



CURIOUS

Cristy Zinn

Author's Note

This is a collection of children's and YA science fiction.

GALLEONS

I sat on the edge of the pier, my feet dangling over the edge so that, when I squinted, it looked like I could kick Georgia Minor and all her teeny sister stars. None of the spacefarers paid me any attention because even though I was almost eleven, I was smaller than average. Not by much, mind you, but obviously enough for people to keep ignoring me.

A hard boot kicked at my back, almost throwing me off the pier. It was old Harp, trundling past with his latest automaton. This one went obediently – obviously it had not yet heard of Harp’s reputation. On his ship, none of the automaton’s ever made it home without need of serious repair, if at all. One look at the galleon’s battered hull and I could see why. She was a scrappy vessel with patched solar sails but she did gleam a fair bit. Harp loved her, scruffy as she was, and I wouldn’t have hesitated if he’d offered me a place on her. She wasn’t on any of the Galleon Trading cards but the *Fortis* had seen enough space in her life for me to think she was an incredible galleon.

"Get home, kid," growled Harp.

"Just looking. I’m not in anyone’s way," I said. "You could hire me though – if I’m bothering you."

Harp laughed bitterly, spittle collecting in the corners of his mouth. "A mite like you? Don’t be ridiculous. Have you even flown a galleon before? Or battled sails in a dying star’s wind? Ever lost your footing and found yourself adrift in space? It’s not a playground out there – you’d do better to spend some time in the arcades."

"Boring," I said, rolling my eyes. "I clocked those games years ago. A real adventure’s what I want, Harp. I’ve got a spacefarer’s blood in me!"

Again Harp laughed. This time so hard tears sprung from his eyes like an automaton oil leak. "Oh, Zeb, you've got a flair for the dramatic - I'll give you that." He walked off, chuckling to himself.

It didn’t take long for Harp and his automated crew to start up his ship and take off. I stood there on the dock watching until the last silvery trails of the sporachrome engines evaporated. Even though Harp had never made any promises to take me along, I still felt left behind. The trails always made me feel that way.

“I had some news from the reel office today,” said mother at dinner that night.

Dorn barely looked up from his book. He was four years older than me and thought he knew everything. He probably did with the amount of books he read but I’d never say that to his face. I nested up my pile of Galleon Trading cards, making sure the Nautilus 550 was on top where it belonged, and looked up at mother.

“News?” I asked.

“Yes. The president of New Quattro has commissioned a galleon display for the Founder’s Day celebrations. Fifty four galleons and one battalion ship.”

I could not speak. Fifty four galleons in one sky?

“And we’re going?” I asked.

She pulled two tickets from her pocket and spread them out on the table cloth for us to drool over. Dorn’s book was finally abandoned – the tickets holding our full attention.

“Where’s the third, mother?” asked Dorn.

“Oh no, I have no interest in flying galleons,” she said, smiling. Dorn gave me one of his knowing looks and I caught the meaning: mother had paid all she had for those and couldn’t afford another. At ten, I wasn’t as sorry about that as I ought to have been.

“Dorn, you’ll look after Zeb won’t you?” she asked.

Dorn nodded sagely and I followed suit. But in my mind I was already plotting to ‘get lost’ in the fair and see the ships up close.

The New Quattro piers were teeming with people. I couldn’t remember ever seeing such a big crowd in my life. But then, never in my life had fifty four galleons been in one place. All seven piers fanned out into space a good few kilometres, suspended there by small sporachrome engines and surrounded by an atmosphere shield to make it safe for ordinaries like us – in other words, those of us who couldn’t afford oxygen implants.

Even the *Fortis* had made an appearance, hanging there in among the other galleons. I waved at Harp who only dipped his head and turned away. Grumpy old codger!

“Have you ever seen such a sight?” asked Dorn. “There are at least ten different specs here too – I’d imagine the weapons systems are unique to each vessel...”

He droned off facts about weapon specs and sail width until I zoned out. Sometimes I thought the boy knew too much for his own good. Instead, I stared at the galleons hanging in space all around us – some right above us, their bulging wooden hulls bobbing as their sporachrome rudders adjusted their tacks. If you looked up for long enough you found yourself dizzy for all that bobbing and swaying and to-ing-and-fro-ing. I couldn't get enough of it though – I could almost reach out and touch them! The galleons ranged from ultra-modern and sleek to bulging and decrepit. All were wondrous. Every single one of them.

I stopped Dorn in mid-sentence – something about hull sustainability on the Comarant 380 - completely de-railing his train of thought. “Can we get a closer look?” I asked.

Dorn's mouth pulled into a thin, tight line. “Fine. Off you go. But don't wander too far. Mother asked me to look after you...”

Before he could launch into a lecture about the dangers of crowds, I skedaddled off towards pier one where the *Nautilus* was docked. I'd done my research over the last two days, making sure I knew where every famous ship would be docked and when. By the time father returned from his latest expedition I was going to be so much of an expert that maybe he would have to consider taking me with on his next voyage.

The *Nautilus* was easily five times bigger than any of the other ships and the queue to get to it was just as long. I dodged and ducked my way through the line.

“My mother's just up ahead,” I would say apologetically and the mothers and fathers smiled knowingly, thinking I was the lost kid of some harassed mother. I reached the front of the queue in no time.

The walkway on to the ship dipped and swayed beneath my feet. I'd been on father's galleon enough times to know how to adjust my gait and find my space-legs and soon I was strolling over the decks like an expert. The ship was all polished wood and gleaming chrome – just like my Trading card.

“Spacefarer father or rich uncle with a sporachrome yacht?” asked a freckled spacefarer who leaned against the rigging of the hoisted solar sails.

“Spacefarer,” I said. “He's on the Chekov Mariner near Georgia Minor.”

“Ah, sporachrome miner then,” he nodded approvingly. “Those are special blokes, those are. We'd be nothing without them.” He strode over to me and shook my hand. “The name's Danny. Who'll you be?”

“Zeb, sir,” I said, puffing out my chest just a little.

“Will you be following in his footsteps then?”

“Maybe,” I said, though I didn’t really want to mine anything, I just wanted to sail. “How far out have you been?”

Something twinkled in the man’s eye for a moment and his face broke into a wide smile. “As far as they’ll let us, son. And that’s pretty far – far enough to turn a man half-mad.”

“And what did you see all the way out there?” Even though father’s stories of space were dazzling, he’d never been that far out.

The man lifted his eyes to the stars. “The usual: other galleons, pirates, exploding stars, nebula’s, the hermit race of Aberkhan and even the rare astral beasts that roam the Jasper Galaxy.”

“Really?” I asked eagerly. Hardly anyone had seen one of those. I felt like I might float away at any minute – this was all I ever wanted to do, to fly away into the reaches of space and see the universe and all its wonders.

A low rumble of light speed being broken sounded on the leeward side and the ship was rocked dangerously. Danny’s eyes were off me and beyond, into the mass of hulls bobbing overhead. I saw the ruckus a long way off: a fleet of deep space yachts with small, sharp sails were angling in between the large galleons, tacking their way towards the *Nautilus*. The yachtsmen aboard were dressed in grey, low tech astronaut suits with old fashioned glass-bubble helmets and the skull and crossbones emblem on their chests – pirates. Soon as they were close to the *Nautilus* they fired their harpoon suckers at the hull. Once their suckers were attached the line hardened and the yachts sporachrome engines lit up to pull.

"The fools!" cried Danny. "They think they can hijack the *Nautilus* by pulling her from the dock."

I followed Danny to the leeward side and peered over the edge. A dozen harpoon suckers were attached and quivering as the yachts pulled at the grand ship. The pirates were smart enough to fire extra suckers at the *Nautilus*’s cannon portals, blocking any possible retaliation. The hull creaked and groaned under the strain.

"They'll pull her apart," muttered Danny.

Just then a shadow spread over the deck. I looked up to see the battered hull of Harp's galleon, *Fortis*, looming overhead. Harp leaned over the side as one of his automaton's lowered two ropes to the deck of the *Nautilus*.

"Want to help get rid of some ruffians?" shouted Harp. He was beaming wildly.

"Yes, sir!" I shouted.

"Not you," growled Harp. "We need real spacefarers for this job."

Danny was already shimmying up the first rope. I grabbed hold of the second and climbed up too, holding my breath between oxygen fields just like my father had taught me. The automaton from a few days ago was already a little worse for wear but still strong enough to help me on to the deck.

"How can we help?" asked Danny, saluting Harp.

"We?" Harp laughed his grisly laugh. "That kid can't help with anything."

"Ah, I think he might surprise you, Captain," said Danny, winking at me. If Danny had been any other spacefarer, Harp might have ignored him but seeing as he was part of the *Nautilus* crew, Harp actually listened. He narrowed his eyes at me, looking me up and down.

"Pah! Beggars can't be choosers – I guess he'll have to do," Harp grumbled half-heartedly.

I'd known Harp forever – he was a cantankerous old man who never wanted anyone's help but today he looked different. There was a ruddy glow to his cheeks and a light in his eyes. He looked like he'd won first place in the galleon display.

"I'll be lowering you and some of my automatons down along the *Nautilus* so you can cut those harpoon cables free. I reckon ten of you should do it," Harp said, leaning over the side of the *Fortis* again to peer at the cables.

"How are we cutting them free?" asked Danny.

"With these," said Harp, pulling out a bunch of laser cutlasses.

I practically grabbed one out of his hands. I'd never held a laser cutlass before – unless you count the toy cutlass that had been passed down from Dorn – and I loved the sound of it as it hissed through the air.

"Careful with that, son," growled Harp. "Leave the theatrics for the harpoon cables, will you?"

Before long, the automatons, Danny and I were bound tightly at the waist, the remaining lengths of rope secured around the center mast.

“Remember, boy, keep close to the *Nautilus* hull and be quick. Once they set eyes on you, they’ll only rev up those engines or shoot at you. A sucker won’t kill you but it’ll knock you silly and then you might drift from the oxygen field...” he looked at me grimly. “Well, I don’t need to tell you what happens then.”

I swallowed, giving my rope a nervous tug just to make sure it was tight enough. “I know,” I said, keeping my voice as steady as I could.

Danny glanced at me and winked before jumping out into space. I tried not to think too hard and followed, holding my breath. On the way down I pulled my cutlass from my belt and dialed it to laser. Time slowed for a moment as I moved through space: the pirates turned and readied their weapons, a few cables came loose as the automatons lasered them free and I kept falling, aiming for the closest cable.

Space is not as cold as the poets make it out to be. Outside the oxygen field the air was warmish and thick. I had jumped a bit far, which meant I had to flail and swim through space to get back to the *Nautilus* oxygen field. A few of my Galleon Trading cards drifted from my pockets but I dared not go after them. My lungs were burning by the time I reached the *Nautilus* oxygen field. I sucked in a deep draft of air, coughing like mad. Beside me the cable quivered as the yacht a little way off revved its engines. I hacked my cutlass at the cable a few times until it broke apart, the threads drifting into space.

Overhead someone was shouting at me. I looked up to see a man on the deck of the *Nautilus* waving his hands at me. “Get aside, boy!” he shouted. “Clear the portal!”

To my horror the cable I had just cut away had been covering a cannon portal and suddenly I could hear it warming up to fire. I dodged aside just before the cannon blasted a shot at the little yacht. The pirates bailed overboard as it was smashed to pieces in a silent explosion, bits of debris floating away.

Harp helped me aboard when the automatons finally pulled me up. The left side of my face was blackened from the cannons powder and my ears were still ringing but I was grinning like a fool.

“Perhaps you were right,” said Harp, slapping me heavily on my back. “Maybe there is a bit of spacefaring blood in you after all.”

“So you’ll hire me?” I asked eagerly.

Harp chuckled, but this time there was less teasing in his laugh. “I’m not sure your mother will approve of that. How ‘bout you come see when you’re sixteen and we’ll talk?”

“Swear it?” I asked, knowing that a captain’s word would bound him to it.

“I swear, Zeb,” said Harp. “You’re as foolhardly as my automatons!”

Harp sailed me to the north pier where I slipped back into the crowds. Word had travelled fast about the pirates’ foiled plan and I heard it mentioned that ‘some kid’ had helped save the day. I walked beaming through the crowds until I bumped into Dorn.

“Where’ve you been? The *Nautilus* was attacked by pirates! You missed everything,” said Dorn. “And what happened to your face?”

I could only grin.

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CLOSED ON ACCOUNT OF THE WEATHER

I stand at my window, ignoring the looma screen behind me as my lecturer drones out some historical-geography statistics and goes on about the theory of planet re-juvination. The clouds are yellow today – sulphur clouds – and I can see our hover dome vibrating against the onslaught of the wind. In the distance, the sea is a fitful green mess. Not much different from yesterday then.

I think of the lottery and how my ID number, along with the world's population, is entered every year. If you want to stand a chance at all chance, you buy tickets. I buy a ticket every single day. I want that trip to a safe zone. I want to feel my feet on real grass, not this fake Astroturf crap. I've been buying a ticket every day for five years. I still haven't won.

As soon as the lecturer times out, I go looking for mom. She's plugged into the office network and blinks at me for a moment when I tap her shoulder. Her face breaks into a smile.

"Done for the day, kiddo?" she asks, rubbing her eyes.

"Yip. What's for supper?" I ask.

She pulls this weird face. "You'll have to program something," she says sheepishly. "I don't think there's much in the fridge."

I try to look disappointed but I can't muster it. I *love* programming dinner.

"No worries.

"Thanks, kiddo." She plugs herself back in as another call comes through.

They'll be there on time. No over-working in this day and age - government shuts down all networks in stages every day, to force people to get away from their looma's and go exercise. Living in an adaption and never going outside means you need help like that, otherwise we'd all just evolve into these blobs attached to screens. For people like my folks it's hard. They remember being able to play outside and take walks on Addington beach. They remember being able to run through the Morningside suburbs, not being limited to a track-tunnel around the outside of their adaption. I don't know any different; I was born and raised in this delightful, weather battered world. I have no idea what it's like to be outside. You'd think I wouldn't miss it then but for some reason I do. On some level I know humans were not meant to live in the hovering equivalent to a hamster cage while the weather tears the planet apart.

I go to the fridge first and wave my hand in front of the door to make it transparent. Mom wasn't kidding: there's a half empty carton of milk and that's about it. The door goes opaque again and I go over to 'the teleporter'. That's what dad calls it - always using his 'Scotty' voice. I watched a few vintage Star Trek episodes with him so I always laugh. The machine is actually called a Re-Animate and looks nothing like the slick teleporting machine on The Enterprise. It's a rather bland looking machine, built for practicality rather than aesthetic; just a long grey tube that you have to assemble and wire yourself. Simple stuff really - it uploads its own programming as soon as it's plugged in so you don't have to be a rocket scientist or anything. It's still pretty amazing if you think about it though - taking food from a Re-Animate dealership and sending it through kilometers of bad weather to arrive here in one piece, still tasting like the real thing. Serious technology that. And let's face it, here on present day earth we'd pretty much be screwed without it. No one is going to risk their lives for groceries.

I pad in our key code and it comes to life.

"Hello, Simon. You have 30570 credits remaining. What is your order?" asks the screen.

I key in some Chinese food – mom's favourite – some bread, some milk and, glancing at the sorry excuse for a fruit bowl, I program some fruit. It's synthesized but at least it's got all the vitamins. I use a registered dealership even though it's more expensive because you just don't go with non-registered companies these days. I tried it once, with a hoodie: the thing arrived with arm holes in the hood and arms stitched to the back. I'd hate to think how your food would come out, let alone people. They haven't got that far yet.

"Thank you for your purchase, Simon. Would you like to order anything else?" the screen asks. I tap the 'buy' option and wait as a blue light pulses through the tube. It takes exactly ten minutes until steam is escaping from the door and I can smell Sweet and Sour Pork.

"Your reanimation is complete. Please be careful when handling your order – the contents may be hot. Thank you for your purchase. You now have 20890 credits left. Would you like anything else, Simon?"

I swipe the screen dark and open the door to let the delicious food smell waft into the room before taking it all out. Then I pop up the looma screen at the kitchen table because I know I'll have to distract myself while I wait for mom and dad, otherwise I'll eat their food. I go straight to the lottery network where Lady Cumulus is doing her outlandish presentation of the lottery numbers. Her hair extensions have green streaks today and she is talking excitedly about today's

winners – I keep the sound off because she tends to squeal a lot. I scan the list on the side of the screen and stop: Simon Paulson. Me. *My name.*

“Mom!” I scream. “Mom, dad, come quickly!”

I can’t stop staring at the screen. I’m wondering if I’m just imagining it because no one has notified me and then a small square lights up in the corner of the screen – there’s a call coming in.

“Simon, you okay?” asks mom as she rushes into the room. “What happened?”

I can’t talk. I point to my name and then tap the square to take the call.

“Hello?” I say.

“Hello,” comes the voice of Lady Cumulus. “Could I speak to Simon please?”

I look at the screen. Her digital version is still chatting excitedly but this voice is definitely hers. I wonder which one is the recording.

“Speaking,” I say.

“Wonderful! This is Lady Cumulus from the lottery network and we’d like to congratulate you and your family on winning the lottery for Safe Zone Four. Congratulations!”

I am speechless.

“Simon?”

Mom steps in. “Hi, I’m Simon’s mother... he’s a little... shocked. Well, we all are. Are you sure?”

Lady Cumulus laughs. “Yes, we are absolutely sure. Your tickets are booked for July, so make sure you take the appropriate leave. Our co-ordinators will contact you about visa’s...”

She launches into a long legal spiel, telling us all about the T’s and C’s. I don’t hear any of it. Images of Safe Zone Four are flashing across the screen – it’s the one in Norway, with fjords, mountains and... rolling green hills... and then it sinks in: I’m going to a safe zone. I think I can feel my toes tingle.

July is a long way off. Okay, it’s only two months away but it feels like forever. Mom and dad get busy organising expensive shuttles and visa’s that the lottery doesn’t cover while I do a couple of virtual tours to get myself accustomed to Safe Zone Four. International law says we only get three days inside the dome, so I figure we should know exactly where the best spots are so that we don’t waste time.

There are only four safe zones on the planet; four radically domed sections of the world where they can control the weather inside and replicate how the world used to be. In a safe zone you can walk around outside and touch nature itself – or so the digi-ad’s tell me. To be considered a safe zone they have to regulate the amount of human influence on the space, which is why there is a lottery – with only 6000 people allowed to go per year, the tickets are like gold. I’ve heard of people selling their tickets to pay off their life’s debt but I don’t see the point of that. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

The bulbous window in the dining room is shivering slightly in the ever-constant wind while we’re planning our trip. Dad frowns and mutters something about it being unusual – I roll my eyes.

Mom barely notices anything but the screen in front of us. “So, I was thinking we should stick to the south of Norway. It’ll be warm this time of year so we can go sailing on the fjords...”

A skeletal branch of some stubborn tree crashes against the adaption hover dome, making such a noise that we can hear it resonate through the inner wall. We’re used to seeing harsh weather but it’s usually a silent violence, not something that affects us directly.

“It’s not cracked,” Dad reassures us, as he goes to the window to take a look at the dome. “It’ll hold up fine.”

I turn back to the screen and notice a small flashing banner in the lower left hand corner. I tap it and a pop-up announcement takes over most of the screen. It’s going on about extreme weather; I snort – as if the kind of weather that keeps you living in an adaption isn’t extreme enough.

“Must have had announcements like this all the time when you were kids,” I say to my parents.

Dad shrugs. “I don’t remember. We didn’t pay much attention.”

Mom chews her lip and stays focussed on the screen. I see a little bit of shame on her face.

“So, the fjords?” I say to her. “Sounds amazing. Have you seen pictures?”

Eventually dad is drawn back into the conversation by our excitement as we scroll through the images of waterfalls and green islands and fjords. Outside the storm rages around our adaption.

It's only three weeks before our trip and I'm programming an old classic for breakfast: Rice Crispies. My dad introduced me to them when I was six – I've barely eaten anything else for breakfast since. We're out of milk so I program some of that as well and yawn while I wait for it to load. The looma screen is still up from the night before and I make a mental note not to forget that again when I come in here for a midnight snack. Dad hates it when I leave it up.

Then I notice the flashing banner in the corner of the screen. It's been up a few times in the last couple of weeks, usually reporting extreme weather. It's even resulted in a few deaths. It's weird because I thought we'd somehow managed to figure out how to stay alive on this planet despite the weather. I tap the banner and the pop up takes over. I'm suddenly glad I haven't dished my breakfast yet because I would have dropped it; my heart is already down in my feet. The banner is sporting two green circles that are crossed out. In one are the words, Safe Zone One and in the other, Safe Zone Four. After a few seconds a banner scrolls across them saying, 'Closed on account of the weather'.

I feel sick.

"In our top story tonight: a disaster marked as one of the world's greatest ecological tragedies, claims two of the world's Safe Zones. UN officials declared the two zones irreparable. The death toll estimated from both zones has been estimated at 600, though there are still lottery winners unaccounted for..."

"I don't understand," mom says, "I thought the domes kept the weather *out*."

"It's untested," says dad. "Even in this day and age, the domes aren't invulnerable. Nothing is." He stares out at our hover dome, brow furrowed like he's wondering if ours will hold out. That's what we're all thinking.

"But surely they'll just send us to another zone," I say.

Dad's jaw clenches like it does when he's hesitating, trying to find the right words. "Actually they can't. It would be illegal and jeopardise the other Safe Zones. I wouldn't be surprised if they dropped the numbers on the other two just to be safe."

"But we won," I say. My voice sounds choked and my heart is being reckless as it hammers in my chest. "We won fair and square." I sound like a child.

Dad points at the looma, where the 'Closed on account of the weather' is sprawled along the top of the screen. "It's over, kiddo. We lost our chance."

Words don't come. I storm out of there knowing it's not their fault but I am so mad. This kind of out-of-control unfairness kills me. I want to blame someone for stealing my holiday but who can I blame? Some other generation that didn't pay attention? What good is that now?

I throw myself on my bed, staring around at my small room with sudden claustrophobia. I'll never have those wide open spaces. My feet will never touch grass. I won't ever be able to swim. It'll just be these four walls for the rest of my life.

The storm is still raging like a tempest outside our adaption when mom pulls us into the cinema for a surprise. I don't feel like being surprised. I don't feel like being around my parents at all but I figure this is her way of coping so I try to smile - for her sake.

She's programmed the screen to take over the entire curve of the back wall so that it wraps around us where we lounge on the vintage cinema chairs snacking on programmed popcorn and coke.

When we're settled – albeit a little begrudgingly – she asks the system to play the film. My breath catches in my throat as the fjords arrive in our cinema. Mom has even programmed a temperature change so that I can almost imagine the sun on my skin. The film is beautiful, panning across kilometres of wide open, green spaces. On a screen this size, it feels a little bit like you're there. Just a little.

She leans over to me. “Sorry we can't go, kiddo. I just don't want you to forget what it used to be like. We want this back and we have to find a way, you know?”

Her voice is hopeful so I nod. I don't think we'll ever have that back now, despite my Historical Geography teacher's enthusiastic ranting over planet rejuvenation. Whatever we're doing to help, I get the impression no one in my generation will see grass again. Still, as I watch Norway pass over the screen I think that maybe we need to work a little harder at trying. And maybe as subtly as we lost it, we could gain it back.

SCALES AND SHADOWS

Lungelo squinted her eyes at the equation she was supposed to be answering. If she squinted hard enough it changed shape and looked like an alien symbol of some kind. It might as well have been alien because she couldn't really understand what they were asking anyway. Her head hurt from thinking about it so hard. She'd already messed up the page with doodles because they usually helped her think. Not today. Her mind was all over the place - like a high-jacked train.

The classroom clock was ticking out of time with her watch. Three birds outside the window were bobbing their heads one after the other, like a mexican wave. Nick, who sat in the desk beside her, would alternate between chewing on his pencil - which was disgusting - and then tapping it on the desk; a counter point to the clock and the watch and the bobbing. There was one book on Mrs Reddy's bookshelf that was upside down, and Lungelo suddenly wondered: if the world inside the book were real, would it also be upside down? These things kept dragging her from the questions on the page. The loud crash was the last and final straw.

It came from the hallway. Whatever it was must have been big because it made the ground tremble and shook dust free from the ceiling, landing on Lungelo's test paper. She looked up. No one else in the class had moved. Candice was reading with her eyes half closed like she was about to fall asleep and Nick was staring out the window, chewing thoughtfully on his pencil. There was another bang and the classroom door trembled, strange black dust pouring in through the crack underneath. Still no one in the class seemed to notice, or care. Then Lungelo heard it - a thousand, ancient voices were whispering her name: *Lungelo! Lungelo! Lungelo!* Over and over and over. Still, no one noticed. Not one kid lifted their head.

Lungelo went to the front of the class where Mrs Reddy was engrossed in a novel of some kind. She always read novels while they were doing tests.

"Can I go to the bathroom?" asked Lungelo, making herself look desperate.

Mrs Reddy narrowed her eyes at Lungelo. "It's the middle of a test," she said suspiciously.

"I know but this is serious. And I'm finished anyway," Lungelo pleaded. There was no point trying to finish the test now.

"Five minutes," Mrs Reddy said, reluctantly handing Lungelo the bathroom pass. "Don't dawdle."

Lungelo grabbed the pass and bolted before Mrs Reddy could change her mind. As she opened the classroom door a hot wind blasted her face. The hallway looked like a hurricane had torn it apart.

"Close the door!" someone yelled at her.

Lungelo snapped it shut just as a loaded arrow sunk itself into the wood, inches from her head. Someone - presumably the same someone who had shouted - pulled her away just before it exploded. The door seemed unharmed but there was shrapnel all over the floor.

Through the dust, and what sounded like the pop gunfire, a girl dragged her towards a bunker of sorts, made up of tightly stacked books, chairs and the odd desk. She was pulled behind it, into a small cluster of kids she sort of recognized from around school.

"Why isn't she scaled?" asked one kid with thick glasses. "Why aren't you scaled?" Lungelo stared mutely at the boy. Scaled? What?

The boy rolled his eyes and smacked his chest, referring to the strange silver armour he wore. "Scaled. You can't fight without it. Shadow arrows can't get through the stuff - you should have it on already. Come to think of it, why are you so late?"

"Give her a break. She's new. Can't you tell?" said the girl who had dragged her out of the line of fire. "The commander will be here in a minute and get her scaled. In the meantime, what's our status?"

The kids rattled off percentages and codes one by one, the girl nodded at each report, her mouth in a grim line.

"They're gaining way too much ground. Get back to your stations - the commander will have more orders for you in ten. Move."

The kids jumped up from their positions, all cocking their oddly shimmering crossbows. The girl turned back to Lungelo with a grin.

"Here he comes," she said.

Lungelo peered through the chaos over the bunker where a man strode through the battle. He moved sure footed through the debris, anticipating shots before they were fired. The dust seemed to part ahead of him. He easily cleared the bunker stack and landed in a crouch inside.

"How are we looking, Thembi?" he asked.

She rattled off some stats, grinning the whole time. It was too weird - surely a commander was someone to be scared of. Suddenly Lungelo noticed that everything beyond the bunker was silent. She looked over the edge of their hiding place and saw that the battle had paused - arrows hung in mid-flight, dust motes froze in place and shrapnel from explosions hung in mid-air. Lungelo turned back to the man. What was going on?

"I'll explain in a minute," said the man, as if answering Lungelo's thoughts even though his eyes were still on Thembi, paying full attention to her.

When Thembi finally finished speaking the commander slapped her on the shoulder and exclaimed, "Brilliant job, Thembi."

"But we've lost ground," she said, defeatedly.

"Skirmishes - that's all. Minor details. It's the bigger picture we're concerned about and that's going great - look we even have a new recruit. Lungelo, so glad you could make it," said the commander, holding out his hand.

Lungelo stared down at the man's hand as she shook it. His skin seemed to fluctuate slightly, from white to dark brown. What was he and how did he know what her name?

"Hi," said Lungelo hesitantly.

"I'm the commander in this little operation. Well, it's not that little. It's actually quite huge - worldwide really. I'm the commander and this is the war we're about to win. I wanted to know if you would be interested in fighting with us. That's why I called."

"That was you?" asked Lungelo in alarm. The voice had sounded ancient and hundredfold. This guy didn't really look like he was older than thirty.

"Ah, yes, it's just this thing I do to scare the shadows. Here's an example," he said. He cupped his hands around his mouth and began whispering. There it was, hundreds of ancient voices together saying: *Lungelo has arrived, pack your bags, Shadows.*

Weird thing for old voices to say, thought Lungelo. Then she noticed some of the shadows writhing and fading in and out of focus.

"They hate it when I do that," said the commander with a grin. "They don't like new recruits. Our recruits are like hundred fold to theirs. Poor things are so overpowered."

The battle unpaused and chaos continued. An arrow flew over the commander's head, missing him by inches. He completely ignored it, though Lungelo was sure he must have been able to hear it, maybe even feel the air move past his face.

"You in?" asked the commander.

"I'm not exactly sure..." Lungelo swallowed uncomfortably. This commander person made her feel like she wanted to be on his team, whatever it was they were doing, but it was all just a little too unreal. "What are we fighting again?"

The commander laughed, his eyes crinkling in the corners. "Sorry, I forgot that bit, didn't I? We're just fighting shadows. Most people can't see them but occasionally people have the ability to notice things like them. They are usually people who can't pin down their thoughts because they notice *everything*. You know what I'm talking about, don't you?"

Lungelo smiled a half smile and nodded.

"So, these gifted kids can see the shadows when we invite them into the battle. If you can see them, you can fight them."

"But what are they?" asked Lungelo. She dared to look back at the battle where the writhing shadow shapes were twisting and reforming, sometimes clouds of black dust, sometimes mist, sometimes a more solid looking mass of black.

"They have quite a few names: worry warts, darkest fears, trouble twisters, distractors, bully instigators, insecurity monitors and so on. They're the usual sort you find in senior primary school. We're having a lot of trouble with the distractors and bully instigators here though. Think you can help?"

"How?" asked Lungelo, doubtful she would be able to help these kids who seemed like crack shots.

"Just aim and shoot really. You'll be terrible at first but that's what practise is for, isn't it? Besides, most of these shadows are cowards. Just a few shots in their vicinity sends them scattering."

Lungelo looked back at the shooters, leaning over their barricade. They didn't look anything like stern soldiers - they were all laughing while they shot from their bows. She glanced back at Mrs. Reddy's door. Whatever this battle was, it was way more fun than finishing her math test.

"Okay," she said. "I'll join."

"Best get you scaled then, shouldn't I? Can't have you running around out there without being scaled. They'll protect you from stray arrows," said the commander.

"Is it dangerous?"

"A little," said the commander, winking at her. "But you're going to *love* this. Trust me." It was funny because Lungelo really did trust the commander. Even though she hardly knew him. There was something in his eyes, something about how he paid attention.

From behind the commander, coming from the far end of the corridor which was thick with shadows, came a giant fish, swimming through the air. Lungelo stared in awe, convinced she must be dreaming or dead. The fish was streamlined and fast, and its scales looked as though there were universes contained inside them. It hung in the air above the commander, its tail swishing and swaying, a trail of scales hovering out behind it. The commander stood up and pressed his forehead to the fish's gills.

"Hello old friend," the commander whispered in his thousand voices. "This young lady could use some scales."

The fish dipped toward Lungelo and did a tight loop around her before swimming off. Scales hovered around Lungelo, shimmering white and silver. Then suddenly the scales were flying towards her and attaching themselves to her clothes, fitting themselves into a unique armour that reflected a glittering light on to the pieces of her dark exposed skin. They clicked and clattered as they slotted into place, covering her back, chest and half her arms.

"And your bow," said the commander, handing Lungelo her own cross bow with a small quiver of luminous arrows. "Remember just aim and shoot. Simple."

Lungelo nodded as the commander demonstrated how to place the bow in the right slot and where to push to release it.

"The bows come back after a few minutes. You don't have to worry about them - they can find the quiver on their own," the commander said. "I'm on my way to go check on the grade one's but you'll be in good hands here with Thembi and Pierce." Both Thembi and Pierce looked up and saluted the commander.

Then the battle paused again and the commander took off through the dust, hands in his pockets, happily whistling the theme to Spiderman - the TV series, not the movie. When he disappeared around the corner, the battle unpaused and an arrow landed on Lungelo's breastplate. It dissolved in a purple ooze which sizzled and burned on the top layer of the scales. Pierce pulled Lungelo down into the bunker and wiped off the ooze with a rag. There was no damage to the scale at all.

"Stay down until you're ready to fire," he said. "No need to give them an easy target - even if you are scaled."

"How long have you been doing this?" Lungelo asked. The girl beside Pierce, a fiery red head, was whooping like a cowgirl as she fired at the shadows.

"Since Monday," said Pierce, pushing his glasses higher on his nose. It was only Wednesday. "Thembi's been here since last Thursday. And Abby," he said, nodding to the red head, "has been here since this morning."

"And how long does it go on for?"

"Always," said Thembi, plopping herself down beside them so that she could take a drink of water and reload her cross bow.

"What do you mean, *always*?" asked Lungelo.

"It's always going on - all the time," said Pierce.

"But I've never seen it before. I'm sure I would have noticed the whole school being torn apart," said Lungelo.

Abby's watch started beeping. "Lunch!" she cried and stood up, arching her back like a cat in a long stretch.

A second later the bell rang and the shadows seemed to slink up to the walls and lockers and the edges of classroom doors.

"We can't shoot them now because they're going to try and attach themselves and we'll hurt some of the kids..." said Thembi.

The classroom doors opened and kids streamed out with their lunchboxes and tuck money. Lungelo saw what Thembi meant: shadows would hop onto the shoulders of kids and lean down to their ears, or they would attach themselves over the kids eyes or ears. There were so many kids and so many shadows. And despite the absolute chaos in the hallways, no one noticed the mess, they just walked on.

"They really don't pay attention," said Abby with an irritable sigh.

From around the corner, came the massive flying fish again, swimming through the air, over the kids heads. Its scales trailed behind and attached themselves to one or two of the kids, who suddenly looked up in surprise. As the fish swam, some of the bigger shadows detached themselves and flickered and writhed until they disappeared.

"He deals with the major shadows," said Pierce. "The ones our arrows have a hard time finding."

"Why doesn't he just deal with all of them?" asked Lungelo.

"What would be the fun in that?" asked Abby. "I'd like a turn too. Nothing more satisfying than watching one of those shadows shrivel up and disappear."

"Plus, I think the commander likes the company," said Thambi.

Suddenly all the kids in the bunker went silent, eyes wide. A hand clamped down on Lungelo's shoulder. Lungelo turned to face Mrs Reddy, who was frowning as if her life depended on it.

"I said five minutes. Do you realise you're going to have to start that test over in detention?"

"Sorry, I got... distracted," said Lungelo. She wanted to say 'drafted' but that would only have made things worse.

Mrs Reddy huffed out a frustrated breath. "Honestly, Lungelo, if you don't start putting some effort in, you're going to fail this year. You have to start doing some work. I'm phoning your mother now and you'll meet me in my class after school. Got it?"

Lungelo nodded and stared down at her feet. Her mother was going to *love* that phone call - she already disliked Mrs Reddy. As Mrs Reddy was leaving, Lungelo noticed the huge black shadow attached to Mrs Reddy's back. A large lump of it was on her shoulder, right at her ear.

"It happens to grown ups too?" asked Lungelo.

"That happened long ago. Those are too heavy for us to fix - they've been there too long. Commander said we should focus on the ones that haven't attached yet and he'll deal with the grownups," said Pierce. "Explains a lot though doesn't it?"

Lungelo looked around. There was Zaid, a very small, timid boy who always looked sad. On his shoulder was a small, dark shape. Nearby was a girl Lungelo knew from extra math but she couldn't remember her name. She had a black shape on both her ears. There was another girl who was a bit too big for her grade. She had a shadow on her shoulder too. All these kids, weighed down by things they couldn't even see. And Lungelo could actually *do* something about it.

"So when do we get back to shooting the pests?" asked Lungelo.

Abby grinned at her. "Soon as the next bell rings."

THE THROW-AWAYS

The old lifeguard tower had lasted well through all kinds of weather. It was the perfect place for a lookout, standing sentry over the dried up bay where the rusted skeletons of ships haunted the Cape coast. San would tell them stories of the sea that used to live there. He would try to make the sounds and draw the colours – when he could find crayons - but sometimes Cobalt could tell he was exaggerating.

She lifted her eyes from the paint-peeled telescope and grinned. San was back... and he was carrying loot. She could see his grey, dreadlocked hair swinging around his sun-darkened face – he was singing. He must have found something good.

She let out a shrill whistle and from the muck and ruins a little way behind the tower children began emerging, crawling out of creep-holes and dented containers. They were a scraggly crew but they were family. The Foggers called them filthy but Cobalt reckoned that was just another reason they gave themselves to make it okay to throw kids away.

“What’s up, Cob?” chirped a small voice beside her. Dapple was a mouse of a kid with grey-brown hair and weak eyes. His teeth were too big for his mouth which was always pulled into a surprised smile. He squinted towards the bleak horizon to try and see who was coming and then looked expectantly at Cobalt.

“San’s back,” she said, ruffling his hair.

“Already? That didn’t take long,” he said. He frowned. Always worrying.

“Come on, let’s try and get to him before the others. There won’t be nothing left by the time they get there,” Cobalt said. She grabbed the swing rope, pushing away from the platform so that it swung in a wide arc over the sand.

She let go in mid-air and landed with a well-practiced tuck and roll. The rope swung back to the tower where Dapple grabbed it. He grunted as he hit the ground, his dismount nowhere near as graceful as hers.

“Too bad the stairs disintegrated,” said Dapple, looking longingly at where the stairs used to be.

Cobalt laughed and ruffled his hair again. He was a strange kid but he’d been shadowing her so long she’d become accustomed to him – always one or two steps behind.

She and Dapple trotted along the worn, silvery path between the hulking ships. There were few shadows at that time of the day but they tried to keep to them as much as possible, the creaking of the rusted bulk heads serenading them. A little way behind they saw the string of kids trying to catch up and quickened their pace.

“First again, Cob?” San said, his leathery face crinkling in a knowing smile.

“Obviously,” she said. “Who else watches the scopes but me?”

He shrugged and dropped his canvas bag to the floor. “Got water?”

Cobalt threw him a flask from which he gulped greedily.

“And?” she asked, impatient as usual. She could hear the nearby shouts of the other urchins who would soon descend and wanted a glimpse of the loot before they got there.

“See for yourself,” San said and kicked the bag towards her, more interested in the water than the loot.

She swatted Dapple aside as he tried to get there first and opened the dusty bag. San always collected strange trinkets from the old-past along with the useful stuff they used every day. Cobalt was after the trinkets – they had stories attached. She tossed aside the flasks, gears and tubes, in search for something more intriguing.

“What’s this then?” she asked, pulling out a small, white rectangle that fitted in her palm.

“It’s an ipod,” San said. “And in working condition too. A miracle really, after all this time.”

“What’s an ipod?” Dapple asked, squinting against the stark sunlight.

“It plays music,” San explained.

Dapple’s face lit up. “Like our fire-sessions?”

Fire-Sessions were the best nights of all. After supper, if there was no fog or looming sandstorm, they would sit around the fire for ages, watching the stars in the clear sky and making music on their makeshift instruments. San had taught them how to blend the sounds together so that they made some kind of sense and sometimes he would tell stories to match the eerie tunes.

San burst out laughing, sending his most recent gulp of water spraying all over them. “Not quite,” he choked.

“Show us then,” said Cobalt, pretending not to be offended by San’s obvious disdain for their most beloved pastime.

“Not now. I don’t want to waste the batteries. They’re getting hard to come by these days. I’ll show everyone tonight at the circle.” He grabbed the ipod from Cobalt’s fingers and pocketed it before they were bombarded by the rest of the crew.

Like a rumbling human wave, San and the kids moved through the dried up bay toward their tumbled down home. The city had gone to wrack and ruin at the same time the sea had receded, forced by the same disaster into chaos. But the quake that had shaken the sea into the centre of the earth had also made lovely hiding places for the left-overs and throw-aways. It was their city now, far away from the New Settlements that deemed them unfit.

They made their home in a strangely spared square that stood between the old harbor and the city. Makeshift tents and badly built lean-to’s were spread over the square like debris, festooned with dangling wind chimes that gave the place a constant music. A fountain stood at the centre where they cooked and ate and made their fires. Their sanctuary was surrounded by the skyscraper ruins and old shipping containers which kept the worst of the sandstorms off them. It wasn’t high-tech, like the New Settlements, but it kept them safe.

They spent that afternoon sorting San’s finds and making supper, just biding their time until nightfall when San would pour over his trinkets and tell them stories of a world they could not remember or imagine.

Cobalt was the eldest of the girls at fifteen. Though she would never say it, she was one of the lucky ones. Her parents had died before they had a chance to throw her away. Kids like Dapple had been abandoned because of their weaknesses, which were not tolerated in the New World. His

lungs did not handle the sand well and his eyes were bad. He was unacceptable, a throw-away – most of them were. Gimpy legs, blind eyes, missing fingers – they all had some *defect* that had made them expendable; defects that none of them had asked for. San found most of them on the empty sea-bed, left to die of thirst, and he would rescue them and bring them home.

There hadn't been any new throw-away's for five years now and Corbalt dared not think too deeply about that. She didn't want to contemplate the idea that they had stopped throwing kids away because they were killing them, but even more so, she didn't want to contemplate that they might have found ways to cure them and it was too late for this ragged band.

That night the stars were bright and there was no bad weather to hamper them – a perfect night for their family circle. San brought out some of the *memory-finds* with their stories attached: a tin of something called Tuna, a large fish that had once swum the ocean, and wooden squares called *frames* that held pictures of families from the old-past. The faded pictures showed people smiling in a green world that may as well have been another planet for all the sand that lived in and among them now. Cobalt had seen those kinds of things before and heard the stories. They hadn't found anything new for a while. She gazed at the stars, hoping to see one of the satellites moving across the sky. Even though they had lost contact with earth, they still faithfully circled it – a heavenly reminder of what had once been. A reminder that not even man's ingenuity had been able to spare him from nature's fury.

Finally, San pulled out the ipod. He had polished it so that it gleamed in the firelight, its small, white body smooth as glass.

“I don't know how much battery power it has left so it might not play for very long,” he said.

He had concocted an elaborate system of speakers and wires, collected over the years and useless until now, which he attached to the small device.

“I hope this works,” he said and all of them held their collective breath as he switched it on.

Music began to filter through the speakers, crackling from the bad connection.

“A piano,” said San in surprise.

“A what?” asked an urchin, his eyes widening with excitement.

Cobalt stared at the speakers, mesmerized by the idea that such a beautiful sound could come from the tattered black speaker boxes that San had recovered. It was a strangely soothing sound entirely unlike anything she had ever heard.

“A piano,” said San. “Beautiful isn’t it?”

“Were piano’s common in the old-past?” asked Cobalt.

She was very taken by the sound. Her ideas of the old-past, from San’s exaggerated stories, were so full of colour and happiness and the sound seemed to transport her there. She imagined the sound reverberating from the very ground of the old world.

San frowned quizzically at her. “Common? I suppose so.”

Cobalt looked up at the stars again. They were exactly the same stars that had shone on the old-past, on a world where children were not thrown-away. As if sensing her feeling of loss for a world she did not know, the piano took on a lamenting tune. It was as if the piano was singing their very souls and all the wounds the New World had given them.

The screen on the ipod flickered and died with the last of the battery and the children sat in a heavy silence, not daring to look at each other. Cobalt heard a sniff from a kid at the back.

“What happened to the world that made this kind of beautiful music?” Dapple asked quietly when the music came to an end. The urchins were silent, waiting for San’s answer.

“It was shaken,” San said. There were tears in his eyes.

“Why is the New World so unkind? Don’t they remember this kind of music?” Dapple asked. His voice was choked by his own tears. “Did the piano know that it was going to end up like this? Is that why it sounded so sad?”

Silence. San’s head was bowed against his chest and Cobalt thought that perhaps he was crying but when he lifted his head, there was a smile on his face.

“Maybe it did know,” he said. “This world didn’t turn out so good for kids like you but it doesn’t always have to be like that.”

“What d’you mean?” asked one of the urchins.

“You’re not going to be kids forever. One day you will be grownups. And one day *you* will be the ones teaching a new generation how to live. You can teach them to about the mistakes of the New World... and you can show them how to make a better one.”

“Who would listen to us?” Dapple asked. “We’re just throw-away’s.”

The other urchins nodded. They were never naïve about what they were, even though they were kids.

“Maybe they won’t listen to us,” Cobalt said suddenly. “But maybe they *will* listen to our music.”

San nodded at her. “That’s right - they will.”

“Why would the Foggers listen to our music?” asked another urchin.

“We won’t give them a choice. We’ll be so good they’ll *have* to listen to us,” Cobalt said.

“But all we make is noise. We don’t make nothing so beautiful as that piano,” sighed Dapple.

“Maybe not right now but we’ve got time. We can grow and practice... we’ll get ready for the Better World. The one that comes after this stupid New World. We’ll show those foggers that the Throw-Aways aren’t broken.”

Some of the kids were already running for their instruments. They weren’t sophisticated and each one was dented or rusted but when they came together with San’s guitar it made sense. Like all the broken, discarded things making one good thing. Cobalt could hear it, deep in the music this time - like a hope sounding out from the trash can drums.

That night, with the stars so bright and unhidden, Cobalt imagined that their music would even wake the sea from its depths under the surface of the earth and bring it back. Maybe the foggers wouldn’t listen but as she looked around at the kids, their faces shining, she felt like the world was about to change in some small way. Something in *them* was going to change. Hope could do anything - even a Throw-Away knew that.

CURIOUS?

“Please enter your choice here...” The cursor blinked; an ever-patient pause.

Kabi stared at the screen, chewing viciously on her bottom lip. The instructions had been very clear: you can only choose one door and once you pass through you may not go back and try again. She wondered about that; about what happened if you tried.

This was her one chance to make something of herself, or so her EduMasters said. And her parents. And her friends. And the Screen Adaption’s of *Life 101*. One chance - that was all you got.

She looked up at the doors again. Three of them, exactly alike; no numbers, no distinguishing marks at all – unless you counted the vague difference in shades a mark of some kind.

She had dutifully gone through testing so, in theory, each door would lead to one of three career options that suited her. But there were stories: sometimes the test spewed out such rubbish you ended up being swallowed up by the very opposite of what you wanted. She’d even heard stories of parents paying off the Mage Programmers to rig the test and get their child into the career of *their* choice – the child never knew what was coming.

Behind her, someone coughed.

“It’s not going to get easier, you know,” said the girl behind her. Dell was tall and dark with a sense of humour to match. She twirled her thick black hair around her finger, feigning boredom, though it was clear she was as terrified as the rest of them. “It’s just graduation. What’s the worst that could happen?”

Kabi tried to smile but she was sure it looked more like a grimace. The worst? Well, she could end up as apprentice to an Orderist who would force her to focus on numbers for the rest of her life; piling them in neat little columns ad nauseam. Or she could end up shadowing a Tradist whose chief function was to keep the cogs running. She’d be covered in grime forever. The only thing she wanted to be was a Mage: the people behind the programs, the magicians of code. *Very* few people had that accolade but she wanted it... badly. Thing is, Kabi seldom got what she wanted and it seemed like no adult on the planet cared about anyone’s *real* talents. If

the test said you were Oderist-Prone, that's what you were – no arguments or exceptions. How she wished she could get her hands on those test results to see for herself.

She glanced at the screen again.

“Please enter your choice here...” the text glowed red on the screen, dousing the podium in a sickly orange light.

“If you don't move it, I'm going to jump up there and push it for you,” said the Dell behind her. “It's just a freaking job, Kabi. All of us are going to have them – they'll pay the bills. Who the hell cares what it is?”

The line of kids that snaked out behind Dell shifted and shuffled, unconvinced it was just a trivial thing. None of them met Kabi's eyes. They didn't want to face the doors yet, or Dell.

Kabi closed her eyes and turned, holding her finger in mid air for a few seconds before punching the nearest button she could find. Door three. And her fate was sealed.

“Thank you for making a choice. Please enter whichever door lights up. May your future stretch out before you with promise.”

The door to the far right glowed yellow and Dell pushed Kabi off the podium, onto the platform below.

“Catch you on the other side,” Dell said, winking.

Kabi nodded. Her hands were all sweaty and her chest was tight. She was acting like a child.

Dell was right – it was just a job, not a prison sentence. Funny, it felt like one and she didn't even know what it was yet.

She walked towards the glowing door and took hold of the handle. The moment the metal touched her skin, a thought occurred to her: were all three doors unlocked? If she changed her mind right now, could she just open one of the other doors and walk through it? The thought began a tsunami in her belly and she glanced back at the line. No one was watching; they were chewing finger nails and scuffing shoes on the concrete. They were too preoccupied with their own fates to worry about hers. Dell was taking her turn to stare at the screen, one finger still entangled in her hair, finding it wasn't so easy once she was faced with it.

Door three beckoned. Kabi listened to see if she could hear anything from behind the door but there was nothing; just her pounding heart. And then she found herself walking; away

from the glowing door and her chosen profession to the door beside it, number two she presumed. She tried the handle and it opened. A few gasps rose from the line.

“What is she doing?”

“Is she crazy?”

“She’s going to get herself arrested...”

Kabi stepped in through the door.

Disappointingly, the door only led onto a narrow corridor. No welcome signs or fanfare proclaiming she’d arrived at the rest of her life. Just slightly greying walls lined with fluorescent tubes leading away around a curve. She wondered if it was always like this – she could have sworn she heard a recorded voice when Max had opened the door on his turn. There was nothing now; not even the sound of her footsteps on the thickly carpeted floor. There were also no sirens or flashing lights to ward her off, so she figured changing her mind must be okay. Besides, the other door at the end of the corridor was so bland it could have been either one of the divisions and she was fairly desperate to see what choice she had made on her double take.

She opened the door and two faces looked up at her, startled; a man and a woman. They were dressed in bland, functional clothing, their faces slightly grey and drawn. Orderist perhaps? She couldn’t tell. The room was small, with another pale door directly in front of her. All these doors but no windows, no way to gauge where she was. Kabi swallowed, closing the door behind her – this was not a good sign. She kept her hand on the handle, wondering if she could slip out before they got to her.

“Was there a malfunction?” the woman asked. She stared wide-eyed, hands fidgeting in front of her.

“Um, what?” blurted Kabi, wondering just how much trouble she was about to land herself.

“Our door didn’t light up. It’s not our turn. Did something go wrong?” the woman asked.

“I don’t think so. I just...” Kabi licked her lips. Was she really going to do this? “I changed my mind.”

The bland couple stared at her blankly.

“At the podium I chose door three... but I changed my mind and came through the middle door instead,” Kabi shrugged as an afterthought.

The man's jaw dropped and he took a step forward. "But you can't... you can't do that... no one's ever..."

"Changed their mind? Not ever?" Kabi asked. Impossible.

The couple shook their heads in unison.

"Okay, well I'm here now. So what did I choose? What do you two do?" It was too late to turn back; she had to embrace this, whatever it was.

"You chose *three*. You don't belong here. You won't be on the records here," said the woman. "If you didn't go through door three you no longer exist."

Kabi burst out laughing. "Clearly I do."

The man shook his head, all sombreness and severity. "Technically you don't. Not anymore."

"Well then, I'll just go back out and go through door three."

"You can't," said the man. "Your turn is over. Sorry."

"Sorry?" asked Kabi. "Just like that?"

"You can't stay here," said the woman. "I'm afraid you have to leave."

"You just said I *can't* leave," said Kabi.

"You can't go *back*, but you can leave." The woman gestured to a door on the right. It was exactly the same colour as the walls, barely noticeable. It looked old, and unused, but by all accounts of logic it should lead straight into the room that belonged to door three.

"Oh, there's another way into three? Why didn't you just say so?" Kabi made towards the door.

"That doesn't go to three," said the woman.

"Where does it go?" Kabi asked, knowing she was going to hate the answer.

"The In-Between," said the man, swallowing anxiously. "You don't belong anywhere now. You don't exist."

It was hard to breathe. "You're kidding, right? I was just curious. I just... I wanted to see what would happen if I tried something new..."

"A career is not a good place to *try new things*," said the man, spittle collecting in the corners of his thin lips. "Once you've chosen you fulfil your portfolio and produce your work. It's not complicated." His jaw tightened and he looked away. "In a way, you've made your choice. Now you must live with it."

The man and woman took a step back, as if whatever was behind the door might inhale them and steal them from their precious simplicity. Kabi took a deep breath. The man was right on one account: she had made her choice. And the longer she stared at the door, the more curious she became. There was an in between place? No one had ever spoken about that. Maybe very few people even knew about it but she was going to *see* it. She was chewing her lip again. She grabbed the handle, steadying herself for a moment. The man and woman pressed themselves against the far wall, almost blending in.

“Stuff it,” said Kabi. Anywhere was better than here – wherever *here* was. She turned the handle.

After door two’s small, dim room, the light assaulted her. Kabi blinked a few times, squinting to see. The door slammed behind her and she imagined the couple sighing a breath of relief that she was gone – the crazy kid who broke protocol. For a moment she wished they’d told her what door she’d chosen; it seemed a shame to have gone through all of that and never know. Colours swam in her vision and solidified into a young man. He was grinning, his hair dreadlocked and streaked with neon yellow. He laid a hand on her shoulder.

“Welcome to the Mage Programmer’s training. We’re jammed to have you – hope you’re curious...”

This story came 1st in the SAWC Young Adult Short Story competition in 2013.