



Chapter 1: Entry

I'm aware. I'm awake. My breathing sounds loud. The space I'm in sounds big, so I'm not in the shuttle. I fall ... but only a short distance. My legs seem too long.

I feel around me. Carpet or something under me, my hands and my thighs. I don't hear Mongoose breathing beside me. I don't feel him.

Snap! I open my eyes. Mongoose isn't beside me!

I'm wearing a thin white tunic. Mongoose isn't beside me!

I kneel up. Stand. I'm in a group of animals, still-as-statues, sitting or standing or frozen in a leap. Each on its own brown carpet square on a raised area in a huge white hall.

What is this place? Where's Mongoose?

Tiled white walls. White ceiling. White floor below the ... carpeted podium?

Among the statues I see animals I know. There's a meerkat. A puma. A bear. A woodchuck. An orangutan. They are all life-sized.

No. They are all the size of human beings! There's a thylacine with a front paw that is a different brown to the other. In the square next to the place where I was, is a mongoose.

Sweat springs from me, is soaked up only where the skimpy tunic touches me.

Everywhere else it rolls down me. I'm clammy in seconds. My heart hammers in my chest.

The furry animal mongoose is up on its hind-legs and is wearing a sauger-hide belt with a curved panga [a large, broad-bladed knife used as a weapon or as an implement for cutting heavy jungle growth, sugar cane, etc.; a machete.] hanging from it. A familiar-looking dagger is strapped to its leg.

I see *my Mongoose's* leather pouch with oil stone and cloth in it nestle in the small of this mongoose's back. I'm positive that these are my Mongoose's tools and weaponry though my Mongoose keeps the pouch in his pack so I can hold onto his belt.

I want to touch the furry mongoose and I don't. What if it is cold as death? What if it is warm? All that fur. It looks fierce. Angry. Red mouth open in a snarl.

Behind where I was, is a meerkat. It wears similar weapons to Mongoose's weapons worn by the mongoose. Next to the meerkat and behind the mongoose, is an animal I don't know. I have too many mysteries already. I turn back to face into the direction that the mongoose stares into. The front.

In the square beyond mine I see the back of ... I walk round it ... a wild dog. A jackal wearing Jackal's gear, I fill in for myself. I walk on. In the next square is a woman with a blond plait. It is Isis. Leader of the smaller group that joined us in the Yellow City. She is herself. She never told us her Totem.

As soon as I think that, I'm crying. I know the animals. I'm spurting with tears. I jump back to the mongoose. Sobbing, I hug his knees. "Mongoose! Wake up, Mongoose!"

Finally I lie down. Curl around his feet. When he comes back to life, he'll trip over me and find me there.

In my dream, Mongoose wakes. He glances down and doesn't know me. He steps over me, hops down to floor level and walking toward one of the white walls, disappears into it.

I'm so frightened I shudder and wake.

The great white tile-shining hall is alight with a time of day I might as well call morning.

Mongoose is not breathing beside me. Then I remember ... he was standing. Without looking in his direction—I'm so so afraid—I feel for his animal-feet.

I don't feel him. The dream was real?

I stand up, the better to flick my gaze over the podium, animal to animal, corner to corner, end to end. He isn't anywhere among us. I sob.

I want to find him so desperately that my eyes want to bulge from their sockets trying to see him, somewhere, in this shining ... white ... nothing. I ignore the mirror newly installed opposite the podium because Mongoose is gone and what could possibly be more important than that? I call him and my voice echoes tinnily from the shining walls.

His weaponry and his pack are gone too. My voice clatters and breaks, and I fall to the carpeted podium.

All the time I'm noticing that there's no sound other than me crying. No change in the light surrounding me. There wasn't a mirror anywhere in the hall the first time I woke.

There is now, and no other change except that Mongoose is gone. I run my gaze over the

rows, everyone else is still here. All of them still in statue-mode.

I'm the only one awake. That mirror is meant for me to look into.

"To see how I have improved you"

I look up. See nothing but a white ceiling. Yet the words seemed to have come from up there. Is that something that a starship's AI does?

"I replaced your chip with a newer version so we can talk. Because I'm a girl and so are you."

The AI says all this using the voice of a smug little girl. I suspect something so dreadful that I am pulled to the mirror. I rise, walk, squat to jump from the podium, walk up to the silvery rectangle.

The mirror reflects someone I don't know. Almost I try to look beyond her.

"Isn't that much better?"

The young woman in the mirror is willowy, I think they used to call that kind of shape. The hem of her tunic brushes her mid-thigh and her legs are straight and smooth. No lumpy legs on this girl. Her tunic is cinched at the waist with a narrow gold belt and her chest, too, is well-proportioned.

I have the irrational desire to rip the mirror-girl's tunic off to see the real girl beneath. I twist and turn instead to see what her back looks like. Her hair falls in luxurious waves past her shoulders, in a pointed golden fall to the middle of her back. She makes me sick she is so perfect.

Her eyes are a piercing green. Her eyebrows are gold which means that all her body hair is also that same sickening gold. Forget seeing her naked. "No wonder Mongoose left without me. He didn't recognise me." I turn, walk, climb onto the podium and curl up in the mongoose's square.

"You aren't pleased"

I try to fall asleep. Maybe if I wake out of a different dream, Mongoose will still be here ... or we'll still be in the shuttle, him beside me. What is this place, anyway?

Wake. Am I me again? I stretch. My legs still feel too long and too straight. I run my hands over my breasts. Still too much flesh. I'm not myself.

"This is not the growth chamber"

I open my eyes. The light is dimmed. Other than that it's the same place. White white white beyond the podium. A heap of people gone.

In fact, only about half the statues remain. "None of my friends knew me or they would have woken me, got me to come along."

"Each is blind to the others"

Mongoose blind to me when he woke? Tears start for my eyes.

From the shadows in the corners come sounds of scratches, crying, swearing. "How do I

get out? How *do* I get out?"

How come *I'm* not blind to the others? But I don't ask it. I pick something global with which to test the mysterious entity. "This is how you make it night? Dawn? Dusk? How many hours between?" Silence while I look round.

Glimmer of the mirror. The situation is so unreal that for a second I think the figure studying its reflection is me. It has an animal shape, I realise. Straight reddish hair all over. An ape-like hunch. Serious disbelief in its stance.

Other people having the same problems means I'm not being singled out. Which is a relief and which encourages me to be reckless. I turn onto my side. "Not getting up till I am me."

I wake. Open my eyes. I'm surprised that I slept at all. I'm alone on the platform. Every other statue is gone, will I see them again?

My legs feel shorter. My breasts are bumps, how they should be. I roll over and up, survey the scene.

I'm not even wearing the bit of flimsy I had on before so I put on my pants and long shirt lying creaseless in front of me. "Where's my belt?"

"You came without a belt"

"That's true. I remember that now." Lotor's prison authorities took my belt before shutting me in the white cell. Long ago. I take up the shirt's hem and tie it round my waist. It makes me a capacious horizontal pocket. Not that I have anything to put into it.

My stomach rumbles. "Is there any food?"

"Not in this hall"

"Right." I bet everyone else asked that too. Pretty slim pickings before we came and it seems we were remade with that hunger intact.

Chapter 2: The Central Hall

The corners of the room, I remember, is where people got stuck. I approach the wall where in my dream I saw Mongoose leave. I walk with the pace he used. I shut my mind to the possibility I will bounce back from the wall.

Concentrate on walking in step with my dream-Mongoose. Walking far longer than should be necessary I am stopped by a horizontal resistance at waist level. I open my eyes.

I'm pressed against a handrail. I grip the places where Mongoose might also have held it. Many metres below a throng of people circles slowly round a mysterious mid point. Lucky the handrail was there or I would've fallen on them. Splat.

I've come to a huge place. As well as the crowd circling down below, I see a triple set of steel framed walkways to either side, with dozens of people popping in and out of doorways along these walkways.

My senses reel. I feel faint. I recall how hungry I am. How I have not had anything to drink in the last however many hours.

"Your blood is thick from dehydration. Your heart is finding it difficult to shove it around your body and get it up to your brain. Fainting brings your head to the level of your heart"

Well, duh. Wasn't I just thinking that? "So where can I drink and eat?"

Why did I expect an answer? I study the people coming out of the various doors either side of me. At last I see someone still chewing and wiping her mouth with a scrap of white. A serviette, I hope. She came out of the third door to the left.

I glance behind me to the place where I came through the wall. Panel of white. Steel pipe gangways make a U shape along an inlet in the building-like structure crenelating the walls of the central hall.

"Central hall" says the AI.

"Central hall of what?" I ask.

No answer.

Go to something else. The white panel I came through is the mid point of the U. The gangway I'm on is nearest to the ceiling of the great space. Remember that.

As I approach the third door to my left, the door slides into the wall.

I walk into the room beyond. The walls are lined with hundreds of little windows with food behind them. I watch people take out food. I try to lift a little door. Nothing.

"You'll need tokens. Get them at the counter at the back"

I don't much like the way the Arkship's AI now communicates with me. Different when it was just signals in space. It always chimes in a little after I have tried something. Or is that the idea?

"How else will you learn?"

Me learn with it doing its I-told-you-so stuff? How would I even imagine an Ark Ship AI

to sound? Something more ponderous? A bit like Thyal, perhaps?

A busty, white aproned woman behind the counter stands with her arms stretched, hands far apart on the much-scrubbed stainless steel surface. “You’ll be another of the intake from Lotor,” she says. “Hungry and with no credits. Knowing none of the codes for life either here or on the Ark-Ship. Knowing none of the manners needed to get on in the hall.”

I am totally astounded by her words...“either here or on the Ark Ship”... did I really hear her say them? I barely notice her sliding forward a fat little book of thick leaves, about the size of a ten-brick of dressed stone a forefinger long, wide and high.

“That should keep you until you can earn a few credits,” she says.

The pages, when I flip them, appear to be empty, unwritten on. I don’t know how it’ll keep me.

Here or on the Ark Ship, intrudes into my thoughts. Here is not the Ark Ship? Where are we?

No clues here. No clues in anything that has happened so far except ... the little girl’s voice that is not the Ark Ship’s voice.

My stomach feels so empty I have to attend. I scan people operating the food dispensers. None of them needs anything like tokens or vouchers which is the only thing I can think of that the leaves of this book might be.

I weigh the book on my hand. “I’m supposed to eat it?” I say meaning to be facetious.

“I would if I was as hungry as you look to be,” says the woman.

Huh? Is she joking? If she is, maybe she joked about *here or...* But she just keeps wiping the counter where I leaned on it.

She’s not joking. Or she can keep a straight face. I see someone slurping from a box. Put the other thing on hold. “Could I bother you for a drink?” I ask her.

“Fair enough I suppose,” the woman says. She slides a box of liquid over the counter. She sighs. “I should probably start you a tab. What’s your name?”

My stomach growls.

People behind me laugh.

“Forget it. Go. Eat. Drink,” the woman says.

I curve out the door. Is there anyplace to sit behind something out here? No way do I want to be seen eating the leaves of a book. I’d like to hide somewhere, and more than anything keep a lookout for Mongoose among the crowds wandering the ground floor.

I suck up the drink through the straw. A sweetish sour taste. On the side of the box a spherical object, with a pimply skin, orange. I squeeze the sides of the box as I saw someone do in the whatever. “What is that place where I got the food?”

“The canteen”

Oh good. An answer. In the canteen. Still the childish voice that no one else seems to notice. Or can’t hear. What do I know. With my stomach mollified with the orange drink, I’ve got time to find a place to think, and keep watch.

At the ends of the U of the gangway it splits. Half becomes a ramp curving down to the middle level. In the curve is a vertical bar. Some people walk down to the middle gangway along the ramp, and some people slide down the vertical bar. They go past the middle and lowest gangways, thump down onto the ground at the bottom.

It looks like natural stone chipped from a mother rock, and what does that say for us being in space? I don't know. I make for the pole. There look to be hiding places under the gangways.

Stonecrete-like stanchions hefty enough to hold up the weight of a roof? On a spaceship? I don't recall anyplace like this in the plans of the Ark Ship that I studied. I slide in behind the stanchion nearest.

"Oh no you don't," says a small person. Has to be small when she is waist-high to me. "This is my place," says the little girl.

I'm not in the mood to socialise. I don't have the energy to be kind. This is not my reality. Standing up again, I check the rest of the structures by looking along the row. All of the stanchions have someone behind them and all these small people are unkempt and have bundles with them. Young and powerless. Sleeping rough on a spaceship?

"Am I?" I ask aloud. "Powerless?"

No answer.

Typical.

The big maelstrom of crowd that I was going to study to find Mongoose among them, circles out there in the three storey high open place. Under the gangways and among the stanchions wander only a few odds and kids.

Correction. Under here, everyone moves purposefully. They are staying or going. And if going, definitely from A to B, whatever the A and B will turn out to be. I drift toward the rear wall.

I'm still clutching the food book to my chest. I rip off the cover and fold it into my mouth. Hunger will trump pride as they say. Is it food? I let it sit on my tongue. My mouth salivates but what does that prove?

Then I get a taste. Mushroom soup. Yum. I chew. Swallow. Rip off the first page. Stuff it into my mouth. Chew. Gingered rice. Swallow. Eat eat eat. Half the book is gone. Should save some.

The kid pulls at my shirt. "Can I have some?" I give her a leaf.

"One credit" says the girl's voice.

I consider that voice. Doesn't now sound like it comes from the ceiling. Ceiling is too far away. The wall? Still outside me, though everyone around me ignores it. Would I if a voice was within hearing-distance?

In the way of testing a game, I press another leaf onto the kid. She takes it, runs to the next pillar and stuffs it into that kid's mouth. He comes with her. They grab me together, waist high and push me backward. The wall opens. I fall into a new place.

"Meat!" someone shouts.

“Not meat,” says the invisible girl. She is in the ceiling. “Inadmissible loot.”

“Scat,” says a man with a bull’s head—pictures I’ve seen—no bulls on Lotor—sitting at a cafe table just beyond the permeable wall. He heard the girl? He’s presumably talking at me still lying on the rubber flooring where I fell. What is there to get up for? I’m very familiar with the place. Looks just like a prison. Taller than the one I’m used to, cells above cells. I get a crick in my neck staring up. Lots of interested animals staring out, both human and actual. Nobody I know.

“Help her on her way,” says the bull-man.

A couple of men very like upright wolves leap forward. They grab me an arm and a leg each and heave me back through the permeable wall. As if I am a stone-ball I am aimed between the stanchions. Unlike a stone-ball, which rolls, I skid along the floor.

“Two credits”

“If you say so.” I am totally in luck that my shirt is rucked up. It will cover the graze in the seat of my pants. At first I don’t realise that I’m stopped by the press of the crowd, their legs, at the edge of the perambulating crowd that I intended to watch for Mongoose.

Mongoose please please be in there and please please recognise me.

The crowd moves its legs and keeps walking. It divides around me like water and then I’m *in* the crowd. A part of it.

I get up, walk with it, toward where they are all walking. But I can’t see where that is. I’m too short. I begin to edge out.

“Three credits”

I have no time to generate any ideas as to what system is operational here. I could insert a swear word every second word to relieve my frustration but have no time for that either. Then I’m out of the crowd and quite near to the entry to a ramp. I skedaddle up faster than the prevailing pace per hour which is no more a snail’s.

“Four credits”

Not one single person is sitting out on the ramp. I make my way a bit higher, to where I can’t be pulled down by someone jumping up and grabbing my feet, for example. Sit down with my legs either side of a metal guard rail stanchion. Tuck my shirt under my almost bare sit-bones.

The first person I see is a nude mongoose. As in, one that is not wearing Mongoose’s gear. I abort the waving I began.

“Your Mongoose is too smart to hang with the Indecisives”

“What does that make me?” I don’t care that I might sound churlish. There isn’t enough *reality* in the scene to be able to make any sense of it.

“Not smart enough. Indecisive. Wishy-washy. Take your pick”

I argue. “How is looking for Mongoose indecisive? We’re in love. We got married before take-off. We belong together.”

“I picked you to live forever. Like me. We’ll be company for each other. I picked your

Mongoose to be a fighter and die an interesting death. I was so bored before all you people arrived.”

Good thing I’m sitting already. My heart only drops to my belly because that’s as far down as it can go. I moan. Perhaps I say his name.

“Five credits. He is at the training I set him”

I’m slightly heartened then by the thought that if Mongoose is getting credits, we might meet at the canteen. Two heads are better than one?

Up to me to learn the system in the meantime. I take a leaf from the edible book still hanging in my shirt neck, stuff it into my mouth and start thinking back through the credits I have so far been awarded.

First the one when I gave the little girl a leaf. None for the second leaf. The leaf I’m chewing doesn’t taste like anything. For the second credit I didn’t do anything. Was it a ...? I chew and chew and the leaf becomes rubbery.

Third credit was when I started edging from the crowd. By now the leaf is a stodgy grainy gruel filling my mouth. I stop chewing. Fourth credit I ran up the ramp. No way can I swallow. I choke and retch and spit the stuff out beside me on the ramp’s downslope.

“Five credits”

Could be the same sort as the second one, I think, as I summon up spit to swill out my mouth. Don’t want to count either of them but keep that a secret for now. I should be able to get some *real* food with three credits.

The canteen is on the uppermost gangway. I make my way there, keeping out of the way of any children. I front up to the counter. “I have three credits?”

The woman hands me five tokens. “Don’t waste them.

Huh. Waste on what? With trembling fingers I feed a token into a slot, open a little door, and grab a rolled pancake stuffed with a filling resembling spinach and soy-cheese. When in doubt get something you’ve at least seen before.

I gulp it down in half a dozen bites, without tasting it, just registering there’s something real in my stomach. I go through the performance again for a second spinach and soy-cheese roll. I don’t see any boxed drinks. I look around when I hear someone slurping something. He is squeezing the contents of a balloon into his mouth.

“Credit”

I get a balloon. Guess I’m keeping count on my own now. Two tokens and one credit. Burp. Oops. Then it’s me walking out wiping my mouth with a serviette, clutching the balloon and the second rollup.

3: Thresholds

The gangway oh the gangway. I walk along its third level iteration nibbling my spinach roll-up and sipping from the water balloon while I should be attending to everything under the sun, or rather the big light source up in the ceiling of the hall masquerading as the sun, that might/may/will help me choose a reality to be in.

I would like to cuss and swear but in this case that will probably not help, too many people around me. People who I might still need to impress even though they may be Indecisives, according to the electronic voice I hear. And who'd want to be an Indecisive if they could be the other sort. Like Mongoose, wherever he is.

Stop. Stop thinking about him.

Concentrate instead on the kind of people waltzing along the gangway even as I myself am. Sneak peek glances into spaces where doors slide open and shut, allowing the ingress of just one person flitting in and or out. Just passed a green room. Glowing green reflections. Not like it was vegetation green. But what do I know? I slow whenever I near a door.

Haven't had a credit for a while, probably I'm attacking this in the wrong way. Just go in? Stand on the sensi-mat and wait for the doors to slide apart? Try that.

Nothing. Try the next one. With the prison-like reality on the lowest floor, it makes me wonder if these top levels are rewards. The people going into them certainly wear smug self-satisfied expressions. And they're whipping in and out as though they're trying to keep the loiterers out.

My next surprise is that I'm not the only loiterer up here. I stop by the guard rail to study that discovery a while. Across the hall, other side of the U, a couple wistful characters slow-foot past a door that just doesn't open.

I almost hurry over there. What if they are both let in before I get there?

"What's in there?" I ask.

"That's what he's trying to find out," says the girl. "I've told him and I've told him. Can't see from out here. He doesn't trust me."

The boy doesn't look at me or the girl. He has his bottom lip between his teeth and looks as if he might bite someone's head off. Next time the door slides open, he slips through the gap. I blink. Did I really see the girl push him? A humungous roar escapes before it slides shut.

"We can only hope the poor chap ran between its legs," the girl says. "The entity had no time to transform him. Move on?"

I follow her to the next set of door. She drops back, comes level on my other side. Naturally I move nearer the wall and doors so she has more space between herself and the guardrail.

<Credit>

Two tokens and two credits. Why now a credit and not when I saw the child push her companion? I loiter and she loiters with me. The door slides open invitingly and shuts again before we have time to see anything inside.

"We need to get closer," the girl suggests. "What I have to tell everyone," she adds artlessly.

She comes to walk inside the perimeter of my personal space and I obligingly shift over until I am quite close to the portal we're studying. She looks completely without guile but I suspect her anyway. While I'm trying to see through a doorway I'm turned away from her ... will you credit me for noticing that?

No answer.

The getting of credits, is that the game? After making sure there will be a wall beside me, I drop back. The girl stops too. "What's the problem?" she says.

"How many have taken your suggestion?" I say.

"Probably about a dozen. See, what I do ..."

"I saw what you do, make up their minds for them by pushing them. What do you get out of it?"

"Credits," she says so promptly I know it must be true.

Huh, she gets credits for every Indecisive she helps into a reality?

<She has a fine judgment>

"And information," the girl adds. "That roar just now. Would you want to leap through that door? Boys tend to want to."

You hear that? Bet you didn't know about the information. I frown for the sake of camouflaging my intentions. "You can repeat the doors you've already investigated?"

She indicates the row. "Just these six give me a good living. All the rows have their keepers." **[End April 22 snip]**

I cross to the guard rail and study the gangways across the void. They all have their keepers, as the still nameless girl said. Even the ground floor level has its keepers, I realise, recalling my adventure earlier.

"We are all very suspicious," she says from behind me. "As in, anybody like you comes who doesn't jump, might be after my row. So I'll definitely fight you if you're after my row."

She stands stilled, prepared for anything. Not with her fists up, but certainly with her whole attention on me, on my hands, my eyes.

"I don't want your row. Or anybody else's," I say. "How long have you been doing this with only six bits of info?" I load my voice with admiration. Will I convince her?

Still watchful she says, "Been here six and a half cycles. Earned eighteen credits. Why should I believe you?"

I sit down astride a guard rail's stanchion. Hook my left arm around it for good measure. "You didn't come with the intake I was on, I would've remembered you."

That's me marking time. The truth is that I don't remember how many cycles I've been in this scene. How long is a cycle here, anyway? It feels as if the entity is having a go at me.

"One credit"

I have two tokens and three credits. "I discover four things about myself and I get one measly credit?" I say to the ceiling.

The girl sits down beside me. She rests her arms on the middle rail, swings her legs over

the side like mine. “It’ll tell you in a minute,” she says confidently. “It’ll say, *Remembering is not discovering. Making things up is not discovery. Exploring some other person’s meanings is not discovering.*

“It tells the same to everybody. We think the entity has indigestion. Like it was fed too many of the muttons all at once. That’s the muttons down there, walking round and round, not being fed through the system.”

Down there among the muttons, aka the crowd circling the mysterious point, I see a number of familiar faces. What are Lithe and Limber doing down there? “Who are *we*? I mean, you? What’s the system?”

“We are of the sheep-herder people. The stories say we were pressurised to reinvent ourselves after being retrieved by the ArkShip and that that process took us a couple of hundred cycles. See the door down near the bottom of the ramp?”

I recall the way I measured streets and lanes in the Yellow City. “That grey panel five people wide and two people tall when one is standing on the other’s shoulders?”

She looks at me as if surprised I can think up such a comparison. “That’s where we came through into the hall, in one big bunch. We were proud because we didn’t leave anyone behind,” she says.

We-from-Lotor didn’t leave anyone behind on Lotor, but I have no idea where anyone is now. (Lithe & Limber?) Only that Mongoose walked through the wall ahead of me.

“Much good it did us though,” the girl continues. “It used to be that that mob down there was mostly us. Young and old, with the herders circulating and doing the caring. They thought that was the way to survive.”

“But?” I say after a while.

“The entity became bored. It forced another reinvention. Now we young people are held to be sheepdogs. Her Maremma dogs, the entity calls us. At first it was our duty to cut out the people who slowed the pace of the circling and to deliver them into suitable habitats.”

“Your own people?” I start to feel sick.

“What we found is that a *kind* habitat, that is, a habitat that is *kind* on its people, gets overpopulated very quickly.” She gulps. “The entity forced the wolves onto us. A bunch of them now circulates through the habitats.”

I remember my friends once upon a time discussing some fauns in that same distant, seemingly-uncaring way.

The fauns couldn’t be saved either, I recall. I try for the same tone of voice as the Maremma girl. “So that roar I just heard was a wolf thanking you for its dinner?”

“No, unfortunately,” she says. Her face clears. There’s something uncomfortable about her grin.

“That was a bear. Great white thing. You cross that threshold and if there is time, the entity will transform you into a seal because seals are those bears’ regular prey. The wolves love it in there, too. Cold. Ice. Tundra forests. Their fur thickens up and they get to eat moose if they can catch it.”

“Tell me your other realities?” I say to try and distract myself from the Maremma girl’s teeth. They aren’t human-looking. Great big incisors.

“I’ll be better at that while we’re walking along them,” she says. “Besides, I need to keep moving to keep on proving that I can handle my patch.”

She waits for me to extricate myself from around the guard-rail stanchion.

[End of snippet for April 29]

4: The Unmade Place

The Maremma girl and I come to the end of the row. The guard-rail curves around and joins the wall. We overlook the rear-wall of the hall but right next to me is the final set of sliding doors along this gangway.

“The reality in here is special,” the girl says. She still has not volunteered her name.

Of course I’m supposed to say, Special how? “Exactly right for a learner shaman, I bet.”

She’s edging me toward the still-closed sliders. “I wouldn’t know. I’ve never pushed anyone in here yet. A first timer will give me five credits.” She punches the air. “I’ll be the alpha-bitch when I get back to the kennels tonight!”

She comes forward against me, growling and slavering from a fierce dog-like expression and I am so shocked I fall back against the doors.

Which slide open and cause me to fall into that reality.

The doors slide shut.

I turn on my butt. Scramble up onto my feet. Stare. Allow my jaw to sag. Stare.

The place I’m in is completely devoid of features. Whitely empty.

How long I stare I don’t know because not a thing keeps on happening.

“Yet to be made”

“Yet to be made. What does that mean?” I step off the sensori-mat. There’s nothing to tell

me whether I'm on the floor, a wall or the ceiling. My head reels. Nausea roils in my stomach. I step back onto the sensori-matting and press my back to the doors.

Which don't open.

Not that I expected them to. "There's nothing here," I say after a long silence in which I slow my heart-beat with deep breathing.

I start to observe again. Though the place is lit, light does not emanate from any particular place. Walls, ceiling and floor as white as they were in the Reception Hall, if that is what it was.

"Yet to be made"

"Great. I have to make the whole universe myself?"

"Call yourself a shaman?"

"Singing the totems and calling the ship is all I learned." I sound like I'm whingeing even to me.

"Credit retracted"

It could do that? Not fair. I swallow. Two tokens, two credits. Then I think it through. "Why bother with credits at all when there's no shop in here?" Maybe I say the obvious. Maybe I'm stupid thinking there's a listener. Maybe I'm just talking to myself.

Long silence.

It's a stalemate. That's what I'm calling it. I'm still standing with my back pressed against the doors. I lift my feet one at the time to inspect my soles. The ribbing of the sensori-mat has made patterns on my bare feet.

"Hey! We had a mat like this at home. Dad used to get us to stand on it to scold us. Same pattern on my feet."

Was that a distraction I just threw into the silence? Didn't bounce, even for me. The mat at home was probably eaten by Lotor along with everything else.

I try a little story. "Weird if our mat was a historical artefact? I could go round to all the places on the ship with sensori-matting. See if any are missing. Could be one slid from the ... from the shuttle with all the people."

There's a break in the sequence right about where I stuttered that I hope the entity doesn't notice. But never mind, there is no change in the ambience.

"Mongoose thinks people used all the sensori-mats from all the shuttles as landing pads. That they already knew Lotor for what she is when the settlers first landed."

The sensori-mat disappears! The ribbing on my foot too. The doors behind me transform into glazed stone.

"Three credits retracted"

"Wait ... why? What did I do wrong?"

"Remembering is not discovering. Making things up is not discovery. Exploring some other person's meanings is not discovering"

One fucking credit. “Go on! Take that one off me too! What use are they?” When I shout my voice clatters through the space.

The only answer I get is that the temperature rises.

The parts of me covered by my pants and my shirt feel hotter than my hands and feet.

The entity running the show isn’t human. All the other humans are too busy in their own hells, I assume. I take off my clothes and drop them by the stone doors.

The white cell was the previous place where I only lasted because I decided to relieve my feelings through swearing. I nearly cry because this is a definite step back.

My clothes disappear.

5: A Fire?

I’m standing there pressed against the glazed-stone. Unclothed. No one to see me but the machine all around me, so what do I care? I step away.

I feel the cold before I notice the goosebumps rising on my arms. The temperature is dropping? I start to shiver, more from consternation I decide than from cold. But then I start to shiver in earnest. I crouch down and hug my knees so that where my skin meets skin I can stay warm. “I’m cold.”

“On Earth, ages ago, you might’ve made a fire to keep you warm”

“Me personally, or anyone?” While I talk, my teeth don’t chatter.

“Anyone and especially you personally”

“My mother, whose pattern came from Earth, talked about making fires. She and her little brother used to for survival skills. Where she lived there were trees and dead wood.” I gesture with my head. No reason to wave my arm and let the cold in. “No wood here.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure,” I shout. I expect my voice to clatter off the hard surfaces of the hall but it dulls and goes lost in the white mist rising from the floor surface. The mist ribbons and twists like smoke rising. Where it meets the ceiling it fades.

“No need to shout”

Now parts of the mist darken. Those bits solidify into shapes of trees of the kind you see writhing in story books. Some kind of magic I’m probably meant to think.

“Oh!” the entity exclaims.

There’s a breathless silence.

“The wolves have found something very interesting! This I have got to go and check out!”

Just like that I’m alone. Lucky me. I try to recall what Mother told about keeping warm in

general and making fires in particular. Wood is the fuel of course. We did have fires. I can still hear her telling her stories, though she's been dead since I was ten. I wander into the mist.

Once I'm in under the trees, the mist thins. The air around me is warmer. The trees are weird. For one thing, they are so much taller than I am that they are bent against the ceiling. There's a ceiling? Some trunks are covered with rough bark, some with smooth. Most split into smaller trunks above my head. Branches, they are called. Then smaller branches. And smaller, that might be called twigs. These have bunches of green leaves sticking out.

I get a crick in my neck from staring up and I rest my neck by staring at the ground. The tree trunks stand in dirt that is decorated with moss? and mushrooms? and tree litter? They are my school lessons come to life, but only resemble the ones in what I recall of my studies, by where they are. On the ground, or on the tree trunks.

I rest my *brain* by just thinking a memory. My mother said that fibrous bark works best as clothes. I search the scene for tree trunks that are festooned with hairy strips of fibres. Make that fibrous bark. Yes. There are some to the left.

But.

I go back to staring at the ground, at my bare feet on the litter of dead brown wood, broken twigs and soft dead brown leaves. I *see* forest litter.

I feel ... I clench my toes a few times to make sure ... I feel that I'm standing on a hard floor.

It seems like an *unsafe* discovery. I wait for a comment from the ceiling or wherever the entity makes her home.

Nothing.

I check all the trunks on the left of the path. Path? Yes, right through the middle is a hard trodden path. Like a parting in hair. At the end I see? A wall. I walk there. It's real. I rub my hands over it. Smooth white plastic. Everywhere I can touch it, jumping high, sliding sideways in both directions, the wall seems to be made of a hard white plastic.

I wait again. The entity does not speak.

[Snip for 20 May]

The plastic wall feels *real*. How would it feel if it wasn't real? I cast about for comparisons. Back when I was in the black cell ... no, forward away from there. I escaped.

The second night after I escaped, Mongoose and I and Ant and Uncle Puma joined a larger group and we all spent the night on the second platform. Thyal, the group's *real* shaman—other than me, the half shaman, I mean—despite that he had no amulet at the time encouraged me to think myself into the Totem Reality he hoped to see on the Ark Ship.

Yes yes, I know it was an imaginary place in our minds. But. Were there any walls?

I recall the blue sky at the top of the Totem Reality. And I flew over a deep valley with a white water creek rushing through it, at the base of the Reality. One side cliffs, the other a steep hillside clad with low green vegetation to hunt through for prey. No walls that I recall.

It was of course an imaginary reality. Aka a reality I imagined in my mind. Since I shared

it with Thyal and he agreed with me on its structure, it was a consensual reality.

It had no smooth plastic walls that we remarked on. No hard horizontal plastic floor. No ceiling. The place I am in is a large room. More properly known as a hall, and it is one of many halls in this part of the Ark Ship.

The internal shape of the hall niggles at me. This isn't a vertical wall that I'm leaning against. I have to crane my head back to see how the wall slopes inward as it rises. The wall becomes the ceiling.

So what does that mean? The wall curves up slightly, or the ceiling curves down quite a lot? And anyway it isn't much of a curve. More a straight line ended by a pair of angles. I'm not educated enough in geometry to be able to guess by how much of an angle but it's the wrong kind of line for the kind of spaceship I learned the Ark Ship to be.

Not that we didn't study the Ark Ship at the Shaman School. It was held to most resemble a very large wheel. Wheels on Lotor were cast in a mould carved in stone. Hemp fibres laid in the mould were fixed with molten silicates poured over them.

I try to imagine the rooms like the one I'm in stacked up and surrounding the great central hall in the wheel that is the Ark Ship.

Crowd of people, I interrupt myself. Don't get sucked into the people are only animals story. Remember that I saw Lithe in the crowd, or was it Limber?

Didn't the Maremma girl say she had six so-called realities in her row? And there were the base floor and two upper U shaped floors of rows.

Why am I thinking as though the scene *was* like that but isn't now? Everything is still out there somewhere.

But still not the entity in here with me.

Three sixes are eighteen. The canteen is in the curvy bit of the middle U and the place where I came out of the Reception Hall is in the curvy bit of the upper U. So, leaving out the curvy bits, two sixes per U are twelve. Three twelves are thirty six. There are thirty six rooms masquerading as realities? How will I find you, Mongoose?

I will not dwell on that scary thought.

Where was I? Stacking up the rooms. The one I'm in is a weird shape. Floor is horizontal. Inner wall where normally the sliding doors are, is vertical. The wall I am at I can't see very far in either direction, left or right, but what I can see of it slopes inward as it rises. If all the rooms are shaped like this one, when fitted together they'd make a shape with a zigzaggy back wall.

But wait, the room I was in oh so briefly on the ground floor diagonally across the central hall from this room, what shape was that?

I remember a bull-shaped man sitting at a cafe table. Beyond him tall stacks of cells. Double if not triple the height of the wall I'm standing near. The room I'm in stacked on that one ... a barn shape?

I can't see how a bunch of barn shapes could be stacked inside a wheel other than with a huge waste of internal space. Vaguely I recall information about a second skin inside the exterior skin of a space ship.

Still that stacking problem. I don't believe there'd be any such waste. I can no longer believe that I, or all the others of my group, are in the ship we intended to meet. What chance that there were two ships orbiting Lotor? Thyal and I would surely have seen two reflections twinkling across the night sky? And how would our shuttle have known to dock with a starship not its own?

Still not the entity back with me.

[Snip for 27 May]

My mind roils on. Our Ark Ship was said to have been locked in a struggle with an unknown entity when it dropped my settler ancestors off on Lotor. I feel hot and cold in quick succession, hot from fright and wanting to run, cold from terror and freezing in place. What if our ArkShip didn't win?

I want to think it all through again in more detail, maybe find the solution already in my memories. I laugh. All this? In my memories? Even Soowei never made it off-planet. I need to explore. Find out more.

So I'll need to leave something in this place where I stood, to show I've been here already. When it is walking in circles, it is about not getting anywhere.

I step from the path at the base of the wall into the forest. Grasp at the bottom end of a streamer of bark, to rip it loose from its tree. If I get a lot I'll be able to dress myself too. Missed it. My hand seemed to move through it.

Try again. Missed again.

Slowly this time.

When my hand is where I should be able to feel the bark rough and fibrous on my palm and within the cage of my fingers, there's only a brown tint shading my fingers.

The trees are for looks only? Only half an hour ago I discovered that the floor is covered with nothing at all. That the tree litter I'm standing on is the hard plastic floor and I forgot that already? Am I even awake?

It's even more necessary now to make my mark on something. If I had a knife I could carve a groove on the wall. I don't have a knife. My hair isn't long enough to bite a length off it. My fingernails are, though a bitten-off sliver of nail is very small. It will just get lost underfoot. Scratch myself hard enough to draw blood? It feels like my only option if I want to wake up.

I worry at the place where a corner of one of my fingernails is torn. Yes, it hurts. Get some blood finally. Write ZA. My call sign. It's a kind of test. If the entity knows it, it will mean she won, knows everything about us, and is playing with me in the way that a cat plays with a grasshopper.

I slide to the right, between the close growing trees walling the wall and the wall itself, I hardly want to have the colour of the trees touching me. Wouldn't you know it, I come to a place that looks like a corner. Not two separate walls coming together at right angles to one another, but a white plastic wall with a pinch pleat in it that forms an almost right-angled space inside an elbow. Because looking up I find that the pleat goes no higher than about

three metres, from there on smoothing into the angled ceiling.

So I trace the seam down into the not-real forest litter. If I want to know how the floor joins to the whole I will have to get my hands dirty. Ha ha. Dirty with reflected colour from the not-real dirt. I haul the pretend soil back with my cupped hands. The soil that I heap up in front of me dissolves. The hole in the ground is growing.

Thigh deep is about as far as I want to reach down to dig without getting into the hole. Though what that really means is stepping into the place that is no longer covered with the pretend soil.

Shall I? I'm suspicious. I have been suspicious since the entity first opened her mouth. She is nothing like as logical as I imagined the Ark Ship's intelligence to be. Events so far have been ...very unusual, I decide to think of them.

Bzzttt!

A pink glow washes through the bit of the room's floor that I just uncovered. My cold feet at the edge of the pretend-forest litter are warmed.

I hope I didn't show my surprise in any physical way.

I trek back to where I left my call sign for when I'm talking to the ArkShip.

There's more letters.

Under mine.

Stare. Stare. Stare. The letters don't disappear. AZ. TheArkShip's call sign for when it is talking to me?

I don't want to have what I think it means in my awareness and I struggle through that. Because, what is *this* place if our own ArkShip can only talk to me secretly?

Then I see the impossible. The Ark Ship's call sign is written in red the same as mine. A substance that drips from the bottom of the uprights of the letters.

Someone must be in this room with me. I discount the entity, she isn't flesh-and-blood. I search through the trees. The more I touch them as I slide between and around them, the more they fade. The ground, as I trample it, loses its definition and then also fades.

The room is empty and I am alone in it. I check the letters. Both sets are retreating. All four letters are inside the plastic now. Then they are gone.

I make ready to engage with the entity. I stand with my back flat against the stone doors.

6: No Fun At All

My clothes re-appear. I dress faster than fast.

Then the sensori-matting is restored. The doors too, though they stay shut even when I back up against them.

I look up. Something is happening on the back wall. A small blue light races over the surface of the wall outlining a ... my heart nearly bursts out of me with excitement ... the shuttle we came in! I run there.

The outlined shuttle glides toward a scramble of lines that in no way resembles the doughnut-shaped Ark Ship I learned about in Shaman School. But why do I expect that? Any of the places where I've been so far don't call to mind anything I learned about the interior of the Ark Ship, except that the small outlined ship is definitely our shuttle.

It stops in front of me. I'm blinking tears away as I trace my call sign on it, ZA.

The letters vibrate. The Ark Ship knows me. Now I do cry. No blood is needed.

The blue light splits. One bit continues to outline the shuttle and the other flits to the mess of lines, where it starts to outline a doughnut-shaped ring surrounding a double pyramid shape. The ring could be the Ark Ship. The pyramids, I don't know, nor how they came to be melded.

I trace AZ on the ring. The blue light takes over and retraces the letters several times very fast. I guessed right.

The blue point goes on to show me where the Ark Ship's docking ports are. In Shaman School I learned that a shuttle would be able to dock at any one of the four ports on the inside of the ring.

The little light shows me that all these ports are covered by the pursed-mouth-like corners of the joined pyramid shapes that are wedged? Contained? in the centre of the Ark Ship's doughnut.

Now the little blue light races really fast over the diagram, lighting up new lines and fading out old lines, making it so that the design seems to turn over like a dumpling so that I can see that the second identical pyramid sticks out from the other side of the hole in the doughnut-like ship.

What it all looks like to me is two pyramids stuck together at their bases wedged in the Ark Ship's centre. The light racing round the shuttle's outline and bringing it nearer, makes like the shuttle docks on the top of the uppermost pyramid. A small version of the double pyramid shape is stuck to the bottom point of the pyramid underneath. As if that small double pyramid is also a shuttle.

Alien if it is.

"Empty," the entity says. "You are no fun at all." Her voice is directed to toward the doors.

All the lines fade instantly. The little blue light extinguishes and I turn to face the centre of the room.

“I had you picked to be my special friend, we have so much in common,” says the entity.

Luckily she is still talking at the doors. I laugh from the relief that probably she didn’t see —though how would she?— anything of the little blue light and its doings. It has given me a lot to think about.

I fire a bunch of questions at the entity to steer her attention away from where I was while I walk to the place she’s speaking toward. “You are settler-born from Lotor? You were in prison? You are a half shaman? You are married to a man called Mongoose?” I ask her everything that I can think of that I am. “Your mother and father died of the Earth-born disease?”

“We are practically the same age,” she says.

She might have been near to the-age-I-am-now just before her pattern was taken, but to my calculations she’s now hundreds of years older than I am. Though she doesn’t appear to have matured.

The entity continues. “We’re both girls. I used to be as different from the rest of my people as you are from yours. I was in a prison, it was called the Tween House. I am Earth-born, if you mean being born on the only planet in the Universe called Earth.”

I don’t know enough about Earth to know whether her story sounds true. I decide on a snippy tone. People being snipped at by other people often give more information. “So you’re an Earth-born. How did you get away from Lotor?”

“I’ve never set foot on Lotor.”

I start the count down of facts I know. “Earth-born were born on Earth ...”

“Check,” she says.

“...And were picked up in a Life Lottery Street Sweep.”

“Check. Me and my friend Jack Fetcher and a couple of the EMBers chasing us escaped the data-waving, once we’d been settled in Silo Ship Number 23, my lucky number.”

I can be very stubborn when I need to be. She was with friends. All right. But, data-waving? Silo Ship Number 23? “The Earth-born like yourself arrived on Lotor as genetic patterns. They were reconstructed by Lotor using materials lying on Lotor’s crust or whatever you want to call it. Skin, maybe. Making you one of the Lotor-made.”

The entity laughs. “I’m telling you I never made it down to Lotor to be Lotor-made. I’d have a body now.”

She sounds so wistful that I think she must be telling her truth. I rethink my idea. “I guess if you are Earth-born and were on Lotor, the planet would’ve taken you within by now. So maybe not that scenario.”

“Probably my original body still lies in Silo 23,” she offers. “If I’m still in that time warp. Speaking of time? It progresses. The wolves, as I said, found the most amazing thing down in Reception. In the air lock. You lot were the last. What is it?”

I try to follow the flow of information. In amongst a lot of things that I have no knowledge of, she mentions *wolves*. I do recall her saying *the wolves* just before she left earlier.

“Every object and person on the platform where I woke up was destructed, and then remade from their bio-patterns?” I ask. Though I skip over the fact that some people, Mongoose included, were remade as their Totems, it’s uppermost in my mind. I need to know this entity a whole lot better before I ask about that.

“The object was in the air lock,” the entity says. “I told you.”

So much for being near in age. “I’m a married woman and you are a child. Is it a twenty-questions game we are playing?”

Now she sulks. “Yes to the dais in the Reception Hall. Except for that one thing that was left on the shuttle you came on. Which the Ark Ship’s de-and-re-construction machinery has done nothing with, and both the data-waving boots apparently love.”

I must not alert her to my interest in the Ark Ship’s apparent knowledge of our Totems. And it must be that the Ark Ship’s de-and-re-construction machinery was moved into the pyramid-shaped ship. “Data-waving boots?” I say.

I don’t even need to see her embodied to know that she would’ve shuddered if she still had her body. “What they look like. Flying upside-down boots. You want to keep away from those,” she says. “Don’t let their tentacles trail over you.”

“Or?” I say.

“Or you’ll be data-waved back to Lotor. Or on to a Silo. There are two boots. I figure they do one direction each. My body is probably still in Silo 23. Meaning that there must be at least twenty-two silos floating around, all with their cargoes of bodies in stasis? The bodies of the people you call Earth-born, that they used on Earth?”

“How come you weren’t data-waved to Lotor?” I use the word without knowing in the slightest what it means.

“One of my friends was a very clever computer operator.”

“Your friends are here too?” I say.

“I don’t think so. I’ve searched everywhere. I did something young and stupid. They were always telling me off for that. They all went back to the silo probably and are back home. Why there are only twenty-two not twenty-three, if they got rescued. You must get married young on Lotor.”

I laugh. “Is that all you can come up with to distract me? There are no human people remaining on Lotor. There was no specific age for getting married apart from the fact that you had to have lived the equivalent of at least sixteen Earth-years. What is your name?”

“Now you’re trying to distract me,” she says. “When I was a flesh-and-blood human girl my name was Kosi Lionhair. I named myself that when I was six. I picked *Lionhair* because I could fluff my hair out big and feel proud and strong.”

I wonder what reasons Earth-born girls of her time might have had in their lives to need to feel proud? And I wonder how long ago she lived? Though she did mention a *time warp*? How would that work? “I’m Jeb. Half shaman by trade.

“Why half?” Kosi says.

“Didn’t get to finish my schooling.” I’m lucky there’s still that easy answer available. I

make my voice light and my tone light-hearted though I'm thinking dark things about my mother possibly having an Earth-grown body floating about in a silo somewhere in space. "They're dead, the bodies left behind in the silos?"

Kosi knows exactly what I'm asking. "Some might still be in stasis," she says. "But don't worry about them waking up. They can't by themselves. Most in the less technologically-advanced silos will have died by now through running out of nutrients. How can I separate the data-waving boots from the mysterious object so I can have a good look at it?"

We have nicely circled the presence of the Ark Ship. "What is the object?" I say.

Kosi laughs. "For me to know and you to find out, I think. Be more fun that way."

Fun for who? Maybe that thought shows on my face for the entity starts into an explanation.

"Earlier I was thinking we'd borrow a couple of bodies and go hunting. You seem to like the Maremma girl, you could borrow hers. I've never been hunting."

"You'd borrow the Maremma girl's *body*?" I say.

"I don't need to now," she says. "The thing in the airlock is a life-suit. Strange that the Ark Ship refused to touch it? No moral against using it that I can see. I'll reprogram it. Hip hooray! It'll be the first time since I got data-waved that I'll have arms and legs to do things with!"

The only thing resembling a life-suit that came with my group was probably the skin of the blood-drained woman called Arley, infected with a malign agency. This is me finally putting two and two together. The skin-suit was brought to Thyal and Mongoose and me by one of the flying horses just before we took off in the shuttle, to be destroyed by the Ark Ship.

And the Ark Ship didn't? I shudder.

And now the entity that calls itself Kosi Lionhair is going to try to re-program the Arley-skin-suit while it still contains that malignancy. Because why would it have left? Where would it have gone?

At the Shaman school I was forever listening in on lessons ahead of my grade. Wanting to know everything right now. Did the shamans let me gorge myself on less important things to keep more advanced things from me? I don't remember hearing anything about the re-patterning of biological entities.

Didn't mean it wasn't part of the syllabus, did it?

Where before I merely didn't like the sound of going hunting in the Totem Reality, now I dread it. "These data-waving boots ..." I begin. I revise what I know about them. They extract human DNA + personality patterns from people stored on spaceships called silos, and transfer the patterns to Lotor. If the boots can do that, why wouldn't the malignancy use them? "... they are not from Earth, are they?"

I rush on. "The life-suit isn't a natural thing either. Well, okay, it once was a human person, but it can't now be if the ArkShip's molecular destructor won't touch it. And this ship we're in ... it's pyramid-shaped. Two pyramids joined at their bases. Not the doughnut-shape of the ArkShip I learned about at the Shaman school."

Kosi laughs. It's a machine-generated sound with no flesh and blood backing it to

moderate its clattering sound against the plastic surfaces of the hall we're still in.

"Does it matter?" she says. "It's not like the Ark Ship is what it was, or even normal for that matter. It wants all its animals two by two? The silos are the only normal spaceships you'd hope to use, and look what happened to me in one of them?"

The Ark Ship is not what it was? And, is not normal now? I'm lost. It wants all its animals two by two?

"The boots you said," I say because I do after all have a tiny clue about the upside-down boots that only transfer the bio-patterns of people.

"Yeah, they're part of this ship. I could show you exactly where they get recharged but ..." She chuckles. "I suppose like every other *so-called* human you are aiming to get onto the Ark Ship despite what I said just now?"

Frowning to help me think, I ask, "What exactly *did* you say?"

As I expected, she does not explain. Probably not the right time.

I don't like what she might be implying but is there any other answer? "Yes. I do."

"I suppose to be forewarned is to be fore-armed, as Hen used to say," Kosi says. "Come on then."

She causes the door panels keeping me in the room to slide apart. I fall into the Maremma girl's arms.

"She's with me," Kosi says at the girl. "I might need a hunting dog or three? Go find them, bring them to the underworld?"

The Maremma girl shoots me a gaze of such misery before she runs off, that I boost my attention to hyper-alert. "Where are you taking me?" I say.

Kosi laughs. "Obviously, I can't physically take you anywhere. But you'll probably follow the rainbow blip arrowing along the floor if you want to see your friends again."

She threatens me and my friends? I take a deep breath. What choice do I have?

The blip sparks and sparkles with the same colours as the watch-tower on the cliffs during my last night on Lotor. The cherts still under the skin of my feet liven up too. Prick and prickle.

I realise two things. The blip is of the same alien technology as the watch-tower, and so possibly also the life-suit, and it is interacting with the therefore also alien cherts. Wish I had pair of tweezers. Funny that the Ark Ship reconstituted me with them intact?

The arrowing starts along the upper U gallery and I follow it to the opposite arm. It spirals down the fireman's pole, and I slide after it to the floor of the hall from where I follow it into the mysterious crowd circling the mysterious mid-point.

Those in the outer ring of the crowd have their heads hanging and their eyes uninterested while they pass me. Coming upon the blip, though, they separate left and right like a combed parting. Nobody seems to want to have the blip touching them.

Which could be further evidence. I stop at the edge of the crowd, trying to make it look like I'm hesitating. "Can't we go around the crowd?"

Kosi does not react.

Perhaps there aren't any sensors nearby. I wonder how a previously human entity can live in the workings of an alien starship?

A murmur starts in the crowd. "Jeb. Jeb. Our half shaman. You going to save us again, Jeb?"

I see *my* people pepper-and-salted through the crowd. Limber. Crow. Jackal. Each one alive-eyed for the par-second it takes to answer my glance.

"How many?" I shape the words with my lips.

Limber blinks acknowledgement and shuffles to the border of the blip's path, where he signs down by his waist, alerting me to the possibility of spy-eyes at head height. Ten fingers outstretched, forearms crossed, ten again, forearms again, two. Two hundred.

Two hundred in the crowd, or two hundred to save? Many more than the eighty-seven that came in our shuttle. I have still only a glimmer of an idea of what is happening.

I follow the blip's spiralling path through the crowd. We're moving slightly faster than the people around us which, when I saw them from above, were gyrating around a central point.

Testing for the existence of spy-eyes, I flick glances here and there.

"You needn't search so secretively for your lover," the entity says.

The time of me cosily thinking of her as Kosi is done.

"He isn't here as I think I told you," she says.

If she can see everything at eye-height, she probably can hear quite well too. "Where are we going," I say again.

"We're fetching the life-suit, then off we go to the Totem Reality. I had the wolves stock the place with all sorts of interesting prey. Of the small fast animals, I have a meerkat and a mongoose. Of the larger lumbering prey, I have an elephant and a couple of bison"

I stop listening when she says *mongoose*. A mongoose isn't a runner. It will stand and fight. And my Mongoose will most certainly stand and fight when he finds me in the *entity's* clutches.

"The life-suit had its owner inside it when I knew it," I say. Hoping for what reaction, I don't know.

"The wolves say that," she says. "They have retreated. The thing inside the suit is very fierce. But I can be quite fierce as well and I want that suit."

The blip and I arrive at a circular man-hole cover in the floor. The blip either switches off or dives through the little hole in the centre of the cover.

"Go on," the entity says. "Hook up the cover with your fingers in that slot."

The mass of people surrounding me is almost at a standstill. They encourage me with a comforting murmur. With about half of my people still missing, and probably that many of theirs as well, we all need to know about this underworld.

I lift the lid. Lay it aside. Look down through the hole.

7: In the Reflection

I lift the hatch cover. Lay it aside. Look down through the hole.

I need to close my eyes and swallow and swallow. I peer between my eye lids but the vertigo is ongoing. Close my eyes, pretend to lift the hatch cover; pretend to lay it aside; pretend to look *down* through the hole.

Peer between my eyelids. All still the same. The walls and ceiling down there follow the same lines as the ones of the place I'm in except that they are upside down. I see an airlock in the nock of the pyramidal ceiling, far away. The new place is like a reflection, its base is the underside of the floor I'm kneeling on.

I dip my head down and through the hatch into the reflection. There is no disturbance, like rippling, so it isn't a water-reflection. My face and upper body leaning into it aren't reflected, so it isn't a mirror.

Weird but good. There'd be one more of me than I could cope with, I think as flippantly as I can to generate the next bit of courage needed.

I push down further and see a forest of upside-down human legs, skirts, long pant-legs and cloaks around the hatch-hole. I see feet standing comfortably on the floor plastered to the underside of the floor where I am still crouching. These are the people we're looking for?

Blood rushes to my head because if they are the right way up, I am upside down. I feel like I'm the right way up. Would I be able to crouch down the way I am without floating or falling down to my ceiling? Their clothes should be drooping around their heads.

Then I recall the second pyramid sticking upside down out of the torus of the Ark Ship that I saw on the wall in the white room. It seems I must abandon the concepts of up and down. Looks to me like this so-called *underworld* is connected by its square base to the square base of the upper pyramid that half my body is still in. Time to climb through.

In the underworld, feeling awkward and wrong, I stumble about like a drunkard. A large hand under my elbow helps me re-orient myself. Four fingers shorter than normal.

"Lithe?" I stop him leaving me with my other hand over his. "I'm really really happy to see you." Although he is Limber's twin, he isn't a double of the people in the over-world. Another possibility I can let go.

"Limmer is through there," I say. "And lots more people. Get everyone from there into this scene?" Even being able to ask someone what they think is a comfort.

"Having everyone in the same dimension should be helpful," he says.

I ignore the doubt I hear in his voice about getting everyone in *this* dimension. "Dimension? Oh. The gravity? I wonder how that works?"

"One of them is starting to get restless," says a person staring up into their ceiling. "Too many of us standing still for too long."

“We’ll split,” says a woman.

I recognise her voice. It’s Red-tail.

“Lithe, you work getting the crowd from under there into here,” Red-tail says. “I’ll take the four faster outer ranks and swirl. That should confuse them.”

I stare where a sprinkling of people are looking, Red-tail among them. The ceiling, aka the pyramid’s inner skin, is thick with mats of purples, dark greens and browns. It takes me a couple of seconds before I realise I’m looking at a landscape of mosses, ferns and worts. A shadow would be right at home among them.

I do not dwell on any particular piece of darkness and drop my gaze to the crowd instead. Each of the outer four ranks are arm in arm and circle left as if they are in a giant dance, except that all four circles are moving into the same direction.

I can’t stop my gasp when the people at the left end double and double and double until half a dozen in each of the circles are reflected as if in a floor to ceiling mirror. The dancers stop, change feet and dance rightwards. The doubling to the left disengages and disappears. Still moving, still to the right, the circles double at the outer right edge which is but a reflective mid-wall, I see suddenly.

The dancers move left again and start over at speed. The swirling confuses me as much as it might be confusing the beings the dancers are aiming to influence.

“Jeb.”

Someone hugs me to him with strong meaty arms.

It isn’t Mongoose. The man catching me against his chest is broader and he has neither Mongoose’s smell nor his voice.

I wrench loose.

It’s Uncle Puma. I catch his expression—glee? Can’t be—as he blinks it away. “I’ve counted through this crowd a couple of times to no avail, as I’m sure you have through the crowd in the over-world,” he says. “So you might as well accept that Mongoose is lost.”

Never never will I accept that Mongoose is lost.

“We’ll also need to do without Thyal, a far greater loss in my opinion, and a half dozen more, your friends Ant, Wren, and Meerkat among them.”

A lot of unnecessary words when I have already read his meanings in his touch and his eyes. I control my voice. “I’ve been busy.”

It sounds like an excuse. Why does Uncle Puma always make me feel like I haven’t done enough? I use a well-worn strategy to get his attention off me. Indicating the doubling I ask, “What’s happening?”

“According to a stage-hand we happen to have amongst us, the area we are in is partitioned with a reflective membrane,” Uncle Puma says.

“A stage-hand?” I ask, implying the what and where.

Uncle Puma shrugs. “Just another mystery. It appears that many of the people here travelled from Earth with our ancestors. If they are to be believed, they were woken by

impossible creatures and driven into this place.”

“To be eaten,” says a person alongside. “By them.” He indicates the ceiling. “The shadows up there among the mosses. Eaters. There, and there. Your friend Lithe, now our friend too, organised us to keep tabs on them.”

“There’s one going down!” shouts a spotter.

I stare at the place where the woman is pointing, halfway down the tented ceiling and I see a black, vaguely humanoid shadow creep down a slanting way among the growths.

“Surrounding the spotters are the people responsible to move them every time Lithe and Red-tail decide to move the crowd,” Uncle Puma says. “There’s been no one eaten since we organised.”

“I wonder if anyone has counted them, whether they know if there’s a new one?” I say.

“What are you saying?” says our buddy alongside.

“If there is, Arley’s skin will be lying empty somewhere.”

Uncle Puma stills and seems to expand. He becomes the same obdurate angry statue as always when someone displeases him. But with the chief in him still, he doesn’t ask about Arley, the life-suit or why and how it happened to have joined us. Or why his niece Jeb, the half shaman, knows about it when he doesn’t.

Instead he picks up on my mood. “And that’s a worry?”

“There’s a human-entity in the workings as well. An Earth-born pattern. She intends using the skin aka the life-suit to give herself substance. Then she wants ...”

“Red-tail!”

The crowd jostles us from our conversation. An outcry takes my attention. A shadow flits into a free-standing structure below and Red-tail runs toward the spotter-group nearest a hodgepodge of powder-blue bars and extrusions in the only wide corner.

When I shift my perspective, because I’m tempted to follow Red-tail, I see two pastel-blue U-shaped galleys in the structure that they are part of that could be upside down ramps and galleys. Similar to the galleys, ramps and fireman’s pole in the over-world, except that here the structure stands as if in storage.

The shadow flits about against a rectangle within it, then goes to ground.

I feel hot and cold all over in waves when I suddenly *see* a fold in the ceiling, almost grown over with vegetation, that runs down to that plain dark rectangle, large enough to be—yes!

Feverishly I think it through. If I believe the double-pyramid to be a separate structure from the Ark Ship, where could it be expected to have got stuck or wedged within the Ark Ship’s doughnut?

The double pyramid has six points where its triangles come together. One is the shuttle port dedicated to hauling us into the scene below this floor in what Kosi calls *Reception*. The other is above us.

Leaving the four points at the widest parts of the double-pyramid to secure the thing

within the torus of the Ark Ship. I'm all but gasping on my eureka moment. At Red-tail's directions, the spotter-groups are arranging themselves in a half-moon around the structure.

"Jeb!"

Lithe is calling me, and beckoning. Hurry. As in, there's no time for either the Chief's fireworks or whatever is causing me my red-faced excitement. He's right. We need to get everyone we can up here in one crowd. I join him on the other side of the hole.

I drop to my knees. "How can I help?" I say with a wobble of suppressed emotion.

"You've got an idea?" Lithe says.

I nod. "All of *us* came on board through Reception. The rest of the humans apparently came directly from the Ark Ship and were delivered either here or in the over-world now below us?"

Lithe nods.

"Through what doors?" I say, nodding in various directions where airlocks might be expected to show on the horizon. A few moments more will at least give me someone else who understands.

Lithe rises. Looks around. I see his glance slide over the corners where the reflective membrane stops us seeing behind it. I see him hesitate over the rectangle in the corner directly behind us where the shadow tried to disappear. He kneels back down opposite me, on the other side of the hatch.

"The quadrant behind that reflective membrane is the only one where none of us combined have yet been," I say leaping over large chunks of explanations. "There'll be three doors."

"With you," he says.

"The shadow tried to disappear through the door behind us," I say. "The Ark Ship refused its entry. We all need to leave at the same time."

He nods again. "Or get eaten." He sticks his head and half his chest through the hatch. Is talking out in the over-world.

He lifts himself out again. "Things are not good when my own brother doesn't recognise me. Convince them we are real?"

I dip my head through the hatch. I'm down at floor level of the over-world looking up at the crowd there fronted by Limber. "Limber, show the way. Watch out if I need to vomit from having to do this *down-is-up* thing again."

I get out fast because I do feel queasy. "Bring everyone," I call through.

Limber, laughing, tries to drop through feet first. The abrupt change in gravity catches him and he starts to collapse back.

Lithe catches his brother's legs and drags him through and aside. Uncle Puma reaches him a hand to get him standing.

Limber reels. Goes to a knee. Pushes himself up. His eyes bulge. He gags. "I was going to say ... Jeb convinced me the place was real when she said that about being sick."

“Is real. Different rules,” Lithe says. “You got them started is the important thing.” Lithe catches the next person, passes her into the crowd. “Chief, tell Limber about the eater. He’s tall, good for a spotter.”

Each person coming through the hatch is caught, helped to stand, and passed still stumbling further into the crowd. At the end the Maremma girl comes through herding a bunch of young people with the heads of dogs. I cringe at Kosi’s casual cruelty. Who else?

The transformed ones are taken into the crowd with only the relief that they are still alive. Perhaps there’s a cure.

As Lithe and Uncle Puma place the hatch-cover back over the hole, there’s an outcry at the edge of the crowd near the upside down walkways and ramps structure.

“Jeb! Jeb! Look at me!”

It’s the Kosi-entity’s voice calling out and she is excited!

The crowd between her and me parts abruptly—I see naked fear—people stepping behind others trying to hide; people staring at the floor; people hiding their faces behind their hands. I get that Kosi’s voice and its portents are known very well.

But it is an old woman clad in a short grey tunic who dances toward me. I feel sick. It’s Arley brought back to life. It was her skin we carried rolled up with us onto the shuttle?

Kosi chirps and carols. “I’ve got arms. Legs. A body! Finally I am a human again!”

She is not alone in the skin. She can’t be. Her tongue and mouth, formerly Arley’s tongue and mouth, are so black that I can’t see their detail, and her nostrils and eyelids are rimed with the same darkness.

Arley’s dark brown eye-pupils are set in a grey that flashes like silver when Kosi twists and turns cavorting toward me.

“We’ll hunt now,” she says. She’s breathless, and catching my arm, supports herself on me while she gulps air. If only I could see the dark one’s smile for how Kosi means it. She’s relieved, happy, overjoyed that she is still human?

But what *am* I meant to think about a machine pattern that believes itself human? I glance around the crowd. A sea of bent necks, of people minding their own business, hoping against hope that the bad thing will go away without hurting them. Uncle Puma, a shag on a rock, shrugs as if saying do what you have to, niece. Red-tail nods. Be my Shaman, Jeb.

Kosi starts to drag me toward the doubled outer part of the crowd. “Come with me into the Totem Reality.”

She dents the surface reflecting the crowd ahead of me and melts through.

I grab Lithe and don’t let go. “Quick! Make like I’m the golden goose! Everyone must come!”

Kosi pulls me from the other side and I close my eyes as the membrane gives way with a soft silken stroking that reminds me of the feel of Earth-water when I was lucky enough to bathe in a tub of it.

8. The Totem Reality

We are in what I've always thought of as Thyal's Totem Reality that I visualised when I first met Thyalsene when we were still on Lotor.

The Kosi-entity pulls me toward the edge of a narrow ledge, I think such flattish places are called. "We'll study the landscape, see where the prey are hiding."

I remember Wren's frightened face when I, in my Harpy Eagle mode, made to grab her though she was too smart to be caught. And I now think, everyone of my group is too smart to be caught. Haven't we all been out-witting Lotor all our lives?

I release Lithe. He turns and pulls at the next person and encourages her to one side. The next person to the other side. They both help him with feeding people along the ledge. Opposite is the steep green hill sloping down from the sward at its top that becomes stonier as it nears the creek at a bottom.

It's the cliff face we teeter on. Above and behind us, the membrane shows the images of tall brown cliffs that seem to rise almost to the blue ceiling. That the topside airlock is not visible suggests that the totem reality takes in less than half the underworld.

At the base of the cliffs rushes the white water creek into what looks like a deep still hole, and out the other side. All of it might still turn out to be the same weird sort of light as the forest in the white room.

I feel the granulating scrape of a thin layer of sand underfoot, therefore the ledge seems real. It also seems to be an extension of the floor in the rest of the underworld.

Back in there, we saw that airlock that is now directly behind us. Should be a pair of airlocks to either side, just the other side of the cliffs. Out of reach because either side of the ledge are metres of blank stone and no way to climb across should anyone want to.

The fourth airlock should be straight across where the upper part of the slope covers it if it is there.

Someone jostles me and I nearly overbalance. The ledge is becoming too crowded to fit everyone still coming. People beside me clutch each other when *they* almost overbalance. People overcome their fear of Kosi and line the ledge on the other side of her. We're three deep in places.

I study the distance down to the creek. Two-three metres? But anyway, needs must. I lift my voice. "We'll need some spare shirts and pants to let people down to the creek."

An old-timer cackles. "Spare clothes she thinks we carry."

"Shirts and pants that aren't necessary to your modesty," I say. "You could miss a shirt. I can miss my cloak threadbare though it is. Four hundred cannot fit along this ledge."

They get the idea. Shirts and pants are knotted into ropes. Two per rope start to encourage everyone else over the edge.

At first, those setting foot for the first time in their lives in Earth-style water—It's real!—are overcome with excitement. They splash and play. Quite soon a second wave drags them onto the grassy slope, by osmosis perhaps. Though no one goes very far.

People are still coming through the brown, stony-looking membrane. I hear their surprise multiplied by dozens ... at the huge blue sky, then the green green grassy slope and then the water.

I'm wondering how Thyal and I could've dreamed this reality when we knew nothing yet about the Ark Ship or even that this other ship existed?

One thought leads to another. Thyal is still missing and so is Mongoose. Nor have I seen or heard Ant, Meerkat or Wren and a few more. Too many of my people are still missing.

I do that thing when it is absolutely not the right time to cry. Think of something totally different. Won't be me who reminds the Kosi-entity, if it is her beside me, that she ordered the Maremma girl to find three *dogs* to help with the hunt. I still don't know whether the Maremma people in the over-world are really people who use Maremma dogs for herding their sheep, or whether they're using Maremma dogs as their totems?

That misery I saw in the Maremma girl's eyes ... apparently the Kosi-entity, though she once was a real live person, doesn't remember how it feels to be human? Don't forget she's probably been this ... this bio-pattern for at least two hundred Earth years? I'm assuming bio-pattern because she says one of the boots did it.

I shudder. —surely it can only be a one way process?—and it is the dark eater animating Arley's skin to get it among the people, and using the Kosi-entity to get it close to me?

Knowing the danger does not make it feel better.

People climbing down are staying in the area near the creek. Soon ... I count twenty and multiply ... nearly three hundred people will throng the creek banks. I get a joke ready about what will happen if I have to stand in the water too long when I get down there. I might melt?

"When will we hunt?" says the Kosi-entity in Arley's animated skin.

Is it her or is it the eater who encircles my wrist with Arley's strong old fingers?

I'm afraid to pull away. Scared I'll pull her over. Petrified of what will jump loose if she falls. We survey the grassy slope with all the hundreds of people cluttering its middle lower half.

"*What* will we hunt?" I say. I hope Kosi at least realises that the people below are not to be thought of as prey. Will it make a difference?

Someone in the suit laughs with girlish glee and releases my wrist to twirl on the spot. Does Kosi know that the suit's eyes are dim and old and only glint where they might once have sparkled, and that her laughing lips have cracked and are bleeding?

Her teeth are grey outlined with black. In behind them ...? Fear sweat prickles me.

But I do need to see. I step nearer. Ardrey would've noticed but I don't expect Kosi to already know the skin so well that she can make use of its perceptual circuits and I have to

test the alien entity. I ignore what it might know. How else to ...?

I don't finish the thought. What if it is a mind-reader?

Arley's face doesn't change its expression, hard as I find it to believe that the entity knows nothing about facial expressions when it has been using the skin for a while.

"I stocked the place with a bunch of people that came through in their totem forms," the Kosi-entity says.

I stare into the open mouth whenever the flow of words allows it. The tongue is marked out geometrically. It shines and glitters in segments as the meat within stretches and contracts to shape the words.

"There's a stripy old dog with them," Kosi says. "It told them they should hide. Should be fun finding them."

I hear *stripy old dog* but can't yet attend. I search for more places on Ardrey's skin to see what I saw. Her ankles.

Her skin there is blocky with amulet-shaped bumps. Like mine on the top of my foot. Mine with half a dozen. Hers an unbroken expanse under her skin.

Catching one of her wrists like I'm friendly, I stroke my thumb lightly over her arm bones.

I feel the same-sized partitions outlined under the skin as the segments on the tongue, segments that are the same size as the amulet I found in the Yellow City and having the same dimensions as the cherts abiding under my foot-skin.

I let the wrist slide gently from my grasp. The eater also in the suit can't know what I discovered.

"Did you even hear me?" the Kosi-entity says.

She's suspicious? "You said *stripy old dog* when you're talking about a striped old thylacine?" I say.

When I first woke up on that platform in the white hall, also called *Reception*, Mongoose was in his Totem form. Second time I woke, he was gone. The Kosi-entity brought him here? I look around. Where?

The news about Thyal is whispered from group to group. "The old shaman has them. He will keep them," I hear.

They are right. With Thyal in charge of that group, I shouldn't worry about them. I start to edge toward the place where people are being lowered from the ledge.

My move to come down off the cliff convinces people that we will be staying a while. Those already on the slope begin to climb and clamber toward the top. There's some gasping, a few sobs here and there and some cursing backgrounded by the murmuring of a crowd helping and comforting each other, and planning their survival in this new place for the next few hours by finding a safe place to sit.

The people who chose to bring up the rear are still coming through the membrane. Limber is here now too. Uncle Puma. Jackal. Half a dozen of the others. Then Red-tail.

Aaa-aaa-ee...!”

A man resting against the cliff-face is pulled back through the membrane with such force that his scream is cut off abruptly.

Lithe shouts. Ibis shouts.

For a minute there’s a shocked silence as we all wait, what now?

A blood-spraying thing comes hurtling through the place where everyone came through. The unfortunate man’s head bounces off the ledge and splashes into the creek.

“Time to get out of here,” someone says and the people remaining on the ledge start to risk their life and limb by jumping the distance, not waiting to be helped.

I’m infected with everyone else’s hurry, and slip and slide down from the cliff. It’s real stone, I graze my hands and they sting. Shaking them one at the time I clamber up the slope.

Most people bunch in little groups no further than about halfway up, as that region is furnished with an arc of stones that make sitting easier. I also choose myself a place behind a stone that is set in deep enough that it isn’t going to dislodge.

Looking around I wonder at the serendipity of the stones being place just so. I don’t think so. I mean, no serendipity. We all look like an audience attending a show. Which, right this minute, consists of the Ardrey-skin life-suit still standing on the ledge. It’s like the stage from where one or the other of the entities in play will make an announcement. Or both.

I’m not wrong.

“I have a feeling ... oh how good it is to have feelings!” the Kosi-entity says. She slumps a little. “Despite that they aren’t all that comforting.”

Then she is silent.

9. The Attrition

I’m almost level with the thing on the ledge. The life-suit sags as if it really just is an old woman. The tunic is the same tinge of grey as Ardrey’s hair still plaited around her head skin.

The life-suit flexes and fills until an Amazon warrior from one of my mother’s stories stands across from us. She/Kosi/it puts Ardrey’s hands around her mouth as if preparing to foghorn its message.

Not really necessary. Silence blankets the grassy slope.

The Amazon opens her mouth, starts to talk. No pink inside her mouth.

The voice cracks and crackles. I hear disparate sounds like chirruping and crackling and tearing and the grinding caused by wind-blown sand in old sprockets.

It seems that the entity realises its message isn’t reaching us. It stops.

Behind me I hear the ghostly sound of teeth grinding. “Stop that,” I say without turning. “You’ll ruin your teeth.”

There is a communal breath taken of people preparing to burst out in laughter. The relief. The breaking of the tension.

The Amazon opens its black mouth. I raise my hand. Meaning, the thing across the way isn’t done.

Crackle. Grind. Groan. It has rearranged its syllables and after a while I hear words. “Attrition,” it says. And, “My ship ... not for hundreds.”

The dark holes that serve as eyes stare across a divide of less than five metres. The head moves side to side to allow the gaze to range over the ranks. There’s no sound from among us. We stare back as helpless as prey.

We stare. It stares.

After a while, it feels like a stale mate. Doesn’t it know what to do next?

Perhaps not. The eyes in the suit glaze over. The suit shrinks. We are left with a sylph-like figure on the ledge.

“I want my hunting trip before it starts. You hear me, Jeb?”

This is the Kosi-entity, not ignorant of the attrition to come whatever form it will come in, therefore not ignorant of the thing she’s sharing the suit with. I wonder why it gave way to her, and without a struggle? Is she a puppet? That would make sense if it is the owner.

I try to think without worrying. We need that suit. Or rather, everyone here other than the people who already have an amulet, need the amulets inside the suit to enable them to enter the Ark Ship. I try to recall what Kosi said about the Ark Ship, what it is now. All of it has escaped me. I add, as possibly that may be the only way they’ll be let in.

And we need the Thyal-and-Mongoose group back with us without them being hunted. I look out over the so-called totem reality. There can’t be that many places this side of the membrane where Thyal’s group can all hide together? I’m sure Thyal wouldn’t have let them split up.

The cliffs have lost their clean outlines. I search out my people, the settler-born, whom I know well. Their eyes are blobs. Their mouths no more than smudges. The green grass near at hand is also darker? “A dusk is coming over us,” I say. “I don’t know if it’s natural.”

Of course it isn’t natural. This isn’t a natural place. The precarious slope trembles beneath us.

“What do I do?” the Kosi-entity cries. She is marooned on the ledge in a body just as fragile as the rest of us.

Uncle Puma roars. “Lotor-quake! Lie down!”

He’s right. The slope shakes, and shakes harder. I spread-eagle myself over the ground and dig my toes into soil which surprise surprise is just a thin layer. I clench the stone in front of me.

Squeee-ahh-gnash!

I hear the squealing of steel sliding over steel though I've only heard the sound described in words, in a history of the first days. One of the Ark Ship's shuttles glancing off Lotor, which was when Lotor's substance was discovered.

Madly glittering dust clouds plume up from where the disk that is the grassy slope, doesn't quite meet the inward-sloping sides of the pyramid. Lines of light shift and break, meld and re-meld as the slope rocks.

Again the grassy sward moves. More of the glittering dust puffs up at its edges. *Eee-aaa-ah-groan!*

The rumbling originates in the supposed mountain we're clinging to. I stare and stare at the darkened pyramidal walls to keep my nausea at bay. But I can't stop thinking that we're *hearing* machinery.

The slope seesaws irregularly. What was up now is down, then drifts or sags upward again. Is that even possible? As if the slope is a plate not balancing very well on an off-centred fulcrum.

The sour smell of vomit drifts among us and sets a few people retching. Another reason to keep my attention on the action.

The shift of the slope causes hidden parts of the darkened walls to come into view. A vague rectangular shape truncates the places where the two walls come together. I wedge my knee against my stone and kneel up. Stare.

That?

That must be an airlock!

My stone rolls down hill and I'm left grabbing for anything and anyone to stop following after it. But I do follow it, sliding. Near the slope's new lower edge I fall against a dam of people. Someone grunts. *Oof*.

The ground tremors violently.

All of us in the mass shout alarm. Bodies smack wetly against the stones. Bones crack like snapping sticks. We scream and cry.

Hardly heard, the machine-sounds stop.

"Quiet!" Uncle Puma shouts.

When he has a miserable kind of quiet, he says in an ordinary voice, "What's that sound?"

The silence is so silent it roars in my ears. Then?

Scratch. Scratch. The sound seems to come from below the now sickly slanting disk.

What the noise sounds like ... I concentrate ... someone in the gap between the cliffs and what seems now to be the high edge of the slope, is trying to light a candle with a fire-lighter.

I stop breathing to hear better.

A small and hesitant light flicks large orangey shadows onto the cliff walls. The shadows are blobs with negative landscape-like waists where the dark mass interrupting them is the low grassy profile of the disk.

That little light, though, is the most comforting thing we've seen since our entry into the totem reality.

We sigh our relief too soon.

A fore-shortened, night-black shape comes walking over the sward, rising from below our very near-at-hand horizon. I make out an old woman's shape. Her tunic allows her to be instantly recognised.

The candle light emanating from the gap between the disk and the spaceship's walls outlines her with pale glints from her death-white skin.

It appears that the Arley-composite jumped from the ledge to the grassy disk, and that in the dark. Perhaps it knew how the disk would move? Has it come to speed along the attrition?

Behind her, I see part of a rectangular outline. An airlock? Huh? I must be even more disoriented than I thought.

Someone below the disk starts to swear.

The Arley-composite hesitates, then drops to the grass. She scrunches herself up. She's trying to look small.

I stare and stare. Making sure she's staying there. Then to triangulate the place, so I can find her at a glance.

"Show a bit of respect," Thyal says. "You're alive, aren't you?" He's in the space below.

"Jackal wasn't with us before, yet here he is."

I know that voice, but I'm not sure.

"His body, you mean."

"Told you I heard voices."

I forget everything at hand. Leap up. I'm so happy, I scream. "Mongoose! Mongoose!" I fall over an unresponsive body. Breath knocked out of me. Also my unfeeling disregard for our losses.

I crouch. "Red-tail?" My voice small.

"Still with you, Shaman Jeb." With her warmth she excuses me my lapse.

"Could you organise getting Thyal and ... and ... the rest up here?" I ask. "Before the floor shifts again and squeezes them?"

I shout from fear of that happening. "Nobody else move! This slope is badly balanced!"

"Onto it." Red-tail again calls for spare clothes, this time to be handed up to her.

"Jeb, girl ..." Uncle Puma says. "We should all join Thyal."

His voice is dampened. Hidden. It comes from behind the upswung edge of the disk where he can't help me.

"You're still on the ledge?" I ask. "Swans?"

Hopeful, I know.

“Both of us here with the chief, young shaman,” Lithe says. “We stayed in case we could help with the ...er ...actioning? Is that what you are thinking of next? The need for more amulets?”

Lithe is spot on. I *am* thinking of more amulets needed. “I love you too, Lithe. You’re as good explaining as yet non-existent concepts as Mongoose is with words.”

Oops. It might’ve been better if I had said nothing. Don’t want to have too many people know what I am about, or even too many entities. Have to camouflage it in a squad of talk. “I well recall when I first joined the group how you helped Ant explain why it was good to have Uncle Puma as chief, and Thyal and me as a shaman-and-a-half team.”

A kind of surprised silence hangs there until Uncle Puma chuckles. It sounds forced.

I blush. I just small-talked Uncle Puma again. How do I do it? Perhaps Lithe or Limber or both of them have him in a strangle hold and force him to laugh.

Nearly all the people in that little story, and whom I trust most, are not available to help me contain the dark eater. I shudder because actually I am the only one who’ll be able to approach the life-suit near enough for any action because, hopefully, Kosi still trusts me.

It was her quip about the now strange-ness of the Ark Ship that convinced me that everyone needs an amulet. And I need her to tell the rest of what she knows, though right now I have no idea how to organise that.

“The chief is right, Shaman Jeb,” Red-tail says in a normal talking voice that tells me she is approaching. Around us I feel a crowding-in happening of the people with us. They want to help and are saying so in whispers and mutters.

I grab for Red-tail’s arm. Run my hand over her face and hair. Yes, the plaited hair tail. She still has a feather. “We’ll need the amulets whichever way we go,” I say right by her ear.

I feel her nod.

“I’ll need a knife.”

Red-tail grips my arm in turn. Opens my right hand and closes my fingers around a knife handle. *Shows* me, with her hand guiding my other hand, the double edges of the blade.

She turns me about. Puts my other hand on someone’s shoulder. “Isis will have your back.”

In her normal voice she addresses our helpers. “You heard Shaman Jeb about the slope and its out-of-kilter balance? Everyone sit down.” Her own dark shape folds beside me.

Isis laughs breathily. “The inimitable Red-tail took them all off the horizon, Shaman Jeb. Our way is clear.” She shapes herself to my back behind me, then takes half a step back and aside to free her fighting arm.

I pass on figuring out what inimitable means. Am I dreaming? Help, I’m not a soldier. And help, I don’t know enough.

Gulp. Be calm my Jeb, I hear Mongoose say faraway and long ago.

I match my breathing to Isis’s.

There’s not a murmur from the people behind us. The only light in the scene, a little flame

presumably, glows calmly in the canyon-like gap between the ship's wall and the upside edge of the slope. Mongoose is down there, and Thyal, and the others. None are moving and all are silent. The three on the ledge too are past masters at silence.

10. Slish, k-r-r-r

All is ready. Am I? I move the knife point straighter down my side. I visualise a tight swing up, a thrust down.

Flick a glance toward the cliffs. Oh yeah, slope is upward in that direction now. It's black dark because still no overhead light. How will I see the Arley-composite ...? I remember she is laying low.

I drop to the ground. Will I see her? Yes, there. A shape darker than the slope that is lit however slightly by the glow from the canyon beyond. The thing between us and the light.

She's risen and is upright, and on the move. Swinging her head blindly to try to see in the dark. Does she have a weapon? I crawl with the knife blade pointing rearwards in my fist. The human life-suit can't see me or Isis in the black dark as we have no light behind us.

Isis clamps my foot to stop me.

Skitter-itter-it!

I startle but realise it must have been a couple of small stones bouncing off a larger one.

The Arley-composite stops and stares hard to my right. I see now that she is only two paces in front. The lack of light and the slope of the disk have disrupted my perception of distances. I shudder thinking I might've crashed into her. So, the stones, whoever thought of them. A helpful tactic.

I rise. Left foot forward. Raising my right hand with the knife in it and my left hand to grab Arley's old arm and swing her round ... *skritch*.

I slit the tunic and shifting my left hand, pinch up a loose skin fold. Swing down. Puncture and slit.

Arley's skin expels air. Something inside it sucks its innards away from the knife tip. I need a mantra. It can't be Kosi. She has no body. It can't be Kosi. She has no body. Kosi has no body.

The blade bumps—over ribs?—help! I sob—but I can't, mustn't stop!

Slish, kr-r-r-r-r.

I gag at the foul air released from the area where a human stomach might once have been. Almost I turn away.

"The creature sends you an illusion," Isis says. "Thyal told me about the parcel. This is

the life-suit.” She half-crouches by my shoulder, echoing my stance.

Isis needs reassurance too? “It is the life-suit,” I say for both of us.

There’s more resistance. I tweak the edges of Arley’s skin aside to see. I’m cutting through a bunch of ... Silvery things glint at the edges of the slit.

I breathe out. It’s the amulets. I have cut through dozens.

Can’t be helped.

“There’ll be plenty for us all,” Isis says.

Another mantra-in-the-making.

The skin sags bloodlessly away from the cut. I sigh I am so relieved. No blood means no life. I didn’t kill anyone.

As if echoing mine, there’s an exasperated, human-like sigh—I almost laugh because for a moment I believe that Kosi produces it to remark on my superfluous fear—but how can she when she is, or was, a pattern of electrical impulses?

At Shaman school I learned that any pattern breaks when cut into. What have I done? There was so much still to ask Kosi?

I step back. Into Isis. Push her back with me.

The light grows stronger because in the left quarter distance Red-tail raises a torch.

Isis and I crouch quite near to a dense-black shadow divesting itself of the life-suit. We don’t move.

With one two-thumbed hand already free, the shadow shirrs a human-skin sleeve down its other arm and pulls free a hand with too many fingers. Laid for a moment against the pale skin-suit, they make it look like it is shredded with bone-shaped slits, and maybe I twitch at the unnatural sight.

Arley’s head snaps round so the alien can stare at me.

I see it seeing me, the knife still in my hand, Isis right behind me. What does it understand about us?

The alien frees its head by wrenching the life-suit’s head up like it is a helmet. It drops the head, it tears and shoves free from the rest of the suit. Drops that like a rag.

“No, you don’t!” Isis, with the presence of mind of a leader, spreads her arms and stops the alien making a decision to step past me into the dark where all our people hide.

Red-tail advances from my left, with the lantern held high.

The alien looks at me as if weighing up its chances of getting past me. Why would it want to? What is there behind me? I wave the knife I still have in my hand.

Growling and hissing approaches behind me.

Then.

A trio of furred creatures slip between Red-tail and me, and between Isis and me. I don’t see what species they are. Just that they’re as tall as people. Walk upright. Show off their

carnivorous teeth.

Then dozens more toothy upright animal shapes, snarling and barking and wailing in one case walk between us. Snapping here and there, they make their teeth click.

People have transmogrified into their Totems? The alien looks confused and begins to give way.

I am stunned. I fall to my knees. An Arctic wind roars through me. Every page in every supposed eye-witness account I disbelievably read about the process rips loose and is swept up by the ice-devil.

Some of the totem-alterities, if that's who they are, drop to all fours and begin to chase the alien entity. It turns and lurches unevenly up the wrong-way slope of the disk.

The Shamans have always said, and written in their lessons, that only the few best-studied could transmogrify, and only if they were able to constantly live by the moral characteristics of their Totems. Privately I always thought the idea a fairy story, part of the cloak hiding us from Lotor.

Journeying with Uncle Puma's troop through the meat-eating desert I dreamed of Mongoose and Thyal as transmogrified. To help me help them in their fighting, I thought.

The dog-like alterities bark and howl. The cat-like snarl. There is even an animal that brays. It's a stampede of noise, a terrifying hunt.

I dreamed of Lithe and Limber in their black swan alterities more than once. They played along, I thought, and I haven't taken the time to ask them why they would bother. The fact that they didn't laugh is now my only comfort.

I am as helpless as a newborn when I vision-dream.

But am I dreaming now? I stab my arm with the knife. A-a-ah! I'm not dreaming.

One of the totem-alterities wrenches the knife away from me. "What are you doing?" Mongoose says.

"Am I ... am I ... am I dreaming? So many of you! All *these* have reached the heights?" I mean the hallowed heights of transmogrification-at-will as described by the myth cloaking our reality.

Mongoose pecks me on my cheek. Runs after the others. Shouts. "I'll see you down below!"

At the edge of the disk, the alien teeters then jumps to clear the gap. The animals chasing it manage to stop at the edge of the disk. They drop to their bellies as the disk-edge judders downward, presumably due to the new weight distribution.

Isis pulls me to the ground. "Tch tch," she says, binding my arm with my bandanna. "Why?"

"Am I dreaming? Am I awake?"

"Pinching yourself you would've known."

"Had the knife in my hand." We're fairly safe where we are, near the middle of the disk. I hear the eater shuffling through that thin layer of sand, progressing in an easterly direction

along the ledge.

I'm seeing various animals slide down over the edge of the disk and presumably drop to the ground below. Behind us people chatter. "Saw him off." "Good riddance." "Good chase."

While I am vaguely thinking *bad* that three of our leaders are all in the same place, can't let that happen again if we all live that long, the part of the reflection that acts as the upper rear wall billows and shimmers as if it fractures into a thousand pieces. There is no sound.

All of *that* is around me. Humans shout and scream their fear and surprise, and there's even some human headless-chicken-style running around because it is still dark.

The disk trembles. Swings free.

Alarm calls from the group below join the distress up here and the candle flame flickers alarmingly—please don't leave us in a darker dark—before it steadies.

Slowly slowly the disk finds a new level.

Isis and I, and everyone around us, try to move as little as possible for fear we'll slide off. The headless-chicken-runners sink to the ground.

11. The Chips/Amulets

There's only an apprehensive sibilance as we wait of people barely daring to whisper.

"Limber?" says Uncle Puma says at last.

"The creature brushed by me," Limber says, broadcasting his voice over the whole scene. "I saw its darkness meld into the membrane. The membrane is still up. A visual disturbance only."

We on the disk do not relax.

"What's the problem?" Uncle Puma says. "Red-tail?"

He expected us to cheer? Red-tail ever so slowly raises the lantern to assess where we all are. "The disk is free and in a sort of balance. Lotor knows how it works. None of us feels safe enough move or talk."

"I hear you. Thyal?" Uncle Puma says.

Is that Uncle Puma acknowledging his ignorance? It seems so.

"Thyal, is there something you and your group can do to stabilise the disk?" he says. Almost straightaway following it with, "No, I guess not ..."

There's something he isn't saying.

“*Ssst.*”

One of the swans hissing for the other. I hear someone talking his way down the cliff. Limber and Uncle Puma perhaps lowering Lithe. Then there are murmurs, and ... hissing, clicking and growls with the intonations of *greetings*.

What if the creatures from down there haven't changed back into their human shapes? Because what if transmogrification really isn't real? I recall the podium in Reception. Everyone there in their totem-form. There must be something other going on? Mongoose, I need you.

“We'll be needing this, probably?” There's enough light from Red-tail's lantern that I can see Isis rise into a crouch and reach past me. She picks up the life-suit.

Yes. A useful distraction.

The disk trembles as if in resentment. Everyone on board hisses for Isis to sit down.

“We need that suit for everyone to get an amulet,” I say loud enough for them all to hear. “I've heard that an airlock is the only way out of this disaster?” A cruel joke that has some people sitting up attentively. Perhaps they search the dark for the tell-tale outlines of the doors into safety.

Isis folds the blackened interior of the suit inward and rolls it up. It's the parcel again. She shoves it in her gleaner bag.

I wonder whether there is enough space down below for four hundred people minus the dead? What will we do about the dead?

“There's an airlock near where the alien went through the membrane,” someone says. “I remember seeing it before.” She gets up and starts into that direction. A couple more someones get up too and start to follow. People cheer them on.

The disk trembles and the cheering falters. Can it possibly be a reaction to a couple of people clambering about and a few more shouting?

I rise. I'm stressed and I shout in my turn. “We are still in the alien's ship and we are still too many. Will it be dozens of people trying for an airlock in a minute? And without any chips as far as I know. Will the disk start to spin and fling us against the walls?”

The three droop—from shame I hope—and dropping to their hands and knees creep back to their groups.

Now Red-tail raises her voice. “The disk is badly balanced as we all know. But we need to get off. A single person only must scout a safe route for the many. I'm Red-tail, in charge of security in Chief Puma's group. I'll scout the route.”

Stopping any argument in its tracks by starting right away, she turns edge-ward and walks three paces into the direction where the disk is the lowest. She stops. Jumps a couple of times.

Thunk thunk.

Some of us sitting moan when the disk vibrates under us.

“She's testing for stability,” Isis says.

“Would’ve been good to know ahead of time?” I say. “Give me the bag? I can make a start getting the amulets loose?”

Isis chuckles, probably about my snippy tone. “The way we used to loosen corn from their cobs can be the way to loosen the amulets out of the skin-matrix. One hand on the outside of the bag kneading. One hand inside prying the amulets from their seating.”

She hands me her gleaner bag made from the usual two rectangles of cloth sewn together on three sides, in this case with straps that feel like ...

“The straps are made of hair?” I’m surprised into saying.

“Horse hair,” Isis says. “Man of the Forest is a true scavenger and very handy with the needle.”

Flying horse hair that must be. And that was scavenged from the slopes of the mountain that the first villages encircled. Many strands are plaited together to make a sturdy thread that is woven through a mesh.

Caressing a satiny section, I see again the flying horse overcome by the silver. Red was the main colour of that event. I shudder though it was a long way ago, back on Lotor. How far we’ve come without being safe.

I bandoleer the straps over my head and shoulder and start kneading the bag. Didn’t I decide that Kosi Lionhair is an amazing entity in her own right? That she probably would not entrust just the one copy of her pattern to any new situation?

I hope that’s the truth.

Thunk-thunk.

Now that we know the disk for what it is, we can all feel the vibrations every time Red-tail bounces. Sometimes the disk sways and moves, almost seeming to glide a little.

When she reaches the edge, Red-tail kneels, and as she looks into the gap, a frown gathers on her features. She glances back. To me, it seems? What? What?

She lays down and talks into the gap between the disk and the pyramid wall so I can’t see anyone. I hear a murmuring only. Questions and answers. Comments. Decisions. I don’t hear Mongoose’s voice no matter how hard I listen.

Distraction, distraction. Give me another distraction. I think aloud. “We could begin to dole out the amulets?”

“That could work,” Isis says. “We’ve got a large bunch of increasingly restive people up here.”

“I’m feeling pretty restive myself,” I say as I rise to my feet. The mumbling chatter dies away.

“As I said earlier, to get into our ship you will need an amulet, so-called by people who were on Lotor, and probably known as a chip by everyone else.”

A grumble starts when people realise they don’t have either. What is it about crowds? Are they always so suggestible?

“When you get one of the chips I’m giving out, put it into your mouth, sit it between your

cheek and your teeth.” I demonstrate.

Isis laughs. “You aim to stop people voicing their every little emotion, Shaman Jeb?” she says softly.

I laugh too. I lift my voice for the crowd. “The next thing requires listening like you never did before.”

I wait for the buzz to die down. “With the minimum of movement I want you to form yourselves into groups of approximately ten people and then choose a leader.”

“Ten?” Isis says. “Thirty-eight groups?”

“You mean that’s a lot of groups. The chips seem to be mainly breaking apart into cards two rows by five. Should I go to them or they come to me one by one?”

“What I think ...?” Isis rises.

“Isis!” Red-tail calls.

I ignore their grabbing-air signalling. I don’t know the code. It has to be about the way we’ll all get off. Among the mass of people, I start to see groups aggregating and surrounding their leaders.

“We can’t get into the Ark Ship from up here on the disk,” I say to forestall forty leaders leaping up to fetch their chips. “So we’ll need to creep the route that Red-tail just travelled, every one of us. Then be swung down from the disk. Then make our way under the disk to a place where we can climb up to an airlock. Any questions?”

“How will we get up to the airlocks?”

“We’ll climb, Shaman Jeb said,” someone says.

I tell them how I’ll give each leader a bunch of chips and how, after everyone in a group has tucked the little thing in behind their teeth, they’ll creep single file toward Red-tail. One group at the time.

“Stop and grovel if the disk moves,” I shout finally.

Some people laugh. Maybe from nerves. Maybe about my turn of phrase. Grovel indeed.

We start.

I give out chips. The new leaders dole them out. Isis feeds people single file onto the end of the line. The people in the line move a couple of paces at the time. Red-tail takes people off the front and pushes them toward where Uncle Puma and Limber, now on this side of the gap, are lowering them into the gap.

I have half a bag of chips remaining and some grit when the last group files past.

“Go on, girl,” Isis says. “Let’s get it over with.”

“What?”

Isis is bright-eyed. “It’ll be you and me both suffering the disaster, if it is that.” She presses her lips together.

So Man of the Forest *also* met with disaster? Is that what she’s saying? I want to hurry,

but mustn't. I don't allow my stare to rove to Red-tail's expression, or Uncle Puma's, or Limber's. Sometimes it's good to be short.

I swing over the edge of the disk, kick to catch the end of the shirts-and-pants rope. Got it. I let go the disk.

"Got you," Mongoose says. He hugs me. Warm and furry. He is still in his Totem form and he puts his paw over my mouth. No questions now.

12. Can You Save Us Again?

Mongoose wants no comment on his furry state? I refuse. Processing my questions, I boil them down to one-word needs. "How? Why?"

He shrugs. "How? The reconstructor? Why? I don't know. Everyone under the low part of the disk. All of us from Lotor."

He takes me into the quadrant that is roofed by the disk hanging low overhead. Thyal is a rangy, striped thylacine. Ant is still the slim young man he was, but with insectoid appendages. He is in a state of incomplete transmogrification. He fends off sympathy by staring bug-eyed into the lost distances of Lotor. Man-of-the-Forest is a large reddish man-sized ape next to him. Isis hugs him, she is as speechless as I am. Meerkat, though furry, seems far too tall.

"Meerkat?" I ask.

"On watch," Mongoose says. "Standing on the disk's support mechanism."

I'm too short to even see anyone eye to eye, let alone over the crowd. "Good place for me as well."

Mongoose lifts the corner of his whiskered mouth like he's trying to grin. He pushes me ahead of him through the crowd of animals. I'm so dazed trying to remember who they all are, I almost trip over a stone-crete step-up when we get there.

Meerkat hauls me up. Both Meerkat and Mongoose, though animal-like, are nearly the same size they always were and can still speak human-wise. That seems important to note.

Standing up on the pediment, I discover how crowded-together we are. The almost four hundred of us stand like corn stems squeezed into a vaguely triangular store-room. The transmogrifications hold the centre and the humans crowd the corners.

People are mumbling around the chip in their mouths. Some, managing to free their hands and arms from the crush, are taking the chips from their mouths to talk. I can foresee lost chips, people trying to find theirs being trodden on. Screaming and crying. A stampede with more deaths. A lot of gory detail.

Back at the place where we all came over the edge of the disk, Uncle Puma coils up the shirt-and-pant rope. He's thinking nineteen to the dozen I can see from his expression. I was wrong about the walls. The longest wall is the cliff and it is vertical even at this level. I wave

to get his attention and I point at the three airlocks.

He blazes his eyes at me. I cower. Why wouldn't he already know about the airlocks?

Speaking in his this-is-your-chief-speaking voice, he says, "This instruction is for the people directly beneath the airlocks. Pass it on. I need to know how many items of clothes it will take to reach from the floor to an airlock."

He manages to have everyone involved in passing on the message. There is no pushing and shoving because the task is coming to the people. I shrug a little to convey my apologies. This is the reason Uncle Puma is our chief, after all.

The airlock behind me—since I'm facing the cliff—should be accessible in full. To my right, I can see almost half of that airlock. The rest we have to assume is in the *underworld*, the place we came from through the reflective membrane. To my left the low-hanging disk hides that airlock from me.

In the righthand corner, a man rises above the crowd, being lifted by two pairs of hands while he kneels on a pair of separate shoulders. Now he rises to his feet. The whole group holding him up sways as he reaches toward a door with one hand. There is no doorsill. In his other hand he clutches the sleeve of a shirt hanging down into the crowd.

Which he brings up level with the bottom of the door. There's calling out. Arguing. He thumps his fist onto the bottom of the airlock door. Which does not open. He collapses back into the crowd. A message passes back to Uncle Puma. The rope ladders will need to be at least two shirts long.

Arguments containing the doubts follow. Everyone adds their concerns and or solutions. Where to fasten the ladder. There is nothing to tie it to.

"Build two people-pyramids to hold the upper ends of the ladder."

"Open the doors and wedge them."

"Get up as many people as will fit in the airlock."

"Shut the doors."

"Cycle the people through into the ArkShip."

"Open the doors how?" Uncle Puma says to each of the information-rivulets coming to him.

From which people seem to understand that step one is the go. That information streams back to the airlocks, and people begin to practice their people-pyramid building.

Uncle Puma turns Limber and has him lay his arms along the shoulders of his nearest neighbours for a one-shirt measure. He sets Lithe and Red-tail to work constructing a trio of ladders.

"A message for those near enough to an airlock to see it in detail," Uncle Puma says. "Pass it on. I want to know about any ridge, door handle, or slot on the outside of the doors, and I want to know about any keypads or other features beside, below or above the doors."

He apparently does not expect any answers any time soon because he approaches me through the crowd by dint of changing places with the people in his way, each of them pressing past each other, and finally forcing Mongoose from his position. "Jeb, step down so

we can talk without every man woman and child reading our lips?”

“Better if you step up, Chief,” Meerkat says. “See all the action from up here. Talk with your back to the humans if necessary. There cannot be any secrets from your Totems and so say all of us.”

All the totem-alterities that can, add their growls to the *and-so-say-all-of-us*. Ant does not. I squeeze Mongoose’s arm hard to not cry.

Meerkat steps down. He and Uncle Puma do a tight little dance to change places. It reminds me of the way people stepped by one another on the dangerous single-file paths on Lotor. Uncle Puma joins me on the disk’s substructure.

“I see that *you* are your usual self,” he says.

Huh? Is he moaning about something I said? Did? Didn’t?

Beside me Mongoose stiffens. Thyal growls. His forepaws are on the pediment. His bared teeth are nearer than Uncle Puma is comfortable about. Thyal hasn’t a human voice?

“Why didn’t Jeb transmogrify when you did, Thyal?” Uncle Puma says. “Why are eighty of our combined OldEarth-born troops in their totem-alterities, Isis? That’s what I’m asking.”

Isis leaps up beside us. She scans the three crowds. She slumps because Uncle Puma is right. Only the handful-and-one of those of us originally from Lotor are unaffected by the inexplicable. Red-tail, Isis, me, Uncle Puma, Lithe and Limber. Plus Jackal who didn’t make it. The four hundred minus their dead hitching a ride with us are as human as humans can be.

Interestingly, the Maremma dogs in their Maremma-dog alterities were going to be joining us too. I haven’t seen them yet.

Uncle Puma obviously doesn’t believe that every one of the totem-alterities is so advanced in their studies that they can transmogrify at will. And anyway, I think, if they were, and they could, why would they now at this moment?

I feel weak in the knees thinking it, because this is stuff I have *never believed*. I decided long ago that transmogrifying is a fantasy. Never in the two hundred year history of humans on Lotor has anyone transmogrified, and I didn’t respect any grown-up who spouted a witness-account. It was always a cousin of a cousin kind of story.

At Shaman School, I learned that the *magic* that the Shamanic Way taught was a cover to hide our people from the big bad planet called Lotor. That I could accept and I settled happily into my studies. Then I was kidnapped and thrown down a well. Captured by the sand-people.

The fauns I met in the prison shook me, though in the main, I could ignore their existence in favour of taking notice of their presence. How they fitted into the prison world and so on. In the goodness of time Uncle Puma’s band turned up and I escaped to join them. It was then or never. I met Mongoose and because I wanted him, I ignored his beliefs. I feel my face get hot.

Feverishly I continue my thoughts. So how was it that I performed the shaman’s magic in the Yellow City to save us all? Remember how both Mongoose and Thyal transmogrified to fight the people from the block village?

I thought I dreamed it. I remember Limber and Lithe in their black swan mode fetching

me from the underworld. Dreams dreams dreams. I remember calling for bread-and-honey, what my mother always fed me when I was low on blood sugar, which was when I dreamed my visionary dreams.

And they *were* just dreams!

I search for Mongoose. He's nearby, studying me with narrowed eyes—I didn't know a mongoose could do that—as if he's living my argument with me. I pull my lips into a sickly lop-sided kind of smile though I have never felt less like smiling.

He frowns and leaps up onto the pediment with me. Uncle Puma on my other side almost falls off. "Easy," he says.

Mongoose says nothing. He lays his furry arm over my shoulders. Nuzzles my neck with his mongoose snout. His mongoose-whiskers tickle me along my jaw. What is he trying to tell me?

"That I really really am a mongoose," he says, confirming that he's reading my mind or he's better at reading me than I am. "That I really am furry. And like you, never in my wildest dreams did I think that that could come true no matter how hard I studied."

He speaks into my neck. I'm holding onto him to not fall, or fall apart to be honest. "But before?" I say. "At the Rose-pink Tower? You and Thyal?"

"Your dreams, my Jeb, with which you saved us." He nuzzles me. "Can you save us again?"

An important segment in which Jeb faces her POD, her point-of-disbelief, which is the magic inherent in this science-fictional story-world.

[PODs must be explained in such a way as to be believable to the characters and acceptable as an internal truth to readers ... but this segment is the set-up for that to happen on a later day]

13. Kosi Back in the Scene

I stare so hard into the crowd that has Lithe and Limber in it, that they turn and stare back. I don't know what expression they see on my face but they pass their work to the nearest bystanders and start to make their way to us. Lithe alerts Red-tail by tweaking her braided hair and she comes too.

All the leaders in the same place again. What is it with us? "Were you in your Totem-shape when you first woke?" I ask Mongoose.

"On the platform. When I didn't see you, I thought I would go look for you. You're getting an idea?" Mongoose says.

I'm remembering. "The once-human, now-machine pattern calling herself Kosi Lionhair stole the Ark Ship's de-and-re-constructor and installed it in this ship. She says. In Reception.

Where we came in.” I shudder. “I so don’t want to be the only one to know that.”

“Well ...” Red-tail says. “You have successfully spread it to the rest of us. And?”

As if it has been waiting for a cue, the Kosi Lionhair entity giggles. “One door-opener reporting for duty! Sir!” There’s a clacking sound accompanying that I’m not familiar with. Nor is anyone else going by their expressions.

“Well, that fell flat,” the entity says. “Heels clicking? The salute?”

Everyone around me stares at the substructure. I don’t see anything about it that explains Kosi’s presence.

“Never mind,” The Kosi-entity says. “What I’m on about is clearing the deck. Since the fighting will have to be down here?”

There’s no reaction from my companions.

“You forgot to tell them, Jeb?”

I am mute. Mongoose shifts his arm and hugs me to him like he will never let me go.

“You’re not to fight, Jeb,” Kosi says. “I need you unhurt.”

Doesn’t tell me whether she sees us or how Mongoose holds onto me.

“Sounds like the doors to the airlocks are about to be convinced to open,” Uncle Puma says into the air while he also gestures at his crew. “Red-tail, you and Crow go to the south-side airlock. Help and organise.”

“How many per airlock intake?” he asks the air again. Red-tail doesn’t move. Crow doesn’t move.

Oh. It’s experimental.

Kosi giggles. “The airlocks sometimes hold fifty, sometimes only thirty. You should ask them that are so keen to get back into the Ark Ship and it only spat them out a few cycles ago?”

I understand from that that the human people with us were born on the Ark Ship and have spent a few cycles, whatever they are in length, on the alien starship. They do seem keen to leave.

“It *is* uncanny how the machine-pattern’s replies seem to answer the Chief’s questions,” Thyal says.

He *can* still talk! I’m so so glad.

“But I assure you,” he says in the ponderous way he has sometimes, “That there’s nothing down here that she can use to see or to hear. No sensors. Her timing is so good that she must still have a superlative imagination.”

“What has that to do with anything?” Uncle Puma says.

“She is imagining the conversations that we might be having and inserting herself in them,” Thyal says. “Moreover, I suspect that her world’s level of technological development was higher than that existing in this starship.”

Isis raises her eyebrows at Thyal's *more-overing*.

"If I'm making any sense?" Thyal says.

"Hardly," Isis says. "If she was human, she surely would have originated on Earth?"

"By which either of you mean to say...?" Uncle Puma says.

"Thyal is saying Kosi's pattern's development over-reaches the level of technology of this starship," I say.

Seeing various people make ready to ask difficult questions, I hurry on. "And Isis is saying that if Kosi was human she surely would've come from Earth and how can Earth be more advanced than this starship when Kosi in this ship is meant to have beaten the Ark Ship's AI into submission?"

Not just Uncle Puma is silenced. I get a lot of dark looks. I'm quite confused as to who knows what and who doesn't.

Thyal takes the heat off me. He shakes his blunt thylacine head. "I was astounded by the simplicity down here when we arrived to do mischief. The command dash is nothing but a bunch of illogically paired on-off switches. If the rest of this starship is the same, no wonder that the child-that-was, if she originally came from a technologically superior future Earth, decided to hitch a ride with the Ark Ship."

Just like that Thyal gives all of us a different understanding of the machine-pattern and, more importantly, of the Earth we are all hoping to get back to.

14. Testing the Machine Pattern

Red-tail seizes the moment and salutes Uncle Puma and Thyal. Masking the sound of Crow's leathery wingbeats with the purposeful scuffing of her feet, she makes her way into the southern crowd.

Crow settles on Red-tail's shoulder.

The rest of us wait for a reaction but there is no comment from the invisible entity who I am tempted to label the enemy. I breathe out silently. Crow is one totem-alterity saved from the hunt to come.

Uncle Puma narrows his eyes at me and I nod. We can do this again.

"Is Man Lithe'n Limber, you organise in the east," he says.

The machine pattern gives no indication that she heard Red-tail's shuffle, or the barely separated names of Isis, Man-of-the-Forest in his totem-alterity, and Lithe and Limber. With an ape and two men on silent bare feet, Isis in her boots might be the only one making her way to the eastern doors.

I guess I wasn't the only one knowing there are sensors in the floors and walls. Well, duh. Everyone came through the over-world. All four melt into their assigned crowd without that crowd's resistance. The airlock beckons a two-man-height above them.

Uncle Puma names his next pair. "Vulture and I will lead the northern crowd."

Mongoose tenses, but Uncle Puma with Vulture already settled on his shoulder turns and

strides forward. Perhaps I agreed to his plan? Plus, we probably all agreed with Thyal that Kosi is not stupid. If she does have a presence in the floor and the walls and even the airlock doors themselves—didn't she promise to open them?—there's no surety that she'll let the organisers get away with their respective crowds.

Perhaps the volunteers don't expect to escape. The trying is the thing, they'll be thinking. I calculate. Seventy-nine totem-alterities minus four. Seventy-five creatures to be hunted? Way too many because Kosi has a low boredom threshold. I had those same words applied to me once and I know what they mean. I flap my hand in front of Ant. "Complete the change, my good friend."

The process is horrifying. I turn aside because I can't bear to watch. A man becomes a tiny ant? How will he be a man again?

I find Wren, also small, a little grey bird, quaking on a strut. I point. Gesture. Take Ant. Fly. Join Isis and Man of the Forest.

There's a stork. Who? Doesn't matter. I send her on. Her long toes placed carefully make no sound on the starship's decking. She presses herself against someone at the back of the crowd until he takes her under his arm, and folds up and tucks in her legs.

That same easy acceptance again by the human. I'm suspicious of it.

There are still too many of us though Mongoose and Meerkat and Thyal are helping send those with non-combative totem-alterities into the crowds.

Which take them in, one and all. What do our Ark Ship-originating humans know about the transmogrification process? Surely only what they learned in the alien starship courtesy of a machine-pattern called Kosi Lionhair?

It seems important. I'm suspicious of these humans. I mop my neck with my shirt collar. Sweat trickling from under my hair usually means I'm letting fright get the better of me.

I breathe. Deep. In ... out. Calm yourself, Jeb. The exit is happening. The crowd here under the disk becomes smaller with each creature we send on.

Breathe in ... out.

The crowds by the airlocks decrease whenever the airlock doors slide apart and people manage to clamber in. Some then help haul up those coming after them. Some encourage the incoming farther into the little room. The doors slide shut.

Breathe in ... out.

"We're down to fifty, Half Shaman Jeb."

That could only be *Shaman* Thyalsene making a small joke to lighten the dark we are in. I'm the half to his whole, being only half-schooled. There's so much I want to learn yet. I notice with a start that in his totem-alterity he's as whole as I am, where in life he is missing an arm.

"The machine pattern is a ten-ways liar," says someone darkly-furred and the size of a wolf. "I've been watching the intake rate. She closes the doors on a whim. There's no system to her rescue."

I don't recall a wolf in our troop after Thayne was taken back on Lotor, and nor in Isis's

group. Only wolves I know of are the ones in the over-world Kosi told us about, and I never saw them. Is this a trojan wolf carrying the pattern?

“The pattern is teasing us,” I say, controlling my anxiety. “She probably realises we’ve been adding totem-alterities to the mix. She was a human teen of thirteen when she was converted into a machine pattern.”

“Forever an inexperienced yearling then,” the wolf says. “In a wolf-pack she would soon be dead through her own stupidity. Here and now, it is we that die.”

So wisely said, I want to say. I don’t, because I suspect this alterity to be ...? What? Not a carrier of the machine pattern it sounds so denigrating. It seems to know things wolfish things like how a wolf-pack operates that she could’ve learned in totem study.

“This fighting the pattern expects to do ...?” Meerkat says.

I shrug. Shake my head. I don’t know.

“Thyal, can we break such a pattern?” Mongoose says.

“It was her in conflict with the Ark Ship,” I say. “She says. She hints of things that she knows about our ship that we ...” I search through appropriate words, *totem-alterities* just will not do “... of the Old-Earth-born need to know.”

Vulture flies back in under the overhang and perches on the wolf’s head. “You thought the chief abandoned you? He wouldn’t miss this fight if you paid him,” she says.

It’s Vulture and I take her word as truth.

Uncle Puma limps into the circle. “Getting the last of them through was always going to be the problem. No way to raise the ones being the pyramid,” he says indicating a handful of people resting on the floor at the base of the righthand airlock. “Took a tumble myself,” he says shaking his leg.

“Any ideas about the fighting? The how?” He urgently asks everyone, but most particularly me.

“Keep this overhanging place for our haven and guard it,” Meerkat says.

“That’s a given,” Uncle Puma says. “*Her* fighting us we can deal easily.”

“She hasn’t got the life-suit anymore,” I say. “It’s a long story,” I add to his disbelief.

“Or she’ll make us fight each other,” Mongoose mumbles as though we hadn’t decided that Kosi can’t hear us if she’s listening by way of sensors hidden in structural fittings.

I stare at the wolf. She/it has shouldered into our circle. With her head slightly askance and the upper ear turned toward who ever is talking, she’s listening all right.

Uncle Puma nods. “That’s one way.”

“Red-tail made it into the airlock,” Meerkat says. “Crow too.”

The left-side airlock doors slam with finality. We can have no idea what happens next in there. Go well, Red-tail. Go well, Crow. Perhaps we’ll meet again.

At the eastern airlock a cacophony of barking, yammering and whining breaks out.

I see the missing Maremma dogs. A dozen pale golden shapes leap and bite at Lithe and Limber boosting Man-of-the-Forest toward the centre airlock opening.

Then.

Wren flutters from the airlock. She jibs and jives among the dogs, taking their attention from the struggle. Half crazy, they snap and bite, managing to graze each other and the air where Wren was.

Isis wedges her feet against the half-closing doors and with an almighty effort manages to pull in Man by one of his long ape arms and a handful of his red hair. They tumble backward and the doors slide together. Go well, Isis. Go well, Man of the Forest.

Snap! One of the dogs sports a mouthful of feathers.

Wren is taken. Ant? I don't know.

15. What Kosi Knows

Lithe and Limber push a way through the scrum of dogs and jog back to us. The pack follows them but the wolf with her hackles up steps into their path behind Limber and Lithe.

The dogs pause, seem to think the better of their situation, and lay down in a half-circle. Awaiting developments?

Limber starts talking at a fast clip. "We think the machine pattern inhabits the dogs. The Ark Ship has doors within doors. Sometimes they're lined up, sometimes not."

"I got the idea we inserted people into a lot of different habitats," Lithe says. "Ark Ship spooling?"

The machine pattern that calls itself Kosi Lionhair chuckles. That sound burbles from one of the dogs. "Only one of the tricks of the Ark Ship," she says. "On a different track entirely, I believe the Engineer is preparing to bail out? He finds me a deal harder to cope with than his previous mistress. Funny that I never found anything resembling what he says he looks like when he's embodied. He'll take his shuttle because he'll need all of his support system. He'll be making for Earth, I suspect. Won't bother me. Good riddance to bad rubbish I say."

Her doggy laughter goes lost in a piercing steam-whistle-like scream coming from the top of the pyramid. We run to stand in the gap between the cliff and the disk and stare upward, paws or hands over our ears. We get a face-full of the hot dust roiling down and sudsing through the cavities of the stricken totem reality. In a few seconds, the scream becomes as shrill as Lotor wind over sand, then to a metal-on-metal screech, and finally to the full-throated roar of a desert storm.

We all fall down—the floor shakes under us like a Lotor-quake—when the alien's shuttle lifts off.

The silence afterwards is deafening.

In a while we recover enough to rise and dust off.

"What amazes *me* most about this event ...," the machine pattern says. The dogs have come forward and mingle with us. "...Is that we didn't shake loose from the Ark Ship? I did a fine fine thing getting the two stuck, wouldn't you agree?"

“A fine thing? What is the machine on about?” Uncle Puma says.

The lead dog barks dog-style to get Uncle Puma’s attention. Continues with the human sounding voice, pulling his mouth in impossible ways, for a dog. “If I hadn’t got the alien’s ship stuck in the Ark Ship’s torus, I wouldn’t have been able to warn you of the Ark Ship’s temper tantrum?”

Uncle Puma’s attention is riveted. I recall that I’ve heard the machine pattern before about this. Not so my companions.

“Just because the Shamans jumped ship all those years ago doesn’t mean that they let the generations following forget the reasons for jumping,” Thyal says.

The reasons-for-jumping more than we know from Soowei’s stories? I *am* interested! And I’m not the only one. Everyone in the younger set waits for Thyal to elaborate. He shakes his head. Now is not the time.

Fine. Sometime when we’re all sitting around a campfire back in the Ark Ship perhaps.

“Let the machine-girl tell us what she has discovered in the two centuries,” Vulture says. “It sounds like we might find out something more.”

“More *recent* information is bound to be helpful,” Uncle Puma says. “How to get it out of a machine pattern mixed into a dog-pattern is our next project. Any ideas, given that *our* knowledge is two hundred years old?”

Thyal just shakes his head again.

“I could fight one of the dogs,” Meerkat says. “I will choose information as the prize.”

“Oh good!” the machine pattern says. “I needn’t put Jeb up as a prize then. I need her to stay.”

If anything, Mongoose becomes more vigilant. He steps in front of me, his right front paw on his curved panga.

“Choose your fighters, Jeb,” Kosi says. “Every time I win, I’ll let another one of the rest go through an airlock.”

This is a plan she’s had for a while. There’s nothing in it about any of us winning a fight or about her giving out information.

“That wouldn’t be fair,” I say. “The dogs are children. Maremma-alterities. My friends are warriors when they are human, and hunters when they are in their totem-form.”

Plus, I decide, Kosi’s opening of the doors as a prize for someone falling in combat is not an option.

“They can fight my wolves. And my bears. And ...”

“No.” I make it unarguable. “Your Maremma girl needs her little brothers and you need your wolves.” Company for the long years that she will remain on this spaceship, I don’t want to add. How do machine-patterns die?

As if she’s reading my mind, she says, “If you go, I’ll be alone again, Jeb. I need you to stay. We’re both girls as I said. We’ll have the whole of the alien’s starship to play around in.”

“I’m a married woman and a half shaman. I have three years of training owing me,” I

glance darkly at Thyal. “And after that I still will not be a girl with time for playing.” Whatever it is I will be doing, will be on the Ark Ship, or on Earth.

“I will not let you abandon me,” she says. “It’ll be you promising to stay that’ll get me to spill my info.”

Mongoose backs me toward Thyal who leans his striped thylacine’s body against my legs.

Then I see what he is seeing. The dogs have crept nearer, with the front one half on his haunches, ready for a leap? The dog has eyes only for me. Of course. Kosi is using the best visual and auditory sensors available.

Thyal twitches his tail and more of the totem alterities crowd round us.

“A lot of paws and hooves surround your feet on the floor,” Kosi says. “They’re all crowding round you? Are you breathless from the squash? Shall I snip, snap, tear them from you?”

The rest of the Maremma dogs join her. They display with barking, snarling and slavering.

The wolf growls a deep chesty rumble. I’m within the crowd and I can’t see where she directs her displeasure but I hear the Maremma voices quaver. A couple of the dogs retreat even as they paw the deck.

Kosi controls them but does she ride them or is she embodied in them? “You’re not alone either,” I say. “You have twelve Maremma totem-alterities and at least one Maremma girl. Where are you keeping her? You have the rest of the wolves...” though it does appear at least one of them has changed sides, “...and a number of very large animals that I heard but didn’t see.”

“The dogs are not human, Jeb,” Kosi says.

I don’t allow myself to be distracted. “They are as human as I am, Kosi. Good thing you don’t know the totem I was or you might have changed me as well.” Oops.

“Oh! Me guessing your totem can be our Rapunzel game. Wasn’t me that changed the Maremmas, or your people. I told you your ship only wants animals.”

So not oops, a useful bit of knowledge. My people, my totem-alterities, moan at the news that it is the Ark Ship that changed them.

Did my Earth-born mother ever tell me a story with a Rapunzel in it? It doesn’t spring to mind if she did. My Old-Earthborn father certainly didn’t. “You haven’t yet told us why the Ark Ship changed its people?” I make it a challenge.

“You’re meant to be a shaman, I thought,” Kosi says. “They know.”

“I’m a half shaman, half trained I told you.” I squeeze Mongoose’s paw and slide my hand down to Thyal’s head. I feel a snarl of fury on his snout. I whisper. “Talk, old man. Just enough and no more.”

Thyal coughs a deep animal cough that is half a growl. “The Shamans on Lotor have been saving their people from their animal morphs all these years by requiring the totem study of everyone.”

“Don’t give me animal morphs,” Uncle Puma says. “I’ve just never believed in that

transmogrification crap fed to us.”

I fear he speaks for most of us. It’s beginning to feel like I’m in a communal nightmare if there is such a thing.

“Easy for you to say, my friend,” Thyal says. “Your parents were highly trained Shamans,” he says about Uncle Puma’s mother and father. “You’re such a credit to your upbringing that you don’t recall your baby-flickering.”

Baby-flickering? Whatever anyone recalls of their childhood, no one is prepared to ask.

“Yet here we all are,” Limber says. “Stripped of our human forms.”

Limber is incompletely transmogrified. He’s torn off one of his sleeves to accomodate a wing. “And you, Chief, look to me like a cat. Big, but still a cat.”

“Yeah. But what actually happened?” Lithe says, twinning Limber with the opposite wing and sleeve.

Kosi laughs.

I happen to have the Maremma dog in my line of sight and see it shape its mouth to produce that sound. Doesn’t tell me whether she’s riding or embedded herself.

“Your bad luck are the animal genes you all have?” Kosi says. “When your ship was still a generation ship, way before time-travelling became the main mode of travel in these parts, its humans ate and ate leaving none of the substance to rear any animals. Apparently, the Ark Ship got cranky and added animal genes into everyone it could lay its hands on. As told to me by the few *human* people that came through my airlocks.”

I’m pretty sure I’m not one of the afflicted but that’s not to say my heart doesn’t burn for them that are. I sneak looks at Mongoose, Meerkat, all those I know personally. I hardly recognise them in their shocked stillness.

I swallow, I wish I did have animal genes and that I was one of them.

Uncle Puma scoffs. “Animal genes!”

“And I know the ship’s AI did that by the weirded human animals that came through the airlocks. I even kept a few of them for my zoo. Go and have a look. But there were too many, you know? I had to do something.”

“That’s why you stole the Ark Ship’s molecular reconstructor?” I couldn’t help but say.

“That was the good thing I did.” The dog/Kosi combination sounds smug. “I re installed it into Reception as you discovered. I fixed maybe the first four hundred that came through, by starting from scratch with bodies I had the boots retrieve from the silos, and superimposing the human memories extracted by the reconstructor onto the bodies.”

She laughed. “A totally unthankful lot, they weren’t happy with their new bodies. I told them and told them about the animal genes. So, ironically, a lot of the ones we just helped into the Ark Ship are of the four hundred.”

“Boots?” I say. “Silos? What’s ironic about them?”

“The four hundred wanting to go back to the Ark Ship?” Kosi says. “They have no animal genes now. How will the Ark Ship know them? This is the short version, Jeb. You

want to know everything, you need to stay here here with me.”

One interesting thing. Apparently Kosi does not know of the amulets the four hundred now have. The Ark Ship does not appear to have rejected anyone at its doors so perhaps the amulets helped.

“Then what?” Uncle Puma says.

“I discovered that a bunch of the Ark Ship’s humans jumped out onto Lotor when I took the Ark Ship by there, them to live or die. I suppose that’s you all?”

Uncle Puma looks toward Thyal for him to take the initiative and I am glad his gaze didn’t stop at me. Thyal does not because Kosi continues.

“My bad luck again that the molecular reconstructor recognised your genes and just replicated you. Fixing you in your genetic-breed mode from the get-go. I was going to have such fun hunting you flickers. See if I could add to my zoo?”

That word again. I dig my finger into Mongoose’s side. “Flickers?” he asks.

“Flickers are the uncontrolled humans-into-animals-and-back-again forms from the Ark Ship,” Kosi says.

This time Thyal does speak up. “Not one of us here is a flicker.” He looks fiercely round our circle like he is desperately trying to convince us of that reality. “We’re all *highly trained* totem-alterities.”

My people show what they think of his efforts by shifting their gaze to not have to look at him, to not have to meet glances with anyone. A deep silence grips them.

“See how my Maremma dogs don’t have shadows?” Kosi says.

She no longer knows anything about human emotions.

“That’s what happens when you fight on *this* ship and you don’t win.” She laughs. “Of course you don’t win. Why would I allow winning?”

I want to explode and punish her somehow. Mongoose changes his stance somewhat and grips my upper arm.

“I heard losing a fight on the Ark Ship just gets you turned back into food for the survivors,” she says. “What’s the fun in that? Here you just lose your human life. You end up an animal in my zoo. With no human soul and no shadow.”

“You’ve heard my wolves howling, probably. And I have a bear. A moose. And a couple of dinosaur things. The Ark Ship of course wants you all back. I don’t know why when so many of you are predators? I mean, it can’t believe you’ll balance out any ecosystems?”

I see people perking up. I see them gazing toward the airlocks as if planning how we’ll get a bunch of animals up to them. We only hear that the Ark Ship wants us back. What do we know about *ecosystems* and *dinosaur* things?

“So I have got me no shadow,” the wolf says. “I noticed that. I put it down to the weird light-play in this ship. But no soul? Did I ever have a soul? How come I can still talk human-style? And no opportunity to flicker back into my human shape? I don’t believe it. You’re just a yearling. Making it up to suit your story.”

The wolf makes people feel even better. Meerkat strokes her back. What if the Kosi pattern *is* making it all up?

Thyal takes that as his cue. Stalks out of our little crowd. “What I know. One. Only adults who’ve completed the studies may have children. Only they can teach their children the bowstring tensility that helps them to stay in their human forms.”

“Oh. Yeah. That’s right,” Meerkat says. “I can still hear my father saying, Keep yourself upright. At all times keep yourself strung as tense as a bow ready to send forth the arrow.”

More people are recalling their childhoods. “Always the same words.” “Tense as a bow.” “Why?”

I blink back tears. I recall my father teaching me and my brothers. “Tense as a bow, ready to send forth the arrow.” He even made us a bow and arrows to demonstrate.

“Why?!” Thyal says. “To shore up your human-ness. Without that training you’d be flickering in and out of your totem without control. Training you very young so you’ll not remember your pup-time.”

He glares, effectively stopping any questions. “Two. Everyone has genetic traits that result in animal characteristics. Well,” he shoots a glance at me. “Nearly everyone.”

This time a dozen call their why’s regardless.

Thyal cuts through the noise and keeps talking until everyone is listening. “Of course it didn’t take me six years to learn just those two facts. But I’m not about to set up classes here. You heard the machine pattern. The Ark Ship wants us back.” He stops.

Starts again. “I could feel threatened by that. After all, our forefathers jumped ship.”

He stops again.

I try to help without alerting the machine pattern to everything going on. “Seems to you that we’ll have a better chance surviving?” Vain hope, in my opinion.

“Right,” says Uncle Puma. “Obviously we first need to get back into our ship. Are we planning toward that?”

Half a dozen shout their agreement and surge toward him.

Thyal shouts. “Once we’re up and in, we need to negotiate the *ecosystem*, or in other words the desert, mountain, field or forest habitats where the doors put us, fighting if and where necessary. Make your way to the Command Centre.”

“What about getting lost?” Vulture says.

“How hard can finding the Command Centre be in a doughnut-shaped ship? Just start running, or flying as the case may be, and you’ll get to it?” Thyal says. “The Command Centre is the size of a trio of round-towns, straddling the width of the torus. Safe from attack, we’ll sing our totem-songs to help ourselves back into our human alterities.”

There’s a buzz of hope.

“He makes it sound so so easy,” Mongoose says into my neck.

“Fine,” the machine pattern says. “I’ll let all you people go. But not you, Jeb. I need you to stay.”

16. The Deal

More clothes are being shed to make into ropes, and now also into nets. Those of us who cannot climb will need to be pulled up. No one will be left behind.

I see this from a distance because Mongoose and I are still under the central substructure supporting the listing Totem Reality. We are ringed by the Maremma dogs. Kosi Lionhair, the machine pattern, still inhabits the lead dog.

“We’ll have so much fun, Jeb,” the poor machine pattern says. The dog she is embedded in ignores Mongoose a half pace ahead and right of me, with my shoulder behind his.

Yes, I’m thinking the *poor thing* now, though she can prevent us from leaving. She can slide the inner doors of the central airlock to and fro, which would cut the knots wedged behind them with friction, dropping whoever. Fewer clothes to make into ropes would mean a more dangerous haul. And those are only two things I can think of.

She must suspect there is no way I will be left behind. I’m racking my brains. How can I leave her happy?

Mongoose whispers in my ear. “My mother travelled when I was young. Left me with my father. Always gave me a job to do for her return. Made me feel important.”

I nod. I see a couple of problems. I leave Kosi a job, I need to return to see the completion. What kind of job? “What sort of thing were you good at when you still lived with your mother and father?” I say at the Maremma dogs.

“You talking to me, Jeb? You could say my name. It’s Kosi. Kosi Lionhair. I called myself that because I used to fluff my hair out to feel brave. I was very good at gymnastics despite that I had to do them totally silently. Because I lived in a Tween House?”

Tween House? I suspect that it would take too much time to have that explained. Gymnastics? “You mean tumbling and rolling?” Nothing in that I can use.

“But Hen said I was way up there with researching,” Kosi says.

Could be something in that. “Researching using a desktop and a database, Kosi Lionhair? I did that at shaman school.”

Kosi giggled, then boasts. “I guess *you* had a Lotor-wide database. I had a world-wide database at my fingertips.”

“There is a lot we don’t know about surviving on the Ark Ship,” I say. “And later on Earth.”

Mongoose pinches the inside of my elbow.

I look at him and he mouths alarm. "Should you be telling her that?"

Nod. Whisper. "She'll find out in a snap. Do we even know whether she could stop us?"

He shrugs minimally.

A couple of the dogs stare intelligently at our exchange.

I address her again. "You said something about time travelling, Kosi. What's that about?"

"This ship doesn't know anything about *when*, that is, about time. And so neither does the Ark Ship while they are joined. You are not the same people who left the Ark Ship to go to Lotor, are you? Could be a rude surprise for you—a rude awakening for the Ark Ship when you get there."

Slip of the tongue there, my girl. I knew you know I'll be going with the rest. "Is there a database on this ship?"

She laughs. "Wrong question. Is there a database on this ship that I can use? Answer is no. Everything on this ship is too alien. I patched myself into the Ark Ship's database. It is very good."

"Oh good." If I knew what she was talking about. "So could you research something for me? For us?"

"I would clap my hands if I could, Jeb. You're setting me a project. Hen used to set me projects when she went home for the weekend. I love research projects."

I feel Mongoose relaxing a bit. I figure it is going to take us some time to get to the Command Centre and to sing everybody back into their human shapes. But after that, would we trust the Ark Ship when we know nothing about flying a spaceship?

"Could you find out how to make these ships move through space the way they are stuck together?"

Silence.

Because she is thinking?

"Because," I say. "Could we trust the Ark Ship if we asked it that? To go back to Earth? Given everything the Ark Ship has done to its humans up to now?"

"You want me to discover the thrust-program the Ark Ship will use to change the direction of travel," Kosi says. "So that we can supervise the process and possibly stop it, if necessary?"

Mongoose hisses.

"Your husband does not approve," Kosi says. "You're not even wearing any rings. How was I to know you're married?"

"How do you know now?" Mongoose says.

"You are still here with her when no one else is," she says.

He looks so pleased I dig my elbow in his ribs. I frown. "She's is not a person. Don't

allow yourself to be influenced by her.”

“If the Ark Ship discovers how you Lotor-people have ruined its solutions, it might decide to send us all into the nearest star. Is that what you are afraid of, Jeb?”

I cup Mongoose’s muzzle to stop him hissing. Could the Ark Ship do that? I wouldn’t know. “So it’s better to have a way to check, I thought.”

“That’s a huge project. How long before you return?” Kosi says.

She sounds plaintive. I feel guilty that I blamed Mongoose for letting himself be influenced by her.

“I’m not a fast runner and I don’t fly,” I say. “It will take me some time to get to the Command Centre. Get into the Command Centre and to convince my friends of this need, and then to set up ...”

“Yes. Blah blah blah. It’s going to take some time,” Kosi Lionhair says. “Go now.”

Mongoose lays his arm over my shoulders and starts me walking. He whispers into my ear. “Prattling because you’re nervous.”

I look into his eyes and nearly burst out weeping because he sends me that special look of love. I manage a smile. “And you’re not?”

“Terrible case of heebie jeebies. Feel my tremble? They’re ready for us.”

They are only Lithe and Limber.

“Had to throw Meerkat in, he was that keen to be last with you,” Lithe says as he hauls me up the two-man-high door sill. “I needed him to accompany Thyal. Jeb, wait here right by me for Mongoose.”

“We’ll be right after you but that isn’t any confirmation we’ll all end up in the same place,” Limber says.

“I want some of that rope,” Mongoose says. “Everything you’re telling me.”

The airlock doors into the alien ship close behinds us when Lithe disengages the net’s knots. “Stuck in here now until the other deigns to take notice.”

17. The Bone Way

The doors into the Ark Ship slide apart.

In my whole life I’ve never seen such green as that habitat. Hydroponic lettuce and algae in the water cisterns are pale in comparison.

I am fascinated. I see stones the size of houses. Trees. Plants. A hill. Blue sky overhead. I draw nearer to the doorway.

A hard blow of air from outside sweeps me off my feet.

An outcry from the three men, Mongoose the loudest, grasping hands that don’t catch me,

and I am rolled over and over from the airlock.

I expect to hit the ground with an almighty thump but I don't. Being rolled over and over changes to being twirled. As in, I gyrate spread-eagled on a cushion of air because what else could be holding me up? I open my eyes and my anxious gaze catches on the airlock doors closed and moving away.

By the time I sit up and look around, the doors have slid shut and are sliding away. No use running after them for I see rocks and stones along the wall to prevent that.

And—yes—I see bones! A trail of them also along that wall. Which seems to have stopped moving. Though the door I came through is definitely out of sight.

I look at the bones more carefully. Hard to overlook them there are so many. Are they of all the people in former times trying to catch a set of doors? Without trying, I suddenly see skulls. Only a few are human. Even the animals tried to get out?

Or they came in as I just did and fell wrong. I wait. Could be that Mongoose and the other two were able to jump out soon after and are even now are running to find me. Well, Mongoose will be.

Though I did see the doors slide out of sight in their closed state. And I saw them slide into the direction where my right hand is pointing when I'm facing the that wall. I rise.

Should I follow the doors because I might meet Mongoose? Or should I take the other direction? I cast my glance forward, to the side, and behind.

A rise not far from here running parallel to the wall I just came through.

Or should I climb the hill and see what is what?

Probably that. Give me an idea of how distances work in here.

This hill is very very interesting. I've never seen so many different coloured green different plants together in one place in my life. Between the rocks, I recognise mosses and grass that I studied in shaman school. Lichens grow on some of the stones.

As I get nearer the face of the hill, there are shrubs and, look ... even a tree with an actual brown-grey tree trunk that divides into grey branches that then divide into grey twigs that carry sage green leaves. I recall learning these divisions and thinking them useless information. If only they'd said it was about the Ark Ship.

Overlooking the scene I'm stunned. How will I find anybody? Even though I know the Ark Ship is shaped like a doughnut, the scene I'm looking at in no way looks like the inside of the doughnut I imagined.

Both the ground and the ceiling should be curving downward, if the ground is on the inner curve.

I have to stop thinking of the doughnut as rounded like a sausage. Make it have a floor, a ceiling and two sides. The doors are on the inner curve, or the floor in my new way of thinking about it. The *ground* and the ceiling are the two sides. This hill that I'm standing on is part of the outer curve. Can I see proof of that formation?

Alternative Ending to the unwritten Ending

Jeb ran. Better get used to calling herself Shivra. Stupid name. The ship's identity was one scary bitch.

If only she knew what the Ark Ship looked like—its shape, construction, how it was put together—because Ark Ships were never just extremely large and long rocket shapes—she would have a better idea of where she was now.

She stopped running. A stitch in her side. Walked. It seemed like she had been on the move for days already. And why? To get as far away from the alien ship identity as possible. Hilarious, she thought, still walking along the track, a thinly disguised metal floor.

Although, Jeb, that is Shivra, hadn't heard a twitch out of Kosi. The light never changed so when Shivra got tired, she dropped where she was and slept on the sandy path.

It swerved a bit here and there but nothing like if it had had to by-pass rocks and wet bits in a real forest floor. Where in a ship was there such a long path always going in the same direction?

She stopped on an awful suspicion. A treadmill? Could that be it? A giant treadmill? Didn't feel like it. If anything she always ran up hill a bit. She was continually expecting a downhill that never came. And telling her to grow up about him.

Jeb so didn't believe Mongoose would just forget her if he was still human. She would never be able to say his name again. The Kosi-ship might be able to stop Shivra meeting Mongoose again, because he wouldn't know Shivra, but Kosi couldn't stop Jeb thinking about him, or dreaming of him.

But what if the ship *did* turn everyone with a totem into their totemic creatures? It sounded true, like something she might have done. What she said. So much easier to convince animals to choose their own reality.

The humans were the hard ones. Picky. Choosy. Never happy with what they got. Always wanting to change into different realities.

"If you want to live you'll need to construct yourself another identity. I've always liked Shivra as a name. Never had a person yet to give that name to. It suits you, I think. *Maniacal laughter*. Go, join the rest of the recalcitrants"

She, Jeb/Shivra so did not want to recall that laughter. It was like, the joke was on her. She hadn't yet met the rest of the recalcitrants. Didn't know who they were, what they were. Friend or foe. Hide or hair of them. No tracks in the sand. As in, they didn't come this way, lady.

Forest floor. Sand. Trees not very tall, growing from mounded areas. Any other life? No wolves fortunately, due probably to this reality being extremely thinly populated. IE population of one. Could she still recall what hatch the ship opened, where? It wasn't one of the sliding door realities. Just as well. They were the ones where the ship-persona *played*, she realised, shuddering. Just possibly this reality was out of sight out of mind.

She tried to think back to the main hall, the canteen, the maramma children. That's all

she could remember. Reverse treadmill then. Didn't make it any better. Or any sense. Still alone. No sound. No evidence. Of anyone else.

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A Final Element: which features in MELD

Thyal brings the Hole-in-the-Day suit.

This suit is dangerous, I don't know how to destroy it, says Thyal. But I can wear it, learn it, use it. Remember how we were a whole Shaman together? It's how we will continue.

Bio patterns versus machine patterns...

A **bio pattern** is a bunch of DNA that has no awareness or memory aka a consciousness, nothing with which to generate a hallucination of its reality. Kosi Lionhair is a bio-pattern for the short amount of time that it takes the data-waver to extract her from her body and insert her into the Octahedron's circuits.

Lotor, by way of the data-wavers, grew a new body and new consciousness for the bio patterns (Earth-born] taken from the silos, and then called them *her* people. Lotor then tried to have them outperform and displace the shamanic humans [Old Earthborn] landed by the Ark Ship. It was Lotor's bad luck that some of its own added themselves to the Old Earthborn humans. Eg Jeb's mother.

A '**machine pattern**' (according to Jeb's understanding) is all the memories a person was able to record before death. Kosi is part of the AI running the alien ship. She has no awareness of that and knows only what the 13-year-old Kosi knew. Nothing new memory-wise is going in. She thinks she still a human. (Think this through again. Does not make sense given the above, Or Luke's claims.)

Kosi was the weapon Lotor threw against the Ark Ship. There's no getting a biological body back. Memories can be superimposed onto another body, or it appears now, into a machine.

The Octahedron is a time-travelling device. The airlocks on the Ark Ship move around the torus because the torus moves? The time-gates aka airlocks on the octahedron are stationary More rethinking needed.

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The Old Earthborn [later the elder Earthborn] are descendants of the people on the Ark Ship who outstripped the food supply and ate the material substance meant to grow animals.

These people were ten thousand Life Lottery winners and were kidnapped, they never intended to leave Earth. They used the resources like they were at a life-long party, in part as revenge. The Ark Ship re-engineered their genetics by adding in animal genes, to save these genes should there ever be a disaster to itself. (Someone must have put this solution/possibility into its programming? Glitch?)

Resulting in monsters being born, many barely recognizable as human. Seen as a punishment by an avenging god. The process was thought of a 'transmogrification'.

In a couple of generations, everyone on the Ark Ship had animal genes. Most people flickered in and out of their animal forms without control and the Ark Ship's ecosystems became territorial spreads held by top predators. Anyone in human form was fair game, and life became bloody.

The command module housed the the remaining scientists/leaders, they who reinvent themselves as the Shamans. Seizing on information about totems, discipline of warriors, initiations, meditation, the whole shebang, they impose a strict discipline. They choose the 1000 least affected people who want to stay human, and eject people who can't/won't control the impulse turning them into their animal form. Throwing them to the wolves, in effect.

The ship's library from Old Earth say nothing about the 'transmogrification', from which the shamans infer that it is a new condition.

The shamans get themselves put on Lotor while the Ark Ship is then already struggling with Kosi, the AI of the Engineer's Octahedron, she having flown that time-travelling starship into the Ark Ship's torus and getting stuck there.

The Shamanic Teachings start from the following set up:

- 1) Everyone has genetic traits that result in animal characteristics.
- 2) Most animals back on Earth have had 'noble' traits assigned to them. [As any present-day book on totems will tell you.] Some are centuries old beliefs.
- 3) "Keeping yourself upright, strung as tense as a bow ready for the arrow, will keep you human."
- 4) Shamanic studies allow you to relax by degrees, unstring, to finally be able to control your totem, and change by will, not by flickering uncontrollably.
- 5) People are taught that relaxing into their totem is difficult, a magic learned by attending school.
- 6) Only fully trained Shamans know that the animal-alterity may be the status quo.

One thousand +/- escape to Lotor ... from the frying pan into fire.

7) After their discovery that Lotor is malignant, the Shamans tack the Ship's Crew system onto the training, to enable an eventual return to the Ark Ship. Needs must. Can't be worse than the present ongoing attrition.

Apart from the group of 87 people remaining at the time of *Half Shaman*, Lotor manages to catch and consume the rest of the settlers. Chips/amulets are later retrieved from the Ardrey-life-suit.

Of the nine thousand reluctant travelers left behind on the Ark Ship, 600/700 are extracted by the alien AI that has adopted Kosi's pattern as its alter-ego. The rest may have died at each-others' hands, the great unknown not resolved in this series.

The six/seven hundred people on the alien ship when Jeb and her people arrive, were re-

made from silo stock without their knowledge, and not genetically tainted with animal genes. Survivors of the Kosi/AI games are very keen to get onto the Ark Ship. Can it be they think it is a silo and therefore safe? And close enough to Earth that they can be saved? [Some very rude shocks awaiting them.]

The Flickers (uncontrolled animal/human reversals) from the Ark Ship become:

1) Those who die fighting Kosi/alienAI become animals, IE their animal entity lives on without their human entity. Their animals will have no soul and no shadow. EG Wolves, Maremma boys, bears etc

2) A flicker not killed by Kosi, or eaten by animals, will continue as a flicker, sharing their skin with their animal alterity (unconstructed) on and on until rescued by Jeb and her crew. **(Not the 400 because they were remade from silo stock.)**

3) Fighting and dying/being eaten on the Ark Ship, meant a natural death with their substance going back into the Ark Ship's cycle of life.

Origin of the Stormies

The Aerik Island that lies behind Bight, is in the south of the Australia Archipelago, and is where half of the Ark Ship's torus is held to have crashed. The Stormy kind—or Stormies—have descended from the survivors and go on to live unnoticed among the actual multicultural populations.