

Azlexia Starr: Escape to the Badlands

by

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Prologue: The Experiment

“I will go.” The leader of the Sage Council stood up and faced the auditorium. “It is only right.”

A murmur of surprise and shock reverberated around the chilly room.

Romff, the Chancellor, cleared his throat and the din quieted. “My dear Pax, you are Portalia’s monarch. The planet needs you, especially in these troubled times. We cannot possibly let you go. A somewhat ... lesser member of the Council should conduct the experiment.”

The men and women nodded and muttered in agreement.

Pax’s clear voice rang out above the murmuring. “We are all equals on Portalia. If I, as its chosen leader, cannot set an example, then who can? Other experiments to fight the malaise have failed. My family must take responsibility for those. So, now it is up to I to try this one last experiment and save Portalia.”

Romff stood and gestured to the Council. “I think I speak for everyone here when I say that the Council, indeed Portalians, do not blame you for the failure of the other experiments, the malaise, or,” he paused and looked around at the expectant faces, “the Hoods.” He sat and folded his hands.

“That is very kind,” Pax said in a gentler voice. “Nevertheless, Portalia is my responsibility. And it is my duty to each Portalian to do everything I can to find

an answer. I will go to Earth. I will make contact with our allies and conduct the experiment. It will be a success. Portalia will be saved.”

“What about the sickness?” a Councillor yelled from the back. “Portalians cannot survive on Earth.”

The Council erupted into tumultuous chatter.

Pax held up her hands, but several moments passed before the auditorium became quiet enough for her to continue. Romff leaned over and whispered to a colleague, who immediately hurried from the chamber.

“The Master Alchemist assures me a cure is imminent,” Pax said finally. “We know that I will have at least several years on Earth, enough time to get the experiment underway. You will bring the cure as soon as it is perfected. We can use it to bargain.”

“And if we fail in finding the cure?”

“Then the experiment will have to follow its natural course. There will be no turning back.”

Before the Council could explode at this latest dialogue, Romff stood with outstretched hands. “I think our dear leader has made up her mind and will not be dissuaded. And I think she is right. She is the one who should go. In that light, I make two proposals: first, she take a trusted companion. If in the terrible event something happens to her, there will be another to conduct the experiment. And second, she take the key, so it does not fall into ... the wrong hands.”

“Very wise proposals,” Pax quickly said, while the Councilors paused and digested this new information. “I will take Io Kelly, he is my most trusted friend

and confidant. And the key will be safe with me. It will return to Portalia when the experiment is proven a success.”

“Here is the key now,” Romff said, as the companion he had dispatched earlier re-entered the auditorium. Councilors strained forward, trying to catch a glimpse of the secret and revered object. He handed the small shape to Pax, who looked at it briefly before quickly pocketing it.

“It will guide your way,” Romff said gently.

“Yes,” agreed Pax. “And the experiment’s.”

Chapter 1: The Skateboard Race

Wanted, with a price on her head, Azlexia Starr ran until she thought her chest was going to explode. She stumbled to a halt and sat panting under a burned bloodwood tree, not believing this new mess she was in. There was no food. No water, except for the bubbling mud bogs, and only an idiot would drink from those. It was stinking hot—one hundred degrees, at least—and she was so thirsty. She was going to die if she stayed out here in the Badlands and in the most horrible way. She wanted to give up, but the thought of her stepfather telling the world she had set fire to their house and tried to kill him made her madder than a cut snake. How could he say that when she had saved him? Why wasn’t he begging her forgiveness and pleading for her to come home, instead of forcing her to flee into this dreaded place?

The sound of scattering rocks echoed through the canyon. Azlexia jolted upright and ducked behind the tree. In the distance, a one-humped camel

casually picked its way along the canyon floor, swaying from the burden on its back. Squinting into the sun, Azlexia saw the camel carried that bounty hunter, Bluey, from the roadhouse. Sacks of supplies perched behind him. With renewed vigor, Azlexia grabbed her skateboard and jogged off in the opposite direction. After all she'd been through, she wasn't going to get caught now.

Despite Azlexia's steady pace, the bounty hunter gained on her. She sprinted to a rocky outcrop and scuttled underneath the boulders. Long shadows stretched across the canyon. If she could last until nightfall, maybe she could dodge him.

A mosquito buzzed around her head and Azlexia slapped at it. Hang on, mosquitoes hung around water! She scrambled along a narrow path that wound under the rocks and soon the dirt underfoot gave way to scraggly grass. A small black puddle glistened in a shaft of light. Azlexia began to shout with joy, but quickly hushed herself. She lay on her stomach, thrust her face into the water, and drank without taking a breath. Then a horrible thought made her cough and splutter. What if the water was poisonous?

Azlexia spat and wiped her mouth. Did she feel different? Should she stick her fingers down her throat and make herself sick? Just as she convinced herself she probably wasn't going to die an agonizing death, something hairy touched her arm. She jumped and braced herself to face this new terror. Her eyes narrowed. Instead of some great growling monster, a tiny kangaroo rat nudged her as if pushing her out of its way.

Leaning aside, Azlexia watched the rodent daintily slurp at the puddle.

With overwhelming relief, she realized the animal wouldn't be drinking the water if it was deadly. Soon, another kangaroo rat appeared, and then another. Azlexia momentarily forgot her woes and watched the furry creatures chatter and drink as if they were having their usual evening tea party. They didn't seem to mind her there; in fact they found her rather useful as one stretched out and used Azlexia's skateboard as a backrest.

The cave-like overhang was almost dark from the vanishing day. Hoping that the bounty hunter had thought she'd kept going, Azlexia decided to stay put for the night. Her tummy rumbled and she longingly thought of the eggs she'd had for breakfast at the roadhouse. Was there anything to eat in the Badlands? The only food was probably these little fur-balls snoring next to her—or even herself!

With these grim thoughts, she tried to get comfortable for the night. She slept fitfully as every noise woke with her with a start and a pounding heart. Dreams of bounty hunters and fiery houses plagued her until she finally fell into heavy, burdened sleep.

In the morning, Azlexia shivered from the early damp. Mosquito bites covered her hands. The creatures had all gone and the water tasted salty and grimy. Crawling out from under the overhang, she stretched in the bright daylight and rubbed her eyes which felt gritty from sand and bad sleep.

A delicious tang of smoke and melting butter tugged at Azlexia's hunger. Carefully, but ready to run like all get out, she scrambled up a pile of rocks,

peered over the edge, and saw the bounty hunter crouched next to a small fire. In one hand he cradled a steaming mug of tea while with the other he deftly poked a fork at several sausages sizzling in a cast-iron skillet. Six feet away, the camel half-heartedly bit at a leafless tree to which it was tied. It stamped its back foot and ineffectively swished its ropy tail against a cloud of flies.

Azlexia's mouth watered and her stomach grumbled. Carefully, she backed down the outcrop and hid in a small space underneath two rocks, close enough for her to hear the bounty hunter's movements. The smell of the food made her head swim, but she stayed still. She listened enviously to Bluey munching away followed by several satisfied belches. Then she heard him clearing away his camp.

"C'mon Hubcap, git down," Bluey growled, presumably at the camel who let out a low squeal. "I said GIT DOWN."

Azlexia crept out of her hiding spot and crawled up the rocks until she could just see into the clearing. She smiled faintly at the sight of the bounty hunter furiously yanking on the camel's halter, but getting no response whatsoever from the indifferent dromedary. Ignoring him, the camel continued to chew its cud and stare across the canyon as if it was daydreaming.

"Blasted, no good, worthless, dipstick of an animal," Bluey blustered, his hair falling in his eyes. "I should've sold you t' that bloke who wanted t' eat your feet."

After a lot more tugging and cursing, Hubcap finally sank to his knees and Bluey climbed aboard the large leather saddle strapped to its hump. Awkwardly,

the camel heaved itself to its feet and, coaxed by much grumbling and cursing from Bluey, moved off towards the mountains.

When the unlikely pair were at a safe distance, Azlexia began following them, deciding it was probably better to keep the bounty hunter in front of her where she could keep an eye on him. Perhaps he would lead her to another roadhouse where she could sneak onto another truck and be gone from this horrible place?

The day grew hot as Azlexia trailed Bluey and Hubcap, now pin-dots against the distant heat haze. She folded her jacket into a makeshift turban and wore it on her head for some protection. Despite holding her skateboard over her eyes like a visor, flies buzzed around her mouth and up her nose with relentless vigor.

Hunger gnawed at her stomach like an army of ants and she wondered if she started seeing mirages, would they involve ice cream and soda? Knowing her luck, she'd probably imagine a plateful of zucchinis.

Ignoring her nagging appetite, Azlexia tried recalling the little she knew about the Badlands in case it may help her. It was the largest uncharted area in the country and no one went there if they could help it. Volcanoes had recently appeared, rupturing the surface with boiling mud pots and geysers. Lava had been spotted spewing from some of the more remote mountaintops.

Any water that didn't evaporate was usually poisonous. Everyone knew the story of Lurk and Dills, two explorers who ventured into the Badlands in search of a lost civilization. They returned, burned to a crisp, poisoned from bad

water, and raving lunatics. Normally fearless, non-superstitious people said that Lurk and Dills had run into bunyips, the worst kind of demons you could ever meet. Over the years, the myths and legends grew until the Badlands were evoked every time a child did something naughty: “Stop that, or I’ll send you to the Badlands.” Kids behaved immediately.

How on earth did I end up in the world’s most dreaded place? Azlexia asked herself, as the evil hiss of a gushing geyser made her heart stop. It had been a bizarre chain of events that had led her here. When had it begun? Was it when she’d started hearing the voices in her head? Or when her classmates had been going on and on about those two missing kids? Or the strange visit from her mother when Azlexia was in hospital? Maybe, but thinking about her mum made her eyes prickle, so she quickly swallowed that memory.

Really, she thought, it started that day I got into trouble over the skateboard race.

She’d been on her skateboard dawdling her way to school, as usual. Well, how unfair was it that she had to spend the summer holidays stuck in a stinking-hot classroom while everyone else got to pop ollies at Pomonia’s new skate park? They could all go watch movies in air conditioning, or climb the lookout that towered above the Über Pit, the country’s largest goldmine, but no, not her. She had to go to summer school, even though she got good grades and did her homework. Mostly.

“Don’t think you’re gonna sit around here gettin’ under my feet,” her stepfather had snarled when she’d asked why she had to go to school in the

holidays. With her mother in hospital, there was no one to disagree with him.

But that day her mother was coming home, and everything would be okay.

As Azlexia had skated through the school gate, another skateboard whizzed past at high speed, almost knocking her over. Steve Cannon turned and laughed. The chip in his front tooth resembled a black stain.

“Race you,” he shouted, scattering several students as he pushed between them and tapped the nose of his board on the ground to jump a pothole.

“You’re on, Cannon,” Azlexia yelled, as she pushed off with her front foot and neatly fishtailed past the same students.

She leaped the hole, grabbed the tail of her board before landing, then crouched low to gather speed. Steve was just ahead of her now. She pushed again, ducked around him, and carved to a halt in front of the school door with a flourish.

Steve swerved and skidded, deliberately colliding into her and pushing her off balance. They tumbled backwards through the open doorway and slid short of two sensible shoes planted squarely on the floor. Azlexia stopped laughing as she untangled herself and stood up in front of their teacher, Miss Henderson, who gripped her hips as if she were holding them up.

“Detention after school, both of you,” Miss Henderson barked, her face red and squashy like an overripe tomato. “And leave those contraptions at my desk. You’re not to ride them at school anymore.”

She turned to go, but Azlexia cleared her throat.

“Miss..?” Azlexia faltered. “I have to leave at lunch. My dad said so.”

Azlexia rummaged in her jeans pocket for the crumpled note her stepfather had thrust at her that morning and handed it to the short, dumpy teacher. She snatched the note from Azlexia, frowned, and held it up to the light as if it was a fake five-dollar bill.

“Very well,” Miss Henderson snapped. “Pick up papers at recess. Both of you.” She turned on her low heels and marched off down the corridor.

Azlexia gently punched Steve’s arm. “Good one, Cannon.”

He smiled his toothy grin. “That’s what you get for beating me.”

As they sauntered back out to the schoolyard, Steve plucked two Cherry Ripe chocolate bars from his pocket and gave one to Azlexia.

“Thanks,” she said, tearing off the red wrapping.

“Did you see that Nollie I did?” Steve asked, biting into his Cherry Ripe.

“Uh huh,” Azlexia mumbled, her own mouth full of chocolate.

Steve grinned manically. He always had loads of candy. Azlexia supposed it was because his dad was a rich lawyer and gave him pocket money. Even though he rode fairly ordinary, Steve dressed like a skater pro in Volcom shorts and Etnies shoes. For Christmas, he’d gotten brand new wheels and trucks for his deck.

“But I still can’t ride mongo foot like you. How do you do that?” he asked.

“I dunno. It just seems more natural to push with my front foot.” Azlexia leaned against the entrance railings, savoring the last bits of chocolate.

He nodded. “Hey, are you gonna come and try the half pipe tonight? They’ve finally put the new lights up.”

“Nah, there’s a big meteor shower starting. I’m gonna watch that.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “You’re such a dag, Az.”

Azlexia watched kids bustle past and enter the school. She didn’t add that she hoped her mother would be able to watch it with her.

A prim voice screeched behind them as a clump of girls entered the school. “My dad reckons that if a strange man took that baby, there’d have to be another car, and the police didn’t find another car. My dad reckons that no one in their right mind would go into the Badlands, anyway.” Sharon Spool halted in front of Azlexia and Steve and folded her arms as if daring anyone around her to disagree.

“Ugh, Sharon Spool and the Spooling Droolers,” Steve muttered loudly.

“Unless they’re up to no good,” Sharon snapped. “Just like you probably are, Steven Cannon and Azlexia Starr, or should I say, Lex-the-Hex.”

The Spooling Droolers giggled nervously behind their cupped hands.

Sharon smirked as she glanced bravely at her friends. “Honestly Stevo, what *would* your parents say about the people you hang out with?”

Azlexia fixed Sharon with a hostile stare. Sharon quickly looked away. Her gang took one step backwards as if their legs were all tied together for a three-legged race.

“I s’pose *you* believe the parents’ story that a strange man stole their baby?” sputtered Sharon’s best friend, Elizabeth Smith. “And their other kid chased him into the middle of the outback, in the dead of night and disappeared as well? How stupid is that?” Elizabeth tossed her hair.

The other girls nodded like puppets.

“Just as stupid as you, Az-lex-ia,” snarled Sharon. “Isn’t that right girls?” She looked around at her friends who continued nodding.

Azlexia clenched her fists. The familiar feeling of heat and energy welled up inside her. Stepping forward, she eyed Sharon steadily.

“I bet you—” Sharon stopped mid-sentence, as her head seemed to unwillingly swivel to meet Azlexia’s glare. Sharon gasped.

Azlexia’s eyes darkened to a deep sea-green colour and the fat black circles that ringed her irises wriggled like angry snakes. Energy shimmered in front of her face like heat waves.

Sharon winced. “She’s doing that, that, squirly eye thing. Quick, get away!”

As the girls stampeded indoors, screaming with their arms stuck in the air, Steve began to laugh but stopped when he looked at Azlexia.

“Wish I had that trick,” he murmured.

Azlexia frowned. “I don’t—”

“You two, inside. NOW!” barked Miss Henderson. Despite her size, their teacher loomed menacingly, prompting Steve and Azlexia to scramble to class.

As the morning wore on, the blistering heat made the students dull and sluggish. While they recited their twelve-times tables, Miss Henderson banged her ruler in time on the blackboard, as if the racket would turn the kids into math wizards. Azlexia sat in the back trying not to fidget. Her knuckles were familiar with the sting of that ruler, and Miss Henderson needed little excuse to deliver a

reminder.

At recess, Azlexia wandered around the schoolyard picking up empty chip bags and popsicle wrappers and stuffing them into a plastic bag. Miss Henderson sat in the one shady spot by the school entrance to screech at Steve whenever he ducked behind a bin or tried to disappear out the school gate.

As Azlexia bent over, Sharon and the Droolers ran around her in a circle and chanted their made-up version of *Ring a Ring O' Roses*: “Dis-a Dis-a-lexia, picking up papers, it’s you, it’s you, we all hate now.”

Azlexia glared at them, her eyes flashing dangerously. Shrieking, the girls charged onto the oval where several boys were playing footy. Sam Schnit, annoyed at having his perfect shot at goal ruined, dropkicked the ball squarely at Elizabeth’s stomach and sent her flying backwards into the dirt.

Minutes before the bell, Azlexia dashed to the girl’s bathroom to splash herself with cold water. She looked in the mirror at her pale face framed by tangled dark hair. Azlexia didn’t consider herself pretty, but at least she wasn’t ugly like Sharon Spool whose eyes bulged too big for her face. Although Azlexia thought her eyes were her best feature—the way they sparkled like glossy green marbles—she couldn’t explain why people ran screaming whenever she looked at them with *that feeling*. It wasn’t a trick; she didn’t do it on purpose. But sure enough, after she’d been called Lex-the-hex, Azlick, Azhead, or some other stupid name, she’d get *the feeling* and something terrible happened because the next thing she knew, everyone was running to their mothers.

She’d tried catching herself in the hallway mirror at home to see what kind

of monster she became, but nothing had happened. All she'd got was a glimpse of her eyes dancing merrily and a slap on the head from her step dad for preening about like an emu at a garden party.

Hurrying back to class, Azlexia quickly pushed away all thoughts about her "squirly eye thing." Her mum was due home and Azlexia reckoned that not Sharon, not Miss Henderson, not even her stepfather could spoil that.

Chapter 2: Stars in the Night

Azlexia squinted at Bluey in the distance. He had stopped again, undoubtedly to have lunch. She considered going and asking him if he would share it with her, but she knew he'd just capture her and return her to Pomonia. She was so hungry, she could even eat her step dad's pigs-feet stew. As she hunkered down between two rocks waiting for Bluey to finish, she remembered she had cooked it that day her mum had come home, right after leaving school.

When the lunch bell had rung, Azlexia had grabbed her skateboard from Miss Henderson's desk and zoomed to the shops to buy a kilo of pigs feet. The butcher, Mr Belly, threw up his hands and in a heavy Greek accent said, "All this beautiful cuts of steak and you want the porker feet. It is a crime, Meez Starr, a crime."

Winking, he added several pigs ears to the feet, deftly wrapped up the paper, and handed the package to Azlexia. She gave him a dollar and turned to leave.

"Wait, Meez Starr." Mr Belly leaned over the counter. "For you an' your

lovely mother, ‘alf price.” As he handed her fifty-cents change, his eyes twinkled underneath the thick black eyebrow that began on one side of his forehead and ended at the other.

After stewing the pigs feet for Mr Starr’s lunch, Azlexia raced around with a cloth readying the house for her mother’s homecoming. Her stepfather opened a can of beer, sunk into the sofa, and switched on the TV. He flicked through the channels until he found his favorite show, *Sheep Dog Trials From The Dales*. At about half-past three, he got up, swayed slightly as he scratched, and announced that he was off to the hospital.

“Don’tchoo mess this house up,” he yelled. “I’ve worked hard t’ get it clean.” He banged the fly-screen door as he left.

Azlexia finished making her mother’s bed and checked that the few rooms in the tiny cottage were as tidy as could be (except her step dad’s room, she never went in there). Satisfied, she settled on the front step to wait. Much later, when the sky was bathed in soft purple and the houses across the street were lost in shadow, a taxi pulled up. Her step dad emerged and wobbled onto the sidewalk. Slowly, her mother followed, leaning hard against Mr Starr who teetered unsteadily. Azlexia gulped at the sight of her mother’s bald head and jumped up to help.

Mr Starr waved her away. “Get back,” he slurred, struggling to keep both himself and Mrs Starr upright. “There’s bin complicashons. Had t’ wait f’r ages.”

Azlexia stood aside as her mother hobbled up the steps, into the house, and to her room. Azlexia hung about the bedroom door as her step dad tried to

shoo her away.

“Is that Az?” a voice wavered from within the gloom. “Come sit beside me.”

Mr Starr glared at Azlexia, his squinty eyes almost disappearing into his tight face. “Oh, aw right,” he snarled, then hiccupped. “Go’n in. But only f’r a minute. An’ watch it if I have to come in there ‘coz a your nonsense.”

She ducked under his arm slung across the doorway and rushed into her mother’s room. Kneeling by the bed, Azlexia peered eagerly at the small figure lying still under the bedclothes. The room was unbearably hot and stuffy.

“Did they make you better this time?” Azlexia asked. “Shall I open the window? Can you get up?”

Mrs Starr laid her bony hand on Azlexia’s head. “Maybe soon, love. When I’m not feeling so tired.” She ran her fingers through Azlexia’s mop of hair. “Your hair is getting so long,” she said gently. “Perhaps you could brush it and make it nice?”

“Aw, mum,” Azlexia began, then stopped herself. “If you want me to.” She crossed her legs and forced herself to smile. They sat in silence for a while.

“Dad says you’ve signed up for summer school?” Her mother spoke slowly, as if she was having trouble catching her breath.

Azlexia swallowed and bit her lip.

“Never mind, Az. I’m sure it’s better than hanging around here all day.”

Azlexia nodded with a tight smile.

“I know it’s hard to believe sometimes, but he does love us very much.”

She stroked Azlexia's hair. "Has the meteor shower started? Are you going to watch it?"

"I wanted to see you first," Azlexia said in a small voice. "I thought we could watch it together."

Mrs Starr nodded vaguely, "Oh, I've seen many. It's a Multiple Pleiades Major, one of the largest of its kind. Perfect cover...it must be soon." She gazed at Azlexia with eyes the same sea-green colour. They sparkled brightly, despite the tiredness on her face. "Off you go Az, and watch the shooting stars. Let me know how many you see. When one hundred have fallen, it will be time."

Mrs Starr closed her eyes before Azlexia could ask her time for what. As Azlexia got up, a sudden loud noise clanged inside her head. She looked around to see if her mother had heard it, but she lay still. Another bang made Azlexia clutch her ears. She dashed from the room, scared she would start shrieking like Sharon and the Droolers.

Azlexia crouched on her bed, concentrating hard on jotting down the number of stars she saw streaking through the sky, but the noise in her head persisted until it became a constant buzzing. Every so often, a loud bang almost knocked her senseless. She poked at her skull. Nothing she did, not even sticking her fingers in both ears and holding her breath, made it go away.

Next door in the lounge room, news headlines blared from the television, so Azlexia tried listening to those instead. "Missing children still not found," boomed a man's voice, the news jingle shrilling urgently. "BOSI called in." The jingle swelled. "Meteor shower begins tonight."

As Azlexia watched a halo of fire shoot across the sky, the dull whirr inside her head screeched like a skidding truck and she gripped her ears as if in intense pain. The high-pitched whistle made her feel as if her brain was being twisted inside out. She shook and slapped her head. Gradually the noise faded, leaving her hot, sweaty, cold, and shivering all at the same time. As she reached for the sheet to wipe her face, Azlexia noticed with alarm the change to the birthmark under her upper right arm. Its round shape was familiar enough. It didn't *feel* any different. Even the weird pattern that wound inside the circle was the same. What made Azlexia's heart jump was the way her birthmark glowed a deep orange-red color, as if it was lit from beneath her skin. It had never done this before.

Panicking, she leaped from the bed and ran into the hallway.

Realising her step dad would have a fit if he caught her messing about when she was meant to be in bed, Azlexia stopped dead at the lounge room door. She waited for him to rise from the sofa and roar at her, but he merely popped open a beer and grunted as the news anchor launched into the story that had been gripping the nation for days. Azlexia ignored the banging inside her head and crouched down to watch the TV.

“The Bureau of Suspicious Investigation is now looking into the case of the two children who went missing in the Badlands a week ago. Adelle Rutner has this report.”

A sweaty-looking woman dressed in a lime-green suit and high heels smiled into their living room. “I'm standing at the remote spot in the Badlands where, last week on a moonless night, Jill and Stan Spacer claim they stopped

after a stranger appeared by the side of the road and waved them down. The man told the couple he was lost, and after they got out of their car, he snatched their baby from Mrs Spacer's arms and took off. The man was then chased into the bush by the Spacers' eight-year-old son, Nathan, but he, too, disappeared. Mr Spacer says he followed the man and his two sons, but claims the night was so dark, he couldn't see and was forced to give up."

The camera panned across a bleak landscape of dry scrub and distant craggy mountains. Adelle gingerly picked her way through stones and red dirt. "As you can see, this is a pretty harsh place for anyone to travel, let alone with young children. Why were the Spacers in the country's most feared region in the first place? When they couldn't give any adequate answers, police began to doubt their story."

Adelle's voice continued over a series of images: police combing through the crime scene; four-trailer roadtrains rumbling past; the tight-lipped Spacers being escorted up the steps of police headquarters. "Even though no charges have been filed, The Bureau of Suspicious Investigation, or BOSI, has been called in to question the couple. BOSI want to know what made the Spacers take such a risky trip with a newborn, and if there was a strange man on the side of the road, how did he get there? Traces of other vehicles or persons in the area, have yet to be found."

Adelle appeared onscreen again. "Meanwhile, the hunt for the missing children continues, but the terrible conditions aren't helping police efforts. Temperatures soar past one hundred degrees here and there is very little water.

And the dangerous volcanic area to the west—the direction, the Spacers say, the man was headed—makes this place almost impossible to survive. This is Adelle Rutner reporting from the Badlands.”

The news anchor looked pained, but was immediately replaced by a commercial about breakfast cereal that would “Start your day with Zing!” Azlexia’s step dad snorted and punched at the remote control. The happy breakfasters disappeared into a small dot.

“Drongos, the lot o’ them.” Mr Starr muttered. “They’ve got no idea.”

Azlexia tiptoed to her room. She felt sorry for those poor kids lost in the Badlands. Despite everything, at least she was home—and safe.

Chapter 3: The Voice in the Mirror

The crack of a mudpot shooting into the sky reminded Azlexia with horrible clarity that she was a fugitive in the Badlands, not safe at home eating breakfast.

She licked her burned lips, trying to summons some spit, but her mouth was dry. She was unbelievably thirsty. Even a drink of the gritty water from last night’s mudhole would do. The sun blazed overhead and the whole landscape shimmered like a blurry movie. Bluey had moved off again, leading the camel by its halter as he peered at the ground. Azlexia wondered if he was looking for her tracks. *All’s you have to do is turn around and look behind you*, she thought with a chuckle. *Or maybe you’re looking for aliens! Like the ones that guy on the radio was going on about the day after the noises started in my head.*

She thought back to that morning. She had been bustling about the

kitchen making her breakfast of stale corn flakes and tap water while a crazy-sounding man on the radio insisted the missing kids had been taken by aliens.

“They came with that meteor shower,” he’d shouted.

Azlexia had quickly turned off the radio when she heard her step dad shuffling down the hall. He usually woke up with a headache and didn’t like any noise in the morning.

Mr Starr slouched into the kitchen, banged the cupboard, and opened and closed the fridge door. A high-pitched whistle made Azlexia practically jump out of her skin, but it was only the water boiling. Mr Starr grabbed the kettle, but dropped it when the handle burned his hand. He yelped as boiling water splashed onto his foot.

“Now look what yer made me do,” he barked at Azlexia, who scrambled for the sponge. She crouched down and began mopping up the floor. Mr Starr kicked out, but missed Azlexia and connected with the cupboard instead.

“Blast,” he cried, clutching his toe and hopping around. “It’s all your fault.”

“Sorry.” Azlexia quickly squeezed the sponge into the sink. “I didn’t mean to.”

Her stepfather took out a mug, banged it on the counter, and slammed shut the cupboard door. “You make yer mother’s tea,” he yelled, stalking out the door. “And hurry up and get t’ school. Hangin’ ‘round here, tripping me up.”

Azlexia had spent the day hunched in her seat, clasping her head and ignoring everyone around her. She had hoped the noises would disappear during the day, but they banged in her mind louder than ever. At lunch, she hid in a

bathroom stall and peeled back her T-shirt sleeve. Her birthmark glowed as fiery as some of the meteors.

Later that evening, she didn't get a chance to watch more of the meteor shower. Mr Starr, in a fouler mood than usual, threw a saucepan at Azlexia as she ran terrified to her bedroom. The saucepan narrowly missed her, but struck the bedroom window with enough force to send glass in all directions.

"Stuff it!" Mr Starr cursed, when the hammer he was using to bang a piece of old board in place of the window hit several of his fingers. He threw the hammer across the room, smashing Azlexia's piggy bank. Three five-cent coins and a safety pin spilled amongst the pig pieces. While Azlexia swept up the mess and pocketed the money and pin, her stepfather glowered and sucked his sore thumb.

"It's all your fault," he shouted. "Gimme that rotten hammer."

As Azlexia shakily handed him the hammer, she heard several front doors open and knew the whole street was listening to her step dad's swearing. She wondered if her mum could hear too, and hoped she was asleep.

Without any chance of a night breeze, Azlexia's bedroom was hotter than a baker's oven. She tossed fretfully. Her bed was as lumpy as dough. Finally she got up to go open the fridge and stand next to it. As she crept through the moonlit house, silent except for the snoring coming from Mr Starr's room, the noise in her head became so loud that she clutched her ears and collapsed against the hallway wall. When she glimpsed herself in the dimly lit mirror, she cried out. The mirror answered her.

“Follow us,” the mirror echoed, as if the words came from down a deep hole. “Don’t be afraid, we’re here to help you.”

Shocked, Azlexia peered at the mirror, her heart thudding in her chest like a runaway train. She looked around and then back at the mirror. She couldn’t see anyone else, just her own pale face looking as if she’d seen a ghost. She stared at herself and felt her face grow paler, if that was possible. Staring back at her were two eyes flashing green and amber as if warning signals had gone berserk at a railway crossing. Horrified, she realized the eyes belonged to her. She’d never seen them do this before.

“Hello, Azlexia Starr,” the mirror said airily, “we are so glad to have found you.”

Azlexia ducked. Despite the unbearable heat, she suddenly felt very cold and shivery. Her mind felt muffled, as if she was underwater. *I’m crazy*, she thought, huddling down on the worn linoleum floor and winding her arms tightly around her head, as if that might keep the voice at bay. *Don’t listen to it*, she told herself, *think about something good such as eating ice cream or skateboarding at the X-Games or being pushed by mum on the swings.*

“Don’t go,” the voice interrupted, “it is so hard to find you.”

With hands tightly clenched against her ears, Azlexia started to sing, *La la la...*

The voice begged again, but from further away. Azlexia stopped singing and relaxed.

Seeming to sense that it was no longer being drowned out, the voice

spoke urgently, “Don’t be scared. It’s really important we contact you.”

Yummy frozen bananas, skateboarding downhill really fast...oops, careful of that pothole. Azlexia imagined herself soaring through the air and landing a perfect kickflip, awed onlookers clapping appreciatively. Thank you...just call me Tony Hawk. Now for my—oh, here I am under the sprinkler...yikes, that water’s cold.

Azlexia continued imagining her favorite things, not daring to stop and poke into her thoughts where the voice might be lurking. Gradually, as she thought about the delicious taste of a Cherry Ripe, she realized the voice had disappeared and the clanging noise had faded to a distant din. Exhausted but relieved, Azlexia rose stiff-legged and clammy, and went back to bed.

For the next few days, Azlexia crept around as if she had a bad headache. She didn’t dare acknowledge the noise in her head that followed her like a bad smell or the voice trying to leap out at her when she stopped concentrating on something else. She noticed the voice became clearer when she went near reflective surfaces or transmitters. So she began avoiding windows, mirrors, the TV, even the radio. Dark circles appeared under her eyes from the strain.

She found that mumbling to herself helped, and she wandered around during recess keeping up a lively babble. Unfortunately, she’d already run through lists of her favorite foods, favorite places to skate, favorite skateboarders, favorite pictures of space, twenty things she’d wish for if she had a genie in a bottle, twenty homework excuses, twenty things she hated about

school, and twenty things she *wouldn't* wish for if she had a genie in a bottle. She was rapidly running out of things to think about.

“Crazy Az, crazy Az,” Sharon and the Spooling Droolers screeched after her. Azlexia was so busy keeping her mind occupied with trivia that she scarcely noticed.

Other kids, who didn't even like Sharon, began to agree. They sneered at Azlexia, “There's that crazy Az girl. She's lost the plot.”

Even Steve avoided her and skated off when she challenged him to a race.

Horrified, Azlexia found herself wondering if they were right. After school one day, she stopped by the Pomonia library and looked up “voice inside head” and “talking mirror” and “crazy” on the Internet. Her searches returned dozens of websites about mental disorders. According to one renowned web doctor, Dr Charley Tan, people experiencing one or two of her symptoms could be cured. But a person suffering from talking mirrors, voices chasing them down, and loud noises that no one else could hear *all at once*, was beyond hope. There was nothing for it but to lock them into a bouncy room and chuck the key into a ditch.

Staying out of her stepfather's way also proved to be more difficult than she would have thought. Instead of watching TV and occasionally ambling to the fridge as usual, Mr Starr spent his time pacing outside his wife's room and popping his head around the door to see that she was still there. Dishevelled and unshaven, he often wandered into Azlexia's room by mistake, his eyes bulging unnaturally. He'd suddenly glance around perplexed, as if he didn't know how

he'd got there.

Then he would notice Azlexia mumbling in the corner and start barking at her to get out of his way, stop being a nuisance, go to the shop, leave her mother alone, and stop that racket until, finally, Azlexia ran past him unable to tell which was worse: the noise inside her head or her stepfather's yelling.

Azlexia wondered if he, too, was going crazy. Perhaps her voices had caused the house to come under some sort of spell and her mother was also stricken by this madness? This would explain why Mrs Starr stayed in her room with the door shut.

Besides taking her a cup of tea and plate of toast each morning, Azlexia hadn't seen much of her mother since she had come home. Mrs Starr stayed in bed and only got up in the morning, when, with a determined look, she carefully heaved herself up by leaning on Azlexia's shoulder and slowly walked to the bathroom.

Often, Azlexia tried to sneak in to see if her mum was okay, but her step dad would appear out of nowhere and bark at Azlexia to get back, as if she was a dangerous dog.

Whenever Azlexia did see her mother awake she opened her mouth to tell Mrs Starr about the voice, but instead of calmly explaining things, she wound up muttering several muddled words such as *ice cream*, *Tony Hawk*, and *dad ate my homework*. She had no idea how she could explain it without sounding like a complete idiot: *Hi mum, here's your tea. By the way, have you heard any strange noises in your head lately? Has the hallway mirror ever spoken to you? Would*

you think I was crazy if I told you that last Tuesday I chatted with it and it wasn't me doing the talking?

Azlexia approached these thoughts like you might sneak up on a dozing King Brown snake—from the side and very quickly.

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