

THE CLIMB

D. Dante Zehavi

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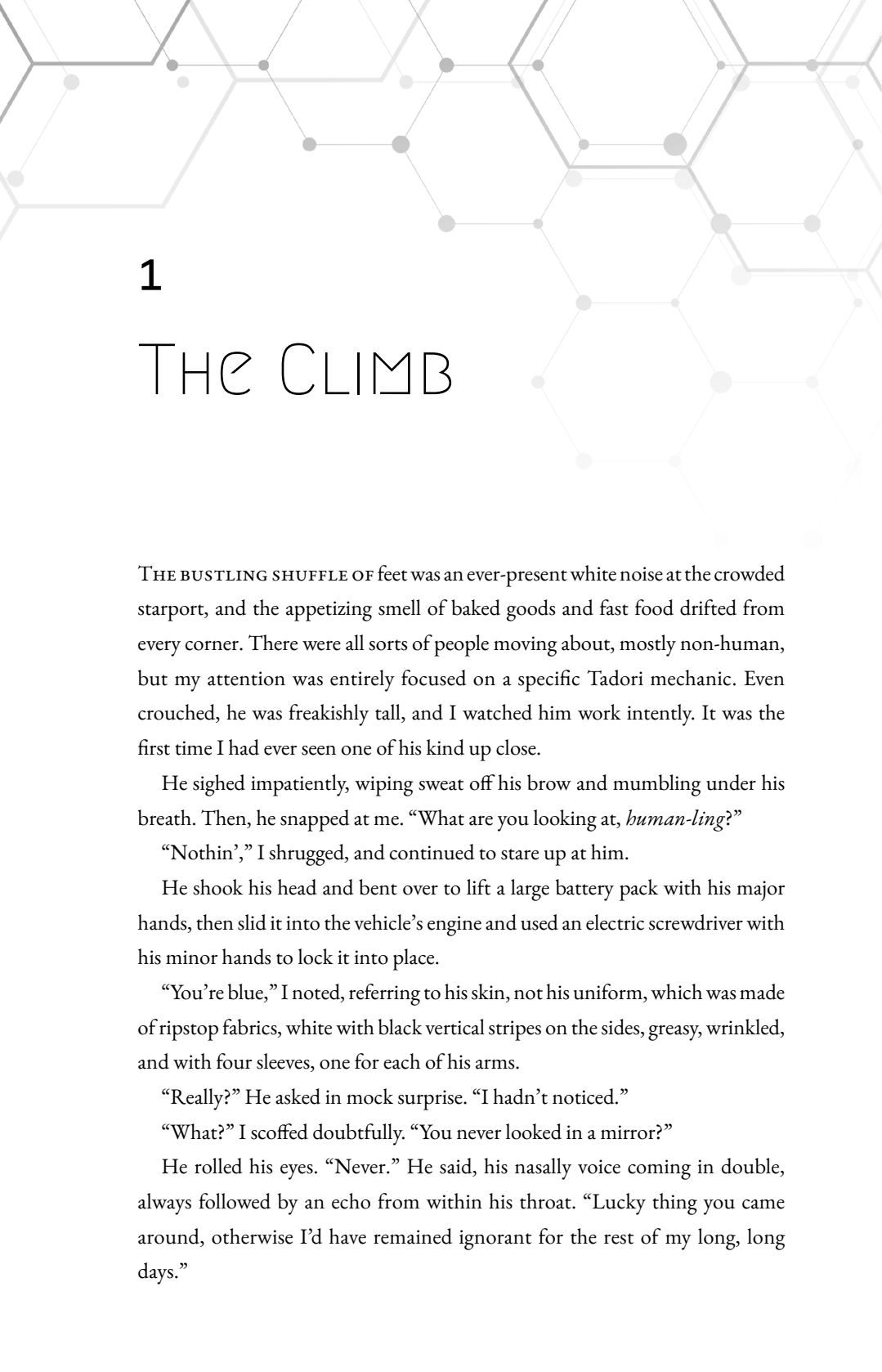
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1

THE CLIMB

THE BUSTLING SHUFFLE OF feet was an ever-present white noise at the crowded starport, and the appetizing smell of baked goods and fast food drifted from every corner. There were all sorts of people moving about, mostly non-human, but my attention was entirely focused on a specific Tadori mechanic. Even crouched, he was freakishly tall, and I watched him work intently. It was the first time I had ever seen one of his kind up close.

He sighed impatiently, wiping sweat off his brow and mumbling under his breath. Then, he snapped at me. “What are you looking at, *human-ling*?”

“Nothin’,” I shrugged, and continued to stare up at him.

He shook his head and bent over to lift a large battery pack with his major hands, then slid it into the vehicle’s engine and used an electric screwdriver with his minor hands to lock it into place.

“You’re blue,” I noted, referring to his skin, not his uniform, which was made of ripstop fabrics, white with black vertical stripes on the sides, greasy, wrinkled, and with four sleeves, one for each of his arms.

“Really?” He asked in mock surprise. “I hadn’t noticed.”

“What?” I scoffed doubtfully. “You never looked in a mirror?”

He rolled his eyes. “Never.” He said, his nasally voice coming in double, always followed by an echo from within his throat. “Lucky thing you came around, otherwise I’d have remained ignorant for the rest of my long, long days.”

I chortled, saying, “Your voice sounds weird,” and moved around him to get a better view of his work.

“Your observational skills never cease to amaze, little human. What will your wisdom reveal next?”

“I dunno,” I shrugged.

He pulled away from the engine hatch and flicked several switches on the side of the hull. The vehicle thrummed to life, and a digital gauge appeared on the monitor, filling up with cyan bars, as the platform began to levitate on its anti-gravity emitters.

He barely managed to smile before the whole thing collapsed—grav-emitters failing, light snuffing out, the electric thrum dying in a shriek.

“Oh, damn you!” He cursed, smashing a major fist against the side of the cargo-hauler. “Blasted thing,” he added, and huddled to look through the engine hatch, once again.

“Can *I* ask *you* a question?” I said, as he reached into the hatch with one of his minor arms.

“My, my, I doubt there is anything I— *Ugh!*” He grunted as he pulled out a cable and transferred it to one of his major hands, which then put it aside. “I doubt there is anything I could tell you you don’t already know, wise little human.” He pulled a replacement cable from his toolbox.

“Probably,” I agreed, with all the confidence of a six-year-old, and thumbed the belt of my oversized cargo pants. “But I wanna try anyway.”

“Very well,” he said, burying his head through the hatch. “I shall hear this query of yours.” His voice echoed quadruply from inside the engine hull.

“Why do you have four arms?”

“Wha— *Oouff!*” He cried as his head banged against the hatch, and he pulled himself out to glare at me. “What?”

I took a deep breath and restated my question, loud and clear. “Why. Do you. Have. Four arms?”

“Ahh— Well— I—” he stammered, bewildered by the question. “Well... why do you have two?” He answered defensively.

I beamed. It was a wonderful question, and one I had never considered before. I took a long minute and thought about it deeply before I replied.

“To hug my mom.”

“Aww,” he cooed.

“And bully my sister.”

“Oh!”

“Can’t do that with one hand, trust me, I’ve tried... doesn’t work as well.”

“Why, I wouldn’t dare doubt you, Mister— Eh...?”

“Lorrian, Lorrian Quincy. My friends call me Lorr.”

“Yes. Lorrian.” He said, burying his head through the hatch again. “What can I say? That’s the duality of mankind for you: hug your mom, bully your sister. Truly, you are an exemplar of your unscrupulous race, little human-ling.”

“Thank you!” I said, chest swelling with pride.

“Wha— that wasn’t—” he snorted, then sighed. “Of course, you’re welcome.”

“I bet I could do that better if I had four hands, though,” I said.

“What was that again?”

“Hug my mom.”

“Ahh... and bully your sister, right, right.”

I sat down on the hauler platform and let my mind drift away, imagining the possibilities. I could eat *and* play holo-games at the same time, and beating dad at arm wrestling would be so much easier—with four hands, I’d be twice as strong—he wouldn’t stand a chance—poor dad.

“This should do it.” He said and popped his head out of the hatch, closing it this time, and once again flicked on all the switches. It thrummed and began to levitate, lifting me up with it. We both held our breath for a long moment. It remained aloft.

“Woo-hoo! You did it!”

“Indeed.” He smiled snobbishly, clearly pleased with himself.

“Can I get a ride?”

“What? Don’t be stupid, this isn’t a game.” He snarled.

“Oh, please, please, please!” I clasped my hands together. “Just a little ride.”

"Listen, you *human-ling* waste of—" he paused, thinking, then grinned. "Listen, Lorrian... normally, I am not allowed to give little children rides on the hauler, but... I could make an exception for you if you succeed in my challenge."

"Challenge?" I jumped. "What challenge?"

"See the... *statues* over there?" He pointed (with one of his major fingers), and I followed with my gaze.

At the center of the starport dock was a small purple garden bathed in the soft natural light of oncoming dusk descending upon it from a ceiling window. Its stone pavements cut through fields of tall grass and bushes with large heart-shaped leaves, all leading to the garden's middle. There, surrounded by a holographic barrier, were statues of Tadori men and women, striking various poses, some with their limbs spread wide, others folded into themselves. They were displayed in a circle with multiple layers, each inner layer taller than the outer, so as not to hide any of them. They were smooth and life-like, I could see that even from afar, but they were clearly made of stone.

"Yeah, I see 'em."

"Good. Now, if you can climb all the way to the top and stand on the uppermost statue's shoulders, then I'll let you ride on the hauler like you asked. Hmm? What do you say, Lorr?"

I smirked. Climbing that high was going to be no problem at all, but... "What about the sign?"

"The sign?"

"The holo-barrier, you shouldn't cross it, right?"

The Tadori shook his head, clicking his tongue, and sat down beside me on the hauler. "Lorr, dear friend, do you really think I'd ask you to do this if it was going to get you in trouble?" He laid a minor hand over his heart. "I am offended that you'd even suspect such a thing." Then, he pointed to his name tag. "You see this? And my uniform? I work here, Lorr—a smart boy like you should know. Well, you have my permission to go past the barrier, so don't worry that little genius head of yours about it anymore!" He ruffled my short dark hair with a major hand, and I giggled.

"So, all I gotta do is climb to the top, and you'll let me ride the hauler?"

“That’s right.”

I nodded, leaped from the hauler, and stood in front of him. “Pinky promise?” I asked, putting mine forward.

“Pinky what?”

“Pinky promise, it’s... You lock fingers together, and you make a promise, and then it’s unbreakable.” I explained.

“Oh,” he looked at his hands. Each one had three fingers and a thumb. “Which one is the pinky?”

“The smallest finger.”

“On which hand?”

“Ahh... the...” It was a real puzzle; I had never considered the implications of pinky swearing with someone who had more than two hands. “Smaller one, I think.”

The Tadori nodded and locked his blue finger with mine. “And so I swear.”

“And so I swear,” I felt the urge to repeat.

“To keep this oath.”

“To keep this oath,” I followed along.

He waited for a long moment and then nodded again. “So, what now?” He asked.

“Now...” I said, unlocking my finger from his. “I climb.”



I passed through the holo-barrier, causing it to momentarily ripple and turn red, then began my climb.

The Tadories were huge, rising to seven feet tall on average, and the statues were no different.

I had to start from a stooping statue, using its limbs as foot-holds as I rose. I rested one of my hiking boots on the statue’s crouching knee, then the other boot on the base of the thigh, and grabbed onto the inner elbow of its left major

arm. Pushing myself up, I managed to climb over its upper left shoulder and stand on its back. Then, from there, I hopped to the circle's second level.

I took a long breath before I continued. The next one was going to be a bit more of a challenge, but I was sure I could pull it off. I hugged the leg of a standing statue and clambered up it, as if it were a pipe. Then, once I was high enough, I reached for its minor hands, which were clasped together below its belly, and gripped them tightly, pulling for counterbalance, while pushing against the side of the statue's body with my legs. Lifting my grip up its right minor arm as I went along, I eventually managed to land a foot on its clasped hands and use it as a step ladder to advance up to its lower shoulders, then the upper. Climbing over its face, I eventually managed to stand on its shoulders and leap to the third inner layer of the circle.

I was breathing heavily now, but remained determined. This was the last layer of the circle, and it only had one statue. If I managed to climb up it and stand tall, I'd win the challenge.

The statue was of a woman, her back straight, minor hands pressed together between her breasts, and her major arms arched over her head, hands forming a diamond between index fingers and thumbs. I stood before her, hands on my waist, plotting my way up.

Her legs were spread wide... If I hooked my belt over her minor hands, then used it for leverage, pushing against her calves, then knees and thighs, I could slowly make my way up. Yes... that could work, and I even started undoing my belt, but never got a chance to try it.

"Hey, you!" I heard the shout and turned. There was a crowd of people gathered around the garden, all of them looking at me, horrified. "What the heck do you think you are doing?" The man yelling was a Rolnic, red-skinned, with sharp scales covering his head and arms, and wearing a Judicant Ranger uniform—blue, with white and black vertical stripes at the sides.

I scanned the crowd, searching for the Tadori—my friend. He could explain it to them, tell them I had permission, but I couldn't spot him. I wanted to call his name, but... I never asked for it.

The name tag! He pointed it out to me, but it was written in Zandri, and I barely knew how to read Ensyn, so a language as complex as Zandri was way beyond me. I was screwed!

“Wait, you don’t understand, I had—”

“Get down from there, this instant!” The ranger yelled.

I pursed my lips, pouting. I was so close to the top; if I went down now, I’d have to start it all over again.

“Listen— you don’t— the Tadori, he gave me permission—”

“Don’t argue with me, boy! Get down, now!”

“Lorrian?!” My dad’s voice.

I followed it and found him and my mom pushing their way through the crowd. They both wore dark overall flight-suits, except Dad’s was fully unzipped—top half hanging over a belt-harness heavy with tools and gadgets—while Mom’s was partially unzipped, enough to expose her neckline.

“What are you— how did you get all the way up there?” Dad asked.

“I climbed,” I pronounced proudly.

“Really?” He smiled.

“Berk!” Mom pressed her elbow into his side.

“Ah,” he cleared his throat. “Look, buddy, you gotta come down from there.”

“But—”

“No arguments, just come down.”

I sighed, defeated, and began scheming my way downward.

Stepping on a statue’s head, I slid down its back to the second layer, and a gasp rose from the crowd.

Mom hid her face in her hands. “Oh, stars, Berk! He is stepping on them.”

“Yeah, well... he needs to come down somehow.”

I leaped—drawing another murmur of gasps—caught a stretched major forearm, and used it to control my direction and momentum, flinging myself down to land on the purple grass, which cushioned my fall.

My parents came toward me, and I started walking to meet them halfway, back hunched over, hands deep in my pockets.

“Nice landing,” Dad said.

"Don't encourage him," Mom said.

"Bad landing," Dad quipped. I snorted.

"This isn't funny!" Mom insisted.

"No, it isn't." The ranger said grimly. "Are you his guardians?"

"Yes, that's my son," Dad said.

"Not something to be proud of at the moment," Mom frowned.

"You are aware that what he did was—"

"Abhorrent." Mom glared at me.

"But Mom, I had permission."

"What are you talking about, Lorr?" Dad asked.

"There was this guy, a Tadori, he—" I searched for him again in the crowd.

"Him! He told me to climb, and said he would give me a ride in the grav-hauler if I managed to get to the top."

The three of them looked over. He was standing there, blending into the crowd, his expression flat. The ranger singled him out with two fingers and beckoned him over. The Tadori pointed an innocent minor finger at himself in feigned surprise, then made his way to join us. "We will get to the bottom of this," the ranger promised.

"Tell them!" I demanded as the Tadori reached us, "Tell them you gave me permission!"

He exchanged confused looks with the three adults, "Is the child speaking to me?" He asked in Zandri.

The ranger clicked his tongue. "Are you sure that's him?" He asked me in Ensyn.

"Yes!"

"Is something wrong, Ranger Jark?" The Tadori asked, once again speaking Zandri.

"This... child claims you gave him permission to climb the Standing stones. Is that correct, Operator Kur'Xin?"

The Tadori, Kur'Xin, reeled back, eyes wide with indignation, mouth open in disgust, minor hands clasped over his chest. "I would never— To desecrate the resting place of my own ancestors?! How could you even—"

“Liar!” I yelled in Zandri, catching both of them off guard. “You four-armed, blue-faced Fossil! Tell the truth!”

“Lorrian!” Mom grabbed my shoulder.

“Fossil?! Did you hear that?” Kur’Xin appealed to the ranger, “How dare you?!”

“We are deeply sorry,” my mom said gravely, her fingers digging into my skin, forcing me to bow my head. “I have no idea where—”

“No doubt,” Kur’Xin cut her off with a sneer, “he learned such vulgarities from his parents.”

“Excuse me?!” My mom changed her tune instantly. “You pathetic, two-faced—”

“Rune...” Dad said in a low rumble, “Let me handle this.” Mom took a step back, pulling me into her.

“You see,” Kur shrugged with his major arms, while crossing his minors. “This is what you can expect from these *humans*, after all the savagery they inflicted upon us, we still let them into our enlightened society, and this is the thanks that we get. Typical behavior, truly.”

“So, you’re saying my son is lying?” Dad asked.

“Of course! The little runt is simply trying to shift the blame. Won’t own up to his own mistakes. It’s no surprise, really, considering—”

“Then, there is no reason for you to be here,” Dad cut him off. “Is there?” He directed his question at Ranger Jark.

The ranger grunted approvingly, then turned to Kur. “Thank you for your testimony, citizen. You are dismissed.”

“Are you going to fine them? You must, at the very least.”

“I said: You are dismissed, citizen.”

“As a citizen, I deserve to know how you intend to handle this, Ranger Jark!”

“And you will,” my father interjected. “By law, through the public records, just like everyone else.” He smirked. “‘We are not animals,’ after all, are we Kur’Xin of the Tadori?” He asked, citing a Tadori mantra.

Kur narrowed his eyes at my dad, holding his gaze for a long moment before turning around and walking away.

Ranger Jark gave a deep sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose, then turned to the three of us. "Conclude your business as soon as you can, then leave Tenybran and stay gone, at least for the next month or so."

My dad's face darkened. "You are banning us?"

"No, I am letting you off with a warning. Clearly, your son didn't know what he was doing, and thankfully, no one was hurt, but you should have been keeping a closer eye on him."

"So, why a month?" Mom asked.

"Because of them," Ranger Jark nudged his head upwards. Several drones zipped above, lenses aimed toward us, recording everything. "Your son made quite a scene; it would be all over the news."

It was Dad's turn to hide his face in his hands. "Damn it to the stars and back."

"Thank you for going easy on us." Mom said.

"Don't mention it... us 'savages' need to stick together, right?" He forced a half smile of razor-sharp teeth. My dad returned it, and we parted ways with Ranger Jark, heading back to our ship.

"Hey, Lorr?" Dad started as we were walking, some of the drones still following us.

"Yeah?" I answered cautiously. Over the years, I learned that 'Hey, Lorr?' was code for 'I am about to ask you a question to which there are only wrong answers.'

"Why did you call that Tadori a Fossil?"

"Oh, eh..." I scratched my head nervously. "I saw on a holo-program that Tadori don't like being called that."

"Do you know why they don't like it?"

"No..."

"Do you know what 'Fossil' means?" Mom asked.

"It means... like... an old rock."

"Close enough," Dad sighed. "You see, Lorr, Tadori live very long lives... for hundreds of years."

"Hundreds?!"

“Almost a thousand,” Mom added.

“Right, but they don’t grow old like us, they don’t wrinkle, or get a hunched back, or have their hair turn white. Instead, they petrify.”

“Do you know what ‘petrify’ means?” Mom asked.

“No...”

“It means they turn to stone,” Dad said.

“Oh,” I answered absently, then noticed that both of them stopped to look at me. They stared for a while, waiting for the pieces to fall into place. I furrowed my brows at them, turning it over in my head. Then, it clicked. “No way!”

“It’s true, and you know what else? Before they petrify completely, they pick a spot and strike their final pose. Then they have to maintain it for, oh... days? Maybe weeks? I don’t know, it’s a long process anyway.” Mom said.

“So... those weren’t statues?”

“No, they weren’t,” Dad said.

“Eww! I climbed on old people?! Gross!”

“Lorrian!” Mom scolded as we continued walking. “Petrification is a sacred thing in Tadori culture, don’t call it gross.”

“No, he is right, it is gross.” Dad countered, then directed his attention at me. “Which is why you’ll never do anything like that ever again... right?”

“Right...” I conceded.

“Berk...”

“He is a kid, Rune, there will be plenty of time to teach him all the sweet intricacies of multiculturalism when he grows up, but until then: Standing stones are gross, and he should avoid climbing them, or touching them, or coming near them. Right?”

“Right...” I conceded, again.

“Right...” Mom conceded, too.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dante always had a passion for storytelling, regardless of the medium, and has accrued years of experience drawing, role-playing, and writing. His books and art can be found on his website.

If you enjoyed this book, please consider leaving a review, and subscribing on the website for future updates and some exclusive rewards.

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