



SAM GAYTON

The background of the entire cover is a sunburst pattern. It consists of numerous light gray rays radiating outwards from a central point at the bottom, creating a sense of depth and light. The rays vary in length and thickness, giving it a hand-drawn or artistic feel.

THE LAST ZOO

SAM GAYTON



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FOR POE

voilà |vwa'la:|

1. exclamation

there it is; there you are: 'Voilà!' said the magician,
producing a rabbit from a hat.

2. noun

any life form brought into existence by a reality bomb:
'Genies were some of the first voilà to appear.'

See also: the Seam, the zoo, reality bomb, glitch

Extract from the Merriam-Webster dictionary, 2098 edition

When he awoke, the dinosaur was still there.

Augusto Monterroso, *The Dinosaur*

1

CAKE DREAM

That night in Pia's dreams they cut the moon like a cake and serve her an ice-white slice. The sponge is all silvery, dotted on top with candied meteorites. It tastes like cheesecake, of course.

The moon comes served on a blue china plate, with a velvet napkin and a mother-of-pearl fork. Quite posh really, especially for angels. Usually they come into Pia's dreams solely to make mischief – shaped like singing frogs, or gorillas wearing knickers, or elephants doing the hula. Hardly the holiest of visions.

Yet here they are, the pair of them dressed like bistro waiters, letting her taste the moon.

She keeps expecting the angels to make it taste like stinky blue Stilton, or yell out 'TOTAL ECLIPSE!' and vanish, leaving her hungry, but they don't.

Something is up. Pia knows it.

But she's asleep, and so there isn't too much she can do except gobble up her serving and ask the angels for seconds, then thirds and fourths, until finally she is full and has to leave the last sliver in the sky as a crescent.

The moon is pretty dry, as cakes go. Pia asks for something to wash it down with, and one angel flies off and comes back with a can of starlight. Pia expects it to taste all twinkly and

sweet, but starlight tastes of nothing. When she complains to the angel, it looks surprised.

‘The flavour won’t reach you for a million years,’ it says.

• • •

When Pia wakes, the dream is still there. The angels have left it shining over her cot in the darkened cabin, pinned in place above her head.

Now she’s awake, the dream takes the form of a halo. Most miracles the angels make appear this way. A circle is an angel’s favourite shape. It’s endless and elegant and completely loopy, just like them. Angels craft halos non-stop. They take beams of light and bend or braid them into rings, the way little kids do with daisy chains. Pia has seen them weave halos out of lamps, sunsets, birthday candles, monitor screens, you name it. Anything with a glow.

This one above her now is plaited from moonbeams, cool and silver-white. It looks like a giant frosted doughnut. Or the ghost of one. Luckily, food phantoms do not exist yet. Imagine being haunted by all the long-gone desserts you’d eaten. Sweet revenge.

Wow, she has woken up really pudding-obsessed. The halo is obviously still broadcasting the dream. It buzzes in her head like a sugar rush.

Pia lies there, going drowsily from one thought to the next until the realisation hits her. Hits hard as a slap. The force of it sends her rolling out of bed and on to the cabin deck.

She can't feel the angels.

They're not there.

But that's impossible. Gone? They can't be *gone*, no, no, she just isn't feeling this right. Pia has a track record of missing things that are right in front of her: just-mopped floors, MIND YOUR HEAD hazard signs, the goggles she reported lost but which turned out to be on her head. This has to be another of those moments.

Except it isn't. Emotions aren't something you can miss. You feel them or you don't.

And Pia doesn't. Not even faintly, not even at all.

The angels are gone.

Where? She runs to the cabin window to look out on the ark. The halo comes with her, stitched in place seven centimetres above her head. It wobbles and nearly slides off. Pia steadies it with one hand. Her fingertips come away sparkly. The angels have sewn last night's frost through the moonbeams like sequins.

It's a leaving present, she realises suddenly. A parting gift. Oh Seamstress, this is bad. The angels are so young. Just kids, really. They've barely outgrown their St Elmo's fire.

The cabin window is in sleep mode, blacked out. Pia clears it with a swipe. Hoping she'll see them. Actually praying. Bright dawn streams into the cabin, sparkling off the sea and the puddles on deck and the rain beaded on the window glass. She throws her forearm across her eyes, blinded. A chill settles upon the top of her head and ears like a powder, and she remembers the night frost and, a moment later, the halo.

Her hand rises up further to shield it, but the halo has already vanished, its pale frosted shape dissolving in the rich butter-yellow of the morning light.

Pia just stands there. Numb with the hugeness of what she isn't feeling. Numb with her numbness. How exactly are you supposed to save the world without angels? It would take a miracle. Which is kind of why the zoo has the angels in the first place.

They might not have gone far. Can she call them back? Pia gets herself into her shirt and orange zookeeper dungarees and pulls on her scuffed boots.

Her shirt is inside out.

Ugh. Doesn't matter. Change later. Just go.

Find them.

2

ANGEL FEELINGS

Outside the cabin the world is blue and calm. Above the ship and below it, sky and sea are still. Both so different to the churning, frantic mess Pia is: shirt inside out, sleep in her eyes, one of her boots already coming unlaced. *Quit worrying about all that*, she tells herself. *Just find something to wreck, something to tempt them back to fix.*

She looks around the deck's garden: at the meadow grass, the flowers, the apple tree at its centre. All of it growing on the deck of the ark. A little patch of green, bobbing on the big blue. The angels have sung each seed up from the soil and capped a tiny halo on every blade of grass. Out of all their miracles, this is the one they are fondest of. The one they keep returning to.

So Pia seeks out the nearest dandelion and kicks its yellow head off.

She looks away, and looks back; and looks away, and looks back. Her heart pounds and her head prays, waiting for the golden shimmer of hands to come and mend the dandelion back on its stalk.

Nothing happens. No miracle. The prayer goes unanswered.

What now? What next? What? Pia can't even call out for them. The angels don't have names: it's zoo procedure not to give them any, especially when they are still young. Names

encourage pridefulness, apparently, and pride in previous imagerations of angels has led to all sorts of problems.

Pia steps further into the garden, to where the angels have built their little house. It stands about Pia's height, round as a halo and made from beams of sunlight, all bent and shaped and pinned into place.

The house has walls made of strong slats of noontime glare, and windows made from treacly summer afternoons, with curtains of gloomy winter twilight and an orange-pink roof thatched from a thousand strands of sunset.

Pia can walk straight through the walls, but that will bring the place tumbling down. The angels' house is fragile, like its owners. So she drops to her knees and crawls through the open doorway.

Inside, the hallway is wallpapered with rainbows. Through them Pia can see the garden, turned vivid shades of indigo and red. She crawls forward, searching for something, anything. A clue, a sign, a note. Surely they've left one?

Maybe it was the halo, she thinks gloomily. It's possible. Angels struggle to communicate in words, and much prefer to talk in dreams and visions. They might have woven an explanation through the moonbeams using the night frost, and placed it on Pia's head to make her understand the reason they were leaving.

But what does eating the moon like a cake mean? Maybe her brain hasn't interpreted it right. Maybe there were subtler symbols in there that she's missed. Pia thinks back to the silver slice, with its cheesecake flavour and meteorites.

Were they candied nut, or chocolate chip? She can't remember now.

If only she hadn't melted the halo out of stupidity, she could slip it back on her head. Dream the dream again, figure out what it meant. She facepalms.

Maybe it was just a distraction. A way to keep Pia dreaming, whilst the angels made their getaway. That's an even worse thought. The zoo's most precious animals have escaped. On Pia's watch. And all it took was cake.

She crawls deeper into the angels' house, steadying herself every few seconds. The further down the hallway she goes, the more it scrambles her vision. The bending and pinning and stitching of light leads to weird optical illusions. 'Like a hall of mirrors', Mum used to describe it.

Pia has called up images on her goggles of old fairground funhouses, and it looks about right. Things too wide, too wobbly, or too fractured to make sense of. And she can't shut her eyes, or she'll blunder into a wall and bring the whole thing down around her like a sunset.

At the end of the hall, every movement makes her queasy. Magenta meadow grass rises impossibly high, then seems to curl to the backs of her eyeballs. Pia's violet hands flatten and unfold in concertina shapes that zigzag as she shuffles forward. The sea is the sky, the clouds are on deck. Her empty belly heaves.

Pia reverses back out again, sick and dazzled. This is pointless. The angels have billions of rooms in their house, and Pia can only access the hallway. The rest are not

three-dimensional spaces, but spirals that the angels draw themselves up into whenever they want privacy, like snails inside their shells, until they are the tiniest pinpricks of light, too small to see.

The house *is* empty, though. Pia doesn't need to search the rooms to know that. Seeing the angels isn't the issue: *feeling* them is. Being in their presence is as much *emotion* as anything else, and the feeling of angels has always been there on the ark.

And now it's not.

• • •

What do angels feel like? It's hard to say. Everyone gives a different answer.

'Like waking up on your birthday.'

'Like standing on a stage and everyone applauding.'

'Like your team snatching victory in the last second of the game.'

Ishan says that for him it feels like looking up at stars and seeing one shoot. But for Pia, it's nothing like her best friend's sparkling wonder. It's way more embarrassing.

To her, angels feel just like (and she hasn't even told Ishan this) getting away with a fart in an elevator. That *exact* same mix of giddy relief and triumph.

Only now there's no relief. No triumph. Only the terrible rushing sensation of approaching disaster.

And all she can do is stand on the deck of the celestial ark and watch.

It feels just like that time she went to the Rhinosaurus rex ark when she was five, and its skin was like the surface of a mountain, with its eyes pooled in their crags like big angry puddles, and Pia got so scared she peed.

And then Gowpen told everyone, and all the other kids in the zoo started calling her *Pee-a*, even though their nanabugs told them not to, until it got so bad that they had to reclassify *pee* as a swear word for a while, so that it got filtered from conversation and no kids could use it, which actually made things worse, because suddenly no one was allowed to say the word ‘people’, or sing the alphabet song past the fifteenth letter, or order anything with peas from the canteen ship, which made everyone super annoyed – mostly at Pia.

And now, her life is repeating. She’s made a mess, again. Accidentally, again.

And again it doesn’t matter one bit. Because soon the whole zoo will know, and hate her for it.

3

SUNSET PAGODA

Did any of the other celestials see them go? Pia runs below deck in panic mode, clanging through doors, boot soles squeaking on the scuffed pink corridor floors, one thought in her head.

Ask the genies.

The zoo has only two angels (well, not even two at the moment) but dozens of genies. At least one on each ark. Over sixty species of voilà on twenty-two arks, but the genies are by far the most common because of how useful they are.

Before there were angels, everyone hoped that genies might be the voilà the zoo (and the world) needs. But it turns out that the wishes they grant are only really practical for smaller stuff, like mending light bulbs and summoning more paper clips. Which is useful, but not on a *save-the-planet* level.

As genies grow older and more powerful, they get paired with a human 'genieer: an expert in wishing. There are about a dozen different types of wishes that have been safely scripted out, but the most commonly granted are zephyrs and thrints. Zephyring is a form of teleportation, while thrinting is 3D printing – rearranging proteins and carbohydrates and fats into something that resembles food. The more powerful the genie, and the more skilled the 'genieer, the better it tastes. Pia always orders double helpings

of dessert whenever Rubio and his genie Ajjimajji are on duty in the canteen. Those two have brownie ice cream down to an *art form*.

But a genie's wick only burns so bright for so long. Finally, the oldest and dimmest of them end up at the retirement home on the celestial ark.

Officially, its name is the Sunset Pagoda. Which makes it sound a *lot* more glamorous than it is. It's just an old storeroom deep in the ship's belly, with fire-retardant walls and floors covered with sand. A place where genies can fizzle out in peace.

Five of them burn there at the moment. Hokapoka, Shazam and Kadabra are all so feeble they rarely leave their lamps any more. (Very few genies live in actual *lamps*, of course: it's just a catch-all term. Genies will burn in anything, really, so long as it's fireproof. Old aerosol cans are common. Tins too. Genies crawl inside them like hermit crabs.)

Solomon and Bertoldo might have seen something, though. The angels were always coming down to play with those two old dears. Pia encouraged it. It was very sweet to watch. Being celestials, genies are made of light too (amongst other things). The angels loved bending them into all sorts of hilarious shapes – cylinders, cubes, question marks. The genies loved it too. They'd float through the air like carnival balloons, hooting with laughter as they twirled.

Mum had liked to call it 'genie yoga'.

• • •

Pia hurls open the door to the Sunset Pagoda. Even though the lights are on, the room is velvet-black. Warm darkness drapes itself across her eyes. It comes from all the shadows the genies wrap around themselves like cloaks. Over time the pagoda has grown thick with them, the way a room grows thick with cobwebs.

In the centre of the darkness, spinning lazily in the air, two rings of licking flame burn above a pair of battered aluminium drinks cans. The lilac ring is Solomon, and the lime-coloured one is Bertoldo. Pia can hear them giggling to each other as they twirl.

Her heart thuds. Each genie is twisted into the shape of a halo. The angels have been here! And not so long ago.

‘Do you know where they went?’ she blurts. ‘Solomon! Bertoldo! I need your help!’

The two genies unravel, and clothe themselves in shadows while Pia holds a hand over her eyes. Seeing a genie’s naked flame is considered rude (only by the older ones, though, self-conscious about the dimness of their fire).

‘Did you see where the angels went?’ Pia asks them again, looking up. In their normal shapes, genies look a lot like people – only made of fire and clothed in shadow, and with extravagant facial hair.

They both whoosh towards her, each one about the height of Pia’s forearm. Both their flames are shrouded except for the flickering tips, upon which burn faces and smoky trailing beards.

‘Did they say anything?’ The questions keep tumbling

out of her. ‘Or, I don’t know, give you a clue? Maybe in the form of a dream?’

Solomon’s and Bertoldo’s eyes dim with confusion. They’re the youngest in the pagoda, but by genie standards, they are both very, very old.

‘The *angels*.’ Pia balls her hands into fists. ‘Do you understand?’ She has to take a breath and swallow before she bursts into tears. ‘I have to find them.’

Slowly, some ember of understanding kindles in Solomon. ‘She comes to the genies with a *quest*!’ he tells Bertoldo, his eyes dancing with lilac fire.

‘A quest?’ the lime-coloured genie murmurs. ‘Could it be true?’

Pia nods. ‘Yes, that’s right. A *quest*!’

Why didn’t she say this straight away? Genies are obsessed with stories. They literally see the whole world as one great interweaving epic they call the Tale. They have their own particular way of speaking too, called Tellish, that involves narrating their thoughts and actions.

‘The desperate heroine was willing to embark on any journey,’ Pia says. Her Tellish has always been clunky, but at least the genies might understand her. ‘Go any distance, endure any hardship, to find her beloved angels. If only the genies might aid her . . .’

She trails off. Solomon and Bertoldo are actually *fizzing* with excitement. Sparks whizz from the tips of their beards like miniature fireworks, spiralling and popping in rainbow colours. Pia is buzzing too. They get it! At last, some progress.

‘The genies were only too happy to help the heroine!’ Solomon announces, as Bertoldo nods furiously. ‘They summoned a mighty boon to bestow upon her! It would guide the heroine to what she was so desperately seeking . . .’

Pia’s eyes widen. A boon is a powerful object that genies give to those they perceive as ‘heroes’. What will this one be? Magic compass? Talking sword?

Bertoldo plunges one long, flickering hand into the smoky blue wisp of his beard and pulls out a foot-long hot dog.

Solomon points with his candlelight fingers, and adds ketchup, mustard and fried onions.

The two genies offer it to Pia triumphantly.

‘The mighty boon!’ they both announce. ‘Take it, and it will lead the way!’

Pia does her best to look pleased as she takes the hot dog. Ah well. At least that’s breakfast sorted. Bless the old dears for trying.

‘The heroine rushed off on her quest with renewed purpose!’ she lies, not wanting to hurt their feelings.

Solomon and Bertoldo are so happy they both discard their shadows and go pinwheeling naked around the room, spitting sparks and smoke and setting off the fire alarm in the corridor outside.

Pia heaves the door to the Sunset Pagoda shut and flaps one-armed at the alarm until it stops wailing. She slides down the door, hot dog still in hand. Muffled through the bulkhead, she can hear Solomon and Bertoldo singing to each other on an infinite loop.

*'The quest can't fail,
It just can't fail,
With the mightiest boon in all the Tale!'*

Pia looks at the hot dog, oozing sauce down her thumb. She has no idea what to do with it. No idea what to do at all, in fact. She ends up just sitting there and eating the hot dog in a dozen miserable little bites. The onions taste funny. And there's way too much mustard. By the end of it, she feels vaguely sick. More of a mighty barf than a mighty boon.

'Ugh.' She gives an acrid little burp. 'Thanks, genies.'

4

CHIMERAS

Like most ships in the zoo, the celestial ark is an i-era vessel, patched up and repurposed to hold voilà. Before the crash and the war, it chugged around the world, ferrying parcels for some internet auction site called *dib\$*.

On the *dib\$* company logo, the dot on the i is a smiley face and the d and the b are both thumbs ups. The dollar sign is in a speech bubble next to the smiley's mouth. A happy little logo, speaking a simple language of money and bargains and lucky finds.

Pia calls him Dibsy. Versions of him are stuck in various sizes to the ark's doors and corridor walls, and a few transparent Dibsys still cling to the porthole windows, bleached by decades of sun and faint as ghosts.

Dibsy is in the hold too, beneath Pia's feet. Hundreds upon hundreds of him, smiling in the pitch-dark, plastered to the sides of the stacked crates of *dib\$* freight that sit on pallets of rotting wood. Stuff that has been out for delivery for thirty years now.

As a kid, Pia used to sift through a few of those packages, marvelling at the pointless junk people had once found it necessary to order. A noise-cancelling fork for people who slurped noodles too loud. A man's tie that looked like a rasher of bacon. A glass bowl on wheels, for taking

your pet goldfish for a walk. Glow-in-the-dark toilet paper. Bubblegum-flavoured shoelaces.

So much garbage. No wonder the world was a mess.

Pia doesn't go down to the hold any more, though. No one does. The entire lower decks are blocked off by a round metal door that looks like it has been salvaged from a bank vault or nuclear bunker. The door's edges are sealed with lead and an emergency concave mirror is suspended above it, ready to swing down and reflect any attempted escapes.

Without really being aware of it, Pia finds herself wandering down the corridor and drifting towards it. She barely registers her movements until she feels her fingers rest upon the small square peephole cut into the door's centre.

Before she can stop herself, she pulls it open, just a crack. Then she jerks her hand away, as if the peephole was red hot.

'Don't,' she says aloud.

She's not talking to herself.

Her cheek grows warm, there's the fuzz of static, and a wicked little whisper sounds in her ear.

Why not? says the creature behind the door. *What is Pia so distracted about? Tell us. We can help?*

Pia shuts off her thoughts. She is nowhere near desperate or stupid enough to go ask *Bagrin* about the angels.

Angels?

Oh, Bagrin knows all about angels.

Facepalm! He's powerful this close. Even through the

door. She backs off, singing an annoyingly catchy pip-pop song in her head to drown out her other thoughts.

*Null it, gurl, be my ohtwo
You breathe me, yea
I'll breathe you*

She tries to hear the synth solo, but Bagrin whispers above it: *Don't go. We won't bite. Won't do anything tricky. Deal?* He sends the image of Dibsy into her head, only the logo is holding out both his hands, as if to say *Come on, now. Would we lie to you?*

Pia stares at the vault door. Deals, deals. With devils it is always deals. There used to be two of them down there, amongst the *dib\$* crates, trapped in the infernal prism. The other devil's name was Gotrob. He had not been as good at deals as Bagrin. Perhaps that is why Bagrin ate him. Who knows.

Bagrin did it for you, of course. After what Gotrob did, we knew you wanted revenge.

'Liar.' Pia shakes the devil's presence away. 'And stop reading my thoughts.'

It's her own fault, for lingering too long here. Lead and concrete can only block out so much temptation. Devils have a particular talent: they can send their voices into the ears of anyone, anywhere.

Sometimes, they even send images. The official zoo term for them is *chimeras*. Every now and then, Bagrin manages

to slip one through to her. Often while Pia is asleep, thoughts unguarded.

Chimeras are like adverts, with Pia at the centre. Most of them are really generic desires. Her, but *pretty*. Her, but *smart*. Her, but *ruling the world*. All obvious stuff like that. Not particularly tempting. A standard safety procedure set-up is that Pia should keep conversation with Bagrin to an absolute minimum, to stop the devil from learning too much about her. It has stopped him from tailoring his adverts and making them irresistible.

Before the crash and the war, everyone owned devices that did the same thing as devils. Dark little boxes called phones, that sat in your hands promising you anything and everything. Listening to your desires and murmuring back: *I can make you pretty; I can make you interesting; I can make you cool*.

Pia touches her dungarees pocket. Just imagine it. Mum and Dad carried phones. A lot of sprawl-punks still do, even though there isn't much for them to connect to any more.

Bagrin whispers to her again. *What do you want to know about angels? We can tell you. Deal?*

'No deal,' Pia corrects. She knows the devil is lying. That's what makes him so tempting. There is comfort in lies. At least they offer hope, unlike the truth. Hope can be comforting even when it's false: Pia knows that from experience.

But it always turns bitter in the end. Hope didn't bring Mum and Dad back. Why would it bring the angels?

• • •

Back up on deck, the halos in the garden have slipped. With the angels gone, the tiny ones above the grass and flowers, small and golden like wedding rings, have mostly blown away. A few of them hang in tangled loops in the branches of the apple tree, the leaves around them already fading to autumn shades.

What can Pia do? The garden won't last long here, a kilometre from land on a repurposed cargo ship. Not without the angels feeding it a steady diet of miracles.

And what if someone sees?

Pia runs up to the rail and looks around for nearby ships. The celestial ark – her ark – is just one of the twenty-two that make up the zoo. Pia can see the old supertanker that holds the megafauna; the small coaster that is the zoo's aviary; the bulk freighter with modified cargo holds where the singing hippos wallow and the pigasi fly.

Each ship is a little brightly coloured island in a colourless ocean: navy and rust-red, brilliant-white, burnt-orange. And at the centre of them all, like the spoke around which they all turn, is the island mountain.

Pia can see it clearly this morning: a shard of black volcanic rock that juts from the sea in a crest of white foam.

It doesn't always look this way. Depending on the glitch that rages around it like an eternal storm, the mountain might look smaller, or see-through, or not there at all. Sometimes it shines. Once, it wriggled and flexed, like the tip of a finger that was half a kilometre high.

It's all an illusion, of course. Just the glitch, playing tricks on the mind.

Pia shudders. Suddenly she's aware of how alone she is up here on deck without the angels. Usually her nanabug would be there to monitor her, but Threedeeep is off being mended after Pia accidentally sat on the drone whilst she was in standby. A really high-authority genie is having to wish her back together.

Sitting on Threedeeep has turned out sort of lucky, though. If the nanabug was there, alarm bells would already be ringing throughout the zoo.

Why hasn't Pia raised the alarm yet, though? The angels have been gone twenty minutes at least now. Seeing as they can travel at the speed of light, that is quite a long time. They might be anywhere. They could be topping up their tan on the surface of the Sun.

And say they *did* want to go sunbathe in space rays – how could Pia even stop them? The zoo has procedures for keeping other celestials contained: devils are bound by prisms and contracts, genies by lamps and wishes . . .

But angels? Well. The only known way to keep an angel in one place was, basically, to *need* them. That's what has kept them here since they first came from the Seam. Pia's need, and above that the zoo's need, and above that the world's need for them to stay.

Only now, it seems like that's not enough.

• • •

Since she is up on deck, Pia decides to check the numinous lamps before she raises the alarm. They form a floodlit perimeter around the ark. You can't see celestials without numinous light. Maybe they're malfunctioning?

She checks: they're not.

OK.

Time to go back to her cabin and fully freak out in private.

Pia's cabin is her bedroom and office, combined. It has windows you can blacken, cloud or clear. It has a chair, a desk, a cot. It has piles of reports, organised into various categories (overdue, way-overdue, half-written) and several stacked towers of old plastic food pots from canteen-pilfered snacks. Various communities of mould are slowly moving into each level of the piled-up pots, like they are penthouse flats.

Pia barges in and waves the walls from clear to cloudy. She catches sight of herself in the reflection. Torn dungarees, wonky fringe, untied shoelace, shirt inside out. Solomon's and Bertoldo's hot dog has left a smear of ketchup on her lip. There's mustard on her boot.

How, in the name of the Seamstress, could the angels have left someone so obviously in need of them?

A few slips of green paper have appeared on Pia's desk since she woke: little messages zephyred there by her best friends, the Rekkers. Pia glimpses a few scribbled notes from Wilma and Gowpen and Ishan:

Rekkers assemble, it's unicorn day!!

Good luck!!

Hey! Slee-P! You up?

Scribbling chat to her friends can wait. She sweeps the messages aside and scrambles around for her goggles. They are i-era, old and cranky. No connectivity any more, just lots of pre-loaded files for reference.

She pulls them over her eyes, blinks them on, and calls up *Procedures of Care*, the zoo's basic keeper handbook. Ninety-five different species of voilà have appeared out of the Seam in the last thirty years, and the handbook has entries concerning every single one. There are tips for grooming phoenixes . . . advice on hummingdragon training (reward them with gold dust, which they love to hoard) . . . regulations on trimming genie beard lengths . . .

It takes a while to find what Pia wants. One of the lenses was cracked (another victim of her butt), so she can't use the search bar. She has to keep paging everything over on to her left eye. Soon she has a headache to add to her panic and her hot-dog burps. It's a day that keeps on giving.

Finally there's a list of procedures titled ENCLOSURE BREACHES / ARK ESCAPES. It consists of several bullet points from Director Siskin, written in the boss's usual way:

#1 - Raise the alarm at once.

#2 - As in, five minutes ago.

#3 - WHY ARE YOU STILL READING THIS?

Pia pulls off her goggles and drops them to the floor. Of course, Siskin is right. Raising the alarm is the proper thing to do. The only thing to do. Facepalm, facepalm, *facepalm*. There *have* to be other options. Anything.

Prayer?

She clasps her hands. 'Please, please, please come back. Please let me open my eyes and see you there. I need you. The world needs you. Amen. Amen.'

How long should she crouch there like this, broadcasting her prayer loop like some sort of distress call?

Are they listening?

Is anyone?

Suddenly the door sweeps open. Pia leaps up, daring to believe. It worked. She can't believe it worked!

But it isn't an angel that comes to her aid. She might have known. In reality, there's only one creature in the entire universe tuned into Pia's wavelength.

It's Ishan.