

8. The Starship

The buggy jerked down a little in the corner where I clung to the guide bars.

Ee-ee-eng. A wrenching squeal in that same corner. The door slid back in its bent frame, and wedging fast, formed a triangular hole.

My chance! The gap had to be large enough! I leapt for the framework, scrambled up it like a monkey. Right foot on a window frame. Left foot in a narrow slot in the door. One hand on the door frame. One arm reaching over the drop to the concrete lip surrounding the roof.

The buggy juddered as I pushed off from it. One foot, two feet. Two arms over the lip. *Snap!* The buggy helped by swaying away.

I clambered up the wall with tiptoes and knees. Slung my knee over. Wrenched my shoulder up and over. Rolled over the containment wall. Lay there, looking up at the sky.

Low cloud. Blue between the foggy patches.

Thank you, Hen, for insisting I learn all those moves. She'd say get up onto the top of the wardrobe in any way except by using a chair. Get up onto the bed from lying on the floor. Get up onto the bed, over the rolled-up mattress, from lying on the floor.

The buggy clanged against the wall below me as a wind stroked the cables and whistled along the buggy's roof. I didn't want to be right there hearing the buggy break loose, fall and shatter on the wall on its way down. Imagining I might've still been in it. I crept away from the brink, sore hands, scraped knees.

Toward the only thing on the roof other than me. A thing that did not make sense. A concrete palm tree in a concrete pot? I curled round it like I anchored myself to it. Shivered while I waited for the buggy to fall.

— — — —

I must've fallen asleep. All those hours last night waiting for the dawn and my excitement. Waking Hen every tick of the clock for another question. I stretched, with my hand still on the potted palm, the only other living thing with me on that roof.

Which was blue! The whole roof area was blue! I had blue light all over me. Blue beams of fog particles rose and I looked up with them.

An octahedron-shaped starship hung over me. I had found the word for its shape in a geometry text. *My* starship, of course. Hanging so low in the sky now that it was too big to be contained with my hands. It could be the size of the whole of Du when she was a baby.

Am I dreaming? Doesn't feel like it. I rose and walked all round the edge of the rooftop of West Tower 5. The surrounding urbs were dim shapes standing in the night black water. Beyond the cone of blue light I was in, I couldn't see any lights. Proof that no one else was even up out of bed.

I remembered back to my seventh birthday when the alien starship had seemed to be playing happy colours. Then my eleventh birthday, that began with unhappy and became happy.

Now there were only stuttering shades of blue, many of them muddied and fading. Ongoing in a random flow, without a pattern. There was no chorus singing their ethereal harmonies. Only a sputtering that reminded me of a broken speaker in my computer. Something was wrong.

If there'd been a person up in it, even an alien, wouldn't they have come out to ask for help? *Though what could I do?* Not a spaceship mechanic, technician or even a real Fetcher yet. Was the ship trying to run itself? If it was an AI, who sent it? "Is this you telling me you have no driver?" I called.

It seemed to me that it tried to answer. Blue grey green dirty aqua colours spattered from its seams. An occasional pure, clear, sandy gold yellow flared among the muddy colours. *My lion-hair colour*. Like it hoped for something. Asked for help.

I spread my arms to the starship. "How?"

Next thing the thinning blue cone faded and all attempts at the colour-play stopped. The largeness of the ship receded and became a shadow against the stars.

"Here she is," said a woman. "Luck is with us. Tell me you are all right, love?"

I recognised her voice. "Lilah? I?"

A second woman arrived. Jules. "Kosi? Is it you, girl? You saved yourself. Good work. The buggy could tell us you were here by the conversation you had. Get the first aid kit, Lilah."

"I only told it I'd stay where I was," I said.

"Buggy also told me you hired for W-8," Jules said. She doused my knees and my hands with some stinging yellow stuff. "We'll set you down there, give you a chit to explain what took you so long."

"Tha-ank y-y-you." My teeth chattered. The dawn cold hit me. The dream-like event just now? I tucked it into a secret place in my mind. *Concentrate on my rescue now. My challenge is still to be achieved.*

"She needs a hot drink," Lilah said.

"We've got the coffee," Jules said. "Let's have you on your feet, young one."

They guided me to their ... "What's this place, please? I remember it but not the name."

Jules laughed. "Our caboose. Our cubby in the sky. Usually strung up there under the crane gantry." She pointed. "You remember that? I'm asking to make sure you don't have a concussion."

“No. No, I don’t think I hit my head.” I glanced up to where the starship glittered in the dawn sky and that’d just be reflections from the sun still below the horizon, off all its surfaces with none of its own colours in the mix. Then it rolled forward. Disappeared.

Huh?

Did I really see that?

Noticed Jules watched me like a hawk. I made my glance up there into an exploratory circling of my head to prove I hadn’t hurt my neck. That I was OK.

The clouds were gone. The crane beam across the divide between the buildings was perfectly visible. The caboose, hung from four cables and was nestled close enough to the roof that I could step over the door-sill and into it without seeing the gap.

“It’s been a while since you were here,” Lilah said. “Remember where everything is?”

“You live here, I’ve always wanted to ask?” I said.

Jules laughed. “I knew you had more questions.”

“Two weeks here, working. Two weeks at home with our families,” Lilah said.

The caboose shifted.

Lilah grabbed me to stop me falling over. She placed my hands on the polished brass handrail that I now saw went right around the whole inside of the caboose.

She closed the door and fastened a brass wire screen across it, slotting it top and bottom,. “Hinges and door-locks allow the door to shift sometimes,” she explained. “The screen will stop us falling out if the caboose cantilevers.”

I didn’t know what cantilever meant exactly but got the general idea.

Jules drew me with her to the wide window and the desk in front. “Saw you dreaming of driving that time. Since we’re short of a buggy, and that buggy is still hanging from its cabling and cluttering the route, we’ll take you across and down to Central Level 8. Press down on that button and you can get us under way.”

9. The Helpful Soldier

I danced through the grey bare-concrete doorway with the 8-W painted above it, so excited to have helped Jules drive the caboose over the gulf. The concrete space opened out to each side into a concourse filled with hundreds of people moving as though they all knew exactly where they were going.

I didn’t. I was on the wrong level for a start. Would I have enough time to browse through the stalls as some of the crowd were also doing? Besides, I was hungry. Would I be able to buy

something for 2 credits? I had to keep 4 for the way back.

Someone stood or sat selling something by every grey column. Hoping to make a sale, a flower-seller lifted bunches from one or other of a half dozen water-filled buckets to show off the blooms.

“Are these real flowers?” I said, sniffing the air for any fragrance.

“On your way, Fetcher.”

At the column next to her a water-seller had built a pyramid of bottles on a cart. I wasn’t thirsty, I walked on.

When I smelled the fluffy popped corn the next woman had in a couple of big baskets, I swallowed a sudden rush of spit. “I’m hungry enough for three bags,” I told her, smiling.

“These aren’t for the likes of you, Fetcher,” said that stall-holder. Not friendly.

What was it with these stall holders? I couldn’t walk away. I stayed to drool.

The popcorn seller screeched. “Get away! You stink!” She flapped her hands at me to get me gone and caught the eye of a soldier-woman passing. “Help me get rid of this pest? Give you a bag of popcorn?”

The soldier came ambling over. She was tall and had muscles showing under her uniform. She grabbed my arm and towed me away. “Pew! You *do* stink! Though you do look like a fetcher. You’re not on your level whoever you are. Tell you what, do me a fetch and I won’t report you.”

She took my silence as agreement. “You look like a beginner. But never mind, we all have to start somewhere.”

What could I say? I nodded. “Fetch what?”

“A girl of my house left her shoes on Level 7. New shoes that she took off while waiting for her transport, because she got blisters, the silly little goose. Worse, she was too embarrassed to go back for them when she realised that she’d forgotten them.”

She walked me to the balustrade overlooking the flight space, keeping hold of my arm tight enough that I couldn’t wrench loose. “Can you see them?”

Level 7 was the next level down. Seats surrounded the open space where you could wait for your ride. There weren’t any shoes that I could see near the seats on the opposite, eastern, side of the concourse. “Did she say where on level 7?”

“I don’t remember. I was too busy regretting that I would have to make another trip into central.” The soldier dragged me north so we could check Level 7 south and then Level 7 west.

“There, under that seat!”

“Check. Go fetch them, Fetcher.”

I remembered that I had the challenge. “I have a fetch on Level Six, can I do that at the same time?”

“Why not? Two fetches at the same time will get your brain cells going. You got the first address imprinted in your mind?”

I nodded.

“Run the shoes down to West Tower, Level 7, Apartment 12. Put them in the entry and pick up your credit chit.”

Easy. The girl who owned the shoes lived in the same building as me, on the level below. And she wasn’t a hidden child. I wished we could’ve been friends. My stomach grumbled and I remembered I was about to fall off my perch with hunger. “I’m too hungry to run.”

“Well, we better get you fuelled up.” The soldier walked me to a snack stall. “Much more wholesome than popcorn.”

“One of those?” I pointed at a sort of roll that looked appetising.

“Soy protein filling. That’ll be 15 credits,” the stall-holder said. “Sauce?” she said so frostily I didn’t bother.

The soldier paid by swiping her mobile.

While I gobbled down the roll, she stared into space. Disowning my lack of table manners, maybe.

Licking my fingers after eating, I re-checked the way Parra Central’s levels were connected. In case everything had been rebuilt since I was here with Hen. In two opposite corners were wide ramps going to the floors above and below. The other opposite corners had spiral stairs, one on either side of the wide maw where the flying transports went in and out. “W-7-12, you said.”

She nodded and took out her cell, dismissing me.

Me—I took off left—towards the ramps.

— — — —

From halfway between Level 8 and Level 7 in Parra Central, I glanced over to where I’d left the soldier. She was still there, now watching me. At the bottom of the Level 7 ramp, I turned to walk back along the western side of the concourse and imagined that every one of the people around me watched me.

I almost missed the shoes, I was so intent on what I imagined. With my face even redder, I backtracked to the seat, put the shoes in my pack and looked around as nonchalantly as I could to plan the next leg of my journey.

This level was even busier than Level 8 and often I had to dodge around people getting into and out of their transports. In the eastern half of the concourse, I had to push my way through the crowds in a produce market among the columns.

Finally I made it to Level 6. Glancing back up to Level 8, I saw that the soldier had gone. I could relax that meant. Enjoy the crowds? Better concentrate on finding the bank of lockers my father told me about.

Nothing resembling lockers in the first corridor. Nor in the second or third. I went clockwise around the outer edge of the concourse. Fewer people walked by the wall, so progress good until someone ran into me full-pelt from the opposite direction.

I went into tumbling mode, stepped back, and stayed on my feet.

She fell. "Who are you?" she said rudely. A girl not much bigger than me, dressed in fetcher garb with shin-length pants and shirt of faded, patchy tans and no-colours and a short raggedy overskirt of worn denim.

"I'm sorry. Are you hurt?" I put my hand out to help her up but she scrambled up by herself.

"If you'd been one of our fetchers, you would've known that this is an anti-clockwise route," she said. "So who are you? What's a beginner like you doing here?"

Three things I didn't know how to answer and one I could've observed. "OK, anti-clockwise. I'll remember that."

"What the hell, Jackie?" a little voice burbled from the side of the fetcher's ear. Oh, she had an earpiece in.

She talked at it out of the side of her mouth. "Can you see me, Gladdy? I caught a foreign fetcher on our patch. She ran clockwise along the outer edge and we met."

"What info have you got from her so far?" the little voice said.

"Nothing except that she'll remember the anti-clockwise for next time. She looks like a beginner?"

"Don't let her get away," Gladdy said as if I couldn't hear every word she said. "We'll take her in."

"Sorry," Jackie said to me with her hand over her ear. "Gladdy is my ganger. She's up there somewhere." She gestured vaguely into the direction of an upper level. "Today is my try-out for skipping up from the beginner class finally."

So maybe Jackie would understand. I gabbled out everything I thought that might help. “I have to go. I’m in disguise. I’m on my challenge. I’m one of Hen’s girls.” I tore out of her grip and continued on my way, still going clock-wise, the next corridor entrance only a few paces.

And there were the lockers, a three-high bank of them. My heart beating hard, I shot to the end of the row and stood flat against the wall, hiding.

Jackie and Gladdy entered the corridor arguing loudly. Jackie defended herself with the things I said. “I only know what she said. She said she is one of Hen’s girls like I would know who Hen is?”

“Hen? Doesn’t ring a bell,” Gladdy said. “You failed the trial obviously. Crashing into someone, you should be able to keep upright. Like her. More time in the gym for you.”

Their voices retreated around the corner and became part of the background hum on the concourse. I peered round the corner to see if they were really gone. When I was sure, I turned to the lockers to get an idea of their lay-out. How were they numbered—or named for that matter—along the rows? Or up and down?

I stared numbly at the middle row of lockers. Scarily, I couldn’t recall whether my father told me a number. I saw things like Smrn61. Nwhs203. A bunch of letters followed by a bunch of numbers. Or the other way around. Like, 54Ssmth. Most were a mix-up. Rn6m7E.

Codes in other words. My father meant me to work out his code? I gasped for air. My hands went slippery with sweat. He hadn’t told me anything. Or I didn’t hear, being so super confident. Then I was clammy all over. Breathing too fast.

Someone walked up to the lockers and passed his mobile over a code. The locker door popped open. “Looking to find, fetcher? Or looking to learn?” he said over his shoulder.

“Trying to remember,” I said. I shrugged, trying for “It’ll come to me.”

He slammed shut his locker. “Good luck with that.” Walked away with whatever he got out under his arm.

I remembered finally that Hen taught me heaps about cracking codes. I looked the weird numbers over more carefully. Just the six lockers nearest, to start with. No vowels apart from a capital E. Comparing it to other capital letters along the row, I thought it might refer to the dorm stacks E S W N. Ours was W.

The numerals could then refer to Levels and Apartment numbers. Work on them later. Back to the fact of no vowels. What had Hen said about them?

Think think. Ah. A long time ago paper was very precious and no computers then. Words were made shorter by leaving out the vowels so more could be fitted on a page. I looked at the six codes in front of me.

Not one had a W, meaning—if I was right—not one of the people who owned these lockers

came from my tower. I started at the beginning. Top row first locker. Was there a W in that code. No. Moved along. Found all the W codes along there and studied how they might make up a name. None could be turned into Moran.

Middle row. I got quicker. Fifth locker from the end...? I smirked. Moran@W820 got made into M8r20nW. I passed my mobile over the code.

Click. The most satisfying click I heard in a long time. I opened the door.

What? Nothing there! Nothing lay in the locker. Empty. Bare walls. Bare base. I felt all over the ceiling of it. Nothing. Not believing my eyes or my hand, I did it all again. Not even a note. Everything light in me dumped down to my stomach and made it heavier than lead. My father meant me to fail?

Failing at the challenge meant ... nobody ever said, but I knew it would be serious. Tears started. I couldn't stop them. I slammed the locker door shut and stepped around the corner again. Hid again. I failed at my challenge. Not smart enough. How did that happen? I cried three sobs worth and thought of a worse thing. Was it worth going home to find out?

Yes. I had to warn Hen. And what about Du, how could I help her now? Got my bandana from around my neck. Mopped up. Remembered dully that I am my father's daughter and that he'd been practicing his smarts a lot longer than I have. Probably something Hen said at one or another time. Warning me.

But now, I'm going to need to be really really smart to outsmart whatever he's got planned for me. And act more convincingly than I ever acted before. I still had those shoes to deliver. They'd give me an excuse if I needed one to be over there.