

With their backs against the damp brick wall, they shifted along the footpath. It was almost dark. They stopped at the entrance and listened. The back street was empty but they could hear Aggers on the main road, making their way home. Rezza shut out the city noises. She concentrated on the alley and listened for the regular tap-tap of the bird searching for food.

"Now!" she shouted. The two girls leaped into the entrance and whooped. The frightened bird flapped and squawked and tried to fly, but not towards Kesai and the net. It fluttered away from them. Rezza had been wrong. The alley wasn't a dead end.

"Grab it!" Kesai shouted.

Rezza's brown dreadlocks, tucked inside her tam, bounced against her neck and Kesai's straggly black hair flew behind her as they raced through the alley and into a narrow, cobbled lane.

"Hold on!" cried Snake, the little dogbot, trying to keep up. "My solar cells are deprimed. You're running too fast!" But the girls didn't hear him.

The bird couldn't take off – the lane was too narrow and twisted. It flapped, skidded and squawked across the slippery cobbles. Rezza gained on it quickly. She sped past some stables, a grain store, a shop that sold raw fibres and yarns, a tea house and the other small stores of her closest

neighbourhood here in west Los Angeles. Breathing hard, she dodged an Agger – an old woman on a bicycle. A slim man in a boiler suit – another Agger – who carried a small tool kit saw her coming and stepped out of the way. The floundering bird was just ahead, but so was a lighted street. Rezza glanced up just as she stretched out to grab the tiring bird. She felt a jolt of fear.

"Stop!" the Guard ordered.

They had run into a patrol.

Behind her, Kesai slowed to a walk. Far back down the lane, she heard the sound of Snake's metal feet clicking on the cobbles. Rezza stared at the three muscled figures in tight silver uniforms. She'd seen Guards before, but only from a distance. Close up, they were scary. Their long black clubs glinted in the fading daylight. Their cold, metallic eyes glared at her.

"What is your hurry?" the tallest Guard asked. He spoke sharply with small pauses between each word. It was very poor speech. If the Guards were so advanced, then they should learn to speak properly, Rezza thought with contempt.

"I was chasing the bird," she said, trying to sound calm. "For food . . . We're hungry . . . We . . ." She left the sentence unfinished. She'd told them what they needed to know.