

Flight of the SkyCricket

Sample Chapter

The other fellow was a knight named Dashonae, who bowed low to the girls. Once he had cast aside his cloak, it was easy to believe he was a knight. A long straight sword hung at his side, and every muscular bump across his chest and midriff was clearly visible through his coarsely woven undershirt (“ripped” was the word that came to Anna’s mind). He was young, clean shaven, and very good looking, with high cheekbones and a straight, thin nose. Eli, she attempted to return his bow with a curtsy—deeper than the last. It was her undoing. She lost her balance and fell on her backside in the sand. The knight controlled himself admirably, but the tiniest grin tweaked the corner of his mouth as he helped her to her feet. Anna rolled her eyes and wondered if she could make her own first impression separately.

But there was no time for further pleasantries. The horses had been paid and were wandering back toward the city with several sacks of oats slung over their backs, and the scientist was itching to be skybound. He herded the girls toward the ship, saying, “Yes, yes, how cozy when young people chat, but niceties can wait till we’re aloft.”

Eli hung back, staring upward at what looked more and more like a boat standing on its stern. Lambient explained that all the effort had been necessary to tighten the four “launch springs.” The large cylinders Anna had thought fuel tanks were actually casings that held huge metal springs—“of my own design,” added the professor, grinning.

“Once we’re all strapped in, I’ll throw the lever and . . .” He threw his hand into the sky to simulate a launch. Anna felt Eli stiffen. “Let’s prep for launch.” He rubbed his hands together greedily before mounting a metal ladder affixed to the ship. Actually, it lay flat along the starboard deck, but since the ship pointed straight up, the ladder ascended to a small, round door in the side of the cabin. If the ship were setting properly on the ground, it would have featured a good-sized deck you could walk about on, like the whaling ship from *Moby Dick*, but since everything currently pointed up, the decks were all just vertical surfaces like walls. “Off we go,” the professor added gleefully and climbed the ladder.

He reached the top of the ladder and swung open the door of the cabin. His hinder parts disappeared through the hatch, but Eli remained fixed, staring at the ladder.

Anna gave her a shove. “Get going.”

“But I don’t think—”

“All the better. Don’t think. Just climb.” Anna was now feeling adventurous and resented her sister’s hesitations.

Eli hoisted herself up. Anna put her hand on a rung of the ladder and followed. But when Eli reached the porthole, she looked down at Anna with wide eyes.

“What?” said Anna impatiently.

“You do realize what he’s going to do to us, don’t you?” Her eyes were wild.

“Yeah, he’s going to launch us like the shuttle.”

“But not on a rocket. On a boat . . . with springs!”

“Yeah, big ones.”

“Don’t you get it? It doesn’t matter how big they are. You can’t get something this heavy off the ground with just springs. And even if he does, we’ll just fall out of the sky again. ”

Anna gritted her teeth. “So at least we’ll bounce when we crash. Now are you getting in or are you getting down?”

“There’s got to be another—”

“There is no other way. Look, you want to find the window and get home? Then climb through the stupid hole. You want to spend the rest of your life here? Then go back to Whinsom. I’m sure he can make you a nun.” She knew she was being harder on Eli than she needed to. Eli would go through with it. She just thought about things too much. But sometimes you have to just bite your lip and jump.

“What’s going on up there?” called Rose from the ground. Eli was shaking violently, but she put her hands on the porthole and clambered in.

When Anna reached the entrance, she looked around her and was amazed how being a scant twenty feet off the ground could change your perspective. As she considered the distance to the ground, it did seem entirely probable that they would crash to their deaths a few seconds after takeoff. The whole machine did seem as if it came out of a bad science fiction movie. Lambient seemed confident, but she had seen his lab.

On the ground, Sir Dashonae had removed the great metal gear and was stowing it against the portside desk under stout leather straps. Sazerac sat beside him, staring up at Anna. He looked her in the eyes for a moment, then lowered his head, shook it from side to side resignedly, and trotted around the ship.

“What?” Rose was still looking up at her.

“Nothing,” said Anna and climbed in.

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