

ORPHANS OF STURNUS



HAROLD R. THOMPSON



From the corner of his eye...

Bear saw a sudden flash of light near the outer wall. He turned to look at it. A girl was floating in the air, her feet dangling, her body emanating golden yellow light. Bear smiled, thinking this was one of his friends playing some kind of trick, but the smile faded when he realized that he had never seen the girl before. She was a stranger.

He stared in confusion. The girl was looking at him. Her eyes were huge and round, and there was something sad and desperate about them. Her clothes were funny, consisting of a pale dress, girdled at the waist with a slim belt, the sleeves short and puffy, and little buckled shoes worn over plain socks. The shoes dangled in the air with her feet. She seemed about Bear's age.

Unsure what else to do, Bear raised his hand and waved.

The girl waved back. Then she vanished.

Bear continued to stare at the corner for a few seconds, then ran up to where Roma waited and grabbed her arm.

"What?" she demanded, pulling away with a jerk.

"Did you see that?" he asked.

"See what?"

"The glowing girl in the corner," Bear said.

Roma laughed, tossing her braids.

"No! What are you talking about?"

The Guardians had arrived, tall figures in black, their strange round faces half shrouded in their hoods. They were herding the children, making them form files, one kid behind the other. No one was looking toward the southeast corner.

"So, only I saw her?" Bear said, wondering if he had seen her at all.



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Orphans

of

Sturnus

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ORPHANS OF STURNUS

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To Ben and Maddy



Chapter 1

Where were you yesterday?” Roma asked Bear during break. First period had ended, and they were in the yard. Roma came up on Bear’s right, seeming to appear out of nowhere. Bear recoiled a step, an automatic reaction, his mind still a little foggy.

“Bear?” Roma said, leaning toward him.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I think I was sick.”

“Sick?” she said, wrinkling her brow. The braids on either side of her head stuck out like antennae. “All day? How could you be sick all day?”

Bear just shrugged. He really didn’t know what had happened. The last thing he remembered was accompanying Miss Sweet into the corridor outside the classroom. Then... nothing. It was strange, and bothered him a little, but Miss Sweet had told him he was okay now.

“Well, alright,” said Roma, apparently satisfied. She twirled away, spinning on her heels and making for the playset where Emmot and Aril were disputing the summit, playing at “King of the Wind.”

Bear leaned against the wall of the school. Other children raced past him. He saw their faces, their smiles, their laughter, but didn’t want to join them. He still felt a little weak. Even at the best of times, he only associated with three or four of the other kids. Somehow, that was all he had the energy for. Quite often, he even liked to be alone.

A shadow fell across the opposite wall, a sudden line of darkness. Bear watched as it crept across the yard, its edge curved like a knife. The mid-day eclipse.

He loved this moment, this daily hush, and welcomed it more than usual today. He needed time to think, to recover from...whatever had happened.

Now the world would fall silent for about an hour and a half, the birds no longer singing, the sky dimming to a deep indigo, dominated by the vast black disc that was Corvus, hanging in darkness as it passed between the world and the sun.

Someone had once explained to Bear, although he could not remember who, that the world was really a moon orbiting an enormous ball of brown gas, a massive planet almost big enough to be another sun. That was Corvus. One side of the moon always faced the gas giant, and this meant that, for a certain time every day, the giant hid the sun.

It also meant that every day brought two dawns.

Many of the other children had stopped playing and were staring up at Corvus as the sun seemed to sink into its bulk. In a moment, when the sun was completely gone, the Guardians would gather the children and send them inside for more lessons. Darkness had filled the yard.

From the corner of his eye, Bear saw a sudden flash of light near the outer wall. He turned to look at it. A girl was floating in the air, her feet dangling, her body emanating golden-yellow light. Bear smiled, thinking this was one of his friends playing some kind of trick, but the smile faded when he realized he had never seen the girl before. She was a stranger.

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"No! What are you talking about?"

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"So, only I saw her?" Bear said, wondering if he had seen her at all. Was this something to do with yesterday, with being sick? Was he seeing things?

The girl had seemed real, though. And she had been beautiful, like something from his dreams come to life.



The school was an uneven and rambling structure made of a silvery gray material with no visible seams or joints. It housed two classrooms, a large dining hall, a small breakfast room, “play” rooms, gymnasium, washrooms, and sleeping rooms. The building had no windows to look out into the yard, which surrounded it on all sides.

The yard was, in turn, surrounded by a high gray wall without visible doors or windows, a hidden gate appearing in a different location every time it opened. The children were allowed outside the gate (or gates, maybe) now and then to romp in the grassy meadows, but that was as far as they could go. They could not venture as far as the patch of yellowpine forest to the north, nor were they ever permitted to go to the city to the east, with its jumble of distant buildings, each a stack of bland gray blocks like the school.

The classrooms were large and trapezoidal, theatres with floors that sloped upward from front to back. Ambient light came from somewhere, although Bear did not know its source. Four curved tiers of ten chairs held all forty children, the entire student population of the school. The chairs were set at intervals, with plenty of room between them. The kids sat there, looking identical in their school clothing—plain gray flannel suits consisting of pullover tunics and trousers.

Bear’s chair was in the third tier. His friend Emmot sat in the second tier, just in front of him.

Guardian Number Four walked between the seated children, ensuring that everyone was settled in their proper place. His tanned face, too smooth and perfect to seem quite real inside his dark hood, showed just a hint of a smile. He wore a large white number 4 on the chest of his black coveralls.

“Miss Sweet is coming,” he announced in a loud voice.

Bear sat as straight as he could in his chair. He wanted to please Miss Sweet by demonstrating perfect posture. He also wanted to talk to her after class, to ask her about the glowing girl, whether it had been something to do with his sickness, or something else. Whatever it had been, Miss Sweet would know.

She swept into the room, an explosion of textures against the drab backdrop. She was tall—taller than even the Guardians—and slim, although with a woman’s shape. Today’s dress was black with silver flecks, and it clung to her body and spilled around her feet. Her perfectly heart-shaped face was deep pink, with a narrow green line running down the center—along the bridge of her nose, across her lips, bisecting her chin, and trailing down

the front of her neck and into her collar. Her hair was like white smoke billowing and swirling around her head.

Bear's stomach flipped, just as it always did when Miss Sweet arrived, no matter what she looked like. She was always beautiful, but beautiful in a fantastic and sometimes terrible way.

"Time to begin," she said, both hands raised above her head, looking as if she were about to sing, which was half-true, for she spoke in a sort of rhythm. "Questions and Answers!"

She paused, and Bear tensed, waiting for the first question. The class was required to answer as one, but some kids were always a bit slow. He didn't want to be one of those kids.

"Where did the human race come from?" Miss Sweet intoned.

"The planet Earth," Bear almost shouted, along with thirty-nine other children.

"Very good," Miss Sweet said, slowly climbing the slope from the narrow front of the room to the wider back, moving between the chairs. "Why did humans leave Earth?"

"Earth was corrupt and overcrowded," came the collective reply.

Miss Sweet stopped and turned. Bear had swiveled in his seat to keep her in sight.

"What is the most advanced planet in the known galaxy?" Miss Sweet demanded.

"Janus!" Bear shouted with the others. These questions were basic, and easy. He was getting them all correct, and quickly.

Miss Sweet began to walk with slow careful steps back down the next aisle. Her path would take her past Bear's seat. His heart began to thump in his small chest.

"What planet is this?" she asked.

"The moon Sturnus," everyone cried.

"And who are you?" Miss Sweet asked, her voice softer now, although no less clear and audible.

"We are the Orphans of Sturnus," Bear said, not shouting now, but proud of who he was, who they were, that they had escaped a terrible fate. Of course, he had no memory of that dark time, of the horrors Miss Sweet told them they had escaped, and that was good. That he and the others had survived made them heroes, of a sort.

"And why did the society of Sturnus fail?" Miss Sweet next asked, descending, coming closer to Bear's chair.

"Stagnation and corruption," Bear said.

He had never been sure what that meant; but it was the proper reply, and he knew it by heart, like all of the other Answers.

“Who rescued you from this terrible state?” Miss Sweet said.

“Janus rescued us,” Bear said, and one of his earliest memories came to him, of one of Miss Sweet’s faces, a more ordinary human face, saying *It will be all right now*.

She glided past his seat. He wanted to reach out and touch her, stroke the soft cloth of her dress, but of course he didn’t dare.

Miss Sweet returned to her place at the head of the room. Guardian Number Four took position on her right near the entrance, hands behind his back, smooth face still smiling.

“Very good, children,” Miss Sweet said. “I did not hear even a hint of hesitation in any one of your voices. Yes, you may applaud yourselves and your fellow students.”

Bear clapped his hands, his grin so huge it hurt his cheeks. It was a good day when they pleased their teacher.

“You are all nearly ready for the next step,” Miss Sweet said when the applause had died. “Just a little more time, but if you strive, if you make an effort, you will be ready to receive the benefits of Janus. Remember that we are an older people. We were the first to flee the Earth, the first to travel into the stars and start again. We learned much, and now it is our duty to share all that we know. It is our duty to share...to share what?”

“The truth,” the class shouted, although the answer was a bit ragged. Bear was one of the slow responders, having spoken a fraction of a second after Emmot, and for that he felt his face begin to redden. He had thought Questions and Answers was over!

“It is our duty to share...?” Miss Sweet repeated, her voice rising.

“The truth!” the children bellowed in perfect unison, Bear included.

“That is correct,” Miss Sweet stated, letting her arms settle at her sides.

Now Questions and Answers *was* done, truly over for the day. Bear had to admit to himself that, despite his one hesitation, it had gone well.

Next on the schedule was mathematics, just a series of equations and problems to solve. Bear removed his work card from its slot in the side of his chair. The work card was a rectangle of some thin floppy stuff, maybe a kind of plastic, but Bear liked it and thought it worked well, projecting interactive two and three-dimensional images in the air in front of him. The images filled his vision, made it easy to focus, to relax and just practice simple arithmetic at his own pace, without any fear of failure.



An hour of reading followed math. Bear liked this class even better, because he could pick whatever story he liked from the library contained in his work card. The stories were all about the planet Janus—how it was once called a “super earth” because it was larger than old Earth, with heavier gravity

that, according to some tales, made its people stronger. The planet only had one city, because there was no need for any others. Its people were the most prosperous and happy in history, and they seemed to come in all sorts of colours, shapes, and sizes. If they wanted to change how they looked, they could do that, too.

Bear wondered when he would ever get a chance to visit Janus.

Reading ended too soon, as always. Classes were over for the day, and Bear followed Guardian Number Four's directions, filing out of the theatre. As he moved through the doorway, he realized with alarm that he'd forgotten to ask Miss Sweet about the golden girl.

It was impossible to go back. He would have to wait to ask her tomorrow.

He followed the children down the featureless gray corridor to a Washroom. The Washroom was a tiny featureless space, like a closet. Bear followed the child in front of him into the closet, stopping for a few seconds while strange lights swirled around him. He always imagined he felt the dirt leaving his skin and hair, but he was never sure if this sensation was real or not. He supposed it didn't matter. The room did get him clean. He could even pee in here if he wanted (although he was supposed to do that in the privy). When the lights went out and he stepped through the other side, he was "free of all foreign particle accumulations," as the Guardians liked to say.

His stomach grumbled. From the Washroom, he followed the stream of kids along another corridor to the large dining hall. This was a rectangular room, silver-gray like every other, with three long parallel tables. The tables were white and made of some hard, slick substance. Bear sat in his usual spot, in his own chair with his little circle of friends—Emmot and Aril, Roma and Kanga.

"Food!" Emmot cried, pounding the table and grinning at his closest companions. "We want food!"

"What are we having today?" Roma wondered, having to shout over the noise of many other voices.

The food came, rising from inside the table on rectangular plates in front of every child. Bear saw it was his favourite combination of meat (a brown square), vegetables (a green square), grain (a paler brown square), and a drink of opaque brown liquid the kids just called "yum."

The meal was a little bland, but that was okay, because he didn't like strong flavours.



When the meal was done, the children had "free time." "Free time" could take various forms. Sometimes, it was structured, as when the Guardians

organized team sports, competitions between sections of the class. Bear enjoyed some of those, but some he hated. If given the choice between structured time and unstructured, he would always choose the latter.

This evening there were no sports. Bear's time was free for real. He could think about anything, or do whatever he wanted. He could go to one of the playrooms and join in an immersive game, or read, but decided instead to go out into the yard, find a place to sit, and do nothing but think and wonder.

He climbed to the top of one of the playsets, sat on a crossbar, and stared at the sky, watching the approach of second evening, counting the stars as they came out. He was feeling better than he had that morning, the weakness gone.

Now and then he glanced at the southeast corner, but the golden girl didn't appear again.

Time seemed to pass too quickly, and Bear was surprised when the chime sounded, a great ringing like that of a steel bell. He had no idea if there was a real bell hidden somewhere, or if it was just a recording, but that didn't matter. What mattered was that the chime meant free time was over.

It was time for bed.

The Guardians appeared, and Bear complied, joining the rest of the kids in the yard, forming a file, returning to the school building, winding down the corridor to his dormitory.

Ten children slept in each room. Their beds were not beds at all, but bags suspended from the walls. The bags had hard sides and were very tight, holding their occupants in a rigid form, with a hood to keep the head in place and prevent it from lolling. Bear thought it was a strange way to sleep, but Miss Sweet had told them all this was the only proper way, the Janusian way. So, he tried to do his best. Even so, he was never quite comfortable.

"Open," he said, and his sleeping bag opened. He stepped up into it, turning as it closed around him, wriggling his arms so he could hold his hands clasped together against his chest. Now he could crook his head forward as far as it could go in his hood, turning it slightly to the right. This was his favourite position, the one that worked best.

The lights in the room dimmed. A voice emanated from somewhere, the voice of Miss Sweet, saying, "Goodnight, my little birds."

Bear was tired. His day had been good, a little more interesting than most. His mind began to drift. His eyes closed, and in a half-dream state he saw the golden girl again, only this time she spoke.

Can you see me?



The next thing Bear experienced was not a dream.

It was summer, the air a warm cushion filled with the soft music of crickets. Bear was at the big yellowpine table in the great room, and the windows to his left were open. He turned to look. There was still some light, despite the late hour—Mum and Dad had let him stay up—and he could see the green expanse of the lawn as it sloped down to the cliff, and the jumbled sandstone boulders beyond, and the sea.

The sea. He could smell it, the brine and the weeds and the sand. He took a deep breath, let that smell engulf him.

“Are you going to play?” his father said.

Bear looked at him, at the thin man with the sandy beard, the smile, the merry blue eyes. Mum was next to him, her dark features inscrutable, as always when they played a card game together. Mum was always the player to beat.

Bear looked at his hand. He had five cards. Three were Stars, one was Rockets, and the last was...

With sudden excitement, he realized he was about to win. He had the last Comet!

“S-s-s,” he tried, unable to get the word out, but for once not caring, not humiliated at his inability to speak when he wanted. Nothing could stop him!

“Supernova!” he at last managed to blurt, slapping down the Comet.

“Oh, well, look at that!” said Mum, putting down her cards.

Dad threw his down on the table, but Bear knew his disgust was not real. Bear was laughing. From below the cliffs he could hear the waves.

Dad had risen from his chair and walked to the entertainment centre.

“Let’s have some more music,” he said. “Play the *Lemyn Concerto Number Three*.”

The music, soft and flowing, came from the hidden speakers in the wall.

“The *Lemyn Concerto*,” Bear repeated to himself. His father always played soft music in the background, and Bear wanted to know the names of the pieces and of the composers. Still, he was afraid he would forget, even though he remembered the tune well enough to hum it to himself.



Another non-dream came to push aside the first.

The seasons on Sturnus were not much different from each other, but late summer brought the whooping of belted owls. Bear and his father were taking an evening walk, in true night after the second sunset. The owls had always scared Bear, but he wasn’t frightened with Dad around.

They made their way along the twisting lanes of their neighborhood, an area of dispersed houses on the edge of town.

“Look,” said Dad, “you can look in people’s windows and see what they’re doing. It’s like a play.”

All of the houses along the cliffs had large windows, and at night warm golden light shone from inside. No one seemed to bother drawing a blind or turning the glass to opaque. Bear supposed people trusted each other here.

“Look, Dad, they’re having a party,” Bear said, pointing to one display. About a dozen people had gathered in their great room, glasses and bottles in hand, and Bear saw their smiles, their laughing faces, although he couldn’t hear their voices. “Too bad there’s no sound.”

In the next house, people were having dinner, sitting in a circle and eating. And in the next, the inhabitants seemed to be just relaxing, reading or looking at their tablets.

“It’s like a museum,” Bear said, “a museum of people.”

“Or a zoo,” his father suggested.

Bear giggled.

They came to the end of the lane, and here they started down the long flight of wooden steps that took them from the edge of the cliff to the beach. Bear held his father’s hand for safety, felt the roughness and warmth of his skin.

The water lapped at the strip of sand. Bear’s father explained that on Earth there were tides, and the sea came in and went out; and that was true here, too, thanks to other moons nearby in orbit around Corvus, but it wasn’t as extreme.

Bear tried to imagine the water coming in for more than a metre, crawling up the beach, and that thought was a little scary.

“Skip stones?” Dad suggested, and Bear agreed, so they looked for some flat bits of sandstone. When they had each found half a dozen samples, they tossed them at the water’s surface, counting the number of jumps they could produce. Overhead, the great striped ball of Corvus hung like a light, fat and cheerful, hiding behind a few wisps of pink-and-white cloud but still providing plenty of light to skip stones.

Bear managed to skip his sixth stone fifteen times!



His eyes opened. He was hanging in his sleep bag. He hadn’t been asleep when the memories came.

His heart was pounding, his breathing rushing in his ears. He’d forgotten his family, his mum and dad, his house, his town, forgotten it all. How had he forgotten?

His eyes darted around the dim room, taking in the shapes of the other sleeping children.

What was he doing here? Why wasn’t he at home?

How had he forgotten everything?

Chapter 2

With the morning, some silent command caused the sleep bags to open, allowing the children to tumble out, landing on their feet to meet another day. Bear wobbled, throwing out his arms to keep his balance, his head spinning.

“No,” he groaned, rubbing his eyes.

The room smelled strange. It was a smell he’d known all his remembered life, but now it seemed foreign. For a few minutes, he stayed put, unable, or maybe unwilling, to move. Someone bumped him, and someone else said, “Come on, Bear!”

He had no choice. This was how his days began.

He let his legs and feet carry him, following the crowd, moving without thinking, streaming out of the room toward the privy. Guardians Number Two and Number Three urged them on, calling out in turn, “Don’t be late. Move quickly. You must not be late.”

Bear went into one of the open toilet alcoves and peed. He stared at the silvery wall as if seeing it for the first time. Nothing seemed real. How had he come to be here, in this strange school with these children? He didn’t belong here.

No, that was wrong. He’d lived here all his life, since the Janusians had rescued him.

“Move along, now, children,” said Guardian Number Three.

A quick trip through the Washroom, the play of lights; and Bear was following Roma into the breakfast room. This was similar to the dining hall, except the walls were yellow, the only coloured walls in the school, and from somewhere came the sound of chirping birds. Bear sat on his bench with

his friends, and in a few minutes his food rose— a tray containing a square of “sausage protein” and another of “fruit.” With it was a purple drink, one of his favourites, but today it tasted like nothing.

“I used to eat better food than this,” he said.

Emmot gave him a dull look, then laughed.

“What?” he said. “When?”

Bear looked past him at the yellow wall. This place wasn’t real. It couldn’t be real. He’d remembered that he’d lived in a nice house with Mum and Dad and a dog named...

He’d just remembered the dog! And he’d gone to school, a different school...somewhere. He didn’t know. He couldn’t remember it all.

He finished his meal. The empty tray sank back into the table; and to his right, one entire wall opened, sliding up to some hiding place in the ceiling. The Guardians began urging the children to get up and head outside into the yard.

“Time for Warm-ups,” said Guardian Number Three, not losing its tight smile.

Bear usually enjoyed Warm-ups, but now the idea made his stomach churn. None of this mattered. He had to think, to remember more. But he couldn’t. He had to do what he was told, just as he did every day—form in one of three lines facing the two Guardians.

“First stretch!” said Guardian Number Three with exaggerated good cheer.

Bear reached for the sky with both hands, reached for mighty Corvus. That, at least, seemed real. He had always known the big planet.

Stretches number two, three, and four followed, and then Bear and the others had to stand on one leg, then the other. The Guardians seemed to think this was fun and made up many of these moves on the spot. The other children laughed, but Bear was silent. He just had to endure this.

Warm-ups ended. There was now some spare time before the first lesson of the day. Bear watched as Emmot raced Roma and Aril to their favourite playset and started to climb. Emmot made it to the top first, as usual, and shouted, “I’m King of the Air! You all have to call me ‘Your Majesty!’”

Bear listened to Emmot’s mock superiority and felt some sense of comfort. The world around him was slowly coming back into focus. Here were his fellow pupils, his friends, and the old familiar yard, those enclosing gray walls he had always known. This place was safe and held no surprises.

He took a deep breath and folded his hands behind his back, knotting his fingers. It was a warm day with a clear blue sky, and Corvus shone like a massive polished marble. He closed his eyes. The memories seemed less real now; maybe they’d been dreams after all. He’d never had a mum and dad. That was ridiculous. Miss Sweet had told them he and the other

children were bred on Sturnus to be slaves, to work in factories that produced riches for a select few. They'd been rescued from a horrible existence.

Miss Sweet would never lie to him.

He opened his eyes. Miss Sweet was in the yard, strolling amongst the children. This was a rare event, and Bear watched her approach with growing anxiety. Should he ask her about the dreams? About the glowing girl?

Were the dreams and the girl connected?

Miss Sweet met his gaze and came toward him. He waited, head bowed just a little bit, but he could not take his eyes from her. Today her face was lime-green, her hair piled gold, and her wide-skirted red dress swung from side to side with each step, billowing out as if from a breeze, although the air was still. Bear thought her head seemed larger than yesterday. How could she have a larger head? He'd noticed this sort of thing before, that she changed more than just her colour and her textures and her clothing.

He gave her a crimped smile. "Good morning, Miss Sweet."

She stopped and looked at him. Her mouth was very tiny and red.

"Bear," she said. "How are you feeling today?"

"Fine, Miss Sweet," he said, instantly regretting the lie. He wasn't fine, but the word had just come out, an automatic response.

"You were sick," she said. "Do you remember?"

"I remember you telling me I was sick," he said, "but I don't remember being sick."

That was the truth, and he felt better for having told it.

"It will be all right," Miss Sweet said. "Have you had any other strange thoughts?"

He stared, and his heart began to pound again, but more from excitement than worry. Of course! He'd been sick. That may have been what made him see things. Did that mean he'd seen things before like the golden girl, the memories of a nonexistent family? Was it just because he'd been sick?

He wanted to tell Miss Sweet, knew he should tell her.

Something stopped him. He was not sure what.

"No, Miss Sweet," he said again, and heard his voice tremble with telling a second lie. "I'm fine."

She regarded him for a moment. Then she touched his shoulder with one hand, just a brief touch, and said, "That's good. We want you to be well."

She moved away, skirts flowing. Bear watched her go, relief mingled with dismay at his behavior.

He shuffled toward the playset. It was an arrangement of white tubes or pipes, piled in steps toward a high point. Emmot still sat there, still proclaiming his dominion. Bear wanted to join him, to forget his confusion, to just do what he always did. He leaned against one of the smooth tubes.

Someone slapped him on the arm, and he started. It was Aril, dashing past.

“Race you to the top,” Aril cried, jumping for the lowest of the white tubes. Emmot was no longer the king, but was hanging from one of the top rungs, swinging back and forth, a huge grin on his broad flat face.

“You’re going to fall, Emmot,” said Roma as she made her way toward them. Aril was close behind her.

Other children swarmed over the playset like dull gray monkeys climbing a tree of bleached bones. Bear watched them but remained on the ground. An image flickered through his mind of another playset, of other children dressed in colourful clothing, orange and red and turquoise.

He squeezed his eyes shut. He was still sick. He should have told Miss Sweet. He shouldn’t have lied.

But a little voice in his head told him why he had lied. A part of him still believed the memories were real. And if that was so, it was Miss Sweet who had lied to *him*.



More memories of the dog surfaced.

Mum had brought him home, a tiny puppy covered in tight black curls. The puppy was so small Bear could hold him in his arms, feel his soft warm body and his tiny heartbeat.

“You can choose a name,” Mum had said.

“Tayor,” Bear had decided, because that was one of the sounds the pup made when he pretended to be fierce.

Bear and Tayor wrestled on the floor in the den. At one point, the little dog sprang away, dashing to the far wall. Bear rolled over and sat up. Tayor dashed back, and with a pounce, dug his tiny teeth into the top of Bear’s right foot.

Bear howled.

Tayor seemed to realize he’d done something wrong and ran away to hide under a table. Bear’s foot was not really hurt, so he went to his new little friend and spoke to him and fondled one of his silky ears.

“It’s okay, little guy,” he said. “But no biting!”



Bear couldn’t concentrate on his math. The memory had come out of nowhere, the scene playing out in his mind all at once, fully formed. There was no question of its being a dream. It wasn’t night, and Bear wasn’t sleeping. He was sitting in his seat in the big classroom.

Then another memory hit him, like a slap across the back of his head. The dog was there again, but others as well...



“We have an appointment this morning,” Bear’s dad said. “At the hospital. It will be fine, you’ll see.”

“Can I bring Taylor?” Bear asked, his voice sounding very small and whiny to his own ears, but he couldn’t help that. He was afraid.

His father looked doubtful for a moment, but then Mum said, “Of course. He can help you be brave.”

They took a ground car to the hospital, which was a large building of silvery metal and glass. The car carried them along a rubberized street on silent wheels. Bear remembered how it smelled, the scent of the upholstery, and Taylor’s puppy smell.

The hospital had a smell, too, and that was of clean things. Bear went there a lot for checkups. He was never sure what they were checking for. Today, he went to a room with walls of gleaming white and no windows, but there were several rectangular video screens hanging in the air. He sat in a comfortable chair, and the doctor and a nurse sat on stools in front of him. Soft music played in the background, strange and sonorous, the same odd melding of tones that had been playing during his last checkup.

“Your mum and dad tell me you like music,” the doctor said.

Bear nodded. “Dad plays music all the time. I know a lot of tunes now.”

“That’s good. It’s good to be able to recognize music.”

The doctor gave Bear some medicine using a cold, white ceramic thing like a little gun that he pressed to Bear’s arm. It didn’t hurt.

“That’s just so we can see better,” the doctor said.

“I know,” Bear said, because pretending he knew gave him some power, some control.

The session didn’t take long. The doctor looked at the monitors and said things to the nurse, and to Mum and Dad. Bear didn’t pay attention to them but just listened to the music, which was soothing. He held Taylor in his lap and stroked the pup’s curly coat.

When the checkup was over, the doctor gave Bear a snap treat, something he always did. Today’s snap treat was a dragonfly. Bear cracked open the spherical package, and the simulated insect popped into existence, zipping around the room for a few seconds before dissipating.

The doctor’s name was Doctor Kamra. To Bear he seemed old, his brown face a nest of wrinkles, his hair and beard white, but he was nice. He was a friend of Mum’s and Dad’s, and sometimes came to the house. Bear didn’t go to see him because he was sick. Bear was never sick. Bear went to see Doctor Kamra because Bear was special, and Mum and Dad wanted to make sure he stayed special.



“Why am I special?” Bear asked his dad one day. Of course, he often asked both Mum and Dad this question. He liked to hear their various answers.

“Because you’re our little boy,” Dad said.

“That’s not what I mean! Why do I go see Doctor Kamra?”

“We’re all special,” Dad said. “Everyone.”

Bear frowned. “But if we’re all special, then we’re all the same, and that means no one is special.”

Dad laughed.

“That’s true. Well, look, I’ll show you what I mean by special. I mean, I can do special things. Remember I promised you I’d make chappies for breakfast?”

Bear grinned.

“Yeah!”

“Well, here they come.”

Dad moved his hands in a flutter around his head, like a magician. The chappie maker came floating into the room, a silver box that beeped and whirred. Dad continued to wave his hands. This was one of his many so-called “magic tricks,” where he made various devices do whatever he wanted.

The chappie maker beeped, and its chrome top popped open. Two chappies, lightly browned, popped out and fell onto Bear’s plate. Two more fell onto Dad’s plate.

Taylor barked.

“You can’t have chappies, Taylor!” Bear said.

“Soon you’ll be able to do your own tricks,” Dad said. “And bigger tricks, too. Much bigger tricks than what I can do, or your mum.”

The chappies were good, smooth and sweet and buttery.



The memories came to Bear all day, like a flood, as if some kind of mental dam had broken. They were vivid, and they were real. Bear was sure of that now. He wasn’t sick. He never got sick.

That night he woke in his sleeping bag and felt water on his face. He pulled one hand out of the bag and wiped away tears. This time he’d been dreaming. *Actually* dreaming. It had been a nice dream about his parents, and it had made him sad.

He knew now that he really had led a life before the school. It had all come back, or most of it. He had never been a slave. That wasn’t true. He’d never needed to be rescued.

So, why was he here at Miss Sweet’s school? Where were his parents? Where was his little dog? Where was his town and his friends and his house?

Something was very wrong.

Fear washed over him, and an acute homesickness that made the tears pour from his eyes. Small sobs shook his chest and shoulders and made him feel stupid. He never cried.

“Bear,” a voice whispered from his right. It was Aril. “Bear, are you all right?”

“No,” Bear said. “Where is everyone? Where did they go?”

“Where did who go?” Aril asked.

“My mum and dad!” Bear wailed.

Fat tears rolled onto his nose. Aril said nothing, and Bear wasn’t able to stop the silent sobs from shaking his tiny chest.

“You never had a mum and dad,” Aril said. “What are you talking about? We were bred in big tanks like food animals. There weren’t really any mums and dads.”

Bear’s fists clenched.

“Yes, there were,” he insisted, and the anger gave him some strength, some control, as did the realization of the probable truth. “They lied to me. Miss Sweet and the Guardians and everyone else who comes to the school.”

“What are you talking about?” Aril said. “You’re going to wake everyone up and get us in trouble.”

Bear shook his head, even though knowing Aril couldn’t see the gesture in the darkness.

“That means something happened to them, maybe to all of our mums and dads. And it also means that we’re prisoners.”

Yes, they were being held here. That was why they couldn’t leave the yard unless accompanied by half-a-dozen Guardians.

“You had another bad dream,” Aril said, his tone more comforting. “It was just a dream.”

“No,” said Bear.

“Bear, the Janusians rescued us.”

Yes, he knew the Answers, all of the Answers for the Questions. They were there in his head, but they were not as powerful as his memories. These memories that had obliterated everything else.

“They took us prisoner,” he repeated.

“That’s stupid,” said Aril. “Bear, nothing you’re saying makes any sense. You sound crazy.”

Bear turned his head so he could just see the edge of Aril’s face sticking out of his hood.

“I’m not crazy. I remember my life before, Aril. Something brought my memories back, and if I have memories, then you probably do, too.”

“Stop talking,” another voice said. Roma.

Bear turned to look in her direction, but could see nothing.

“You need to try and remember,” he told her.

“Oh, shhh!” Roma said.

Bear glared into the darkness. He felt hot rage rising, making his face burn. What was he going to do now? What *could* he do?

He didn’t fall asleep again for a long, long time.

Chapter 3

When Bear woke, achy and bleary-eyed, the next morning, for a moment everything seemed like before. Here was a morning like every other in his sleeping room with his friends. Soon, they would get up and go to breakfast, like they always did. Maybe there would be a sporting event today.

Then realization dawned.

Everything had changed, and nothing had changed. He was in this strange place that, up until a day ago, he had liked well enough; but now he knew it was a prison, a horrible prison when compared to the memory of his true home.

And he had no way out.

The Guardians formed the children into their files. Bear obeyed, as always. He was just a ten-year-old boy, and he needed to do what he was told. He was under the control of these people who had claimed to be his friends, but who had deceived him.



Breakfast was a chore, and the yard afterwards held no interest. Bear stood apart, pressed into the southeast corner of the wall where he had seen the golden girl. Roma was spinning and dancing in front of him, trying to get him to chase her, but he kept shaking his head.

“You’re no fun!” she chided.

The chime sounded, the great invisible bell. Bear went back into the school, to the big classroom. The first lesson of the day began.

Guardians Two and Three took up positions near the door, and Miss Sweet glided in. Her face was pale yellow, her mouth larger than yesterday.

It looked as if she had changed her head again. Her hair, too, was yellow, and arranged in tufts that stuck out in all directions; her dress was pale green. He wondered if she meant to look like a flower.

Bear couldn't help his admiration, even adoration, but with those feelings came a burst of acute anxiety, like an electric shock through his whole body.

"Good morning, my little birds!" Miss Sweet sang.

"Good morning, Miss Sweet," the pupils all said. Bear said it with them, because he repeated these words every day and he did not even think about not saying them.

"Today, I would like to do something a little different," Miss Sweet continued. "No Questions and Answers. You did so well yesterday that you have all earned a reward. So, retrieve your work cards and styluses."

Their work cards ejected from slots in their chairs. Bear took his and held it in front of him. The stylus was a white stick attached to one side.

"We will work on your skills in creating analog representations," said Miss Sweet. She held her hands out at her sides, as if about to cast a spell in one of her favourite Janusian tales. "Some consider this the art of drawing, but on Janus we know that the ability to draw is the ability to clarify your thoughts. That is its purpose. How precise is the image in your mind, and can you create an accurate representation of that image?"

Bear glanced to his left and right. The others were smiling, no doubt anticipating what was certain to prove an almost whimsical diversion from the usual lessons. It seemed clear to everyone they were going to get to draw pictures. They were going to have some fun.

It had been a while since their last drawing session, and that had been fun, too. Bear had enjoyed it, despite the rigid rules Miss Sweet imposed on what they could and could not depict on their cards. Those rules, those restrictions, she had explained, "Will free your imaginations."

She imposed rules again.

"This is what you are to do. I will speak the name of an object. You will envision that object. Then, you will create a representation of that image with your stylus."

Bear's work card began to glow, and the work card field, a luminous white rectangle, extended from its side. He pulled the stylus from where it was clipped to the card and touched its tip to the field. He felt resistance, and a black mark appeared in the white space.

"An eating fork," Miss Sweet said.

Bear's anxiety began to subside. This was something he liked, something he understood, and he found himself falling into it. He imagined one of the smooth white forks they were given in the dining room. They had

four tines, the outer longer than the two inner ones. Using his stylus, he started to draw the fork on the white rectangle. It was important to make it look as real as possible, with the handle flaring toward its end. If his drawing was too crude, he knew Miss Sweet would make him do it again until it was right.

“Tanner, Maya, and Bayan,” Miss Sweet said, “you can do better, I think! See the fork in your mind, reproduce it on your card!”

Miss Sweet had not moved from the head of the room, and Bear wondered how she could see Tanner’s, Maya’s, and Bayan’s drawings. But of course, she saw everything.

As the lesson progressed, she told a few other children to try again, and Tanner had to try a third time. Bear and the others who had not been called out, who had succeeded on their first attempt, waited. Bear could not help feeling some pride in his work.

“Very good,” Miss Sweet declared at last, clapping her hands. Bear’s drawing of a fork disappeared from his work card field. He was sad to see it go.

“Now, for the next exercise, you will place in your mind an image of yourself. You will then create a likeness of yourself with your stylus.”

This was considerably more difficult than drawing a fork, quite a large leap forward, and there were a few low groans.

“Now, children, negative emotions are unproductive,” Miss Sweet said. “So, begin!”

Bear poised his stylus above his work field. Its tip looked like the head of an arrow.

The stylus trembled as memory drowned him.



The garden was on a hill in the town. Mum and Dad and Bear went there often, and Bear liked the fat bantan trees with their wide, shading leaves.

In the center of the garden was a statue. The statue was made of white stone, and was of a young woman in a flowing gown standing with a small four-legged animal, holding a bow and arrow.

“Who’s that?” Bear asked.

“Her name is Artemis,” Mum explained. “She’s a goddess from an ancient story on Earth. She looked after the trees and the grass and the wilderness. The environment here on Sturnus is something many people worked very hard to create, and Artemis reminds us that we have to look after it. It’s very fragile.”

“Why does that animal have trees growing out of its head?” Bear asked.

Mum and Dad laughed.

“Those are antlers,” said Mum. “That animal is a deer, an Earth animal. They used the antlers to protect themselves.”

“Like swords growing on their heads!” Bear said.

He understood now. There were a few deer on Sturnus, although not many. They roamed around eating trees and shrubs. Bear had only ever seen pictures of them.

“Here, look,” said Dad. “There’s a trick you can do. See if you can make her draw back her bow.”

Bear frowned. How could you make a statue move?

“I’ll show you,” said Dad. “It’s not simply a statue. It’s a posable figure.”

With her right arm, Artemis drew back on her nocked arrow. Bear gasped.

“Another one of my magic tricks!” said Dad. “See if you can do it.”

Artemis relaxed the arrow. Bear stared at the statue. He had no idea what he was supposed to do.

“It’s okay,” said Mum. “Never mind your dad. You have to be taught how to do these things.”



“Bear,” Miss Sweet said, “you haven’t drawn anything.”

He looked up from his work field. The memory of the park and the statue had been so sharp, so vivid, it was like being there again. He could almost feel the sunshine, smell the bantan trees.

“See yourself in your mind,” Miss Sweet prompted.

Bear tried to stifle his alarm. His heart was pounding. He clutched his stylus and saw himself, but as he must have looked on that day in the park, amazed that his father had made a statue move. How old had he been? Just a little boy with a round head, his hair cut short, just as it was now, even all around. His skin was pale like Dad’s, and freckled, his nose just like a knob or button. His eyes had been wide with surprise.

He started to draw. He had to focus, to do what Miss Sweet said. He envisioned his entire body, saw himself standing outside in the grass with no shoes. He made his head a ball, his neck just a skinny bridge connecting it to the collar of his baggy shirt. He made his shirt hang down to his baggy pants and added other details—grass under his toes, his right hand waving, a sun in the sky on his left, and the massive striped ball of Corvus on his right. And he made himself smile. He was smiling because he was not alone.

He drew Mum and Dad there with him.

He realized too late he shouldn’t have done that, that it would give everything away, but he’d wanted to so much that he’d let the idea carry him. It was as if drawing them would bring them back into his life.

He wanted them back.

“Stop,” Miss Sweet commanded.

Bear paused, his stylus about an inch from his work field. He didn’t look up. His heart began to thud all the harder, like someone was punching him

in the chest over and over, as he sensed Miss Sweet coming toward him, climbing the sloping floor from the front of the theatre.

She halted next to his seat. He could not look at her.

“Who are these other people, Bear?” she asked, her voice soft, soothing.

“Just people,” he said.

“No one you know? They look a little tall to be your friends.”

Bear just shrugged. He felt himself shaking, sweat pooling at the back of his neck.

The drawing of himself, standing outside in the sun, his parents at his side, winked out of existence.

He pressed his eyes closed, squeezing out a single tear. The tear sparkled as it fell through his work field to land on his lap.

“Look at me,” Miss Sweet said.

Bear didn’t want to look at Miss Sweet, didn’t want to face her disapproval, even now. But there were punishments for resisting, and he didn’t want to face those, either. Slowly, he raised his eyes to gaze into his teacher’s sun-yellow face.

“Come and see me after class, okay?”

Relieved that she didn’t seem mad, he just nodded.

“Okay.”

The rest of the lesson passed in a blur. When it was over, Bear filed out as usual, but once in the corridor, Guardian Number Three took him out of the group to where Miss Sweet waited.

“Bear,” she said, “please stand still.”

He stopped in front of her, nervously trying to decide whether she still sounded friendly or not. He didn’t know what was about to happen. If she asked him more questions about his picture, he decided he wouldn’t admit to having remembered his old life.

Miss Sweet extended her right arm toward him, and his stomach clenched in fear. Coiled around Miss Sweet’s wrist where he hadn’t seen it a moment ago was the Snake, an oily black cable with three silver metal teeth at one end. This was one of the most dreaded things in the school, reserved for kids who had done something particularly bad. Why would she use the Snake on him?

He’d seen it used on others, on kids who were defiant or threw tantrums, but he’d always been good! Now, Miss Sweet, the beautiful Miss Sweet, was going to use the Snake on him because he’d drawn a weird picture.

He made an involuntary whimper, and that was all he had time for before the Snake uncoiled from Miss Sweet’s arm, the gleaming end leaping for his forehead. When it touched his skin, the pain was like a blow from

a hammer, radiating down his face and neck and along his shoulders. His vision went white, and the walls around him faded from existence.



When he opened his eyes, he couldn't see. He didn't know if this was because his eyes weren't working, or because the room was pitch dark. He was standing, but something bound his arms and his legs, and he couldn't move.

Terror welled up from the pit of his stomach, and he clenched his jaw and heard himself whimpering. More memories flooded in—not good ones, not ones of a lost home, but of this dark place. He'd been here before, when he'd been sick.

He'd forgotten. Or they'd made him forget?

"His brain scans are atypical," he heard someone say, a woman's voice he didn't recognize.

"How so?" said another. Miss Sweet.

"It's nothing I'm familiar with. I would have to study it further. In fact, I would like to."

"Is the nexus functioning properly?"

"Yes, it seems fine. And my repression measures are still in place. Are you sure he's had more memories? Even after the last procedure?"

There was a moment of silence, and then Miss Sweet said, "Yes. It may be subconscious, but he seems to have retained at least an impression of his family and former home."

The first woman made a strange noise, a kind of snort, and then said, "Just mind what you say. He's awake and able to hear us."

"Can't you ensure he remembers nothing of this session?"

"Obviously, I can't," said the first voice, now sounding a little irritated. "We've carried out the repression procedure on this subject twice now, and I can't recommend it again without risking damage. Or is that not a concern for you?"

"Yes, it is. This child has potential. I don't want to lose that. Not just yet."

More silence. Bear's breathing and heart rate had calmed somewhat, so intent had he been on listening to the conversation, which was baffling in some ways but also confirmed his suspicions.

"What are our options?" said Miss Sweet.

"Since the nexus is functioning properly, that is not an issue for you. This leaves us with the odd brain scan and the emerging memories. I know nothing of the first, and it may not even be relevant. As for the second, you can try a more direct approach. One question, though. Have any of the other subjects exhibited these symptoms?"

“None.”

“That’s at least something.”

“We’ll have to try a different approach with this subject,” Miss Sweet said. “Bear, are you awake? Have you been paying attention?”

Bear didn’t want to respond. He held his breath, hoping he could hide in this darkness, even though he suspected they could see him.

“You have been having difficulty, Bear,” Miss Sweet continued. “You’ve been sick, and it’s making you think you remember things that were never true. Have you been remembering things?”

Miss Sweet’s tone was calm, reassuring, the Miss Sweet Bear had trusted for so long; and he felt himself relaxing. He had always answered her, and it was wrong not to do so. He still wanted her approval.

Doubts crept in again. What if he really *was* sick, and the memories *were* false?

But the other woman, the one talking to Miss Sweet, had referred to “emerging memories.”

“I…” he started. “I think maybe I’ve remembered a little.”

“Just a little. Well, you have to try to ignore those things, Bear, because they’re just symptoms of the sickness. We don’t know what’s causing the sickness, but it’s something in your brain. I don’t want you to be scared, but I also want you to understand that it could become more serious over time unless we take steps to correct it. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Bear said. He wanted to at least appear to cooperate. If he cooperated, maybe he would get out of here soon. His arms were starting to ache, and there was a pain in his lower back. The more he thought about this pain, the worse it seemed to get. He tried to bend, to flex his muscles, but whatever was holding him kept him fixed in place.

The pain flared, a burning shockwave that lanced up his back and across his shoulders, just for a second. He cried out.

“Miss Sweet, there’s a pain in my back,” he shouted, and the pain lanced again. “Ow!”

“What is it?” said Miss Sweet. “A pain?”

“Stop it,” Bear gasped. “It keeps coming. It’s getting worse.”

The pain flared again, in his arms this time, an intense heat from within. When it was gone, he sagged within his unseen bonds.

“It’s another symptom, Bear,” Miss Sweet said. “It’s the sickness. Those memories you think you’ve been having, memories of another life—they’re false, Bear. Those things never happened. And the more you think of them, the more the pain will come. You have to never think of them! Please try, Bear. It’s the only way to stop the pain.”

Bear shook his head. His memories had brought the pain? But he hadn’t been thinking of them when he’d first felt the pain.

An image of his mother came to him. He was little, and she was sitting with him in his bedroom. She was singing a song, a song he'd loved about a little rocket who went to the moon (although which moon was never stated), a little rocket that continued on to a planet called Mars, but then turned back because it got lonely for home.

The pain lanced through him again, and he screamed, the song dissolving in a flash of red that seemed to come from inside his eyes, the first light he'd seen in this room.

"Please, Bear, stop thinking about the false memories!"

"I'm not!" he gasped, though that wasn't true this time.

"Let's do some Questions and Answers. Maybe that will help. Who looks after you?"

"You do, Miss Sweet," Bear said.

A sudden sense of calm flooded through him—calm and happiness. It was the opposite sensation to the pain. The relief was almost too much for him, and for a moment he was lost in it.

"Who will guide you to knowledge?"

"You will, Miss Sweet."

More calm, and even pleasure, a sense of hope.

"I think it's working, Bear!" said Miss Sweet, sounding excited. "Let's try another one! Who saved you from slavery?"

"Janus," Bear answered, and he started to giggle.

"Good! Remember this lesson. When you have one of those memories, I want you to run through your Questions and Answers. That way you can keep the pain away. Can you do that, Bear?"

"Yes," Bear said. The feeling of intense happiness was gone, but it had left an impression. "I can do that."

"Good."

The invisible bonds on Bear's arms and legs gave way, and he blinked in sudden light. He was standing in the corridor outside his sleeping room. Guardian Number Four was there waiting for him, that little smile on its round face.

"You look better," said the Guardian. "It's time for bed. I trust you will sleep well."



Bear woke again in the middle of the night. Someone was snoring. The room seemed calm, reassuring, the same room he slept in every night. *His* room. He thought of the session in the dark place, the things Miss Sweet had said. He'd tried to please her, as he always did, and he would keep trying to please her. He would be good and make her proud.

He'd always trusted Miss Sweet. Why should he mistrust her and the other Janusians now? Because of things he'd thought? And it did seem possible, even reasonable, that there was something odd about his brain, like he'd heard the other woman say; and that the memories were false.

He shook his head, another part of him objecting. He'd heard the entire conversation between Miss Sweet and the other woman. He knew what they were doing. They'd tried to repress his memories and somehow failed. So, they were trying something else. They were trying to warn him away with the pain.

If his memories brought the pain, as Miss Sweet said, then there was one way to find out.

He conjured a memory. It was easy now. He thought of a day when he'd been playing with Taylor in the kitchen. Mum and Dad were making supper in their usual way, by sitting in chairs and somehow making cooking devices whiz and zip around the room, depositing food on the table. Mum came over to him and hugged him, and the dog had tried to get in between them. That was funny, that whenever Mum or Dad gave him a hug, the dog wanted one, too.

"Sorry, Taylor," said Mum, "we love you, but Bear is our special little boy."

And then she'd said, "Be true to yourself, to who you are, and that means being true to your thoughts and feelings."

Bear thought maybe he'd mixed that up, that Mum hadn't actually said that on the day when Taylor had tried to squeeze into their hug. It had been another time. He remembered her face, her voice, her words.

This was a good memory, a very good memory.

It brought no pain.

Bear could only conclude Miss Sweet and the other woman had brought the pain, and blamed it on his memories, as some form of treatment. Their "new approach".

He pounded and kicked against the sides of his sleeping bag, trying to tear it, to rip it to shreds. After a few minutes, he realized how stupid that was, that he needed his sleep bag, and he wasn't strong enough to damage it anyway, so he stopped. But the anger didn't go away.

"Bear, is that you?" whispered Aril. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," Bear said. "I had an itchy spot."

"Oh. I didn't know what was going on there, you were making so much noise."

"Sorry. The spot was hard to get at."

"That's okay. Hey, where were you today?"

"I don't know," Bear said, which was true. Maybe he'd never left the corridor, although that seemed unlikely. The entire experience was so strange

he didn't think he could explain it, so he just added, "I think I was sick again."

"Oh," Aril repeated. "Well, I hope you're better."

"Thanks, Aril. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Bear."

Bear heard the real kindness in his friend's voice. Yes, there was still kindness to be had. He did have friends. He was not alone. He wondered if he should tell Aril about his memories. He had to tell someone.

A glimmer of light in the far corner of the room caught his eye. He looked.

The girl was there, floating in the air. She was dressed in the same clothes, the same shoes. She was looking at him.

"Aril," Bear whispered. "Aril!"

"What?" Aril said, sounding sleepy.

"Do you see her?"

"See who?"

"There, floating in the air. That girl."

The girl smiled, and then she disappeared.

"She's gone," Bear added. "Did you see her?"

"No, Bear," Aril said. "Are you dreaming again?"

Bear didn't answer. First the girl, then the memories. Or had it been the other way around?

He was tired, too tired to think. He shut his eyes and tried again to sleep.

 Chapter 4 

Despite his worries about his memories, about Miss Sweet's certain treachery, all Bear could think about the next morning was the golden girl. He'd seen her twice, maybe three times so far; and it couldn't be a coincidence that she'd first appeared the same time his memories of his family had started, so that must mean something, that there was a connection. Maybe she wanted to give him a message? Maybe she'd come to tell him where his family was, and how to get back to them. She'd come to help. Whoever and whatever she was.

That had to be it.

He wanted to see her again, to actually talk to her. He was sure she'd spoken to him before, asking him if he could see her. If he could just talk to her, she would give him answers.

That idea took hold and wouldn't let go. At breakfast, Bear ignored the chatter at the table and watched the room, surveyed the corners, in case the girl appeared again. Later, he looked for her in the classroom, then in the yard, and then in the dining hall.

She didn't appear.

The next day was the same. Bear's need to see the girl overrode every other thought, but her failure to return brought crushing disappointment.

The old routine continued, the days coming and going, the lessons, meals in the dining hall, free time. Miss Sweet was back to treating him like everyone else, and he did his best to pretend he was obeying her, that he was ignoring his memories. In a way, that was true, because he told no one else about them. He was afraid that, if he did, they would get in trouble, too.

Two days after the horrible session in the dark room, the Guardians led the children out of the classroom into the yard and opened a door in the outer wall.

This was a welcome distraction, a moment of freedom. Bear laughed as he followed Aril out into the meadows, into what seemed a vast open space. The pleasure of the moment was enough to make him forget his worries, to enjoy the sensation of the grass under his bare feet. The sun was warm on his face, and he felt happy, truly happy, for the first time in a long time.

Strong winds had blown some debris from the nearby forest into the meadow, and Bear and Aril found two stout sticks suitable for use as swords. They engaged in a running battle across the crest of the hill. Emmot soon joined in, fighting them both and roaring. The battle soon gave way to laughter and excited commentary from Emmot, who said this reminded him of one of Miss Sweet's stories, a Janusian tale that also featured a sword fight.

Bear stood back and just listened. He often just liked to listen.

Roma approached, saying, "What are you talking about?"

"Sword fights," Bear said.

These were his three best friends. He knew that he hadn't known them before the school, when he'd lived with his family, but now they were his closest companions. He only knew them because someone had taken them away from *their* lives and brought them to this place.

"Do you ever...?" he started to ask, then stopped himself.

"Ever what?" said Roma.

"Nothing." He turned and took a few steps away from the others. "I forget."

"There you go again!" said Roma.

Bear kept walking. He gazed toward the city, the buildings gleaming silver in the morning light. A black sphere was descending from the clouds to a landing pad somewhere in the city centre. Bear often saw the spheres taking off and landing, and wondered where they came from, where they went.

He glanced back at his friends. He'd been about to ask Roma if she, too, had memories of a previous life, of families and houses and friends. He didn't want her or the others to start thinking about it, and talking about it, because Miss Sweet might find out, and she would know he had started it. Then she might take him back to the dark room. He never wanted to go there again.



The Guardians herded the children back to the school, into the yard, and the door closed behind them. Bear was always sad when outside time ended, and this was no exception.

He glanced around, looking for any sign of the glowing girl.

“Look, Bear,” Aril said.

He held up the stick he’d used as a sword. He’d hidden it from the Guardians, concealing it in a leg of his pants, and brought it with him. The school did not allow the children any personal belongings, not even an old stick, and Bear was alarmed, worried Aril could get in trouble, and would have to face the Snake and the dark room.

“What are you going to do with that?” he said. “You have to get rid of it!”

“I’ve always wanted to know what this stuff is made of,” Aril said.

Aril was quiet, even quieter than Bear sometimes, smaller than the other boys, with a small sharp face and hair the colour of copper; but he also had a streak of mischief. He started poking the stick into the surface of the yard, which was not bare dirt but made of a smooth, hard, but yielding substance the same colour as the walls.

“Bear, I think I got it! Look, I made a hole.”

Aril pulled the stick out of the jagged indentation he had made; but as they watched, the hole flattened and smoothed over, leaving no trace of any damage.

“Well, I thought I had it,” Aril said, sounding dejected.

He stabbed the floor again. Bear moved closer to him, shielding him, looking out for Guardians. Roma came spinning by, her twin braids standing straight out from her head as she twirled.

“Hi, Aril, hi, Bear.”

“Hi,” they said in unison as she came to a dizzy stop, laughing and almost falling.

Bear motioned for her to be quiet, to not attract attention to Aril’s experiment.

“I won’t,” she said. “I’m dizzy.”

“Why do you do that?” Bear asked. “Spin around and dance and sing all the time?”

“Because it’s fun,” she said, her tone implying she thought his question foolish. She started spinning in the other direction, singing, “The sky, the sky.”

“Hello, Aril,” said Guardian Number Four, halting and holding out one smooth hand. “The stick, please.”

Bear and Aril stood as stiff as statues. Aril gave the stick to the Guardian, who didn’t stop smiling as he took it.

“It’s time for class, boys,” the Guardian said.

The chime sounded. The Guardian didn’t detain them, and Bear and Aril joined the others. Bear slapped his friend on the back, relieved at

surviving what seemed like a close call, but also a little triumphant they had pulled off something forbidden. At least until they'd been caught.

They filed into the school and down the corridor to the classroom, where they took their seats. Guardian Number Three strutted up and down the aisles before announcing, "Miss Sweet is coming."

Miss Sweet entered the room. Bear stifled a gasp and stared at her. She looked entirely human. Her skin was a creamy tan, her hair a plain dark-brown hanging to her shoulders. Her long dress was brown as well, and her hands were bare, without the usual gloves.

She smiled. Despite everything that had happened in the past few days, Bear's heart leapt.

He thought she'd never looked so lovely.

"Did you enjoy your time outside, my little birds?" Miss Sweet said.

"Yes, Miss Sweet," the children replied in unison.

"Good. This is a special day, and I mean to begin with a story. Would you like to hear a story?"

"Yes, Miss Sweet," the children said again.

Miss Sweet poked the air in front of her with one slender index finger, and the perfect image of an old-fashioned book, the kind with a thick leather cover and rough-cut paper pages, appeared before her, floating at eye level. Some of the children gasped.

Bear couldn't help grinning, and settled into his chair, ready for another welcome distraction. He loved Miss Sweet's stories, even the ones that were bizarre and incomprehensible, as they often were, for those were still interesting.

"This is the story about a young horse," said Miss Sweet. "Does anyone remember what a horse is?"

Bear knew that a horse was a semi-mythical animal from Earth. There'd never been any on Sturnus, at least not real ones.

Kanga answered the question.

"Most horses liked to run and carry people on their backs," Miss Sweet said, after praising Kanga's answer. "But not the one in this morning's story. No, he didn't like to carry anyone. He wanted his freedom! So, he broke out of his pen and ran away, far, far across the meadow."

After running for some time, Miss Sweet explained, the horse got his foot caught in a rabbit hole (a rabbit being another Earth animal that didn't live on Sturnus). Unable to get free, the horse asked a series of forest animals to help him, but none of them would or could. At last, as the horse grew more and more resigned to his imminent death, his human master found him, pulled his leg free, and took him home. There, the horse ran and ran in circles, happy to be back where he belonged.

Something about how the story turned out made Bear's stomach churn. He didn't like this story as much as Miss Sweet's other stories.

"I want to be a horse!" Roma called out.

Dead silence followed. Miss Sweet didn't allow the children to speak without permission, and her eyes locked on Roma. Coming out from behind her floating book, she advanced up the sloping aisle.

Bear was tense and worried for his friend, who didn't seem to understand her error. Roma was grinning.

Miss Sweet's words were not what Bear had expected.

"Someday, if you're good, you can be a horse," she said, gazing down at the tiny girl. "Don't you realize this? You can be a horse. It's true."

Roma gasped. "I can?"

"This is something that the power of Janus can provide. Today you are an ordinary little girl, Roma. Tomorrow you can be whatever you imagine. Would you like that?"

"Yes, Miss Sweet!"

"Good!"

Miss Sweet strode back to her book and snapped her fingers. The book disappeared with a ringing sound.

"It is true that we value reason above all else, is that not so, children?"

"Yes, Miss Sweet," the children said.

"But beauty is also important," their teacher continued. "There is beauty in perfection, like the magnificent figure of the horse. That sort of perfection is what we strive for. Perfection is what *you* will strive for." She pointed at the class with both hands, index fingers extended. "This afternoon, at second dawn, you will begin the next phase of your lessons. You are ready. Some of you will find this difficult, and some of you will fail. That is to be expected. But for those who succeed, the beauty of perfection will be one step closer."

She gazed at them in silence for a long moment, looking from pupil to pupil. When she met Bear's eye, she smiled.

He felt a burst of pleasure, followed by a burst of shame.

Then another memory came to him.

It was the smile that had brought the memory. Bear had seen that smile before, that smile in that beautiful oh-so-human face.

He was sitting in the greatroom, with Taylor at his feet. The house began to shake, the entire house bouncing and wiggling, the windows flexing and bending, things in the kitchen falling off their hooks. Electrical devices snapped and popped. Bear stopped what he was doing—he could not remember what. He only remembered the alarm, and Taylor barking.

After that there was a gap. It wasn't a blocked memory, because he had never known what happened.



He was buried in rubble, bits of wood and dust and stone and shattered hylar. A hard, cold mechanical hand took hold of his right arm and pulled him free. He thought the hand had come to rescue him, but it hurt where it gripped his bare flesh, and he complained... but it didn't let go, just held him up, forcing him to stand on his feet.

Wreckage was everywhere. People were running in all directions, some screaming and shouting. Bear looked around in bewilderment. The metal hand at last released him, and he saw now it was attached to a black metal creature like an enormous insect, with a rounded carapace and huge mechanical arms and legs. Several of these machines or creatures or whatever they were walked to and fro, and he saw one shoot twin yellow beams of fire or light from emitters that protruded from the front of its body.

The machine creature that had rescued Bear took hold of him again, this time gripping him around his belly and lifting him. He screamed as it tilted him toward a hatchway that opened in its top. Something smelled funny, like burned plastic. The interior of the machine creature was dark.

There was another gap.

Bear must have fallen asleep, awakening in what looked like a hospital. The hospital was not Doctor Kamra's hospital. Bear had never been here before.

"Tayor!" he called. "Tayor!"

Where were Mum and Dad? There were other children, in white beds to either side of him. They all wore gray tunics and gray trousers, their feet bare.

He drifted in and out of sleep, and then he saw a face looming over him, the face of a beautiful young woman with tan skin and a comforting smile.

The face of Miss Sweet.

"There, now," she said. "Are you awake? It's all right. Everything is going to be all right."

"Where's my mum and dad?" he asked. "Where's Tayor?"

Miss Sweet shook her head. "I think you must be imagining things. We rescued you from the slave pens. You're safe now."

That was what she'd said, and he'd stared at her in confusion. When had he been in slave pens? What had happened to his house, to the others in the neighborhood?

"Was there an earthquake?" he asked.

"Don't you worry," Miss Sweet said. "We'll explain everything later. You just rest now."

She left.

He hadn't known her as Miss Sweet at the time.



The memory stayed with him as he filed toward the dining hall. Miss Sweet had rescued him, she really had. How could he have forgotten something like that? Still, it was unclear what had happened. Had there been some kind of disaster? The machine creatures had been scary, but they'd taken him to the hospital. Maybe they really had been trying to help, rescuing people from the smashed houses.

What had happened to his mum and dad? Where were they?

The corridor smelled of something good. Really good, as good as the food in his old house.

"Mmm! What's that smell?" said Roma, turning to Bear with wide eyes and a crooked grin.

Bear's mouth began to water, and his stomach clenched. The hallway outside the dining room was filled with the delicious aroma; and he breathed it in, feeling his nostrils expand and wishing they could expand even further.

With glowing faces, the children crowded toward the door of the dining room, eager to see what this might be.

Inside, Bear took his seat at the white table with Emmot, Aril, Roma, and a tall girl named Kalla. His stomach was painful, and he didn't think he could bear to wait any longer. The memory of the disaster no longer pre-occupied him. His hunger now ruled. He just wanted to eat whatever was making that incredible smell.

At last the table opened. A wide white bowl rose toward him, a bowl of steaming golden soup. White noodles floated in the broth alongside flaky white stuff—meat, maybe. On a plate next to the soup was a large oval slice of real bread, hot as if just out of the oven and covered in melted butter.

"Oh!" Emmot cried. He dove at his bowl, scooping the broth and noodles into his open mouth with his spoon.

Bear took a hesitant sip, worried the soup might be too hot. But it was just right; and as the rich flavour filled his mouth memories filled his mind, more memories of home and parents and the little dog at his feet. His chest felt tight, the emotions just held in check. He took another sip, and another, eyes squeezed shut.

When he was done, his bowl empty and his bread reduced to a few tiny crumbs, he looked up to see Miss Sweet come into the dining room. This was something she'd never done before, and all of the children stopped eating and stared at their teacher in sudden silence.

Miss Sweet placed herself at the head of the room, just as she did during her lessons.

“There is an old saying from Earth that is appropriate within the present context,” she said. “This saying is ‘leave room for dessert.’ It is a warning not to overeat during the first courses of a meal. Your stomachs are not large, and though most of you would like to have a second serving of noodles and bread, that would fill you up and you would be unable to enjoy the next course.”

Bear’s empty bowl and plate disappeared into the table. Seconds later another bowl appeared. This bowl was smaller and contained two rounded brown balls with rough surfaces. Bear took the small spoon that had arrived with the bowl and gave the brown stuff a poke. The spoon cut into it easily.

Bear looked at Aril with a broad grin. “Ice cream!”

He remembered the last time ice cream had been served here in the dining hall. It had been the anniversary of their rescue from slavery.

There were more howls and exclamations.

“I scream!” Emmot cried, proceeding to eat his in three enormous bites, which made him groan and hold his face, complaining about how cold it was.

Bear tried to savour his, taking tiny bites he let melt on his tongue.

Only Roma seemed a little unhappy.

“I don’t like this flavour,” she said.

“Children,” Miss Sweet said, “your attention please!”

Bear looked up from his bowl to see that someone else had come into the room. He’d never seen this person before—a young man, thin but muscular, with light-brown skin and copper hair that glistened and sparkled. His clothes were simple close-fitting black trousers and a black square-cut jacket.

“Children,” Miss Sweet repeated. “We have a visitor today from Janus. This is Mister Verren. He has come to inspect the school and to see how your lessons are progressing.”

Verren grinned at the students and raised a hand in greeting.

“Are you enjoying yourselves, children?” he asked.

Cheers erupted, hands and spoons waving in the air. Verren’s smile broadened, and he held up both hands for quiet.

“Good!” he cried. “That’s very good. We want you to be happy. We have high hopes for you. High hopes. You represent a new beginning for both Janus and, indeed, for the entire human race. Did you know that? Do you know how important you are? And because of that, it’s really important that you listen and work hard, especially for the next few weeks. Am I right?”

This was not part of Questions and Answers, so Bear was not certain of the correct response. No one else seemed to know, either, and only one voice replied. It was Kalla, who said, “Yes, Mister.”

Most of the others then chimed in, saying, “Yes, Mister.”

Bear remained silent.

“Good,” Verren repeated. “That’s really great. Well, it’s about time you finished up here so we can get started. Right, Miss Sweet?”

Bear thought he saw the man’s eyes sparkle—*really* sparkle with a glint of inner light. Which was strange, because human eyes didn’t do that.

 Chapter 5 

Four Guardians led the children to the play yard, and there Guardian Number One told them to form one long line, elbow to elbow, facing the outer wall. Bear ended up standing between Aril on his left and Roma on his right.

He couldn't help being excited.

Miss Sweet and Mister Verren walked along the line, finally halting in the center and facing the assembled pupils. Miss Sweet stood a little closer to the kids than Mister Verren. She raised her hands in front of her, palms downward, then lowered them.

"Now, everyone sit," she said. "There are chairs provided."

Bear looked behind him. A chair had appeared where no chair had been before. It was white and shiny and didn't look very comfortable; but when he sat, he discovered it was made of a soft cushiony material, unlike the chairs in the dining hall.

The children gasped and giggled at this latest wonder.

"Quiet, please!" said Miss Sweet.

"Please, be quiet," Guardian Number One repeated.

The chatter ceased. The Guardians moved down the line of seated children, passing out tubes of gray plastic, each about twenty centimetres long. Bear examined his, turning it over, noticing a ridge or seam running along one side. He scraped at the seam, discovering it was actually the edge of a plastic sheet, rolled up inside the tube.

After the tubes had been distributed, the Guardians handed out what looked like toy animals, placing one at the feet of each child. Bear and most of the others laughed in surprise and delight. He thought the toy at his feet

was an elephant, another animal that didn't live on Sturnus but that he recognized. It stood on its hind legs, like a human, about as tall as his knee, and was gray with a curling trunk and floppy ears.

Bear glanced from side to side and saw that every kid had received a different toy, all based on terrestrial animals—stuffed animals with fluffy fur, smiley faces, and bright yellow eyes.

"I got a horse, Bear!" Roma said, her smile bright. "Look!"

Aril's creature was a cat of some kind, light tan with brown spots.

Bear resisted the urge to pick up his elephant and hold it. They'd not yet been given permission, and he knew better than to do anything before he was told it was okay. At the same time, he sensed today was not a day for harsh reprisals. Something was going on. First, there'd been the good food, and now toys, all coinciding with the arrival of this Mister Verren.

Was he taking over?

No, Bear decided. Miss Sweet seemed to still be in control.

"Now, pay attention," Miss Sweet said. She held one of the rolled plastic tubes. "This is what you are to do."

She touched the tube to her forehead, just above and in line with her eyebrows. When she took her hands away, the tube stayed in place. It looked funny, and some of the children giggled. Miss Sweet then pulled the rolled plastic sheet out of the tube so that it covered her eyes, like a pair of goggles.

"Now, everyone do what I have just done. The tube is your controller."

Bear did as instructed. The tube stuck to his forehead with a faint tingling sensation, while the plastic sheet was so clear he barely noticed it.

"Now the moment you've all been waiting for," Miss Sweet continued. "You may pick up your animals."

With much shuffling and noises of delight and satisfaction, the kids took up their toys. Bear was surprised at how heavy his was.

"There is a mechanical switch on the back of each animal's head," Miss Sweet said. "Find the switch, turn it on, and hold your puppet animal in your lap."

Bear found the switch—a small black rectangle—and moved it, felt it click into place. A faint humming, almost like a musical note, emanated from somewhere. The sound didn't seem to be coming from the elephant, but from inside Bear's ears.

"Some of you may not be successful at what we are about to ask you to do," said Miss Sweet. "This is natural, and no one should be alarmed. Not everyone has an identical brain to everyone else. Some people are good at understanding some things, but not others. I urge you all not to worry, but at the same time, I also ask you to make a maximum effort."

Bear felt a sudden pang of nervousness, suddenly afraid he would be one of these kids who couldn't do the thing, whatever it was, they were about to be asked to do. It didn't matter that Miss Sweet told them not to worry.

"If you don't succeed the first time," Miss Sweet said, "there will be another time. It may take your brain a while to make the connection, but you all have the necessary machinery to do that. Every one of you has something in your head. Did you know that? You have something we have given you, a thing that will help you communicate with the animal puppet we have also given you. That thing we call a *nexus*. It will help you become entangled with your puppet, what we call a *proxy*. You and the animal will become one."

At the mention of the *nexus*, Bear's stomach did a flip. The last time he'd heard that word had been in the dark room, when the voice of the woman who was not Miss Sweet had said that his *nexus* was working properly.

He looked at his elephant, looked into its bright-yellow eyes, then pulled it toward his small chest, holding it in a tight embrace. That made him feel a little better.

"Have you all turned on your animals?" Miss Sweet asked.

A chorus of affirmatives.

"Good. Stand them on the floor in front of you, facing away. Once you have done that, we will take the next step. Quite literally!" She laughed a musical laugh. "These animals are robotic proxies. You can control them. When you do, you will become the animal, though you will also retain control of your own body. The controller device you have fixed to your forehead allows you to do this.

"Your brain produces electrical activity that is processed by the *nexus*. Your controller receives and amplifies those signals, filtering out the ones that are not useful and converting the useful ones to information your puppet understands. At the same time, your puppet emits signals that can be read by your controller. *If you can sense them.*"

Miss Sweet paused. She held her hands clasped in front of her. The children waited, hushed. Miss Sweet seemed to look from child to child. When she met Bear's eye, she smiled, and the automatic pleasure that caused made him look away, embarrassed.

"Listen to the music," Miss Sweet said. "The music is all-important. It underpins everything. You may also sense colours and shapes, but the music is the most direct representation of what you need to see."

Bear listened to the humming in his ears, concentrating. To his surprise, the sound grew louder, more distinct, and changed, becoming high-

er in pitch. It sounded like someone drawing an endless bow across a violin string. Even more strange, it seemed to have a spatial origin, although not in the normal sense of something producing sound waves. The note still came from inside his head, but he could follow it with his mind, trace it to where it seemed *thicker*, and that was the elephant.

A translucent image appeared on the clear plastic sheet hanging over his eyes. It took him a moment to realize he was seeing from the elephant's perspective as it stared at the outer wall from its position at his feet.

"Do you have the link?" Miss Sweet said.

"Yes!" Bear shouted in his excitement, as did a few other voices.

"Well, I don't have it," Aril whined. "What's supposed to happen?"

"It's cool," Bear said. "You follow the music, and you can look with your puppet's eyes."

"Okay. But how?"

"If you have the link with your animal," Miss Sweet was saying, "you may control the dominance of each visual field. That means you can choose between what you see with *your* eyes and what your proxy's eyes see. This may be done with little effort, simply by concentrating on the view you want to dominate."

Bear discovered it was as simple as his teacher had described. If he wanted to just see with the elephant's eyes, he could. Or he could see with his own eyes only. It was a matter of engaging the musical tone, of bringing it closer or farther away, a sensation that was both pleasant and relaxing, especially when the strange tone seemed to fill him and recede into the background. He could sense it without really hearing it, like a wave through his body. This happened when he was the elephant, only the elephant, and it felt good.

He closed his eyes, his real eyes, for a few seconds, but could still see as the elephant. He hadn't realized how tensely he'd been holding his shoulders, how cramped they'd become, so he reached up to stretch his arms and back.

Bear's real body remained motionless in his chair, but the elephant moved, stretching *its* arms and back.

"Very good, Bear!" Miss Sweet said. "You are now a puppeteer. The rest of you! Do as Bear has done! Become the proxy in front of you and walk across the yard to the wall."

Bear felt like laughing. He wasn't the kid who failed, but the kid who took to the task like a natural!

In his excitement, he had let the elephant's view fade, but the musical tone was still there, still strong, so he followed it back to its source, riding it like a current in a wire; and he was the elephant. He took one hesitant

step with what felt like his own leg. It was simple. He just walked, but he could feel the smooth floor under his elephant feet, and when he looked at his hands he saw fuzzy gray plush.

When he reached the wall and turned around, he saw himself sitting in the chair, hands on his lap, with Roma and Aril on either side of him.

Aril was one of only three children who had been unable to move their puppets.

“I can’t do it,” he said, sounding desperate and frustrated. “I just can’t do it. What am I supposed to do?”

“Listen for the music, Aril,” Miss Sweet said. “Can you hear it?”

“What music?” Aril cried, and he started to stomp the ground with his feet.

Bear pulled away from his elephant, dropping the music, letting it fall away until he’d returned to his own point of view.

“It’s like a note, Aril,” he said. “A note in your head. Can’t you hear it?”

“No! That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you!”

Mister Verren stepped forward.

“It’s okay,” he said, holding out his hands. “As Miss Sweet said, not all of you will hear it the first time. Why don’t you and the other two who are having trouble go see Guardian Number Three? He has something for you to do. Don’t forget to take your animal.”

Aril let out one final exasperated sigh and rose from his chair. He and the two others who had failed went with Guardian Number Three, who led them back into the school.

Bear glanced at Aril’s empty chair.

“Figures Aril would mess things up,” said Roma.



Bear was a little worried about Aril, and sympathetic that he’d encountered the very problem Bear had feared; but there was no sense in dwelling on another person’s problems. Aril would figure it out. For now, Bear had his own proxy elephant to play with, to walk around the yard and interact with the other proxies he encountered, waving at Roma’s horse and punching Emmot’s Hippopotamus on the arm.

Time passed too quickly. When the midday eclipse came, the session ended.

“Leave your proxies where they are, children,” Miss Sweet said. “Just leave them be. You will see them again, don’t worry.”

The Guardians collected the tubular controllers, and the kids filed back into the school, disappointed but in good spirits.

Bear climbed the sloping classroom to his seat. When everyone had settled in, he noticed that neither Aril nor the other two kids who had failed had returned to class.

Miss Sweet went through a Question-and-Answer session, but Bear didn't answer with the usual enthusiasm. He started to worry Aril had been taken to the dark room, but that made no sense. For one thing, Miss Sweet was here. Plus, Aril hadn't done anything wrong.

He was probably getting extra instruction in how to use his proxy, that was all.

At supper, Aril's seat in the dining hall remained empty. Emmot looked at Bear and said, "Hey, where's Aril? You seen him?"

"He had to go for extra lessons with the puppets," Bear said, as if he knew for certain, but no one had ever skipped a meal for lessons. Except for Bear himself, when he'd been in the dark room.

Emmot seemed to accept Bear's explanation, but Bear was full of growing doubt.

"Miss Sweet said we'll get to use our puppets again tomorrow," Emmot said. "I can't wait! That was the most fun I've had in a long time. I wonder if we can fight them? I mean the puppets? Mine against yours."

"Stuffies don't fight, Emmot," Roma said.

Bear shrugged and poked at his food. No special soup and ice cream this time—they were back to a square of meat, one of grains, one of vegetables, and one of fruits. Bear had to force the food in and chewed with deliberate slowness.



Supper ended, and free time arrived. Bear went into the yard and climbed to the top of the playset, where he sat and gazed toward the forest. The sky above was already fading to deep mauve, with a few high cirrus clouds masking the face of Corvus. In the forest, a few birds fluttered and squabbled. For some reason, birds never came near the school, nor did flying insects.

Emmot joined Bear at the top of the playset.

"King of the Air?" he asked.

Bear ignored the question.

"Hey, Emmot, ever wonder what's on the other side of the woods?"

Emmot let out a single bark of laughter.

"All the time! Every day, I think. I'd love to find out. And you know what else?"

He pointed toward the city. Bear looked and saw a black ball rising from amid the distant gray towers. Another ship, probably going back to Janus.

"I wanna go where they're going," Emmot said. "They tell us all about Janus, but we never get to go there?"

"We never get to go anywhere," Bear said.

"Yeah," Emmot agreed, sounding plaintive.

Bear looked back toward the forest. He'd had a good day, a fun day, and for some reason that bothered him, as if he'd betrayed his growing sense that Miss Sweet and the Janusians were deceivers.

The problem was that he wasn't sure of anything.

What would happen if he just ran, just took off and ran into the woods some day during one of the play sessions in the field?

He'd be found and brought back pretty quickly, he supposed.

He thought of his parents, and his old home. He thought of the statue of Artemis. Was it still somewhere out there?

Resting his face in his hands, he closed his eyes. He needed answers and had no way of getting them.

He opened his eyes. Hovering in the air before him was the glowing girl.

He sat upright.

"Emmot," he said. "Hey, Emmot!"

"What?" Emmot said. He was now near the bottom of the playset, climbing on the lower layer of pipes. Bear hadn't noticed that he'd moved.

"Never mind," Bear said. He had been about to ask Emmot if he could see the girl; but she was hovering above the wall, outside its confines. Emmot couldn't have seen her from where he stood.

The girl floated closer. Now she was inside the wall. Her dangling feet in their buckled shoes looked funny.

Emmot didn't react, even though now she should have been well within his view.

Bear just stared.

"You can see me," the girl said.

"What?" Bear said.

"What do you mean, 'what?'" Emmot said.

"Nothing!" said Bear.

"You can see me," the girl repeated.

Emmot had climbed down to the ground and started running, away from the playset. All of the kids in the yard were doing their usual things. No one was staring and pointing at the glowing girl floating closer and closer to where Bear sat.

He looked back at the girl and nodded.

"I've been looking for someone who can see me," she said. "And hear me. You're the first."

“Who are you?” Bear asked.

The girl turned her head, her hair swinging as if it were real hair, with mass.

“I’m not sure,” she said. “Things are coming to me slowly.”

She was now so close that Bear could have touched her, but he didn’t dare. Everything about her was golden and luminous, and he wondered if she’d burn his fingers. He thought she was very pretty—beautiful, in fact—and with the hair that spilled down past her shoulders, the shapeless dress that flowed around her, she was like a star that had come down from the night sky. For all that, he wasn’t afraid. He was relieved to finally meet her, to talk to her.

“I think my name is Min,” the girl continued. “That’s the name I remember. Yes! My name is Min.”

“I’m Bear.”

Min had halted less than half a metre away. “Hello, Bear. That’s a funny name.”

Bear pulled himself up, finding a more comfortable position on top of the playset. “It is?”

The girl’s smile vanished. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make fun of you. I was hoping we could be friends.”

“We can,” Bear answered. “And my name is kind of funny. It’s a kind of animal. Don’t worry about that.”

The girl looked pleased.

“My first friend.”

She hovered there, grinning. A few minutes passed as Bear searched for something to say. He wanted to ask whether she knew anything about his family, about what had happened, but he couldn’t quite figure out how to start.

“Why are you floating?” he asked.

“Floating? Oh, that’s because I’m not really here.” The girl closed her eyes, and her face twisted in a series of rapid expressions. “I’m a projection,” she said. “I think. From far away. One that only you’ve been able to see so far. To ‘pick up’. I’m like...a signal.” Suddenly, her eyes widened, her smile faded, and her face became serious. “I think I’m a prisoner. I think I’m trapped where I am. I need to be rescued.”

“You’re a prisoner?” Bear said, and his heart sank. This meant his hopes she had a special message for him, that she knew what had happened to his parents, probably weren’t true. Maybe she had nothing to do with any of that.

“Yes. I’m stuck here. I’ve been looking for someone to help me. Can you help me?”

Bear shook his head.

“I’m sorry, Min. But...how?”

Min had begun to rise, floating into the air like an ember from a fire.

“Where are you going?” Bear cried, careless of who might hear him.
“Where are you a prisoner?”

“I have to think about it,” Min said, rising higher and higher. “I’ll come back. I think I can figure it out. Then you can come and help me.”

She started to fade, her light dimming, her form becoming less substantial. She raised one hand and waved, and then winked out of existence.

Bear stared after her, hoping she would come back but knowing she wouldn’t. Not tonight.

A few stars had appeared in the sky, and a faint breeze stirred. The chime sounded. It was time to go in, time for bed.

Bear climbed down from the playset in a daze, disappointment and soaring excitement mingling, but the excitement was gaining ground. Min said she would come back. He would see her again.

He had too much to think about and felt like he understood nothing.

He followed the other children inside, through the Washroom and into his bedroom. There he discovered Aril, safe and sound and already asleep. That was a huge relief, but now Bear was too tired and too distracted to think about it. His sleeping sack opened, and he climbed in.