

4. The Day Before My Birthday

When I was nine or ten my first challenge had seemed a hundred years away. But time passes, as Hen says. I started a journal last week. Hen's suggestion to get me over a mood of unhealthy anticipation.

I laughed. *Unhealthy anticipation?* But I set to. I wrote everything I could remember from about age five, including about the alien starship. All of which took quite a few days out of the week.

Tomorrow is my thirteenth birthday, the day of my challenge.

I opened the virtual window into the apartment and to check that Du was alright. It looked like more schooling for Du with her mother close by today. My brother and father were not on the premises.

So because the actual day would be the challenge, Hen and I ate my birthday cake the day before. In other words today. Without my father present as per usual. "I'm not important to my father," I complained. My nerves talking. I knew for years already how much more important my brother was to my father than either Du or me.

Also as usual when we ate and drank anything, we ate under the air scrubber so the smells—or rather the *aroma* of the birthday cake went outside instead of into the house.

Hen changed the subject. "You've already chosen your name." Traditionally, thirteenth birthdays were for choosing a *proper* name. Hen meant the kind of name that might've made me invisible in a crowd. We both knew 'Kosi Lionhair' wasn't it. I got ready to defend my name and probably showed that on my face.

Hen changed tack before I had a chance to get started. "I'm sure your father will be here tomorrow bright and early to tell you your challenge. Hidden children are a family's treasure. Insurance in case something happens to the legal children."

I ignored that she didn't sound convinced about me being my family's treasure. "What could possibly happen to my brother?" I said. "He is so ... protected." My father hired two soldiers. One woman to guard my brother, and one to guard himself.

"These days, the Life Lotteries target the families of the government's enemies." Hen pressed her lips together like she definitely wasn't going to say another word.

I knew I'd have find the rest out myself. Because I had lots of questions. For instance what about the supposed randomly chosen dates for Life Lotteries? And how was my father an enemy of the government? I wanted to gulp up the rest of my milk-tea so I could get started with my research but Hen restrained me with one hand as she sipped her coffee. "To make it last," she said. "Let's think a bit n=more about tomorrow."

"Tomorrow is the day I get to go outside, and by myself, both supposedly for the first time in my life." I said. A big act would be required by me as my father couldn't find out that Hen has been taking me out for six years. "You are a very good actor," Hen said as if she knew

exactly what I was thinking about.

She'd be let go instantly if he discovered it, probably without further pay. Since the government supposedly doesn't know that hidden children exist, hidden kids are safer running around on their own than with family. Safer for their families and the kids themselves, according to Hen. Therefore the thing about going-out-by-myself. The thought of losing Hen was enough to give me nightmares. My acting will be impeccable.

Once I tidied up my cup and plate, there was still the whole rest of the day to wear through. When I now stood on the closed toilet lid, my head touched the ceiling sideways. If the alien starship visited tonight, I'd have to kneel on the toilet to see out of the window.

Kneel on a cushion on the toilet lid? That might work. I grabbed a cushion from our couch to put it on my bed, ready for tonight.

"For kneeling on the toilet lid? Good idea," Hen said. "Let's have a look out, see what there is to see."

This afternoon the airs coming from the east, where the sea joins the estuary, smell deep green and mysterious.

"A breeze carries the smell up the side of the building," Hen said. She's squeezed beside the toilet, beside me kneeling up. She put her arm around me. "If you look left of Parra 6, you'll see Parra 10. In front of Parra 10 is Parra 11. There are twelve of these urbs arrange in rows, all standing in the estuary."

An old story. Where is she going with it? I rattle off what I know to get her started. "I live on Level 6, in the south-eastern corner of 5W, one of the four dorm stacks surrounding Parra 5 Central."

"You've got it." She let me go and I fidgeted with nervous energy. With a tiny sideways smile she took two pairs of magnifying goggles out of her apron pocket. Handed me a pair. "Let's see if we can make out all the urbs and if there's anything to see of the land to the west?"

While we're peering that way, I got the idea that the green lands were the actual target of this exercise. "Green because there are farms there, crops growing?" I said. Then I got mad. "How many years of Life Lotteries? How can there still not be enough food?"

I parroted the social media platforms I visited online when Hen was off duty for the ten hours when I was meant to be asleep. She'd begun to be absent in those hours when I was seven.

When I asked him about that one day, my father said I wasn't a baby anymore. He couldn't afford to keep a servant twenty-four seven longer than necessary. "You're safe in here and there is the red button to call me if you feel ill."

Hen said afterward it was to be expected. "No use being angry with him, Kosi-mine. He's only doing what he knows. And he's opened a door for me to help you in other ways."

So instead of being angry with my father, I was often angry with the alien starship. How come just personal visits on two birthdays? Why not all my other birthdays? There was no mention of the starship's strange actions anywhere on the Net. Some websites said the ship continued to hang in our skies to help Earth to recover from its environmental breakdown and climate troubles but they never said if the starship actually did anything.

"How long before the Antarctic and the Arctic Ocean freeze over again? Wasn't the starship supposed to be helping with that, the freezing?" I said. I knew it could do it. That hailstorm, after all.

"I don't know, pet," Hen said. "I do know of a bunch of wanderers who herd camels out there," she said, pointing to the extreme left. In the west. "Away over the mountains. They call the starship their *Lodestar*. They've learned to navigate by it. Suggests a whole different alien starship, doesn't it?"

I forced a grin. "I love you, Hen. Still trying to distract me into a different world." The alien starship's visits only *seemed* personal, I'd lately begun to think. There was no mention of its strange actions anywhere in the ParraNet. "It's like I was the only one who saw it, and twice at that. Hard to believe!"

Hen smiled. "I believe you. It's out there! Only one more night to wait, Kosi-mine."

I could hardly wait to go outside by myself. How would it be? Would Hen stay in the house while I had my adventure?

Reading my face she said, "I'll be here when you get back, Kosi-girl."

I hugged her and threw the goggles on my bed. Grabbed hold of the acrobat-harness hanging in the doorway between my bed and the dinette. I input my routine into the harness controls and stood perfectly still so the straps could secure themselves around me. Then I rolled into my favourite sequence of forward and backward paces, turns, tumbles and back-flips. I spun in place, not getting anywhere. I'd never gotten anywhere but that would soon change.

"It's here," said a voice loud on the outside of the building.

"I reckon. With all that noise in the pipes!"

Hen was instantly at the doorway punching the keys that froze my harness and me with it.

We listened like a couple of prey animals before they start running. What I've seen on nature videos. There's nowhere to run in our house.

After a long time, Hen pushed me in front of her—slow as snails, past the dining nook that had an air-scrubber above the tabletop microwave. Into Hen's bed-nook. Luckily she hadn't yet folded her bed to the wall. Meaning we had somewhere to sit out of sight of the grills.

We'd practiced these manoeuvres every day of my life. This was the first time in my living memory it was for real. "What?" I asked silently but with raised eyebrows.

Hen spelled words on her fingers to explain. Maintenance personnel on the gangway above the grills. The desalination pipes on the outside of the building for that express purpose, ease of fixing.

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I purposely stayed awake that night to wait for the the alien spaceship.

It didn't come.

5. The Disguise

Hen got as little sleep as I did as I woke every hour from midnight on with questions, I was so excited!

"Worry about yourself," Hen said. "How will you take in all the detail your father will tell you?"

"Will I have time to visit Belle and Jules?"

"Probably not," Hen said. "Starting at the back of the hidden house, write down every detail you can recall."

That was Hen losing her temper and giving me some busy-work.

Starting at the back of the hidden house ... I wrote ... and all in a row are the bathroom, my cupboard-sized bedroom, Hen's room, the dinette and the living room. Father's study is at the end. Wider than the hidden rooms, it has three doors out. He'd probably say three doors in. Or through. Whatever.

I checked Hen and she was asleep. *Better continue.*

Hen and I have access to the study by way of a sliding door which doubles as a short wall. Once through it, when we go out together, we walk past the back of my father's big desk, to what Hen calls the back door almost in a corner of the long back wall of the study.

Right opposite it in the other long wall is the door into the house proper where I have never been. The windows beside that door show the house garden. Between those two doors is another short wall, but this one with cupboards covering it completely.

Finally, at 7 AM sharp, after breakfast and while I watched through the keyhole, my father entered the study, sat at his desk and rang a little handbell. I tried not to prance and tried to stand demurely in front of the desk. But listened like a hawk.

He told me everything twice in different words but what it all boiled down to was I first had to make my way across to Parra 5 Central. Then go down to its 6th level. I was to get its layout straight enough in my mind that I'd be able to draw a map when I got home.

Duh, I thought. I tried really really hard not to show my impatience on my face. How many maps had I already drawn for Hen? *Still, he wouldn't know that so better be patient.*

Then I was to find his locker in one of the corridors adjacent, and bring home the contents.

“And make sure to be back before dark. Five simple things,” he said. “Understand?”

“Why are you making it all sound so hard?” I said

My father got red in the face but the imp in me continued. “I’ve studied the visuals. I know the look of the concourse.” I was thinking at this rate there wouldn’t be any time for me to do some ordinary sightseeing, like where is the best food-stall today.

“I’ll get her dressed,” Hen said.

She took me into our quarters. An open carry-cloth lay on her bed displaying a denim shirt stained with old sweat and muddy with I-don’t-know-what, and cargoes in roughly the same condition. Frayed edges. Lots of pockets was the only advantage I could see.

I pulled back. “These clothes are even older than ...” I’d been going to say my previous outdoor wear, but remembered my father was in his study and the door between him and us stood open.

Hen mumbled. “You’ll go out looking like a Fetcher urchin, not a target for every mischief because you’re still the most ignorant kid in the concourse. Dozens of Fetchers running around with some as new at it as you. No one will mess with you with the Fetcher House supposedly backing you.”

Hen said all this with a little smile. Laughing at me about the way I pulled on the disguise while trying to keep the disgust off my face. I had to fold my top lip between my teeth to keep from pulling up my nose.

Next Hen misted my lion’s hair with water and brushed it flat. Then mussed it to resemble the casually disarranged hair of the ID pic of the Fetcher girl she’d found on the ParaNet.

I checked my new appearance in the mirror. “Mmm.” Maybe I did like it a bit.

Hen grinned with a finger in front of her lips and gesturing with her head toward my father next door. “We haven’t finished yet. You’ll remember the work we did on odour. Remember this smell?” She sprayed a horrible, dirty-smelling stink over me.

I gasped. “Not all over me!”

“You want to go out smelling of a hidden house?”

“This place smells?” Learning the odours Hen brought me in bottles and sealed in plasteel bags, I’d been proud of my quick nose. “I can’t smell anything!”

“Because you’re accustomed to it. Tell me what I’m spraying.”

“As sweet as rot, with sharp undertones of piss.”

She nodded, and passed me an extremely old BigEars earpiece with someone else’s earwax still on it. “All Fetchers have some or other com-device, most of them at least as old as this one. I doubt this one can be made to work.”

I nearly gagged up my breakfast. But what Hen insists on, I mostly do. We cleaned the earwax off. I fitted the gadget into one of my ears.

Before she led me back into my father’s study for him to check me over, Hen squeezed her lips together with her fingers. Warning me not to back-answer him.

I must have conformed to his idea of what I should look and smell like, because he gave me a key-card to get into his locker and a cell phone with enough credit on it to get home.

“Think of the mobile and the credit as my birthday presents,” he said.

Though he shrank from the stink enveloping me, I insisted hugging him, politely, for thanks.