

- RUNAWAY -

The rustling was growing louder. It was changing, too, into a kind of hum. Then a sudden loud scraping joined the hum, a scraping Harriet recognised with terror. The main door was being pushed open.

In the crumbling and forbidden East Cloister, on the top of a worm-eaten wardrobe stored with other decaying furniture in case it came in handy some day, Harriet clutched Bruno in the darkness and – even as her ears strained for further ominous sounds – wondered what the rustling was. Outside in the night the first rumble of thunder sounded distinctly.

With Bruno tight beneath her arm, Harriet crouched lower. The ancient wardrobe creaked beneath her movement. Why it wasn't collapsing under the pounding of her beating heart Harriet couldn't understand: but she was thankful for the gusting wind whistling through the ancient walls camouflaging any sound she made. Across stone slabs and piled furniture a beam of torchlight flickered, flashing over the dust and cobwebs that lived among the rubble. A dragging step shuffled forward, accompanied by wheezy breathing and the click of claws on stone: Hunch, the caretaker, and his dog, Slapper.

And more terrifying still to Harriet's straining ear, a firm authoritarian tread, the stamp of a heavyweight heel. Quite unmistakable. Mrs Boult-Rivet! Harriet almost screamed: she must know I'm here, but how? What could she be doing in the East Cloister sniffing round Harriet's favourite hiding-place in the middle of the night? She'd told no one of her plans. There was no one to tell, anyway, most of those in the girls' dorm, led by Donabella Fitzgrosvia ('One doesn't pronounce the 's', don't you know anything?') and Malicia Drivel-Watkins being as horrible to her as the teachers were.

The mutter of voices approached; the beam flickered.

"'Twere 'ere, Mrs B. Round 'ereabouts."

"And you say it seemed to take orf?" The harsh grind of Mrs Boult-Rivet's voice, like nails down a blackboard, would stay in Harriet's nightmares forever. "From around here?"

A swirl of wind presaged a crash of thunder just outside. Harriet felt herself jump. The hum was getting louder, the wardrobe trembled. Startled, Harriet grabbed the edge. Her fingers grasped a sinewy string. String?

"From round 'yer," Hunch confirmed, "And disappeared beyond the tower. Like it were going down a tunnel."

"Ye-es."

Harriet knew that this three-letter word spoken like that actually meant: I hear what you're saying but I have never in all my days heard such a pile of old tripe and onions in horse manure sauce and if you seriously expect me to believe a single word of it you are even more intensely stupid and revoltingly dim than the utterly dense I already think you are. But ye-es saved a lot of time.

The hum seemed louder still . The dog slobbered unconcernedly around the desk legs, casually raising one of his own until Mrs Boulton-Rivet's stick slapped him back.

"Filthy mutt," she snapped. "Hunch, keep the foul mongrel under control."

Harriet could hear Hunch's intake of breath. "Slapper," he said haughtily, "is a pedigree 'ound. Used to mixing in the best of - "

"Shut up, Hunch. Look at that?"

Harriet's breath caught in her throat.

"Oh...'tis mud, ma'am, I should say."

"Indeed. Mud. What do you think mud – wet mud – is doing on a pile of desks in an area that is strictly out-of-bounds? I think we have the solution to your flying box phenomenon. Flashing lights and strange noises, indeed! Just as I expected it's all caused by an unruly child – and I suspect I can rapidly discover who it is...what's that noise?"

Hunch listened. "'Tis an 'um."

"I can hear it's a hum..." Mrs Boulton-Rivet calmed herself with an audible effort. Harriet gripped the string as if it was a lifeline and prayed harder than she'd ever done that Mrs Boulton-Rivet wouldn't start looking for her on the top of the wardrobe. "Hunch, what is the cause of the hum? I take it this must be some malfunction of the heating system, which as it's only November should not be operational at all?"

So that's why all the rooms were always so freezing.

Thunder rolled again.

"'Tis not the 'eating. You wait. You'll see," said Hunch with a superior air.

Harriet felt a stirring, as if Bruno had shifted in her arms. Her fingers were entwined in the string. It seemed to wriggle...

Mrs Boulton-Rivet's reply was abruptly cut off.

Like a train from a tunnel, in a green glowing light, with a whoosh of speed and compression a

large cardboard box hurtled to a halt directly beneath Harriet's favourite hiding-place. A tangle of string writhed from the back of the box, and the string in Harriet's fingers began to twitch. The box rocked gently below her, the green glow cupping it like a fluorescent river. Inside the box two scruffy creatures sat. They looked a bit like Bruno, but one was a brown dog with a bent ear, the other a grey monkey.

The animals were staring up towards her.

"Grismond!" They yelled together.

Harriet's mouth dropped. Her eyes fell to the friendly face of her favourite bear, the bear Daddy had given her and sworn her to look after. Two shiny brown eyes stared brightly back up at her.

"Bruno," she breathed.

"Princess," he said, in a low growly voice.

"Grismond!" yelled the two animals in the box again, joyfully.

Harriet looked from them back to Bruno. She had a sudden feeling of dread.

"Bruno, what - ?"

The grey monkey was reaching towards Bruno from the box. The brown dog with the bent ear waved some papers in its paw.

"The Workings, Grismond. Come, it's the Window. We have to Shift...now!"

The grey monkey grabbed for Bruno's paw.

Harriet held firm. "No, you don't understand - "

The monkey tugged harder. "Help me, Grismond, I will save you - "

"Spillock! Hurry!" The dog in the box called.

Harriet's glance snatched downwards towards him. Beyond, in the greeny glow, she caught a glimpse of two pale astonished faces.

"I'm trying, you blonk!" said the grey monkey, Spillock, yanking once more at Bruno.

"No. Don't. You can't take Bruno - " Harriet was almost in tears. Bruno was her best friend in all the world. She didn't care who saw her, who heard her. She'd promised her dad. She couldn't lose Bruno...

Bruno twisted and fell from her hands, nimbly coming to his feet as Spillock hauled him towards the box.

"Princess - "

Bruno's paw was reaching for her. She leant down, and the wardrobe teetered.

"Hurry!" the dog called. "I can't hold it much longer!"

Beyond the cloister, lightning flashed. In the green glow, from the corner of her eye Harriet saw Mrs Boulton-Rivet's face change from astonishment to fury, her eyes light up, and heard from deep within her the beginnings of an almighty rumble, as if she'd gobbled something that would make her insides explode. Any boom from Mrs Boulton-Rivet's insides was drowned by a peal of thunder.

But Harriet was tumbling now. She felt the firm clutch of Bruno's paw.

"Hold tight, Princess!" she heard his voice urge, and she clung to his paw as if she'd die if she didn't.

Spillock had dropped into the box next to his companion, Bruno behind them facing backward and reaching out his other paw to Harriet, and stretching to pull her towards him.

Already the box was moving, swaying in the strange green light, power building to a surge as the three animals in the box stared back urgently. Harriet got a hand on the edge of the box, Bruno clasp her wrist. Thunder crashed, and the world seemed to explode.

Then they were gone. A huge roaring, a whoosh of stunning speed, and they were in a tunnel of cavalcading colours hurtling breathlessly.

With trails of string squirming around her, Harriet concentrated all her strength on clutching Bruno's paw with one hand and the juddering cardboard box with the other.

### **- FLIGHT -**

Harriet's first attempt to flee the Shrub Academy for the Gifted Juvenile had brought her scrambling over piles of rubble into this overgrown ruin called the East Cloister. Seeing the door appeared impregnable – though the sudden, shocking appearance of Mrs Boulton-Rivet and Hunch the caretaker had now told her otherwise – and finding a comfortable and not too cobweb-strewn perch up here out of sight on top of the wardrobe, she had rested and considered the hopelessness of her situation. Hungry and tired – and knowing she had to try to stick the school out for longer than the three days she'd thus far managed, for the sake of her mum and dad at least – she'd slunk back to her punishment and tea, but over the following couple of months had continued to escape to her lair whenever the demands of the school, teachers or classmates had got too much.

It was all her dad's fault.

A shabby but everyday life based on her local primary school and friends she could kick footballs with had turned into this rarefied and privileged 'education' for which she was meant to feel grateful because it was so sought after. The Shrubbs Academy for the Gifted Juvenile had appeared out of nowhere and taken over a genteelly rotting finishing school, most of the furniture from which was 'stored' in the unusable East Cloister as new buildings and equipment flowed in, especially into the huge complex hidden behind the trees where Harriet's father toiled in his laboratory unseen and unheard from since their arrival.

The Academy's unique selling point had ensured a stampede of juveniles desperate to show off their giftedness: every child enrolled at the school had had to face in battle – on the games console – one Filius J Shrubbs, and demand for the opportunity had been sensational. Quite why Harriet had got through she had no idea, as she wasn't much of a one for computer games, preferring more physical activity. But later she found out – Gloriana Trollope in the next bed had told her one night after they'd both been scragged – that NO child had won: Filius had beaten every child he'd faced.

Filius, however, was rarely seen. Occasionally a limousine drove out of the trees and a pale, fat boy loitered on the edge of the playing field for a few moments before returning whence he came. Harriet had watched the limo through the trees and thought about running away in that direction to try to find her dad, but she knew it was a heavily guarded area and she'd be caught in seconds.

Somewhere over there behind the trees was her dad, enticed here by the free school place for her, the immense salary – which had allowed her mother the time and freedom to go off to fight for all the causes she'd for years felt so strongly about – and above all by the opportunity to spend all his time working on his ether, wormholes, superstring...all the stuff he'd wasted his life pottering on in his shed while Mum had striven to make a living for them all. For her dad was one of those men for whom life was a playground where he could go scurrying after any weird idea that came into his head, irrespective of whether it was time for tea, collecting a child from school, completing a day's useful employment...in short, Harriet's dad wasn't a lot of use to anyone in practical terms, although he could make quite fantastic and useless toys and was very funny and daddyish when he remembered. Now Harriet was older he didn't make the toys any more, which was just as well as the attic was full of their broken bits. Instead he had become increasingly obsessed with his 'lab' (the garden shed), and when dragged away for a meal used to drone on about how close he was to making connections through the wormhole, how superstring could revolutionise the concept of time... To change the subject her mum or Harriet herself would start to talk about his other favourite subject – football – so he'd start on that, and she and Mum could return their attention to what they had been doing and needed no longer pretend interest.

Harriet had held no kind of conversation with her dad for months now, and only spoke to Mum every week by phone. She was missing family and friends and not enjoying being picked on by the girls. Many of them had been at the school before it had become the Shrub Academy, when it had been the Muckybrass Institute for the Furtherment & Finishing of Young Ladies. Despite the arrival of other new students – including even boys – the ‘Young Ladies’ of the Finishing Institute had not taken kindly to the newcomers, especially Harriet, and had worked hard on making her life a misery.

So Bruno had become hugely important to her. Dad had given him to her one day shortly after he'd begun his new job – a month before she'd started at the school – a day when he was even more distracted than usual. With an intense expression, he'd handed her this 'present' – a present 'which you must look after very, very carefully, do you promise me, Hat?' – and she'd naturally said yes of course I will Dad, looking at the rather scruffy teddy bear oddly because, let's face it, she was a little old for teddy bears. But Bruno had grown on her quickly, and now they were almost inseparable. (She often found herself wondering what he was up to while she was in class. There was a twinkle in his eye which just made her wonder...)

And now she was gripped by this same teddy bear's paw and hanging for grim death on to the battered cardboard box with three talking toys in it, shuddering and swerving through space. She knew that this time she'd really gone and done it. She was going to be in the biggest trouble of her life when she woke up or Mrs Boulton-Rivet grabbed her or whatever happened next.

Dazed and buffeted, Harriet clung on to the bear's paw and the cardboard box. Colours flashed by in a kaleidoscopic spectrum, a rainbow tunnel burrowing through a black immensity as dense as rock. She had no time to think about what was going on, cramming all her effort into not letting go, resisting the pummelling as they hurtled, swooping and corkscrewing and juddering on their frantic way, like a roller-coaster gone manic.

Once a hand slipped and instantly she felt her wrist gripped with numbing ferocity. At one moment they would soar upwards as if they were never coming down again. At another they'd reach a peak where all time and motion stopped for an instant before they were released into a downward charging rush, swerving one way, then the other. She felt like a flea on the back of a swift. Onward and onward, up, down, spiralling wildly. How much time passed she could not afterwards have said. It seemed to last forever – but then was over in an instant.

She became aware that things were changing. The onrushing madness eased. Joining the roaring that filled her ears was a growing howl, getting louder as the box slowed down. Ahead was a

dawning white light which brightened in intensity and surrounded them as the world lurched, the cardboard box shattered, and bodies tumbled.

Harriet bounced, rolled and came to rest. Exhausted by her battering she allowed her eyes to stay closed. Resting on a soft, comfortable warmth she felt herself dropping off, drifting away despite the nagging demands growing in her brain. Maybe this is dying? – the thought floated past her without substance or meaning.

Gentle light was dawning through her closed eyes. She could feel her head at rest against warm fur. Perhaps she had slept; at least she no longer felt like a tumble-dried sock. She shifted slightly, trying to make sense of the scrambled egg that was her brain. Deep inside that eggy mess was something very important she ought to remember, something so thrilling it was actually impossible.

Stirrings and flusters murmured around her, but she didn't open her eyes. From somewhere she could hear muted whispers of wonder and astonishment; for the moment the gargantuan roar of a demented Boulton-Rivet did not destroy this peace, so Harriet stayed still.

The fur beneath her head shifted and her eyes opened cautiously. Before her was a glass wall, with figures moving behind it. Around her on cushions other bodies were stirring, moving themselves with care in case they'd been bashed. She sat up gingerly, testing arms and legs, and refusing to let her brain work. Next to her, something moved and she turned to look into a brown furry face smiling up at her.

"Bruno," she breathed, remembering what the impossible was.

"Princess." The low rumble of his voice made her heart jump. "You're all right?"

It was half question and half relief. Although aware of other movement, other voices, Harriet couldn't take her eyes from Bruno, her round cuddly bear.

Who wasn't a bear any more...well, he was a bear, and round and cuddly, but now he was bigger than she was and she was no longer going to be able to carry him under her arm. And now he was talking and smiling and moving...he was real! Her best thing in all the world, no, her best friend in all the world, was here beside her...

She felt suddenly shy. Her arms, which had reached automatically for him, dropped back uncertainly. But Bruno opened two hairy paws towards her and she fell into his embrace, hugging him close with all her might and burying her face in his sweet-smelling warm fur.

It was a moment she wished might never end. But she knew it must, there was so much going on, so many questions she wanted the answer to, and even if it was a dream it didn't matter because it seemed so real.

She pulled herself from his hug and stared inquiringly into the face, happy as hers, which was beaming down at her.

"You're...different," she said.

Bruno's grin widened. "Don't worry, Princess. I'm the same. But you're in my world now. The world is Mineoyster, and I'm an Orlik called Grismond."

"A...what?"

"An Orlik. Welcome to the world I come from."

"But...you're my teddy. How can you..?"

"It's a long story, Princess - "

"Ah, Grismond, what a miracle! Welcome home. And Mother of Pearl! What have you brought me?" The tone of surprise and reverence did not fit the very bossy, breathless voice which broke in on their quiet words. "A Thing!" it added breathily.

Harriet became aware of more moving figures. The brown dog with the bent ear was on a couch in the corner dusting himself off, the grey monkey called Spillock was shaking his head as if dazed. They were now both as big as Bruno.

The brown dog spoke. "Didn't think we'd make it, Professor - "

"Well done, Daedalus, Spillock. You've done a wonderful job getting Grismond back. And then to have Shifted a Thing! We must check the Workings - "

"Professor, Harriet is a - "

Bruno was interrupted by a door bursting open and a scrum of excited voices.

"It's worked! It's worked! We've got you back, Grismond - "

"I have the Workings here, Professor - "

"Superstring took us straight through the Wormhole, just the way you'd predicted, Professor - "

"I'm so glad you're in one piece, that everything's worked out - "

"Who will you send next?"

There was a sudden silence at Daedalus's words. The Professor blinked and shook her head.

"We'll have to see if there is a next, Daedalus. The Committee..." She broke off, her large eyes magnified by giant spectacles fixed on Harriet. "I s'pose I'd better not keep them waiting. Come... Harriet, is that right? We must hurry. We'd better deal with the Protocol, I'm afraid. Quite a number of the Committee need to meet you. And I'm very much aware that my research budget and every

future mission very much depends on their doing so." A smile made her face less like a chopping-board. "I hope we can make you feel at home. Grismond will be with you." She straightened abruptly. "Come, Daedalus, Spillock, two of the Ancients have crawled from their holes on the Committee of 47 and wish for a first-hand account. Grismond, bring the Thing along - we'll have a full debrief later, once all this ridiculous Protocol is out of the way."

Harriet was tugged upright long before she could think of a good response to being called a 'Thing' and found herself trotting along behind a woman who could have been Mum's age, old but not as decrepit as Mrs Boulton-Rivet whose hair was already grey. This woman's sprawling chestnut hair was held in check by a flimsy ribbon like a crowd at bonfire night, her enormous eyes hugely magnified behind glasses like portholes.

"This is such a proud moment for me. To have Shifted a Thing..!" She grinned back at Harriet. "My name's Anathema Grilse but they call me the Professor. I've been dying to meet someone like you. To Shift a Thing from Beyond..! I've dreamt of this moment...never believing it could happen, of course. We've Shifted countless Orliks to your world but we've never got an actual Thing! You will have to tell me more about your research into superstring and wormholes, it must be so far advanced! It's a privilege beyond measure to meet such a mind..." A frown ploughed over her face. "You are a small species, though - "

"Professor, Harriet's a - "

"And Grismond, we'll need a full and urgent debrief. Things here have not improved since you left. We really need to prove that your mission has achieved any success other than this wonder..." Her face darkened as she came to a door. "Now let's try to get you away from these imbeciles as quickly as possible..."

She muttered the last words beneath her breath as she swung a door open. Inside a small dim chamber like a waiting room, with seats and low tables, two rotting old men broke off an earnest squabble to stare angrily at Harriet.

"Well, what have we here?" asked one of the old men, his two black eyes glowering at her out of a face like a raisin which had just sucked a lemon.

The other old man approached her like a dog with a snake, cautiously but ready to bite. He walked with a hurried, bounding limp. His face was rounder than the other's but no friendlier, with a nose shaped like a parsnip. He was not much bigger than she was, coming too close and examining her from head to toe in a waft of mould. "Kid Zero," he breathed, so softly that Harriet wondered if he'd spoken at all.

The wizened, ancient men were so wrinkled and hunched that they reminded Harriet of shrunken

heads she'd seen once on a school outing to an Aztec exhibition, only instead of just their heads it was their whole bodies which were dried-up husks. Both wore tatty black robes as mangy as they were, which twitched around their shoulders like swarms of fleas. With their black gowns and screwed-up faces they looked as if they should have been hanging upside down from a beam with fangs sticking out of their mouths and wings curled around them. On their heads was a curious cap, like an open mouth holding a ball: Harriet stared for a while and then realised it was an oyster with a pearl.

"A Thing!" announced the Professor, struggling to subdue her pride and triumph.

Harriet had her mind too full of the horrible old men to object to being called a 'Thing' again.

Now the other old man with black eyes was sidling towards her, crouching lower to examine her better. He too gave off a smell like dust gone rotten, and looked very cross as if it was her fault she was there. Although both these old men looked quite similar in Harriet's young eyes, she could easily tell them apart because this one's nose was a potato; and she suppressed her quick grin.

"A Thing..." he whispered, as if accusing her of a crime.

"Astonishing," added Parsnip Nose.

Bruno squeezed her hand. Harriet felt like a carcass surrounded by sharks.

The door behind them flew open and a sleek, round man appeared, smiling but a little out of breath. He was smiling in a way Harriet didn't much like. "A true achievement, Professor. I congratulate you. We in the Conglomerate have only just heard - "

"That," said the Professor drily, "was very quick." Her eyes were glittering.

"Of course, now that you've succeeded in Shifting a Thing, the Conglomerate will - "

"No," snapped the Professor. "It won't."

The man's round, seamless face, taut and shiny, rippled. The two old men in black regarded her with what might have been momentary respect.

The Professor was speaking again. "Harriet, may I present the Ancients, Gnarlbone" – (Potato Nose) – "and Slunk" – (Parsonip Nose) – "Esteemed Members of the Committee of 47. And" – with barely concealed hostility – "Dorg, representing the Conglomerate." Harriet found Dorg watching her expectantly, but the Professor was continuing: "The Conglomerate, I'm afraid, has done everything in its power to obstruct my research - "

"Oh, come now, Professor - !"

" - while the Ancients and their Committee have barely tolerated it - "

"What?!"

"Your ingratitude, Professor - !"

" - so it's been very difficult for us all here in our Laboratorium. Nonetheless you are living proof of the success of my research. I'm afraid, Harriet, we have to go through certain...formalities before you and I can put our heads together and discuss the wonders of superstring." The Professor put her arm round Harriet's shoulder and gave her a brief hug.

"But, Professor - " began Bruno, before angry growls silenced him with their spluttered indignation.

Gnarlbone – the one Harriet thought of as Potato Nose – turned to Harriet, regarding her as if she was something spiky he'd just coughed up. "Well, one thing's for sure: she certainly won't do, Professor."

"I'm aware of that, Gnarlbone. Mother of Pearl, she's only just Shifted!"

The other Ancient, Slunk, had begun to look at her with a very curious expression on his face, a hungry, cunning, eager look which made Harriet feel like a chocolate sponge with loads of cream and jam oozing out of it on Malicia Drivel-Watkins's plate.

"Harriet," tried Bruno firmly once again, "is a - "

But a rattling of chains and a clump of marching came through the open door, and a strange creature walked in, halting with an abrupt shout and a stamp of feet.

It stood on two legs, had a head and a body with an arm each side; but the entire thing was covered in what looked like black plastic armour, with a visor hiding any face the creature may have had. Hanging from a belt were a long stick worn like a sword, and a holster with a hand weapon like a gun. From its waist hung chains, which it was unbuckling with a swagger, ready for use.

The creature saluted. "Commander Love reporting. Suh! For duty. Suh! With a detachment of - "

"Yes, that'll do, Love, thank you," said Dorg smoothly, as the others looked on in shock. He smiled humourlessly at the Professor. "I took the liberty, Professor, of ordering us a detachment of Grumps. The Board of Directors – indeed, the Chairman himself – deemed it prudent. With all that's going on these days..."

The Ancient called Gnarlbone interrupted. "Obviously the priority is that she come before the Committee of 47, that is the Protocol. Professor, delighted as I am that your two Orliks have returned with Grismond – a magnificent achievement, I may say, and allow me to be the first on the Committee of 47 to congratulate you - "

"I was first, not you. I was looking at the door when she - "

"Yes, but you haven't congratulated her, have you?"

Harriet could tell from the Professor's impatient expression that such bickering was not at all unusual among the Ancients.

"Would you please stop arguing and get on with your dreadful Protocol," broke in the Professor. "I take it she must also be presented to the Pearly Queen?"

"Of course," snapped Slunk. "Of course she will. Protocol must be followed. At all costs. You Cast-offs just don't seem to understand the fundamental importance of ancient protocol - "

Gnarlbone, as his colleague was speaking, was circling Harriet and observing her as if she'd crawled through a muddy tunnel in her best dress. Not that she wore dresses, unless forced to. "But she still won't do. It's almost time for Tea - she must be made ready! And there'll be the Banquet. And it's the Great Game too - "

"The Great Game!"

Everyone stared at Bruno in astonishment. Harriet without being told knew that speaking thus before Ancients was not quite the right thing for an Orlik to do, even an important one. But Bruno seemed unconcerned.

"Who's playing?" he asked almost dreamily.

"How in Pearl's name would I know?" snarled Slunk. "I take no pleasure from having to attend such silly pastimes as the Dreamiership, I have more important things to consider."

"The Dreamiership?" murmured Harriet. "What's that?"

"Floatball - " Bruno began, turning to her and ready to explain at length. But the Professor interrupted.

"What do we need Grumps for, Dorg?" The Professor's voice was thoughtful.

"To be on the safe side, Professor," answered Dorg smoothly. "Something pretty unpleasant could have Shifted through the wormhole. You, even tucked away here in the bowels of the Laboratory, must be aware of the disruptions in the Dream Generator – indeed, you and the Gaffer have been working - "

"Even so..."

"Whatever," Gnarlbone broke in, "she won't do, that's all there is to it."

"I propose that Grismond take her to Madam Wintertor," said Slunk. "She must be made ready."

Call her, Spillock, will you..?"

Spillock, the grey monkey, moved away and began muttering at something on his wrist.

"Excellent." Gnarlbone clapped his hands. "I will report back to the Committee. It's getting to the end of Fortywinks – by my reckoning – so we'll aim to present her at Tea."

"Right. Professor, we'll warn the Citadel to expect you. Make sure you show due respect to Protocol. After all, it is what we live by. Leave this all to us."

"I have every intention of doing just that," sighed the Professor. "I want as little to do with your dreadful Protocol as I can manage."

"The Board of Directors - " cut in Dorg with icy emphasis " - must insist that the Thing be presented before the Chairman. At least once the minimum demands of Protocol have been met."

The Professor's voice sliced through the opening words of the inevitable squabble which followed Dorg's words by pulling a fob watch as large as one of her spectacles from the pocket of the white coat she wore. "Mother of Pearl, is that the time? We must hurry...I have so much to see to...Has the Gaffer fixed the problems in the Dream Generator in time for the Great Game tonight?"

"There are still problems, I understand. But the Game will go ahead."

Dorg spoke. "Love, take a Grump and accompany the Thing and her Orlik. Keep your eyes open, understand?"

"Suh! Yessuh! I'll take Corporal Peace. Suh!"

Harriet found herself and Bruno being hustled along the corridor by the two faceless guards. Looking up to Bruno to demand answers to some of her spilling questions, she caught his quick shake of the head and concentrated on hurrying. It wasn't till they were settled in a small carriage which swayed as they entered that she asked the first of them.

"What are Grumps?" she whispered as their guards sat opposite them.

"General Regulatory Upholders of Mineoyster Protocol," whispered Bruno back. "Well...you did ask."

The moment the doors hissed shut their transport lifted sharply and shot off down a tunnel, rocking gently.

"The Tube." Bruno smiled at Harriet. She smiled back up at him with an increasing sense of wonder. "It'll take us in from the Laboratorium, which actually lies beyond the Fringe, to the Urb itself, where all the important buildings are, where all the important things happen. You'll see. It's going to be - ”

But the carriage was already slowing, their guards standing as it stopped and ushering them into another chamber. They hurried along to a door which Commander Love opened, showing them inside.

Once again with a gentle hiss they soared, this time upwards though it felt as if they were hardly moving. Then they came to a gradual halt. The door opened on to a vaulted chamber made of grand old stone, from what Harriet could make out, and their guards ushered them out.

"Thank you, Love. Arrange the carriage, would you," said Bruno.

"Suh! Yessuh!" said Commander Love, closing the door on them.

Descending a grand spiralling staircase towards them was a small Orlik the size of Harriet. Tight greying locks gripped the top of her skull. A pair of rimless glasses pinched a long red-tipped nose down which Madam Wintertor aimed a disapproving glower at Harriet above an arching eyebrow of a mouth.

"I see you have brought me a challenge, Grismond." Her voice was low and deliberate. "This way." An open hand invited Harriet to mount the stairs. "We must hurry."

Harriet grasped at Bruno in alarm.

"You'll be all right, Princess. I have to go too, and prepare. Even though I'm only an Orlik, I am an important one, and I will have to - "

"Come! We have no time for chitchat!"

"Bruno, please - !"

"I'll be with you before the Committee..."

Harriet was somehow being drawn up the stairs away from Bruno, and before she could make a fuss or stretch an arm to stop herself he was gone, and she was through a door which was shut firmly behind her.

## - MINEOYSTER -

On the end of Madam Wintertor's skinny arm Harriet entered a circular chamber.

The light here was a salmon-pink glow, warm and reassuring. The chamber was filled with costumes displayed on racks, and mirrors reflecting all the range of colours and textures.

"Now," said Madam Wintertor sternly, observing Harriet along her nose, "a bath is most

definitely called for first - "

"No way."

"Through here," went on Madam Wintertor implacably, and Harriet's curiosity drew her to follow as Madam Wintertor disappeared behind a curtain.

The bath, at floor level, foamed with suds. Despite her earlier protest Harriet dropped to one knee and dipped a hand into the water. It was warm, comforting; the scent given off by the soap seemed to draw her in. Quickly she pulled off her running-away clothes and lowered herself with a gasp of pleasure into the pool where the warmth wrapped itself around her body. She breathed out contentedly and lay back, feeling relaxation ease into her.

Madam Wintertor's voice came from behind her somewhere. "I'll do your hair in a moment." And for the first time in her life Harriet didn't even begin to argue. Madam Wintertor went on: "First, with that delicious coffee colouring of yours...let me see...perhaps..." She disappeared through the curtain muttering to herself. A thought of escape flitted through Harriet's mind but there was too much she wanted to find out, and she wouldn't leave Bruno – she'd promised her dad she'd look after him, after all. Besides, this was a wonderful bath, warmth seeping through her, tiredness oozing out. She lay back and allowed Madam Wintertor to wash the wild tangle of her hair.

She'd always sneered at dresses before, but when she saw what Madam Wintertor had laid out for her to try on she gasped with delight: these really were for princesses! The underwear was soft and silky; the gowns long, in rich, deep colours. Harriet gaped at the shifting patterns, and caressed each dress with the tips of unbelieving fingers, eyes shining. Now she knew how dressing-up could be fun.

Madam Wintertor was pressed to get Harriet ready as quickly as she could but even her unbending starchiness relaxed as she admired her trying on every one of the gowns laid out.

All the patterns seemed to move as she did. The turquoise gown shimmered like a tropical sea. The red flickered with golden flames. On an azure background deepening to purple, golden stars sparkled. The white glistened with frost. The green glowed like a newborn forest after rain, swaying in a gentle breeze. But the black...against her skin, the black shading to chocolate with vanilla swirls made her a feast, and Madam Wintertor nodded approvingly and almost stretched her mouth in a smile.

"You look like a princess," was all she would say.

Harriet examined herself shyly in the mirror. She couldn't remember, ever, a time in her life when she had bothered to think herself beautiful, and she was surprised and a little bewildered that

the Harriet she knew could also look like this.

There was a sharp rap at the door.

"No time to waste," said Madam Wintertor briskly, straightening again, her face returning to its customary disapproval, as if she had a slug in her mouth. "On we go!"

She swung the door open and there stood Bruno. Except he wasn't Bruno any more. If Harriet hadn't grasped before how important Grismond was in Mineoyster, she got a glimpse of it now as she stared at her teddy bear, grown in size and dressed in scarlet and gold robes like the Prince in a panto.

"Bruno!" she gasped.

"It's my uniform. I'm a Commander of the Elite Guard." His eyes had been twinkling as they examined her and a wide smile had filled his face. Now he blinked bashfully and his smile shrank to a shy grin as he bowed before her. "Princess, you look..."

He ran out of words but she knew what he meant. "So do you," she said.

"Humph," said Madam Wintertor. "Off you go, the two of you."

Harriet was almost through the door. "What about my things?"

"Don't worry," Madam Wintertor told her, "I will attend you at the Banquet, and I shall have your...things...packed in your bag. Go, now. Don't keep the Committee of 47 waiting for their Tea. It wouldn't do, it wouldn't do at all."

Harriet seemed to be hurrying along yet another corridor, down a different staircase this time, accompanied by Bruno and their strange black guard. They came to a door which was opened as they approached by the other guard, Corporal Peace. Harriet could tell them apart because the Commander had a red stripe round his helmet and the corporal two stripes on his sleeve. He ushered them forward quickly towards a square black carriage standing as if at the edge of a platform, and Harriet as she ducked inside had the impression it was off the ground. Out of the corner of her eye she spotted something that made her shake her head in amazement. She gathered her breath and her wits as she sat back on the sumptuous cushions.

The carriage moved with a slight lurch and the sound of a low burbly hum. Harriet glanced through the window beside her and saw soaring planes of shiny glass cascading skywards towards a distant filmy dome. Gazing from her window Harriet stared with disbelieving eyes at the stream of steadily-moving traffic which they'd joined.

"Bruno..?"

"Yes, Princess?" He was chuckling.

"Bruno...they're pigs."

"They are pigs, Princess."

"But...they're flying! Aren't they?"

"Ah yes, a miracle of methane and magnets..."

"There's a pig pulling us as well? I thought I saw one..."

"Ooh, four, I should think..."

"We're in a flying carriage being pulled by four flying pigs..?" Harriet tried to crane her neck to see. "How do they do it? Pigs can't fly!"

Bruno chuckled. "They have a little attachment added," he told her with a grin. "Stuck in their...um...bottoms. To utilise the gas they...um...produce..."

Harriet couldn't help laughing. The blank faces of the guards on the plush cushions opposite stared back at her.

"Who are all of them? In the other carriages?"

"Well, Princess...they're like you, really. We Orliks call them Hoohahs. And here on the Upper Layers is where the HOGs – Hoohahs of Grandeur – live. And where the best emporia are to be found."

"Emporia?"

"Shops. What Hoohahs like to do is preen – which is a bit like shopping and showing-off all at the same time – so they cruise the Upper Layers, popping in and out of emporia, eateries and so on. Checking out how those with most marbles live."

"Marbles?"

"Marbles. On Mineoyster Hoohahs – and I'm afraid to say more and more Orliks – think it's important how many marbles you own."

"But you can't do anything with marbles."

"Well, actually, on Mineoyster they're a sign of wealth. Hoohahs have an awful lot of time to fill, so they use marbles for shopping and preening and speccing – one of the biggest things for so many of them is the Marble Bonanza, for instance. You spend your marbles to choose magic numbers. You can win millions of marbles if you pick the right numbers. The chances of that happening are so far out you'd think no one would bother. But they love it..."

They were passing a sparkling pearlescent pyramid.

"Elsa's Carapace," muttered Bruno, waving a paw. Harriet stared. "Splendid, isn't it? But do you know what they do in there? Spend their time speccing, is what. That's the other thing Hoohahs like doing: speculating, games of chance, trying to guess how something will work out, which number comes next, that kind of thing. And crooning – they're always pretending they can sing. Elsa's Carapace is the biggest and best place for a night out speccing or crooning."

"Don't they ever work?" Harriet was only too aware of the hassle her parents always had about money. It was one of the reasons she was here now, she thought...

"Oh yes, what they call work. It's like so many grown-ups in your world. Basically all they do is talk, hold meetings and so on. Stuff to impress others which doesn't really do anyone much good."

"Trying to show how important they are. Yes. Mum and Dad were always moaning about stuff like that..." Talking about Dad and Mum was not a good idea. Harriet didn't want reminding of real life, not yet anyway.

"It's Orliks which actually keep the urb running, you'll see."

"How come you're so important, Bruno?"

"Oh, I don't know that I'm that important. See this round my wrist? That's an Elite Badge. Special. Means I can get to places other Orliks can't. It can be useful sometimes."

Harriet further didn't want to think of her parents because it might destroy this illusion that she was able to hold a conversation with her teddy bear. In a corner of her mind she wondered when it would all go back to normal, and Mrs Boulton-Rivet would be screaming in her ear.

"Why're you called Orliks?"

Bruno was gazing absently outside. "Because we help you get to sleep," he murmured. "Look there, Harriet – you see that monstrous red building? That's the headquarters of the Conglomerate."

"Who are they?"

"They own just about everything. You see, Orliks like to help. That's what we're good at. But here on Mineoyster things are changing. There aren't many Childer – children – any more. And we love Childer. That's why so many of us go to your world - "

"Why are there no children?"

"The Conglomerate have a machine. Hoohahs love it. It's called a Psychlone. It slows down ageing. So they don't need Childer. But there are Hoohahs called Cast-offs - "

"Oh. Like the Professor!"

"Yes, like the Professor. Cast-offs don't use the Psychlone They age naturally. Have Childer. Have lives that you'd understand. But they have to live on the Fringe. Or even beyond the Fringe, where most of the Orliks live. They're not allowed to live in the urbs."

Harriet was finding it hard to take everything in. She was torn between not taking her eyes off her splendid teddy and trying to look at everything they were cruising slowly past in a very grand manner.

"We arrived in the Laboratorium. That's on the Fringe, and that's where the Professor lives. She spends all her time fighting the Committee and the Conglomerate so she can continue her research."

"Is that how I got you? Because of her research?"

"Something like that. She's been experimenting with Placing – that is, Shifting Orliks to a specific place. She's trying to contact others in your dimension who she's sure are doing similar work on the ether."

"My dad works on the ether. And wormholes and superstring and stuff. He used to work in an old shed in the garden and then the Shrub Corporation came along and offered him this fantastic job. That's why I'm at that horrible school. He's there experimenting in the labs they've got behind the trees but I never see him. And I don't see Mum cos she's busy saving rainforests or whales and stuff..." She couldn't stop the tears, and Bruno held her as she sobbed. "That's when he gave you to me. He'd just got this job and he came home one day with you and said I must look after you very carefully cos you were a special bear..."

"Well," said Bruno slowly, "I'm very glad I ended up with your dad. Because now I have you looking after me!"

Harriet chuckled through her tears. "And now we're talking to each other. And I'm dressed like this. And you're big and important. Oh, Bruno, it's..." She couldn't find a word.

Beyond the carriage was a glittering, magical world. It wasn't light and it wasn't dark, just a soft glow.

"What's under the Upper Layers, Bruno?"

"Two more layers where most of the Hoohahs live. Then at the bottom there's the Dumps. It's where many Orliks settle when they come to the urbs."

"Oh. Do you live in the Dumps?"

"No, Princess. My home is quite a long way away." Bruno smiled. "So I live with the Professor on the Fringe where she set up her Laboratorium. It does mean she can do her work without fussing about delegations and committees and meetings every five minutes, doing what Protocol demands

and filling the day the way Hoohahs have to."

"What's Protocol do, then?"

"Protocol is the rules by which the Committee of 47 do the government. They've been fixed for centuries. They have to do everything every day according to a strict schedule – the Protocol."

"What, every day?"

"Yes, every day."

"No wonder they're so miserable. And what about the fat man we met?"

"Dorg. Hmm." Bruno stared out at the gleaming cityscape. "He is one of the more important members of the Board of Directors which run the Conglomerate. Actually, you would say he is the Chairman's right-hand man. And the Chairman is called F Peas Wantmore, the richest Hoohah on Mineoyster. But like so many rich Hoohahs what he's got isn't nearly enough – he wants it all. I just hope you don't meet him..."

Harriet was quiet for a moment as she watched the world pass. "Where are we going, Bruno? Can you take me to your home?"

"I'm afraid that's impossible at the moment, Princess. I live a long way from here. And I fear we are going to have a lot to do. Starting with your presentation before the Ancients, the Committee of 47, as Protocol demands."

"And I have to go and meet them, this Committee?"

"Not only the Committee, Princess – the Pearly Queen herself!"

Harriet stared. "You mean, like our queen?"

Bruno nodded.

Harriet shook her head in disbelief. With thumb and forefinger she pressed nails into her wrist. It hurt. But she did not awake to Mrs Boulton-Rivet's ranting.

"I'm afraid you are awake, Princess. It's not a dream."

Harriet swallowed. The tears were hovering close again, like a storm cloud on the edge of the joy she felt talking to Bruno.

"Bruno..."

"Don't worry." A warm paw pressed her hand. "We'll get you home again. We'll find your mum and dad. Don't worry."

Harriet's spirits soared. "Do you know where they are?"

"No. Not exactly." Bruno, frowning hard, hurried on. "But we should be able to do what we did before, so the Professor can Place you with your dad... Look!"

Their carriage, part of a slow procession of curious faces, was taking them past a sheer wall glittering with a silvery-pink lustre which shimmered and danced as they moved by.

"What is it?" breathed Harriet, gaping as the angle of wall changed and the light reflected molten silver.

"The Marble Halls," said Bruno. "Second only to the Palace in magnificence. That's where F Peas Wantmore lives, the Chairman of the Conglomerate – probably the most powerful Hoohah on the planet," he added darkly. "The largest collection of marbles anywhere – even than the Pearly Queen's Marble Hoard in Konk's Croft."

"Is Konk's Croft near here?" asked Harriet hopefully, because with a name like that it might be fun to look at and anyway she'd be interested to see what a hoard of marbles looked like.

"No. It's on the Fringe. Guarded by the Elite Guard."

"Like you?"

"Yes, like me."

"Oh, Bruno, there's so many things to understand." Harriet thought for a minute. "What's this Great Game that's on tonight?"

"Ah, floatball." Bruno's face took on a dreamy expression. "Floatball's great," he said with a faraway grin. "That's something I miss. But we'll make up for it tonight! You're going to be guest of honour at the Great Game!"

Although she didn't know what he was talking about, Harriet shared his excitement. She stretched an arm around his chubby waist and hugged him hard. Opposite them the two guards sat unmoving. Outside, the shimmering pearly beauty of the place passed by. Occasionally, avenues opened off their route. Hoohahs dressed in fine robes walked leisurely about, or sat to be waited on by attentive Orliks. Everywhere she looked triggered another question – and all the stimulus was helping push back everything that had earlier threatened to break through: where her mum and dad were; what was going to happen to her here; what would happen when she got back; how on earth she was going to get back...

"Look!" said Bruno, pointing at two glowing, curved pillars rising majestically towards the luminescent dome. "The Pearly Gates! The entrance to the Palace, where the Pearly Queen lives. But we're going... there." He was pointing down and to the side. "The Citadel of the Ancients. And, by my reckoning, we should be just in time for Tea."

Harriet stared down at a sprawling, jagged rockfall of roofs, walls and terraces which seemed to spread across her whole view. As they approached she felt her heart sink at the oldness and tattiness of what was ahead of her – a complete contrast to the luminous beauty of the rest of the city. This looked like a jumble of child's bricks that someone had left out in the rain.

Their carriage was sinking towards a ceremonial archway curving from the terrace. Harriet could make out a multi-coloured fluttering of gowns, a welcoming party gathered for her benefit. Bruno squeezed her arm gently, lending her strength, and she leaned gratefully into his warmth as the carriage drew up at the edge of the terrace.

As she got out she recognised Gnarlbone and Slunk, stepping forward self-importantly and bowing their heads slightly. Hoohahs in different coloured robes as ancient as those of the Ancients' but without the funny hats, bustled about in a fuss.

"Hoohahs," explained Bruno shortly, "who serve the Committee. There are thousands of them making sure the Protocol works."

Harriet was whisked into a vast echoing hallway.