FIVE

It took a moment for Helen’s eyes to adjust to the dim light of Dr. Simon’s office, and as her vision cleared in the gloom, Helen realized she had been expecting something like a vet's office on Earth—a bright, sterile, beige room with a solitary exam table and perhaps the odd scale or other small piece of technical equipment.

What greeted her eyes instead was a large open space ringed by monumentally precarious piles of clutter and disarray. Machines of every shape and size in various states of repair were scattered around on a mishmash of tables and chairs. Bookshelves overflowed onto the floor into disorganized stacks, and everywhere sat cages and aquariums in which creatures of all sorts flapped, crept, burrowed, swam, and slithered. When Helen appeared, the racket from the cages fell silent, and at least a dozen pairs of animal eyes swung in her direction. While this was unnerving, it didn’t stop Helen’s attention from being dragged to an unlikely object in the corner—an actual computer, the first Helen had seen since arriving on Lokabrenna. The computer was not one of the flat, tidy touchscreen tablets she had grown up using in school but rather an ancient whirring behemoth desktop machine with a ramshackle LCD screen that looked like it had been repaired hundreds of times over and was now made mostly of glue and tape and dangling wires.

Standing at the screen was a man who appeared almost as disheveled as the room itself. He wore a patched grey coat with at least a dozen pockets allowing easy access to various items and tools that poked out at odd angles. His red hair stuck up in tufts on his balding head, and he peered at the computer screen through a comically thick pair of glasses that seemed much too large for his face and stuck out awkwardly over an unkempt beard. Guiltily, Helen realized he was more or less exactly what she pictured when she heard the word "Sciist."

As Helen started to say hello, there was a loud electrical buzzing followed by a muffled explosion from somewhere in the interior of The Green, at which point the computer screen went black. They were left in darkness except for the light provided by an oil lamp and a small skylight somewhere far above, and Helen got a whiff of a familiar odor that reminded her of an antique chrome blender she once played with in her grandparents’ garage. *Ozone*. That’s what her mother had called the smell…

At sound of the explosion, a huge unkempt pile in the corner rose unsteadily to its feet, revealing itself to be yet another bear-sized—and apparently immensely old—scruffy-looking dog. Helen managed to feel only a moment of anxiety about the dog’s potential for aggression before the creature gave a mild howling "woof" and collapsed back into shaggy black, brown, and white heap, as its back legs gave out.

Dr. Simon adjusted his glasses and stared at the blank screen for a moment more before turning to Helen. "Well, I guess that's it for the electricity today," he said with a shrug and a smile.

The dog in the corner used his back paw to scratch his ear with great effort and gave another soft barroo.

"Oh hush Golem," said Dr. Simon, taking off his glasses and rubbing his eyes. "You can't howl away a blackout."

The dog groaned and shook his ears, sending a long string of drool flying onto the back of Dr. Simon’s pant leg.

"So," said Dr. Simon, ignoring the drool and taking a step towards Helen with an outstretched hand. "I'm Simon Goldberry. And you are?"

"Helen," she said hesitantly, remembering the uncomfortable attention she had garnered from the onlookers in the Scupperton town square.

Dr. Simon's eyes brightened, as he propped the ludicrous reading glasses on his head and out of the way. "Oh, yes, yes, yes, of course! Of course you are," he said striding back across the room to a shadowy door in the back corner. "I know exactly why you're here.”

Dr. Simon opened the door with a smile and a theatrical flourish, and Blink shot into the room like a thunderbolt, racing straight into Helen's arms. She was knocked off her feet by the force of his jubilance, and then, with his prey now at full disadvantage, Blink proceeded to jump all over Helen, licking her face, whining and panting, seeming to say in every way he knew how, *I* missed *you!*

Helen laughed, a real belly laugh full of relief and exhausted joy. Seeing Blink alive and well was the first unequivocally good thing that had happened since Helen's traumatic arrival the day before. Blink seemed fully recovered with the exception of two shaved patches on either side of his ribs and a number of ugly puncture wounds that had evidentially been closed up by the now proven skill of Dr. Simon. The wounds weren’t stitched, though, Helen noted curiously. *What was holding them shut?* Helen ran a hand over Blink and tried to examine the wounds more closely, but Blink's exuberance made him impossible to pin down at the moment. Tossing the question aside for the time-being, Helen grabbed Blink around the neck and hugged him with all her might.

As though disapproving of this unruly display, Golem flopped to one side and gave another a great doggy groan.

Dr. Simon stood a polite distance, only approaching again when Helen had regained her feet. Once she had risen, Blink calmed down a bit but pressed himself as close as he could to Helen's leg, his tail keeping time like a pendulum.

"Well this little fellow presented quite a medical mystery," said Dr. Simon, looking down at Blink with an expression that communicated affection coupled with scientific interest.

"He's really the last thing I have from home now," said Helen, realizing she didn't even know what had become of the clothes she had had on when she had arrived. What *would* she have done if Dr. Simon hadn't been able to help? "I really don't know how to thank you," she said, sinking her hand into the reassuring warmth of Blink's fur.

Dr. Simon dismissed Helen's comment with a wave. "Banish the thought," he said. "Really I should be thanking you. It is certainly not every day an Animist is presented with a case as interesting and difficult as this one."

Helen was slightly puzzled by this comment. “I would think you must see injured dogs all the time,” she said. After all, dogs seemed to play a larger role in this culture than in her own.

Dr. Simon held up one finger. “Ah but that’s just the problem.” he said, raising an eyebrow. "I do treat dogs all the time, as you say, but if I had assumed Blink were like those dogs—” Dr. Simon frowned, reliving the puzzle Blink had posed. "Well let's just say that the wrong assumptions cost me more patients than necessary in my younger days."

Again, Helen was shaken by the thought that she might have lost Blink as well, but Dr. Simon was now thoroughly lost in his retelling of his own story.

“When Arden Dickens arrived at my doorstep with your dog," he said. "I assumed Blink must be a mutation, something like dwarfism in the human population perhaps. If that had been the case, I would have needed to adjust Blink’s medications based on his weight. Smaller dog, smaller dose of anti-bacterial agents. But luckily,” he said with a half smile, “I didn’t stop there or that might have indeed been the last of your little friend. Assumptions like that are the enemy of science, you see. ”

Helen was suddenly immensely grateful that Dr. Simon was the Animist in Scupperton. “But why wouldn’t it work that way?” asked Helen.

Dr. Simon nodded in appreciation of Helen’s curiosity. “In most cases it certainly would,” he said. “*If,* that is, Blink had been born here on Lokabrenna. But Blink was such an odd case, I felt compelled to question Mr. Dickens further, and he revealed the very strange circumstances of your arrival, of the ship and the Eye, and that, I must say, put me in a bit of a quandary.”

Dr. Simon pushed aside a pile of books from one of the dusty overstuffed chairs against the wall and sat before gesturing for Helen to do the same.

“You see,” said Dr. Simon crossing his legs and stroking his beard in thought. “The dogs here differ from the dogs of Old Earth in more ways than just size. The Firstcomers were, as you might imagine, quite short on resources when they arrived. They needed animals for food and protection and fleece, but their society had almost nothing to spare. So the first Sciists made a compromise. They used genetics to transform their animals, refining them for greater efficiency, which in some cases meant splicing in genes from the local wildlife—to greater and lesser effects. Golem over there, for instance,” said Dr. Simon gesturing towards the corner.

Golem raised his head at his name.

“He eats no more than Blink, despite the difference in size. All of our domesticated animals were altered similarly—but,” said Dr. Simon with a solemn frown. “There was a price.”

Helen had been completely drawn in by Dr. Simon’s story. “What was the price?” she asked, her voice almost a whisper.

“Time,” said Dr. Simon. “Knowing Blink’s origin, I judge him to be five or six Earth years old and perhaps a third of the way through his natural lifespan?”

Helen noted that Dr. Simon knew enough to say “Earth years.” She nodded.

Dr. Simon gestured again towards his own dog. “By comparison, Golem over there is also six and very near the end of time."

As though he understood what they were saying about him, Golem struggled to his feet again, gave Helen and Dr. Simon a mournful stare and then stumbled slowly through the open door into the back room.

"Sorry old friend," Dr. Simon said sadly before turning his attention back to Helen. "While our animals do eat much less than their predecessors, they pay for this with shorter lives. We have selected for longevity over the years with some success—the first generations of altered dogs were lucky to make it to the age of three. But our animals still only live about half as long as their counterparts on Old Earth did.”

“That’s sad,” said Helen, mulling over the possibility of losing Blink at his current age. “I suppose that’s why the Firstcomers didn’t make similar changes to humans then?” she asked.

Dr. Simon shook his head unhappily. “Oh, Helen. If only you had been there to advise them. But they were just so desperate to survive. It’s hard to blame them.”

Helen felt a chill crawl through her blood. “They didn’t—“

Dr. Simon nodded sadly. “They did. It didn’t last long. It really only takes one generation watching their children wither and die at 20 before survival doesn’t seem so important anymore. From then on, genetic modifications were reserved for non-human life.”

Helen tried to imagine how terrible things must have been for the Firstcomers to resort to such an experiment.

“So you see,” said Dr. Simon spreading out his hands in front of him. “Not knowing if the story Mr. Dickens told was true—whether Blink was merely a small dog from Lokabrenna or a *normal* dog from Old Earth—I faced quite a dilemma. Give a small dose of antibiotic and risk the infection spreading out of control by morning if the amount was inadequate, or give a large dose and risk poisoning the patient.”

Helen found herself liking this man, who referred to her dog as his patient. “How did you decide then?” she asked.

“It was his teeth,” said Dr. Simon gleefully. “The wear on his teeth revealed that his age was roughly five, and since all other physical signs suggested Blink was still a young dog, I knew the story Arden related must be true. So I gave him the larger dose. Since then his immense appetite for his size—as well as his recovery—proved me right.”

At that moment, Emma appeared in the entryway, her arms loaded with basketsful of greens and vegetables. Clearly holding no grudge about Emma's role in the events of the night before, Blink wagged his tail vigorously but also stayed glued by Helen’s side. From the other room, Golem gave the requisite "woof" that his sentry position required of him.

Emma hoisted one of the baskets into a more comfortable position on her hip. "Well there you are, then," she said looking at Blink with satisfaction. "Didn't I tell you Doc Simon knows his business?"

But something about her relieved tone, made Helen realize that Emma had not been quite as confident about Blink's outcome as she might have originally let on.

"So back to The Goat then?" asked Emma. "I'm sure Millie could use your help before the lunch rush."

At this, Helen felt her stomach sink. She certainly owed Emma her services, but Helen could think of nothing she would like to do less than suffer Millie's insults about Helen’s insufficient vegetable cutting prowess for the second time that day.

"Actually," said Dr. Simon (and Helen hung to this interjection like a life raft), "I was thinking Helen could apprentice here for the day. I would love the chance to ask her about the animals of her home—if she is not too terribly needed at your place, that is.”

Emma looked uncertainly at Helen for silent input on this question. Helen nodded vigorously, and Emma seemed to warm slightly to the idea. Helen could still see something of the Corsairs' long held distrust of the Sciists in Emma's skeptical look, however.

"I have been somewhat short-handed since Henry Walters fell ill," said Dr. Simon, who seemed to realize Emma might need a couple final bits of persuasion. "And it wouldn’t be a bad idea to keep Blink under observation for the day."

"Well," said Emma slowly, "I suppose Helen does have to learn the ropes if she will be staying here for any extended time. I thought she might have a few more days of rest first, but she will eventually need to apprentice at all of the guilds in any case."

Helen gave another vigorous nod, thinking that absolutely anything would be better than spending hours in the kitchen with Millie.

This sealed the deal, and Emma gave Helen instructions to have the old man who watched the dories ferry her back to The Grey Goat when the day was done.

Once Emma was gone, Dr. Simon turned to Helen with a smile. "Well I guess our first piece of business is the Dickens' sheep," he said cheerfully. "Now where are my glasses?" Dr. Simon began frantically searching all of the many pockets in his lab coat.

“They’re still on your head,” said Helen, before he could get very far in this task.

Dr. Simon looked delighted and grabbed the errant glasses in surprise. “Wonderful! See? You’re helping already. Shall we then?” he said, gesturing towards the door.

Helen nodded, having no idea what would be expected of her as an apprentice but looking forward to the day nonetheless. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a long, scaly tentacle reach out of the sand in one of the larger aquariums, but then Golem gave a gruff bark and the slinking appendage disappeared again into the depths of its home.