

2. Xanthe

From: School of Human and Alien Biology, Brisbane

Secure Message Facility

Xanthe to Zebe:

Hey Twinster,

You are amazing how you still so often forestall me. That prophetic Celtic thing in you, I'm sure. I'd love to help make your dream come true. Don't stress, I'm not losing the plot. Remember that I must embroider. It's the Viking-daughter thing in me. I started undercover last week. A couple of days before your request, in fact. But so intensely serendipitous. Or should I say synchronous? Never could tell the two apart.

Yes, in case you're asking, at the School of Human and Alien Biology. The undercover part is where I masquerade as a cleaner. Quite okay to say where any human might want to read it, because it's the ladies in the cage having the wool pulled over their eyes. You've got it, it's the extra special cleaning job. One of the perks is this secure ComLink. I'm laughing, enjoying my completely unexpected synchronicity with my twinster, the perks, the mystery, the fluffy wool, the beauty of the moment and because I had myself implanted with a ComJack.

Yes, I know. I can just about see you start an argument, I'm meant to be finishing my year at Zoo Hall and join you at the Reefarium. I'm sorry about your problems there. Though this request of yours is seriously interesting.

I had to beg Whit ... you know my boss, Whit Smith? ... to let me do it. Disappointingly, I didn't have to beg very long or hard. I think because SoHAB has run up against the problem of not enough data for it to be worthwhile to keep it all going. The creatures are better at keeping secrets than an enigmatic oracle.

I said to Whit, what do you expect when everyone going in are either cleaners or guards? You need someone specifically to stand around and observe. Let the creatures put her through a third degree, not the poor women doing the work. And I said all that in the mock-up room, with the cleaners and guards standing around us. They nodded so wisely and agreed so hard that Whit was convinced. Privately, I think he was petrified they'd all walk out, and that Management would then blame him for rocking the boat. Worse for him, they'd expect him to find a new lot.

You wouldn't believe the practice runs. The demo room ... you know, the sort with seating stepped to the ceiling ... is mocked up to look like the inside of the cage. The cleaning squad practices in there every day, brain-storming every possible eventuality, they are so scared. Trouble is of course, the ladies aren't human. They come up with stuff no human would think of. But that's just my opinion.

Whit went away to talk the rest of the white coats into accepting the plan.

One of the guards said, "It'll be wonderful for all of us to have you along, Xanthe. Thank you."

That started them all talking.

“The unbroken staring at us sometimes is the hardest thing to bear.”

“I think because they are so non-human? I mean they shouldn’t be able to stare so wisely?”

“It’s like jockeying your hoverole with a police fly-car keeping pace overhead. You know you’re going to do something wrong just because they are watching you.”

“Don’t worry, we won’t forget you when we exit. Let’s practice the pull-back exit with Xanthe in the centre, girls.”

Am I loving it, lovely Zebe? You bet. I can hear you say I’ll be outside my demography, whatever you mean by that, Twinster. I am the Viking-daughter and that will always be true. So, I guess what I’m trying to say, I’ve started trying a different demography.

Various holos of the critters lounge about in the mock-up room. I said to Whit if he taught me the protocols for that software, I would change the display after a cleaning session to resemble what I’d seen that day. And that we’d be able to study whether the way the aliens arrange themselves has any significance.

Whit laughs like a kookaburra at my theories and suppositions. He doesn’t have an iota of romance in him and I don’t encourage him. Anyway, I’ve got my eye on someone else entirely.

Management has given me a nifty little vacuuming-wand for pretending, very light and very useless, to suck up a bit of dust here and there. Don’t worry, I let the actual cleaners with me get on with it. They know what to do.

My first day we went in, in squad formation, three guards across the front, me directly behind the centre. I’m tall and I won’t make myself small, even for a bunch of alien ladies. Guards and cleaners both scrunch up to be less noticeable, as if that would work. Alongside me a pair of cleaners. Behind me cleaners. Five all told. Then another row of guards, six of them in total. Cleaners carried mops and buckets or vacuum cleaners. Guards carried hardwood staves. No guns or knives go in, what if the creatures get hold of them is the logic there.

The smell is indescribable as people have said and said. We all breathe through our mouths. Part of the smell is plain old Earth-origin effluent deriving from the Earth-origin creatures. I had too much to see this first session to look for the latest victims.

The alien smells are too alien to be able to say what they were like. Straight after we were out, I set Whit onto sourcing an olfactory counter. We’ll hide it in my vacuum cleaner and we’ll see.

At the time of their capture, what was assumed to be a many-headed, many-limbed creature turned out to be a bunch of separate creatures, some of them very Earth-animal-like, for example the ape, and some, like the lavender-coloured woman with one huge leg, rather other-worldly.

Claire King knew exactly but would anyone listen? She apparently was paid for her silence with a huge genetic-engineering project to be worked at the Reefarium ... funny how I never met her when I came to see you. I suppose you had to sign a secrecy clause as well. Still, I am your twin.

Claire comes from that same valley where the aliens splashed down and lived for the missing fifty years. I read the historical notes that SoHAB forced her to write before they would send her and the baby up north. Do you know that baby? He should be about thirteen. The female creatures call themselves a huddle when it is translated out. Everyone here calls them that now.

According to the tests, not one of the huddle creatures is responsible for the continual electrical outages the School has suffered until recently, when the electrical circuits relating to the alien's abode (polite name for the cage) were finally separated from the general supply.

Now it is only the video cameras and spot lights in the cage that don't work but no one is game to go in specially to fix them. The huddle is responsible for the stuff (a mix of various body products including blood) smeared onto the inside of the observation walls rendering them so opaque as to be completely useless.

Don't start, Sis. Yes, it is an info dump I'm giving you. How else to keep you up to date with my life? Because that's what you constantly tell me you want. The reason you want me to visit. Every fortnight? Give me a break. I've got a life, you know. Saturday night is the annual SoHAB Staff ball. Of course I'm going which means of course that I'm not coming to your precious Reefarium again. Must be even more a ghost house now with Joe, Beardy and Laura gone.

See how I know your every question, answer and output?

Anything else you want to know? Mail me as usual. For my personal news you will have to wait, which I know you will gladly do for me, because when you do make it down to town on my express invitation. Yes, you read that right. You are not welcome until I expressly invite you. If you even try, and I know that isn't out of the question, you will find out I have had the locks changed.

Ostensibly to keep out my nosy twin sister. Please be patient. All this guff I'm churning out is not aimed at estranging us, but at glazing security eyes. More specifically elevating their boredom levels. I know for a fact that they don't do big words so I think I'm fairly safe. This only because the facility has had to employ sapient ha ha for most of the jobs that used to be robotic. Did I mention the difficulties due to the mysterious interference in the power supply? Your Valkyrie twin, Xanthe.

PS. If you've ever been to SoHAB, you'll know the Central Hall is made up of three concentric donuts. The foyer and the donut hole together are shaped like a key hole with a shank to the outdoor. These are the public access areas. Lots of coming and goings there. There's a rail at a metre-and-a-half distance in front of the barred giraffe-sized door, where there are always people waiting for a glimpse of Brisbane's most famous resident.

The aliens nearly always prefer to hide in the centre of their apartment accessed by way of either a dog-legged corridor from the giraffe-sized gate, frustrating for the viewers because there's no seeing around corners, or the service door-airlock-service door arrangement where cleaners and guards ingress.

A few facts for your delectation and my use as thicket. The back wall of the huddle's apartment, that was meant to be one-way viewing, has been, as I said, obscured. Regular viewing times have been a wash-out since the Huddle obscured their mirror and refuse to come to the gate.

I'm wondering how I can relate what I'm doing as a cleaner to auditing Procyon Products' use of public monies. Still need to write up the project, of course.

Procyon Products as a result are trying to raise money by selling figurines and in fact all things alien. One thing interesting PP has got going are the five silver-coloured dog or wolf pups, all of them males, which were deposited one night by the inside of the giraffe door. The supposition is that the Earth-origin dog or wolf mother tried to hide them from her huddle mates. Since they eat all male intruders.

PP had the giraffe door open like a flash to retrieve the pups. They're being kept in a kennel in the basement. Naming the pups, which are on show daily in the apartment opposite the alien's, is fast becoming their favourite fund-raising racket. They've begun a silent auction, which is silent only on the names of the bidders. The amounts are broadcast freely, which is where I'll expect you to find them, Sister, if you're interested.

Do you ever wonder what possessed our father and mother to name us as they did, then saddle us with the viking-daughter and celtic-twin labels? My dearly beloved calls me his Valkyrie. He is in it up to his neck helping me help you. That's a warning. Don't come to town and rock the boat. Yes, I love a bit of drama. Though now that I'm living and loving, I'm notching drama back in favour of good deeds and building up social capital. I could go on and have been known to. Remember the screeds I churned out to pass my grades? Back in the day. Cheers.