

Halfway Across the Galaxy and Turn Left



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ONE

It was clear from the first moment of landing that Mother's calculations were wrong and X's were correct. Mother had calculated that the family would touch down in eighteenth-century Versailles, and had one little velvet slipper poised, all set to run out and greet it. When she saw the actual landing space/time zone, she collapsed in a spiral of brocade and started yelling.

'Just typical of you, Father, buying a second-hand steerage computer from that shifty character you met at the Zoomtrack! Anyone else would have seen that it was obsolete government property! Oh, I should have known better than to come!' She would have burst into tears of fury, but didn't want to spoil the heart-shaped beauty spots pasted on her cheeks.

Father nonchalantly stepped out of the space raft and picked her a rose, and as they were as rare as black diamonds back home on Zyrgon, Mother relented enough to follow him down the stairs. X felt some sympathy for her, dragged halfway across the galaxy. None of them had wanted to leave home. Qwrk had just been nominated on his fifth solar birthday for a full professorship to the Knowledge Bank, and Dosis was waiting to be auditioned for the Cosmic Fliers. There wasn't anything as glamorous as that binding X to home. She often felt as ordinary as a

control button, wedged between those two eminent siblings. However, she had an important reason of her own for not wanting to leave. Lox. She had idolized him for as long as she could remember. Parting, even a temporary one, was anguish, but there was no help for it.

Father had got himself into a spot of trouble in Zyrgon, by inventing a successful, though devious, method of winning the government lottery. He won twenty-seven times in a row and even though he'd always inscribed the tickets with the names of visiting aliens, the authorities became suspicious. Mother couldn't bear the thought of Detention Centre, and there was nowhere to hide where they lived. Zyrgon was a very small planet, and everyone on it knew everyone else. So that was why X, as Family Organizer, made Father spend some of the lottery money on a pre-used raft. She'd also told the neighbours, one jump ahead of the Law Enforcers, that the whole family was going to Zyrgon's second moon to visit Aunt Hecla and her hybrid-antelope stud farm. But instead, they had come halfway across the galaxy and turned left.

'That steerage-computer definitely indicated eighteenth-century Versailles,' Mother said sadly. 'I thought I'd have afternoon refreshments with the French monarchs and dance a minuet.'

'I told you from start to finish that it wouldn't be Versailles,' X said. 'I wish you'd learn to trust MY calculations, which certainly didn't include travelling back into history. Distance was quite hard enough to master, thank you! Wasting all that time on the voyage learning French and making that ridiculous costume!'

She waited impatiently for Qwrk and Dosis to come down the stairs, not allowing any luggage except the store of currency, the necessary official papers, and the

Pocket Information Calculator. Then she utilized all her powers to create an air pocket, and the raft, which had been poised in the middle of the field like a silver obelisk, vanished, leaving nothing but a semi-circle of fuel leaks on the grass. (That raft, like the steerage-computer, had also been bought from the shady character at the Zoomtrack.)

‘Our last link with home gone!’ Mother wailed. ‘Poor little Qwrk could this minute be attending his very own investiture at the Knowledge Bank! And Dosis having to miss the audition! And my Fifth-Day Luncheon Club! I was going to have everything transparent this time, to show that conceited Mrs Gombaldu a thing or two. Crystal cakes, and the moonchip tumblers I won from saving all the Klickscore coupons ...’

‘She doesn’t say anything about MY routine being interrupted,’ X thought bleakly. ‘But then, I don’t have glittering talents like Dosis and Qwrk. There’s nothing glamorous about being a Family Organizer.’ She thought of a conversation overheard at one of those Fifth-Day Luncheons. ‘I’ve been blessed in my children,’ Mother had said to the members. ‘Dosis is as beautiful as a tripligate moonrise. Qwrk is a professor at the age of five. Oh, and I’ve got X, of course. I’d almost forgotten. It’s useful, having an Organizer like X in a family.’

But the centre of an alien field was no place for idle reminiscence. ‘Mother, stop that noise at once,’ X said sternly. ‘People down here don’t lament in public. We mustn’t draw attention to ourselves. Besides, our last link with home is just tucked away temporarily. Now, before we leave this deserted spot to find somewhere to live, everyone must listen to me carefully. I want to remind you that they have Detention Centres down here, also, for

people who aren't averse to bending the rules a little.'

Father nodded meekly, on his best behaviour. Dosis wasn't paying heed. She'd found the wild-rose bush beside the landing site and was making herself a coronet.

'You can't wear that,' X said. 'People might stare at you.'

She thought glumly that people probably would stare at Dosis, anyhow, even without the rose coronet. They always did on Zyrگون. Dosis had already had ten betrothal offers even though she was only just into her adolescence. Sometimes flowers sprang into bloom on the ground where she walked. Her hair billowed into golden wings, her voice was like harp music, and she wrote poetry. She was very annoying.

Right now she was treading air to gather roses from the top of the bush.

'Dosis! Stop levitating!' X said, cross with responsibility. 'It was discussed on the voyage, what we can do and what we mustn't.'

Dosis didn't obey straight away, and when she did come down, it was only because she saw a pretty animal in a corner of the field. She went to it and communicated. They knelt eye to eye, telling each other their lives' histories.

X looked across the field to the distant town and its traffic. There were no romantic horses and coaches as her mother had yearned for, but fairly modern traffic much the same as they had at home. Still, she felt an unfamiliar flicker of uneasiness for all the new burdens now placed upon her, even though she'd studied the Pocket Information Calculator so conscientiously during the three-day voyage.

'Ready when you are, X,' Father said cheerfully.

They put such trust in her, were so confident about her abilities! X hid her uneasiness and checked the family's clothes before they entered civilization. During the three days, she had transformed Qwrk's, Dovis's and her own travel overalls into shirts and long dark-blue trousers. That, apparently, was what young people wore down here. Father had rather fancied a suit of thin stripes on a dark background with a bow tie and bi-coloured shoes. He'd seen such a pattern on the PIC and was drawn to it, but X pointed out that it belonged to an earlier period. She'd made him a plain white shirt, grey trousers and tie instead, though he grumbled about his Zyrgonese travel outfit being altered into anything so dull.

Mother hadn't helped much with the clothes preparation. She'd stubbornly insisted that they would arrive in Versailles, and had concentrated on brocade and powdered curls.

'The rest of us look correct, but you don't,' X said. 'Take off that silly garment and make it into a plain dress that no one will notice particularly. You've got a garment repair kit in your handbag, even though I told you not to bring any tools of trade. A plain dress, I said, Mother. No trimmings.'

'All right, then, a plain dress,' Mother said sulkily. 'Plain for mourning. I shall wear nothing else all the time I'm forced to live down here.'

When everyone was ready, X led them out of the field and down the road towards town. The buildings were certainly different from the slender tapering apartment towers on Zyrgon.

'Horizontal instead of vertical,' Father said. 'I don't know that I like it. Countryside shouldn't be cluttered up with housing, and besides, who'd want all that green

garden stuff around their apartment? I wouldn't fancy it myself. Any law enforcer could creep up unawares and nab you!"

'Still, it's gracious, I suppose,' said Mother.

'And there would be plenty of room to build your own private planetarium or laboratory,' said Qwrk, impressed. 'I wonder why they don't? All they have are tiled pits full of water diluted with chemicals.'

'Swimming pools,' X said impatiently. 'You should have done more general study on the voyage. I don't want you all bothering me with questions about the names of new things. From now on, you must all look up the PIC data for yourselves.'

Dovis stopped suddenly. 'I don't need any data on that beautiful apartment!' she cried. 'I shall live there! Good-bye, everyone!'

Before X could stop her, she skimmed away from the group and into the grounds of an impressive house. It was clear that a bribe-taking official of some kind lived there. No other person could have afforded it, not even someone like their father with his innovative gambling schemes. X watched in dismay as her sister tried to open the door manually. When that didn't work, Dovis tapped her heels together and used kinetics, showing off a little, as she was more skilled at kinetics than anyone else in the family. The door slid gently open and she waltzed inside. There seemed to be no electronic challenge installed in the house entrance, no relayed voice querying her intentions.

'X, rescue that foolish girl!' cried Mother. 'We don't know what sort of people live in that house! According to the PIC, this planet has always been filled with questionable types. They've never had any really efficient mood

control for the problem population.'

'Everyone wait here,' X said, for Father was regarding the house with a definite gleam in his eye, calculating its riches, and she didn't trust him at all.

Dovis had found a mirror in a gilded-metal frame, just inside the doorway. She'd stopped to admire her image, standing quite still, dazzled, as always, by her own beauty. X knew it would be useless to call; whenever Dovis came upon a mirror, you could intone her name till the stars melted before she'd answer or even hear. She hooked her hand in amongst Dovis's long tendrils of hair and tugged her back outside. Dovis came quietly, not being a fighter. None of those Cosmic Flier types were, X thought scornfully.

'You are NEVER to go off like that again by yourself,' she scolded. 'You know very well that we have to stay together in a group. Do you want to jeopardize all my arrangements? You can't just stroll in and out of people's dwellings on this planet.' Dovis, reacting as she always did when scolded, drifted away behind glazed eyes to some secret spot inside her mind.

They walked on until they came to the town's centre.

'This is more like it,' Father said. 'Buildings close together as they should be. Plenty of escape routes over rooftops, and crowds to hide in.'

X noticed that Qwrk had taken out his solar reckoner and was snap-recording the passing vehicles. 'Put that reckoner away at once!' she said sharply. 'I didn't even give you permission to bring it off the raft. The PIC is quite sufficient.' She confiscated the reckoner with a sharp rap over Qwrk's knuckles. It had been a mistake, she thought, to send him to that expensive, professor-orientated Knowledge Bank, instead of to Zyrگون

Community Centre like everyone else's child. Mother had only been trying to impress Mrs Gombaldu, anyhow.

'We must find a house of our own,' she said. 'Look out for a notice saying Real Estate Agent.'

But everyone was too busy gazing at other things. The PIC was passed rapidly from hand to hand as they came upon new and curious sights. X didn't need to consult it very often, and was pleased with herself for learning so much on the voyage. She was, however, unprepared for the noise and disorder. Nothing seemed well planned. There was, for instance, a garment shop next to one selling food, and next to that was one that apparently sold music. A great discordant blare of sound cascaded from the entrance.

It seemed an untidy plan for a shopping centre, and the people were untidy, too, in their movements. Nobody obeyed a code of walking behaviour. For one terrible moment, X was separated from her family by a large bulky woman with a little cart on wheels. When she caught up, Mother was gazing at a shop that displayed clothing. She was a Wear Designer on Zyrگون, and the different materials here interested her very much, though she was scathing about their style. She couldn't quite forgive missing out on romantic Versailles.

Dovis still hadn't emerged from the secret region in her mind, and walked with her eyes fastened upon nothing. X held her tightly by an arm, so that she couldn't absently levitate. People turned to stare at her beauty, but on the whole, X started to relax a little. Her family, she decided, didn't look so very different from the native population.

Halfway along the main street there was a Real Estate Agent. X gazed, bewildered, at the cryptic words under

the photographs on display: *WW carps; lge kit; OFP; BIRs; cls all convs.*

‘Close all convs?’ Mother said. ‘What can that mean?’

‘Convoys?’ suggested Qwrk. ‘A house that’s close to a space depot, most likely. Let’s take that one. I’d like to study their flight techniques while we’re here.’

‘They still use that smelly old-style fuel,’ Mother said disdainfully. ‘I haven’t come all this way to choke in air-traffic fumes. If I have to live in a sub-standard house in a primitive society . . .’

‘They aren’t really sub-standard houses, Mother, only different. Some of them look extremely comfortable,’ X said. ‘And I must hire one before Dosis comes back from her secret mind place. She always complicates decisions so.’

‘None of these houses look nearly as nice as Versailles.’

‘It doesn’t matter where we live. We might hear very soon that we can go back to Zyrkon.’

Mother was beginning to dab at her eyes again, so X hurried everyone through the door of the Estate Agent. ‘We wish to lease a house,’ she said, not allowing herself to dwell on the fact that she was addressing one of THEM for the first time.

‘We have several houses for rent,’ the man said, talking over the top of her head to Father.

‘An appalling lack of etiquette!’ X thought indignantly. He didn’t look like a person with minimum manners-training, either, being neatly dressed and prosperous. ‘We need a dwelling immediately, one that we can use from today,’ X said, but the man scarcely paid any attention to her at all. He talked almost exclusively to her father.

Then he led the family outside and into a large, gleaming vehicle. It looked cumbersome to her eyes, but Qwrk was obviously intrigued by it. Protective instincts rising, X noticed that it apparently had no monitored steering at all, being totally in the charge of this Mr Herring, for that was his name. It seemed an irresponsible state of affairs. She thought of flighty Dosis given charge of such an uncontrolled vehicle, or Qwrk, with his mind that was apt to explode into spasmodic white light, swamping everything else he might be doing. And this community must surely have its share of people similar to Qwrk and Dosis, all given freedom to dash about unchecked. It was almost, she thought, as though this town's transport system was one huge Zoomtrack! But Mr Herring, she was pleased to discover, maintained a decorous speed as he took them out of town.

'More countryside that is cluttered up,' Father whispered to her over the back seat. 'I wish they wouldn't do it. It should be one or the other.'

'It's called suburbia,' X said. 'A sort of mid-way state.' She decided that she rather liked the idea of separate housing, each in its neat rectangle of green. It would make quite a pleasant change, not having to share an elevator with forty other household Organizers when you went about your business. You could almost come and go without anyone noticing.

'The streets have names!' said Mother. 'Oh, how endearing, and look at those dear little buildings next to the houses! What are they for? Do people keep strange pets in them?'

'They're called garages,' said X. 'Hush, Mother. Mr Herring will think you're odd if you show you don't know. People here store their vehicles in them.'

'How strange. Don't they have communal under-apartment parking?'

'Sssh!' said X. 'I think this is the building for lease that Mr Herring wants us to examine.'

But she saw that it wasn't suitable at all. Although the house was set in its own grounds, the skyline behind was spoiled by massive ugly pylons bearing cables. It would have been impossible to gaze at their distant, real home at night. Each room of that house was like a little dark pit, like the places on Zyrگون where they mined for pearlrock.

'We don't want this one,' she said to Mr Herring, but he was chatting over her head again.

'A marvellous locality, available at this price only because the owner has gone overseas for a year. Plenty of space for a billiard table, bar, rumpus area for the kids, you name it.'

'We don't require any of those things, whatever they are,' X said, raising her voice. 'This house isn't suitable. And surely the building regulations have been contravened? Does the government allow the leasing of houses with great spreading patches of damp?' She pointed out the stains, masked though they were with pigment, and Mr Herring looked at her unpleasantly.

'Coffee stains,' he said. 'And they've been nicely touched up with paint.'

'Damp and mildew,' X said severely. 'Criminally disguised with paint.'

'I wouldn't like my children to live in a damp house,' Mother said. 'And besides, there isn't enough window area. At night we wouldn't be able to look through the sky and see ...'

'The stars,' X said, treading sharply on her foot. 'We're all interested in astronomy.'

‘Then I’ve got just the place for you out on Panorama Drive,’ said Mr Herring. ‘Smaller – I mean cosier – but still plenty of room for a hobby telescope.’

He took them to the house on Panorama Drive, which was so awful that even Aunt Hecla wouldn’t have considered it as a stable for her hybrids. X pointed out, among many other faults, that the main-room floor had a five-degree slope, and that the chimney needed underpinning. Mr Herring gave her another displeased look.

‘Quite a little old lady, your daughter,’ he remarked to Mother.

‘Oh, no, X is only in her three-hundredth year,’ she said, forgetting to convert the Zyrگون lunar years into solar terminology, which made X only twelve. X could see that she was tired from the long voyage and liable to make more mistakes which perhaps couldn’t be disguised by coughing.

So when Mr Herring showed them the third house on his list, she said, with just a superficial inspection, ‘We’ll take this one, please.’

‘But you haven’t checked for spreading damp, termites, bracing, plumbing, wiring and noise pollution,’ Mr Herring said sarcastically.

‘This one,’ X said. ‘Now, the bond money, the advance rent, and the signing of the lease.’

The mention of money made Mr Herring quite spry and he drove them back to his shop at an alarming speed. While he was preparing the official papers, X whispered to Father to get out some of the hidden currency. Father went behind a screen of house pictures and drew out a bundle from his security vest. The currency was of paper, and not very clean, unlike the sparkling disc-money of Zyrگون. Father’s dubious friend from the Zoomtrack had

obtained it. He often had to retire secretly to this planet for various reasons similar to Father's. X was dismayed to find that half of the money belonged to different countries and eras, some of them lost in time. Father's friend obviously hadn't trusted that steerage computer, either.

She found the correct notes to give to Mr Herring, and after the business transactions were completed, led the family back to the new house. It was a very long walk. The others kept nagging her to let Dosis transport them all there by kinetics, but she wouldn't allow it, because it would have been out of the ordinary and definitely cause people to notice them. When they reached the house, she took charge of the keys and opened the front door. They entered, exhausted. It had been a tremendous strain, this first dealing with the populace. From weariness, Qwrk shed his mental age and became his nasty little chronological one. He started to whine for the chemical analyser which Aunt Hecla had given him for his birthday. X said he couldn't have it, so Qwrk just went away into a corner and fiddled with gravity. There was a noise like a fragmented thunderclap and the analyser slid through a small ragged slit in the wall and settled on the floor of the main room.

'I told you not to transfer possessions here!' X scolded. 'Just look at that hole! Now their weather will get in! Do you expect me to do household repairs when we've been here for only five minutes, you intellectual little pest?'

'I'll run up a batch of molecular-reaction adhesive and fix it,' Qwrk said.

'Oh, no you won't! They don't use repair methods like that here. They go to a place called Hardware and buy renovating materials. We mustn't deviate from their ways at all.'

But she was too tired to go out and find a Hardware. Her eyelids kept sliding shut like airlocks, and Dosis was already fast asleep, floating gently somewhere up near the ceiling. The rest of them not possessing her talent, X relented enough to allow Qwrk to fiddle with gravity again and transfer the travel hammocks from the spacecraft. They tumbled into them and into instant sleep.