

The Thirteenth Stella

By Amelia Jones

Will wakes me from a fitful dose, his hands dancing softly on my back. I hear a click, and he sighs in a relieved sort of way. I look up, and he jumps. He didn't notice that I was awake. A battery tumbles from his pocket. I wonder where he found it.

"Good morning, Will," I say, yawning. The sun is bright. It must be almost noon. I laugh. It is funny that I over slept. He smiles at me, but he looks worried. The ad said there were no problems here in the floating city called Snarzuck. What could a seven year old be so worried about?

"What's wrong?" I ask him.

"The lab is creepy," he tells me, "unnaturally creepy."

"You mean L.A.B.? Yes, it is a bit odd," I reply. No one remembers what L.A.B. stands for. It just adds to the mystery. I need to know more. "Do you want to know more too?" I ask him. He looks at me and slowly nods. "We'll go tonight," I tell him, not thinking about our safety. I crave answers.

I wake up at ten, too excited to sleep any more. I silently pull up the loose floorboard in the living room. Matches, a pencil and a hairpin fall into my pocket, found over the years. Will tries to creep up on me. Hiding behind the chair is pointless. I saw him walk in. I smile at him. He looks excited. He must want to go too.

There was a chill in the air as we walked through the city. I shiver and snuggle deeper into the soft neck of my woven sweater. Will stumbles in the street behind me. I pick him up, my weak muscles straining with the bulk of his small body. I wish we got more exercise here, but the thickly netted neighborhoods of Snarzuck held no fields or parks. I think longingly about grass, a plant long gone from the solar system, as we trudge through the road.

We make it to L.A.B. before dawn. I try the back door, but it is locked. A bit of fiddling with my hairpin fixes that. I have never picked a lock before. I didn't think it would be so easy. Did someone let us in on purpose? I look to Will for answers. He looks scared now. I have never seen him look scared before.

"Do you still want to go?" I ask him. He forces himself to nod. He looks determined, but it's still strange for him to look so terrified.

We tiptoe inside.

"Babies!" blurts Will. He covers his mouth. He must think we need to be quiet. I wonder why he said babies. I guess he meant the children that disappear when they are born, returned months later by the government, happy and healthy. Does he think that they come here?

I wander up the hall. I see two hallways, but the one to the right has a window. Maybe I will see something. I turn right. Will whimpers behind me, pointing to the door. I know he wants to go, but I can't stop so close to answers.

"Go back," I tell him. "Meet me at the door. I'll only be a minute." I know it's unsafe, but what else can I do? He nods but instead of leaving, he goes down the

other hall. I almost call out, but I stop myself. I can't give us away. I will go after him when I am finished here.

I see movement in the window. Almost running, I head towards the glass. I skid to a stop under the windowsill. My guesses are confirmed when I peek into the room. The children are in there, along with scientists in lab coats. I see a shadow behind me. I start to turn around, but my knees crumple under me. The words SHORT CIRCUIT flash in front of my vision, and the world gives way to darkness.

I wake up in a small but comfortable room, my cheek pressed against the scratchy rug on the floor. There are feet dangling from the couch. Who is sitting on the couch? More importantly, where am I? Is this room part of L.A.B.?

"Get up," a cold voice commands me. I do, and I sit on a chair that I didn't even know was there. I feel like my body is being controlled by someone else's brain. I glare at the man in front of me. He grins back, the perfectly white sort of grin that forces answers out of even the strongest warrior. Although he smiles, his eyes are full of hatred. Maybe he wants answers from me. If he does, he will get them.

"Tell me S.T.E.L.L.A., what do you think of artificial intelligence?" his voice is suddenly sickly sweet. I preferred the cold voice. He continues to speak, not waiting for an answer. "Do you find it annoying when robots almost get the best of you? Well I do!" he glares at me again, and presses a button on the remote he is holding. I suddenly go stiff. I can't move. How did he do that? His smile is back. "Well, you have basically cooperated. I guess you have earned some answers," he tells me. "Would you like some?" He enjoys watching me try to reply. "Fine! I'll start about 12 years ago. We made a fleet of spy robots, my company and me. Each robot had a number. The robots were modeled after young girls and we tracked them and gained a lot of information. Unfortunately, all but one of S.T.E.L.L.A. robots broke down. Do you understand, S.T.E.L.L.A. 13?" Does this mean I am a robot, I wonder. I guess so. He continues. "You, 13, went to the new city we had built, to get children for our experiments. We used you to find out who was going to have a baby. Then, once we knew about a baby, we took it and slightly modified its genes. We changed things like hair and eye color, you know, easy stuff. You watched them grow up normally. It was the perfectly set up experiment." So that's what I am - a stupid video camera, identified by the number 13. No wonder 13 is the unlucky number.

"What about Will?" I ask, suddenly able to speak again at the push of a button.

"Don't you know? He said you caught him! Well, I'm not going to tell you everything! I'll give you a hint. Robots need fresh batteries, and it's very inconvenient to have to power them off every few months. That's all I'm telling you. Boys, dispose of her!" The door slams behind him. I am glad to be away from his syrup-like voice.

I spin around, suddenly angry, posed to punch the figures behind me. I don't. I can't. I stare at the two boys, dressed in white bio suits. I won't hurt them. Although their eyes are glazed with ice, their blood full of hatred, the hatred that drives to kill, I won't hurt them.

One reminds me of... wait, he is Will! I freeze. I can't move. I can't think. Time slows and my vision blurs. Words flash in front of my eyes again. This time they read POWER SOURCE DISCONNECTED. Then it changes to POWERING DOWN. POWERING

DOWN. The words flash over and over again, so bright my head hurts. POWERING DOWN. POWERING DOWN. I divert my consciousness to Will. POWERING DOWN. POWERING DOWN. He is surprised, I think. POWERING DOWN. POWERING DOWN. A, no my battery tumbles from his hand. POWERING DOWN. POWERING DOWN. My brain can't keep up. Can't, can't, can't. I scream in frustration and look at Will. POWERING DOWN. POWERING DOWN. How could I think he was young? POWERING DOWN. POWERING DOWN. I gasp for air. POWERING DOWN. POWERING DOWN. No matter how much I get, it's not enough to keep me alive. POWERING DOWN. POWERING DOWN. I can't look away from Will. He is crying. He peers up at me, so sadly that I flinch away.

"I'm sorry," he whispers, and I think he is.