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Into the Out

Stephen Goldin

**Parsina
PRESS**


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First Parsina Press edition, August 2016.

ISBN: 1534739327.

EAN-13: 978-1534739321.

Letter 1

Hi Bianca,

Bet you never thought you'd hear from me, huh? Well, it's kind of a surprise to me, too. Not that I don't like you or anything—you're my only sister and all, well, my only sibling when it comes right down to that—but you're just not around. Mom and Dad arranged it so I can't forget you and I think of you sometimes, but probably not as much as I should. I probably wouldn't have thought of you today, either, but—well, I'll get to that.

Mr. North says I should make this report honest, thorough, detailed, and in order. I hope he's, like, prepared for the consequences of that. It probably won't be pretty—but if I'm going to be famous (as I will), I can't afford to pussyfoot around. Only the truth to you, Bianca, I swear it.

You see, Mom and Dad moved to Califia Springs on short notice last week because the city hired Dad to make sure the new part of the town they're building is, like, compatible with the older part. In case you've forgotten, Dad's a civil engineer/city planner and we move around a lot. A *real* lot. Sure, I'm used to that, but it's a bitch and a half when it happens three weeks before the

end of term. If I had any friends to leave behind, it might have been painful. Fortunately I was spared that. The life of a destined-to-be-famous person is a noble but lonely one.

Dad and Mom signed me up at Califia Springs Charter School, which has the unquestioned best reputation in town. Sounds impressive, huh, till you realize there are just two high schools in Califia Springs, and Reagan High is a public school with a less than stellar rep. I mean, we have parents with *some* standards, right?

The other thing you should know is that CalSprings Charter is, like, oh-so-snooty about its supposed superiority. San Alonzo High, where I just came from, is looser on the extracurriculars. As long as you filled your academic slate (which I of course did, straight A's), they didn't much care. I had a pro-forma debate club on top, but all you had to do is show up and talk to get credit for it.

But for top honors at CalSprings, they insist on a passing credited extracurricular. "Good grades need good citizenship," says one clause in their charter. Damn it, I *earned* good grades, but even with the last-minute transfer they won't make allowance. Without a passing extracurricular, I couldn't get more than a solid A- for my whole damn year of academics.

People have gotten famous with less, of course. But they didn't have *my* standards. I've always been straight A. So I had to sign up for an extracurricular.

Trouble is, this late in the year, my choices were limited. Debate was full to bursting, as was Life Lessons. Lit Club had room, sort of, but they've already done their full year of reports and there isn't time to catch up if I also want to sleep anytime in the next few weeks. Sci Club might have been a breeze, but its work was already done and it was closed to new entrants.

StuGov had adjourned for the year, and Yearbook just went to bed. Chess Club, of course, would have me, even though they were mostly through their annual tournament, but of course they're, like, the perennial Losers' Society; I can't imagine anything more boring than sitting and watching nerds battle it out for last place in the social hierarchy.

So that's how I ended up in Mr. North's classroom for Explorers Club. They still have one assignment left this year, an all-day excursion tomorrow. As long as I participate and don't screw it up beyond redemption, I'll pass. That means I get my A's and save my academic record. Hooray!

I have to admit, I don't consider myself in any way an explorer. Oh sure, explorers can become famous. Everybody knows Christopher Columbus, Lewis and Clark, and Marco Polo. But guys like them become famous for what they discover, not for who they are. I want people to know the name Tamara Ruben for who I am, not for something I happen to find.

So anyway, back to the report. There I was in Mr. North's classroom this afternoon—it's Friday, May 24—at three-fifteen p.m. waiting to get started. I had my permission form all signed and ready to hand in, but Mr. North wasn't there yet, so it gave me a chance to look over my fellow explorers.

There are ten kids in the club besides me, five girls and five boys, so I shift the balance onto the girls' side. Since I was the new kid I was odd girl out and there was a sort of social distance. Finally, one girl came over to introduce herself. She was pretty and well-dressed and short, even for a girl, but bursting with self-confidence—some might call it arrogance. What some guys call “perky,” if you're into that sort of thing.

Along with her came this guy, tall and well-built. She wore him as an accessory, like an expensive bracelet.

She held out her hand and we shook, and she said

she was Linda Wu, junior class vice president. Her boyfriend, she said, without giving him a chance to speak for himself, was Burke Hastings, captain of the football team. Does that tell you all you need to know?

So I told her I'm Tamara Ruben, and I'd been sophomore president two schools ago, before I decided high school politics was kind of a useless game I didn't need to play.

She flashed a smile that, so help me, *looked* sincere, and said, "Oh, I'm sure we'll be friends. Can I call you Tammy?"

So okay, this is going to sound bitchy. I'm normally very polite, Bianca, really I am. I could win medals for my decorum, if they ever gave medals for that sort of crap. But I just don't take insults well. Just five seconds ago I'd told this Linda Wu my name, and now she thinks she has the right to change it! So I stepped right up into her personal space and said, "My name is Tamara Ruben, maybe 'Tamara' if I ever allow you to be familiar, and someday you'll brag that you heard it directly from my own lips. I am *not*, never *have* been, and never *will* be, a 'Tammy.'"

I guess she's sensitive or something, because she backed away like I'd taken a swing at her. I guess she's not used to people talking to Linda Wu, junior class vice president, that way.

Then she turned and walked away until there were, like, three rows of chairs between us. Burke Hastings stared at me a sec, then followed after her like the proper adornment he was. I sat down at one of the student desks, still steaming.

I sat there a few seconds until I saw another kid sidling up. This one was black with badly cut hair, and glasses that looked two sizes too big for him. His clothes looked like brand-new hand-me-downs. His teeth were... unfortunate, like you'd be taking your life

in your hands if you tried to kiss him.

He asked me what happened with Wu, so I told him the short story in all its details. “I am not a ‘Tammy,’” I repeated for him.

He looked at me earnestly and said, “I never thought you were.”

This mollified me a bit, so I asked him what his name was. “Warren Jefferson.”

I shook his hand. “Pleased to meet you.” Before we could do any more talking, Mr. North entered the room, and our attention went to the front.

Mr. North is a big black man, sort of reminds me of James Earl Jones except his voice is a little higher and squeakier. Still, despite that and his suit, which was a little frayed, he has a commanding presence—or he would, if he wasn’t so sick. Bad cold or flu would be my guess. His eyes were rheumy and his body was wracked with coughing fits every few minutes, but he kept soldiering on despite everything. He looked about as pale as I can imagine a black man looking.

The first thing he did was have me stand up and introduce myself to the rest of the club. Linda Wu, I noticed, was pointedly looking at her boyfriend while I did it, but like, what could you expect? There was one other girl who didn’t really look at me, either, but it wasn’t through animosity or anger or anything. She was just... well, she didn’t seem completely attached to this world. She had a white shirt and a gray skirt, with stringy black hair that didn’t look so much combed as sculpted. She had a notebook out on the desk in front of her and was scribbling in it—and, looking back on it, I hadn’t noticed her paying attention to anything since I came in. Her complexion was sort of pasty, and for some reason my mind decided to call her The Gray Girl. She wasn’t offensive, just not completely in the present. Eerie.

So anyway, after Mr. North introduced me and collected my permission form, he turned to club business.

He told us, between coughing fits, that our expedition tomorrow will be to someplace called Stanyan Hill. This drew immediate groans from almost everyone, which led me to think they'd been there before. Maybe too many times before. Well, when you're in a town out in the California desert, I don't imagine there's a wealth of places to go exploring.

When the groans died down, Mr. North held up his hands and said he knew they'd been to Stanyan Hill maybe a few too many times before, so he was going to shake things up a little this time. We were going to write contemporary reports—honest, thorough, detailed and in order—about our experiences there. Somebody, I didn't see who, commented what sort of “experiences” could you have at a picnic ground, and that drew a couple of snickers, but Mr. North either didn't hear it or, more likely I think, didn't want to dignify it with a response.

Since I was the new kid, it fell to me to ask whether there was a specific form we had to follow, and he said no, we were free to tell our experiences the way we thought best—log, journal, whatever—as long as it was honest, detailed, thorough, and in order. Originality of expression was always welcome.

Before we broke up, he gave me a hand-out he'd given the rest of the club previously of suggested supplies to bring along:

- flashlight
- toothbrush/toothpaste
- aspirin/ibuprofen
- insect repellent
- sunscreen
- hat
- first aid kit/antibiotic/bandaging/snakebite kit

- canteen
- snack
- field glasses/binoculars
- pocket knife
- matches/lighter
- candle
- rope
- blanket
- handkerchief
- scissors
- gloves
- sturdy shoes or boots
- hand lotion & soap
- towel
- deodorant
- lip balm
- tissues/wet wipes
- nail clippers
- hair brush/comb
- dental floss
- necessary medicines
- feminine napkins/supplies
- mouthwash
- plastic or folding cup
- sun glasses
- sweater or wind breaker
- traveling utensils/chopsticks
- trash bags
- sewing kit
- bungee cord
- batteries
- compass
- measuring tape
- tongs

What was this, I wondered, an afternoon outing or

an expedition into the Amazon rainforest? I could see the usefulness of everything on the list, but still—WTF?

When I got home and told Mom and Dad about the assignment, Dad got very thoughtful. He disappeared into his bedroom and I heard the sound of closet-rummaging. Then he came out with a scuffed old knapsack and a plastic box about one foot square and three inches thick. It looked so klunky it just *had* to be low tech.

Dad explained the knapsack was the one he'd hiked around Europe with during a summer break when he was in college, and he's told me repeatedly it was the best time of his life. The box was a voice recorder prototype he was given some time ago. It doesn't have any special apps, but it recharges in ordinary daylight and it records what you say. (It's what I'm dictating this letter into right now, in fact, like a practice run.) An engineering friend who worked at the company that made it gave it to him to alpha test, but he never really did that and it just sat in his closet all this time. It'd be just right, he said, to record my impressions of what I see tomorrow.

I thought of a zillion possible objections. The thing is, like, really bulky; it'll take up a ton of room in my/Dad's knapsack. Seems pretty heavy, too. And I don't need anything solar-rechargeable; I'll only be gone one afternoon.

But I've learned from long experience that when parents want to help you, humoring them avoids a lot of problems. They mean well, and as long as it doesn't actively get in my way I can smile and say sure and figure out some way to make it work.

Hence, this letter. I don't think you'll mind being used to further my academic career. It's a worthy cause, after all. The battery on this thing had an almost nonexistent charge after being stored in a dark closet for years, but I'm dictating this with my desk lamp shining

on it, and I'll keep the lamp shining overnight. I'm used to sleeping with a light on. Dad gave me a basic orientation, and the machine seems pretty simple. Maybe a little too simple; I can't seem to find any edit functions. But at least it records just fine. Meanwhile, Mom's running around like crazy on a scavenger hunt through the house trying to find as many of the items on my list as possible.

So anyway, tomorrow I'll write you the real report. I'll fill you in on all the details of our thrilling trip to Stanyan Hill, wherever the hell that is. Honest, thorough, detailed, and in order, my new mantra. I only hope it'll be, like, moderately fun, too. Right now, I've got to go pack all the stuff Mom's finding into my backpack.

Talk to you tomorrow. Your sister,
Tamara

Letter 2

Hi Bianca,

I think there's a special hell designed specifically for kids: the school bus field trip. Claustrophobic, overheated (winter or summer), noisy, smelly, filled with people you either don't know or don't like—and worst of all, boring. You're trapped in a rattling, bumpy contraption with no hope of escape. Little wonder we all love it so much.

So anyway, I showed up in front of the school promptly at 7:30, as requested. So did the other ten Ex-Club members. I guess, despite the general bitching about how boring Stanyan Hill is, nobody wanted to pass up a chance at all that fresh air and sunshine. Well, personally, I don't give a shit about fresh air and sunshine. I just want the club credit. Silly me.

I'm wearing my blue and white blouse, the short-sleeved one with the open neck, plus casual-fit blue jeans, sturdy half boots, and Dad's knapsack. I've got one of Dad's old fishing caps on, too, to protect my scalp from sunburn. I packed myself a pair of PBJs for

lunch, along with a fruit juice pack. Mom tossed in a bag of apple chips. Have to have something healthy, after all.

Dad's a very efficient packer. I guess he learned it while hiking in Europe. Everything Mom was able to find from that list got packed into the knapsack, along with this recorder. Just my luck, huh?

Mr. North showed up shortly after the rest of us, looking even sicker than he did yesterday. I was torn. My motherly instincts, such as they are, felt so sorry for the poor man I wanted him to cancel this excursion and go home to bed. But on the other hand, I need the credit for this club, and the outing's necessary to save my academic rating.

The school bus arrived a few minutes after Mr. North, and the whole club boarded. Mr. North stood at the front and took roll. He was coughing so bad I'm sure we'll all end up with the plague. When everyone was aboard, he signaled the driver and off we excursed to Stanyan Hill.

We distributed ourselves throughout the bus more or less evenly. Linda Wu and her boyfriend sat together, along with another girl in the seat behind them who looked to be one of Wu's cronies. I sat alone at first, but then Warren Jefferson came over and sat beside me. He's wearing a pair of black jeans and a gray tee-shirt with red lettering that reads:

**EVERYTHING HAPPENS FOR A REASON
AND USUALLY THAT REASON IS PHYSICS**

How could I diss anyone with a shirt like that, so I accepted his presence with a friendly grin. He nattered about the weather and his previous field trips. Harmless stuff, so I just let him talk and didn't bother to interrupt.

I noticed The Gray Girl seated by herself two rows behind us at the very back of the bus. She had her note-

book out and was jotting something down in it. That seemed to be taking Mr. North's dictum about writing a contemporary report very seriously.

I asked Warren about her, and he said she's always like that, absorbed in her notepads and little else. He said her name is Jennifer Penney, and the snottier kids call her "Jenny Penney." That made me wince. I wondered who was crueler—the kids who gave her that nickname, or the parents who gave her a name so susceptible to perversion.

Warren wondered whether she might be autistic, but I told him no. I'd been around some autistic kids when I assisted in a Special Ed class at one school a couple years ago, and Jennifer Penney wasn't at all like them. They couldn't break out of their special world. I can see Jennifer's aware of her surroundings, and just doesn't care. She has her own personal universe in her notebooks, and she's perfectly content. The rest of the world just isn't important.

I wondered to myself why she chose to join ExClub. But that's none of my business, so I let it go. I did ask Warren about the girl sitting with Wu and her boyfriend. He said that was Julia Layton, and she's indeed one of Wu's lackeys. Her father's a retired naval commander, and she has impossibly snooty standards. Well, so do I, when it comes to that.

Warren's kind of a gossip-girl, 'cause he gave me the rundown on our fellow explorers even though he admitted he didn't know them all that well. One of the boys with a serious, brooding look, is Donny Nakamura. Kind of cute, I guess, if you're not put off by clinical depression. He had ear buds and was listening to something on his phone.

The other two boys were sitting and talking together. Jim diCamillo is skinny with wire-frame glasses and light brown hair that falls down over his forehead. War-

ren thinks his dad's some kind of salesman. The boy with him is Mike Vasconsuellos, with black hair and, well, not exactly fat but boxy-looking. His face is more pocked than most kids our age, but I'd rank him as both earnest and honest. I trusted him at first glance. His family runs a food truck, Warren tells me.

The other two girls on the bus were busy on their phones, either texting or talking to friends. Serena Swann is impossibly tall and lanky, a black supermodel in the making. She didn't so much walk as *flow* from place to place, like a silky ghost. She's so physically perfect I could hate her instantly, except I don't hate people without provocation.

Warren's voice took on a different tone when he talked about her. Methinks he has a crush on her. Hopeless, of course—but isn't that what crushes are?

Compared to Serena, Kim Trudlow looks positively stocky, though taken on her own she had a perfectly normal figure and a lovely face. Spiky black hair, bushy eyebrows, and at first I thought she looked entirely too serious for her own good. Then her friend on the phone said something to make her laugh, and she was transformed. I decided I liked her, after all.

The bus ride was nearly two hours. Warren told me that the Indian name for Stanyan Hill translated as something like "Mountain of the Lesser Gods," and after that we ran out of trivial things to say, so he suggested a game of chess. Before I could decline, he whipped out his phone and had a game set up.

I was trapped. Truth is, Bianca, I'm lousy at chess. I know how all the pieces move, of course, but plotting moves and strategies way in advance is just not one of my talents. I know, I know, all famous people are supposed to be, like, smokin' chess geniuses, so this is a handicap I'll just have to overcome. Sometime. But that's something for the future.

After just a couple of moves it was obvious I'm a blithering idiot at the game, and I'm sure it was almost

painful for Warren to watch. And yet, I could see he was dumbing down his game so he wouldn't embarrass me too badly. As we played, it slipped out that he was a finalist in the Chess Club tournament, which didn't surprise me in the least. He did manage to string things out so it took him almost half an hour to beat me—mostly because I took so long between moves, trying to figure what to do next. Then, before I could back out of it, he tricked me into a second game.

I contrived to lose that one even faster, then begged off any more by saying I needed to dictate some notes. He accepted that—a little disappointed, I think—and went off to give me some privacy.

So here I am, telling you about a stupid school bus trip. I'll write more when I actually have something to say. We're almost there, so I'll put this dumb machine away.

Your sister,
Tamara the Explorer

Letter 3

Shit! Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit!

We are screwed. Totally, royally screwed. I might almost say “raped,” but rape might at least have some element of the personal about it. This is just cold, implacable fate.

We’re all going to die here, unknown and alone except for the eleven of us. And it’s all my fault. And these aren’t even the people I’d have *chosen* to die with.

Okay, Tamara, calm down. Breathe a little bit. Focus. This isn’t the time or the place to panic. Even though it truly *is*, like, the perfect time and the perfect place.

Damn. I just tried to edit that stuff out, and I can’t. What kind of crappy software did they put in this recorder, that doesn’t have, like, an edit function?

Yeah, I know, it was supposed to be an alpha test. Doesn’t make me feel any better about it. Maybe it does have an edit feature, but I sure as hell can’t find it.

Okay, so I’ll just sit here and dictate this letter into my recorder. If the Voices let me. It beats screaming, or tearing my hair out. Or crying. God knows, no crying. How would it look to posterity if I spend my last hours, or days, crying?

Posterity? What posterity? Posterity will never even know I existed. I'll be just one of eleven high school kids who vanished on a field trip. Period. Not even a footnote to history.

Breathe some more, Tamara. Calm down. You might as well do this report the way you decided to write it, before everything went to shit. I may die, but I'll die doing what I promised myself I would. Be true to yourself, girl.



Hi Bianca,

This morning began beautifully, sun shining brightly in a clear blue sky. Perfect weather for a catastrophe.

(Stop it, Tamara! In order. Keep things in order.)

So anyway, we reached Stanyan Hill. Lesser gods, indeed. Turns out to be, like, a big mound of dirt and scrub in the desert, surrounded by flatter land with even more dirt and scrub. Its base is maybe two hundred yards at its widest point, and I'd guess it's two, maybe three hundred feet high, with a rounded, weathered top that makes it look almost ashamed of itself for sticking out of the ground so conspicuously. If it were much bigger, geologists might have explored it more thoroughly as some kind of desert anomaly, but as it is, I guess it's mostly fit for high school kids to climb around on.

I spread some sun screen on my arms and face as I listened to Mr. North cough his way through a canned safety lecture on how to behave ourselves. Stay in groups, good ol' buddy system. He was finally facing up to how sick he was, and he wouldn't leave the bus to come along with us. He and the driver would stay back here while the rest of the club went out unsupervised to climb over the face of the hill on our own.

Warren asked if I'd be his buddy, and looking over the other prospects I figured he was as good a bet as any. Most of the other people seemed to already have grouped themselves in some arrangement or another, probably echoing patterns from previous trips. Without any formal discussion—or any discussion at all, really—Jennifer Penney tagged along after Warren and me. She was never exactly “with” us, but she moved in the same direction and was never out of our sight. Every so often she'd stop and scribble in her notebook, as though some monumental insight suddenly struck her. Then she'd finish her thought and catch up with where we were going.

As to that—Warren asked if there was any specific formation or site I wanted to see, and I just shrugged. I know nothing about this place other than lesser gods seem to claim it, so everywhere was just as new as everywhere else. He said there was one spot he liked from previous trips, sort of a ledge about halfway up the eastern side of the hill, and it had a beautiful view of the desert spread out in front of you. That worried me for a second, because “ledge” sort of implies a cliff face, which in turn implies rock climbing. I don't do rock climbing. But Warren assured me it was a fairly gentle slope up, and this ledge was just a level place before the rise started again. I said why not, so he began leading me up the hill.

Okay, so the nursery rhyme about Jack and Jill went through my head, except the scansion doesn't work at all when you substitute “Warren” and “Tamara.” I tried not to think about the part where Warren fell down and broke his crown and Tamara came tumbling after.

And Jennifer Penney came up right along with us.

Okay, so by now you've probably guessed I'm not the rugged outdoorswoman type. We passed scruffy-looking plants and bushes, but I have no idea what they were. We walked past boulders and outcroppings, and I

had no idea what *they* were, either. We could have been passing untold mineral wealth, ours for the taking. If so, someone else would get rich off it, not me.

It did make me realize how pathetic this report was going to be. I'd have no specifics about what I was seeing. Maybe the good thing is it made me decide that, if I go on any further explorations, I'll try to learn more about biology and geology, so I can comment more intelligently next time.

Yeah, next time. Right. Fat lot of next times there's going to be.



So anyway, we made it up to Warren's ledge. Maybe the slope of the hill was a little steeper than I estimated, because it took us over an hour. I keep myself in reasonably good shape—not a gymnast, maybe, but I bike a lot—but I was definitely winded when I got up there. I was also feeling a little weird in a way I couldn't identify. Not headache-y, not dizzy, not nausea. I'd almost say it was like double vision, but things had a single distinct edge. Just eerie. I tried not to let anything show.

Warren waved at the panorama laid out before us. The desert did look nice, and we were around on the other side of the hill so we didn't have the sight of the bright yellow school bus to remind us of mundane things. I saw why he liked this spot.

A couple minutes later, Jennifer Penney joined us on this lookout point. She wasn't breathing hard at all. I hated her for that. She didn't even spend much time looking over the landscape. She just sat down, cross-legged on the ground, took a notebook out of her backpack, and began scribbling in it without a word to us.

Whatever.

It had been a long time since breakfast and the climb made me hungry, so I twisted around to get one

of the sandwiches out of my backpack. As my head moved, I thought I saw a movement in the wall of hill behind us. I'm afraid I made a little surprised squeak—very embarrassing for someone as sophisticated as I am—and called Warren's attention to the area. At first he didn't see anything, and I was starting to think my mind was playing tricks on me. Then he aid, "What the hell is that?" and took a step closer.

There was an opening in the hill, and as Warren and I both stepped closer to look at it, he said, "It's a cave. I don't remember that being there." So it wasn't just my imagination.

I don't remember seeing any movement, but Jennifer Penney was there, too. Standing right beside us. She was looking at the cave, too, not saying a word, then raising her notebook and scribbling frantically into it.

Warren took out his phone and showed me pictures of the way the ledge looked last time he was here. No cave that I could see. Then he put his hands around his mouth and called out, "Hey, everybody, I think we found something."

I was barely paying attention. The back of my neck itched. Only it wasn't the neck itself, it was more like inside my skull. And I could remember seeing the cave open up, like a door sliding silently to the left, like someone said "Open sesame" or something. And now the itch. And Jennifer Penney was scribbling even more frantically.

A couple other ExClub members shouted back, wondering what we'd found, and Warren gave a brief description of the cave. Within minutes, everyone was headed our way. I guess this was the most exciting thing people could imagine on Stanyan Hill. Given how bored everybody sounded yesterday, they all reacted like we'd offered them free ice cream cones. Their choice of flavor.

To distract myself while we waited for people to

show up, I had one of my PBJs and some sips of my juice pack. Warren took out his phone and snapped a picture of the opening, then unpacked a sandwich from his own pack—looked and smelled like chicken salad. Jennifer just scribbled.

I just finished my sandwich as the first kids arrived, and naturally it was Linda Wu, Burke Hastings, and Julia Layton. Behind them were other kids, too, and pretty soon the whole club was standing there, looking at the cave mouth and gobbling like turkeys at the sight. The ledge hadn't seemed particularly small when I first got there, but it was getting pretty crowded now.

I hadn't realized it, but one of the unwritten duties of junior class v.p. was being boss of the ExClub excursion. Or maybe it was being in charge of caves and other unexplained phenomena. Whatever, she was almost instantly leading the discussion.

Was Warren really sure the cave hadn't been there before? He was, and he happily showed her the photos, before and now, to prove it.

Had the cave mouth previously been blocked by some kind of boulder that rolled away in, oh, maybe an earthquake or something? Well, there was no boulder on the ledge with us, and a quick look down the hill showed nothing in that direction, either, that could have covered the opening. Wu didn't bother with the hypothesis that the boulder might have rolled *up* the hill.

I didn't mention my suspicion that I'd seen the cave slide open. I was already the new kid, and Wu didn't like me anyway. No point making myself out to be a raving loony this early in the excursion. After all, the day was still young.

Meanwhile, my neck was really starting to bother me. You know how a fly will suddenly go crazy and start buzzing hopelessly against a window pane? It was like

that, except down the neck of my blouse. Except this was inside the back of my skull, and the fly, like, really, *really* wanted to get out.

I hadn't even realized I'd moved close to the opening until Wu sharply told me to get away from there, and I saw that my feet were almost inside the cave mouth. I heard my own voice saying, "It's silly for us to argue here when we can just go inside and see for ourselves."

Did I really say that? I always thought I was more level-headed.

We argued a little, with the other kids just watching us. Then she tried the ultimate argument, resorting to a Higher Authority. She pulled out her phone and tried calling Mr. North. (Of course she had his number programmed in.) But there was no answer.

She was making all the arguments *I* should have been making. The arguments I *would* have been making if there wasn't the buzzing in my skull. Some part of me knew she was right. Why wasn't I listening to her? Was it just because she tried to change my name to a diminutive?

Instead, I took a step closer to the cave mouth.

She told me not to be stupid, that it was dark in that cave. In answer, I just shrugged one shoulder out of my backpack and moved it around in front of me, fumbled inside, and took out my flashlight. I held it up in triumph, then slipped the pack back around my shoulders and stepped forward into the darkness of the cave.

That one step nearly made me turn back. The cave suddenly felt very dark very fast. Some light filtered in from the cave mouth, but it seemed almost like I'd crossed into the nether world. The day was still warm, even in the cave's antechamber, but I shivered.

Then Warren stepped in beside me. He had a flashlight, too... only he bothered to turn his on instead of just waving it around like a stick, the way I had.

So, belatedly, I turned my own flashlight on, too, and shone it around. I've been to Shenandoah Caverns on a family vacation back when I was a little kid (no Bianca, you weren't there, you'd already left us before that), and though I don't remember a lot about it, I know what the inside of a cave looks like. Rock walls, maybe some embedded minerals in the rock glowing back in the light. Stalactites and stalagmites, probably not close to the entrance, but a little further on. Of course, since this wasn't a tourist attraction, it wouldn't look as perfectly neat as the one in Virginia. Probably not as big, either.

This was, like, a room. A vestibule, to be a little more precise, an antechamber. I've heard of houses in wetter climates that have a mud room where you can wipe the muck off your shoes before coming into the actual house. This felt like that.

It seemed pretty square, maybe ten feet on a side and seven feet high. There was no furniture or other details, just plain white walls.

Warren's eyes were wide. "Somebody built this!"

He may have intended his voice to be soft and filled with awe, but it carried quite well. Wu, still outside, asked what he was talking about, and he told her this was a regular room, built by regular people. Given that kind of teaser, she of course had to come in and see for herself. She had a flashlight too, naturally, and the three of us shone our lights around, proving pretty conclusively that this was an empty room.

"Who did this?" she wondered.

I had no more idea than she did, but I moved to the back wall, opposite the opening. I reached my hand out to touch it and, wonder of wonders, part of the wall—an inner door, I guess—slid open to reveal a greater dark emptiness beyond.

We all gasped. I'm not sure what I expected—I hon-

estly don't remember expecting anything—but it sure as hell wasn't that. I shone my beam inside, but it didn't hit anything. The light diffused in the air, but there was still mostly darkness beyond the door. Warren and Wu did the same, to no better result. Whatever was beyond the doorway, it was bigger than a simple flashlight beam could easily show.

I took another step forward, and Wu grabbed my arm. She told me in no uncertain terms that we were way beyond our depth here and we should wait for permission before going any further. Because this place was obviously artificial, we were probably trespassing. The school had gotten permission for us to explore Stanyan Hill, probably public land. A building inside that hill was another matter entirely.

Her voice was competing with that angrily buzzing fly inside my skull. And losing.

But Warren, nerd that he was, came to my rescue. We were the Explorers Club, he said. We were explorers. We should explore. There weren't any "No Trespassing" signs posted, no "Danger, Do Not Touch." Nothing had been locked, it all just opened to us. Even if we were trespassing, and somebody grabbed us and took us into court, we were just ignorant kids. What could they do to us? Send a nasty letter to our folks? Have a judge give us a stern talking to?

They could shoot us out of hand and settle the matter later, Wu pointed out. What if this was some top secret government installation, a new Area 51 even the Internet didn't know about? Maybe they could make us disappear and no one would ever hear from us again.

Meanwhile, the other kids were coming in the door behind us, wondering what was happening. The room was getting pretty crowded, and I didn't think we'd all fit. Flashes were going off as people took pictures of the anteroom.

I felt almost sorry for Wu. She was trying her damndest to be the responsible one here, really she

was. And normally I'd be doing the same. Famous people keep their heads in unusual situations, don't they?

But she had the same Pandora gene most girls do. She wanted to know what was in here just as much as I did. And she didn't have that damned buzzing fly in her skull.

After a minute, I took the step into the darkness. And all she ended up saying was, "Don't touch anything."

Warren came in right beside me, shining his light around. Behind us, by ones and twos, all the other kids stepped into the darkness, too. There were so many beams of light it looked like some miniature scene of an old-time movie premiere.

At first I thought we were in a tunnel. I could see walls to the left and right of us reflecting back our beams, but nothing in front as far as our lights could reach. Then I could see the white walls on either side, and I realized we were in a hallway. A pretty long hallway.

And I started coughing. I looked down and saw my feet were kicking up dust. So were everyone else's. Lots and lots of dust. Whatever this place was, the cleaning crew hadn't been here in, like, forever.

All the other kids were coughing right along with me. After a moment's thought, I checked in my backpack and brought out a kerchief I tied over my nose and mouth like a bandit in an old Western. Seeing my example, a few other kids found similar protection, but Warren and Wu were both out of luck and had to settle for covering their faces with their hands—not nearly as effective.

I commented to Wu that if this was some secret government base, they'd let the maintenance contract lapse. Then I shone my light on the floor ahead of us, where we hadn't stepped yet. There weren't any foot-

prints. Nobody'd been here for a very long time. She caught the implication, and nodded. We moved slowly on.

For twenty or thirty feet, the walls were bare white, and they were petty well covered with dust, too. There was no decoration, no pictures or writing or any type of identification. The only signs of life were spider webs. Plenty of them, so I assumed there were plenty of other little insects for the spiders to eat. I can just be full of these clever little insights when I set my mind to it.

Then we came to a door. It was closed. I and everyone else shone our lights on it and around it. It was shaped like a pointed archway, maybe eight feet tall and three wide. There was no sign on, above, or beside the doorway, nothing to indicate what the door led to. The door had no knob or button, no obvious way to open it. A couple of the boys tried pushing against it or sliding it aside, but it wouldn't budge. We talked and speculated as a group. No one had any ideas we thought were at all useful. People flashed pictures on their phones. Eventually we moved further down the corridor.

Twenty or thirty feet down, we came to another arched doorway, again closed, again with no way to identify it, and again with no way to get it open. The people who built this place must've had good memories, someone suggested, so they'd know what each room was for without a sign. "That, or good maps," Julia Layton suggested. "Or maybe the maps were stored in their phones or something."

We came to a third door, then a fourth, and all were identical as far as we could tell. For something that started out as promising as a hidden cave, this was rapidly getting monotonous. Even Wu seemed bored by the whole thing.

But there was still that buzzing fly in the back of my head. I didn't know what it meant or what it wanted, but it wasn't done with me yet.

Finally we came to a circular ramp that spiraled down into the ground, wide enough for three of us to walk abreast. No steps, but it was pretty steep and there was a banister of sorts along both the inside and outside of the path. We stood around the upper edge and looked down. The ramp disappeared into darkness below, and even our flashlights weren't enough to reveal what might be at the bottom.

We stopped and looked at one another. Several people, myself included, wanted to continue our exploration and find out what this place really was. Wu argued that we could leave right now, write our reports, and get full credit for a job well done. I countered that this place was long abandoned and presented no danger. Wu said there might be a good reason why the place was deserted. "What about radiation?" she said. "That would explain why a perfectly good and obviously expensive building was just abandoned in the middle of the desert for no reason we can see."

I settled the argument definitively. I started down the ramp. Wu reached out to grab my arm again, but she was a second too late. Not wanting to be left behind, she reluctantly followed me.

Ramps are supposed to be easy. I mean, they make them for wheelchair patients, right? But this one was so steep I had to hold onto the railing to keep my balance. It made my knees hurt, too, because I had to take short steps and plant my feet just right to keep myself erect.

About fifteen feet down, we reached a landing. Off to the right was another corridor looking just like the one we'd just traveled. But below us, the spiral ramp continued down into further blackness.

Wu waved her arm to indicate the corridor on our right and said—snidely, I thought—"Do you want to explore *that* corridor too?"

"No," I told her, "I want to go further down."

“You’re crazy!” she said, staring at me disbelieving.

I think I must have been. What’s worse, I was stupid. I can look back on that and see it so clearly now. But right then, right there, all I knew was that I had to go further down the ramp.

I started further down. Wu seemed shocked out of her mind at my defiant lunacy. Before she could grab me—or, more likely, order her boyfriend or one of the other boys to grab me—Warren jumped ahead of her, following me down. He called back over his shoulder that she and the others should wait there for us, but I was his buddy, and he’d go with me to keep me from getting into trouble.

If only. But at least it kept Wu frozen in place long enough for me to continue on my way.

I went further down, clutching the railing, with Warren close at my heels. The steep slope of the ramp was as hard for him as it was for me, but he came on with fierce determination. I think he may have called for me to wait up, but I didn’t listen. If eyes can really be glazed, I think mine must have been. All I knew was I had to go down the ramp.

We reached another landing, and I stopped. To my right was another corridor. The ramp continued spiraling down ahead of me. I shined my flashlight both ways. Then I turned right into the hallway, following my own personal yellow brick road. Warren was right beside me. He was nattering cheerily about something but, to be honest, I don’t know what it was. The buzzing in my skull drowned him out.

We passed another closed door. I stopped beside it, looking at the blank wall, then reached out a finger and traced “Tamara Ruben” in the dust. I stared at it. But writing my name in the dust wasn’t going to make me famous. All it got me was a smile from Warren and a dirty finger, which I wiped off on my jeans. Then Warren stepped forward, drew a big-nosed figure peeking over a wall and wrote beneath it, “Kilroy was here.” I

vaguely remember hearing something about that somewhere, but I don't recall its importance.

We walked past three more closed doors without even stopping. Then there was a long interval on the wall before the next one. Only this door was open.

Warren and I both stopped and looked at one another. Then we looked into the darkness of the room beyond the doorway and shined our lights into it. There was nothing to see close to the entrance. For what seemed like hours we said nothing. Then I told him to run back and get the rest of our team while I waited there for them.

He double-checked that I'd wait right there, and I assured him I would. So off he went, at a fast trot. It wasn't hard to backtrack, just follow the trail we'd made in the dust.

Gullible fool. I waited till I could no longer see the beam of his flashlight, then headed into the room beyond the open door.

Brave Tamara. Maybe they'll put that on my headstone. If I ever get a headstone.

The room was big; I could tell that by shining my light across to the opposite wall. It was also empty. Nothing marred the pristine carpet of dust on the floor. I wondered vaguely how long it would take to accumulate a layer of dust that thick. I mean, this was way more than an inch. Without some special source, we were talking way more than weeks, or even years. Start thinking in terms of decades, centuries.

But no, that couldn't be right. These walls looked and felt like some modern material. They didn't have that a century or more ago. Not that I'm an expert on architecture or materials technology, but still. Damn, I wished Dad was there right then. He's an engineer, he could pin this stuff down a lot better than I could.

But I think I'm temporizing, looking back from the

point of now onto the point of then. Was I thinking cogently at that particular moment? Almost certainly not. I was moving, without much rational thought at all.

I know I entered the room with my back against the side of the left-hand wall. And I waved the beam of my flashlight back and forth, making sure I didn't have any unexpected company. At least I wasn't *that* irrational. Nothing was going to creep up from behind me.

As I said, the room was empty. No furniture, no people, no designs either on the opposite wall, on the floor or ceiling, or on the wall at my back. There was just me and my flashlight in a very big, very dark, very quiet room. No footprints in the dust to prove anyone had walked here in recent memory. I was unquestionably alone.

A thought chilled me. What if something *flew* in here? Maybe a flock of bats or something? Would that leave the dust on the ground undisturbed?

But my flashlights showed lots of spider webs, and they weren't disturbed, either. Flying creatures would probably have disturbed them, somehow. Or eaten the spiders. No, I was alone in here. I was almost positive of that.

I reached the far wall and a door in one of the pointed archways slid silently open into a room beyond that. I jumped. I was pretty sure I'd seen the outer door of the cave slide open, but that was just from the corner of my eye. This was an outright invitation. I might have expected Lurch the butler to welcome me to my doom.

Then I forced myself to calm down. There wasn't anybody here. I probably tripped an electric eye or a floor plate or something. I'd survived this far, might as well take the leap beyond this. I shined my light inside the doorway, expecting to see a bare floor beyond that as well.

Instead, there was a seat planted firmly in the floor, looking something like an acceleration couch in a jet cockpit. It faced the far wall, its back toward me, but as

I craned my neck side to side I could see there was some kind of figure sitting in the couch. And there was a greenish glow coming from the creature. My flashlight almost drowned out that extra illumination, so I turned it off for a second to check.

The glow was weak, but there.

Never let it be said that Tamara Ruben demonstrates great powers of discretion at times of crisis. I left the wall and moved into the center of the room, right up to the couch.

I turned my flashlight back on and shined it about the room as I walked. Still plenty of dust on the floor, but no spider webs I could see. Had the place been sealed off so tightly even spiders had trouble getting in?

Question: How had this figure gotten onto the couch without disturbing the dust around it? Answer: It had gotten on before the dust accumulated on the floor. This person had been here for a *really* long time.

As I reached the couch, I examined the figure on it more carefully. It was a skeleton in a jumpsuit, a uniform. But not a human skeleton. I'd only seen a real one hanging from a stand in a bio lab, though of course I'd seen lots of pictures and movies. And of course, at Halloween, though those usually look fake. This was subtly but demonstrably different.

The uniform was mostly sea-foam green, with decorative patches of red or blue on the chest and sleeves. It was a one-piece jumpsuit, with boots on the feet and gloves on the hands. The only opening was at the neck, where the skull came out.

The creature was no taller than I am, maybe even a bit shorter; it's hard to tell because it was lying on the couch. It had two arms and two legs, but they seemed a little shorter than a human's would be, and it had a barrel chest that would have made it appear stocky. The limbs were joined funny, like they bent a little wrong.

The skull was smaller than a human of that height might have, though it wasn't exactly a pinhead. The eye sockets looked too small. There were no ears or nose, but human skulls don't exactly have those, either. Cartilage rather than bone.

Then I did the one smart thing I did all day. I took my phone out of my pocket and snapped a picture of the skeleton in the jumpsuit. I don't think it was a conscious decision. My eyes were focused on one specific detail—a globe about the size of a softball lying on the being's lap. This globe, smooth and featureless, was the source of the greenish glow I'd noticed. My eyes focused so hard on this ball I could scarcely breathe.

I put my phone back in my pocket. Then I reached out to grab the glowing globe...



The glare was so bright it hurt my eyes, so I scrunched them shut again immediately. The back of my head hurt. My shoulders hurt. Worst of all, my ass hurt. It was throbbing, like some vengeful god had just spanked the crap out of it.

And there were voices in my head, talking continuously. It was like a DVD that had a second audio channel in another language. But it wasn't Spanish; I know enough Spanish to at least order a decent meal, and this didn't sound at all like that. This was a language I'd never heard before. And it was running simultaneously with normal sound, only slightly in the background.

My arms and legs felt okay, except for a very faint tingling in the palms of my hands. And I was sitting on the ground with my back propped against the wall. But I didn't remember sitting down.

I fluttered my eyelids a little. They were teary from the bright light, but I could just make out shapes through the lashes.

Bright light? It had been pitch dark a second ago. I needed to use my flashlight, I remembered that. It was

painful, but I blinked furiously, trying to open my eyes a bit further.

There was a group of figures moving around, one standing next to me, towering over me, and I heard Warren say, "I think she's coming around."

His voice was slightly louder than the other audio channel in my head, slightly more understandable only because he wasn't talking gibberish.

Another figure joined him, crouched beside me. Linda Wu. Her voice actually sounded concerned as she asked, "Are you all right?"

I said, "I think so. What happened?"

"I was about to ask you that same question."

It took a really long conversation because a lot apparently happened very quickly and nearly simultaneously. Wu did almost all the talking for the group, while I described what I saw and did. I had to ask her to repeat herself a lot, because her voice suddenly got mixed in with the other Voices. And sometimes I stopped because I lost my train of thought amid all the crosstalk going back and forth in my head.

Wu explained that Warren got back to the group and told them to follow him, that he and I had found an open door. At almost the same time, the lights came on, everywhere in the hallways and all at once. It was like the brightest of sunlight, and for a few moments everyone was blinded by the sudden glare. It was indirect, coming from all over. No pinpoint sources, just intense white light everywhere.

And instead of blank white, the walls had designs on them, glowing from within. They weren't pictures, or didn't seem to be, but they weren't in any language anyone could recognize. They weren't *on* the walls, but coming from inside like a computer monitor.

And at almost the same instant the lights came on, there was an earthquake. Only not exactly. We're all

California kids, we know what earthquakes feel like. Two basic types: the sharp ones that feel like somebody gave you a sudden shove, and the rolling ones that make you feel like you're on the deck of a small ship in a big ocean. This was more like being on the back of a wet dog trying to shake itself dry. And this was strong, at least a 7.0, maybe stronger. The kids were worried at first that the ceiling might fall in, but it was built to good standards and stayed up.

The earthquake lasted maybe five minutes before it stopped. No one could remember ever feeling a quake lasting that long. Burke Hastings tried his phone, but couldn't get a signal. Turns out, no one else could, either. So Warren and the others followed his tracks back here through the dust. They found me lying on the floor against the wall, unconscious. That was half an hour ago. My breathing at first was quick and gasping, but eventually evened out to normal. I wasn't bleeding or anything; apart from being unconscious, I looked fine, but they were worried I might have a concussion or something.

I looked around the room and it seemed wrong, but it took a sec for me to realize what the problem was. Except for us kids, the room was empty. There was no acceleration couch with its jumpsuited body and glowing ball. Instead, the walls shone with dials, graphs, and changing indicators that may have been numbers, except I couldn't understand them. And the Voices were keeping up a constant stream of chatter, making it hard for me to hear the real people around me.

I asked Wu what had happened to the chair and the body, and got just a blank stare. So then I told them what I found and they started looking real concerned.

"Well, if she wasn't crazy before," Julia Layton said, "the earthquake sure knocked the little remaining sense out of her."

"I got a picture of it," I said, reaching for my phone. You know how hard it is to get a phone out of your

pocket when you're sitting down and your head's spinning and Voices are distracting you? But I managed it after a couple of seconds and called up the photo. There it was, just like I remembered it.

I passed the phone to Warren, and he studied it for several long seconds before he passed it around to everyone else. People were quiet as it came to them and they looked at what I'd seen.

No one spoke for several seconds. Finally Warren said, "Looks like an alien to me."

"And how many aliens have you met?" Julia said cynically.

"You mean aside from you?" Serena Swann asked. Her voice was a cynical drawl that elicited a few snickers.

Julia flushed a little, but was otherwise undeterred. "And did this alien skeleton just get up and walk away, carrying the couch with it?"

"I don't know what happened," I said. "But I don't have Photoshop on my phone. I can't take pictures of something that's not there." My head hurt, and I was starting to *wish* I had something as simple as a concussion.

"Let's get out of here," Wu said, slowly and calmly. She looked at me as she said it, but I was in no mood to dispute her. *Out* seemed like a great direction this time.

I pushed myself off the floor, or tried to. My sore shoulders protested mightily, and didn't want to lift my weight. Warren saw my problem and offered me a hand up, which I gratefully accepted. I stood unsteadily for a second, the back of my jeans filthy with dust. I brushed at them awkwardly, then nodded to everyone and we started off.

Did I mention my ass hurts? Still does. Made me walk slow and funny. Take it from me, you don't know how much you use the muscles in your ass until you try

to walk when they don't want to let you.

We left the rooms where we'd gathered and started down the long hallway toward the ramp. The whole place looked different with the lights on. More ordinary, less spooky in some ways, just like a long corridor. But then I thought about the disappearing dead alien and a chill went down my back. This place was still desperately spooky.

We got about three-quarters of the way to the ramp when Kim Trudlow, the one with the spiky hair, shouted in surprise. She said she saw something moving. None of us discounted her, just looked where she pointed. After a few seconds, we all saw it.

It was a boxy thing of metal, a little under waist high, with a lot of arms waving around in frantic motion. It came in our direction, but slowly. Behind it, the hallway looked clean and sparkly.

I remember a creature in the Disney *Alice in Wonderland*. It looked like a Scottie dog, with a whisk brush at its head and tail, and it brushed its way along the ground. Wherever it brushed, the path ahead of and behind it disappeared, until there was no path left. This thing reminded me a little of that.

We all realized that, despite the frantic whirling of its arms, it was no threat to us. "It's a rumba," somebody said, and we all laughed nervously. For all its weird appearance, it was just an automatic vacuum cleaner, getting rid of all the dust. It had a big job ahead of it, from what we'd seen so far, but this strange device somehow made this surreal situation feel the teensiest bit more homey. The aliens believed in keeping their home clean, too.

I slowed the party down a little with my limping gait, but we still made good time. We passed the robot without incident; it didn't even seem to notice us. Then we were up the spiral ramp to the level where we'd come in. The robot hadn't reached this level, yet, so it was still easy to trace our footsteps in the dust.

Our footprints came to the inner door of the mud room, then stopped. The wall was shut tight; we couldn't even see a crack around the doorway. We were sealed in here tight as a drum.

Kim Trudlow gave a sound between a curse and a sob. "I really need to get out of here," she said. "I gotta pee something fierce!"

I'd been pushing it to the back of my mind, but now that the subject was broached it couldn't be ignored. I had to go, too, and the chorus of agreement showed the sentiment was universal. No one wanted to simply relieve themselves on the smooth floor of the hallway. The cleaning robot would probably take care of the mess eventually, but meantime the thought was gross beyond belief. Not to mention the lack of privacy.

One of the Voices was speaking urgently in my head, and a crude map appeared superimposed over my vision. "Follow me," I said—and without waiting to see who was coming, I started back along the way we'd come.

I waddled down the hallway as fast as I could—did I mention my ass hurts?—and went past the ramp to a doorway further on. I touched my hand to a glowing design on the door, and it slid open to reveal a room beyond—a sparkling clean room whose function was beyond mistaking.

The room was long and narrow, with five stools about two feet high made of some smooth material like porcelain. The stools had no seats, just open bowls you had to squat over. There weren't any stalls or dividers, either; the stools were out in the open. So the aliens had little or no sense of privacy. Along a facing wall was a line of basins, but no mirrors.

"Girls first," I said, playing usher. "Boys have to hold it a little longer." The girls needed no second invitation to fill the long room, and I closed the door be-

hind us by pressing another glowing button.

I noticed all the girls were wearing jeans for this excursion, a remarkable exercise in practicality. The instant the door closed they were pulling their pants down and claiming one of the stools for themselves. There were six of us girls and only five stations, so I played noble and let everyone else take a turn before me, shifting from foot to foot with growing impatience.

My eyes were roving the room, and I noticed there was nothing resembling toilet paper. Serena Swann finished, and just before straightening up she gave a sharp squeal and her eyes shot wide open. She was quickly followed by Kim Trudlow with a similar reaction. I asked what the problem was, even as I was unfastening my own belt to take my turn.

Kim's face was beet red and she couldn't speak, but Serena wasn't as shy. "I'm glad I was able to pee," she said, "but I didn't realize getting fingered was a complimentary service."

Turns out that, instead of leaving you to wipe yourself, the toilets here did it for you, extruding a small appendage that quickly sanitizes you and gets you all fresh and nice. I tried it myself a few seconds later, after having squatted gingerly over the bowl. It felt totally invasive, but it was quick and painless. Not what I'd have chosen as a wake-up call, I guess, but it beat the alternative of feeling drippy and dirty.

As we were all getting ready to leave, Serena suggested not telling the boys. "Let them find out for themselves."

"They can just stand and pee into the bowl," Wu said, but Julia said, "They'll have to sit down sometime." We were snickering as we left the bathroom. It was the one funny thing that had happened all day, and it seemed funnier than it probably was.

As we stood around waiting for the guys to finish, Wu asked me, "How'd you know the bathroom was here, and how to open the door?"

This was the moment I'd been dreading, but I couldn't put it off any longer. "The Voices told me."

"What Voices?"

So I had to go into a long explanation of what was happening inside my head—from the insistent buzzing that drove me to explore the cave in the first place to the actual Voices that were talking to me in a language I couldn't understand, and who showed me a map of where the bathroom was and how to get into it.

She looked at me like I was crazy, and I can't say I blamed her. I once saw a list of excuses, and right at the top was, "Sorry, I can't come in to work; the Voices told me to clean all the guns today." Sounds funny, until you hear it come out of your own mouth and you're being serious.

Wu was giving me funny looks, humor-the-crazy-girl looks, not wanting to believe me but how else could she explain what was going on? Then I heard Jennifer Penney talk for the first time. She looked up from her notebook and said, "The Voices are real. I hear them too."

"You do?" Wu and I said, almost simultaneously.

"Yes. Not as good as you do. They're like someone whispering behind a closed door way down the hall, but I hear them talking."

She held up her notebook, displaying rows of cramped writing in black ink on the lined paper. "I'm taking down what they say, at least phonetically."

"Can you understand them?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I don't have a big enough alien vocabulary yet, or a sense of their grammar." Then she went back to her note-taking. Wu and I vanished from her consciousness as though we were momentary distractions best forgotten.

Wu and I looked at each other. "Why are they talking to *you*?" she asked.

I shrugged. “Just lucky, I guess.” I don’t know if I conveyed all the irony I felt in those few words. But I was greatly relieved. You don’t know, you can’t know, what it’s like to feel crazy. Now, thanks to Jennifer, I knew there was objective truth, however strange, behind what I was experiencing.

The boys came out of the bathroom a few seconds later, Burke Hastings and Jim diCamillo very red-faced. They didn’t say anything, though, and neither did we.

We all stood around in the hallway talking, wondering what to do next. We were all feeling much more alive and brighter after the visit to the bathroom, but no one had any strong suggestions of what was going on or what we should do about it. A few people tried their phones, but still got no signal. Burke wanted to try again forcing open that wall to the mud room, but I said the Voices weren’t being as helpful about that—and apart from pen knives and other small objects in our packs, we didn’t really have any tools with us.

Then suddenly there was a klaxon sort of sound that shook the walls and our eardrums simultaneously. People put their hands to their ears, and we all looked at one another. A couple of people asked what was happening, and for some reason they looked straight at me when they said it.

Wu was one of the ones looking at me as she asked, “What do we do now?”

“I don’t know,” I replied, “but I think we should get to the bridge.”

“The what?”

I felt as confused as she looked. Why had I called it that? “The room where you found me,” I said. “And we’d better hurry.” Without waiting to see whether anyone would follow, I started off back the way we’d just come.

Down the hall, down the ramp, down another hall. I didn’t look back, but I didn’t have to. I could tell by the shaking of the floor and the echoes of many feet

that the rest of the group was behind me. And I wasn't moving as fast as I normally could. Did I mention my ass is sore?

We reached the room I'd been in before. The cleaning robots must've been here in our absence; all the dust had been swept away. Five acceleration couches had sprouted from the floor. None of them, I'm glad to say, had dead aliens lying on them.

Without hesitation, I grabbed the central couch. "This is mine," I declared. "Grab a couch if you can. If not, find some spot as comfortable as you can and hunker down in it."

"Why?" Donny Nakamura asked. "What's going to happen?"

"I have no idea," I admitted, "but you'll want to be secure when it does."

I looked around automatically for a seatbelt of some sort to strap myself in. There wasn't one. The seat was leathery and felt comfortable, though, built for a body just slightly wider and shorter than mine.

Only once I was securely in my couch did I look around the room. The wall still had dials and gauges, but now, directly in front of me like a big flat-screen TV, was a large wall monitor. It showed a deep blackness powdered profusely with spots of white, zillions of them. The blackness and the white coexisted peacefully, without contradiction.

Wu was to my right, Warren on my left. Warren was gaping. When he spoke, I could just barely hear his awe-stricken voice over the blaring of the klaxon.

"We're in space," he said.

Part of my mind was saying, "Of course," while the other part couldn't believe that. How could we be in space? We were in a cave in a hillside in a California desert. Geologic features don't spit out formations like giant watermelon seeds.

“Well, no wonder our phones can’t get any signal,” Serena said. “The nearest tower’s probably a zillion miles away by now.”

The blaring of the alarm had accelerated its pace, then suddenly stopped and emitted four sharp *blats* in a row. Then the floor bucked under us.

I don’t think you’ve ever been to an amusement park, Bianca, but there are some rides that spin around and the floor drops away and you get this queasy feeling in the pit of your stomach before your sense of balance, your sense of up and down, restores itself. Then you may be falling like an elevator with its cable cut, or you may re-establish a sense of stability. But that wasn’t what happened here.

For me it was like a shirt or a sock that’s been taken off inside-out and some giant invisible hand was reaching down my throat to turn me back the other way. The PBJ I’d eaten just a couple hours earlier wanted to come along with it. It had been crunchy peanut butter, too, and I couldn’t imagine it looking any better the second time around.

All around the room, people were making an odd assortment of sounds I couldn’t describe even if I wanted to. I screwed my eyes tight shut, afraid anything I saw might send my stomach completely over the edge.

Then, as abruptly as it happened, the klaxon stopped. So did the nausea. Instead, I found myself drifting in a strange, comforting ocean of warm inner peace. I breathed shallowly, afraid to take large lungfuls because it felt I might drown in cotton candy.

After a few seconds of this, Wu said, “Look!” beside me.

I didn’t want to. I wanted this peaceful, dreamy moment to last a few hours longer.

But my eyes shot open without orders from my brain. The monitor in front of me, which moments ago had displayed a deep starscape, was now a gray pearlescent sea, swirling in clouds of gentle turbulence.

I stared at it for quite some time, blinking with incomprehension. Then, from my other side, Warren breathed softly and said, "It's the Out."

"The what?" Wu asked. Clearly she was having a hard time catching up with reality. And I have to admit, I wasn't any too far ahead of her.

Warren struggled for words to explain. "There's an animé series called *Outriders* about space police who patrol between the stars fighting space pirates and other baddies. The hyperspace they travel through is called 'the Out.' It looks just like that grayness on the screen."

"So you're saying we're in hyperspace?" Wu said incredulously. "We were just on Earth a little while ago, and now we're in interstellar space?"

Warren shrugged shyly. "That's just what it looks like to me."

But I knew he was right. I could feel the Voices nodding to his supposition, if voices can nod. They were at least humming agreement. Damn, could they understand me when I couldn't understand them? That seemed manifestly unfair. Maybe I was thinking in pictures or something. That's how they showed me where the bathroom was, after all.

Kim Trudlow, sitting on the floor in a corner started crying. So did Donny Nakamura. Serena Swann, more affected by the transition, threw up belatedly. I can't say I blamed her, but there was an uncomfortable stomach-acid stench in the air.

Thirty seconds of silence drifted by, and it stretched to a minute or more. Then Mike Vasconsuelos asked what we were going to do. Wu repeated the question, and she was looking pointedly at me.

"How the hell should I know?" I asked.

"Aren't the Voices talking to you?"

That just made me mad. "All the Voices did was show me where the bathroom was," I said. "It isn't like

they're giving me crash courses in interstellar navigation and spaceship control. Or maybe they are, but I'm too dumb to understand. All it really proves is they don't want us dirtying up their ship by peeing on the floor."

I felt so sulky I barely noticed one of the robots gliding in and quietly cleaning up Serena's vomit from the floor. Those things are really handy, but that's an observation I make only in hindsight.

Then Warren came to my rescue, whether deliberately or inadvertently I don't know. "Bathrooms are great," he said, "but we all came on this excursion with just a snack. Unless we can find food and water, we'll be dead in a week or two anyway, and it'll be damned unpleasant in the meantime. Maybe the aliens who kidnapped us'll return us in a couple hours—but it'd be ridiculous to count on that."

"Oh, is that all you're worried about—your stupid stomach?" I growled, pissed. "Follow me."

And why did I say that? I had no idea what I meant, no idea what I was doing. But before anyone could ask, before I could even try to explain, I hobbled off the bridge (have I mentioned my ass hurts?) and out the door, leaving it up to everyone else to scramble after me. Which they did, wondering—just as I was—what was going to happen.

I went down the hall to the stairwell and down the ramp one more level, then through another corridor to a very big door, three times the size of any we'd seen so far. It opened to my touch, just as the bathroom had, and we found ourselves facing a vast chamber of long dining tables and seats. Being school kids, the word that leaped to all our minds was "cafeteria," but Julia Layton, whose father was a commander, also supplied "mess hall." Whatever you called it, it was obviously some chamber for the mass ingestion of nutrients.

Mike Vasconsuellos said, "It's impressive, but where's the actual food?"

I hadn't stopped, though, just continued walking to the back of the room and yet another unmarked door. Opening it, I led the group into another large room filled with other machines, tables and basins, lined by an entire wall of cabinets. Obviously a kitchen.

Now I'll confess, I'm as at home with a kitchen as, like, a gecko is with a stereo set, but I at least know one when I see it. Mike's eyes positively lit up and he immediately began wandering among the aisles of machines and prep tables, trying to figure out their purposes. Some things were obvious; a spoon is a spoon, a bowl is a bowl, and there were examples of each stored in places specifically designed to hold them. But would a Neolithic woman know what a food processor is or how to make a microwave oven work? She might starve to death in the midst of plenty.

Mike—whose family, I vaguely remembered, ran a food truck—went to examine the cupboards. Some held tools, obvious or arcane. Others held boxes that, when we pried them open with our pen knives, were found to contain clear plastic containers of square pellets. The pellets were of different colors and sizes—some small beige cubes about a quarter inch on a side, some larger cubes of green, red-orange, and blue, still others nearly half a foot on a side, that were so cobalt blue they were almost black. Other containers held round pellets of yellow, green, and gray. Most of us guessed instantly we'd found the pantry.

This cheered most of us up a little, but Donny Nakamura refused to yield to unabashed optimism. "What good will any of this do us?" he wondered. "Remember those decades of dust on the floor? And the alien skeleton was probably dead longer than any of us have been alive. What do we suppose the freshness date is on all this food? If it really *is* food. Is it all stale, at best, or rancid and full of germs at worst? Or can hu-

man stomachs even digest alien food? This could be a kitchen full of poisons.”

So what could I do? I reached into the container of green cubes, pulled one out and popped it in my mouth. Almost immediately I started coughing.

Everyone looked concerned and Kim started toward me, ready to slap me on the back or perform the Heimlich maneuver or something. I held up my hands to assure her, then reached into my backpack and fished around for my juice pack. I took a swig, coughed a couple more times, and said, “The food’s all right, just dry—very, very dry. It tastes a little like cabbage, but with only half the flavor.”

With this much assurance, people began cautiously tasting the food cubes and pellets. We didn’t want to exhaust our liquid supplies, but we found a cabinet with cups, and spigots over some basins dispensed water. It was warm and tasted a bit stale, but it was drinkable and washed down the food, which was all we needed from it at the moment.

We tried the different colors with minimal excitement and less enthusiasm, until Jim diCamillo tasted the red-orange cube and a few seconds later began vomiting violently. We got him plenty of water and eventually he stopped throwing up, but he continued looking pale for some time. Kim Trudlow said she’d tried that color and had no ill effects; maybe Jim got a bad cube, or had a food allergy of some sort to it, or something else. We were a little more circumspect after that.

One of the rumbas came by a few minutes later and cleaned up the vomit. Handy little machines. So far, they’re our best part of this whole experience. Now if only we could find handy little machines to fly this ship home again.

Our home, I mean. Going to the aliens’ home might be more likely, but wouldn’t be nearly as good.

After a while, when we were satisfied we wouldn’t

immediately starve or die of thirst, we left the kitchen and sat in the mess hall. The tables had benches on either side seating three people each, so we filled out two tables and tried to talk about what to do next. None of us was thinking straight, I'm afraid. We were all scared. Even those of us who liked science fiction and might have volunteered to travel to some alien world weren't really happy having no choice in the matter.

Warren pointed out this was an *old* ship; the dust on the floor and the dead body told us that. The systems were working so far, but what if things started breaking down? The ship could spring a leak, or air recycling could give out. The hyperdrive might not be able to return us to normal space. Thermal controls could go haywire. There seemed to be some artificial gravity holding us in place—we all felt a little lighter than normal, but we didn't have accurate equipment to measure it—but that could give way at any time and leave us floating around the ship. Like, any one of a zillion things could go wrong, and we had no way to fix it.

This cheerful assessment left us all in a pretty grim mood, I'll tell you. Julia reached into a pocket and pulled out a slightly crumpled pack of cigarettes.

"What are you doing?" I asked her.

"Getting myself a smoke."

"No," I said.

"Screw you," she said, pulling out a lighter and lifting it to light her cigarette.

I reached out and slapped the cigarette out of her hand, knocking it to the floor. "What the hell—?" she exclaimed.

"The ship won't like it," I said.

"I don't care, Ms. Freako. *I'll* like it. I've just been kidnapped into interstellar space by an alien spaceship. I *need* a smoke."

She and I glared at each other for several red sec-

onds until Warren spoke up. “No smoking aboard spaceships,” he said. “It’s hell on the recirculation system.” He struggled for another second to come up with a metaphor she might accept. “Just like a submarine.”

Julia muttered something about the horse he rode in on.

Before the altercation could get any worse, Linda Wu stood up. “How many smokers do we have here?”

As it turned out, Julia and Jim diCamillo were the only smokers in the group—and between them they only had the equivalent of a pack and a half. “If it turns out we’re on this ship any length of time,” Wu said, “you’ll have to quit cold turkey soon anyhow. Might as well start now.”

“I’m gonna get damned cranky,” Julia growled

“How will we tell?” I asked.

Julia picked her cigarette off the floor and stuffed it back into her crumbled pack.

A few minutes later, we checked our watches. It was now about six-thirty Pacific Time. Not very late, even considering we’d been up early to meet the school bus. But this was an exhausting day, both physically and emotionally. We could barely keep our eyes open. I suggested we return to the bridge. There were couches there, at least for five of us, and enough room for the rest to spread out on the floor. But being there, we could at least be ready if something else happened, like the ship slipping back out of hyperspace. I don’t know what we’d *do* if that happened, but at least we’d know about it.

People’s eyes were slowly glazing over, and I could see the day had taken the same toll on them as it had on me. We all visited the bathroom again, then dragged our weary bodies up to the bridge, where I again claimed the center couch. Nobody argued with me. I lay back down and fully expected to fall instantly asleep.

But sleep was slow in coming, for a variety of reasons. The bright lights that were on throughout the ship

didn't dim; they seemed to want to burn their way through our eyelids. I can sleep with lights on, but lights this bright were a challenge. And the Voices didn't want to shut up, either. They weren't yelling at me, but they talked urgently and incessantly, imparting all sorts of data that might be both informative and interesting if I could understand it. Plus there was an understandable level of anxiety sinking its teeth in my mind and not letting me relax.

Everyone else seemed to have trouble falling asleep, too—and they didn't even have the Voices as an excuse. Well, not quite everyone. Jennifer Penney seemed able to close her eyes and drop off in an instant even though she could, sort of, hear the Voices.

I closed my eyes for a few seconds, and when I opened them again I could see by my watch three hours had passed. That was good, but now I was wide awake again. I needed more than three hours' sleep if I was going to face the situation, and I definitely wasn't sleepy now.

I realized I hadn't written up this report, so I slipped quietly off my couch, took my backpack, and left the room without waking anyone. I went a couple of doors down the hall, opened it up, went inside and closed it again. I'd be undisturbed here—probably forever if I wanted, except for the Voices. And I was starting to be able to ignore them, at least a little.

So here I am, sitting on the floor in a corner as comfortably as I can (did I mention my ass hurts?), dictating this letter to you. And my brain is chasing its tail around in circles in my mind.

What's the point in writing this? Supposedly, it's so I can get a good grade in this club so I can maintain a high GPA. Well, that's not going to happen, is it? The other kids and I have been kidnapped by a dead alien and are being hauled in a spaceship through interstellar

space to who-knows-where. We'll never get home again. For all I know, we may never even reach our destination. This ship could stay in hyperspace and fly our shriveled corpses off the edge of the universe.

This is all pointless. I'm going to stop now. I'm getting tired enough to get back to sleep, I think. I'll just go back to the bridge and crawl onto my couch again.

So why don't I just stop talking? I should just shut up and go to sleep. Why do I have to explain myself? Because I think it would be rude? You're not out there and you'll never read this, but I have to be polite.

Goodbye, Bianca. I won't be writing any more. Your sister,

Tamara

Letter 4

Hi Bianca,

Okay, I guess I lied. So sue me.

I really had no intention of lying, I honestly thought I wouldn't be writing. What was the point, when nobody'd ever read it? Certainly not you, certainly not Mr. North. And I'm *certainly* not going to share these writings with any of the other kids. I was depressed as hell, and I was sure we'd all die soon anyway.

But today is Day 4—informally we've all been calling last Saturday, when we left home and the ship took off, as Day 1, and that's the closest we've come so far to an official calendar. The ship's still going, but we don't know where. I'm no closer to dying than I was that first day, and life is going on monotonously, if you can use such a word to describe this weird situation. And I need to do something to keep my sanity, so I guess writing a letter to someone who'll never read it is as good as anything.

So anyway, about an hour after I finished dictating

that last letter and went to sleep, I woke up again to the sound of alarms and the Voices screaming at me. I stumbled off my acceleration couch and toward the door before I knew what was going on. Out in the hallway I turned left without even thinking. A couple dozen yards away I saw a figure sitting on the ground, making incoherent noises. I didn't recognize it at first, but as I approached I could hear its voice. "Julia?" I said. "What happened?"

She looked up and glared at me, her head covered in some glistening foam. "Your goddamn ship *attacked* me, that's what happened!"

My mouth froze between two possibilities, wanting to say it wasn't my ship and it wouldn't attack anyone without provocation. And then my mouth shut down again, because my brain refused to say it *wasn't* my ship.

Then Linda Wu was tromping groggily down the corridor behind me, sleep still fogging her brain. "Julia, what happened?"

It was the same exact question I'd asked, but Wu got a slightly better answer by virtue of the two girls' friendship. Amid curses and spluttering, Julia admitted she'd snuck down the hall to cop a smoke, but she'd only got a couple puffs before alarms went off and her face got squirted with *something* that put out the cigarette.

I'm afraid my laughter didn't defuse the situation.

Wu went briefly back to the bridge and returned with a towel from her pack, then helped dry her friend's face. "'This stuff stinks,'" Julia complained.

If I hadn't been laughing so hard, I might have commented that tobacco smoke did, too.

"I'm afraid," Wu said, "the ship is willing to enforce its strict no smoking policy."

Julia continued glaring at me, even though I wasn't the one who squirted her. We all returned to the bridge, but couldn't get back to sleep because of Julia's just-

audible cursing under her breath. I won't repeat any of it, Bianca, 'cause it's not fit for your delicate little ears. Eventually, though, I did get to sleep once again.

We all woke up on the bridge the morning of Day 2, and Wu looked around to take an informal roll call. That was silly, right? Where was anyone going to go? But Donny Nakamura was gone. Wu started asking, increasingly frantic, if anyone knew where he went. Julia mumbled something about the ship maybe squirting him, too. I was just waking up, not at my sharpest, still yawning. I formed a mental image of Donny, and at first my thoughts were reassuring. "Oh, it's okay," I said. "He's down in the kitchen."

Then I saw the blood. He was lying in a pool of it.

I woke up immediately. "He's in trouble!" I said, rolling off my couch and onto my feet. "We've got to get to him, fast!"

The others were only waking up, too, but they took their cue from me, and in the next few seconds we were all running off the bridge, down to the kitchen.

He was lying on the kitchen floor. There was a knife beside him and a pool of blood spreading beneath him. At a quick glance (which later proved right), he'd gone to the kitchen to find a knife and slit his wrists.

An alien robot arrived on the scene seconds after we did. This wasn't one of the cute little vacuum cleaners, either; it looked like a cross between a miniature ambulance and an automated hospital bed. Before we could stop it, it scooped Donny up and rushed him out and down the hall. We were mostly out of breath from our first run, but we managed to keep up as it sped down more corridors to another large room filled with coffin-looking containers. The robot lay Donny in one of the caskets and a plastic cover sealed up around him.

Jim diCamillo asked, rather stupidly I thought, what this place was. "Sick bay," I said. What else could

it be?

Wu gave me a sharp look and asked how I knew Donny was in trouble. “The ship told me,” I said.

“Like it told you where the bathrooms and mess hall were?”

“Yeah, something like that.” I was feeling a little distracted.

“We’re going to have to talk about this,” she said.

“You bet,” I agreed. “But later.”

So anyway, it turns out Donny was even more depressed that first night than the rest of us. We all took shifts standing by his coffin that first day after his attempt, and for some reason he chose me to open up to about his feelings. Yeah, to me, Tamara Ruben, Amateur Psychiatrist to the Poor and Ignoble. Maybe because I was a stranger, who knows. Seems his whole life had been turning to shit lately. His parents were constantly fighting, and each was having affairs they weren’t bothering to disguise. They just announced to their kids they were getting a divorce. Donny’s older sister just got knocked up. His girlfriend dumped him. And now he’d been kidnapped by aliens. Talk about hitting the Trifecta.

So, like, what better way to deal with things than going down to the kitchen to find a knife and off himself? But by the time I finished talking with him, Mama Tamara convinced him none of that other shit mattered now. We were beyond its ability to affect us. The past is dead history, and only the future counts—so let’s make as much of it as we can.

Boy, can I dish out the oyster stew, or what?

See why I need to dictate this report to maintain my own sanity? I figure talking this all out with you—or at least *to* you—will help stabilize me. I have a feeling I’m really going to need that.

Donny’s recovering nicely. That casket the robot put him in provides a lot of automated healing functions. I don’t know whether it’d work on something

complicated and subtle like scarlet fever or pneumonia, but if a creature is designed to have internal fluids, then bleeding is bleeding and broken bones are broken bones. The sick bay knew enough to, like, seal the leak, fabricate new blood based on the sample Donny had conveniently left on the kitchen floor, and give him a fill-up. In just a few hours he was out of danger, and by evening he was sitting up in his bed. All ten of us swarmed around him, which got pretty close in that crowded space.

We told him that, whatever happened to his family back on Earth, *we* were his family now, and we'd try not to fail him. Very cathartic. And Donny was so embarrassed at having distressed us when we had so many other problems, I was almost afraid he might commit seppuku for bothering us with his suicide attempt.

And speaking of healing, my ass is getting better from its bruising on Day 1, thank you so very much for asking. As near as I can figure, I got such a strong shock when I touched that glowing ball it threw me across the room. I banged my head, the backpack jolted my shoulders, and my ass was severely bruised from its impact with the floor. I've heard that strong electric shocks can do something like that. In any case, the pain's dying down, except when I tighten my butt muscles for something or other. (And no smart remarks about my being tight-assed!)

