

6. The Elevator Buggies

We were out through the back door. “What’s through there?” Hen said as she hustled me past the glass sliding doors on the right. “Do you recall it from the map?”

The from-the-map bit was part of the act, my father possibly being still within hearing distance. “The transport pick-up yard for our level, where hover cabs pick up and drop off people, and deliver stuff.” I said though I had eyes only for the door at the end of the corridor. Steel grey.

Hen stamped on the sensa-mat. “This is how to get the old door to take notice.”

Finally it slid into the wall to the left. We stepped through, over a sill. Hen let the door slide shut behind us and no more play-acting needed. At the end of the covered area, a curtain of ... “Is that rain?” I asked.

“It sure is!” Hen said with a smile in her voice.

I shot out, as far as the safety rails. Drops touched down on my face and arms. They soaked into my Fetcher clothes. They fell into my eyes sometimes and into my mouth—I opened wide—and tasted only of water. I was outside again! This time in the rain! Getting wet!

The rain fell in long staves from a light misty place full of half-visible struts and girders high up between my building and the one opposite. I breathed in the fresh cool air. The rain hissed where it splatted against the wall.

Far below was a darkness. The staves became silvery drops streaking down into that dark. Another, deeper breath. The rain-wet air swept away my indoor life.

Finally I looked at the building opposite.

Hen stood beside me, enjoying me enjoying the rain. “That’s where our utilities are,” she said as though it was my first time.

I started to glance around for any listeners and or watchers.

She gripped my hand, shook her head ever so slightly.

I recalled the maintenance windows. Anybody could be watching.

Hen said, “Our shops, medi-labs and schools. People call it Parra-Five-Central.” She stopped as if she waited.

I gabbled that lesson. “Parra being the name of our particular city. Five the number of our urb, and Central referring to it being in the centre as well as being central to the urb.” As always, there was a lot to see, and this time, I also had to recall all the things I would be doing for myself.

A couple of elevator buggies crawled down tracks fastened to the opposite wall. “The rails

hold the buggies?" I didn't give Hen time to explain. "Ten openings make ten floors?"

"Twenty floors. Every second one with an opening. Inside is a spiralling concourse where people can walk up or down to every level ..."

Finally we heard a succession of doors closing in the apartment which were my father leaving his study. Him trusting Hen to set me on my way.

"Call down a buggy," Hen said. "Your address is W—8—20 short for West Tower, Level 8, Residential Unit 20. What's your address?"

I made a song of it. "W for West Tower, 8 for Level 8, 20 for Residential Unit Number 20. W for West Tower, 8 for Level 8, 20 for Residential Unit Number 20. W for West Tower, 8 for Level 8, 20 for Residential Unit Number 20."

Hen laughed, hand on my arm. "On your way back, if anyone asks where you're going, or why you're going there, say that your mother, Bardelote Henry, works here. That you're meeting her."

Stunned, I said stupidly, "That's you?"

"My name. Yes."

"But I call you Hen because of me being your chick!"

She hugged me. "You're my chick whether I'm Hen or Bardelote."

After we sniffled up our emotions, Hen said, "Key-in your destination as soon as you get into the buggy and the door is closed."

"6th level?"

"True, your father didn't say Level 6 where. All right, let's say 6-W. That's Level 6 West, the side of Central that faces West Tower. Slot your cell into the top of the keypad," Hen said. "And you will see it taking your credits."

"OK."

"Now you wait for a buggy," Hen said. "Go for it, Kosi-girl!"

She hugged me. I didn't watch her go back into the hidden house. I bent over the guard rail to watch a rattling hum approach from below. A metal roof approximately the size of Hen's bedroom ceiling rose up in front of me. The rest of the buggy, a faded green metal cage, stopped in front of me. Its metal gate hooked the gate in the railing and concertinaed open.

I stepped into the cage. Rickety wood-look-alike floor, bare of paint. Ribbed ceiling. Barred window-holes all around. No glass. From the door it would be two steps to every corner, I knew from previous rides. The corners nearest the building's walls, on their outside, had four half-open metal fists grabbing the metal rails attached to the front of the building. Top and

bottom.

Which was how the buggies were able to slide up and down without falling off, I thought. I swallowed down fright. *They've lasted all these years ... not going to fall now.* Didn't answer how they were powered, though. The cage door closed, dragging the gate shut with it. Clatter-clash.

"Where from and where to?" the buggy said by way of a small speaker above the door.

"W—8—20 to Parra Central West, level 6." The read-out said 4 credits gone. Which meant 6 credits remained. I took my mobile back. "Okay. What now?"

Thud.

I jumped. The ribs in the ceiling lowered and released a leg each ending in a brass foot. I had to shift my foot out of a recessed brass footprint set in the floor.

The buggy said, "Be still among the guide rails or be restrained."

Huh? Never had that happen before. How? Why? Maybe it didn't mean me personally. But what if it did? I held one-handed onto one of the polished guide rails. Mussed up my hair to feel bigger and braver.

7. Crooked Fist

The buggy hummed as it slid up the wall. The floor vibrating under my feet told of an engine underneath. The brassy fists moving along the rails outside made the whining sliding sound I'd often heard lying in bed in the hidden house. Trying to fall asleep, that mysterious metallic whining constantly stopping and starting kept me company.

When I was four or five, I asked Hen every day. "What's that slipping sliding squealing in the night?"

She'd say things like, "A Fetcher bringing the groceries." Or, "A Fetcher fetching a breakfast for someone working through the night." Or the Fetcher would bring a kite, if it became a windy night. Towards the end of her patience, I asked purely to hear what she could come up with. The Fetcher fetching old bread for feeding hungry ducks was one of her last stories.

I turned within the confines of the guide rails by my sides. Across the divide, wide rectangular openings came into view at the top as the buggy slid up, and disappeared below. A fly-car swooped between the two buildings and entered the highest opening.

A cacophony of sound erupted from there.

I startled, then distinguished between emergency sirens, hooting of vehicles and shouting by people. A fly-car caused all that upset? I grinned. Out came the fly-car. Swooping down between the two buildings, it re-entered by the lowest dark opening I could see. If other people could make mistakes too, I decided, I'd be alright.

Clunk! The buggy stopped and bounced a little. The door stayed shut. A large hook, like a crane hook, dangling from a many-stranded steel cable, coming from where-I didn't-know, and snagged a fist near the wall.

The hook slid around the fist until it sat securely. I leaned towards it from my place between the guide rails, tracing the path of the cable leading from it with my startled gaze. Mist and cloud above.

Clunk. Clunk. The fists on the outside of the buggy being hooked? I turned following the sounds. *Clack!* I held my breath. *Clack!* This was happening to my left, the second fist near the wall. I had to see what was happening. Ran quickly to that corner.

"Passengers stay in their places, please," the buggy said.

"I'm not moving."

Clack. The hook hit the fist. Did not engage. Swung back for another try. Made it.

I breathed relief. Uh-oh. The little lever that was meant to be pressed back and spring forward to close the circle, hadn't sprung forward. The fist sat loose in the lower wider arc of the hook.

The cables tightened. I strained to see up through the slow-moving cloud. I saw a huge ... A huge horizontal crane beam with what looked like a freight-container dwelling hanging from underneath? The structure, whatever it was, hung above and at right angles to the building. I felt like I should recognise it but I was too distracted.

The whole thing looked something like the robotic cranes that once carted shipping containers from ships to the shore, and onto trucks and such. Building complexes such as ours, Hen said, installed them to lift elevator buggies from one side of the divide between buildings, to the other.

The buggy began to rise above the top of the building. Or rather, the right-hand fist slid free from the rail.

The left-hand fist rolled in its hook. Slid free. The buggy floor tilted! Help! I slid too before I had hold of the guide rails again.

A quick look. The fist looked skewed. It didn't fit well around the top of the rail. And probably me weighting down that corner of the buggy tightened the skew of the fist.

The other three hooks clashed and clattered. The buggy juddered.

Was that the other three cables jiggling the buggy? Maybe to see if they could loosen it? My hands were slippery with cold sweat but I grabbed a further guide rail to make wider hold, my feet in a wider stance to balance against the shocks.

I grew dizzy watching the roof of the buggy swaying a tiny distance again and again from the crippled fist as the crane, by way of its cables, tried to fit the loose fist back onto its rail. The

two sets of couplings at the bottom of the buggy squealed and resisted being moved back and forth. Would they bend as well?

The crooked fist groaned, then twisted on its shank like on a loaf of bread dough. Hen again, that I knew that. But metal? Twisting like that? Not possible.

I should get out of there.

How?