

THE LUCKY JUMP was all the rage that year. Clair had tried it once but had become bored after arriving at a string of destinations that seemed anything but lucky. An empty field, a theater advertising a show in a language she didn't understand, an underwater viewing platform full of noisy kids, and somewhere so wet and hot she didn't even leave the booth. Clair could get better views from home, surfing media through her lenses, *and* be comfortable into the bargain.

It was Libby, of course, who convinced her to give it another try.

"Come on, it'll be jazzy."

"How exactly?"

"There's this clique—they call themselves crashlanders. Ever heard of them?"

Clair shook her head. Libby was into that kind of thing, not her.

"They're the coolest of the cool," Libby said. "You wouldn't believe how popular they are. Hardly anyone can join them, but we're going to."

"Just like that?"

"Trust me, Clair. Have I led you astray before?"

"Plenty of times."

"Come on! What about when we auditioned for the circus even though we couldn't even juggle? Or visited that hacked satellite and Ronnie threw up?"

"Yes, but then we got stuck at the South Pole—"

"You're the one who set the booth to Chinese."

"Only because you dared me to try!"

They laughed. That *was* a memorable moment. They had only gotten moving again when Clair found a friend of a friend who knew how to change the settings back.

"Where did you hear about the crashlanders?" Clair asked.

"Through Zep. He's not one of them, but he'd like to be."

Clair just nodded. Lately she clammed up when Zeppelin Barker, Libby's boyfriend, entered the conversation.

"Come on, Clair. Say yes. You always do in the end."

That was true, although she couldn't imagine it ever being jazzy to d-mat from place to place. There was no point resisting one of Libby's whims when she had her mind set on it.

"All right."

"Great! I'll come to your place after class. Be ready."

Clair lived in Windham, Maine, with her mother and stepfather. She and her best friend went to high school on the other side of the continent, near Sacramento Bay, California. Libby lived somewhere in Sweden—Clair always forgot the name, but that didn't matter. She just told the booth to take her to Libby's, and so it did.

Clair dialed a familiar outfit from the fabber's memory: navy plaid skirt and tank top, with black boots, bicycle shorts, and belt, and a navy headband in the vain hope of keeping her curly hair in line. She'd given up on ever having Libby's perfectly straight blond locks. Where she was dark, Libby was light; combine the two of them, she'd often thought, and you'd get someone of precisely average

coloring.

Libby was running late. While she waited, Clair searched the Air for anything regarding the crashlanders. Apart from an old book with the same name, there were several peacekeeper reports concerning the new clique and its members. Founded by a woman called Alexandra Nantakarn, the clique held “crashlander balls” at different points around the world every night: in old missile silos, abandoned hospitals, and other ruins, often illegally. Exclusive parties in exotic locales sounded like the kind of thing Libby would be into, but there was no information on how the balls were organized or who was allowed to attend.

Before Clair could perform a more detailed search, Libby arrived, looking fashionable in white tights, silver A-line dress, bright-red leather retro Doc Martens with yellow laces, and a skull-hugging yarmulke that matched the boots but left her hair free to do what it did best. Her makeup was a wild contrast between white foundation and primary-colored lipstick and eyeliner designed to pull attention away from the brown birthmark that, despite numerous skin treatments, stretched from her left ear to her chin. Clair had given up trying to convince Libby that the mark was anything other than a minor imperfection—unlike, say, Clair’s nose, which she had inherited from her birth father and hated with a blinding white-hot passion.

“Come on.” Libby dragged Clair out of the apartment and up the hall. “It’s starting.”

“The ball?”

“Exactly!”

“What’s the huge hurry?” asked Clair, messaging her stepfather to apologize for not saying good-bye in person. “We’ll be there in a sec.”

“No, we won’t, because I don’t know the way,” Libby said, adding with an enigmatic grin: “But it’s vitally important we get there first.”

“What?”

“You’ll see.” Libby pulled a makeup applicator from her pocket and touched up the pancake over her birthmark. The booth’s mirrored interior reflected and re-reflected thousands of Libbies and Clairs in all directions.

Libby said to the booth, “I want to get lucky.”

Somewhere, a machine shuffled every possible public d-mat address and selected one by chance. Instead of taking them to a destination they specified, like home or school, the booth would take them to a random point anywhere on the Earth. People used Lucky Jumps to sightsee or while away an empty afternoon. Clair had never heard of anyone using them to actually get anywhere in particular.

Bright light flared from the booth’s eight corners, and the air thinned around them. Clair opened her mouth from years of habit. Her sinuses strained.

sssssss—

She stuck a finger in her right ear, wiggled it—

—*pop*

The lights returned to normal and the door opened.

They were on a rugged coast, looking out over choppy water under skies as gray as granite. The northwest coast of England, her lenses told her. Nowhere.

“Well, this looks fun,” said Clair.

“Better than that thing you took me to last month—the Morris Dance Festival, whatever it was.”

“I was promised men in tights,” conceded Clair.

“And if any of them had been under seventy, maybe it would have worked out. Again,” Libby told the booth. “Lucky, lucky, lucky.”

“We’re not seriously going to randomly jump around until we find the ball, are we?”

“That’s the plan.”

“It’s going to take us forever,” said Clair. “We’ll *literally* be in here forever.”

“Don’t be such a worrywart. Just wait and see.”

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Red Australian desert vanished at the horizon into the endless starscape above. A nocturnal lizard crouched in the light spilling from the booth, frozen by the sudden development.

“Crap,” said Libby.

“You can say that again.”

“All right, all right.” Libby put her applicator in her pocket and embiggened Clair’s hair with her fingers. “There, perfect. Third time *really* lucky, please.”

The door slid shut on the sight of the lizard, stolidly chewing on an insect that had been attracted by the light.

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The doors opened on an utterly ordinary, utterly uninteresting Ugandan d-mat station.

Clair folded her arms and raised an eyebrow.

Libby was starting to look a little impatient herself.

“Okay, I guess the surprise is ruined now. No one knows where the crashlander balls are until they happen, see? People Lucky Jump around until they find somewhere with potential and then they all converge.”

“Anyone can do this?”

“Anyone can suggest venues on the crashlander forum, but they make the final decision. And they don’t let anyone come to the ball who hasn’t found a venue before. You get it?”

Clair did see. This wasn’t just about a party. The ball was literally their ticket into the cool new clique, which in importance to Libby was right up there with the clothes she was wearing and the person she was dating. Schoolwork barely rated.

Clair piggybacked on Libby’s feed from the crashlander forum and splashed its content across the infield of her lenses. Uganda vanished behind a wall of images, projected onto her retinas by contacts she had worn from birth. The forum was full of people exchanging images of suggested sites taken with their lenses. There were a *lot* of images.

Clair and Libby jumped twice more, without success.

“This is giving me a headache,” said Libby despondently, brushing her bangs back into line after the doors closed and the gale outside ebbed to a muffled scream.

“Harder than you thought?” Clair tried not to sound smug.

“Much. Maybe we should pack it in.”

“Why? We’ve only just started.”

“I thought you’d be pleased.”

“*Someone* has to find a venue. It could still be us.”

“Not at the rate we’re going.”

This was the way it always went. Clair didn’t like giving up on anything once she got into it, and Libby was easily bored. “We’ll just have to go faster, then. Booth? Again, please.”

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Clair was seeing the fun of it, now. There was the challenge of finding the right place entirely by chance, combined with finding it before anyone else did. The odds for the former were low—there were tens of millions of d-mat booths in the world, after all, maybe hundreds of millions—but that made the odds of being the first to any one of them higher. Clair figured it canceled out.

And if they found the place, they would be crashlanders. *They* would be cool, and Zep would come to *them*, because he was as much a publicity hound as Libby. That incentive she kept carefully to herself.

Their seventeenth Lucky Jump put them in the middle of what looked like an abandoned industrial complex somewhere high up, judging by Clair's unpopped ear and the instant chill against her skin. She stepped out and looked around, skeptical.

"Booth's ancient," said Libby, circling it with a look of profound dissatisfaction. It was an outmoded model, square, with a single round-edged door opening out of each white face. Just four transits at a time. "It'd be a total bottleneck."

"Could work in our favor—you know, make it feel exclusive?" said Clair, gazing up at thick iron girders and bulging rivets, and beyond all that, a high, domed ceiling. The floor below was empty, because industry was a thing of the past. Anything except people could be fabricated at will, as long as it had been through a d-mat booth or a fabber at some point in its existence.

"It's freezing," said Libby, hugging herself, "and the air's thin."

"We can fab heaters," Clair said, peering through a window at the infinite quilt of mountains outside. "Oxygen, too, if people need it."

"Because passing out is a definite buzzkill."

"Doesn't it give you a high if you breathe it pure?"

Libby shrugged. "Don't forget the parkas," she said. "They're *always* sexy."

Clair checked the Air for details on their location. They were in Switzerland, it turned out, and the amazing building around them wasn't an old factory at all, but an abandoned astronomical research station, the Sphinx Observatory, just over two miles up on the top of a hollowed-out mountain, with an ice palace somewhere at the end of an old elevator shaft below and observation decks that had been sealed up for a decade. . . .

Clair read on with amazement. Was this place *real*?

"I'm getting a buzz," she said. "Quick, take my picture."

She opened her arms, and Libby stared hard for a second while her lenses worked.

"Got it, gorgeous girl. You want me to post it to the forum?"

"Worth a try."

"You really think they'll come?"

"Only one way to find out."

Libby's lenses flickered in the gloom, and when Clair checked the crashlander forum, she saw images of herself standing in the observatory spreading out into the world.

"How will we know if they like it?" Libby asked, worrying at her lip.

"They'll just come, I guess."

For five minutes, nothing happened. Libby kicked the floor in moody silence, hands plunged deep in the pockets of a thick woolen coat she had ordered through the booth, while Clair paced around the enormous space, refusing to give up hope. She was finding it harder, though, with every passing

minute, as the cold seeped into her skin and she became aware of a faint dizziness from the thin air. Giving up, as Libby was clearly ready to do, would be a lot easier than persisting much longer. And the odds of talking to Zep were practically zero anyway, even if the party happened. . . .

The booth behind them clunked. They ran across the room to see. One of the four doors was closing. In quick succession, the remaining three closed too, and the echoing metal space was full of the hum of matter and energy spinning into new forms. Clair stopped pacing, barely able to breathe with anticipation. They were stranded, but only temporarily, and soon they wouldn't be alone. She saw the same eager alertness on Libby's face. Neither of them dared speak.

"Hey," said the first person out, a lanky man in his twenties with a British accent and a swoop of yellow hair that completely covered half his face. He stared around him with one green eye wide and gleaming, and shivered. "This is savage."

"You like it?" asked Libby.

"Maybe. Where's the telescope?"

"Don't know," said Clair. "We haven't looked yet."

He wandered off to explore. The door he had come through was already closing, processing someone else.

The second door opened, admitting another young man in a thick, furred overcoat, who simply ran across the room to the nearest window and gasped with something that might have been excitement or alarm. It was hard to tell. The view through the window went a *long* way down.

Libby looked at Clair, who shrugged.

The third potential partygoer was a girl with Thai features and a South American accent.

"Are you Liberty Zeist?" she asked Clair.

"No, I am," said Libby.

"And you want to be a crashlander."

"Uh, obviously. We both do."

"Haven't you heard that all the good sites have been taken?"

Libby looked at Clair in frustration. Clair's heart sank. All their jumping and standing around in the cold had been for nothing. If the crashlanders had already been here, that meant no ball and no Zep.

"Just messing with you," said the woman with a grin. "This is a great find. Congratulations."

She produced three beers from her backpack and tossed one each to Libby and Clair. The third she opened.

"What are you waiting for? It's time to party."

"But how do you know?" Libby asked. "Doesn't there have to be a vote or something?"

"Democracy is *so* twentieth century. Besides, the queue for the booth is thirty deep already. I'd say the decision's been made." The woman grinned and raised her can in salute. "Xandra Nantakarn. Welcome to the crashlanders."

Clair turned to Libby and saw the delight she felt mirrored on her best friend's face. They whooped and high-fived and toasted each other's brilliance with their gifted beers.