

Chapter 3: The Colossus

The 2080s

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Chapter 3: The Colossus

12:00pm GMT Friday 10 January 2085

The whole Carter family gathered inside the garage, where Dad was trying to squeeze Rover's carry-cage into the boot. When he was satisfied with its position, he picked up Rover, shoved him in and closed the cage door.

'Sorry about this Rover,' said Dad, 'it's going to be an uncomfortable week. But you'll have more room onboard the ship.'

'Are we finished then?' asked Zak.

'One last thing,' said Dad. 'I have to turn off the house computer. Do you want to see.'

They all marched back into the lounge. It still seemed homely enough – the dark blue carpet and ceiling; the orange and white animated pattern on the wall; the turquoise and green sofa covers. The only evidence to suggest they were moving out was the lack of solid ornaments.

A control panel appeared in the centre of the wall. Dad cast his eyes on the panel and worked his way through the menus. Suddenly, the whole room transformed. The strong colours and patterns swiftly faded, to be replaced throughout by a uniform grey.

Zak had experienced this in his own room when punished, but he'd never seen the effect on the rest of the house. He took a quick peek in the hallway and kitchen. Beforehand, every drop of colour had been dynamically displayed via the house computer. Now, carpets, stairs, worktops and all other surfaces were blank.

'I hardly recognise it as our house,' said Zak.

'I'm glad to see the back of that wallpaper pattern,' said Skye, 'it was vile.'

'But it's all on computer,' said Mum, taking offence. 'I was going to reuse it in our new home.'

Skye shuddered, and whispered to Zak.

'See if you can delete it before we get there.'

Zak nodded.

'Oh, there's one last thing,' he said.

Zak nipped into the kitchen, and touched a spot on the worktop. The cupboard below slid out. It was still full of crockery – new plates would be cheap on Mars. Zak retrieved an object tucked away at the back.

‘Gran’s clock!’ said Mum. ‘What was it doing in there?’

‘I couldn’t stand the ticking,’ said Zak, stuffing it into his bag. ‘Let’s hope no-one thinks it’s a timebomb.’

Although it wouldn’t be inconvenient if he was detained out of suspicion, he thought. It would save him an escape attempt.

The family returned to the garage, leaving the house for good. They strapped themselves into the car - Zak and Skye in the back, Mum and Dad in the front, with Dad taking the seat at the control dashboard.

Much more spacious than a motor car, the jet-car was a haven of comfort. In the air, the width of lanes was no longer restricted by the historic placing of buildings, and so jet-cars were fifty percent wider than motor cars. Yet the jet-car travelled so fast that most journeys were only a matter of minutes.

‘Kids,’ said Dad, ‘it’s going to be a stop-start day today I’m afraid. It will be six hours before we get on board the ship, and most of that time will be spent waiting around. We’ll drive to Coventry Airport, but then we’ve got to catch a plane to the Florida Spaceport, take the shuttle to the Earth One Space Station, and then transfer onto the ship. I’d say you’re better off listening to music, than trying to watch TV or play a game.’

Zak sighed. Maybe it would be more relaxing if each part of the journey took several hours.

Dad started the car. A low but loud hum grew around them. The roof of the garage opened. Two doors separated and wheeled back to the side.

Zak looked out of the car window and through the open roof. The sky was a brilliant blue, with barely a wisp of cloud to spoil it. He was sure it was unusual to get such a clear day so early in the year, and wondered if scientists were being a bit hasty in concluding there was an Ice Age on the way.

The jet engines fired underneath, and the car rose vertically through the open roof. It ascended to a height of twenty metres, well above the house. Zak watched the downward camera view on the dashboard, which showed the rooftop garage doors wheeling shut.

‘Goodbye house,’ said Dad.

The car swivelled ninety degrees to the right. The engines burned again, and the car shot forwards and upwards to join a nearby line of traffic.

Dad leaned back from the dashboard and turned to the children.

‘It’s only five minutes to the airport,’ he said. ‘We won’t see Rover after that, as he and the luggage will be handled separately. But you can visit him on the ship.’

He closed the navigation display, brought up the travel arrangement details, and started checking them, leaving the flight computer to precisely guide the jet-car to the airport.

Zak considered his opportunities to escape. He didn’t know the exact proceedings along the way, so there was a strong element of risk to his plan. Therefore, it was worth one last attempt to persuade his parents to give up the notion.

‘Dad,’ said Zak. ‘Tom thinks that the ship to Mars could be attacked by terrorists.’

‘What?’ said Dad with incredulity.

‘Two other ships have been blown up, and the MMM have said they’ll treat people going to Mars as a target.’

Dad laughed nervously. Zak noticed Mum look away. Skye had already started listening to music and was oblivious.

‘Zak,’ said Dad, ‘the ship isn’t going to be attacked. The MMM are just a bunch of rock hugging eco-freaks. They haven’t got the capability to blow up a ship. Those other ships were destroyed in accidents.’

Zak sensed that his parents were hiding something, but Dad’s voice grew in conviction.

‘They’d need a pretty big bomb to destroy the ship we’re travelling on. And security is so tight they wouldn’t be able to smuggle so much as one particle of explosives on board.’

Zak didn't feel reassured, but he was not confident in making his own argument.

'But there's no escort through the solar system,' he said, remembering one of the points Tom had put to him.

'Zak,' said Dad, as if Zak was being unreasonable. 'The most dangerous part of the journey is this jet-car ride. One slight error by the flight computer, and we could collide with another car and smash into the ground. The second most dangerous part is the plane. We have to fly up to 30,000 metres and down again at high speeds. If the engine fails, it's a long way down. The third most dangerous part is the shuttle. Rocketing straight up through the atmosphere is not only testing on the health, but you've got to hope you don't hit any large debris floating around in orbit. Thankfully, the shuttle has a very hard nose. Travelling across the solar system is plain sailing by comparison. Space is so vast that the chances of colliding with anything are virtually nil. Should the engines fail, there's no gravity to send you hurtling to the ground.'

Dad tried to give a reassuring smile.

'Yes,' he said, 'by the time we reach the space station, we'll be past the worst of it.'

Zak stared at his dad in horror. He had never known travelling was so dangerous. He began to feel anxious about the day ahead. Not only was he still concerned about terrorists, he now had all these other perils to worry about.

His escape plan would still go ahead, provided he actually made it to the shuttle.

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4:00pm GMT Friday 10 January 2085

To Zak's great relief, the jet-car and plane journeys were completed uneventfully. He was now facing a new experience, the shuttle. He had never been into space before. Even late in the 21st Century, while many thousands travelled into space every day, space travel was not commonplace.

His escape had to be timed perfectly. It had to be just before a point of no turning back, so that once he was on his way, his family could not return to get him. It would have to be between the shuttle arriving, and the Colossus leaving.

Zak took his seat by the window on the left side, near the rear of the carriage. He found the interior of the shuttle comforting, as it was similar to the plane he had just travelled on. His nerves eased as each stage of the trip progressed identically to an aeroplane flight - taxiing on the runway, firing the engines, accelerating at high speed, then lifting off. The first noticeable difference was that the self-serve drinks trolley did not make its way down the aisle. The shuttle continued to rise at a steep angle, until the flight status read an altitude of 15,000 metres, when Zak noticed out of the window that the wings were changing shape. The huge wings that had stretched out to the side to give the aircraft lift, were now folding in, converting the shuttle into an arrow-like shape. It reminded Zak of a bird of prey folding its wings back in order to launch a dive, except in this case, they would be heading up.

A soothing male voice made an announcement.

‘This is your Captain. Passengers and crew, prepare for vertical lift.’

The shuttle tilted back. Zak risked another glance out the window, to find that the horizon was vertical.

The engines fired again, a deeper roar that reverberated through the carriage. Most of the passengers, including Zak, let out an audible gasp. Now, he felt like he was sitting on a rocket, heading straight up, and away from Earth.

Such was the intensity of the ride, none of the passengers were talking to each other. Zak looked to Dad for reassurance on this, only the third most dangerous part of the whole journey. But Dad had his head bowed and his eyes shut. His knuckles were white from gripping the arm rest.

Out of the window, the sky was turning black, as the atmosphere became thin. Zak couldn't help but gaze out. In all the space pilot games he had played, none had done justice to the view that now presented itself. Earth gleamed a brilliant blue. White cloud formations swirled across most of the surface, and where they broke, patches of green and yellow distinguished land from sea. Zak tried to identify the coast from the fragments of colour, but found it difficult to make sense of them, as the shuttle was still rising vertically, and he was having to look over his shoulder.

Suddenly, the shuttle banked sharply to the left, triggering more gasps. Zak now found as he looked out that he was facing almost directly down towards the Earth. Due to thin cloud cover, he soon realised that he could see western Europe. A solid white sheet extended from the North as far down as the tip of Scotland. Britain was white from the snow cover but just about framed by the blue sea. Zak hadn't realised that the ice sheet had advanced so close to home.

As he wondered what might really happen when the ice sheet reached the mainland, he became aware that he was weightless.

The noise of the shuttle intensified, and Zak became alarmed by the sound of loud pinging. The Captain's soothing voice brought another announcement.

'Apologies for the noise. We're just encountering some orbital debris. Nothing to worry about, this shuttle has a very hard nose. Enjoy the rest of the flight, we will be arriving at Earth One in fifty-five minutes.'

The pinging eventually stopped, and within the time stated by the Captain the shuttle slowed and came to a stop. Zak couldn't see the Space Station out of his window, but the passengers were instructed to leave the shuttle.

Now was the time. Zak braced himself for the escape. He took his time and fumbled around, much to his family's frustration, so that they were among the last people to leave their seats. The stewards watched intently to ensure everyone left the carriage.

They made their way to the front using the new method of floating down the aisle, then continued out of the door and down a tunnel. It was a relaxing way to move after the journey, but difficult to control. As they bumped their way along, Zak looked out for the next checkpoint. He had to make sure he avoided going through it, but his only escape route would be back to the shuttle. He had to return and hide for long enough.

They reached the back of a queue. With people and hand luggage floating around, he couldn't yet see the head of it, but it moved quickly.

As the last few stragglers joined the queue behind them, they arrived at the front. Waiting for them was a pod with large windows. They climbed into the seats, and began to fasten themselves in.

Then Zak jumped out of his seat.

'I forgot my bag!' he exclaimed. 'It's got Gran's clock in.'

In that moment, he could see Mum and Dad struggle with the dilemma. They wouldn't want him to leave it behind, yet they wouldn't want him out of their sight either. They froze.

Zak didn't wait for a response. He quickly climbed out to make his way back to the shuttle.

He was confronted by a huge lipstick framed smile.

'Is this your bag?' said a stewardess, holding it up.

Zak grimaced at her, getting a puzzled reaction.

'Yes,' he said, swiping it from her grasp.

He felt almost pushed back into the pod, and before he had even found his seat again, the door slid shut and the pod started moving.

Zak took a deep breath. That would not be the only opportunity, but it would only get more difficult.

The lights inside the pod were dimmed, so for a few minutes, they could see little other than the sides of a tunnel as the pod trundled along at a slow pace. Then, the large windows turned black, and the change in lighting caused them all to squint and adjust their eyes. They peered outside.

For the first time, Zak could see the Earth One Space Station, from which the pod had emerged. It was a huge flat construction made up of interlinking modules. Behind it loomed the blue globe of Earth. As the pod drew away, the perspective shifted, enabling Zak to gain some perception of the scale.

The pod was travelling along a windowed chute through space, which stretched out in a curve over a considerable distance. It terminated at their destination.

‘There it is,’ said Dad pointing. ‘The Colossus.’

Zak wasn’t impressed with his first view of the ship. At this distance it simply appeared to be a thin tube. Although a few mechanical arms reached out to it, there was no familiar object nearby to gauge its scale.

‘Some Colossus. Are we actually going to fit in that thing?’ he asked.

‘We’re still a few kilometres away yet,’ said Dad, confidently.

‘How big is it then?’ asked Zak.

‘Six hundred and eighty metres long,’ replied Dad, ‘and thirty-two metres in diameter. It’s divided into two halves. At the front is the living area, and at the back is the engine and fuel tank.’

As the pod continued its steady journey along the chute, some of the detail became clearer. Zak could see a slight notch halfway along. He could easily tell which half was which. The half to the left was white, its end forming a rounded cone like the front of an aeroplane. The right half was copper coloured, and fanned out at its end.

Zak laughed. ‘It’s a giant rocket,’ he said.

‘That’s why it takes only one week to get to Mars,’ said Dad.

‘I wouldn’t call it beautiful,’ said Skye.

‘There is a beautiful ship called the Eternal Sun Spaceliner,’ said Dad. ‘It takes three months to reach Mars. Would you like to go on that instead?’

‘No,’ said Skye apologetically. ‘This is fine.’

Zak spotted markings on the surface of the ship. They slid downwards and disappeared.

‘Is it rotating?’ he exclaimed.

‘It is,’ said Dad, smiling. ‘It rotates to create artificial gravity. In space, we are weightless because the forces of gravity are so small. But it’s possible to create a force that acts like gravity. The cylinder spins around, and we get pulled against the sides. Its called a centrifuge.’

‘Like those spinning rides at the theme parks,’ suggested Zak.

‘That’s right,’ said Dad. ‘Or you could say its like the spin cycle on an old-fashioned washing machine.’

‘Great!’ said Skye. ‘A week of being spun round like a pair of damp underpants.’

‘Well, it would be more convenient to use a gravity field,’ said Dad impatiently. ‘But that’s just science fiction.’

The pod was nearing the ship, and would soon reach a windowless chute, which led to one mechanical arm at the centre of the living area. The arm appeared to hold the ship in a circular claw, but the ship rotated smoothly within its grasp.

It was their last chance to view the outside of the ship. Conversation stopped as all four of them stared in awe. The ship appeared to grow before their eyes, and ever more detailed markings became clear. Even on its side, the ship was tall. They were dwarfed by it. And its length now stretched as far as any of them could see.

The gentle rotation of the ship was mesmerising. Zak felt as if he were shrinking, while a giant steamroller bore down on him. He started to cower, but the view disappeared abruptly, as the pod entered the tunnel.

‘I take it back,’ he said, excitedly. ‘This is one hell of a ship!’

Zak felt a first tinge of disappointment that he wouldn’t be travelling on it.

The pod came to a halt and the tunnel lights switched off. The family could see only each other in the dim light. Zak could sense his body turning, but couldn’t see any evidence of movement. There was a pull of acceleration, followed by an equally fast deceleration. Zak found this slightly uncomfortable, but then became aware of the weight of his body on the seat.

‘Gravity!’ he exclaimed.

Outside the pod, a door slid back and light flushed in. A steward was waiting. He opened the pod door, and greeted them with a smile.

‘Welcome,’ he said, ‘to the Colossus.’

Zak unclipped his seat fasteners and stood up.

‘Hurry up,’ he insisted, ‘this pod will be whisked away any second.’

The others fumbled around faster.

He helped each of them out of the pod, then pulled the door closed and sat back down. Four astonished faces looked on as the pod slid away with him inside.

‘Goodbye,’ he shouted, with a wave.

The light quickly faded, leaving the pod in darkness. Zak felt his body churn as the pod spun into the returning chute. Then, as it slid into the windowed section, the space station and Earth appeared back in view.

He had done it. Zak congratulated himself. It had been relatively simple. The Colossus would not be delayed for one missing passenger, and by the time he was returned to Earth One, it would be starting its engines.

Zak stretched back in his seat and took a deep breath. He would simply tell the authorities that he refused to go, and instead wanted to stay with his obvious legal guardian on Earth - his Gran. He could only imagine she would be pleased when he turned up, and with one of her prized possessions no less.

To his surprise, the pod became dark again, and Zak felt himself turn upside down. Light then filled the pod, and gravity took hold. The scowling face of the steward pressed against the glass.

‘Out!’ he demanded, as the door slid open.

Zak complied. With four pairs of eyes trained on him so angrily, he felt shame. But this was due to yet another failure of his plan, rather than any sense of wrongdoing.

‘What do you think you’re doing,’ demanded Mum. ‘I know you don’t want to come, but that’s no excuse for trying to wreck the trip.’

‘Well I’m here now,’ said Zak irritably.

Mum shouted at him a bit more, but he ignored her.

He looked up, and absorbed the sight before him. It took a few seconds for it to resolve into something that made sense in his mind, as he related the shape of the outside to the architecture on the inside.

They were in a huge room, shaped like a drum on its side. The floor on which they were standing was the wall of the drum. It stretched out in front of them, curved upwards smoothly, looped back overhead, and completed a perfect circle behind them. It was a path that looped the loop. Zak was astonished to see people standing and walking around its entirety.

‘They call this a hamster wheel,’ said Dad, ‘a section of the ship with a path all the way round. This one is the reception hall.’

Zak got to grips with the basic shape, but there was more to understand. There were so many people walking in so many directions, it made him dizzy. He tried to make sense of the finer details.

Each side of the hamster wheel took the shape of a huge disc. These discs were the true walls of the room. Where these walls met the floor, Zak could see four doors evenly spaced along each side. Each door had an arched frame that glowed with a bright colour. He could also see another set of doors higher up the walls. These were connected via balconies along each side, and walkways crossing overhead. About a quarter of the way round from where he stood, stairs led up to this higher level. The ship was a double-decker.

He could not see all the way around the path. As he looked directly up, there appeared to be a ceiling. He changed his position to get a sense of perspective. It remained directly overhead, but the pattern shifted slightly. He realised the ceiling was curved back on itself tightly, so forming a thick axel running through the centre of the wheel.

Zak’s head was spinning, as there was so much to take in. But he could not sense that the giant cylinder they were standing inside was itself spinning round.

The rest of the family had sat down on a large bench in the middle of the hall. Zak knew there was one last opportunity for him to escape – the lifeboats. He had to find their location. He also had a strong urge to run round the hamster wheel. For some reason he couldn't remember, it seemed the thing to do.

He started the timer on his watch, then broke into a sprint. He charged along the right side of the hall in the direction of the curve. Despite the floor rising up ahead of him, it felt no different to running on flat ground.

He kept in a straight line, as despite the large number of people in the hall, it was surprisingly uncrowded. The passengers were mainly men, and the women were mostly one half of a couple. Zak spotted a few families with small children, but couldn't see anyone his own age.

As he reached a quarter of the way round, something caught his eye. He spied what appeared to be a girl up ahead, on the other side of the hall. He couldn't see her face, because from his position he was looking down on her from above. Her long straight hair was jet-black and silky, perfectly parted down the middle. As he got closer, her face came into view, and he caught sight of pale skin and a dinky nose. She was definitely a teenager, but she appeared to be with a much older man.

He stayed on the opposite side to the girl, but took a good look as he went past. He was curious about her, but startled by the scene. The man looked old enough to be her grandfather. He stood at a reception desk, engaged in conversation. Like a statue, the girl stood a few feet away in a stiff upright pose, her hands clasped neatly in front. She wore the oddest clothes he had ever seen on a young person, a navy trouser suit with elegant white trimmings. An embroidered rectangular case was by her feet. She looked so out of place, he wondered if she had somehow been plucked from an era of history.

There was no time to find out more. Zak put his head down and kept running. He soon found himself tiring – it was further than it looked. As the pod entrance came into view, he spotted the lifeboat symbol next to a red door on the left. He had gone the long way round. By the time he arrived back at the start he was panting heavily.

‘Twenty seconds!’ he exclaimed, staggering over to the bench.

‘That’s rubbish,’ said Dad, ‘it’s only about eighty metres.’

‘I went off too fast,’ said Zak.

‘You’re probably unfit from sitting in that chair all day,’ said Skye. ‘You should do some exercise while you’re onboard.’

The family remained seated, and watched as one last group of people was dropped off by pod. When there were no more arrivals, an announcement came over a loudspeaker.

‘Would passengers please make their way to the Acceleration Room at 16-O-G. The ship is ready to depart.’

The number 16-O-G meant nothing to Zak. But he noticed that the other passengers had rushed to converge on a flashing green door opposite the pod, and next to the lifeboat door.

He leaned over, and pretended to be recovering, waiting until the queue had almost disappeared. He joined his agitated family at its end.

This was Zak’s last chance. He had to sneak into the lifeboat room, and cut adrift.