

## Chapter 15

We followed Kovac in silence up the staircase in the North turret, stopping on the second floor to follow the North corridor to the back of the school. When we reached the polished wooden door of her office, I remembered that I was the only one of the four of us who had been inside before. Kovac turned an aged key in the lock and led us in.

The back wall of the office was made entirely of glass, which overlooked the expanse of the greenhouse. The other walls were made up entirely of shelves, filled to bursting with thousands of books. All around the room stood all sorts of interesting laboratory equipment, stacks of papers, tiny astrological models, and an abundance of sleek little computers, tablets, and phones. As I anticipated, Eva, Lydia and Mary were currently taking in the room with looks of astonishment on their faces. I'm certain that any one of them would have commented on the abundance of interesting objects standing about the office had it belonged to anyone other than Kovac.

"Take a seat," instructed Kovac, indicating a grouping of chairs situated opposite her desk. She then moved gracefully around her desk and into her elegant black leather chair, which faced pointedly away from the greenhouse window.

Kovac pulled towards her an ornate rotary telephone, upon which she began to dial a number. Holding the gold and marble receiver to her ear, she waited.

"Yes, this is Natalia," said Kovac smoothly into the receiver, "Please inform Professor Thatcher immediately that I have reason to believe that one or more boys may be out of the school and on our grounds,"

I felt Eva inhale sharply next to me, but I didn't dare turn to look at her.

"Thank you," said Professor Kovac, before hanging up the receiver and turning to look at all of us in turn, an unreadable expression on her face.

"Why don't I begin," she said coolly after a moment, "You four are up to something that does not involve, as you say, a lost watch or bracelet," she smiled dispassionately, "Such amateur behaviour," she whispered, "to sneak around the school without so much as a synchronized back story,"

She was mocking us, patronizing our lack of coordination as she continued to stare at each of us in turn, her green eyes bearing into ours. She wasn't wrong and I felt thoroughly stupid for making such a ridiculous mistake.

"Fitz, Cooke, Springfield," she said suddenly, "wait outside,"

I looked from Professor Kovac to my three friends, each of them wearing an utterly helpless expression. They stood up obediently and left the room, leaving me alone with Kovac, as I prayed silently that my vigorously pumping heart could not be overheard.

Kovac was once again gazing into my eyes, undoubtedly trying to read me, but I had been expecting this, and was ready to do whatever it took to get myself and my friends out of trouble.

"Professor Kovac," I began cautiously, "We weren't meeting anyone from the boy's academy-"

"You're lying," said Professor Kovac quietly.

"No," I said firmly, "We weren't meeting anyone,"

"You expect me to believe that?" Kovac asked me shrewdly.

I hesitated for a fraction of second.

"Yes," I answered.

"Why?" she asked me as she leant forwards, looking playfully curious, like a cat toying with her food.

"Well," I said, gathering my courage and preparing to cheat, lie and steal my way out of this mess,

"Because we were downstairs consoling our friend Nicole Truait,"

Kovac knew perfectly well that I was not friends with Nicole Truait.

"Consoling Nicole?" asked Kovac, momentarily surprised.

"Yes Professor," I said slowly, "Nicole is concerned that her father is having an affair, and she's quite upset," I waited, letting my words sink in.

Kovac's expression turned from cold to fiery, but when she spoke, it was with a calm and calculated tone, as was her signature.

"Do you value your position here at Galileo Miss Elliot?" asked Kovac.

"Of course," I answered politely.

"Then what exactly are you trying to do?" asked Kovac quietly, tilting her blonde head slightly to consider me.

"I'm just telling you what we were doing Professor," I said, "Don't worry," I added, "I didn't tell her anything about you and-"

"Enough," said Kovac quietly, but with such force it was a clear order, "You are walking a very fine line" she said, leaning back into her chair, staring at me with a frightening glare.

"Professor I am simply giving you the information you requested," I said, praying this would work. If I could only scare her enough into thinking I might expose her affair, perhaps she would let us off.

My heart was hammering and I was feeling light headed. I sat there silently, praying for a miracle, knowing all the while that if this didn't work, we were all on the verge of being separately interrogated by Natalia Kovac. Everyone's fate, including Julian's, rested on me.

Professor Kovac was still staring. I waited, hardly daring to breathe.

After a very long silence, in which Kovac did no more than gaze at me with calculating eyes, she finally spoke.

"You cannot worm your way out of trouble via blackmail," she said, her tone sarcastic, "I am the youngest female astrophysicist in the entire country, and I was requested specifically for my role as headmistress of this school. Your information would barely award me a slap on the wrist," she was smiling now, watching me for signs of weakness. I did not dare move a muscle.

"Because I feel it is advantageous at this time to avoid a scandal, I am willing to make you a deal,"

"What kind of deal?" I asked, curiosity winning out over a faint voice in my head telling me not to make deals with the devil.

"Your friends get off without penalty," she smiled shrewdly, "and you will serve detention next Sunday-"

"The day before the Astronomy exam?" I asked, "Professor, I really need the time to study,"

"Well its either that," said Kovac holding out her left hand metaphorically, "Or," she held out her right hand, "I interrogate each one of your friends separately and find out the real reason you were wandering around school telling lies this evening, at which point you will risk suspension or expulsion, depending on the severity of your crimes,"

I had not anticipated this. I was certain that she would do anything to avoid a scandal. But she had evidently negotiated before, and was well practised.

"Okay," I said, knowing I had little choice, "I'll do the detention,"

"Good,"

Kovac stood up. I made to do the same, but before I could rise from my seat, she had moved gracefully around her desk to stand before me. She leaned down over me, her face inches from my own. She smelled like vanilla and peppermint, and she had a small spattering of freckles on her nose that I had not noticed before.

"You do not want to play games with me Miss Elliot," she whispered, "You won't win," she enunciated each word with a smooth force, and I could do nothing more than shrink back into the hard wooden chair.

Finally, Kovac rose, leaning back upon her desk, arms folded, still staring at me. When she did not say anything else, I attempted again to rise from my seat. When she did not stop me, I bolted from the office without another word.

As soon as I'd shut the door, Eva, Lydia and Mary were upon me.

"Whats going on?"

"What happened?"

"Is she making us all go in separately?"

I held up my hands to silence them.

"It's fine," I said, "Lets get upstairs,"

Ignoring their bewildered expressions, I began leading the way back to the North turret and up to the Copernicus Wing, ignoring the quizzical looks my friends were giving me as we went.

Back in the safety of Mary and Lydia's dorm, I filled them in on what had happened. They listened with wide eyes and open mouths, evidently under the impression that I had pulled off a very impressive maneuver.

"Wow Pernelle, thanks for taking the bullet on that one," said Eva, once I had finished talking.

"It's cool," I said with a small smile, still feeling put off after my time in Kovac's office.

"You're worried" said Lydia matter-of-factly, picking up on my mood.

"A bit, yes," I said. I did not really feel like I had gotten us out of trouble, or that I had in any way been in the driver's seat during my time in Kovac's office. It had felt to me that Kovac had been the one in control the entire time.

"I thought for sure that she'd do anything to avoid getting caught," said Mary.

"So did I," I said.

"Does she really want to face everyone knowing what she's doing?" said Mary.

"Of course she doesn't," said Eva, "Pernelle," she turned to me, "this is poker. She's betting that you're too afraid to be expelled to do anything else, and that she can scare you into submission,"

"I think you're right Ev," said Lydia, "Someone like her is constantly in control of everything at all times. Something like this is probably just another day in the life of Natalia Kovac,"

We sat in silence, considering this for a moment.

"I just hope that Julian made it back to school," said Eva breaking the silence. Just then, Lydia jumped up from her perch on the bed.

"Eva!" she practically shouted, "What did Julian say?"

I had almost forgotten how this whole thing began. All three of us turned to Eva with rapt attention.

"Well," began Eva, pushing the hair from her face, "he told me that his father was barely home all

Christmas, and that he suspects he was visiting the school. Apparently, when he was home, he would spend hours on the phone in his study, and Julian caught snippets of the conversation through the vent in the dining room” Eva leaned in conspiratorially,  
“It is 100% confirmed that Kovac and Truall senior are building something at the school, and that it's brand new, top secret technology,”

“Did he say what it was?” I asked.

“No. He's been very cautious never to call it by name, and when Julian asked him if he was working on something new, he pretended like the project didn't exist,”

None of this was very shocking information. It was pretty much what I had expected.

“But then,” continued Eva, I perked up, “A couple of nights before the end of the break, while Julian's mom and sisters were on a shopping trip in Paris-”

“A shopping trip? In Paris?” I asked, momentarily forgetting myself. Eva turned to look at me incredulously.

“Who do you think you're dealing with?” she asked, “The Truall's are the wealthiest family at this school, without question,”

“Yes but that's a little bit excessive, don't you think?” I asked, still taken aback.

“What I think, is that the Truall's have funded the vast majority of this school and its technology-”

“We're getting off topic,” Lydia interjected.

“Right,” said Eva, shaking her head at me in disbelief, “As I was saying, one night during the break, Kovac came over to their house, apparently in a blind panic.

“Julian saw their housekeeper let her in from their upstairs balcony,” continued Eva, “Apparently they disappeared into the study for hours, Truall senior coming out once or twice for coffee. From what Julian heard through the vent, the pair of them are involved with a project back at the school which involves at least ten other people, including Dr. Walker and Professor Thatcher, and which requires its own private server with over 500 terabytes of space,”

“Jesus Christ,” I said, “Is he sure they weren't talking about the school's server?”

“Yes,” said Eva, “The school's server is located at the boy's school, and it only has thirty terabytes. The fact that they're using another server on top of that one...” she trailed off.

“Hang on,” said Lydia, “Back up a second, I only have a 70 in computer science, what's the big deal about them having another server?”

“Well it's extremely excessive,” I answered, “The school server is already way more than enough for the 500 odd people using it. The fact that they're using another, much bigger one for something else...” I gave a long, low whistle, “They're seriously up to something you guys,”  
There was silence.

“I know it isn't quite the lead we were hoping for,” said Eva after a while.

“Oh it's something,” I said, “That's a colossal amount of data. We just need to find a way to tap into that server,” my mind was already racing, back to the Jack O' Lantern ball, standing on a stone terrace with Jasper as he told me that he'd hacked into a yahoo server last summer because he was bored.

“We need Jasper,” I said, jumping up and causing Mary to start violently.

“Jesus Pernelle!” said Mary, clutching her heart.

“Why Jasper?” Eva asked, ignoring Mary.

“He builds computers!” I said, “He's been writing code since he was eight, and he hacked onto a yahoo server last summer- that's a secret by the way,” I added for good measure.

The four of us looked at each other, each of us thinking the same thing. How far down the rabbit hole were we willing to go, and when and how would we land on solid ground?

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The rest of the week passed in a mess of homework and revision. I had no time to think about Jasper or the secret server, and in the moments between classes and assignments and reading, I was busy dreading the detention with Kovac.

The detention was, in short, an eight-hour waste of time. I was forced to clean the enormous aquarium in the front hall. I spent the entire day up to my elbows in green algae and fishy salt water, straining to decipher an aged set of spotted instructions for properly cleaning the tank. To add insult to injury, clusters of girls continued to walk passed the front hall all day long, casting me sidelong glances, some of them even asking me what I was doing, as though it wasn't the most blatantly laid out scenario on the planet: a large glass bowl of various coloured fish species sat in a puddle on the floor, blue pebbles littered the vicinity, various chemicals and cleaning supplies lay strewn around an aged cardboard box, and me, covered in green muck and water, adorning an enormous pair of orange rubber gloves, and holding in unison both a hose and a tattered sponge.

Every half hour or so, I was forced to endure the opening of the front doors, which sent vicious blasts of wintry air into the front hall, causing me to shiver violently in my damp clothing.

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It was still bitter cold in the Maritimes. Many of my classmates had fallen ill to various head colds and respiratory illnesses. Those ancient classrooms were so poorly insulated, we often remarked on where our massive tuition payments were going, if not to a new heating system and some basic insulation based repairs. In the corridors there were several known wind tunnels, which were next to unbearable whilst wearing a skirt and thin stockings.

At the very least our dorms and common rooms were kept warm with the electric fireplaces, which meant that on most evenings we spent our time huddled in these such places, hunching uncomfortably over our homework and heavy text books. I had tried on several occasions to encourage my friends to accompany me to the library, but I had been point blank denied each time, all of them maintaining that the library was nearly as cold as it was outside.

"My nose and ass will be numb for the rest of the day if I go in there," said Eva, during one of my fruitless attempts to persuade her.

"I'd rather sit in front of the fireplace on our dorm room floor until my back is cramped and aching, than sit at a table in the library where I can see my breath," she said defiantly.

I, on the other hand, felt that the cold was a small price to pay to be able to sit in the grand old room, with its arched ceiling, creaky wooden floors and dusty old shelves stuffed with thousands of books. I worked best in a well lit and inspiring surrounding, even if I had to wear a toque. I suppose it comes from my prairie upbringing. Although it was quite cold in the Maritimes, it was nothing at all compared to the dead of winter in Saskatchewan.

Near the end of January, Eva came down with a nasty cold and missed three days of school, putting her even further behind in her homework.

Worse still was the professors frequent reminders that Galileo was not an ordinary high school, and that each and every pupil had to continually earn their right to study there.

On the last day of the month, Professor Kovac informed us in Astronomy that anyone who could not maintain at least a 70 percent overall average would be considered for expulsion, based on "compelling evidence that the pupil cannot cope with the course work".

This was enough to cause several fits of hysteria that evening in the Copernicus wing.

Eva, who was still getting over her cold, and who was behind in almost all of her homework, burst into tears in the common room after supper.

"I'm just so exhausted, I've never felt like this in my life!" she said, tossing her Chemistry text book clear across the room, where it landed face down with its pages open.

Several girls turned to stare incredulously from their table in the back corner.

Eva was too panicked to care.

"I don't know how they expect us to do all this," she complained through tears of frustration, "and I'm terrible at math, which I need for Calculus, Physics, Chemistry, Astronomy and now Computer Science. Gaahhh!" Eva cried, burying her face in her arms and collapsing upon the table in defeat.

I was growing anxious too. Even though my efforts were near constant and I worked at a faster pace than most of the girls in our year, our professors had not been jesting about the weeding out of students who could not keep up with the ever increasing course load.

I was doing well in most of my classes- well being a relative term. At St. Mary's, anyone with a couple of brain cells would have been able to keep up and do well. There, I had always been the best in every class, excluding Gym. But even amongst the sweat stained chin up bars and the worn down medicine balls, I tried my hardest and still finished third in the class. Had it not been for a couple of jocks who competed in every sport ever invented, I would have had a perfect record.

At Galileo, keeping my average above a B was hard work, and achieving straight A's meant living and breathing my studies, breaking only to eat, sleep and achieve the basic standards of human hygiene. Gone were the days where I was the only one in my year who was actually trying, gone were the days where a five-hour essay would award me a perfect grade, and gone were the days where the teachers looked upon me with pride, a genius amongst the common towns people of Oak River, constantly impressing them with yet another flawless math assignment or a heartbreaking, yet expressive short story.

At Galileo, almost everyone was working as hard as they were capable, and almost everyone was in stiff competition with one another.

To my immense surprise, Nicole Truait was turning out to be one of the best students in our year. Her grades were as flawless as mine, and she was a shameless teachers pet. Worse than her sucking up was her not-so-subtle reminders of her father and all that he had done for the school.

"When my father donated the money for this greenhouse-" one day to a disgruntled looking Professor Hertz, "I had no idea that they intended to make it one of the most technologically advanced of it's kind," she said, glancing upwards at the immense solar panels with counterfeit

intrigue.

Professor Hertz granted her a small smile, but looked otherwise unmoved. I remember it taking a good deal of effort not to roll my eyes so far into the back of my head that I would have been at risk of them getting stuck that way.

Our grades were of course confidentially distributed, generally via the school website which contained course pages for each of our classes, so it took me a good while to realize just how high Nicole's grades really were, and it took her an equal amount of time to discover the same about mine.

I'll admit it came as a surprise. After all, Nicole had given me very little reason to believe she was capable of complex mathematics or advanced problem solving. But by the end of January, it had become profusely clear that I had underestimated her academic standing.

It was a windy Monday, and Professor Horace was in the middle of handing back our Computer Science midterms. The room was filled with odd little groans and whispers, the sounds of anticipation and dread in equal measure. Horace called my name, and glancing around the room and spotting me, he began to sidestep his way over ungracefully, through the mess of desks and clustered girls.

As he placed my exam paper face down on my desk with a pudgy hand, he did something that he had not done at any of the other desks. He smiled at me, and indicated my exam with a brief nod. As I turned the paper over, I was greeted by a slanted letter A followed immediately by a plus sign. I exhaled in relief and made to turn over my paper, when I looked up and saw Nicole standing over me looking mutinous.

"A+?" she said nastily, "Well I suppose one of us will have to end up overweight with a neck beard coding Call of Duty,"

Stacey and Jessica burst into fits of giggles while Nicole stood there looking down her pudgy nose at me, exceedingly pleased with herself.

"Or," said Eva, who was sitting directly in front of me, adorning her most resentful tone, "She could end up coding the next Facebook from her Harvard dorm like Mark Zuckerberg," Nicole shrieked with mirth.

"Don't worry Nicole," said Eva contemptuously, "I'm sure if you ask nicely, Pernelle will save you a job in her office filling out spreadsheets,"

I snorted.

At that precise moment, Horace began navigating his way back down our aisle and Nicole had no choice but to stalk back over to her desk near the front of the room.

"Thanks," I said, smiling at Eva as Professor Horace handed back her own exam wordlessly. She turned it over with trembling hands to reveal the letter B. Her face relaxed.

"This is great!" she said, turning back to look at me again, "I thought for sure that I'd gotten a D!"

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It was a grey and gloomy Tuesday afternoon. Olga and Anita had made a hearty winter stew for

lunch, complete with home made dumplings and a side of potato salad. The meal had been delicious but heavy, and had put most of us into a food coma, making an already difficult set of afternoon lessons into a pursuit of wakefulness.

Professor Hewitt, during a lively interpretation of Dorian Gray:

“Night after night I go to see her play,” read Hewitt, his voice full of boyish wonder, “One evening she is Rosalind, and the next evening she is Imogen. I have seen her die in the gloom of an Italian tomb, sucking the poison from her lover's lips,”

Whether it be his dramatic retellings of the most distinguished moments of literary classics, or his relentless effort to as a group compel us to adorn a similar enthusiasm, Professor Hewitt's English class was always an entertaining affair.

I must take a moment to pay credit where it is due. There were plenty of afternoons at Galileo where I remember coming out of his English class feeling both dazed and confused, as though recently transported back to the dimension from whichever narrative we had been undertaking at the time. He had an incredible ability to make those old stories come alive in the sunlit classroom, which smelled distinctly of old wood and aged books. I was always impressed with his ability to engage even the most uninterested of teenage girls, but today, after the stew and dumplings, the majority of us were feeling dead to the world, as we all attempted to put on our best looks of engagement, whilst slumping forward as far as we dared and resting our heads in our hands.

“Ordinary women never appeal to one's imagination. They are limited to their century. No glamour ever transfigures them. One knows their minds as easily as one knows their bonnets. One can always find them. There is no mystery in any of them. They ride in the Park in the morning, and chatter at tea-parties in the afternoon-” he stopped and looked up from his tattered copy of Oscar Wilde's only known novel, clearly expecting some sort of reaction, but I'm certain that none of us had been taking in any more than the rhythm of his voice.

“What's the matter with you lot?” he asked, looking over his glasses down his long narrow nose at all of us.

I sat up a little bit straighter in my desk. What on Earth had he been talking about?

“Well?” he demanded, “I expected that Dorian's extreme over simplification of women of that era would be offensive to many of you. I feel that somebody must have some insight here,”

When none of them spoke, he frowned very distinctively, and fixed his eyes upon Eva.

“Miss Springfield,” he said, the sides of his mouths twitching with a slight smile, “Why is everyone falling asleep at their desks right now, as opposed to following along with the book?” Eva hesitated. She was generally the liveliest participant in English class.

“Well I suspect that it was lunch today Professor Hewitt,” said Eva honestly, “We've been fed stew and dumplings and I suppose the gloomy whether isn't helping either,”

“Stew and dumplings...” said Professor Hewitt scratching at his three o'clock shadow, “I'll have to have a discussion with Olga and Anita about what a proper mid-day meal at an ivy league academy should entail,”

In Astronomy directly afterwards, Kovac had something in store for us which was quite unlike her usual proceedings. When we arrived in her classroom she was waiting near the door, instead of behind her desk as was her ritual. Adorned in expensive looking knits and pearls, she was holding a stack of papers in her freshly manicured hands, her nails a dark blood red which matched a



ruby encrusted hair ornament sitting atop her golden curls.

"Ladies we are heading to the library," she announced as we made for our usual seats. I halted in my tracks, reacting perhaps a little more slowly than usual thanks to the stew, and turned back towards the door from whence we came.

We waited while a couple of stragglers lolled into the room moments before the bell (earning themselves a glare from Kovac) and then we set off as a group down the hall towards the staircase. We climbed the stairs in silence, many of us still tired, and all of us knowing better than to talk.

When we arrived in the library it was deserted. The lights were off, and it was quite dark inside owing to the gloom. Through the vast windows I could see a thick fog settling in around the trees of the surrounding forest, leaving just the very tops of them visible. In combination with the snow, it gave the eerie illusion that we were floating in a white abyss.

"Everyone take a mat from the pile," she said pointing to the check out desk, before which stood a large pile of thin black gym mats.

Eva and I turned to look at each other, my brows furrowed with confusion, and hers raised into her bangs with surprise.

"Find a space to lay down in the centre of the room please," said Kovac, as she fidgeted with a square machine, about the size of a DVD player, but with several odd little lenses around its perimeter.

Many of the tables and chairs had been pushed to the side, and there was now a large open space of wooden floor, which all of us were currently heading towards with our mats.

Many of us were looking around at each other, clearly astonished that we were being ushered into the library and instructed to lay down by anyone, let alone Kovac.

When we had all found a space on the floor, I, between Eva and Mary, Lydia laying on Mary's other side, Professor Kovac turned on the machine she had been fidgeting with, which turned out to be some sort of spherical projector.

We were suddenly surrounded by twinkling stars, and I understood immediately why we'd come to the library, with its arched, dome shaped ceiling and its majestic sprawling rafters of dark polished wood.

This was the same starry backdrop from the UFO performance during the opening ceremony. It felt like it had been centuries since that night, when I'd first set foot in Galileo Academy, the beautiful Natalia Kovac meeting us at the door...

A soft melody had begun to play. It was very relaxing. I don't think I could place it into any known genre... it was just... peaceful.

Kovac began to speak in a soft whisper which carried easily around the open room.

"Come along on a journey girls," she said softly, her accent like butterscotch.

The stars began to move, and it felt like we were hurtling through space at light speed. We began at once to approach a star, and as it drew nearer, it became as enormous as the library ceiling, rafters barely visible beyond the image of the blazing celestial body. Just as I felt sure that we were going to collide with it, we instead swung around it, orbiting it from an increasing distance.

"That," said Kovac, "Is our star, the sun. We are currently pulling away and approaching Earth, our current location in the universe,"

I was astonished, my tiredness forgotten.

"As we pass by our planet," she said, as a tiny glittering blue orb came into sight like an isolated

sapphire gem against the blackness, "I want you to keep a firm understanding of it as our current location as we embark on this journey," The Earth was bigger now, cloud systems and bits of land becoming apparent.

"Let us float out passed the Earth," we zoomed away from the little diamond, "passed Mars," we flew by the dusty red planet, "and beautiful stormy Jupiter," the layers of its storm systems rotating around one another, its angry red eye like some sinister vortex. We floated out beyond Saturn, brushing the edges of its majestic rings, Uranus, and bright blue Neptune, until we were suddenly becoming engulfed by chunks of ice and rock.

"The Kuiper belt," said Kovac reverently, "It extends from beyond the orbit of Neptune to 50 Astronomical Units from the sun. For those of you who have undoubtedly forgotten, the astronomical unit or AU is approximately one hundred and fifty thousand kilometres long and the average distance from the sun to our Earth,"

We floated passed countless rocks and oddly shaped asteroids. The effect was quite convincing. During that afternoon in the library, I felt for the majority of the time that we were truly in motion.

"-it is in fact the debris left over from the formation of our solar system,"

Professor Kovac was speaking once again in the voice that she reserved solely for discussing matters of space and time. It was motherly, warm, and with a pinch of excitement.

We were now approaching a golden rock, bigger than anything we had encountered since entering the Kuiper belt, which sported the outline of a heart on its surface.

"And here is little Charon," she said softly, "And Pluto," as we approached another large rock, blue this time, "The baby sister of our solar system, recently reclassified as a dwarf planet,"

We were once again heavily surrounded by rocks. After only a handful of moments, the asteroids began to thin, and we were quickly approaching blackness. But then, after only a moment or two, we entered another cloud of rocks and icy bits.

"This," said Kovac, "is the Oort Cloud," she sounded as though she were discussing her own child, "It is the farthest outer bounds of our solar system, a massive spherical cloud of icy rock, extending one hundred thousand astronomical units from our sun,"

As the Oort cloud slowly began to thin, tiny pin pricks of light became visible in the distance. The glowing inhabitants of our cosmic neighbourhood.

"Now let us pick up the pace," said Kovac excitedly, and we began to accelerate at once towards the stars.

Out in the distance a tiny object was growing larger by the second, and as we neared it, it began to exhibit a beautiful arrangement of colours. I recognized it quickly as the cloud of interstellar dust surrounding the Eagle Nebula.

"Interstellar dust is the primary reason that we on Earth are not able to see the fiery centre of our galaxy," I heard the clicking of her high heels as she moved gracefully around the room.

"It has always been one of my greatest sadness's regarding our position in the galaxy," she said with distinct regret, "Imagine that we could see it, the centre I mean," I chanced a glance away from the rainbow dust cloud and over to our headmistress. She was still displaying that soft and affectionate look.

We broke through the nebula and were now speeding towards an incredible swirling mass of light.

"The fiery death spiral of millions of stars, planets and galactic dust, whirling inwards, every

closer, to that incredible dark mass at the centre of it all..." she trailed off, gazing up at it in awe, "How is it that we can know so many things, yet we can know so very little..."

I gazed around the room now, it appeared that many of the girls had fallen asleep. Eva was turned towards me on her side, and Mary was sprawled out, eyes closed, breathing deeply. From my vantage point on the floor, I could not see any one else who was watching the library ceiling, where we were zooming out and away from our own Milky Way.

Soon we were passing by other galaxies, some of them similar in appearance to our own, but some of them very different. Professor Kovac explained that some galaxies were dying, which meant that they were no longer producing new stars. We zoomed on and on, until I no longer had any idea where we were in relation to the Milky Way. There was nothing but a vast expanse of countless twinkling disks.

"The Virgo super cluster," came Kovac's voice, reverent, "home to at least 100 local groups of galaxies like our own..."

We travelled on and on, it seemed like the clusters and then the super clusters would never end.

"The vastness is entirely incomprehensible," said Kovac in a low voice.

How far did it go? I was once again straining to understand infinity.

"NASA has recently discovered the existence of ultra massive black holes, the gravitational centre of galaxy clusters, which begs the question, are there even larger black holes holding together the clusters of galaxies?" she walked a few steps on the wooden floor, "It appears that there is a black hole for every galaxy, and so must there not be one for every cluster of objects with a size exceeding the mass of our galaxy? We know of nothing else which could produce the gravitational force required to hold these masses together in orbit,"

I chanced another glance at my classmates, I could not believe it, but it appeared that every single one of them was asleep. Kovac saw me looking around the room and did not say anything, but she continued to hold my gaze, wearing a slightly formidable expression. I realized in this moment that she was aware that everyone was asleep, but most uncharacteristically, was not doing anything about it.

I looked back up at the ceiling to avoid her piercing gaze, and saw that we were rising out and away from the clusters of clusters, away from the pin pricks of light which were currently representing the incomprehensible masses of stars. As we rose out and away, the galactic clusters began to connect and to intertwine, creating a geometric structure, almost like honeycomb. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, and the most beautiful thing I could imagine.

I chanced another look at Kovac and was surprised to find that she was still looking at me, not staring at me. She was staring directly at me, and she looked entirely unabashed when I met her gaze. The film on the library ceiling was ending, and the lovely melody was fading away. We were reaching the edge of the observable universe.

"What did you think Pernelle?" asked Kovac, still looking at me.

I hesitated, not sure whether I wanted to tell her how much I'd enjoyed it.

"It was beautiful," I said, deciding there was no sense in lying, "I've never seen anything like it," Kovac smiled strangely. She was observing me with an odd expression that I could not read.

"I thought you would like it," she said, still smiling. I stared at her, noticing vaguely the perfection of her lashes.

What was her angle? She'd never been nice to me before, and she certainly loved to play

games... Perhaps it was the effect of the virtual space travel, but I don't think I will ever know how long we stared at each other that day in the library. Her leaning back on the polished wooden checkout desk, ruby lips, golden hair. Me laying on my back on the ground, covered by my school cardigan, head turned sideways to look at her over Eva's sleeping body.

At some point Eva began to stir. She opened her eyes to see me staring directly over top of her. "Whahappened?" she mumbled groggily, "Pernelle?" she turned her head to see what I was looking at, but Kovac had already moved away and was crouching down next to the tiny book shelf dedicated to all of Mr. Lloyd's favourites, and unplugging the projector.

"Alright girls," said Kovac straightening up, cord in hand, "It seems as though many of you have fallen asleep, which is very unfortunate because this was a very special treat,"

The rest of them had woken up now. Most of the students looked surprised to find themselves on a mat on the library floor. Nicole Trualt sat bolt upright, looking particularly bewildered by the situation.

"Oh my gosh I was totally passed out" said Lydia, pushing herself up and looking over top of Mary, who was rubbing her eyes but did not seem quite as disoriented.

"That's too bad, it was really cool," I said, still thinking about my moment with Kovac.

"There is still five more minutes before the bell, but you may go early," said Kovac over top of the general confusion.

We all began to get up, some of us more easily than others, for it appeared that many of my classmates had been in a deep slumber only moments before.

We got up and started to put our mats away where we'd gotten them. Kovac had never let us out early before. What an odd lesson that had been. I remember feeling perplexed beyond description as I walked out of the library, the halls deserted, not yet populated by the inevitable herd of high school girls who would be its occupants in under five minutes.

As we all left, none of the girls were talking very much. Everyone was slowly making their way over to the Copernicus wing to drop off their things and get changed for dinner. When we reached the spiral staircase at the end of the hall, Eva broke the silence.

"That was odd," she said simply.

"Yes it was," said Harriet Spak, who was just a short distance in front of us, "I think I dreamt something, but I can't remember..."

"I feel like I dreamt something too," said Lydia. Several of the girls nodded in agreement.

"Well isn't that what happens when you fall asleep?" I asked, wondering why this was anything out of the ordinary.

"I just feel weird," said Eva.

"Oh," I said, and all of us split off into our respective dorm rooms, the conversation ceasing without another word.