SIX

Autumn and Winter, 2154. The Milk of Paradise

We almost had to drag Benta and Rich with us on the now-familiar train to Barton Oaks. Benta was listless and numb, and looked at me so coldly I could hardly bear it. I found myself echoing her accusation. Why did we have to think of her?

Rich was vociferous. "Over my dead body," he shouted. "Those power-hungry bureaucrats have manipulated my life. I'm not going to let them manipulate my mind."

We got them onto the train, mostly because they were startled by the subway system and subdued by the glares of travelling workers. "It's wonderful," I whispered to Benta, holding her cold hand. "It's like . . . all your dreams come true."

She drew her hand away and turned to stare into the darkness beyond the window. Rich heard and mocked in an undertone. "Dreams come true. Listen to yourself, Lisse. They've brainwashed you, turned your mind to soup, and you don't even know it!"

If it is brainwashing I won't give in, I thought savagely when we got to Barton Oaks and, when the grey couch unfolded backwards until I was reclining, I swore I wouldn't let myself be hypnotized. I stared at the ceiling, concentrating on the patterns of light, counting the repetitions. I won't . . . I won't. Then I blinked and was staring up at soft blue sky.

It's not real, I told myself. It's an illusion, I said. I drew in a breath of damp, spicy air that set my toes and fingers tingling. The desert and the grassland were behind us now, and we had awakened — or been transported — to the edge of the mysterious, misty lands. Ahead of us rolled hectares of parkland, set with trees whose branches spread wide above the short, bluish-green turf.

Benta clutched me, and I could swear that her nails digging into the flesh of my arm were real. No dream. No hypnosis.

"Lisse, am I dreaming? It is so beautiful! And those are nut trees. Like the ones on the farm. Before they cut them down."

She ran across the grass, her arms wide, and embraced the trunk, running her fingers down its smooth bark. She laughed. "It feels real. Oh, Lisse, it is real, isn't it?"

I took a deep breath of sweet, untainted air and nodded. "You bet it's real, Benta." I was persuading myself as well as her. I pushed the memory of the gum in Scylla's hair out of my mind. If the dingy streets, the factory, the craziness of nightlife in our
DA were real and this was not then life was meaningless. I laughed. "As real as real!"

Then I saw Rich. He sat hunched over, looking down, not at the vista ahead, his hands clasped together. "Rich, are you okay?" Karen bent over him and shook his shoulder. When he moved away from her hand, I saw that he was taking his pulse.


Only when Benta cried out, "And there are ripe nuts on the ground!" and the others ran forward, did Rich lumber after them. I followed him to where the others were squatting on the grass. I picked up a fallen nut, peeled off the rind and broke open the shell. The meat inside was crisp, and sweet as Paradise.

Into my mind flashed a couplet from a nineteenth-century poem I had found in the library. How did it go? "Beware, beware . . . something, something . . . for he on honeydew has fed and drunk the milk of Paradise."

Paradise. I got uneasily to my feet and walked on. The great grey trunk of one tree sparkled in the sun. I put out an exploratory hand and touched a sticky lump. I broke it off and touched it with my tongue. Honeydew. I looked up and saw the combs, lodged in a crack between two branches, bees buzzing attentively around. It was too perfect, as if someone were reading my mind.

Go away, I snarled inwardly. Leave us alone. Don't spoil this place. It's the only joy we've got.

Then the others crowded around, picking at the hardened drops of honey on the tree trunk. Trent was all for climbing the tree and breaking off a comb, but the rest of us dissuaded him.

"You've got no protection. You could get stung."
"I'm not afraid of a sting or two."
"What about ten or twenty?" Rich warned. "You could go into anaphylactic shock and die, and I wouldn't be able to do a thing to help you." Then he realised what he was saying and stopped. "Go ahead. The bees aren't real. Their stings won't be either."

"In any case, when we've been in danger before we've just found ourselves back at Barton Oaks. It'd be stupid to let that happen before we've found any more clues," I added.

"What clues?" Rich naturally asked.
"The Game is like a treasure hunt. Every time we come here we look for clues that will help us find the treasure."

"Such as?"

"Well, first there was the mesa. It was like a map of the desert to tell us where to go next. Then there was the salt lake and the meteor crater . . ."

"And the grasslands . . ." Katie put in.
"That's not much of a clue."
"The dry riverbed where I fell over the native copper, remember?" said Alden.
"What about today?"

"Honey and nut trees, I suppose."
"I think it's all nuts," Rich retorted automatically, but I could tell that his mind was working.

We walked on slowly through patches of parkland and forest. It was too beautiful to hurry. I stopped thinking about being a rat in a maze and
began to enjoy myself. There were small streams, gravel bottomed, with sweet, cool water to drink and splash on our faces. We followed one of them downhill to a small waterfall and from there to a bigger river, where the water ran so white that we christened it Milk River at once.

"Why is it that colour?" I asked.

"Kao I, In expect." Katie lay flat on the grass and reached over, scrambling with her fingers until she had freed a ball of sticky mud from the river bank. "Look at it. Beautiful stuff." She rolled it into a ball, pushed her thumb into it, and quickly turned it into the rough shape of a cup. "But almost too fat to use by itself. It needs to be mixed with fine sand." She squashed the cup back into a ball of clay and tossed it into the water.

There was an echoing splash downstream as a large fish leapt from the water and fell back. If we had fishing poles and lines, I thought idly... Katie rubbed her clay-whitened hands on her coveralls and we walked on until, about an hour later, we came out upon a sandy bank. Below it, the river spilled into a wide water meadow, lavishly sprinkled with yellow, white and blood red. The river spread out in meanders and marshes and then, presumably, fell away to the lower ground beyond. We could see no more. Beyond the water meadow was only tree-tangled mist.

We collapsed upon the ground, falling back onto the sweet-smelling turf, letting the sun and soft wind play over our city-whitened bodies. I shut my eyes and breathed the flower-laden air. I ran my hands over the soft grass. Beside me, Benta turned her face and I saw in its shining that she was happy again.

"It's not real," Rich muttered, over and over, like an incantation. And in my own head a small voice worried at me, the way a piece of grit can worry your foot. An echo of Rich. It's not real. None of this is real. They're reading your mind and giving you what you long for most. Don't get taken in.

One by one, we fell asleep and came softly out of sleep to find ourselves on the grey couches in the grey room. In a wordless peace we walked down the deserted passage to the change rooms and got out of our coveralls and into the brilliant motley uniform of the unemployed.

At the door, we came face to face with a group of ten eager youngsters. "You've been playing The Game?" one of them asked.

We nodded.

"Is it exciting? Can you tell us what happens?"

None of us had the words to explain. "You'll have to see for yourself," Scylla said at last. "I expect it's different for everyone."

I remembered hearing the same response from the girl to whom I had spoken on our first visit to Barton Oaks. I had thought her reticence was the result of a rule, or a matter of etiquette. But now I knew. She hadn't told me because there just weren't any words. As we walked home from the subway I realized that I had left my anger and my disbelief somewhere down in the water meadow.

Even Rich was changed. Some magic in that quiet sleep had overcome his doubts. When we picked up a germ from a miserable old woman, who swapped a load of moth-eaten wool in exchange for some of Scylla's paintings, he was
frantic at his inability to treat us, since none of the expensive antibiotics he was used to were available to us. He began to concentrate on folk medicine, which treated sickness with herbs such as feverfew and garlic, healall and parsley. He and Katie developed a friendly partnership between medicine and botany, aided by the practical Benta.

Meanwhile Paul, assisted by the rest of us, extended and refined the map of the Game territory, marking in colour everything we had found that might be considered a clue.

“Next time we go back,” Katie remarked, after we had argued ourselves to a standstill one morning, “I’d like to make a real pot with that clay and see if I can fire it.”

“If you could make a fire,” Trent pointed out.

“Exactly.”

“But they won’t let us take anything through, even a lighter or a single match.”

“People must have made fire in the old days, before lighters, I mean. Karen, do you know how they did it?”

“It began with wild fire, from a lightning strike or volcanic activity. People started a fire from that and kept it going afterwards. If they had to travel, they stored hot coals in a pot until they could remake the fire in their new home.”

“Suppose there weren’t any lightning storms? Or volcanoes?” Katie asked.

“A hand drill could generate enough heat to ignite very dry rotten wood or straw, I suppose. If you could rotate it fast enough. And striking a flint on steel, of course. That was used for centuries. But you have to have steel — or maybe iron would do.”

“And flints.”

“We’ll see if there’s anything useful on fire-making and firing pottery in the old library.”

Meanwhile Scylla unravelled the moth-eaten cloth we’d exchanged and began spinning it into new thread. She bullied Brad and Trent into building her a frame loom. She strung her threads on it and found a way of lifting half the threads and leaving the rest behind, so that she could push a shuttle of thread through and beat it down. It wasn’t long before she was able to make fabric, and out of the fabric, new clothing.

“It would be fun to build a loom on the bank above the water meadow,” she said dreamily one day.

“You talk as if the Game country were a place to live, not just to find clues in,” Karen teased her.

“We’re all doing it, aren’t we? Building fires, making pots. And Rich and Katie looking for healing herbs.”

“Only none of the herbs are like any we’ve seen or read about. It’s as if the Game world was a foreign country!” Katie frowned.

We did try to make fire in the misty land but, whether we were stupid or the materials were too wet with dew, we could never manage it. It didn’t really matter. The days were always warm and sunny. There were nuts to eat and, in any case, we were never allowed to stay there long enough to get really hungry.

It had been spring when we left the Government school for our DA in the grumpy city. So little grew in the gritty streets that we were hardly aware of
the seasons. The days just grew longer, the city air more oppressive. Then it grew slowly cooler. It seemed to drizzle constantly. That was all. The warehouse grew cold and we were thankful for all the cloth that Scylla had woven, piling squares of stuff on our beds at night and wrapping them around our shoulders like shawls during the day.

Winter made the unchanging summer of the Game country even more wonderful. The sun shone, the flowers never withered, the nuts were always ripe. We explored the slopes below the water meadow and discovered that far to the south lay a huge lake or inland freshwater sea whose extent we could not guess, since the water met the sky in a blur of misty blue with no hint of a far shore. Back in the city, Brad began to read about boat-making, and he and Trent used the woodworking equipment to make models.

We lived for The Game. Every moment in that place was magic. Every day in the dingy city was only a preparation for a return to Barton Oaks. Hunting for clues and looking forward to a ‘prize’ was no longer important. Only Rich and Paul continued to pore over the map, trying to wring some answers from it. What will happen if we answer the riddle and win the prize? I wondered.

“Don’t get it right,” I begged Paul and Rich. “We won’t be allowed to go back.” But they just laughed at me.

“It’s much more likely that we are only allowed a certain number of tries at The Game, win or lose. Then that’ll be that.” Paul shrugged.

“Don’t say that! They can’t take it from us now.” My heart echoed Benta’s cry. It was worse for her, of course. And Rich. They’d given up more for The Game than the rest of us had.

It grew colder and darker. We waited for another summons to Barton Oaks. A week went by. And another. Trent and Paul began to fight again, and Rich to scorn.

“Th’ere playing games with us. Mind games, depriving us of pleasure, like rats in a trap, watching us . . .”

“Shut up! Shut up!” I screamed and went for him. Brad pulled me away and held me tight until I stopped crying. A year ago that would have been comfort enough. Now it was meaningless. All I could think of was a maze with us running to and fro and a great eye watching us from above.

Spring once more. I actually saw a bunch of daffodils in a worker’s flower shop across the street from the perimeter of our DA. I longed to run across the street and stand with my nose against the glass, warming my soul with their sunny colour. As I stood staring, two youths in red-and-gold motley appeared from the shadows, lounging against the grimy brickwork.

“Come on,” one of them called. “What are you afraid of? I’ll buy you a daff if you come over here.”

The other laughed raucously, and I saw a glint of steel in his belt. I turned and ran back to the safety of our home, with the brightness of the daffodils in my mind, forgetting all about the thread for which I was supposed to scrounge. I was weeping inside for the touch of a daffodil. A single daffodil.
I mourned for that image of spring and sunshine until another envelope appeared. Another invitation to Barton Oaks! Another chance to go through the door into a world, however unreal, where golden flowers bloomed so lavishly that it was hard not to trample on them as one walked. We had not been forgotten after all.

Joyfully I sank back into the familiar grey chair. I shut my eyes. Willingly I relaxed. And dreamed. I had never dreamed before. It had always been an instantaneous transfer. Afterwards, when it seemed important, I tried to remember the dream, but I never could. There were no visual images to hang onto. Only a sense of movement and pressure. Of time passing. How can one dream of time passing?

Then the dream was over. Before I even opened my eyes I knew that something had gone wrong.