10. Where is Hen?

When I left the corridor I went straight into the crowd so it took me a while to finally arrive on the walkway facing Parra-West across the way.

Which was the name of our dorm block, according to the letters high up under its roof edge. Did I even look back this morning, to make sure of it? I shook my head at my lackadaisical attitude. Level 7, Unit 12 was where I had to go with the shoes. I punched in the numbers in the Buggy Booking Box on the wall.

Waited. Mist gambolled between the buildings. The underside of the caboose under the crane-beam slid to and fro. Comforting but I dropped my gaze. Didn't want to miss my transport. Didn't want to seem to be the wrong person, say that soldier was still watching. Or my father for that matter. What if he shadowed me?

A buggy stopped in front of me and I stepped in. I rode up. The hooks engaged nicely with the fists on the buggy. *Thank you, Jules and Lilah*. The buggy swayed across the gulf.

On the other side the buggy bounced a little. I imagined the lower fists seeking the rails to hold onto. The machinery under the buggy whined harder as the buggy quested for the exact fit. A balloon of worry swelled and swelled under my breastbone.

Zzatt!

There! The fists slid over the rail. The balloon popped and relief filled me. The buggy slid down until the upper fists also engaged. *Clunk, clatter, clash!* The hooks went swinging up into the fog. The buggy slid down and passed a number of doorways without stopping. I read the numerals as we passed them. 10, 9, 8 …

The buggy slowed. I read Level Number 7 beside the gate into the exterior corridor. The buggy stopped so that its floor lined up with the level's floor. The panel opposite to the door I'd entered became a door in its turn. It slid aside, catching a guardrail as it went by. All of it the same as I had experienced many times before.

"Passengers may disembark," the buggy said.

I tottered out. It took me a couple paces to find my normal gait. I looked up, wanting a break in the clouds. Even a micro-second's worth of seeing the starship would've been good. But just rain again blew at me. The buggy clashed its door shut and sank toward the lower floors. I was alone in the Level 7 entry.

Which is good. Forget trying to convince myself. I walked along the walkway around the outside of the building with as normal a pace as I could manage. Something you'd obviously only do in fine weather, or if you were pretending to be a fetcher, like I was, without the proper codes to walk the inside-corridors.

Around the corner from Parra-Central where I hoped to find Residence 12, I finally saw the sun, almost overhead. The building had hardly any shadow and the sky surrounding the sun was more white than blue. Hen said to never stare into the sun because you'd go blind in less

than a minute. I broke out into a sweat from the heat radiating from the walls nearby and Level 7's steel walkway, and maybe also my worries. *On I go*.

Residence 12 was the corner unit. I set the shoes side by side on the doormat, and tidied the toes nearer together then the heels, to not give real fetchers a bad name.

Got my credit and started home. I figured that I could find a door on Level 7 into the central transport yard where a flight of stairs would lead me to Level 8. I'd stopped feeling very clever back at the lockers and was not surprised when I arrived in front of the glass doors into the Level 7 corridors that they didn't open for me.

But I danced like a demon on the sensa-mats, in case that might help. Swore and screamed in a whisper voice. None of it helped. The doors stayed shut. After an hour or more, is what it felt like, a cab came sliding in to drop someone home. The passenger, a woman, straightaway saw me sitting there by the doors. And of course I told her the story Hen told me to tell.

"Bardelote Henry?" she said. "Bardelote is a mother? That's been a well-kept secret." She looked me up and down for more secrets. "Just started in fetching, have you? I need someone for my groceries. Remember that for when you have a bit of experience, okay? My address is W-7 Apartment number 4."While she talked, she drew me with her into the building.

I didn't break the spell. In the corridor we parted ways. She went to the left and turned the corner. I waited until she was out of sight and made a dash for the concrete internal stairs, up two short flights to Level 8, along the concrete corridor to the door into the study.

At least that was unlocked.

My father, at his desk, stared at me with an utter amazement flaring to disappointment then white-hot rage. He pointed me into the hidden house.

I went. I had to warn Hen. I searched the place in five steps. *No Hen!*

Behind me, the door to the study slid closed. The locks nicked shut. I was a prisoner.

11. My Little Sister

I was so tired I went to bed early. It's also the most comfortable and secure-feeling place when Hen isn't in the hidden house with me. I believed she'd gone home. I needed those feelings to stop thinking of all the worst things that could still happen.

Breakfast the next day was hard. At first I peered at the family eating theirs. My father glanced toward the louvres every time he forked up a mouthful of scrambled egg on toast. I sock-footed to the study door, hoping against hope that it was unlocked and that there was a tray of food for me on the desk.

But the door between me and the study was still locked and did not budge to all my pushing, pulling, beating it, and jumping on the sensa-mat. Both the louvres were sealed when I got back to them. I imagined he'd done it just to shut me out.

Out of pure frustration, and hunger—I had to take my mind off it—I distracted myself with researching our urb, Parra 5. You can never tell when a bit of in-depth knowledge might come in handy.

Satellite views showed this complex to be one of dozens. All in the form of a + sign if you could see them from overhead, each one with four dormitory stacks around a utility stack. Dormitories were where people lived. Utilities were where they worked in shops, stalls, kiosks. Clinics, schools, offices. Barracks and labs. All stuff I already knew.

I put in my ear-buds and the computer to audio. “These days,” murmured the Parranet, “Most life styles encourage further travel. The utility blocks now contain two levels of transport facilities. Where for instance you can catch a bus to the nearest air travel port or a cab to take you home in comfort.” OK, that was new.

Parranet continued. “The elevator buggies every complex has threading between their buildings are well past their prime and prone to accident and failure.” *Duh*.

“It used to be that the areas in the utilities blocks that are now used for transport pick-ups, were food gardens. But since the Life Lotteries have indeed trimmed the population, there’s land again to farm. Or so say my government sources.”

Starting to sound very uppity! I took the buds out of my ears and switched off the computer.

I’d been keeping my hunger down by sipping lots of water. But now my gut complained loudly every time I thought of food. And I had already broken into the emergency snack supply that Hen kept under her bed. If I ate three bars a day, I might last for 6 days. Surely my father would have given in by then?

More research should keep mind off my stomach.

“All the central buildings in each complex are eight sided. All buildings have that transport well in the centre, for ease of fly-car use.”

Then there was a lot of maths about the proportions that I couldn’t be bothered with.

Later in the morning there was an upset in the non-hidden house, or should I say *another* upset? Hen and I had been hearing them for a while and trying to ignore them. Something is coming to a head, Hen said once. And she’d gestured *zip-your-lips*. The same thing as saying don’t-ask.

I opened the virtual window by way of the macro I invented that is now always skulking somewhere on my monitor.

My father entered the living room from the garden room. Atrium to him. He frowned about all the noise. But he said, “Why don’t I take my little sweetheart for that walk I’ve been promising her?”

Du, his little sweetheart for that minute—I mean, has he ever taken any notice of her? *Not*

that I recall. Well, Du was over the moon. Of course. “Yes please, Daddy. Can we feed the ducks?” He nodded. She glowed with happiness. “Please wait, Daddy, and I’ll get us some bread.”

I’m crying because it’s happening and I don’t have anyway of preventing it. I’m a prisoner.

“What about me?” says my brother. I don’t see what his mother promises him because I’m all eyes for the little mite stepping out proudly with her father, bread bag in hand, babbling happily.

I hear them passing by the study door. I hear the glass doors sliding open and shut, and the faint whine of a cab sliding away.

One hour, forty-seven minutes and thirty-two seconds later, my father returns. Without my sister. A special little treat for a special little girl? *I doubt that. I miss you, Hen.*

I named my sister Du because it means strong. But she is still only a little one. Where could my father have left her? *I need to get out of the house and find her.*

12. In the Dark

Someone came into the study.

A long time ago Hen made a hole in the wall beside the door. To be prepared, she said, and to keep tabs on comings and goings.

It was my father. He sat at the house desk and woke it.

“Where’s Hen?” I said through the hole, though I wanted to ask where he’d left Du.

“You didn’t come back at the agreed time so I put her off,” he said without looking up.

“You *sacked* her,” I said.

He did his fierce anger thing with his mouth. He snarled silently, showing off his strong white teeth. “Go sit on your bed,” he said.

I stalked back to my bedroom and my bed, where I was meant to sit with my hands neatly on my lap, my feet together on the mat, while he stood over me and told me what he thought of this or that of my actions.

He didn’t come through.

After a while, as his true daughter, I seethed with some anger of my own. I had to get out and find Du. Hen would be easy to find as she was affiliated with the Fetcher House. “Can I tell you why I was late?” I said meekly through the hole. Previous experience taught me it would do me no good to show any anger.

“Won’t make any difference,” he said.

I abandoned being-good and being-polite. “Difference to what?”

“Maybe your passing will be more peaceful if I tell you of *my* difficulties. And so maybe you won’t haunt me.”

Thinking that they were the two most awful things a father could say to his daughter if he was serious—and he didn’t sound like he was joking—I almost missed what he said about my mother.

“Your mother went the way of Life Lottery winners. What was I to do with you when my new wife demanded her rightful two children?” He stared back into his past. “We had our boy. He started off very well and I admit we got our hopes up.”

“For what?” I said to get him out of his dream.

“But round about the middle of his childhood his schoolwork went to average. We had him assessed, taught by the best and then retested. I almost had to let you *pass* then, money was so tight. We never dreamed he wouldn’t make it into one of the feeder schools to the University of Alien Biology. We were so, so disappointed.” He drooped, reliving it.

And then he perked up. I wasn’t even jealous about my brother’s schooling because the way my father perked up, so callously. Something awful had to be coming.

“That same week we heard about the Gen-En-Co Smart Kids program. The company provided two ways to get into their program. One, they ran a lottery for five unencumbered places for those who didn’t have any children already or enough credit to buy their way in.”

“Wait, what do you mean by unencumbered?” I hoped it didn’t mean what I suspected.

“Means what I said. People who didn’t have any children already,” he said.

“You had me, my brother and my sister.” I surprised myself with my accusatory tone.

He shrugged. Wafted us out of the way with one hand. “We put our names down for one of those places right away. Second, Gen-En-Co auctioned off fifteen places per intake. Though we didn’t have the credit, we thought to maximise our chances. Gen-En-Co had ancillary requirements that not everyone could fill. But we figured we could provide them with the smart male child they required … we had one male already after all … for their experimental education program. A gamble that didn’t pay off.”

My heart beat sluggishly from fright. He’d already dumped Du. Abandoned her somewhere, like Hansel’s and Gretel’s and all the other fairy tale parents left their children behind. What would he do with my brother? With me? My hands filmed with cold sweat.

“But never mind, yesterday we heard that we’d won a place! We’ve been accepted! One more week and we’ll move into our luxury quarters at Gen-En-Co. We’ll finally be free from government interference, the world is our oyster.”

Did he think that if he told me, I would excuse him his crime? Hen taught me what was what, and what my father and stepmother were doing wasn't it.

He shut the computer down and went into the legal house. The louvres stayed sealed.

I lay on my bed, did not sleep. I let myself be angry. I didn't want to be scared.

Everyone got up with the birds, as Hen used to say. I always asked her, what birds? The ones that sing the dawn chorus, she said. *One day I will hear the dawn chorus*.

Now I listened at the louvres. I heard my brother pretending that he thought they were all going on a holiday. He knew something was up because half the time he behaved like a five-year-old, like Du, as if he was trying to be her and himself at the same time.

My father entered the study. He woke the inbuilt desk computer. "House," he said. Then, "Go to sleep. Put the utilities into dormancy."

The lights in the hidden house dimmed. Then the remaining pinpricks of light winked out. I kept my hands flat on my desk to keep it active and glowing. The dormancy state crept around my hand—maybe their warmth stopped it advancing—then edged under my hands. Finally the desk's input surface died and went opaque.

Schlick. The study door locked itself after my father on his way out.

Hen always let me have a night-light but now I couldn't see anything no matter how hard I looked. I concentrated on sound. Water gurgled in the pipes. Something chugged past outside. The aircon buzzed overhead.

The buzzing stopped.

The aircon stopped?

I got up off the chair and held onto the desk to make sure it didn't run away into the dark. Touched the wall with my outstretched hand. How hard was it to remember directions when I could only see stars and them only when I rubbed my eyes. Left hand to the wall.

No. *Better idea*. I sank to the floor. Crawled to the bathroom, skimming the wall with my left flank. There, the door jamb. I rose onto my knees, clambering my hands up the jamb.

The bathroom ceiling was low because I was taller now. I reached overhead. The air-vent was above my head, just inside the bathroom door. I stuck my fingers into the little squares of the grill covering the vent.

On hot days my fingertips would get icy cold. On cold days my fingers used to get warmed. A neat trick I worked out all by myself in my seventh year. Then, I had had to stand on my desk chair.

No air moved in or out through the vents. No air! *How quickly would I use up what I had?*

How fast if I cried and screamed? I bit my lip and stared hard into the dark.

Would Hen have just left? Without making sure I could escape if need be?