

When I was an infant in my mother's arms
I would watch the starlight in her face
'Cause I was reaching out to understand
the cosmic charm
I am just a starchild, born in space.

Level 42, 1981

Chapter 1

‘Good morning, Lucy. Time to get up. Cleanse and prepare. You are three hours, twenty-two minutes and fifteen seconds away from your destination. Acclimatization will begin in two hours, forty-three minutes and twenty-nine seconds.’

Lucy lurched awake, her heart hammering, breathing so hard she could hear her excited gasps rattling around the sleep pod.

‘Mumgram!’ she whispered. ‘Is this it?! Is this really *it?*’

Mumgram smiled. ‘Yes, Lucy. Time to cleanse and prepare. You are three hours, twenty-two minutes and four sec—’

‘Music!’ yelled Lucy, undoing the driquilt and flinging it open. ‘Earth: England: nineteen-eighties!’

‘Specify genre,’ said Mumgram, her grainy face showing definite signs of the air ducting that looped

down from the low ceiling behind her.

‘Genre—Pop. Band—erm—Level 42. Track—your choice,’ Lucy grinned. She would be glad to sort Mumgram out. The graininess and see-through-ness had definitely worsened over the past few months as the ship went into powersave protocol in its final stages. It was hard to remember what Mum’s proper face looked like. There wasn’t much fuel left—but she’d be able to power up *Hessandrea* in seconds, as soon as they docked. Enough power for another circuit of this galaxy—and to sharpen those ’gram features again.

‘*Though I live on the edge, time is on my side . . .*’ Lucy sang along, skipping into the cleansing booth as the familiar chords and rhythm struck up. She seized a brush and worked through her long dark hair. It was well past her shoulder blades again now. She would *love* to cut it off, but the last time she’d tried that it had been a mess. She hadn’t looked anything *like* the girl in the L’Oreal adverts. She eyed the snippers on the shelf. *No*. She would wait. Get it done properly. Someone *else* would cut her hair for her.

Lucy’s brush slowed down. Just the thought made her stomach flip. Someone *else*. Imagine.

She took a deep, steadying breath and quickly pulled her hair into a long, thick side plait. She knew this

wasn't fashionable. Just above shoulder length, flicky, 'attitude' was what was in, according to *This Morning*. But sometimes girls had hair like hers too. That girl in the woodwind band they'd had on yesterday; the one who played clarinet. She'd had a side plait and nobody had laughed.

'*Oooh, watch her dance . . .*' she sang on, doing a little spin on the floor. Did she have a good voice? Mumgram said she did. But then Mumgram would.

She stripped off her sleep suit and chucked it outside as she hit the steamshower button. Fifteen seconds later she whacked the dry button. It wasn't the most luxurious bath she'd ever taken but she was too excited to waste any time.

'Shall I get into the clothes?' she called out, returning to her sleep pod and eyeing the garments hung up beside her bed. They'd been there for a week now. She'd tried them on three times. Every time felt as exciting as the last. A pair of genes. No . . . not G-E-N-E-S . . . *J-E-A-N-S*. She must remember that. Sounded the same—spelt different. A world of difference in meaning. So—jeans—and a sweatshirt, green. Socks. And trainers. *Trainers*. Why did they call them trainers? She'd never really worked it out. In America they were sneakers. Trainers sounded better than sneakers. Being sneaky wasn't nice.

‘You do not need to get into the clothes until five minutes before acclimatization,’ said Mumgram.

‘But I *want* to!’ laughed Lucy. ‘I can’t wait! I can’t!’ And she seized the hanger. The sweatshirt was easy—not much different from the travelwear she’d been in for the past ten years. Soft and stretchy. Green, though—after ten years of mostly blue or grey. It slipped easily on over her regulation grey undies. The jeans were trickier, with the tough metal button and the metal zip. They pressed against her lean belly and she couldn’t move quite so fluidly in them.

She sprang up and grabbed the exobar beside the pod, pulling herself easily up to chin level and then pumping up and down twenty times. No problem there. But when she curled up her legs into a mid-air crunch, it was definitely harder in jeans. She guessed she’d get used to it. She dropped back down and seized the footwear.

The socks and trainers felt weirdest. She had never needed them before. Her toes and soles were like her fingers and palms. They were used to the feeling of the modular panel flooring around the ship: the exact temperature and texture that they’d always walked upon. With the new footwear on, it was like a part of her was blunted.

But she knew they didn’t walk around in bare feet—

not unless they were on the beach or in their houses. She had to get used to it. Should have worn them for a lot longer, really. Should have worn them for the last six months, ever since the blue orb had edged into view. She prodded the black and silver stripes beside the laces and read NIPE. She smiled. It was meant to be NIKE. But the scanner must have misfired and hadn't read it properly, so *Hessandrea's* assimilator had grown the Earth-style trainers not quite perfectly.

'Please take some breakfast,' said Mumgram, cutting through the music, just as the sleep pod's nutrishute rattled open and delivered a smoothie and four carbisks.

'I'm too excited to eat a thing!' Lucy said, knotting her laces with some difficulty.

'Acclimatization will be suspended until you have eaten,' said Mumgram, with annoying logic. 'Minimal nutritional requirements must be met for safety reasons. Please eat, Lucy.'

Lucy sighed and stood up. She walked awkwardly in the spongy, clingy trainers and picked up the smoothie and the bisks. She took them with her down the walkway to the bridge and settled at the console, so she could sit back and stare through the window at the beautiful blue-white orb which had been growing steadily bigger for weeks.

The automatic navigator had pulled the ship into orbit already, setting off the gyrodrines to keep the orbital velocity of exactly thirteen kilometres per second nice and steady. *Hessandrea* was only hours away from the entry point, 367,400 kilometres above the United Kingdom, awaiting the best possible moment to drop through the atmosphere. The on-board forecaster calculated that this would be 11:14:04, British Summer Time.

The landing target was an island off the south coast of the United Kingdom. Lucy had no idea why they had chosen the Isle of Wight. But there had been a logic to everything they did. Their logs, for some reason, hadn't stored this logic, so she could only assume it was because it was a friendly place. She hoped so.

She drained the smoothie and shoved the second bisk into her mouth and then went to stand by the full-length wall mirror beside the sleeping pod and looked at herself. Dark hair. Blue-green eyes. Pale—but not pallid—skin. Regular sessions under the D-Vit lamp had stopped her going see-through. She was of medium height for a fourteen-year-old girl. Medium weight. She was slender but her muscle mass was heavy. Relentless daily exercise for the past ten years had been crucial to stop her bones turning into a brittle mess. The exercise had worked. Bioscans told her she was in the peak of physical fitness

and the planes of muscle across her belly confirmed it. If anything, she needed to soften up a bit to look like a normal Earth girl. She might have to say she was a gymnast or something.

Lying. That was going to be strange. Saying things that were not true. When had she last lied? When had there ever been any need? Probably when she was little; up until she was four. She had been a normal Cornelian Eclata child after all . . . hadn't she? Lucy screwed up her face and shut her eyes, trying to remember.

'Nope,' she said, with a shrug, and walked spongily back across to the console to take a seat and scan its collection of lights, dials, and monitors.

'So—how is Earth today?' she said aloud, more to herself than Mumgram, but Mumgram responded.

'Earth is experiencing normal weather patterns and relatively little seismic activity today,' stated Mumgram. 'Other than a three point six scale earth tremor off the north island of New Zealand, epicentre twenty-four point five kilometres south of Wellington.'

'Well, we're heading for another hemisphere,' said Lucy. 'Lucky.'

'Seven point six per cent of the planet's surface is currently affected by hot warfare,' went on Mumgram. 'The closest war zone to your destination is Afghanistan.'

‘OK—how far away is Afghanistan?’ muttered Lucy, tracing her fingers along the view screen which offered a rotating aerial map of the entire surface of the planet below. Mumgram connected to the screen and a little blob of red blinked within a land mass above the Indian Ocean.

‘Distance from London to Kabul is five thousand, seven hundred and eighteen point five kilometres,’ said Mumgram. ‘From Rowridge, on the Isle of Wight, to Kab—’

‘Don’t worry, anything over five thousand kilometres is safe enough,’ laughed Lucy, kicking back in the chair and feeling excitement course over her again, as powerful as Kwathekki Falls . . . no. No. Like *Niagara* Falls. Kwathekki Falls were long gone. Well . . . they were probably still falling, millions of light years away on Cornelian Eclata, but it was doubtful any mammalian life form was left to see them. The spectacular torrents of three ancient rivers merging into one enormous canyon, under the arcs of seven permanent rainbows, had been one of the biggest tourist attractions on the planet. Nobody visited now, though. Nobody was there. Lucy’s young heart had got so used to the clench of sorrow at this fleeting thought that she didn’t really notice it any more.

So excitement coursed over her like *Niagara Falls*, which was pretty damn splendid too, judging by the images she'd seen. Maybe she would go there one day as she had been to Kwathekki. She didn't remember Kwathekki, of course. She'd been only three.

'So—how is England?' asked Lucy, trailing her fingers across the screen to spin the globe around to the small, boot-shaped island and then jabbing at the sole of the boot until the scale zoomed up and she could see the southern part, where the Isle of Wight nestled into the instep.

'England's weather is calm and cloudy,' said Mumgram. 'There are no wars taking place today. The economy is depressed, but stable.'

'And the Isle of Wight?' asked Lucy, jabbing again until the diamond-shaped island filled the screen.

'In line with the rest of the UK for weather, but its economy is picking up as the summer months approach,' said Mumgram. 'The island depends upon farming and tourism. Tourism income improves across stretches of good weather.'

'How often does it get stretches of good weather?'

'Not often,' said Mumgram, in a surprisingly vague way. 'The UK is notorious for the unpredictability of its weather. The months of May to July have historically

been the warmest, with the least rainfall, but over the past decade, weather patterns have become more erratic. As much on the Isle of Wight and in the South of England as elsewhere.'

'What else do we know about the weather in the south?'

'It's sponsored by PowerOn,' said Mumgram.

Lucy smiled. 'The weather *forecasts* are sponsored by PowerOn' she corrected. 'On the local TV station.' She loved it when Mumgram got something wrong (a very rare occurrence). 'I don't think that has any effect on whether the sun shines, though. Oh—that reminds me.'

She turned in her chair and reached to her left to press a series of blue buttons and pull a lever. Outside, sixteen solar panels moved around eighteen degrees. 'We need a little extra sun today, yes?'

'Correct,' said Mumgram. 'I would have alerted you in ten minutes.'

'I know,' said Lucy. She knew a lot, in fact. Everything that Mumgram had told her since she got up, she really knew already. Hearing it from Mumgram was like asking for a favourite nursery rhyme book to be read to her for the fiftieth time. She had been studying the new home planet all her life—or at least that's what it felt like. She could speak English fluently, because a variation of

English is what all of her people spoke. She had ironed out her Cornelian dialect over the years, listening again and again to Earth's news presenters and talk-show hosts and soap-opera actors, so she could pick up the correct delivery and word usage.

She also spoke fluent French, Italian, German, and Spanish. This had been a precaution, in case the guidance systems which had been set for the UK went adrift during the long journey and she ended up in a neighbouring country.

'Am I going to be OK?' she asked quietly. Mumgram flickered a little over her shoulder and, deep inside the ship's computer brain, some tiny integrated circuit triggered a compassionate expression.

'You will be fine, Lucy,' said Mumgram. 'You have been prepared for this. You have had all your shots against Earth's more dangerous viruses. The gas mix you breathe is now closely comparable to that of Earth's atmosphere. Your language and your clothing match that of females of a similar age. You should not stand out.'

'Will I . . . touch . . . someone?' murmured Lucy, so quietly she didn't think the Mumgram audio pick-up would work.

'Yes,' said Mumgram. 'You will.'

Lucy stared at her fingertips and an old memory in

the very cells of her skin stirred. The last touch. The very last . . . big fingers slipping across little fingers. *'Goodbye, baby. Get home safe.'*

And that was all. Lucy shook her head. The memory wasn't even in it.

She couldn't imagine how it would feel to be touched by another being. She hadn't been touched for ten years. Mumgram was always there for her; helping, teaching, advising, directing. But Mumgram could not touch. Mumgram gave a brilliant impression of love. But Mumgram was a holographic display which would feel nothing if Lucy were to take herself off to the airlock and blow herself out into space. The display would urgently advise against this action, of course, right up to the last second and then, when her body was expanding and blowing into atoms across the nothingness outside, Mumgram would fall silent and all would be peace.

Even so, Lucy loved Mumgram. Because there was nobody and nothing else that she could love.

For now.

Lucy looked at the ever-moving track of glowing numbers along the top of the console. Estimated time of atmospheric entry: three hours, two minutes, thirty-one seconds and counting.

She was nearly home.