

5. Zebe @ the Reefarium

On the Monday of her return to work, Zebe rang Mr Boatman-and-boat—as named by Callum—to pick her up at the Coleman Street jetty. The strong silent type, he finally spoke when they approached the Reefarium. “Welcome home, Doc,” he said. “I brought over some interesting visitors a couple of days ago. Could be you’ll meet someone.” He guffawed.

She frowned to cover her startle. Did everybody at the Reefarium know of her quest? And Boatman—how *she* thought of him—didn’t even live there?

Boatman expertly tossed a rope-loop over a bollard. He handed her up the steps onto the jetty and tossed her bags up without ceremony. He nodded at the bollard for her to coil the rope and throw it into the front of the boat. The engine hardly sputtered and he was gone.

“Thanks,” she said at the bollard. “Hope to see you again.” She picked up her bags, one in each hand. The sachet of Xanthe’s dust in her sport-top was a sweaty square against her breast.

She walked measuredly toward the building, with her back to where PoleWatchers might be pointing their look-and-listen devices. Everywhere there were poles carrying communication transmitters—and there were at least two pointing at the Reefarium—there were spy cameras attended by sneaky technicians in the pay of the EMBers.

Normally there’d be at least one person on the jetty when the boat arrived. Like, Callum? He and Boatman had a best-buddies friendship, after all.

Claire walked out to meet her a little way from the entry. With her rosy cheeks framed by fly-away silver-grey hair, brown eyes, and hardly a wrinkle despite living outdoors more than in, she looked livelier by the day. Claire’s maths—her years at the Reefarium and how old she was on arrival—never made any sense to Zebe.

“Callum is not around?” Zebe said.

Claire countered her not so innocent question with one of her own. “You look happy. You’re looking forward to starting a new project?”

Feeling outclassed as always in the getting-info-by-questioning-the-quarry routine, Zebe asked Claire about her plans.

“The silver mud I brought from Moogerah Valley has somehow escaped this facility and is being spread through the landscape by natural forces,” Claire said.

“You mean it’s out there contaminating the whole of Eastralia?” The wind sougning among the jetty’s pilings sounded like a knell for the end of the world.

“You bet,” Claire said. “However you want to describe it. Though the mud is in no way inimical. Unlike the dust,” she said. “The revival of that krill before you left was like an omen. I started releasing mud in a big way. Come see a discovery I made?”

Claire thinks the alien dust is inimical? What's the difference? Her mind in a turmoil, she let Claire guide her into the visitors overnighting quarters where Claire went skipping behind, and in front of Zebe, unlocking and locking up again.

The doors all through the complex doubled as fire-security doors. "Security as tight as ever," Zebe said.

"Forgot to tell you we have a bunch of visitors," Claire said. "Three that can't—or won't—live below the water-line. I put them in the upstairs ocean-side apartments."

"From where they can see the dolphinate?" Following her question with a joke, "Should I hyperventilate?"

Claire let Zebe's so-called joke fall flat. Mysterious visitors indeed. "When will I meet them?" Zebe said.

"Dinner. Their catering. I gave them the run of the restaurant-kitchens though they seem more accustomed to cooking over campfires."

Zebe checked her wrist deck. A couple of hours till dinner time. She ignored Claire's innuendos. "In the meantime?"

Claire politely pushed Zebe toward the laboratories. The corridors had a wet-gold-over-dusk sheen. "What's with the gloom?" Zebe said for something to say.

"We're running on half power," Claire said.

Seemed like Claire had started in on the tit-for-tat game they regularly played. "Every time I've come back from leave, I've hoped we could be friends."

Claire laughed. "Bit late for that when I'm leaving in the next couple of days. Weren't you trawling for a life-partner? One of our visitors looks like he might've been your type before he was transformed."

Zebe slapped her cheek. "Damn, you stung me. My type? Boatman already told me that."

"*Transformed* is the operative word." Claire chuckled. "I posted a treatment plan to his and your decks, for you to treat him should your interest be piqued."

Will I ever be free of Claire? Zebe breathed to get her cool back. *Transformed? Yeah, right. This is Claire teasing.*

Claire stopped Zebe near the workstation outside the wet-room with her hand on Zebe's arm.

Xanthe's latest missive glowed on the monitor.

From: School of Human and Alien Biology (SoHAB), Brisbane
Secure Message Facility
Xanthe to Zebe:

Hey Sis, still not talking to me eh? How about letting bygones be bygones?

Though my new job relates to step one and you get to work with the end product, I took this chance to get us back together. Mainly because identical twin sisters should be friends. I'm masquerading as a cleaner, how do you like it?

Since no more volunteers available to go into the cage to clean it; and robots can't due to the alien embargo on electronics; the next result was that Procyon Products had to hire someone. I had the EMBers put my name forward, as I thought it might be a laugh. And since I was the only brave applying, I'm in!

Every other morning I get myself dressed in my special cleaner outfit and take in hand my custom designed hand pump-action vacuum cleaning device and place myself in the middle of the phalanx of female security guards armed with short swords and crossbows.

We stride into the utilities area in the middle of the SoHAB hall, calling out and clanging and banging to warn the Huddle to stay aside. The guards train their weapons on the Huddle while I'm in there hovering up any little silvering I see. The alien dust, you see, turns silver when it hits the ground.

Vacuum bag full, I shout, "Done!" and we withdraw, never turning our backs on the Huddle. In Utilities we all congratulate each other that we got through another clean-up without any losses. Then I go to an isolation room where I bottle the dust and date it.

Apparently, Joe Loreno worked up some legal samples. Why don't you come over this weekend and explain how that went? Neil and I will tell you all about our results working up our illegal samples. Maybe let you have some? Ha ha ha. I'm joking, of course. Come over and meet Neil. I insist, twinstler.

"The last paragraph appears to relate to us," Claire said, dropping her hand from Zebe's arm.

"Sorry," Zebe said. "I was in such a hurry to save my sister from herself that I forgot to delete." She did need to stay in good with Claire, so she laughed disparagingly. "Xanthe plays at being a scientist." Could she deflect Claire's attention from Xanthe's stupidity? "Who knew *Joe's* samples were legal?"

Claire frowned. "It's what he did with the product that was reprehensible."

So much for Claire and Joe not getting on. Unless he went cap-in-hand to Claire for her help? Zebe laughed again, couldn't help myself. "And we all accepted that what you did is not reprehensible?" Ouch. Not a good format for either a confession or an apology.

"Why did *you*?" Claire looked honestly surprised.

She means just me. Worse and worse. "The money you raised enabled us to continue the work?" She made it as impersonal as she could. Pointing her mobile at the monitor, she deleted Xanthe's letter.

Claire chuckled. "I'm merely surprised that *you* can finally acknowledge where your funds came from all these years. And you're here now for ...?"

Zebe breathed relief. "Stage Two, assuming that you'll have us. But it *is* about the Reef, after all." This in case Claire had taken against someone. "I was thinking we could start a dozen basic corals. Any that do well with the additive ... we can then expand the program to include their variants. We could plant them out in the lagoon, to test them in natural conditions ..."

"My time here is done." Claire laughed. "The rest of the money has moved to Souzadelay, to purchase a homeland for the dolphinate. I'll be gone as soon as I have sent on my gear."

“Tell me you’re joking?” Zebe looked Claire fully in the face, widened eyes, to get her plea across. “You’ll abandon us just when we’re getting results? We could have a living breathing Reef again in less than five years?”

“Callum left this morning.” Claire walked on ahead. “No need for me to stay any longer.”

Callum left? Who with? Zebe pushed past Claire. Turned. “But the rest of the crew, they’re still here?”

“The rest left soon after you did,” Claire said. “They all took product so we can expect that they’ll have gone for good.” She walked past Zebe and took the corridor leading to the sea-doors.

Zebe followed. It took her a minute to collect herself enough to shut her gaping mouth. “What happened?”

“Joe’s illegal dissemination of the product,” Claire said, barely turning. “I’ve written up the essentials and posted that to your workstation, too.” Then she did stop. “*Did* you bring back a sample?”

“What if I did?” Zebe said. “Don’t tell me you’re worried about our visitors discovering it? They’re hardly going to strip search me.” She didn’t say without-provocation because who knew what the EMBers already knew about Xanthe’s and Neil’s set-up. Neither of them, in Zebe’s opinion, were the most security conscious people in the security business.

Claire swung open the left-side door and snagged it to its fastener on the wall. “Bit of air down the corridors. They’re not EMBers. Far from it.” She looked at Zebe in that sizing-you-up-way that she had, as if she seriously wondered whether Zebe could take what was coming. “One good thing,” she said. “It was your sister who went down to Byron Bay. Our visitors are convinced you’re a blonde.”

Visitors from Byron Bay. Zebe breathed easier. “What did she do?”

“Infected a gent by the name of Poul with some scrapings from a coral revived by Joe Loreno. His so-called legal sample sourced, I believe, from her when he was at Zoo Hall for his report.” She stared at Zebe with her head cocked like an inquisitive crow. “I hope she only pretended to infect herself as well?”

“Because?”

“It’ll go very badly for her should the Huddle discover that she is infected with the dust. If she is.”

Zebe’s blood drained from her face and fingers. “That Poul is *here*?”

Claire looked nearly as sick as Zebe felt. “Remember that mattress-fish that hung around for a while?” she said.

“You fed it for the longest time,” Zebe said.

“I thought it might eat my people if it went hungry?” Claire said.

They stopped in the doorway. Claire’s people, a cetacean-human hybrid she called the dolphinate, lounged in the largest of the sheltered lagoons attached to the Reefarium. How their existence had even been possible to achieve, Claire never would say. Zebe had the idea that Claire had broken every EMBer-set edict ever legalised. “How did you convince the mattress fish to leave?”

“A bunch of orcas herded it away. I thought killing two birds with one stone. But, what I heard from our visitors, the mattress-fish grew much much larger, and made it south. Suggests the tables turned and the orcas were eaten. In Byron Bay it ate, possibly, that Poul. Though the informant swears Poul is alive in the fish.”

Zebe scoffed. “A Jonah in the whale come to life?”

Claire mixed metaphors when she lost the plot. “The informant’s state-of-being took my breath right out of my sails. Damn, damn Joe Loreno!”

And she wept, Zebe was astounded to see.

“And damn *you* for killing my work, my life, and my theory!” Claire said. She pulled Zebe back into the corridor with some force, and slammed the doors shut.

Even though Claire’s violence was mostly displaced onto the doors, Zebe had to force herself to press on. Her mouth almost too dry to speak. “The spreading of the alien dust through the landscape theory? When the dust is out there right this minute, spreading itself, I think you said?”

“I only ever spread the *mud*, Zebe. My theory is that the mud is benign and will do more good than harm. You and Xanthe introduced the dust but everyone under the sun will believe that that was me as well.”

Zebe stepped away from Claire’s clenching fists.

“I’ll be leaving as soon as I can,” Claire said. “Callum refused to come.”

“He’s not stupid, is he? He went already, you said.”

“Without so much as a goodbye. Away with the least trustworthy of our guests. Who are men, to his understanding.”

They arrived back at the wet-room work-station. “Delete the hard drive?” Zebe said for something to say. *A way to get proceedings proceeding.*

“Don’t bother. I’ll be kayaking. I’ll leave the sea-doors open when I go. Seawater still very efficient at wiping hard drives.”

“You’re going with ... them?”

“Why would I abandon my dearest friends?” Claire said. “The innocents in all this.”

Which put Zebe in her place but gave her the boost to say what she had thought ever since she discovered the point of Claire’s hallowed project. “The only innocents in this are the dolphinate children yet to be born.” But *remember that Claire’s project’s money was going to reseed the Reef?*

Claire laughed. “You’re judging me. Hope you find it easier than me to negotiate the cataclysm.” She walked toward the elevator.

Zebe followed her though she had too much to think about to be sociable.