

A Strange Place

Zois peered into the dark bedroom and pricked up his ears to listen. It was so quiet that he was reminded of old times, when he had been the exclusive owner of that space, before his little brother arrived. For the first time in his life he felt that sharing was not that simple. Fortunately Zois 2 was asleep. There must be no witness to what he was about to do.

Quickly he jumped out of bed and padded towards the central space in the apartment, his bare feet hardly making any sound on the shining floor. The bluish soft light of rest-time was interrupted in places by the dark shadows cast by furniture and home appliances. Silence everywhere.

He stood in front of a wall covered with device-screens, each one assigned to a family member along with the chair in front of it. He hesitated, but only for a moment. Then he sat decisively on his mother's chair.

"If you encounter any problems ...," the nice lady from the Ministry had said. Very polite she'd been. Obviously there was a problem, but he could hardly have told her, just as he could not have told his own mother why he had decided to do something as inappropriate as this: to hack information from her own private device. He had thought that their mother's absence was causing Zois 2 anxiety and insecurity but perhaps it was having the same effect on him, too - the difference being that he did not have an older brother to follow and pester with questions. No, he had to look for the answers on his own.

The screen in front of him was quiet, just like the other three; at regular intervals, bright beams of light indicating communication possibility signals (CPS) darted across and vanished. Since their mother's device was configured for a Highest Degree of Education licensed user, it could not compare to his or Zois 2's devices: you could even access someone in Mars on that screen.

His finger touched the security key which contained all the codes. He could not activate the screen by mere thought as his mother could, but fortunately every device-screen came with its own translucent security keys, in case the user could not utilise thought-activation for some reason.

He pressed the ON key. Data began to dance in front of his eyes - his mother's device was not used to manual handling - but it quickly flew off-screen and normal mode settings were displayed. Zois sighed with relief. *This is a promising start*, he thought.

He had begun to type 'search presence' when all of a sudden data flashed onscreen and began to scroll down, a long parade of graphs and digits. Quantities of water content in the deposits today and yesterday. Types and values of pollutants outside the protected city. Cleanup results. Usage distributions to channels A and B. Indices for yesterday and the day before. Cleaning errors. Water storage disruption. Error-adjustment values.

What's going on here? He began to type out passcodes impatiently. *There must be a passcode to stop all this influx of data, where on earth is it?* It looked like incoming info from Mother's office - but this shouldn't be happening!

If anyone catches me doing this, I'm done for! he thought. He had no idea who else could have access to that information, but obviously his Mother's assistants would, and her boss of course. *If any of them gets it into their heads to access this data right now, I'm in serious trouble.* There was a solid City CPS next to the equally solid signal of the Ministry. Any rippling on the signals would indicate he had been discovered.

New indices scrolled down in front of him: Soil – Moisture – Quantities. 50%. 75%. 80%. 99%. Numbers alternated so rapidly that his eyes could not keep up. And then suddenly the signal for data visualisation was on.

And then an image.

It was the image of the City, but seen from the outside: Zois could see the dome and one of the external gates. Then that image receded and was replaced by a dry deserted plain; his mind perceived it in dark yellow and brown colours. It was a hazy,

polluted, cold wilderness. Humankind had been well rid of that kind of place long before he was born.

The flat empty place filled the screen for a moment. And then he could not see the blurry, dusty horizon any more. What he was seeing now was mountains. Not really mountains, hills more like, but as fuzzy and brown as the plain.

What on earth is happening here? What's all this data doing on Mother's screen? There doesn't seem to be anything interesting about this place. There's nothing out there, Zois thought.

His password-typing fingers were now idle. He feared he might be discovered but nothing could stop him. He was surprised to find that he thought of it all as a game. A much more exciting one than the virtual intergalactic voyages with Kora and his other friends, undertaken in the safety of their device screens.

Suddenly the screen began to wrinkle and ripple with such intensity that Zois's heart jumped to his throat. He was caught! But no, both City and Ministry signals were still solid, undisturbed. Whatever was happening did not come from there.

The image now projected on the screen seemed to be coming from over and beyond the surrounding hills. It wasn't fuzzy anymore. There was something there. The mountains – or hills – were changing from brown to yellow, then to a light green colour. It looked changeable, alive. Vegetation! He zoomed on the image and there it was, clearer and clearer. Plants! Tall, willowy plants, with wide green leaves that swayed slowly in a synchronised dancing movement. His eyes moved lower and saw shrubs with light green branches that turned a darker shade as they bent low over the ground. Still lower the colour changed to blue, the strangest blue Zois had ever seen. It looked nothing like the deep blue sea in the pictures Father sent from his expedition. This was a softer, more transparent blue that turned silver at the edges.

An insect with translucent wings flew onscreen and hovered for a moment just in front of his face, giving him the impression that it was looking straight into his eyes with its own little round restless eyes. Then it shook its wings and vanished among the dancing light-green plants.

His eyes shot upwards, searching for the protective dome. To his astonishment, there did not seem to be one. But there should have been – there was always one over places with any life. There were protective domes over cities and agricultural land, even over some of the few remaining forests, at least those deemed worthy of preservation. Life on earth could only exist under protective domes. Everything else on the planet was dead or dying. It was common knowledge. But that insect and those bright green swaying plants did not look dead at all. And he was certain there was no dome over them. Astonishing! Such a possibility had never been mentioned at school!

The first logical explanation that came to his mind was that of course this place must be on another planet. But the solid, imperturbable signals at the bottom of the screen assured him that the place was on this planet and indeed not far from the City at all!

Zois hesitated for a moment. Then without further ado he began to type in the pass-codes from Mother's device to his own. If it was bad enough accessing Ministry information from her device at all, he was now committing a much more serious crime passing that information on to his device.

He realised he was short of breath, as if someone had been making him undergo straining exercise. The data was rolling in from the one screen to the other rapidly. Suddenly he thought of his little brother. In the carefully regulated temperature of the apartment he felt sweat trickling down his spine, soaking his t-shirt. He turned suddenly and strained his ears to listen. Quiet. So quiet that he thought he could hear his brother's soft breathing. Fortunately, Zois 2 was still asleep.

He moved to his own seat pressing OFF on his mother's screen. The data on his screen froze. Still short of breath, he pressed SAVE; he used the weirdest password he could think of in order to secure the whole thing into a memory cache that nobody could ever access except himself. He then deleted all traces of his recent activity on his own device, just to be on the safe side.

Only then did he remember what had brought him to Mother's device in the first place. He had been so surprised and absorbed by the sight of that strange place that he forgot all about Mother's absence for two consecutive days and nights. Now, at the

end of the second night, her absence did not seem important. If Zois was anxious for morning to come, it was because he had to wait until then – now being such an impossibly late hour - to call Kora and tell her all about his discovery.

