

#### **4. Zebe at Xanthe's**

Zebe waited in Xanthe's minuscule front porch, more impatient by the minute. It wasn't like Xanthe to be late for her twin, even if she was coming from work. Zebe had hardly let Cele know she'd be gone for the weekend, then had to wait for an hour for the boat to take her to the mainland, to then fly to Brisbane. Normally she didn't mind the journey but Xanthe's email had been so mysterious.

The most worrying thing about it was the way Xanthe alternated seeming anger and actual excitement. As if she was saying something more than just the meanings that could be attached to her words. Xanthe hadn't very far to come at all since she had a town house in the SoHAB residential facility, almost next door to the complex.

Zebe on her toes could just make out the roof of the central octagonal hall. "Come on, Xan!" she said. "I'm here, on the doorstep." Her twin-key hadn't let her into the house, as Xanthe had threatened. There was a new lock, and a couple of newly installed ID scanners.

Zebe so wasn't in the mood for explanations. Even the fact that she was here this weekend was wrong. It'd been Xanthe's turn to come to Zebe. But as was often the case, if she wanted the twin thing, Zebe was the one who had to let go of anger and irritation. She gritted her teeth. It was the pattern they settled into after their turbulent teens.

Finally a hoverole painted all over with SoHAB security logos swept into the residential transport parking. Xanthe hopped down from the passenger-side before the hoverole skirt had deflated, earning her a growl from the driver. Probably about safety.

The hoverole settled and the driver also got out.

Tall, and dressed in the SoHAB security uniform, his muscles were well-defined. Hair blond. That handsome hunk Xanthe had been raving about. Neil, Zebe recalled. He walked round to the passenger side of the vehicle.

Zebe stepped into the garden to be out of view and so not distract her sister's tilt at romance. If that's what was on Xan's mind.

Neil reached into the back of the two-seater and delicately handed out SoHAB souvenir bags, one by one.

Xanthe strung them along her arms, five on each side.

Reading his body language, Zebe heard him say: "That's the lot. How about a kiss?"

Xanthe lifted her face with a cheeky sideways smile, for him to do the deed.

The man took Xanthe's whole Viking-daughter width and length in his arms, snaking in under the bags on Xanthe's left and around Xanthe's shoulders on the right. He cupped the back of Xanthe's blond head and directed it so her lips met his. He seemed to have her measure.

Xanthe's be-bagged arms hugged him to her as she also worked at the kiss.

Her lover walked her backwards until she rested against the side of the hoverole and he leaned into her.

Zebe closed her eyes. She felt left behind even though it was always Xanthe who began anything new. Zebe swished impatiently at the bushes.

The couple broke apart with a final, ordinary, see-you-later-alligator peck on the cheek. The man got back into his vehicle and Xanthe walked for home.

And I don't even have a prospective lover on the scene, Zebe thought blackly.

"Cheer up," Xanthe said. "You look like another wet five-day-weekend."

"That was last time. Looks like a dry weather weekend from where I'm standing." Probably Neil was the reason Xanthe had refused to come to Zebe's.

At the front door, Xanthe hugged Zebe and gave her the bags to hold. She said softly and with her face hidden between the two of them, "I had the security upgraded." She stared into an iris ID scanner at the same time as she allowed another machine to scrutinise the inside of her left wrist.

The door clicked open.

"You don't believe in security. What happened?" Zebe likewise spoke softly. The fact that Xanthe was mistrustful about something, straightaway raised Zebe's paranoias.

Xanthe waited with replying until they were in the house and she had relocked the door and reset the ID equipment. "Never did anything illegal before!" Xan pulled faces to tell Zebe that she'd cooked up something absolutely fatal.

Funny faces were a Xanthe thing. Zebe got her way with the poker variety.

Zebe walked on, into the living room. She stared around. Nothing illegal here that she could see.

Xanthe came into the room and gently set the souvenir bags next to one another by the door. Just resting them delicately against one another. "Smile," she ordered. "After all, I'm doing it all for you."

"All of it for me?" Zebe said. "In your email you said you'd already begun down that road. And anyway, I'm not a good enough excuse for you to get involved in something dangerous to your freedom."

Xanthe over-rode Zebe's piddling resistance. "It's something you'd never guess of me. But get us a drink first, will you? To get you into the right mood and me to relax after a whole lot of plotting and paying."

"That kiss was a payment?" A fury against the new boyfriend gripped Zebe by the heart.

Xanthe laughed. "No, Neil and I are mates! He's in it as deep as I am."

"More like lovers, it looks to me."

"All right, yes, we're lovers. We've even applied for a hearing to make it legal."

"You let him?"

"Zebe! I said, 'We have applied for a hearing.' And once we've tied the knot we'll be applying to have a child though it'll be years before it's our turn."

"It's that serious?" Zebe said to stall any further unsettling news.

Xanthe laughed again. "Oh, Zebe! You'll get on fine with Neil. I've told him all about you. How we are. You'll still be my funny Celtic twin. He's helping me to help you without thought of the danger to his career."

Zebe wasn't mollified by the praises. "Celtic twin! Huh."

“Neil said that as soon as I showed him my holo of us. Your dark hair, your eyes and your olive skin. He said that in his experience Celtic types were better at poker than anyone. Probably because in ancient history they were always having to play survival games against all the invaders.”

“Quite the history buff, your Neil.” Underneath, Zebe was amazed and secretly pleased at the man’s reading of her. Though of course he would’ve had plenty of help the way Xanthe talked up Zebe when Zebe wasn’t around.

“We don’t eat here anymore, you know,” Xanthe said. “The kitchen’s become quite the little lab.”

Zebe attended her sister with something like horror. “You’ve gone and done what?”

Xanthe had thrown herself down onto her vintage twentieth century couch, plumped up a couple of antique-style cushions and footled her shoes off. She lay back. “Get us our drinks in hand and I’ll tell you.”

Zebe didn’t move.

Xanthe said, “I’m not showing you anything while you’ve got that the-end-of-the-world-is-nigh mood on you.”

“Okay!” Zebe approached the transformed old roll-top-desk-made-into-a-drinks-cabinet. Up with the cover. Out with the preparation shelf on its slide-out supports. She stared unseeing at the array of bottles.

“I’ll have the slitzicky on strawberry rocks,” Xanthe said.

The hot-and-cold food dispenser was next to the desk. Instead of being in the kitchen.

Skim down the catalogue on the front and key in the code for the frozen strawberries. Press ENTER and wait for the strawberry container to get to the dispenser slot. A tall glass for Xanthe from the top shelf in the cabinet. Fill the glass with berries and slurp over the liquor. A chunky wide glass for herself. Three berries and mash them. Lots of soda water. A little ...

“Here, let me help you. At this rate you’ll need ten drinks before we can get on with the excitement.” Xanthe slurped up half of Zebe’s soda and filled the glass with a good amount of slitzicky – which was still the only successful product to come out of the research done at the SoHAB. She handed Zebe her drink.

Zebe sipped cautiously. "You're going to save the world with something you're concocting in your kitchen?"

"With your help, you bet!" Xanthe laughed.

"And it's illegal?" It didn't take too much thought to come to the riddle's solution. "You're stealing something from the labs?"

"Taking. The alien's leavings. Dust. I extract it from the vacuum cleaner, bag it and bring it home. Merely following up on that thing that you suggested so elegantly but not as wishy washily as my news to you. Therefore much harder to wipe from the records."

"Oh. That's what made you mad at me?"

"How much training do you need? We're twins. Have the same brain power."

"Not look-alike twins."

Xanthe bridled. "You had yourself changed. You'd rather be an isolate."

"I didn't want to be seen to be a clone of you, a glorified cleaner. How would I get work in my field?"

Xanthe laughed kindly. "My dear secret clone. Always half a step behind. The day I got your email, Neil nailed the last strips to the benches."

Zebe glanced at the carrier bags.

"Never mind them for now," Xanthe said. "Normally the dust gets incinerated."

Zebe knew about cleaning because she began in her work as a lab technician cleaning out lab jars. Things like dead fruit fly experiments. Now the matter of cleanliness everywhere in the Reefarium, and indeed contamination, were her responsibility.

Up to the moment she discovered the new living water in Callum's swimming lesson tank, she'd been terrified that the wholesale reef death happening outdoors, in unmoderated sea water, would infect her coral nursery aquariums.

Xanthe said, "But after I had a little experience with some of it, I wouldn't ever waste it again."

Zebe said what she was meant to. “What little experience?”

“I’d run short on vacuum bags. So, thinking to re-use the bag I had, I shook the dust from it into the incinerator instead of throwing the whole bag in. A glittering silvery swag of it was blown off course ...”

Zebe held her hand up. “Wait! Tell me you were wearing your isolation gear!”

“I was, but the mangy cat we feed on the sly wasn’t. The cat was downwind and got snowed over. Couple of days later, when it re-appeared, its fur was suddenly healthier than my hair. A process that would’ve taken weeks with the right drugs.”

“Why did you think it was the dust?”

“Because her fur is silvery now. Black and white in patches, with a silvery overlay. Very now.”

Zebe sipped her drink in tandem with Xanthe while she thought. “And?” She made her mouthfuls smaller so she could hold out for the length of Xanthe’s drink.

“It got me thinking. I decided to bring some of the dust home so I could really look at it.” Xanthe sculled down her drink to subvert Zebe’s tactics.

Zebe grinned at her and their silent manoeuvring.

“At last, a smile.” Xanthe swung off the couch. “Come on, I’ll show you.” She slid back the concertina room divider, one half to the dining area, one half to the kitchenette.

Every horizontal surface was covered with glass laboratory jars. Zebe stared. “You must have just about emptied the shelves at SoHAB.”

“Not at all. A job lot at an auction. Cheap as.”

“Sterilised?”

“Neil makes sure we’re rostered on for the same weekends. We autoclave them in the basement. You remember the equipment museum there?”

They stepped into the kitchen gangway. Jars containing similar coloured contents were grouped together.

“Culture medium?” Zebe said

“A far more complicated story. These jars here,” Xanthe referred to a group of jars near the sink, “are with medium and dust. The first two rows started with a recipe we got off the internet. The back two rows with stuff we got from the lab. All these are the first lot we did. See what happened?”

Zebe stared into the jars. “Nothing? Like, just dust lying on top of the medium? I don’t even see the normal bacterial and/or fungal activity I’d expect from a smear of ordinary dust.”

“That’s right. Then there’s the third set in that batch, along the window sill.” Xanthe crowded Zebe towards the wide window sill.

What she used to call her hanging gardens now contained twelve jars of luxuriant silvery-green growth on a finger thickness of agar culture medium. A different leaf-shape in each jar. Jars sealed with glass lids.

“I got that frustrated one day with nothing happening, I picked two-leaf twigs of all my herbs and stuck them into a jar each.”

Zebe rolled her eyes. “Our impulsive streak.”

“Yes. But by next morning most had grown to where I put the lowest marks.”

Silvery leaves of sage, thyme, oregano and the rest of Xanthe’s herb collection each filled its jar. All of them with five pen marks up the side of the jar. The agar jelly below was streaked with masses of roots. “You haven’t let them out, have you?” Zebe said urgently.

“You think I learned nothing all the time I spent at your precious facility? As you can see, Neil cut glass lids which we siliconed on.”

“We should do some to compare. Just agar and the herbs.”

This time Xanthe rolled her eyes. “See these? We started them the day after.”

*These* were twelve jars, each with a finger of the brown growth medium and a twig of one of the herbs, two leaves with the tops cut off. All of them with two or three new leaves. A couple of thin roots through the medium. Nothing like as luxurious as the herbs with the alien’s dust.

Zebe alternated staring at the two sets of jars. Her thoughts spun like a centrifuge.

She was silent too long for Xanthe. "There's more." With her hand on Zebe's arm, she steered Zebe to the jars on the breakfast bar.

Three groups. Zebe concentrated on something ordinary. "Neil put this rim around the bench top?" Obviously to stop the jars falling off, there were so many in each division.

Xanthe nodded. "Told you already. All these," she made a circle with her arms above the jars at the left end of the bench, "are flowers. The herbs and dust worked so well, we thought we'd experiment with anything organic. These are bits of all the plants out of a pair of his-and-her corsages we got for the SoHAB ball. Plus the dust, of course."

"What about this lot in the middle?" The jar that really weirded Zebe out sported a clutch of tall, curved, spatula-shaped objects. With what looked like growth stripes in alternating white and silver.

Xanthe laughed embarrassedly. "The one you're looking at is Neil's nail clippings. Like a bunch of sky scrapers, aren't they?"

"And I suppose this is your hair? Gold with a silver overlay, that could be a good look too."

Xanthe didn't notice Zebe's coolness. "Then there's this lot, Zebe." Pent-up excitement exploded from her by way of a whooshing breath.

Zebe stared at the final group of jars. "You used all the beach-wrack we collected?"

Xanthe explained impatiently. "Just shavings, Zebe. I've still got the things. Look at this one, this was a loose scale from that leatherjacket fish skeleton we found." Xanthe lifted the jar to Zebe's eye height.

A sheet of translucent white hexagons each the size of a pinkie finger tip covered the interior glass of the jar. From each scale's centre to every corner ran borders and struts of a denser silvered material, which should've been plain white calcium.

Xanthe put that jar back down into its slot and lifted another. "And guess what this is."

The jar insides heaved with a dense, live, wriggling mat of thin sea urchin legs. Zebe refused to accept that her dry mouth was due to apprehension. She croaked, "How much of the shell did you put in?"

"A sliver, broken off with a pair of pliers. The spines are in this next one." Xanthe put down the jar with legs and took up one with a forest of thick silvery-red sea urchin spines.

Zebe closed her eyes. Walking into the living room, she bumped against the couch and sat down heavily. "I'm stunned. Speechless."

Xanthe replace the sea urchin spines and came to sit down next to Zebe. "You need time to think it through. We'll save the Reef together."

Zebe stared at the School of Human and Alien Biology souvenir bags until she saw them. "Aren't your bosses suspicious, Xan? When you walk out with ten souvenir bags of dust? What do you tell them?"

Xanthe laughed. "Those bags are part of Neil's collection that he keeps here. They're coded to the collectable figurines SoHAB produces every three months. One of their primary fund raisers. Come and have a look how much Neil loves the Huddle. We might as well get changed while we're up there since Neil will pick us up in half an hour for our dinner date."