

Flight

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FLIGHT

Neil Hetzner

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In *Flight* I have tried to imagine how technology, culture and language as well as the geography of the world will have changed by the end of this century. Yet, while I can only guess at how the physical world will be different, I can be sure the emotional world of humans will remain the same.

PROLOGUE

What's Past...Isn't.

The road south from Muyinga, weaving through the mountains of Burundi in East Africa like a mud and gravel stream, was more suited for intrepid goats than the battered truclet negotiating its challenges, but Nora Elieson had driven that twisting, never-repaired, vertiginous track so often she could keep most of her mind free to think about guinea fowl.

A half-century before, in another, far different life, the octogenarian had been very well-regarded and very well paid for her thinking, especially the kind of thinking that could solve a problem by leaping over it. Now, once again, from that place of creation that had always been a mystery to her, had come a thought for how to increase the guinea fowl harvest in the villages she had just visited. To keep the thought coming, one deeply tanned hand left the steering wheel and began tugging at the snarl of short gray hair that covered her head. Although she was excited, the fugitive scientist knew she must be careful not to be too clever. Being too clever had cost her that previous privileged life.

It was not cleverness, but a tempered love that had given Nora Elieson her current life. Hanging around a coffee urn at a small New Africa conference, Nora had met Beryl Langue. Langue was a Global Nations' agronomist who had spent twenty years in Fifth World Africa improving sorghum harvests by altering both the genetics of the plant and the agricultural techniques and habits of those who grew it. That GN work had had small infrequent rewards. It was not until after the age of sixty, when Langue met Nora and they married, that both received rewards greater than their ages and attitudes had allowed them to imagine.

At his new wife's insistence, Beryl Langue had left the GN. Nora Elieson had money and an idea for mutating guinea fowl so that a second, third, and fourth wing pair would regenerate after harvesting. That idea took almost ten years to become reality. Progress in science, or anything for that matter, in Africa was a dispiriting slog; however when success finally came, the couple felt the work and wait, and the inroads it had made on Nora's wealth, had been well worth it. To Nora Elieson's way of thinking, the work with the wings of a nearly brainless bird was more important than the paradigm altering discoveries she had made so many years before.

Three years after the breeder stock had been distributed throughout the impoverished villages that clung to life along the steep sides of the Rift, average daily protein consumption had more than doubled. Long-boned, thin muscled children stumbling along the red mud roads had become a less frequent sight.

Being able to harvest two over-sized wings every ten weeks meant that most villagers no longer needed to slaughter their birds for meat. Harvesting the birds' wings, instead of slaughtering them, led to families having bigger flocks. Since guinea fowl need little human assistance to thrive, families were able to increase their protein calories at very little expense in either time or energy. An unintended, but welcome, extremely welcome, side effect was that the larger flocks were driving down the insect population upon which they fed. Since many of those insects were vectors for some of Africa's most virulent diseases, the villagers' mortality rate, especially among infants, was dropping. Nora thought that decreasing infant mortality was more important than increasing life expectancy, something about which she knew a great deal.

As she slung the Toymoto's steering wheel from side to side to avoid washouts and slurries left by the rains, and compensate for its worn-out struts, Nora reluctantly considered just how much longer the work she and Beryl were doing could stay in the shadows.

After one hundred years of money and manpower from the developed countries had been more than matched by a century of corruption, new disease strains, and tribal and national wars, the rest of the world had looked elsewhere than Africa to ease its conscience and do its good. Poor, benighted Africa had become even poorer, more benighted, forgotten Africa.

It was the latter, the forgotten aspect, which first had attracted Nora Elieson. She had needed a place to go to ground. Now, she sometimes worried that the benefits that she had helped bring to the forgotten villagers in the forgotten mountains in forgotten Burundi in forgotten East Africa would cause someone somewhere, the wrong someone, to remember.

The eighty-nine year old woman with the impatient eyes was nursing the dinged and dusty Toymoto through a series of switchbacks forty kilometers north of Gitega when an incongruous sound of civilization intruded. The pulsing of the blades echoing against the steep rocky sides made it sound like a swarm of rotos, rather than just one, was flying up the valley. The sound, a low, slow thump, like clapping underwater, was not totally unheard in Africa. With little infrastructure, but with plenty of weapons and even more hate, rotos were the vehicle of choice for getting those illogical few, who valued their lives but still came to Africa, across her great distances.

Re-feathering. That was the idea Nora was running through her aging but ample circuitry. Burundi had been wet and hot for ages, but when the world began to warm, it had become even hotter and wetter. That change in meteorological conditions had caused certain species of flora and fauna to thrive and others to wither. Guineas could tolerate a great deal of heat, but it took a lot of calories to do so. Re-feathering could lead to both better insulation and heat dissipation. If the feathers....

The thick foliage on the other side of the Toymoto's bug-spattered windshield first began to sway and then to bow up and down in a way that reminded Nora of dancers at a harvest ceremony. The thump of the roto, like the beat of a ceremonial drum, quickened and grew louder, as it dropped down toward the earth.

Rather than just noticing that a roto was overhead, Nora, who had lived much longer than some wished, began to pay close attention to it. She slowed down so that she could divert some of her concentration from the winding, muck-wrecked road to what was going on above the thick canopy that was concealing her.

The machine darted, hovered, darted and hovered in a way that reminded Nora of a humming bird before a flowering trumpet vine.

Having no rational reason to think that she was in danger, but having no reason to dismiss that she felt that way, Nora turned off the truclet's motor and coasted to a stop under the green canopy.

The machine above quieted as if it were listening before it zigged, jugged, zagged and sped off north, back-tracking up the serpentine valley through which Nora had just come.

Even after dismissing all of the adrenaline coursing through her ropy body as mis-applied biochemistry, the old woman waited another ten minutes more before starting on her way. She told herself that when she got closer to Gitega she would try to see if there was enough civilization in Burundi's latest capital to bounce a call to a former capital, Bujumbura, to ensure that Beryl and

their daughter, Prissi, were alright.

Less than an hour later, Nora made the call and she found that everything at home was fine except that, after her week's absence, her husband and only child daughter greatly missed her.

They missed Nora even more that afternoon when she didn't arrive when she should have. All through the night as their patience grew thin and their panic grew deep, they missed her even more. The next day they missed her twice more as they drove up and down the road north of Gitega, but on the third time, along with two retired muzungu mercenaries, they found the truclet and those remnants of Nora Elieson that the jungle hadn't harvested.

The truclet had careened off the road in an implausible place. Nora Elieson had come to her end crossing over a ridge that offered a relatively dry smooth surface as well as a tremendous view to the north of spiky mountains burdened in green, like the mossy back of an alligator. To the west one could see the deep shadowy Rift from which hominids first decided to leave their trees. To the south was the badboard stew of slums and worse slums, those canted shanty boxes which had replaced the hominids' trees. Just part of the splendor of Gitega, Burundi's newest capital. Further to the south, no larger than silver threads, one could see, piecemeal, if enough tears could be blinked away, the twisting, snaky waters of the Ruvyironza, source of the Nile.

When the police finally arrived, there was less investigating than philosophizing as the two detectives, all wrinkled khaki and sweat-smearing sunglasses, wondered whether it was the distraction of 'from whence we came' or of 'where we go' that pulled Nora Elieson's eyes from the road at the wrong time.

Beryl Langue, remembering the phone call and noticing the clean swept circle in what should have been a dusty road, thought that the accident might have been something else. Prissi Langue, the couple's twelve year old daughter, despite being warned to stay in the jeep, had been compelled to look when her mother's body was carried back up the gash made by the Toymoto's plunge. She was stunned by what the jungle had done to her mother.

Despite being frightened and confused, Beryl Langue, immediately upon his return to Bujumbura with his devastated daughter, took action. The usually unassuming man called in favors and insisted upon irregularities. After a hurried funeral, more hurried packing, and within seventy-two hours of her death, the remainder of Nora Elieson's family was on a boat on Lake Tanganyika crossing from Burundi to Congo. When Beryl Langue looked back, the battered buildings of Bujumbura glinted in sunlight. When he looked ahead, mist roiled from the lake. Beryl Langue thought that captured things perfectly.

Despite what the police report and death certificate said, Beryl Langue's thinking atop the ridge was correct. Ironically, the aged passenger in the roto who caused Nora Elieson's death, himself a man of great intelligence and greater patience, lost what he, too, valued most.

It was those two losses, high above the turbid life and death of Africa, a continent where a half-bowl of millet could catalyze friend to foe, which gave birth to the troubles would so threaten Prissi Langue three years later.

CHAPTER ONE

A Teacher Is The Best Experience

Prissi Langué, a fifteen-year old second year Dutton School student, came stomping up the stairs from the Carver Common Room. Prissi was stoking a hissy fit and enjoying every molecule of the volatile chemistry jumping within her body. After a late Thursday night marathon studying for a test in Chinese and finishing a problem set for Fi-Sci II, she had bunked breakfast to sleep late. When she woke, she was ravenous as only a fifteen-year-old girl can be. There was nothing left in her snack-cache but empty bags and boxes containing pitiful corners of salty crumbs or sugary dust. It didn't take a genius to know that her roomie, Nasty Nancy Sloan, had been on a pillage again. To silence the animal growling in her stomach, Prissi had run downstairs to the Common Room to get a tofusicle from the venderator, but when she had stepped on the biometric pad in front of that glowing tabernacle to teener desire, it had beeped twice. A single beep was a warning. Two beeps meant that the machine thought that she was too fat. Two beeps meant the machine, regardless of how much money was inserted as a bribe, wouldn't open the little tabernacle doors behind which a host of secular treasures could be seen.

The Dutton School took care, too much care in the minds of most of its charges, that their young bodies be as carefully nurtured as their immature minds. Since Prissi knew she wasn't close to being overweight, the obvious answer to the double beep was that some starving chunk, probably Nasty Nancy, had jammed the machine...again.

The fuming Prissi, gray-green eyes sparking, bow-lipped mouth spitting noises like an ancient steam radiator, was back upstairs and half-way down the hall when she heard the scuffling steps of someone in Drylons coming her way. She peered down the dark narrow corridor, but the mid-morning sunlight wriggling through the narrow clerestory window at the end of the second floor hall made it impossible to see who was approaching. Since Prissi was far too tired to win and far too competitive to lose an early session of dorm hall repartee, the half-synapsed girl took three quick steps and disappeared into the third floor communal bathroom.

Prissi leaned against the raddled bathroom door and took a deep breath. Her calm detachment lasted for less than a second. The powerful magnet of the three meter long mirror above the sinks tugged at her eyes. Since the greenish bio-phosphor lights would have made a beauty queen look like something that belonged in an aquarium, Prissi resisted looking. Her teener ego had plenty of other battles to fight, but the mirror, evil truth-teller, pulled, promised, wheedled and won. Leaning over the vanity counter-top, which held three porcelain sinks, Prissi tucked her mouse and mange hair behind her ears so she wouldn't miss any of her faults and imperfections.

The ears themselves were faulty—the lobes weren't detached and there were three small moles, looking like an ellipsis on the rim of the left ear. The eyes...yes...the eyes...maybe her best feature...but not today. Those usually laser bright, almond-shaped windows on her soul were dull and the skin below them was brownish gray, like...like...a bat's armpit. The nose—ohmigodohmigod—the nose. The size of a national monument, the shape of a soggy popover...ohmigod...and fertile ground for...for...ohmigod...excrescences. It took Prissi a moment to separate the water spots and other less identifiable specks on the silvered glass from the...things... on her nose. She dipped her face down, then closer, then away. She continued to inspect the day's crop of horrorescent...things... until the raspy sound of the Drylons and the whisper of pinions along the wall faded to silence.

"I hate me. I hate school."

Freeieekin school.

As soon as she had the thought, Prissi felt remorse because she loved Dutton. She really did, but

there were days, and this certainly was going to be one, where she could not deal with all of its rules, rules contained in a two hundred page catechism of whats, whens, dos, don'ts, and hows: twenty plus pages on how many gigs were to be awarded for unruly hair, toe peepage, trans-fat consumption, bigotry, littlery, faddism, fatism, sexism, anti-gaiety. A chapter on the ins and outs of honor. A huge section on dorm and dining room demeanor. A chapter on service—service to one's roomie, one's floor, one's dorm, one's teams, to the little village down the hill, to Connecticut, Noramica and the world beyond. A rule for everything, but not a dambdumb peep about walkers and wingers.

The biggest difference in school—bigger than race, wealth, and, in Prissi's opinion, gender— and the administration avoided it.

From what Prissi could gather, in the good old days, a million years or so ago, nearly everyone at any elite prep school would have been a winger. Now, almost fifteen percent of her classmates were walkers. She herself had a half dozen older friends who didn't fly. Two of those hadn't fledged because they came from homes where the money for the mutation was not available. Mary Ung hadn't muted for religious reasons. Frank Beese hadn't been able to get a permit to mute because of his obesity, according to Frank a problem that had killed his grandparents and was likely soon to do the same with his parents. Of Prissi's walker friends, the most striking one was her NQB, not-quite-boyfriend, Joe Fflowers. Joe didn't want to fly because he wanted to keep playing hockey. At least, that's what Joe said, and said, and said, but Prissi was sure that a big part of his refusal was just teener defiance because Joe Fflowers was the grandson of Joshua Fflowers, the man who had invented fledging.

Prissi herself, who only had had her wings for ten months, still was obsessed with what those wings could do. When Prissi fledged, just before her fifteenth birthday, she was 1.6 meters tall and weighed 46 kilograms. As a result of her small size and proportionate weight, she was qualified to choose from a wide choice of wing shapes. With fledging, the general rule was that the larger the subject, the fewer the choices. After discussions with her father, which, if she were truthful, were more arguments than discussions, Prissi wheedled LT wings with a red and silver rippled feather pattern. Least Tern wings, with their delta shape and small surface area, had been designed for quick turns and great speed; however, there were trade-offs. LT's were much less effective for soaring or long flights. Although they took extra energy to fly and were ineffective for long distances, Prissi loved her LTs because they let her do acrobatics and stunt flying most other wingers couldn't come close to duplicating. Another benefit of the stubby delta design was that they took so much energy they pretty much self-regulated body weight. Prissi thought that an LT teener winger would have to be pretty lovelorn, heartbroken or acnefied to get too fat to fly.

Prissi Langue loved flying. For her, it was the ultimate freedom. When she was in the air, two hundred page rulebooks, intractable math problems, the slights and slurs of classmates and the sadness that clung like cobwebs from her mother's death in Africa three years before stayed on the ground. Many of Prissi's friends were ambivalent about flying. They liked their wings because people like them, privileged people, were supposed to like their wings. They liked the freedom flying brought, but they feared the danger. More than eighty thousand Noramican teenerz died each year from crashes. But, for Prissi, being in the air brought nothing other than a great sense of well-being. From growing up in Africa, where two and four-legged dangers existed everywhere, the girl had a well-developed sense of what was safe. Her mother's death only had confirmed what she already knew—the earth was a dangerous place to be alive and an easy place to die. Yet, when Prissi first began to fly, even while she wobbled her wings and bobbed her landings, one of the biggest and most unexpected benefits of being in the air was how safe she felt. The higher she went, the safer she felt. At two hundred meters, looking at the insignificant details far below, Prissi felt as secure as when she and her mother had snuggled in a string hammock on those sloggy, slow, Bujumburan mornings. Mornings where sunlight and mist coming off Lake Tanganyika

swirled around one another in a slow dance. Misty mornings. Missed mornings.

Prissi shoved her face closer to the mirror to shove away her thoughts. What a minefield. She loved science, idolized scientists, but how was it be that they could grow wings on kids and regenerate organs, but couldn't do a freeieekin thing about pimples. Science—key to the mysteries of the universe. No, not, quite yet.

Prissi tipped her head to keep her hair, which tended to fall around her face like a tattered flag, out of the way before she put the tip of an index finger on either side of an excrescence centered over her left eyebrow. She pushed down and away. The growth, like a miniature nebula, exploded onto the mirror.

“She shoots, she scores!”

Prissi stared at her contribution to the communal killing field until a panicky flutter told her to look at her mypod.

She swore.

If she didn't flame, she was going to be late for Fi-Sci. Dr. Smarkzy, even though he was her counselor and mentor, did not tolerate students walking in late. Despite her being his star pupil, if she came in late, he would have an aneurysm, and Prissi didn't want her favorite teacher dead. Plus, if she got one more gig during Winter Term, which was almost over, she'd be over the limit and back on Skru Kru scraping plates and ignoring sniggers.

“Freeieekin stupid idiocracy.”

Prissi yanked the bathroom door so hard, it snapped back and caught the tip of her left wing. Making a sound that was more expressive than any words could have been, Prissi jerked her wing free. A half-dozen silver feathers fluttered to the grimy floor as the re-energized and re-angered girl accelerated down the hall toward class.

Prissi Langué's favorite subject at The Dutton School was science. She liked Chinese—it slowed her mind down, especially when she had to focus hard on the tonals. She loved her English class—she had spent more time with books than parents or peers growing up in Africa. But, she adored science. Despite being on the verge of finishing her fifth term, Prissi was still amazed at how good the science at Dutton was. While it had been 2094 in the rest of the world, in a science classroom in Bujumbura when she was a student there, it might just as well been 1994. To Prissi, science in Burundi was an overly-Christian white woman droning. In contrast, sitting in Advanced Field Science, Fi-Sci II, was like having a bag of popcorn going off in her head—fifty minutes of thoughts careening and ricocheting around inside her head.

The teacher of Fi-Sci II, an exceedingly old and horribly crippled man, a gnome with a slow smile but a fast gnomonic tongue, Dr. Smarkzy, seemed to know all science well and his specialty, a combination of prionology and sub-molecular chemistry, cold. Like some of the particles and strands he described, Smarkzy himself could be volatile, maybe even a little unstable, but to Prissi he was a god—Prometheus. An old arthritic Prometheus, except Prissi guessed that Dr. Smarkzy didn't feel that his time with students was as bad as being chained to a rock—at least, most of the time.

As soon as she had walked into her first Fi-Sci II class the previous September, Prissi had known it was going to be a disaster. It was her last class of the first day of her second year. All of her other classes that day had been had been taught by young, energetic and, mostly, attractive teachers. In

contrast, the man standing at the front of the lecture portion of the small auditorium looked to be more than a century old. He was a tiny man, almost as short as Prissi, with a gargantuan head, bald except for a few tufts of pure white hair springing out from above his enormous, translucent ears. The ears were extraordinary. Despite the many hours she had spent studying them since that first day, they continued to have a kind of abhorrent attraction for Prissi. Pink and gray with a blue-tinged rim, they reminded Prissi of the shells of some kind of mollusk—a kind you wouldn't want to eat. When Dr. Smarkzy talked, the ears slowly waved like anemones in a tidal pool. Going along with the old man's ghastly ears, were hands and legs so crippled that he shuffled and scuttled, like a scorpion. That first day, when Dr. Smarkzy pointed at Prissi to take a perch in the first row behind the walkers' chairs, all of his fingers except for his pinky actually pointed back at himself.

Prissi slowed from a flog to a walk as she spotted the Weiners, a old couple who were the heads in Mickelson House and famous for giving out gigs for the least of infractions, standing out in front of the Mu Datarium. The old furtz were going to make her late. A second later she forgot her frustration when she heard Nasty Nancy squeak, "Priscilla Langué, you are going to be TARDEEEE."

When Prissi whipped around, she almost caught her roommate with the edge of her wings.

"All because of you. You ate my Snoogles and my Yogyiums. I could have starved to death!"

The vehemence of her denial made Nasty Nancy's hair, which resembled a large red-dyed cotton ball, toss about like tumbleweed stuck on a fence post.

"I hate Yogyiums."

"You've been known to inhale what you hate."

"Not Yogyiums. They're like mayonnaise-filled marshmallows."

Despite knowing that speed and Nasty Nancy were antithetical, Prissi pleaded, "C'mon. Hurry up. We'll be late."

"Doesn't matter to me. I'm not even close to Screw Crew and spring break starts in five days. After that, the academic gods wipe the slate clean—which means what? Isn't slate a kind of rock? Why does it need to be wiped?"

"African thing. Tell you later. Gotta go."

"To see Dr. Crab?"

Looking around, but not seeing the Weiners, Prissi resumed flogging toward class. As she half-flew and half jogged toward the worn double doors of the scientatory, she returned to her memory of that first day, of how Dr. Smarkzy had stood quietly in front of the class, waiting for the bell to briz. It was only his eyes, amazingly bright and improbably turquoise, that led Prissi to guess that his mouth was twisted in a grin, not a grimace. Afraid to defy his direction, Prissi had moved to the spot he had indicated. She reluctantly had climbed onto her perch and had been horrified at the thought of spending a year with such a repulsive looking person.

Six months later, Prissi could not deny that Vartan Smarkzy was ill-made. In fact, she had had to concede that point to Nasty Nancy more than once. But, and this is what her roomie did not get, any distraction that Smarkzy's looks might cause stopped the moment when his sparkling eyes,

melodic voice and irresistible enthusiasm for teaching science began.

Prissi was half-way through the door to Room 320A of the Katharine Zoeg Scientatory just as the bell brizzed. When Prissi hesitated at the door, Dr. Smarkzy shifted his smartstick from the glowing three-foot hologram of pockmarked tissue caused by the prion responsible for bovine spongiform encephalopathy to Prissi and then down to her seat in the first row of perches. While the chagrined teener made her way toward her perch, ignoring the smirks and sibilant sniggers of her classmates, Smarkzy drew his neck down into his shoulders like a turtle waiting for a fish. The second Prissi perched, Smarkzy, like a mad Wagnerian conductor, was using his smartstick to lead the class to a deeper understanding of the Escher-like folds and structures of prions and their effects in DNA.

DNA. Stairway to a trillion possibilities.

Although her mother and father always had laughed at the absurdity when Prissi would accuse them of not being her real parents, Prissi often wondered whether she was made from her parents' DNA. As early as fourth grade, when she began to learn of all the parenting possibilities—GEEs (genetically-enhanced embryos), surrogation, hy-babes (hybrid babies with either sperm or egg from a donor), and the ancient stand-by, adoption, Prissi had fantasized about how she came to be with the people who called themselves her parents. Those tales, first thought while lying on a cot under mosquito netting on the eastern shore of Lake Tanganyika, usually involved exotic people in even more exotic circumstances.

Prissi stared at the ladder of life pulsing inside its glowing sac at the front of the room and considered the wisdom of bringing some of her parents' DNA back after winter break to prove that she could not possibly be their spawn.

Prissi snorted so loudly that Smarkzy's smartstick swung in her direction. Her face reddening in dismay, Prissi covered her mouth to squelch another outburst.

Spawn. Prissi Langued loved that word. Evil spawn. Like corn smut, but with shoes and underwear. Prissi toyed with the idea of bringing back a gatherum of hair from her father's brush, then bribing an honor's senior to type it to see if she really was flesh of his flesh. But, that would only answer half the equation. Finding out about her mother would not be so easy. The only possession Prissi had of her mother's was a small, ornately carved rosewood box. After her father gave it to her, Prissi had been caught within a labyrinth of emotions as she opened it and found her mother's engagement and wedding rings, as well as a strand of pale green pearls. Even after hundreds of times, looking in the box still released a rat's nest of feelings in the girl. Prissi shook her catfood brown hair to sweep away her thoughts.

Coming out of class, Prissi saw Joe Fflower's broad back half-way down the hallway. She sped up and darted left and right around her classmates to get closer. Like with a lot of teener relationships, Prissi sometimes had a much better time watching Joe than actually being with him. Even from the back, she could tell that, like always, he was walking with his nose in the air. She rode her loving loathing like a favorite horse as she scanned down from his shiny, blond, perfectly curled, but perfectly uncoifed hair to his too broad shoulders and down to his VCB. The first time Prissi had noticed the VERY CUTE BUTT, it was so distinctive that she had nicknamed it Hector. When she found out who its owner was, that he came from a family with more money than Mumbai, came from the family that had dominated the meta-mutancy business for three-quarters of a century, she was sure the VCB would never have a place in her life. But, in another example of Dutton's famous tradition of diversity, Prissi Lange and Joe Fflowers had become friends, and, finally, after a months-long fencing match of feints and counters, more than friends.

Following three steps behind, Prissi had a bittersweet feeling in knowing that Hector would soon go behind the feathered veil. There was no chance that Joe's family would let him remain a walker. Prissi had listened too many times while a cavalierly defiant Joe explained why he didn't want wings—at least, right now. He wanted to play hockey. Prissi knew that Joe's reputation was that he was one of the top ten high school hockey players in the country. But, even if that were true, Prissi could not imagine Joe's father, Illiya Fflowers, the Co-President of Cygnetics, a company that fledged over five million teenerz a year, letting Joe have his way. Whether he wanted it that way or not, the Joe Fflower's was going to have to accept that tomorrow would be his last hockey game as a walker. Four days after that, Spring Break would begin. Prissi was positive that when Joe returned from break, he would have been muted. And, while the world would have gained a winger, unfortunately, Prissi's eyes would have to bid a fond adieu to a visible VCB.

Prissi skipped around Kipo Phelps, wrapped an arm around Joe's waist and laid her head on his shoulder.

"Hi."

Joe wriggled himself free.

"No PDAs, miss."

"Well, what if I hit you in the arm, would that be seen a public display of affection?"

"An attack on me is an attack on Dutton."

"Wouldn't want that. I'll see you later. In private."

Joe turned toward Prissi, and gave a slight nod toward the restroom door, but said nothing.

As Prissi watched Joe's VCB go through the doorway, she sighed.

Once again, for the billionth time, commerce would trump art.

Oh, woe. Goodnight, sweet butt of a not always so sweet prince.

Prissi snorted, then immediately chastised herself. Next to her flourishing farm of excrescences, her high strung ever-talking hands, her mutation into a fizgig whenever she had too much caffeine, and the nose, of course, the monumental nose, the thing Prissi hated most about herself was her snort. It was a horrible noise. Like the sound a javelina would make before it gored a dog. The snort was her unedited laugh and it made her want to cry when she heard it.

With gallimaufry thoughts of love and hate, like and dislike, bubbling in her brain, the girl hurried down the hall and burst from the Zoeg. The sun was shining, the wind was blowing. The tulip heads wee bobbing in a way that reminded the girl of Twa tribe dancers. Another snort was triggered by the massive snowflakes dancing in the sky. Snow in March was unknown. Snow from a blue sky in March was magic, and, for Prissi Langué, magic always drew a snort.

CHAPTER TWO

BFF

The wingless Joe Fflowers flies...in skates, on ice. Unless he makes a mind-boggling decision, tomorrow will be the last time Joe will skate in Evenen Rink. He loves the old arena. Of the scores of rinks where he has practiced and played hockey for eleven years, the century-old Evenen Rink has the hardest ice he has ever skated on. Evenen's ice is so hard that the sound his speeding blades make as he races over its surface could have come from some medieval Japanese musical instrument.

Cross push stretch cross push stretch don't think cross push stretch.

Joe has the entire sheet of ice to himself. His Friday schedule leaves the last class period of the day free. Every week of hockey season he has taken those extra minutes before practice begins just to skate.

No helmet. No pads. No stick. Just dim lights and hard ice.

Joe explodes forward as he uses all of his strength to push through on the inside edge of his left skate. He closes his eyes to concentrate on two sounds—the hissing of metal slicing through ice and the roar of a thirty kilometer-an-hour wind blowing past his ears. He glides blind down the length of the rink. At the last second, as some inner sense feels the boards just ahead, he shifts his weight to his outside edge and, eyes still closed, circles back from whence he came.

If he does not decide, cannot decide, then, tomorrow it is over. In a week, the skater will be gone. A mutant bird in its place.

Joe opens his eyes, cuts an edge, uses three short explosive steps to accelerate, lengthens his stride, digs hard, increases his speed and smashes his shoulder into the rickety old glass. The rink reverberates with sound.

Five more days. His father has let him know the day before that the wing-mute is scheduled for the day after he gets home for spring break.

Five days and the thing he likes doing most in the world will be gone. Unless....

Joe spins toward the opposite end of the rink and speeds off. He drives himself down the ice. As he crosses the second blue line, he notices movement in the shadows behind the heavily scratched glass.

Coach Deirkin. The bald, but bearded coach, famous for his harangues, merely points his finger and gives a slight shake of his head to his best player.

Joe aborts his crash. Slowing his breathing and his speed, the fifteen-year old circles the rink a half-dozen times. The first three times around as he comes down the ice he looks closely through the dim glass for Deirkin. After that, he decides that his coach has gone down to his office, probably to practice yelling.

Joe tentatively extends his arms and flaps. Flaps again. Flaps and swears at his father and what is to be his fate. Unless....

After practice ends, Joe holds back. He waits until he is sure that he is the last one leaving the rink. Instead of following his teammates, who are rushing down the hill to get to the dining hall, Joe slips along the wall of the side of the rink and hurries to the back. The boy makes his way through

a small forest of shadows. He stops where he has been told to wait and listens. The only sounds he hears are a couple of shrill taunts from down the hill and the bored drone of the compressors making ice.

"It's Joe."

The tired boy leans against the wall and looks at stars sprinkled, like sequins, among a sky full of cotton-balls. He waits for ten minutes, but no one shows. As Joe waits, his feelings rise and sink, like a teeter totter, between relief and disappointment. He doesn't want wings, but he doesn't want to leave Dutton and he definitely doesn't want to leave Prissi. Joe knows he has a hard time showing it, but Prissi Langué does something inside him that no girl...no person... ever has done. She seems to see past all the defenses and screens he has had to put up from being from an immensely wealthy family. She teases him, likes him, argues with him and, best of all, acts like she doesn't know his last name. He can't even imagine how much he will miss her...if he decides to go.

As Joe pushes himself from the wall and shifts his skate bag higher on his shoulder, a low voice emanates from the deep shadows between the compressors and the rink wall, "Have you decided?"

A startled Joe blurts, "Yes, I...no. Not really."

"Time's short."

"I know."

"It can't happen on a whim. It has to be set up. Organized."

"I know. I know."

As Joe's fears turn to anger at being watched...studied...for ten minutes, it causes his voice to pitch up an octave. He worries that it might break.

"It can't happen with a day's notice. We need two days, at least."

"It's not going to happen now. I'm late. I've got to go."

"Think hard. It's close to too late. Think what you will lose. You could be the best."

Joe whirls away from the speaker, as if eluding a defender on the ice, and sprints toward the lights of the dining hall. As he shoves open the massive door, the teener is breathing hard, and not so much from the run, as from what he is running from. He hurries into the reassuringly familiar light and warmth, the myriad of noises and pastiche of smells swirling through Mullen Dining Hall.

* * *

After being abandoned by Nasty Nancy, Prissi has been sitting alone with her dinner and her thoughts. Tonight's dance. Smarkzy's special lecture on Sunday. The essay due on Tuesday. How boring Spring Break was going to be. And the thing she didn't want to think about: Seeing Joe's cousin Jack Flowers in less than twenty hours at The Bissell School dedication.

Prissi's thought get even more jumbled when she sees Joe run into the dining room and grab a tray.

As Joe moves from station to station filling his tray, he looks down the length of the cavernous room to where his teammates are sitting. In the far left corner Beak, Frankie Nuts, Willie T and Bawlzout Bechley seem to be scrimmaging as much as eating. Feeling too confused to defend himself against their rough friendship, Joe veers off to the right side of the Tudor-style hall to where Prissi perches at a table by herself. Just before he sits, Joe looks back to be sure that the dessert station will block his teammates' view. After he drops his skate bag, Joe nods to Prissi.

Prissi tips her head at Joe's tray, which is filled with meat and potatoes, and in a mocking voice says, "All green."

Joe, laughing at the line some Ecos use as a greeting, responds with its complement, "Or all gone."

Prissi dramatically twirling her fork through the edamame and udon noodle salad she has been avoiding says, "Or, not."

When a nonplussed Prissi saw Joe bee-lining toward her table, she had twisted around so quickly to see if the hockey corner was empty that she had snapped a couple of quills. Now, while Joe scarfs his food, Prissi leans forward so she can angle her wing and pull out the useless quills.

Freeieekin feathers. She was born too late. Sixty years ago, it was still possible to get membrane wings. But, the ersatz bat wings had gone out of favor not only because the folds of flesh didn't contain melanin, thus wouldn't tan, but also because the wings couldn't be grown without claw-like appendages at the end, which had to be kept trimmed. Plus, of course, they were disgustingly ugly, which Prissi, given her age, actually considered a strong selling point.

Fine, she thinks. Wings that looked like they were made from the wattles of dowager geris had drawbacks, but they didn't have freeieekin feathers.

After Prissi finishes her wingkeeping and looks over, Joe Fflowers seems a million kliks away. Not sure of what he might be thinking or feeling, Prissi feels an irresistible urge to touch the bumps on her face before putting her head down and stirring her food. She wishes Nasty Nancy hadn't run off to finish her homework before the dance. Although Prissi is still hungry, she is not hungry enough to chance the social dangers of eating udon with Joe at the table. She can visualize noodles flying across the table and onto Joe after being launched by some random spazz neuronal blast. Or, if by some unexpected good fortune, the food happened to make it to her mouth, she is sure that half of it would hang from her lips like the slobber and green that slops from the mouth of a hippo deep into its dinner. But, swirling and twirling, but not eating, looks stupid, too. And, she can't leave...because... Because. Because, she can't. Because her honor demands that she say something about going to The Bissell School tomorrow to see Jack.

After a painful moment, instead of the truth, the guilt-driven side of Prissi opts to go with a non sequitor.

"Smarkzy. What do you think?" Prissi blurts as a second part of her brain wonders how Joe's nose still seems to be pointing up when his head is tipped down over his plate

"What about Smarkzy?"

"Genius, huh?"

"Not to me. He's just a garden variety scientist."

Prissi's face goes from the pink of internal conflict to anger's bright red. She asks combatively, "And that would be?"

"Dissatisfied, superior, tunnel-visioned snoops."

Prissi fakes a smile she hopes will convey her surprise that such a handsome privileged alete can be so cynical.

"But, interesting, right?"

Joe puts his fork down and tilts his head so he can face Prissi more directly.

"Not to me. They're all the same. It's all about dissatisfaction. It doesn't matter how much they know, it's not enough. Science is all about knowing. Every time a scientist learns something, he wants to leap forward to learn something else. It's like they're Boy Scouts collecting badges and can't get enough."

"So, like every other alete who got in here on brawn and not brain, you prefer ignorance."

Joe Fflowers shakes his head in disgust and turns back to the solace of his plate. Prissi stirs her food and savors the double dip of guilt—over what she has said and what she hasn't. After waiting long enough to suggest that she is withdrawing rather than retreating, Prissi gathers everything onto her plate and pushes back her chair. As she tentatively walks behind Joe, the unhappy teenager retches a small, bitter, "Sorry."

Joe nods his head, then, without turning around, quietly says, more to himself than to Prissi, "I prefer feeling to knowing."

Since it is easier to feel righteous than guilty, Prissi says, "Well, since you do, let me say that I FEEL more like studying tonight than dancing."

A part of Prissi hopes that Joe will parry something back, but he just shakes his head again. Prissi hurls her plate and silverware onto the conveyor at the bussing station, then, bolts from the silence that trails behind her.

CHAPTER THREE

Minor Miracles

One hundred sixty kilometers south of Dutton on the wounded island of Manhattan, Joe Fflowers' grandfather, one hundred-seven year old Joshua Fflowers, is tapping the treads of his wheelchair and thinking of flight. Before him, through the glass wall, a flurry of rare and precious snowflakes dance in the currents of the updrafts rising from the street one hundred thirty-eight stories below. Ever since he moved into the Airie almost seventy years before, Fflowers has been intrigued by the phenomenon of a rising snowfall. To the west, across the three kilometer-wide Hudson River, ragged vermilion clouds scud toward him as the source of their evanescent beauty, a dying sun, drifts toward the horizon. It is just minutes before the ancient's favorite time of day. His gnarled bones, more claws than hands, tattoo the treads in anticipation of what's to come as well as anger at the slow passage of the minutes.

Years blur by, and, still, minutes drag.

Fflowers nudges the wheelchair closer to the electricity-generating Secur-solar windows so that he better can see Fifth Avenue a half-kilometer below. After a long look into what once had been the world's economic Grand Canyon, the trillionaire looks out at the thousand upon thousands of aquaphorous lights that give a blue-green glow down the spine of the island south all the way to the Houston Levee. As he waits for the minutes to pass, the old man recalls the first time he stepped onto what once was such a vibrant island.

May 21, 2010. His eighth month at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory. An MIT PhD. micro-biologist and post-doc researcher at twenty-two. Dragged, along with Elena Howe, by the primary researchers, their mentors and bosses, Reiklein and Grammai, to meet Larkston, the magic money man, who was becoming interested in meta-mutancy. Spring fog and drizzle. Grid-locked streets. Muted headlights. Bleating horns. Shiny surfaces everywhere. A gauntlet of umbrella spokes as they hurried toward The Plaza after abandoning their marooned cab. Larkston meeting them in The Oak Room—beyond garrulous, maybe drunk. Pork chop hands squeezing shoulders and elbows, herding. Into the elevator. Up twenty floors. Larkston big in an airless room. Little things—red, black, green—on silver trays. Big slugs of alcohol in little glasses. Napkins, napkins and more napkins pressed upon him by a tiny waiter with a comical Hispanic accent. Larkston's laugh, like his billions, growing exponentially. Ricocheting off the walls despite the floral rug and damask-covered couches. Grammai rolling his eyes, stuttering in alarm that a magic moment, so long schemed for, might pass without being seized. In her first of a thousand times, Elena into the breach. Fingers. Calming fingers stroking Larkston's arm like a favorite horse's mane. Soothing words. Her low whisper of a laugh taming Larkston's bray. Grammai with the laptop. Reiklein, the breathy, hyper-kinetic zealot, interrupting Grammai, the Oppenheimer clone. Elena, touching, smiling, breathing, not begging, but rather imbuing the rich man with belief.

Then...the moment. The mutation. From interested observer to contractually-shackled benefactor. Handshakes. Back pats. More over-generous drinks. The just-shy-of-impolite retreat. Gamboling down Fifth. If over-weight, middle-aged genius can gambol. To the train. To the labs. To the ramparts.

The old man looks at his watch, a stem-wound gold-cased graduation gift from his ineffectual father, who himself had received it from his almost wealthy great-grandfather.

Only two minutes have gone by.

A snowflake as large and light as a dandelion seed bounds up, hits the window, rotates ninety degrees and melts away. The ancient Midas watches its rill slide toward earth. His fingers tap. He looks out toward the southern half of Manhattan. The island is so different from when he first came to live on it. Back then, it had felt as if the city were more alive at night than during the day. He loved to wander about looking at the lights and the magic they made of the night. While the streets of SoHo, Tribeca and West Heights were busy and even crowded during the day, they weren't bustling, they weren't kinetic with the edgy kind of energy that they had at night. He had come to the city and the city had changed. In part because of his efforts, but, he told himself, the vision before him would have been even more different without his efforts.

It was not just Manhattan. The world itself had changed. The world had gotten warmer and wetter and Manhattan, once capital to the world, now was dying. And, he had changed. He had gotten colder, drier, and...and...he was dying.

It was almost quitting time in the thousands of offices below him. A century before, a human wave of energy would have spilled out onto the streets. Like a broken dam. And that torrent would have

plunged through the canyons and poured into the restaurants and bars, the bodegas and markets. What had been full during the day would empty and what had been empty would fill and overflow.

The city had been so alive...but, then, immutable, unstoppable metamorphosis. Like all cities, in all times. Like all of life.

Ice melted a half a world away and that newly released water found its way to Long Island Sound and the rivers that bordered both sides of the city. Tides had risen and then barriers to protect the city had risen and the waters had risen higher and the city had fought back but the waters rose again and, after awhile, the city had tired of the fight. The streets of southern Manhattan became canals. The ground floors of buildings were abandoned. Entrances were raised. Catwalk and elevated sidewalks hugged the facades of Wall Street for a time and, then, had been abandoned like a rotting ship. Like an old pensioner facing straitened circumstances, the city had retreated from what had been and cobbled together what could be. Over time, more and more people decided that it was easier to leave than absorb the changes. Two new, clean, well-lighted, sterile cities, nicknamed Newton and Screwton, had been birthed in the western hills of New Jersey. Newton—birthmother of the new in fashion, music and the vid-arts, the only visual art remaining. And Screwton, the ever cold, ever hungry succubus to Mammon. On this particular weather-mad March eve, the old man, now, finally, a realist, slips his noose and indulges both in nostalgia for a city, and a life once ten times as bright. His mind jumps with bright-hued, but scattered, memories, like a scrap-book unbound.

...Bursting through set after set of double doors with the desperate desire of a salmon on a fish ladder, through the final portal, then, sucking blue-black night air deep into his lungs while his eyes feasted on the star-pocked sky. A night heron's pale moon shadow racing across concrete the color of old ivory. The tic-flicking exhaustion and brain-inflaming exhilaration of knowing they are close, so close to the biological switch they are trying to divine. A galvanic fear that they will miss the small turn that can take them through the maze. Moments later, knowing it is the perfect moment, Elena Howe, now wife, though not named Fflowers, licorice black shiny hair keeping time to the broken rhythm of the breeze, rushing up to offer perfect lips to Fflowers. Elena, a silver sylph brightening a lunar world. Hermes in disguise.

Fflowers emaciated fingers drift to his face. He touches the drought dry corners of his eyes before rubbing the ridges of his forehead.

The sky goes scarlet. Finally, six o'clock comes. Below him, a first thousand doors open. Workers in therma-jerkins of every color, kanga-paks cinched tightly across their chests, crowd the doorways. Two or three quick steps along the docks jutting from each floor of every building, a moment's plummet, and then the flap of wings.

Thousands upon thousands, one hundred thousand, then two, then three hundred thousand winged humans begin their flights home. All those flights and freedoms, each and every one, a boon from his small band's efforts almost eighty years before.

Human flight, now an old trick, but one still worth the wait for an old earth-bound man. A dying man.

For a few short moments, like the bats in Carlsbad Cavern, clouds of humans, their wings of every shape and color, fill the sky. Ten minutes later, the flock is gone, the city empty except for slow exodus of the wingless.

The old man rolls himself back from the glass wall, executes a slow turn and makes his way down a

long hallway toward his nightly chore.

Joshua Fflowers wheels himself to the dining room, where a table that could, and a half-century before regularly did, seat thirty, is set for one. Although he is not hungry, when he is served, Joshua Fflowers eats. Despite the palette of colors on his plate—the sea-grass green of asparagus, an arterial red tomato sprinkled with chalk-white chevre, two seared lamb chops with golden edges—when those colors get inside his mouth, they turn to gray. The old man has ageusia, has had it nearly a half-century, since the year after Elena was lost. All food, whether crisp, crunchy, chewy or of a pudding softness, whether marinated in wine, bathed in infusions of basil or rosemary, or drowned in a puree of Scotch Bonnets, vinegar, molasses and milk, tastes like...gray...like nothing. Food as slurry. Food as duty. And, since his health has failed, he can not even eat what is on that brightly hued plate. That plate is just art, artifice and irony. His health is such that dinner comes from a bottle fitted with a tube. The centenarian's twisted hands drag the bottle toward him. He lowers his lips and suckles whatever is in it that supposedly harms him least.

Oh, Romulus, such a meta-mutancy, the craving wolf into a craven lamb.

There are not many areas where Fflowers is, or ever was, dutiful, but this is one. He eats to sustain a life that passes both too fast and too slow. A life that, at midday, is much too short, and, alert and alone at three in the morning, much, much, much too long.

“Oh, Elena, what we could have wrought.”

The old head jerks up when he realizes that he has blurted out in anguish what he only had meant to think.

He swallows methodically, but thinks less so. He is dying and hopes for that relief. He is dying and begrudges that darkness. He has all of an old man's wants—revenge, love, forgiveness, eternity.

He hopes he has just one more day with all this weighty age that has worn him down. He will dedicate the building tomorrow. Then, go off to his rejuvenation. If all goes well, in two weeks he might be eating from a plate. He might be walking. He might be happy. If all goes wrong, well, then, a bane is lifted and he is free.

CHAPTER FOUR

Betrayals

Bissell School sophomore halfa-hunk and modestly talented soccer...hero, Jack Fflowers flung the FRZ-B past Prissi's right shoulder toward Lake Wanapocamuc. From twenty meters below her, Nancy Sloan challenged, “No waya you can playa.”

Prissi yelled back, “Oh, yaya?”

Prissi dropped her right wing, threw her left leg over her right, and shoved her left wing forward and down. Her body pivoted around. She drew up her legs and pulled her wings tight to her body. She cannonballed until she was less than ten meters feet above the lake. When she executed a

two-part wing flare, her silver and red feathers shimmered like the aurora borealis. Prissi dove down and caught the FRZ-B in her mouth when it was less than a meter above the glittering surface of the lake. She barked in delight as she skimmed just above the lake's dimpled water. As the winger passed from water to land, she banked up, then, abruptly dropped her last rows of remiges down to brake. When she landed, the exuberant teener skidded on a small patch that remained of the previous night's snow. As she snapped her body to keep her balance, something popped in her right shoulder. Despite the needle-sharp pain, Prissi forced herself to finish off the one hop landing. The hurting winger stopped just in front of the granite perches by the Bissell School boathouse where she, Jack and Nasty Nancy had been sitting and talking until competitive juices and spring hormones had motivated them to play an under-manned version of 3D-FRZ-B.

Prissi's shoulder was on fire, but she didn't say anything when Jack, with a flurry of bright white and Bissell blue feathers, muffed his own one-hopper and banged against the boat house. Nancy slowed so much on her landing attempt that she fell from the sky with the grace of a pregnant booby. Nancy was panting, and, as Prissi easily read from her cork-screwed eyebrows and radish-red face, not too happy that she hadn't scored a single point. Since she still had the FRZ-B in her mouth, Prissi cocked her head like a cocker spaniel and, to break the tension, puppy moaned until her roomie laughed.

"Bad puppy. Give me my FRZ-B."

Prissi backed up a step and growled.

"Puppy!"

Prissi extended her neck; Nasty Nancy took the disk, gave Prissi a pat, then, all three teenerz plopped onto their rough hewn perches. Hiding her eyes with her spineless hair, Prissi studied Jack and compared him to his cousin. Where Joe's hair was blond and curly, Jack's was caramel-colored, slightly wavy with a sheen that looked more greasy than healthy. Where Joe's chest came before the rest of him like an ice breaker plowing the northern seas, it was Jack's sleek otter head that arrived before his narrow chest and indifferently slumped shoulders. Where Joe's eyes were bright blue, round and innocent, Jack's were dark and lazy. Joe was mostly forthright; Jack seemed to prefer corners and alleys. All in all Prissi thought Joe was more attractive, but Jack was more DISTRACTIVE. Prissi shivered in delight...and guilt.

After taking a long and purposefully loud slurp of his caffe-mucho and tapping out the opening of Beethoven's Fifth on the table top, Jack Fflowers complimented Prissi on her catch.

Prissi demurred, "It's all in the wings. How much time do we have?"

Nancy looked at her mypod, "About an hour."

Exchanging the girl-to-girl look, Prissi stated in the way generations of teener girls have, so that her statement sounded like a question, "We better go get cleaned up?"

As the trio flew toward Jack's dorm, they looked down at the temporary stage that had been set up for the dedication of the new science center. The light covering of snow, which blanketed the rest of the hilly Bissell campus, had been removed from in front of the stage with blowers. Sitting on brilliant spring green grass was a battalion of folding chairs and perches in close formation. From high above, Prissi could imagine an ancient army awaiting the clarions. Rising imposingly from behind the stage, just to the right of Grayswold Hall was that ancient science building's replacement—the six-story, six-sided pink and gray granite Joshua F. Fflowers Scientatory. A half-dozen members of the Bissell grounds crew were fussing over barrels of brave school blue

tulips looking forlorn against the snowy backdrop.

As she passed over the stage, Prissi was more than a little surprised when she realized that the little man painfully mounting the temporary stairs and shuffling his way to the podium was Vartan Smarkzy. Prissi flew in a tight circle so that she could watch her mentor look out over the non-existent audience before taking a sheaf of papers from his pocket and sticking them on a shelf under the podium's top.

Prissi pounded her LTs and caught up with Nasty Nancy and Jack just as they dropped down and landed in front of the tower which jutted from the front of Hoch Hall.

"Did you see who that was? Dr. Smarkzy. What's Bissell doing letting my favorite Dutton teacher talk?"

Jack grinned, "Our arch-rivalry is dead for a day. Except for FRZ-B. Smarkzy is giving the dedication. He and my grandfather went to school together. My grandfather told me Smarkzy did some real CE work back then."

Nancy gacked her patented cynical laugh, "What was cutting edge back then? Battery-operated flashlights? He creeps me. He's like a crab, but with no shell."

Prissi fought the urge to argue with her roomie. Ever since coming back from Winter Break and finding Adam Lin no longer had an interest in her, Nancy had been putting on weight. With each kilogram of flesh gained, Nasty Nancy had become nastier—more sarcastic, more critical, more cynical. Given the way her friend was panting after a sortie that hadn't changed Prissi's breathing at all, the teener guessed that Nancy was only a few kilos away from having her wings clipped. For Prissi, that was a very scary thought. Even though Nasty Nancy Sloan did not love flying in the way that she herself did, Prissi knew that if her roomie were grounded, the results would be so ugly that their friendship, begun the first week of their lower mid year, would not survive.

Prissi took a tai breath to calm herself down, but, it didn't help much. She took another breath and held it even longer. Prissi told herself that she needed to stop being so judgmental, even though being judgmental was one of the Constitutionally-guaranteed rights and privileges of teener girls. She looked over at Nancy who was scowling and waiting for a comeback. Prissi clamped her jaws and smiled.

To get away from feeling meek and indecisive, Prissi turned her attention from Nancy back to Jack. Even though Jack Fflowers had no VCB, he was not without a certain darkside-ish charm, and it was that which is what had gotten Prissi in her current mess.

In the classroom , but, especially, on the playing field, Dutton and Bissell had been fierce, but friendly, rivals for more than two hundred years. On the ice, up and down the steep hills of cross country courses, on the links, in sculls, on football, baseball and soccer fields, thousands upon thousands of contests had been played out in hard fought and, often, close competition. Each fall, the schools alternated hosting an afternoon's athletic contests, then a dinner, and, afterwards, a dance.

The previous year, it had been Bissell' turn to host the events. Prissi, the only lower mid on the varsity soccer team, first met Jack Fflowers when he complimented her play as she came off the field after an agonizing 3-2 Dutton loss. Later in the afternoon on that perfect October day, Prissi watched Jack play on the junior varsity soccer team in a game in which Jack had gotten two penalties as his team lost to Dutton 5-4. Prissi and Jack bumped into each other at the dinner and, again, at the dance. Giving into the teener version of the fates, the two new acquaintances talked a

little and danced a lot before it was time for the Dutton students to return to their campus.

The next time Prissi saw Jack Fflowers was in three months when he showed up at Dutton for January's Winter Dance. Again, there was more dancing than talk. At the end of the night, there was something in the shadows outside Mullen Hall that made Prissi's lips tingle for what seemed like a week. Afterward, they traded a half-dozen txts. By the time Bissell came to Dutton the following fall, Prissi's friendship with Jack's cousin, Joe Fflowers, had begun. Joe had been both surprised and unhappy when Prissi told him that she knew Jack. Joe made it very obvious that the two cousins did not get along. Against her better judgment, but enjoying the frizz it gave her, Prissi got together with Jack after their respective 3D FRZ-B contests. Both had given up soccer after having fledged over the summer. They met by the pond and talked a little before Prissi, to relieve the awkwardness she was feeling, challenged Jack to a flying contest. When Prissi easily won that contest, Jack stalked away angry. She saw him staring at her at the dance while she was dancing with Joe. The boys' faces made plain their feelings, even though the band was too loud to hear what they said to one another.

When Prissi was back in home in Manhattan over winter break, Jack had txted her and apologized. A day later he called and she had agreed to meet him at the Diddy Center to ice skate. Since Prissi had grown up in Burundi, where the only ice skates to be found might be in a colonial-era museum, Jack easily outskated her before taking her to dinner at Nam's, one of the most expensive restaurants in Manhattan. Back at school, they had txted one another a couple of times a week, a practice Prissi had not quite gotten around to sharing with Joe.

Despite their intersections and interactions, Prissi had been surprised when with only two days notice Jack had invited her to the ceremonies for the dedication of his grandfather's gift to Bissell. She had hesitated to accept until she learned that Joe was not going to the ceremonies so that he could play his last hockey game for Dutton. After she had failed to tell Joe what she was going to do, Prissi had squirmed an invitation for Nasty Nancy to come along to ease her guilt.

Prissi nodded her head back toward the new building as she asked Jack, "Does your grandfather like his legacy?"

When Jack shook his head, waves of Peking duck-colored hair bounced attractively.

"He hasn't seen it much lately. He used to come up here a lot to check things out, and take me to dinner. But, not lately. He doesn't get out much. He was supposed to be rejuved six months ago, but then there was an organ match problem. And then this thing," Jack swept his arms toward the new building, "got delayed. He really wanted to be here, so he just decided to put things off until after the dedication. But as he waited, things got worse. After he finishes up here today, he goes right to the Juvenal Institute."

Nasty Nancy offered her caustic opinion, "I can't see hurting my health so a bunch of bored kids can clap for me."

A furious Jack enunciated each word, "I don't think he is here for the acclaim. He loves Bissell. He thinks that if it weren't for the education he got here as a student, a scholarship student, none of the other things would have happened."

"Like becoming the richest man in the world."

Nasty Nancy's tone caused both Prissi and Jack to step back from where they had been leaning against the black granite perches in front of Hoch Hall.

“Need a breather, Nance,” said a mortified Prissi. Jack said nothing. He just flew away.

CHAPTER FIVE

GEE Whiz

Joshua Fflowers felt as old as time as he smiled and scrabbled with another hand. Some unconscious, but meticulous, portion of his brain recorded it as the one hundred forty-first hand-shake. Despite the pain in his finger joints, Fflowers squeezed firmly and dryly. He held back a sigh, smiled and reached out to the next well-wisher while pushing back his own wish just to be done with the circus in which he was starring.

Fflowers had been excited when he first had the idea of giving Bissell a new science center, but, now, almost four years later, he was far beyond the point of regret. He didn't begrudge the money he had spent on building and equipping a facility that put Andover and Exeter, Eton and Harrow, even Toin, to shame. The money was nothing, not even one tenth of one percent of his worth. If his commitment had been no more than the transfer of funds, things would have been fine. But, of course, it could not be that simple. Nothing ever was, except in physics. He had to be toadied to, fawned over, and feted by the school's administration and trustees. He had to be consulted with on the architecture and artwork—not that anyone particularly listened. He had to be commended and thanked...by everyone from Headmaster Binny Dowdahl to the Board of Trustees to the alumni association to the parents' committee and student council to the little fellow who folded towels in the field house. He had to be lauded and applauded at the just finished dedication ceremonies where he had given a speech that was more coughs and growls than subjects and verbs.

And, now... now, he was in a receiving line that snaked to infinity, acquiring a zoo of germs from squeezing the greedy hands of envious wishers and obsequious well-wishers leaning over his wheel chair, coveting his wealth, pitying his health, all while whispering, bellowing platitudes, gratitude and good cheer.

The benign benefactor in Fflowers fought the rebel's urge to power up the wheelchair and plow through the crowd to safety. Away from the parade of stifling people with their mid-body noises and smells as they hulked and hovered over him. Away from the stream of sycophancy slowly wending its way past him. Away to the roto. To relief. In three hours he could be through the Institute's doors and beginning the rejuve he should have had so long ago.

Joshua Fflowers ruefully thought of how he might have delayed too long, irrevocably ruined his health, for the sheer joy of what he was doing at the moment. The old man toyed with the wheelchair toggle. He turned his head to stare at the sleek stomach, an abdomen looking almost as stiff as its starched shirt covering, of Binny Dowdahl. Well-met hale fellow headmaster. Spinner of dreams. Pocket picker of the rich. Fflowers considered whether he should request, or demand of Dowdahl, that his duties be over, but Binny was regaling an Oriental couple looking de la mode Chinois in their long flame-hued phoenix wings.

As Fflowers waited for the ineffably charming Dowdahl to finish his story, he recalled how even Ives Cheredon, his beloved headmaster from ninety years before, despite being as brilliant a raconteur as he was essayist and poet, occasionally had self-loved his words and thoughts to where a tale well told, with more fillips and flourishes than a Souza march, had made an assembly seem to last an eternity.

Feeling his hand move, the old man turned away from the past to look up, past a short fat body, into a large eager face, hacked in half by a bad-toothed smile. Except for the monstrous teeth, the man looked and smelled like a boiled egg. While he pawed Fflowers hand, the little man sputtered, "Thank you. Thank you. Yes, as always, I believe our future, our nation's future, is now walking, now, this very day, in the hallowed halls of Bissell. Those hands deserve the best, and you have certainly given them that. I thank you. Bissell thanks you. Noramica thanks you. Yes. Yes."

"Yes."

As Fflowers sent the man on his way, he wondered when the little enthusiast last had sent a euollar to the school. His gaze drifted back to Dowdahl's starched stomach. The excursus continued.

Another hand took Fflowers. He shook and smiled and shifted his thoughts to something much more pleasant...Smarkzy. Being back with his oldest friend had been the high point of the day. He and Vartan had come to Bissell the same year, 2001. Smarkzy, the sophisticated only son of a New York investment banker—a banker famous for taking outrageous risks on untried technologies and earning even more outrageous rewards— had befriended the poor scholarship student escaping from the skeletal remains of a Massachusetts mill-town. They met in a Latin class and, despite their differences in background, found they had much in common. Both hated sports, abhorred the sweating, swearing camaraderie. Both loved science—tearing back the veil to reveal Nature's close-kept secrets. Both thought the Greeks and Romans, their art, literature, and history to be far more engaging than the current product. Vartan was smart, well-bred, well-read, quick with a quip, slow with a judgment. Smarkzy was...suddenly, the ruminations stopped. At the edge of Fflowers' peripheral vision, but no more than a dozen handshakes away, was his grandson, Jack.

A small hand, a small distraction.

"Thank you for your kind act."

"Thank you for your kind words."

As the next well-wisher approached, Fflowers looked at Jack, but thought about Jack's father and his uncle. Joshua Fflowers despised both his sons, the younger one, Illiya, for being an indecisive moralist, the older one, Adaman, one for being immoral. He cared little for his grandson, Illiya's son, Joe, but Fflowers truly enjoyed his time with his grandson Jack. Jack reminded the centenarian of how he was when he was young. Brash, devious, charming, bright, but not afraid of those who were brighter.

The next few guests, whatever they might have given or pledged to the school, got their money's worth from Joshua Fflowers—a firm though twisted grip, funny words, a twinkle in the eye. Fflowers charmed like he had eighty years before when, penniless, he had sought to loosen any number of purse-strings to pursue his mad idea.

* * *

As they shuffled forward along the slow-moving line, Prissi studied the famous old man while Jack told her how close he was to one of the world's three trillionaires. Jack spent a lot of time at the Airie, Fflowers' Manhattan penthouse at the southern end of Central Park on The Plaza Plaza. Jack had traveled to Europe and Russasia with his grandfather during school and summer breaks while it still had been relatively easy for the old man to travel. Jack amused the wealthy old man. Although she had no reason to doubt Jack, from the physical changes she was watching unfold on

the old man's face, Prissi was sure that Jack's relationship with Joshua Fflowers must be much more complicated than he was letting on.

As they had advanced in the line, Prissi had been watching the icon of fledging, the most famous scienpreneur of the century. He had been bored, then, after he had seen Jack coming his way, he had become more animated. Suddenly, the trillionaire had become extremely agitated. His head was bobbing and twitching, and Prissi was sure she could see a tremor in his hands. The curve of his mouth changed so that the smile became a rictus.

Turning her mouth toward Jack's ear, Prissi whispered, "Is this going to be okay?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Look. He seems epic upset."

Jack looked, then, laughed, "Probably just frantic that it's taking so long to see me."

When Prissi stepped hard on his foot, Jack continued, "Or besotted by your beauty."

"Jack, be serious. Look. He looks horrible. He could CPUke in a second."

* * *

In a different, less current language, Fflowers was thinking many of the same thoughts as Prissi. He thought what black-humored poetic justice it would be if he were to die, his central processor apoplectic, at the dedication of a building he had endowed with the sole thought of nurturing students whose brains were capable of re-discovering something miraculous he had caused to be lost so many years before. What Greek theater it would be, if, at the moment of his death, he should be brought back together with the person... no, it couldn't be **the** person, but a startling mirror image of the person, one of three, who had wrought the century's greatest miracle, and wrestled it into the light before slamming it back into the ignorant dark.

Despite the press of bodies and wheedling voices around him, Joshua Fflowers could not take his eyes off the girl talking with Jack.

Moving along with the shuffling sycophants, laughing with his grandson, was a girl who looked how Elena Howe, his wife, muse, science partner, and enemy looked when she was fifteen. The girl's impossible resemblance to Elena squeezed the insides of Joshua Fflowers like a heart attack. This Doppelganger could not be by chance. Somehow, this impossible girl had to share most of Elena's double helix, but how? Could she be Elena's daughter? Impossible. Rapacious Fate struck twice had taken away that option. Could she be a niece? Impossible. Elena had had a sister...Morgana. But, she must be dead thirty years by now. Could she be a grand-niece and look that much like her? Impossible. A daughter that couldn't be. A niece that couldn't be. The girl looked too much like Elena to be anything else but a clone. But, how? And, why? Why now? Why here with Jack?

As the guests in the line shambled along, like refugees from a war zone, Joshua Fflowers pondered. He and Elena had never had children. That was a decision, strictly a temporary decision by Fflowers, to which Elena reluctantly had agreed. He had argued that they were too caught up in changing the world with wings. Children could come later. Of course, they had hedged their bets with frozen eggs and seed. That had been a prescient move given that Elena was to fight ovarian cancer before she was thirty-five. But, the eggs had been stored at the lab where the research for the Centsurety Project had been entering the final stages. The eggs, the knowledge and processes

of Centsurety's world-altering discovery, and worst of all, Elena herself had been lost to him in the explosion which destroyed the lab.

As he had a thousand times over the last fifty years, Fflowers clamped his jaws tight to keep from wailing.

By the time Jack and Prissi had their turn, Joshua Fflowers had recovered enough of his equanimity that he could do his Midas and Merlin imitations without a misstep.

From two steps away, the girl, whom Jack introduced as Prissi Langue, even more closely resembled Elena—the slight epicanthal folds that gave the eyes their almond shape, the almond theme continued with the Shoshone skull, the slight creases, eczema markers, under the Venus-bright eyes, the long neck, an elegant stem for what Fflowers suspected would be a head overflowing with intelligence and derring-do. The girl was so much like Elena that he had a barely resistible urge to ask her to take off her shoes to see if she had elongated toes with the little ones turned nearly sideways.

Joshua Fflowers held his grandson's hand as Jack introduced Prissi.

"Mz. Langue, my pleasure. Have you a chaperone to protect yourself from my Jack of all traits, bad traits?"

When the old man winked at her, Prissi felt an instant freedom. She shook her head, "No, sir. No chaperone. Just my rapier tongue and Dutton's shield of honor."

The old man growled in pleasure like a dog getting its ears scratched. He felt like he had been yanked back eighty years to those halcyon days when Elena Howe and he first met as post-doc students at Cold Spring Harbor.

Joshua Fflowers had rarely slept when he was a young man. He had felt that he had no time to waste in sleep. But, he had spent thousands upon thousands of hours in bed thinking and, in a whisper, recording those thoughts into his mypod with the serenely sleeping Elena alongside. In those hours, as he had studied her face in the silver of moon-glow or the amber of street light, he had done what he considered to be his best thinking—how to give freedom to humankind and how to cripple those who stood in his way. As he had thought the thoughts that changed the world, he had studied Elena's face pore by porcelain pore. Now, from a meter away, Fflowers had no doubt that by some mystery, which he swore he would unravel, the face before him, this wonderful, wily, intrigued, intriguing, bright, never to be expected face, was, somehow, protein of Elena's protein.

"Langue? Are you French? Langue is French for tongue and the root of the word language."

"No, sir. I'm from Africa. No French there in quite awhile."

The old man tipped his head as he considered that piece of information.

"And how did you end up at Dutton? Are you a legacy student?"

"No, sir. My mother died and my father moved us to New York. After we were here awhile, he decided that I could get a better education if I went to boarding school."

Jack interjected, "Well that's true...if you're smart enough to go to the right boarding school."

Joshua Fflowers held up a hand to stop Jack, "And, are you getting a better education?"

Prissi nodded her head vigorously, "Dr. Smarkzy is one of my teachers."

"Then, you are. Then, you certainly are."

As he continued to talk to Jack and the girl, Joshua Fflowers could feel the force of the receiving line grow, like water building behind a dam. On a powerful whim, he decided he could get to the institute even later than he already was going to be. Organ preservation had come a long way. He asked Jack and Prissi to have dinner with him. When the girl declined, saying that she had to get back to Dutton, the centenarian felt the rejection as sharply as a high school boy.

A minute later the teenerz said their goodbyes—Jack with a hug and the girl with a wide, but enigmatic smile—and hurried off. Once they were gone, a distracted Joshua Fflowers hurriedly fed the egos of the rest of the hungering parade.

As Binny Dowdahl accompanied him to the roto, Joshua Fflowers rattled off a dozen questions about Jack, Prissi, and Jack and Prissi. Dowdahl had the right answers about Jack, knew nothing of Prissi as she wasn't a Bissell student, and raised his eyebrows until they resembled the St. Louis arch as answer about the two of them. When Fflowers asked him to find out what he could, Bissell's headmaster and chief Myrmidon nodded eagerly.

As soon as the wheelchair was locked in place and the roto's blades were spinning, the trillionaire began ogling Prissi Langué and her family. By the time he landed at the Juvenal Institute, his biggest finding was how little he was able to discover, despite access to innumerable interlocked databases and a host of search engines, about Prissi Langué and her parents. However, Fflowers was still far too much the scientist to be stymied by initial failure. He knew that as soon as his rejuve surgeries were over, he would be back on the trail. He had no choice. He had to know about the girl.

As Joshua Fflowers considered who and what Prissi might be, he necessarily thought about his two sons. Even as he was prepped by a host of nurses to receive his new parts, he reviewed for the millionth time how those two sons were the unfathomable punishment he had paid for a well-intentioned act.

Two years after the Centsurety lab explosion, in an effort to relieve his pain and divert his anger, Fflowers had had his seed mated with Elena's eggs. Adaman had been the result. From the moment of his birth, Fflowers had felt that the son was nothing like the mother, nor the father. He neither looked like them—an outcome which belied the supposed advances in genetic engineering—nor did he act like them. By the time Adaman was two, Joshua Fflowers learned why. He had thrown the die and lost—because the die had been loaded. The egg that had been fertilized with his sperm had not been harvested from Elena's ovaries. A DNA scan had revealed that. Months of investigations as to who was the source of the egg resulted in nothing but dead ends. Knowing that Elena had switched eggs on him finally brought full force to Fflowers how much she despised him.

As Adanan grew into a snarky, oily, needy boy, Fflowers' revulsion grew alongside. Finally, since he could not change his feelings, he tried to change the paradigm by having a second son. Fflowers was fifty-seven when he grew a second son from an egg that had been carefully considered and even more carefully tested. The result, Illiya, was somewhat more to his liking...at first.

Even before the arrival of Illiya, Fflowers could not think of Adaman as his real son. The boy was a burden, a disappointment, even his heir, but not his son. Night after night, Fflowers would wander

through the dozens of rooms of the Airie, which felt twice as big and frighteningly empty since Elena had gone, and consider the child whom he and Elena could have, and he had convinced himself, would have made. A child more like Elena and less like himself.

In the late night chiaroscuro made by the swirling beams of winger beacons, hawk's roto searchlights and the spatter of late night revelers' erratically weaving flight lights, Fflowers would walk his own personal stations of the cross. The high-ceilinged library, crammed with science and myth, where over and over he had insisted to the doubting Elena that they were too young and their lives too full to have children...yet. The baronial dining room where Elena first had mentioned in passing the anomalous results of her pap exam. The statuary gallery, at that time his sanctorum, the place where he first had had the idea for the Centsurety Project. The parterre, with its central allee lined with marble and alabaster imaginings of all the forms the gods had left undone. The parterre, where the best and worst of his memories had been born....

Fflowers looked past the flurry of hands preparing him for his rejuve....

...It had been on starry night in late winter, just before the Ides of March, in the parterre which was filled with art and flowers, that a sleepless Joshua Fflowers had had the idea for the very best present he could give to Elena for her forty-fifth birthday.

It was a time of congruence. Things long worked for were falling into place. Finally, after fifteen years, the China market was exploding. Cygnetics just had reported record quarterly earnings for the twentieth time in a row. The delayed fledging process had been making remarkable progress. After a dozen tries, the special embryos of the Centsurety Project, still no bigger than beans, seemed to be thriving. It was time for him to give Elena her wings. It was not that he had had no doubts about his gift. After all, the wings would be grafted, not grown. And Elena, who had helped millions to fly, had never expressed her own desire to fly. Soon after Elena's battle with ovarian cancer and resultant hysterectomy eight years before, Fflowers had argued with her to get wings as a balm to her wounds, but she had wanted nothing to do with it. Rather than flying in an empty sky, she preferred to lose herself in work.

At the time, Fflowers had heard his wife's wishes, but he hadn't believed them. There had been too many other times when Elena's initial resistance later had turned to acceptance. Fflowers had convinced himself that, once the gift was made, Elena would be immensely grateful that he had taken the initiative.

But, Elena had not been grateful. She had been horrified. And as her revenge, she had left and taken all of her, and so much of him, from him. He had been left with an incurable emptiness, and progeny he could not own within his heart. Now, with the appearance of the girl, who, in some miraculous way, must be egg of Elena's egg, the girl who had conjured herself at this auspicious moment, Fflowers knew that he was about to be rejuvenated in both body and soul.

As he was wheeled into the surgery, Joshua Fflowers was more hopeful and more excited than he had been in more than fifty years. Fate had come round. He was forgiven.

Seventy-two hours later, a half-dozen slight sighs away from death because of a rejected liver split and a pancreatic transplant gone spectacularly wrong, hope and promise as well as any interest in Prissi Langué, her history and kin, were far removed from Joshua Fflowers' guttering thoughts.

CHAPTER SIX

Lost Paths

As he lay dying, Joshua Fflowers could not pursue his interest in Prissi, but the same could not be said of Prissi's interest in Joshua Fflowers.

The day after the Bissell dedication, Prissi, along with a scattering of students and a smattering of Dutton faculty had listened while Vartan Smarkzy had given a Sunday Series lecture called False Paths. Smarkzy's talk focused on some of the heralded scientific theories or paradigms which had led to little or nothing—humouristic medicine, a geo-centric solar system, alchemy, the id/ego/superego trinity, and dark matter.

After the lecture, on a beautiful balmy afternoon with a souging wind and dumpling clouds, Prissi was taking a necessarily slow walk across campus with Dr. Smarkzy—slow both because of her teacher's infirmities and because Prissi herself was still sore from hurting her shoulder the day before. Smarkzy was adding to the false paths he had mentioned in his lecture—phrenology, natural design. Prissi was listening but she also was feeling a sense of loss because Spring Break was to start in just two more days.

Even though she would be relieved to get through the rush of work Dutton teachers assigned to be due just before break, if she couldn't be out of the country vacationing on an island as seemingly most of her friends were scheduled to do, then Prissi would rather be at Dutton than home. Although it was almost three years since her mother had died, Prissi thought that her father now was even more wounded by grief rather than in the days and weeks immediately following the accident. From Prissi's view, the time healing all anodyne wasn't working for Beryl Langué.

Noticing that Prissi was favoring her shoulder, Smarkzy gently tapped it

"This, this whole process of fledging—the meta-mutancy, the timing, and the intricate biochemical processes— also might prove to be a false path."

Intrigued with the man she had met yesterday who had discovered the process that allowed fledging, and interested that there might be a better way to accomplish the transformation she had undergone the year before, Prissi asked, "Why? We fledge. We fly. What's wrong?"

Smarkzy's gnarled hands did a tortured pas de deux in the air. "Well, perhaps it's not so much a wrong path as a less than optimum path. A young person or that person's parents must decide whether to have wings at a period in life when much, if not most, is still in shadows. The wings one chooses may not fit what one becomes. In other words, the wings choose the life rather than the life choosing the wings. How many thousands, if not millions, of people lose ten, twenty or more years of flying because they have a mis-match between wing style and somatotype?

"Eons ago, in my fabled youth, I was asked to help out with did some interesting work being done by a former student of mine. She was working with a group that was being funded by a well-known scienpreneur, one whose acquaintance you recently made."

"Joshua Fflowers."

With his head so big, his body so frail, and his balance suspect, Prissi tentatively held out a hand when her teacher began vigorously bobbing that head.

"Although, at the time, as a field of study, meta-mutancy was more than twenty-five years old,

most of the theorizing still ran down just one, albeit admittedly somewhat wide, path. Joshua Fflowers was already famous, honored and immensely rich. But, if you knew Josh as I did, you would know that wouldn't be enough. He was driven to do more than he already had done—which was no less than the gift of flight to mankind—if gift it truly be."

After a pause, Smarkzy chuckled, "To wealthy mankind, anyway. From what my former student told me, my old classmate was frustrated, pent-up. He was driven to go someplace new and exciting—perhaps akin to the irresistible force that drove the 15th century explorers. I could understand this because he and I had been fair friends when we were at Bissell together. I'm not sure I've ever met a more driven man...and, my dear young lady, I've known a few Nobelists as well as many Duttonians in my many years."

He nodded in thanks at Prissi's snort.

"That distinguished Bissell alumnus put together a group of people—a group of scientists—very bright, very well-educated, but, unfortunately, not well-socialized to the norms and rules of mainstream science—a group the likes of which probably had not been seen since Josiah Wedgwood, Newton and their group, or, perhaps, the Oppenheimer team."

Smarkzy stopped dead in his tracks and rubbed the slight stubble that rimed his chin.

"Hmmm. That's a new thought. Fflowers might even have seen himself as Oppenheimer—you know of Robert Oppenheimer, the father of the Manhattan Project— a brilliant physicist and an even more brilliant strategist, administrator and motivator?"

When Prissi shrugged, Smarkzy mimicked her.

"No? Well, that's a pity. I'd say he's well worth a look...a long look. My former schoolmate brought together a collection of people who were almost guaranteed to do brilliant science. But, it was almost as sure a bet that the light they brought to their work would be outshone by the light and heat of their personal frictions. I remember Roan, that was the name of my student, described it once as a place where big, bright labs were filled with bigger, brighter egos. They came together at a place Fflowers had built just outside the research center at Cold Spring Harbor on Long Island—a hallowed place where some very serious science, including, perhaps, some of my own, had been getting done for many, many years. Fflowers drew them in with a dream, fabulous tools, gave them long leashes and lots of money—all of which comes very close to a scientist's definition of paradise." *

It's 2097 and teens can fledge and grow wings. Fifteen year old Prissi Langué loves flying, school and her friends. However, after Prissi finds pictures of her dead mother working alongside the man who invented fledging, she begins an investigation that uncovers long hidden world altering secrets.

Suddenly, it seems like everyone wants Prissi dead. Can Prissi fly far enough and fast enough to escape her enemies?

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