

FORBIDDEN BOOKS

BOOK ONE OF THE FORBIDDEN SERIES

In the year 2116 CE, Earth is destroyed by a devastating tsunami. The survivors escape to the planet Kosna, where they build a new life — and start a new era: **AED** (After Earth Devastation).

Nearly a thousand years later, humanity lives under domes, scattered across eleven planets. Every move is controlled. Every rule must be obeyed. Individuality is forbidden.

On the planet Kosna, twelve-year-old Joset has never been good at following rules. She questions everything — even when it gets her into trouble. When Joset and her friend Hogan stumble upon a hidden settlement from the first colonists, they uncover something that was meant to stay buried: **books**.

Books that challenge everything they've ever been taught. Suddenly, Joset is pulled into a secret resistance movement known as Freedom. Hogan is left behind, trapped by a family secret he cannot escape. As the distance between them grows, so does the danger.

Because in a world built on control, the truth is the most dangerous thing of all. And when everything starts to fall apart, Joset is forced to ask herself one question:

Who can you trust?

Natalie F. Boekhorst was born and raised in the Netherlands. With a background in journalism, she has always loved words — but prefers to trade facts for fiction.

Her writing journey began while living abroad with her husband and children. Today, with her children grown, Natalie divides her time between the Netherlands and Spain, crafting novels that explore freedom, identity, and the power of knowledge.

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MAP OF KOSNAPOL



TIMELINE – HISTORY OF THE COLONIES

115 before AED * (2001 CE)	International group of scientists (known as so-honoured Heros) took measures for the	evacuation of mankind after its prediction of a disaster that would destroy the Earth.
86 before AED (2030 CE)	Discovery of a technique based on Seinniet, which meant that spaceships could voyage far outside the Earth's solar system within one day.	
85 before AED (2031 CE)	Discovery of the Hero solar system and the planet Kosna. The so-honoured Heros and	a team of academics decided to found a new colony here with their families. They called it Kosnapol.
25 before AED (2091 CE)	First volunteer colonists arrived on Kosna – men, women and children from all	population groups. Sy, the descendants of the so-honoured Heros, governed several colonies on Kosna.
10 before AED (2106 CE)	Colonies were set up on the planets Irnamo, Hisna, and Mna in the Hero solar system.	
0 AED (2116 CE)	As predicted – what started as a volcanic eruption on a small island off the coast of	Africa ended in the devastation of the Earth. A new era began.
301 AED	Discovery of the Sy solar system with the planets Shadigo, Kemder, Humini, Globob, Ekfee and Salu. Domed colonies arose on	these planets. Sy ruled from Kosnapol but on each planet a High Council became responsible for day-to-day affairs. People lived happily together and trade between planets flourished.
801 AED	SyLeon came to power as leader of Sy and things changed. He abused his power and the colonists suffered greatly.	
814 AED	Colonists couldn't take it any longer and started a revolution against SyLeon, Sy and their High Councils . The revolution was quashed. Many colonists, dubbed The Disobedient, were sent to the contaminated Earth (meanwhile renamed the Motherplanet) to help with clearing up	the contamination. The other colonists were brought together in domed colonies. All knowledge was entered into computers and books were, from that moment, forbidden. Sy moved its headquarters to the Motherplanet. It was the beginning of the dictatorship where Sy decided all the laws and the High Councils of each planet ensured those laws were obeyed, helped in their task by Assisters, Indicators and Guardians.
997 AED	This situation lasted until the year 997 AED, the time of the 12-year old Joset, colonist under the Kosnapol dome...	

*AED – After Earth Devastation

DISTURBANCE IN THE HERB GARDEN

JOSET WRIGGLED FROM SIDE TO SIDE ON HER CHAIR. ASSISTER Krib's history lessons were always boring, but today they were of absolutely no interest at all. If only it was tomorrow. She couldn't wait to get out to the warm water source. There in the water even her robot Jo couldn't follow her and she could really relax.

In her mind's eye she saw Jo nervously hovering along the water's edge, her oval head spinning around on its spindle and her antennae sticking out in the air. That image was replaced by one of a little tuft of red hair that had escaped from Krib's bun and persisted in waving around. Joset couldn't help it – she burst out laughing. She immediately began to cough, hoping no one would have noticed. But Krib's eyes settled on her.

'Miss Joset, should I send you to the sick room? If not, do not disturb my lesson.'

'Sorry for the disturbance, Assister Krib. It won't happen again.' Joset tried to look as innocent as possible and gave one final cough.

Krib looked at her thoughtfully through narrowed eyes, then turned abruptly and tapped on the end of her pointer. A text appeared in the air. Joset sunk down in her chair and gave a sigh of relief, glad to have got away with it.

A kick on her shin made her sit bolt upright. She looked

around angrily. Lorry shook her head and pulled a face. She knew that look from her friend – it meant 'Be careful or you'll be in trouble.'

Joset shrugged her shoulders and looked at the words hovering in the air. Could she help it if she suddenly started laughing? She felt another bubble of laughter coming up, but tried hard, and managed, to concentrate on the text and not on Krib's hair.

Krib pointed to the display. 'Call up document 9893 and read carefully about the discovery of the Hero solar system and the planet Kosna.'

Joset bent quickly over her own computer. Document 9893; yet another text about the Heros, even before the beginning of their system of counting the years. Before the Motherplanet was almost destroyed and humanity was saved by the Heros. How important was that – it was more than 1000 years ago? Who could be interested in that now? She couldn't help it, her thoughts kept drifting off. She was happy when the bell sounded and she could go to the sports hall. Her free day was getting closer and closer. Just some sports, an hour of homework class, a free hour, an hour weeding in the herb gardens, eat, sleep and then, finally, swimming in the morning.

She was turning off and closing up her computer when Lorry bent over closer to her.

'What's the matter with you today? You're lucky you didn't get sent to the punishment cell.'

Joset shuddered. The 3C was absolutely not where she wanted to be tomorrow.

'I couldn't help it. Did you see that tuft sticking out of Krib's bun? I was thinking of the warm water source and about Jo who hovers along the edge waving her antennae, and suddenly the

antennae became Krib's tuft of hair,' Joset protested.

Lorry grinned and rolled her eyes. 'Where do you get these ideas? And at completely the wrong time.'

Jorinde joined them as they were walking to the sports hall. 'Joset, what were you thinking of? Krib can't wait to give someone punishments, and you make her job much easier.'

'I've already said that, but it doesn't make any difference. You know Joset.' Lorry threw her arms despairingly into the air.

Joset sighed. They were right, of course, but she found it so difficult. She was fed up with sitting down indoors.

'I can't do anything about it. I can't think of anything except swimming. It's so good; you really must come with me sometime.'

Lorry pulled a face. 'No thank you. I'll just enjoy my hoverboarding.'

'What about you then Jorinde?'

'You know I can't swim and I don't intend to learn. Leave me alone with my personal games computer and the bubbletubs. That is water enough for me.'

'Fine, I'll swim on my own again tomorrow.'

'Well, first you've got to hoverboard with us in this sports lesson.'

Admittedly, hoverboarding was her second favourite sport and in the next hour Joset put a lot of her energy into it. She finished her work quickly during the homework class, which had a double advantage – the hour flew by and tomorrow she could spend all her time on nice things.

Half an hour later she was hoverboarding towards the herb gardens. She was much too early, but she didn't care. She was enjoying being outside the Big Building. Joset was smiling, thinking about Falea, her dormitory monitor, the way

she sucked her lips in whenever she was cross – and Falea sucked them in often, as she had again today. She had also frowned and looked meaningfully at the clock. Joset had just shrugged her shoulders and left the room.

The sun was low and shone through the glass of the dome that enclosed the town. Lights were reflected on the paths and Joset made a game out of dodging them. Her robot Jo grumbled as she hovered behind her.

'Miss Joset, you are not being very sensible. Miss Falea will report this to Assister Krib, and so must I. I don't understand you. Either you have a problem being on time, or you are much too early. Why can't you simply be on time, like the others?'

'Jo, shut up for once. It's so nice just to be here. Smell the different scents of the herbs. Isn't that better than the artificial smells in the Big Building?'

Disapprovingly, Jo spun her head round on its spindle. 'Miss Joset, I can see, hear and communicate at a distance, but smelling is not one of my functions.'

Joset laughed and patted Jo's head. 'I'm glad there's something you can't do.'

At the entrance to the herb garden she stepped off her hoverboard and looked carefully round the corner. The full-time work team was very busy over to her left. They didn't see her come in. Quietly she hovered to the little shed where the hoes were kept. She would begin at the back of the garden, by the lavender bed, where it always smelled so wonderful, especially when you brushed against the plants.

As she was walking to the bed furthest away, she saw something shining between the bushes. It was a curious, V-shaped ring. Joset almost dropped her hoe for the ring was not by itself, but sat on the finger of a young man with curly

black hair. He looked as if he had been living in the bushes for days. Twigs were sticking out of his hair and there were black smudges on his face and indoor work suit. He certainly didn't belong to the herb garden work team.

The man looked no less surprised than she did and quickly put his finger to his lips before diving deeper into the lavender bushes. A quick look at her robot told her that Jo had not noticed anything. The oval-shaped head was turned towards the herb garden entrance, the cute little antennae waving around as usual.

What was a dirty man doing hiding in the lavender bushes in the Kosnapol herb garden? She didn't get much time to think about it. Suddenly the peace was shattered by thirty or so Guardians running into the garden. Some of them quickly pushed the shocked work team into a huddle.

Jo hovered nervously to and fro. 'Miss Joset, hurry up. Something dreadful has happened. Just do what the Guardians want.'

Joset shot a quick look at the man and saw the panic in his eyes. Should she help him, if only to get the better of the Guardians? But maybe the man was really a Disobedient or had killed somebody.

Jo pushed her almost to the middle of the herb garden. Still thinking about the curious man, Joset walked over to the weeding team. Colonists were being captured like that more often now. When she was younger she hadn't ever thought about it. It just happened. Now she wanted to know why. She had asked once. That had earned her two days in the punishment cell. It was better not to get involved.

Suddenly she felt a strong hand grab her arm and drag her along. Her cries of protest were smothered by a hard slap in the face.

'Shut up, colonist! How dare you speak to me without

permission? What is your name?'

Her cheek was burning from the slap and she felt herself stiffen. He had just struck her! She dug her nails into the palm of her free hand. She would rather die on the spot than let him see that it hurt. To hide her rage, she looked down at the ground and answered quietly.

'Joset Mota's, honoured Guardian.'

'Joset Mota's, I shall report this opposition to the High Council.'

His pock-marked face was really close and his breath stunk of rotten leaves. Joset quickly strode over to the other colonists. Let him report it. Then she would tell that he had used violence without any warning. When you were sent to the 3C, the strikes of the cane that were always part of the punishment were horrible, but at least you knew what was going to happen. This slap was completely uncalled for!

There was a shout from the lavender bed and the Guardian let her arm go and ran over to join the fight that had broken out. Two Guardians kept an eye on the colonists while the rest ran to the spot where the man had been hiding.

However bravely he resisted, the unknown man was no match for such superior strength. Joset watched as the Guardians knocked him out with their stun guns and carried him off in handcuffs, leaving signs of the struggle in the soft earth of the lavender bed.

But before he had been handcuffed and taken away, the man had taken the opportunity to call something out to them. For a split second he had looked straight into Joset's eyes. She had no idea what the words meant, but later that evening in bed they echoed still inside her head. '*Colonists, do not allow yourselves to be oppressed. You have rights. Turn against the dominion of the High Council and Sy. Freedom for everyone!*'

THE PUNISHMENT CELL

'FREEDOM FOR EVERYONE' THE MAN HAD CALLED OUT YESTERDAY. Her only free day in the week would probably now be spent not in the warm water source but in the 3C. Joset looked out at the two Guardians talking to Falea in the relaxation room. By Sy! It couldn't be true. Not today!

Iorry came to stand beside her with a worried look on her face. 'Has their visit anything to do with you or are they Falea's new boyfriends?'

Despite the very strange feeling in her stomach, Joset smiled. 'I don't think the second option is very likely. Who wants Falea as a girlfriend? The first unfortunately seems likely. By Sy, I just want to be swimming now.' Joset rubbed her cheek gently.

'That Guardian from yesterday will certainly have given my name to the High Council, and maybe Falea and Jo have too because I went to the herb garden so early. You have to do everything just as Sy wants here. What a rotten planet.'

'Joset, calm down, they'll hear you.' A worried Jorinde cast a swift glance at Falea.

'So what! I have to go to the 3C, so one day more or less makes no difference.'

'Oh, I could never think like that,' Jorinde sighed.

Joset replied immediately: 'Do you know what that man called out yesterday? "Freedom for everyone." And if that

means a life without the 3C and nonsensical laws, then maybe I should have helped him escape.'

Now Iorry looked serious too. 'You mustn't talk so loudly. Next you'll be exiled to the Motherplanet as a Disobedient. You know, that contaminated planet where you get pustules. Do you want pustules?'

'I just want to go swimming,' Joset said quietly, shrugging her shoulders.

Joset watched Falea coming towards them through the sliding glass door, leaving the Guardians in the relaxation room. She came to stand right in front of Joset and clicked on a small machine in her hand. Joset read the lines projected in the air:

ACCUSATION

Accused

Joset Mota's

Charge

- 1. Left too early for duty hour*
- 2. Disobeyed both dormitory monitor and robot*
- 3. Resisted Guardian Roman van Wodin*

Date of disobedience

Fifth moontime, day 27 in the year 997 AED

Punishment

- 1. Five strikes of the cane on the hand*
- 2. Two days punishment cell*

Punishment to commence

Fifth moontime, day 28 in the year 997 AED

Now the pit of her stomach really sank. It seemed as if she was one of the Disobedient, whereas all she had done was go outside early and, according to the Guardian, not moved away quickly enough. She had absolutely not resisted anything. She clenched her fists.

‘Joset, do you agree with this accusation and this punishment?’ Falea’s voice sounded shrill in the otherwise silent dormitory.

Was there any point in arguing? The last time she had done so it had cost her another day in the 3C. She looked Falea straight in the eyes and nodded slowly. She would not forget the part played by her dormitory monitor in this. She saw that Falea, swallowing nervously, knew it too.

‘Then I must ask you to go with the Guardians who will take you to the 91st level.’

Joset put her towel back in her cupboard, activated Jo and walked through to the Guardians trying, above all, not to show how she felt.

The 91st level was the punishment section. The smell of disinfectant was stronger here than in the rest of the Big Building. And it looked as bad as it smelled. She was dreading being shut in the 3C, but first she had to hear the charge again and ‘receive’ (the Assisters’ words) her five strikes of the cane, as if that was something she had asked for.

While Jo waited in the corridor, Joset walked between the Guardians into a small room. How much worse could it get? At the table sat Krib. Of all the Assisters, she would have to be

the one on duty today. Joset winced thinking about the caning.

When Krib saw her, her mouth twisted into what passed for a smile. ‘Miss Joset, how strange it is that anyone of twelve should find themselves in this section again within a couple of moontimes. Is there an explanation for that, Joset Mota’s?’

Joset pressed her lips together. She certainly did have an explanation - Sy’s stupid rules- but she was wise enough not to say that out loud. She said nothing.

Krib narrowed her eyes. ‘Miss Joset, I am amazed that you have nothing to say this time. You usually give your opinion unasked. Have you finally realized that there is no point in opposing the rules? They are there to protect you and everyone else. Leaving your dormitory early is not allowed, unless instructed by the High Council for an approved task. But this was just for your usual daily task, wasn’t it? Imagine if everyone went everywhere just like that without permission. It would be chaotic. And your behaviour to the Guardian was completely wrong. How could you possibly think of trying to protect a Disobedient, to resist a Guardian and also to scratch his face?’

There was no longer a trace of the artificial smile on Krib’s face; her eyes were flashing and her lips were just a thin line. Joset clenched her fists again. She could no longer keep it in.

‘Krib, I protected no-one. And I didn’t resist at all, let alone scratch him. The Guardian hit me in the face – without a warning. I should have lodged a charge against him. And nobody suffers if I go outside a bit early. So I don’t understand why everyone is making so much fuss.’

‘First of all, it’s *Assister* Krib to you’. Krib banged hard on the table.

Too late Joset realized that her reaction was exactly what Krib wanted; a reason for more punishment. She bit her lip.

‘Not using correct terms of respect, answering back and even doubting a Guardian’s words? That earns you double the number of days in the punishment cell, Miss Joset.’

Phew, obviously it could get worse. Joset swallowed hard.

‘You are lucky. For a twelve- year old you are already at the maximum number of strikes of the cane. Although I think a few more might knock that resistance out of you. Maybe we should send you to the Motherplanet as a Disobedient next time. Far away from everything you know, on a planet where you have to work the whole day in the open air. Lovely contaminated air, and without the protection of a dome. Is that what you want?’

Joset shook her head and looked down at the floor. She felt tears burning behind her eyes and hoped that Krib couldn’t see them. It was all so unfair.

Everything went quiet; then she heard Krib’s voice.

‘Hold out your left hand with the palm upwards.’

Joset couldn’t look at Krib anymore; she just did as she was told. The caning was more painful than before but she was too proud to make any noise. But she could do nothing to stop the tears falling down over her cheeks.

When it was over, she turned around and followed the Guardians to the punishment cell. Jo hovered on behind waving her antennae and trying to get Joset’s attention. Joset ignored her and was glad when her robot was left behind in a special room and she didn’t have to listen to a never-ending commentary on disobedience.

The nurse smeared some ointment on her left hand and then left her alone in the cell. At last she could let her tears flow. It was all so unfair. She hadn’t done anything. She missed her friends and the noise they made. She rubbed her painful hand gently. Last time the pain had gone quickly but the scars

remained. How could she ever see Krib again without thinking about today? Why couldn’t she ever keep her mouth shut? Would it have made any difference? She had already been condemned. Why? She hadn’t hurt anybody, had she? If she had to have five strikes of the cane and four days in the 3C, what had happened to the Disobedient in the herb garden? And what had the High Council invented to make him a Disobedient?

Joset rubbed her eyes dry. She mustn’t think about it - that only made it worse. She looked around the room - the bare white walls, a toilet in one corner, a wash stand with a plastic beaker in the other corner and the decontamination cubicle in a niche on the longest wall. Well, she decided, she had to stay here for four days and then she would be a model colonist. She didn’t want to think about things such as the Disobedients, the Motherplanet, Krib and Sy’s laws. She just wanted to have fun with her friends and nothing else.

Carefully, she pulled two smuggled dice out of her indoorsuit. She managed to pass the time with her dice and her Counting game. She so wanted to be a model colonist, but with her own rules as far as possible.

THE WARM WATER SOURCE

AT LAST, HER FREE DAY IN THE WARM WATER SOURCE. SHE HAD been looking forward to this all week. The thought had given her hope in the 3C and strength during Krib's lessons. She hadn't drawn Krib's attention to herself, hadn't caused any trouble, had asked no questions and had got up at the second bell that morning. She had indeed been a model colonist these last few days. No-one was going to take this free day away from her. She threw her towel down on the ground and ran to the edge of the lake. Jo followed her chugging and groaning.

'Miss Joset, this is really no place for a robot. I don't understand why people want to get so close to the warm water. All that steam. You really go too far. What possesses you to want to go in the water?' The robot rolled her eyes and turned her head from side to side.

Joset tapped gently on one of Jo's antennae. 'Don't whine! Just stay here. I'll see you later.'

She stepped into the warm water and swam with strong strokes to the rocks at the end of the glass dome. She flipped over onto her back and floated. In this place, in this lake, life was great. She made small circles under the water with her hands and smiled. She wouldn't let Jo's complaining spoil her free day.

Joset looked up at the huge red ball of light above Kosnapol's

dome. One of the three moons was partially blocking their sun, making it look as if someone had taken a huge bite out of it. Over to the right she could see the flashing lights of a spaceship. If only she could secretly go to one of the other planets, how good that would be, far away from Kosna and all its senseless rules. Even on her free day she had to get up exactly when the second bell sounded. But she had done that this morning. Joset burst out laughing at the thought of the surprised look on her dormitory monitor's face. She had given Falea no reason to suck her lips in today.

Grinning, Joset watched the spaceship until she could no longer see it. Even if, as Lorry said, it was the same everywhere, at least on another planet there would be no Jo, no Falea and no Krib. But there would still be Guardians, she thought bitterly. In her mind she heard the unknown man's words again. What was "oppression" and what did 'freedom for everyone' mean? No 3C? That would be great, but that would never happen. Irritated she pushed a wisp of brown hair out of her eyes and turned over onto her front. There was no point in thinking about it, she couldn't change anything. The man had gone, she had survived her punishment in the 3C and today was her free day. She had better make the most of it.

She looked over to the hilly areas for her friends. She couldn't see Lorry, who was undoubtedly practising on her hoverboard somewhere. She could see Jorinde's blonde head in the grass. She was probably engrossed in one of her PGC games. It was a puzzle to her how Jorinde could spend the whole day doing that. Joset called out and waved to attract her attention, but only Jo reacted. The robot hovered nervously up and down along the edge, all five buttons on the ends of her antennae flashing. Joset imagined her lecturing again, but she didn't care. She turned

round, then swam further towards the huge rock and swam round it a couple of times.

Just as she was about to swim round again, a boy's head appeared sneezing above the water. The spatters flew into her face as he shook his blond curls. She knew this boy. Until his twelfth birthday he had lived with Ama Somala, just as she had herself. The boy spat water out of his mouth.

'Joset! What a good job it's you. I was scared stiff when I saw someone swimming above me. I'm not used to that.'

Joset laughed. She was happy to see him again. 'Hogan, what are you doing here?'

'Our dormitory's free day has been shifted to the seventh day.' Hogan looked carefully round about. 'Is it busy in the water on those days?'

'Absolutely not. I'm the only one who swims so far. The others stay at the edge or sit in the bubblepits by the source.'

'That's lucky.' Hogan seemed relieved and, floating, they exchanged all the latest news.

'Do you like being twelve and not living with Ama Somala anymore? Have you got used to the dormitory? I can still remember when I first moved in. Luckily I was grouped with Hollard, so I knew at least one person.'

Joset looked again at a passing spaceship in the air. 'I have been grouped with Jorinde and I have a nice new friend called Lorry. It's just a shame about the dorm monitor. She's a real dreadful Indicator.'

'What's your Indicator's name?'

'Falea, and you couldn't imagine a worse dorm monitor.'

'Falea?'

'Yes, do you know her?' Joset looked out of the corner of her eye at him, but he had turned his head away.

'I've heard of her.'

'Well, it's a good job she can't follow me here.' Joset smiled and flipped over onto her stomach. 'But where did you come from? I've been here a while and I didn't see you in the water?'

Hogan turned round to her and laughed mysteriously. 'Can you still keep a secret?'

Joset felt her heart beat faster. A secret? It was just like it used to be when they lived with their Ama.

'Course I can, what kind of secret?'

'Do you want to see it?'

'See what?'

Hogan gave a broad grin. 'That rock is hollow inside.'

'Hollow?' Joset looked disbelievingly at the enormous boulder covered with moss.

'Yes. Hollow. Do you want to see? Come with me around the back.'

Full of curiosity, Joset followed him. When they reached the back of the boulder, Hogan turned around.

'We have to swim under water. Can you hold your breath a long time?'

Joset shrugged her shoulders. 'I often swim under water for fun. I can count to sixty.'

'Forty is enough. You have to swim along the rocks to the bottom. There is an entrance there. Keep your eyes open and follow me.'

Before Joset could say anything, Hogan had disappeared. She looked round quickly. Could anyone see them? Somewhere in her mind she heard the words '*model colonist*'. Then she took a huge breath and dived after him.

THE HOLLOW ROCK

HOGAN'S VOICE ECHOED IN HER HEAD – 'THAT ROCK IS HOLLOW inside.' Joset only half believed him but really wanted to see if he was right. She could vaguely see him under the water. Just above the bottom Hogan pushed aside a clump of water plants. There was the hole. Joset swam through it as quickly as she could and immediately rose to the surface. Oxygen! She took deep breaths to fill her lungs with the priceless element and then looked around her. She felt as if she was in a moving dome. The water threw twisty-twirly silver shadows onto the walls of a circular cave, but despite the movement this place made her feel peaceful, almost safe, more almost than she could ever remember feeling. She could see that the grotto was small but high. The water seemed to disappear through the wall on the left. She felt that she was being pulled to that side by the current, so, treading water, she moved against the current and swam a bit to the right. Hogan rose up beside her.

'I said the rock was hollow, didn't I? What do you think of it? It's good, isn't it?'

'It certainly is. But how come we can breathe? Is there an opening to the outside somewhere?'

Hogan pointed to the disappearing water. 'This is just the beginning of a subterranean tunnel which comes out in a beautiful grotto. There are probably air holes on the way,

because sometimes I feel warm air.'

'Have you been further than here then?' Joset wondered.

Hogan nodded. 'We have to go under water another bit here; then it gets easier.'

'Easier?' Asked Joset, but Hogan had already gone. Joset looked at the left hand wall. How far was "another bit"? She didn't want to have to hold her breath again without knowing how long she had to do it for. She hesitated briefly and then dived down after him.

She found she could surface again just after the entrance. She came up in a low tunnel. If she stretched her arm out, she could touch its ceiling. It was darker than in the small cave.

'Hogan?' She couldn't see anything but she heard a scraping sound coming from a little further along, just after a sharp bend to the right. Joset let the current take her. The water felt colder here and she gave an involuntary shiver. Suddenly a clear light lit up the walls of the long, round tunnel. Hogan stood bent down on a wide ledge with a torch in his hand and ...

'What is that?' Joset stared in amazement at a sort of wooden shelf bobbing about near the edge. It had the familiar oval shape of spaceships but without the cockpit section. Strangely, it didn't hover, but floated.

'This is a floatingship. That's what I call it anyway. I made it myself. And these things,' Hogan held two flat bundles of sticks in his hand with flattened-out wider ends, 'with these things we can travel against the current.'

'How did you get all this stuff here?' asked Joset in disbelief as she climbed up the side.

'Just by swimming here and back lots of times with sticks. The stems of the water plants are strong enough to bind all the sticks together. I've travelled through the tunnel to the grotto I

told you about and back, only then we have to move against the current.'

'And the light?'

'That took a bit longer. I smuggled it out of the classroom. You should have seen Krib's face when she found out the torch had gone missing. She couldn't believe that it wasn't in its place, where she had left it the previous day. She was furious. She even reported it to the High Council.'

Joset could imagine exactly the face her hated teacher had pulled. She had seen it only recently, just before she had gone into the 3C. She rubbed her left hand gently where the weals were still visible.

'Just be thankful she didn't catch you. That would certainly have earned you a month in the 3C and the maximum number of strikes of the cane.'

'The 3C?'

'My name for the punishment cell – a Cold, Claustrophobic Cage!'

Hogan laughed and the sound of his laughter echoed through the tunnel.

'Shhh!' The sound escaped unbidden from Joset's mouth. Suppose someone caught them? She pushed a lock of brown hair back nervously, brushing against the birth mark behind her left ear.

'Relax,' Hogan assured her. 'No-one can hear us; the tunnel runs along the outside edge of the dome.' Now he really had her attention.

'Outside the dome? How do you know?'

Hogan laughed mysteriously and pointed to the floatingship. 'Come with me.'

Joset looked doubtfully at the huge thing.

As if he could read her thoughts, Hogan answered 'The only way to find out if it will hold us both is to climb on it.'

They pulled the floatingship towards the ledge and, very carefully, crawled on to it, one after the other.

'Here Joset, take the torch. If you go and sit up front, I'll steer with the bunches of sticks. Careful! Don't wobble. Yes, good. It's really well-made, even if I say it myself.'

'Maybe it is, but it feels very shaky.'

Joset crouched down on her knees and held on tightly to the side with her left hand. With her right hand she held the torch, shining the light over the water in front of them. She tried to keep her balance – it wasn't quite the same as on a hoverboard! Behind her Hogan sat with his legs crossed, steering with the stick bundles so that they didn't hit the sides. Now and again she felt his elbow against her back. The current took the floatingship on, further away from the little cave. She looked behind her, but there was only darkness. She was suddenly very happy to have the torch in her hand that lit up the way in front of them.

After a little while she started to be able to pick different things out in the dark. She wondered if it was her imagination or had their surroundings really changed? The tunnel walls were rougher than before and the silver reflections seemed to be replaced by other colours. The tunnel seemed wider here and the current weaker. She said as much to Hogan.

'That's right,' the boy answered, 'we are almost at the grotto I told you about. Just one more bend.'

Joset could feel a change in temperature now. A stream of warm air stroked her skin, almost like the warm water source outside. The light level increased quickly so that she almost no longer needed the torch. Joset started breathing faster and felt

an excited tickle in her stomach. There was the bend.

A gasp of surprise and pleasure escaped her lips. From the walls and ceiling of a high, wide grotto areas of transparent rock shone out red, yellow, green, purple, blue and white. Their reflections in the water and the torchlight all together created a wonderful, twinkling, colourful spectacle. Joset felt she was part of those colours.

‘Hogan, this is beautiful,’ she whispered.

‘Good, eh? Hogan whispered back, while he steered the raft to a ledge on the opposite side.

Joset turned the torch off, put it on the ledge and stepped carefully off the floatingship. The ground felt rough under her bare feet. She walked over to the wall and ran her fingers over the surface of a purple-white stone. It was sharp and she pulled her hand back rapidly.

‘I’ve kept the biggest surprise till last,’ said Hogan softly.

Joset looked at him. Even more surprises?

Hogan seemed more excited than ever. He took her arm and led her to some rocks to the left of the ledge. To her amazement Joset saw a cleft just above her head, just big enough for them to squeeze through. And that was precisely what Hogan had in mind. She saw that he had brought the torch over with him and she watched as he climbed carefully up, holding on to pieces of rock jutting out. Then he disappeared into the crevice.

‘What are you waiting for?’ His voice called through the opening.

Where had he brought her? Joset could hardly believe that this wasn’t just a dream, but really happening. Quickly she climbed up after him. Another tunnel? She felt warm air on her bare skin and crept after Hogan. The ground made her knees and left hand sore. She tried to move on one hand and her feet

but it didn’t work. The tunnel sloped upwards and the higher they climbed, the lighter it became. Hogan turned the torch off. Joset felt lightheaded and found it was difficult to breathe. All that climbing took a lot of her strength and she asked herself how long this would go on. Suddenly, not looking where she was going, she bumped into Hogan. Behind him she saw an opening and... red light.

Hogan moved a little to the side and there was just enough room to stand next to each other. The feeling of light-headedness was stronger here, as if she was standing on her hoverboard. But there were no hoverboards here and no people to use them, only a hilly landscape with fantastic, oddly shaped rocks. But the strangest of all was the light. Joset had to narrow her eyes to bear it. The red light from the sun cast a red glow over everything, and there was no dome here to filter the light. The dome! Where was the dome?



To be continued.....

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