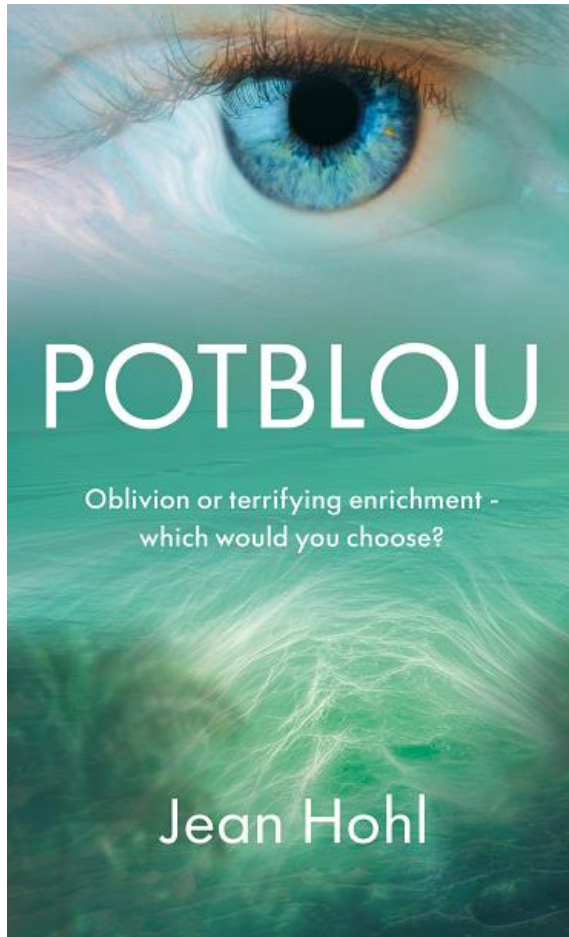




A female crew and men tangle with alien biotechnology far from home. Their emotional reactions determine whether they survive or lose themselves. Terror, romance, trickery, corporate greed, humor, and learning how to let go are all on tap.

Potblou

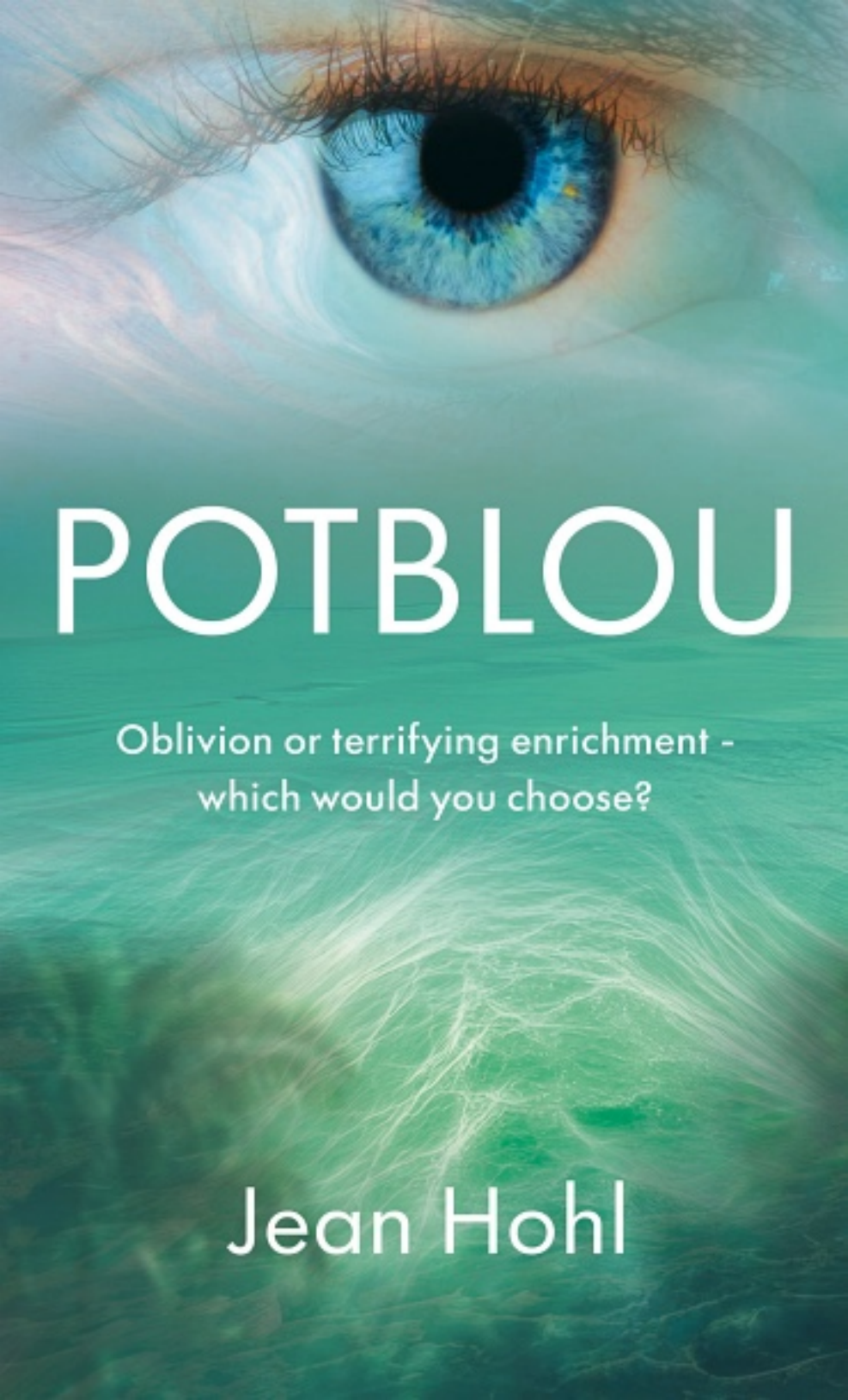
By Jean Hohl

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POTBLOU

Oblivion or terrifying enrichment -
which would you choose?

Jean Hohl

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CHAPTER 1

A silver craft slid through the sky and landed near the river. The craft's glide extensions folded back on themselves like insect wings, and the craft's silvery surface turned black. A hatch opened and a lone woman climbed out, her body shimmering in shades of blue, green, and silver.

It was early morning on the planet. The woman registered the heat and humidity during the moment it took her SensoSute to adjust. She sealed her small ship and walked away. As she passed over a dark patch of ground, her shimmering Sute streaked itself with shadow.

The crew had dubbed this wild place Potblou, a South African word meaning "bright blue." From orbit, the planet's system of rivers looked like blue syrup on a wrinkled dress of lush, green velvet. The tropical forest was partly covered by cumulus clouds that thickened where the land met the pale silvery-green sea.

Vrienda knelt and touched the dark earth, then strode to the riverbank and gazed at the eddies on the broad waterway. The bank was low where she stood. She stooped to touch the water and decided the Sute was protection enough. After the barest hesitation, she waded in.

The water swirled around her calves and thighs, pleasantly cool. She gazed upstream and saw brown roots and a black mud shoreline. The rushing river where she stood was a bright turquoise blue.

She wondered about the river's blue color. Vrienda activated her finder and was pointing it at the water when a tree limb rushed past and struck her broadside. She lost her footing and was swept under.

Sister.

The voice was a subliminal twinge emanating from Vrienda's skull implant. She ignored it as her body tumbled downstream. Triggered by stress hormones, the SensoSute force-flexed her extremities. The connector attached to her trailing finder also flexed, wrapping around her wrist like a small snake. As the current pulled her downstream, Vrienda's panic subsided, and her mouth curved in a smile.

Sister, report.

Vrienda caught hold of a tree root and ducked beneath the surface. She looked around underwater and saw nothing moving toward her. Lifting her head above the surface, she listened and looked for anything in motion in response to her tumble downstream. Time passed and nothing happened.

She relaxed and gazed at the bright greenness of a tuft of reeds in the black mud of the shore. Only then

did she transmit a measured, subvocal response to the waiting watchperson onboard the mother ship.

Gone swimming. No teeth, no claws.

Vrienda was irritated at having to communicate anything. Immersion in the landscape, seeing and feeling everything around her, was what she preferred. Her implant provided a communications link between herself and at least one other crewmate. It had to stay online on this first-down excursion, but delay in answering a watcher's query was permitted.

Vrienda stilled her thoughts. Still clinging to the tree root, she stretched her legs in the current and checked her finder's analysis. The water was fresh, with no pollutants. She coiled her device back around her wrist and noticed her body was riding high, as if the river were salty. There was also the fact of its curious turquoise blueness.

Something bright winked at her from deep in the water.

Diving deep on a first-down visit was against protocol. But on this first trip, whatever she did would be her risk alone.

Vrienda's SensoSute was already feeding her an oxygen mixture. In response to her intent, extensions grew from the material covering her feet and ankles. When her Sute buoyancy went negative, she dove to find the source of the winking brightness.

Onboard the orbiting ship, Neefa frowned at the console. Other women drifted past, talking in low voices.

The commander sat down next to Neefa. “Any word yet from Vrienda?”

Baasa Vrou was senior staff. Her gray hair was cut in a spiky shag that complemented her narrow chin and wide-set gray eyes. A deep scar, white against the rich brown of her skin, extended from her left cheekbone up into her hairline. Years before, she had trusted a stranger in port too quickly. The result of her new-recruit naiveté had been a fine imposed by the Sisterhood of Planetary Explorers, equal to the cost of stitching up her face portside. The scar and the white shock of hair that grew from it were reminders of the lesson.

The young woman at the console pursed her lips before answering. “Baasa, you know how she is. First down and this is her kind of place.”

Baasa studied the images coming from the sensors on Vrienda’s shuttle. The scene looked peaceful. Vrienda wasn’t calling for help. She preferred privacy, and her perceptions had often been valuable to the crew. The Sisterhood was known for its renegades and their occasional spectacular discoveries. Baasa saw no

reason to interfere with Vrienda's preliminary scouting.

"Let's give her six ship-hours. If she maintains silence past six, let me know."

Neefa bowed her head in acknowledgment and set a timer for the sector. Six hours seemed overly generous, but that's what the commander wanted. Personally, Neefa didn't give a damn about the crazy bitch.

Vrienda moved through the river, breathing easily by means of her SensoSute. She dove repeatedly but saw nothing shiny enough to reflect light. She forgot about the mysterious twinkling and examined stones and river grass, making personal notations with her finder to be shared during debriefing. There was no reason to hurry or keep track of time. Enjoying herself, she drifted downstream.

A couple of harmless looking, fishlike creatures darted past, surrounded by a narrow band of darker water. She pointed her finder at the anomaly and subvocalized: *Water striated. Data on the way.*

High overhead, Neefa picked up Vrienda's brief transmission. So, there was no problem after all. She reached for the sector timer switch and turned it off.

On the planet, Vrienda ran her fingers through the shadowy stream within the larger river. The water was slightly cooler and felt granular between her fingers. She pivoted fully into it and found herself being pulled gently downward. *This is curious*, she thought, and was shaken by a bone-jarring hum.

Vrienda let go of her finder and tried to restore buoyancy to her Sute. Then her body went rigid. Glassy-eyed, she sank toward the bottom of the river.

Much later around sunset, Vrienda surfaced in the shallows nearly a mile downstream. She lowered her feet and almost touched bottom, then lifted her head out of the water and floated a step forward. The Sute had lost its opaqueness over her breasts and crotch. Beneath its layers, her skin was sallow. Blood was in the whites of her eyes and her pupils were dilated. She made a keening sound and began to pant, then sank beneath the water.

“It’s night on a strange planet. She’s been there for hours, and she doesn’t respond. What’s not clear about this situation?”

Baasa’s neutral tone belied her concern. *Here we go again*, she thought. *No matter how much we value our independence as individuals, relationships come*

first. With this relationship, there is a problem. She stared into Neefa's eyes, waiting for an answer.

Neefa stared back and resisted fingering her braid. "I went off duty two hours after Vrienda's last transmission, the one leading me to believe everything was fine. She knows she's supposed to check in for the change of watch. She's impossible! She makes our job impossible."

Baasa sighed. "I know you've got history with this woman. While on duty, you're to put personal matters aside." She glanced at the console. "Tomorrow, you lead the recovery team. Find Vrienda and bring her back."

And fix the relationship, she thought.

Around dawn of the next day, Vrienda surfaced again. Despite the heat and the harsh brightness, she resisted the urge to stay underwater where it was cool and quiet. Her eyes hurt. She raised a hand to shade them and was surprised to see webbing between her fingers. Something in her throat made it hard to breathe.

Submerge, the reptilian part of her brain whispered. *Return to the coolness below.*

Vrienda ignored the impulse. Anger and a sense of betrayal made her capable of resisting. Stubbornly she

kept her face above water, willing her throat to open and her lungs to breathe. At a quiet cove in the river, she dragged herself out of the water and collapsed on the black mud shore.

Time passed.

Vrienda lay unconscious as the tropical sun beat down. In response to her body's growing distress, her SensoSute mobilized. Tiny, undulating extrusions pushed out from the Sute wherever her body touched the ground. When the extrusions reached a critical number, her prone body began moving through the mud as though carried by a colony of ants. She was inched into the river gradually, until the cool water rose over her head and covered her completely.

CHAPTER 3

Neefa, Jared's sister, was medium height by Earth standards and solidly built. She wore her brown hair in a braid that reached halfway down her back. This morning she donned the wraparound that held her braid close to her head, then suited up and joined two of her fellow crewmates in the shuttle bay.

Their base ship, *Sisplorer2*, was a space yacht built to envoy specifications, meaning it could tunnel through space without a flight plan and was treated as a nonpartisan entity. The usual luxury compartments had been turned into compact quarters for ten to fifteen personnel. Its cargo bay held a sizable chamber with a separate life support system for storage of exotic biological specimens. A separate, equally spacious shuttle bay held scouting craft for use by the crew and possible guests.

Like other quality yachts, *Sisplorer2*'s components were self-repairing. The ship recycled all trash and metabolites, and its engines and systems were powered by a solar thermal radiation system. With the high level of ambient sunlight in the vicinity of Potblou, all power supplies could be kept fully charged, meaning landing parties were free to use separate scouting shuttles. Being able to come and go independently was the popular choice.

Neefa watched her two friends board their shuttles, unbuckle from the dock, and descend toward the planet. She climbed into her own craft and followed.

The three women cruised through the atmosphere and landed in a rocky clearing close to the river and the source signal from Vrienda's implant.

Lurann and Jileena debarked first and watched Neefa climb out of her shuttle. Neefa's baggy puffsuit was viewed as old-fashioned, to put it mildly. Her friends grinned at each other but said nothing. Off-duty was the proper time to rub in how flawlessly their own skin-bonded SensoSutes performed.

Neefa was aware of their scrutiny. "Yeah, yeah, I know how I look," she muttered, "but I'm comfortable."

Her one experience with a SensoSute back on Earth had been extremely unpleasant. When the Sute had begun to initialize, Neefa felt the tiny probes lock onto the pores of her skin and penetrate the moisture of her eyes and mouth. It had felt so invasive that she screamed the code before clawing her way out as fast as the Sute would unpeel from around her. Neefa learned afterward that her reaction was called a maladaptive disorder. Disgusted that a bioengineered product had become a standard for measuring human behavior, she had vowed to steer clear of SensoSutes forever.

The three women crossed the rocky meadow and reached the shore of the river, then began walking downstream. They stepped carefully through reedy growth and around purple and black-leaved bushes, occasionally looking at the tall trees farther away from shore. They hiked a quarter of a mile.

Jileena re-checked her finder and pointed to a cove in the shoreline of the bright blue river. "She's in there."

The women studied the carved-out place where water must have worked loose part of the shore, causing it to collapse and the river to widen.

"Using a tractor cord is standard op," Neefa remarked, "but she might be entangled. Who wants to look?"

Lurann made an exaggerated bow to Jil, who was short and blond, a botanical technician and diver.

Jil studied her finder. "Vrienda's vitals are borderline acceptable. We know the water is non-toxic. I'll go."

The three women synced their equipment. Jil climbed down the riverbank and stepped into the water. Holding her finder beneath the surface, she moved forward cautiously.

"There she is," Jil announced, and the three women inhaled simultaneously. "She looks

unencumbered, but there's too much plant life around her to be sure."

The shared finder image showed Vrienda curled up on the bottom, her head on her arms and her eyes closed as though she were asleep. Her body was obscured by a cloud of green, feathery filaments that waved slowly in the current.

Jil submerged and swam closer to Vrienda. She stopped short of the filaments, planted her feet on the bottom, and made a slight throwing motion. Her Senso cord obediently stiffened and the finder at its end advanced toward Vrienda's body, brushing against some of the green filaments in passing.

The cloud of growth around Vrienda turned a deep red and Vrienda's eyes snapped open.

Jil froze.

Vrienda's normally dark-brown eyes were yellow. She looked around, appearing not to see Jil, and moved into a sitting position. The long tendrils moved with her, dwindling in size until her entire body looked like a red, rippling carpet.

Jil hesitated, then gently raised her arms to attract the other woman's attention.

The effect upon Vrienda was immediate. The red-carpet effect vanished. Her skin became scaly and fishlike, slits in her neck pulsated like gills, and her arms and legs sprouted fin-like extensions. She rapidly

propelled herself away, disappearing into the depths of the river.

Jil stared wide-eyed after Vrienda. She surfaced and climbed ashore. Water sluiced from her Sute in sheets. By the time she reached the top of the muddy embankment, she was dry.

Her two companions joined her.

Jil jerked her head toward the river. “The way she looked was so—” She shook her head. “It wasn’t what I expected. I didn’t think to snag her with a cord. Then she just took off!”

Neefa moved closer and put an arm around Jil. “It wasn’t your fault.”

Lurann nodded her agreement.

The three women returned to the landing area in silence, monitoring their finders and looking around every few steps, alert for any signs they were being followed.

They reached the rocky clearing where their black-shifted shuttles were baking in the sun. Jil, Neefa, and Lurann faced each other beneath the dome of the silvery-green sky.

Jil rubbed her arms, shivering. “She acted like an animal. Did she know what she was doing? I couldn’t tell—.”

Lurann shook her head. “She keeps to herself. I barely know her. The waving red tendrils, her reaction,

her skin changes—they were disturbing.” She turned to their companion. “Neefa, what do you think?”

Neefa’s eyes were cold. “I think she found what she’s been looking for. I think she’s gone rogue.”

Neefa and her companions returned to *Sisplorer2* and made their report to the commander. They were finishing platters of synth sausage when the comm band on Neefa’s wrist vibrated. After a wide-eyed glance at the message’s source, she waved goodbye to her friends and raced back to her quarters.

Neefa unlocked her console and sat on the bunk facing her vidscreen. Oddly, the private message was Code Red, but she recognized the callmark. She pressed her thumb against the pad and finalized Open.

Her brother’s face appeared onscreen.

“Neefa, it’s me.” Jared’s image was remarkably clear, considering how far the info packet had traveled. “I hope you’re doing well.” He paused. “SensoCo is about to make an important announcement, but Boris has said things other than what he agreed to.” He raked a hand through his hair. “You and your crewmates need to hear the news now. I’ll comment afterwards.”

Neefa reclined on her bunk pad and kept her eyes on the vidscreen. “Bad news about SensoCo,” she muttered. “What could it be? Are people in Sutes

asphyxiating? Are clinics full of SensoSute addicts? *Of course* there's a problem. Any moron could have seen it coming." She smirked, planning a humorously sarcastic reply to her brother.

Jared's image faded, replaced by a clip of SensoCo's spokesperson and family heir. Neefa frowned at the image of Boris Junior, whose last name sounded a lot like "moron." His expression was especially tense. She thought the man was an idiot. His fabulous wealth seemed to excuse however he looked and whatever he said or did.

"Boris MORR-ee-on here in upper California," he began. "As CEO of SensoCo Interglobal, it's my pleasure to keep you updated on the latest developments involving SensoSutes, our most popular product."

Neefa was surprised he called himself the CEO, then remembered Jared's mention months ago of Boris Senior's extended absence from the company. The old guy must have finally retired, leaving his unpleasant son in charge. Her eyes glazed over as an automated cut-in briefly summarized the company's history of scientific success.

It was common knowledge that the first SensoSute was designed to bond with skin to metabolize bacteria and body secretions. That feature alone was useful for people who spent time in restrictive or contaminated

workplaces. The technology progressed from there, with SensoSute functions becoming increasingly exotic, incorporating chameleon-like aspects and the capacity to provide homeostasis in different environments. Scientists and explorers took note. Within a decade, the Sute's nanotechnology allowed humans to breathe underwater or in clouds of toxic gas.

The Sutes were initially offered for free on a trial basis, but that changed after the outpouring of favorable responses. Faced with losing their expensive SensoSutes, the creative geniuses whose projects had benefited from the use of SensoSute technology clamored to their sponsors. Funding materialized and Sutes were snapped up. After the public got word, trendy versions of the Sute were developed for those who had no desire to explore oceans or visit other planets. In less than thirty years, the Morreon family business became the most successful private enterprise on Earth.

Neefa frowned at Boris's white face on the vidscreen. Something about him always made her skin crawl. When she was younger, her brother Jared had arranged a private tour of SensoCo's company headquarters. She had caught a glimpse of the pale-skinned Morreon heir as he walked by the lab they were in. Even then, she had disliked him on sight.

Her eyes widened with a new thought. Could it be that Boris was simply not human? Not that there'd be anything wrong with that, she amended. Aliens were in fashion with most people younger than eighty. But if Boris was non-human, why would he bother to conceal it?

Neefa shrugged, abandoning that line of thought. It was unfortunate that the Sisterhood had a special relationship with the company now being run by Boris. SensoCo was a major sponsor of their voyages and provided Sutes for their use, free of charge. In exchange, the Morreons got the lion's share of whatever the Sisterhood found that the company wanted.

Onscreen, Boris was finally getting to the point.

"Our scientists have alerted me to startling new info." Boris stared at his imagined audience, his tone casual. "It appears that under certain conditions, a SensoSute may help a wearer to—" He paused, licking his lips. "*Transition*. We suspect that such a transition would be to the wearer's advantage, but our company lacks sufficient data to state that as a certainty." He twisted his face in what was meant to be a warm smile. "So once again we're asking for your help. All SensoSute owners experiencing such benefits are invited to participate in a new study prior to the recall of Sutes that lack institutional accreditation. We will

pay for return of Sutes that have not shown such benefits. For further details and to register for compensation, visit the SensoCo vidsite. We look forward to hearing from you.” The screen went black.

Neefa sighed. The offer of payment would draw the public into the study, as usual. She wondered what “transition” meant.

Jared’s face reappeared onscreen. “That’s the official version, Sis. It’s actually more serious than that.” He took a breath. “Tell your people to wear their Sutes minimally or not at all. Anyone who’s stressed or injured should get back to base and unpeel as soon as possible for their own safety. The uncertainty level might be highest in watery environments.”

His tone softened. “Please warn Vrienda. I know how much she loves her Sute. Tell her it could start helping her a bit too much.” He paused, his dark eyes intense. “My warning to you and Baasa is private and unofficial, but be aware.” The screen blanked.

Neefa stared at nothing, recalling Vrienda’s strange behavior in the river. Maybe Jared’s ex-girlfriend hadn’t chosen to be a fish after all.

And then Neefa groaned. She had listened to the transmission alone. Code Red messages were play-once encrypted, which meant the content randomized after the first viewing. Such messages ordinarily went to ships’ commanders and other top-level staff. Seeing

her brother's callmark, she hadn't taken the code seriously.

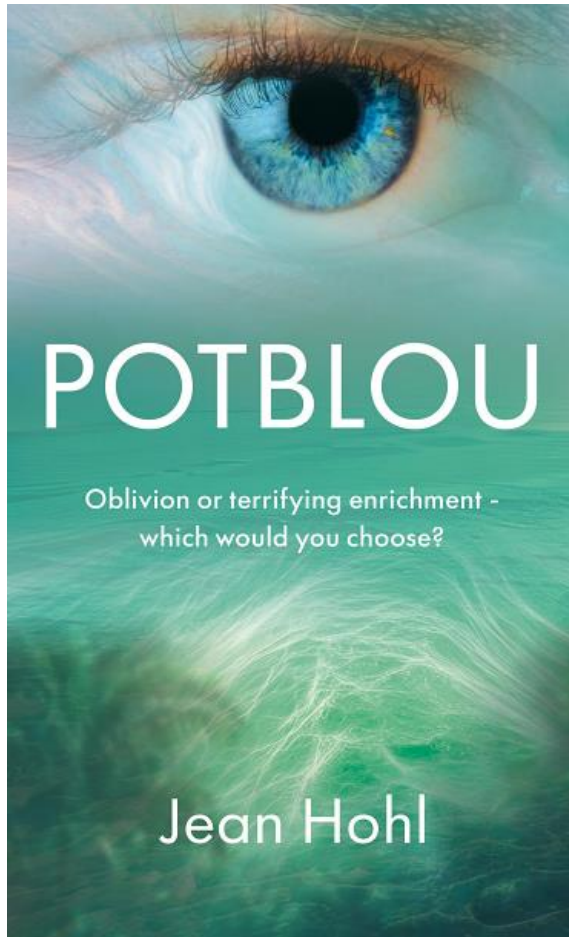
Neefa leaned against her bunk's support pad to flatten it, then lay still with her arms crossed over her chest. She had opened the message and now it was gone. The commander would not be happy. The other reason for her frustration was personal. Vrienda had left Jared, but he still had feelings for her. Neefa hated Vrienda for breaking her brother's heart, but she felt an obligation. For her brother's sake, she had to find out if the problem on the planet was with Vrienda or her Sute.

On the planet, Vrienda swam mindlessly upstream. Seized by a ravenous hunger, she sank to the river bottom and stood in the black mud. Her body did something and her hunger faded. She glanced at her arms and legs and saw a patterned sheen that looked like fish scales. Surprise and fear washed through her. She remembered going fishing with her father when she was a child. Other memories surfaced.

Vrienda became fully conscious. She studied her underwater surroundings and what she could see of her finned, scale-covered body. She must have been submerged for a long time. She remembered her enjoyment of exploring the river. After that, nothing.

What had happened? She didn't know, but here she was. Her Sute must have saved her.

Vrienda felt a burst of gratitude toward the tiny nano organisms in the Sute covering her body. After what seemed like an answering tingle, she pulled her feet from the mud and swam for the surface.



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