was trying to get my attention!

I looked towards Opi. I knew they'd have seen what I was up to without moving their head, and I knew they knew I was watching them now. What did they want to tell me?

They put down their knitting and slowly tapped their nose.

How would that help me? I mirrored their movements and tapped my nose.

My freckles! I could feel them starting to burn and I braced myself for the pain. Opi was making another connection with me, but why?

I screwed up my face; they'd never burned as strong as this before. Suddenly I understood and I leaned into the pain and the heat.

The guards were starting to sweat, tug at the Lycra around their necks, wipe their foreheads, their skin pulsating with the heat that was coming off my face!

One of them moved to the table and grabbed the bottle of Lightfantastic.

'Oi, pour me one too!' yelled Purple Beard. The others agreed.

It was working!



My face had cooled as I raced out of my hiding spot and across the room to Opi. The guards were all slumped on the floor, and Purple Beard was snoring his head off. I grabbed Purple Beard's arm and held his wrist over the digi-lock on the clear box. It pinged green, then the door swung open.

'Opi,' I whispered. 'You're alive! I mean, I *knew* you were, but still ... I can't tell you how happy I am to be right!'

I expected them to be going straight at me. They didn't, but they give me a huge smile. 'Astrifer, my hero! I knew you were the one. You summoned an army!'

'You saw them all? But then I got scared and ran away.'

'You did what you needed to do,' replied Opi. 'You were true to yourself and leaned into you. And look what happened because of that. Because of you and your wonderful brain. You did it – you found me!'

'We're not free yet!' I said urgently. 'Come on – we have to get you out there, get you in front of the world. I had it all wrong – *you* have to be the one who speaks! Tell your story! Rainbow will find a way to hack the system!'

I couldn't work out why Opi wasn't bounding out at their usual careening speed as I held the door open. Now I was up close, though, I could see that their eyes were cloudy. And their skin ... instead of vibrant verdant greens and lush browns, it was paler, almost crackly. Bits of root seemed to have cracked off.

'Opi, what's going on? Are you OK?' My voice came out fast and panicked.

'Just a bit dehydrated, that's all.'

'Let me get you something to drink!'

'Not that sort of dehydrated. I think the word for it is *desiccated*. Your planet, all the light, the fake neon ... It was so much fun to play with, but I think it's drying me out. The effect of your planet is killing me. I need to get home, Astrifer, but I think it might be too late.'

'Nonsense,' I said, putting all my emotion and worry to one side. 'Would your hero get here too late? Never!'

I stuffed their knitting in their bag and popped it over my shoulder, then gathered them up in my arms. I expected them to be heavy, but lifting Opi was like lifting air. As I carried them towards the open grille, they rested

their head on my shoulder and their fingers on my neck. I tried not to cry as I realized that their fingertips had lost their gloop.



CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

We resurfaced at the back of Central Square and I braced myself for the onslaught of the crowds, holding Opi tight against me.

I barged through everyone, trying to make a path, but then people noticed who I was – and who I was carrying – and they started yelling for others to make way. Before long, a route cleared through the centre of the tightly packed crowd, all the way to the front. Opi bumped against my chest with each step I took, and I could hear them make little burbly moans.

Rainbow was the first to spot me. She came running over and helped me to lay Opi down on the ground. They gave her a huge smile and she took their hand.

I spotted Uncle Fluro, Slugger and Doris, and I went over to talk to them.

‘Bolt and Flame went back to SRS HQ. They hacked the mainframe – we’re in,’ yelled Doris over the crowd. ‘This is beaming all over the world!’

‘This is what can happen when people come together!’ shouted Slugger as he pointed to the huge screens that showed not only us but everyone around the world who was also marching.

‘It’s a ruddy revolution, and you’re our Starlight Rebel!’ yelled Uncle Fluro.

‘I found Opi – come on! But they’re really, really sick. Rainbow’s with them,’ I babbled. ‘I can’t believe the shell isn’t open, but that’s OK, I know what we need to do now. We need to get Opi to speak – that’ll be the final tipping point, once the world hears directly from them!’

I dashed back to Rainbow and Opi, and the others followed.

Blaze was kneeling beside Rainbow. He’d taken off his precious Strikers jacket and had balled it up under Opi’s head.

‘You need to sit with them,’ said Blaze. ‘I don’t think they’ve got much ...’ Then he choked and couldn’t get the words out.

Rainbow hugged him, then squeezed my shoulder.

‘Opi’s fine,’ I said. ‘They just need to talk to everyone, and then –’

Rainbow shook her head. ‘You need to stay with Opi, now, before it’s too late.’

No, I thought. No! Not when we've come this far.

I heard a weird moaning noise and I realized it was coming from me.

Blaze and Rainbow stood up and were joined by Uncle Fluro and the others. Uncle Fluro wrapped his arms round them both. They formed a protective horseshoe around me and Opi.

I knelt beside our new best friend. The crowd, as if understanding this was a private moment, kept a space around us.

‘Astrifer, do you have my bag of clickety-clack?’ Opi asked in a desperately quiet voice that made my heart ache.

I took their bag of knitting off my shoulder and handed it to them.

Opi struggled to get into the bag, but when I tried to help, they brushed me off.

‘I finished it. The scarf. It’s a bit waffly at that end – I never was any good at casting off, not even at home. One of my dads usually helped with that.’ They did a little choke and a tear popped out.

‘That’s not important,’ I said, trying to hold back my own tears. ‘Save your breath – you need to speak to everyone!’

‘Astrifer Nova, this is important!’ Opi said urgently. ‘You listen to me now! This is not a digital exchange, but I hope that’s OK. It’s an analogue swap.’

‘Opi, I adore you, but most of the time I have no clue what you’re going on about, and this is one of those times.’

‘Your first commission. You said people paid. I don’t have digital pay. I have scarf pay. Will that do?’ Opi held the scarf out to me with shaking hands. ‘For the map.’

‘Oh, Opi, but I haven’t finished it for you yet! It’s not complete! I couldn’t even do that right!’

Opi’s hand patted mine. ‘You did *everything* right, Astrifer Nova. You couldn’t have done one speck more. I’m so happy we picked you. You’re perfect, exactly the way you are. The only thing you need to do better is believe in yourself. Look how many people all over this beautiful planet believe in you – their Starlight Rebel! You must believe in you too.’

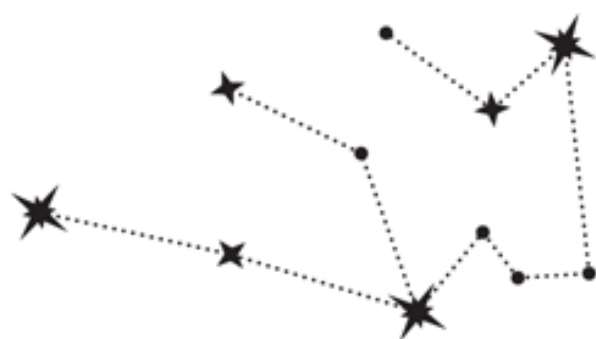
‘Hang on, Opi – I’ll finish it now.’ I scrabbled in my pocket and took my notebook out. ‘I’ll finish your map for you! Hold on! Please! You’ll be OK if I can finish it!’

Opi closed their eyes. I could barely hear what they were saying and I had to lean in close, almost put my ears by their lips.

‘I know the map will be the most wonderful thing anyone has ever seen,’ they gasped out. ‘Because it’s made by you, and you and your friends are the most wonderful people I’ve ever met. And because the map shows people exactly who you are.’

A little line of dusty particles blew out of their mouth, the sort that once upon a time honoured me with my freckles, and I watched as the trail rose gently into the sky above. I couldn’t follow it for long, as it disappeared into the neon glare.

When I looked back down, Opi had vanished.



CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

A haughty, nasal laugh brought me out of my freeze. I didn't know how long I'd been motionless, staring at the ground where Opi had lain. I must have wrapped the scarf they'd made me around my neck, because my hands were plunged into the soft wool.

I stood up. Opi's death had been beamed around the world and the energy of my friends, and the crowd around me, standing in complete silence, was the most powerful thing I'd ever felt.

I looked to the steps of Highlighter HQ and there were Field Marshal Firework and President Attack. Rainbow made a screaming run at her dad, but Slugger held her back with his one arm.

'Such histrionics!' President Attack exclaimed. 'How unbecoming in a Highlighter Kid. But don't worry – we'll have you *back to normal* in no time. Can't have a daughter of mine out associating with criminals and fugitives.' His eyes scanned me and my friends. 'Because that's what you are!'

At that moment, all the screens flashed and blared into a cacophony of light and sound. News channels scrolled across the screens.

THE FIRST MURDER IN CENTURIES!

PRESIDENT ATTACK RESTORES PEACE!

**NO NEED TO WORRY, FOLKS!
NG PLC HAS YOU COVERED!**

FREE HOUSEBOT UPGRADE AVAILABLE NOW!

BRAND-NEW DRONE RELEASED TOMORROW!

On every screen, beneath the scrolling banners, were our ID headshots and an image of my friends standing over us as I knelt by Opi, who was

splayed on the ground, except they'd used AI to change Opi to look like the purple-bearded security guard instead.

'Our head of security was happy to pose for that, to make up for letting you escape,' sneered Field Marshal Firework.

'But ... but how can you show that?' I gasped. 'Everyone just saw what really happened! With their own eyes! You can't change what they know they saw!'

Field Marshal Firework chuckled. 'That's where you are wrong, Ms Nova. We can show what we want.'

President Attack moved down the steps, closer to me, giving Rainbow a wide berth as she tried to claw at him. Mam and Dad helped Slugger hold her back.

The crowd stood firm behind me, but I could feel a wavering. Fear rippled through them as they looked at the screens and saw what their president was capable of doing.

President Attack smirked at me and spoke in a low voice, so the onlookers couldn't overhear. 'You see, Astrifer Nova, people like Field Marshal Firework and I hold the power. This is the way it has been for two hundred years, and this is the way it will continue. The more people see these images –' he gestured at the headshots and the fake scene – 'the more they will believe them, and forget what they actually saw. What they witnessed lasted a mere moment. What we broadcast will last for much, much longer. And the ones who don't forget? Well, they won't be a problem for long.'

'But our planet is *dying*!' I screamed at him. 'The shell is destroying it!'

'We take what we need to power this planet, raising it to glorious levels of future-forward technology, and now we are deemed to be a threat by those outside. But, as before, we struck first! The shell is absorbing the energy of the galaxy – powering our planet, not killing it, as you believe,' President Attack said contemptuously. 'And once it is done, it will be just us who remain. Weak people like you –' he glanced up at the crowd and curled his lips in disgust – 'like *them*, may perish before that point, but what's that to us? We will open the shell when we are ready. We will survive. People like us always do. And we will continue as we have always done. Because we can. And if we can, why wouldn't we?'

I was horrified, and caressed the soft wool of Opi's scarf to soothe me as I sorted out the words that were jumbled in my head. 'Because anyone can

see what you're doing is wrong! You're murdering innocent lives here, on your own planet, *and* those beyond – all because you think they might get you first? What's that all about? It makes no sense!

'And how would you understand anything about any of this?' President Attack raised his arms to the screens and they all pinged up my headshot, my freckles standing out – stark against my face.

'*You* are a mere sock-factory worker.' He spat the words out at me with utter disdain. 'We've proved it time and again. Who would ever believe in someone like you?'

I could feel my freckles warming ever so slightly as I stroked the scarf. They tingled a little more, and I felt soothed by stroking it, by the connection not just to my friend but to myself. I understood now that my need to calm myself like this was OK. That Opi's creation wasn't just a physical gift, but – for me – a gift of unlocking, finally, what was important and brilliant about myself.

Art and making and all our differences – they mattered. They meant something!

'Opi did,' I said quietly as I pulled out my notebook, which held their map that I couldn't finish for them in time. 'Opi believed in me.'

I wiped a tear from my cheek, but then just let them roll.

'They believed in me,' I said, louder this time. I raised my voice as I continued. '*All* these people believe in me.' I tugged the scarf tighter around my neck. 'We've created a community of people who care – who *believe* in our planet and our galaxy. My friends and my brother believe too.'

They all took a step towards me, their faith holding me up.

'And my parents,' I said, looking to them, my voice echoing around Central Square. 'They always believed in me, even when I felt I didn't deserve it.'

Mam and Dad beamed at me through tears.

'The only person who didn't believe in me was me! Well, I do, Opi – I do believe!' I cried out, looking to the sky.

Then I started drawing, did the only thing I knew I was magnificent at, that I believed in. Right there on the steps of Highlighter HQ, in front of the incredulous President Attack and Field Marshal Firework.

I wasn't talking to them any more. I was done with that.

I was drawing.

I was going to be a cartographer.

I was going to stand there and finish Opi's map.

Using my notes, I started filling in the details. Entwining Opi's world with ours. Then suddenly I heard the crowd gasp and Rainbow whispered to me to look up.

When I did, I laughed. It was beautiful!

Opi had been right. I did have magic in me, but not some fake tech – it was the magic that came from building a community around you. But not only that ... it was from self-belief, from finally knowing exactly who you are, and knowing that's enough.

I wasn't just drawing on the map, I was drawing on the shell!

I didn't need the pencil any longer. Images fired out of my brain and blazed on to the inside of the shell, covering it instantly in my doodles and drawings and wonders that were in my head, so that the whole world could see.

The elevator buttons that Opi had loved pressing. Doughnuts appeared around the edge of the lake that they'd told me about, where one day they would have spawned the next generation of Opis. Their dual moons, and ours. I'd never seen them, and I knew I no longer would, but I placed them together on the map.

They blazed on the inside of the shell like constellations.

I sketched the four of us – me and Blaze and Rainbow and Opi – on the electro-bike, but instead of travelling on the ground, I drew a skyway around our planet and we soared along it.

My freckles blazed as I drew, sparking out of me and up into the sky, bouncing off the skyscrapers, exploding into shooting stars.

I could sense Rainbow next to me and it felt as if her voice was coming from a distant galaxy: 'Keep drawing, Astrifer! Something's happening!'

I drew and drew, telling my story, my life-story map, Opi's story, the story of the SRS. What happened two hundred years ago and could never happen again. What our future could be, based on our knowledge of our past – on a foundation of kindness, fairness, care, knowledge, trees, sharing, all the things that my group of ragtag friends held dear and knew to be true, knew with our whole hearts and beings, that we were meant to live in a universe where everyone was different and treasured and valued.

It all poured out of me, and via my starlight freckles it emblazoned itself on the shell, and I knew that everyone here on this planet, and in the galaxy beyond, could *feel* what me and Opi *felt*.

We shared our connection with the universe.

They could all know how it felt to be underestimated or alone. How Opi felt to travel that great distance in fear but most of all in hope.

That togetherness was the thing that was most important – working together and looking out for each other, supporting and doodling and drawing, and making and resting and all the things that this fast world had denied us.

I slumped in exhaustion. People were shouting. President Attack was yelling for help.

Rainbow on one side. Blaze on the other. I could feel them lift me up.

‘Azzy, you have to see this!’ my twin whispered to me.

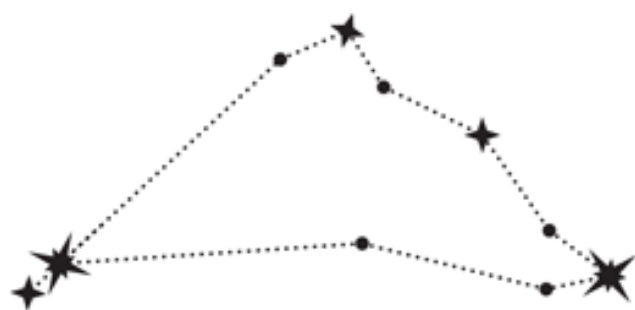
I held my head up and was met with the sight of the strikingly tall councillor with flashing flowers in her hair. She was standing on the steps of Highlighter HQ gazing up at the shell. She glanced at me and nodded.

I noticed President Attack and Field Marshal Firework being detained in light-cuffs, chained together by neon loops, Purple Beard leading them away.

‘Look up,’ urged Rainbow. ‘You have to look up! See what you’ve done!’

I did, and for the first time there was no blaring glare to catch me out. The neon had been switched off permanently.

My drawings burst into starlight as the shell around us exploded into nothingness, and the velvet far beyond twinkled into existence for us as my stars burned in the night sky.



Epilogue

3901 – four Earth years later

I stood backstage in my old school after this year's Work-path Allocation Ceremony. I was being congratulated by all the dignitaries, but I couldn't wait to get out to see my friends and the new recruits we'd just had allocated to the SRS.

It was unusual for someone of my age to be in such a senior position, but the world was slowly starting to come round to people being appointed for their skillsets and likes, rather than outdated beliefs like age, ability, race or class. It wasn't all plain sailing, and I knew it never would be, but we were slowly getting there. The hiccoughs along the way stopped us getting complacent.

'How does it feel to be fawned over?' asked Doris when I finally made it outside, stepping into the breeze and slight nip of an early autumn evening. 'Did you like my interruption?'

I understood how nervous students would be feeling as they waited to be allocated and in my speech I had told them I recognized that anxiety, that I had felt that way too. I shared what it had been like when I'd been allocated to the sock factory. Doris had heckled me from the front row when I said that.

'Slugger and Fluro are with the newbies,' Doris told me. 'Got some good ones. There's a visually impaired artist who makes incredible sound drawings,' she said, pointing them out in the crowd not far from us. 'I can't wait to see how our Chief Cartographer puts them to use!'

Doris gave my arm a squeeze and wandered over to them. I could see Uncle Fluro holding court with Slugger; he'd waxed his moustache for the occasion.

I plonked myself down on the steps. I hadn't learned to do much in a dignified way; I was still always tripping over things. These were the same steps I had sat on when I'd thought my life was over and I'd heard the roar of the crowd cheering for Blaze.

He came and sat on one side of me, Rainbow on the other.

'This time of year is hard, isn't it?' said Rainbow, and I nodded in reply.

It was the trees losing their leaves; it tugged on my heart and reminded me of our dear friend Opi. I pulled the woollen scarf tighter around my neck, and snuggled into it. This action always reminded me of the bittersweet moment when I'd used the memory of Opi burrowing into my neck to help me rescue them from the cage.

Almost rescue them.

My breath hitched. *Focus*. I stroked my scarf. Dad had needed to make a few repairs over the years for me, but that meant I could still wear it all the time.

We'd travelled to where their planet had once been, but in its place was an absence. A missing.

We may have saved ourselves, but we hadn't been in time to save Opiuchus, Opi's planet.

It was a hurt I could barely live with at first, but then, as the years passed, it didn't go away. It just changed to something slightly more manageable.

I lifted my head and let the breeze run over my cheeks and nose. I still couldn't believe how amazing it felt, to be outside, under real sky, with real weather – though I was in agreement with Matty, our Chief Engineer, drizzle was not a favourite.

Dusk was falling and stars were beginning to emerge.

'There's one of ours,' said Blaze as a rocket took off from the launch pad outside the old Neon Government HQ. It was a regular shuttle, part of the fleet that linked our solar system and supported the Interstellar Alliance that now made up our planet's governing body. Blaze was in charge of the training programme to get our astronauts ready for travel.

'You've got a right itch going on there, Azzy,' said Blaze as I scratched at my nose.

'Want me to lend you a hand?' asked Rainbow, looking up from the data tablet on her lap, where she was crunching an equation that was far beyond the scope of my brain to compute.

I couldn't get the scratch off my nose. Properly itchy it was. Suddenly I realized it wasn't just an itch. It was my freckles. They were –

Uncle Fluro yelled over to me, waving his hand, pointing at his fingertip. He could feel it too!

I stood and looked up into that vast unknown, so much still to be discovered and mapped, and I could feel my starlight freckles burn bright.

A message from a friend.

‘I can feel them,’ I whispered to Blaze and Rainbow. I pulled Opi’s old map from my pocket, the one I always carried with me in the desperate hope that one day I could give it to them.

‘Opi isn’t gone – they’re still out there somewhere!’ I said in my out-loud voice. ‘And, together, we can work out how to find them.’

Acknowledgements

When times are scary, as they are now, all I can do is write, and believe in love and hope. This is my protest song, and some incredible people helped me make it happen.

Thank you to the disability rights activists, protestors and artists: those on whose shoulders we stand, and those fighting today. Some of you are friends, all of you are allies – we are in this together. We should not have to still be fighting this hard.

This story did not begin as a protest. It began as a cavorting, epically ludicrous space opera. My brilliant editor, Linas, found the true heart of that story, and believed in my ability to tell it.

My husband, Mark, found the missing links to make this the story I needed to tell. And that's why it's dedicated to him. My brain and body often feel like they don't fit in this world, and he always – even when he can't understand why I'm doing something in a certain way – enables and supports me to be completely and utterly me. When you find someone like that, it feels a little bit magic.

My agent, Molly, is also a little bit magic, and always believes in what I'm doing with gusto and brilliant emails. Thank you.

Incredible art director and designer of stars, Alice has been with me since the start of my Puffin journey, and her work always makes me gasp. She completely understands everything I do and then makes it beautiful and striking. Happy tears every time I see a cover design and a section-break ornament. Wendy, copy-editor and supplier of brilliant notes in the margins and eraser of 'just' and 'so': you are brill and ~~just~~ get this. Please have a complimentary fart puff on me. Thank you both oodles.

Thank you to Helena Jayne for the astonishing cover artwork. When I met Astrifer for the first time, I cried – she's exactly as I imagined she would be.

Thank you, too, to the amazing schools and bookshops who invite me to come along and meet the next generation of epic humans. I have so much faith that they will transform this world; we just need to make sure they're enabled to do so. I've been supported by teachers, librarians and booksellers, and it means the world. Special shout-outs to Mr Palmer-Bell and Ms Blomfield at Castlevew; Sarah at Polam; Kim and Katie at Waterstones; Mel and Richard at Drake the Bookshop; Heather and Zade at Forum Books; and Emma at the Bound.

Thanks to my awesome family. I know I'm rubbish at phone calls, messages, and I have a habit of going off-grid when I'm writing, but thank you for always being there when I come back.

Fran, thanks for telling me to use big black pen lines. Sorry I haven't been able to do them yet – I'm trying! And for being the sort of person that will always tell me about the secret hot-chocolate machine when I'm having a wobble.

Kev and Steph, your friendship means the world – CCC forever! I never base characters on real people, but if I did, then Slugger and Doris may well be your long-lost relatives. I wish I'd been able to make them both half as cool as you.

Kaye, you are the Cake to my Lizard and I promise we will get to see each other again, hopefully before the year this book is set in.

I was able to spend time working on this book, and lots of other juicy projects, thanks to the Tees Valley Artists of the Year programme, which is funded by the Tees Valley Mayor and Combined Authority and the UK Government through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. It afforded me a life-changing year of support and dedicated time to write. Thank you to every single person I worked alongside, particularly Heather, Chris and Anna. It's vitally important to fund artists, and this project has been a game-changer and I'm really proud that it happened in Teesside where I live. I hope more places follow their example.

Main mega and final biggest whooping awesome confetti thanks go to the disabled and neurodivergent people I've been lucky enough to find friendship and solidarity with. You rock. Keep being awesome exactly the way you are – it's the way we win.

I will have forgotten someone vitally important – my memory is not the best – or maybe I haven't met you yet and you're about to be the most awesome person in my life? Both sorry, and thank you.

PS: AJ, remember you promised you'd read the acknowledgements first this time? Have you?

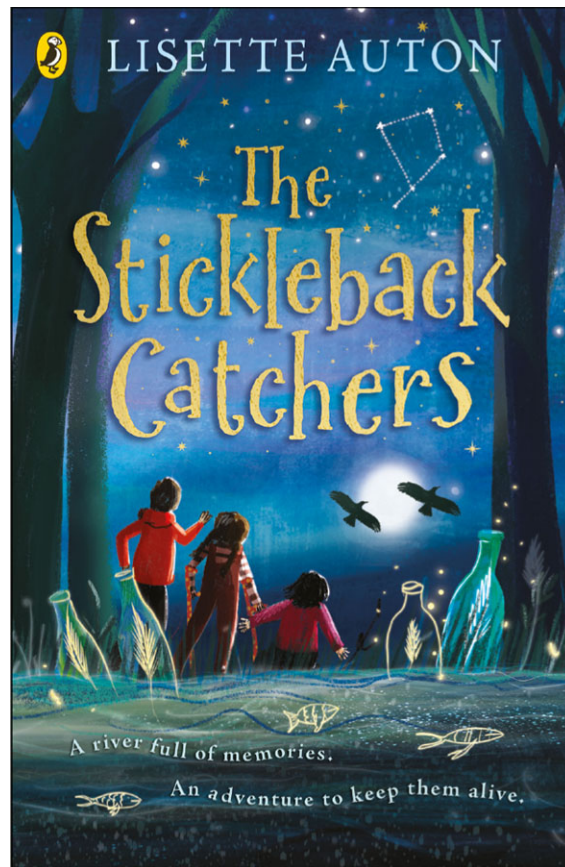
PPS: Any mistakes you find are mine alone. There would have been 3,000,000 more if not for the super-skilled and keen-eyed Team Proof, led by the wonderful Josh.

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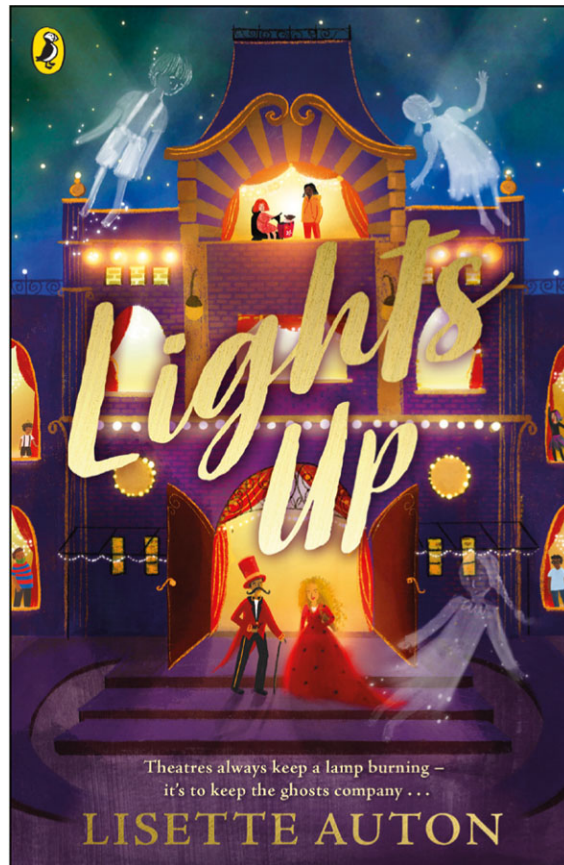
Alpha Lux was only a baby when she was found washed up beside a remote lighthouse. She was raised by a mermaid, and now the lighthouse is home for any disabled person who needs somewhere to belong.

But when Alpha realizes that her beloved family are in danger of being discovered by Outsiders, she must decide what kind of future she wants ... and what she's willing to do to get it.



Mimi adores her wild, fun, full-of-life gran, but she's worried because Gran has started to forget things. Then cracks begin appearing around their home, and a mysterious black crow arrives – and only Mimi is able to see them.

Mimi is determined to solve the mystery. Luckily she has new friends to help: Titch and Nusrat. Together, they're the Stickleback Catchers, solvers of puzzles and seekers of adventure ...



Hettie's grandad is gone. So is her favourite place in the world, the Arts Centre. Many years before, **Jack** is lonely too, but his life changes when he's taken in by a mysterious theatre troupe. And many years before that, **Araïne** is also struggling, and she resents the rich people she sees on their evenings out at the theatre.

In this magical story full of ghosts, theatre, love, friendship and family, Hettie, Jack and Araïne discover that they are connected in ways they never imagined ...



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