

Hamsters Have

"There one!" exclaimed Bert, touching the controls lightly; the saucer flipped to starboard and hovered silently in the air, high above the town. "Down there, see?"

His co-pilot peered down. "See nothing, Bert".

The pilot sighed and shook his head. "Put on day-vision; see girl"

Patty slipped a gleaming silver helmet over his head. It was equipped with the very latest SIGHT (Super Intensity Goggles High Technology). With it, Patty had the sharpness of sight surely of an eagle. "Ah, now see", he confirmed. "Bit skinny. No cheeks."

"All humans skinny.", muttered Bert. "No cheeks," he agreed mournfully. He touched the controls briefly once more, and the saucer raced sideways, executed a double flip and hung upside down another hundred feet lower. The craft was now cunningly concealed behind a chimney pot on the other side of the road from the target. "All humans skinny, think you," he murmured again. "But you fatty, Patty."

Patty glanced sharply at his colleague at the controls. "What say you?" He bared his teeth and popped his eyes threateningly. "Me fatty? What you, last night supper - ten radishes, half cabbage; two sticks beech! Me not fatty - but me big cheeks!" he boasted.

Bert ignored him, and concentrated on manoeuvring his craft slyly around the chimney pot, so as to keep the human in sight without being seen. He had learned all these skills at SCOOOL (Saucer Cadets and Observation Officers Learnarium), where he had come first in his year; no one could teach Haricot Bert how to flip a saucer faster out of sight.

"We get this one", he confirmed. Patty Perkins belted himself in, ready for attack.

"Go! go! go!" shouted Bert boldly. The saucer flipped out from behind the chimney and dived straight over the road and down at the target.

Kats was a little surprised to see a tiny plastic flying-saucer suddenly land on the pavement in front of her. Even more surprised when the lid of the saucer flew up and two angry-looking furry creatures bounced out, chattering and showing their teeth. She stepped back, half-worried, half-fascinated. She knew hamsters could deliver a nasty nip if provoked. On the other hand, perhaps it would be worthwhile waiting to see what happened: it was not every day you walked home from school and were accosted by two mean-looking hamsters in flying saucers.

She crouched down and waited to see what would happen next. The hamsters surrounded her, with almost military precision. Their whiskers twitching threateningly, their noses thrust towards her, they forced Kats towards the saucer. Then she felt a sharp nip on her left ankle; but, before she could even cry out or turn round - whoomf! - there she stood next to two person-sized hamsters, bold as brass bright as day. Well, no, not that; for as she looked around, Kats realised that it was not that the hamsters had grown bigger, but rather that she had suddenly shrunk to hamster-size. In front of her, a gleaming flying-saucer stood ready for take-off. Up above, the trees had suddenly grown to monstrous size.

"Climb in!" ordered one of her furry captors.

Kats did as she was told, scaling the side of the nearby saucer and falling in over the edge. The saucer was well-appointed, for a hamster. Piles of not-so-clean sawdust on the floor, plenty of cotton-wool to curl up in. In fact, there was barely room to move about, so much sawdust and cotton-wool was there. The atmosphere was very warm and stuffy, and smelled faintly of rotting vegetables - not very surprisingly, since there were half-chewed parsnips and remains of apple-cores in decaying profusion on the floor.

Along one side of the saucer there was a set of complicated controls, at which the leading hamster and his friend had now stationed themselves. As they pressed buttons and studied luminous dials, the lid of the saucer silently came down and closed off all escape routes. The two hamsters muttered to each other, their ears cocked, their whiskers twitching madly.

The girl had been standing looking around; the saucer suddenly leaped into the air, and she was thrown to the floor of the craft. Bits of cabbage and cauliflower rained down on her, and pieces of sawdust the size of newspaper floated around her. The pilots executed some startling acrobatics in the air. Through the roof, Kats could see now the clouds scudding by, now the ground racing past in a blur, as the saucer veered from side to side. Then the weaving stopped, and the blue sky was all that could be seen. Kats' stomach returned. And with it, her voice.

"You can't kidnap me like this!" she protested, "Let me go at once!"

The larger of the two hamsters turned away from the control panel.

"Sorry." he said in an almost inaudible voice. "Must stay. Me Bert, he Patty, you...?"

"Me Kats", said the girl, without thinking. "No, I mean, my name is Kats! And can't you talk louder - I can hardly hear a word you say."

"Sorry", said Bert in the same low tones, "Not able".

"My granny says I don't speak loudly enough," replied Kats. "She'd have a blue fit if she came across you, I can tell you!"

"Hamsters have granny," mumbled Patty Perkins from his position at the controls.

"I'm not worried about your granny: *my* granny is going to be very angry if she hears about this! Taking a girl away in a flying saucer, and whisking her off! She'll set the police on you. And then my mum and dad will come and get you as well-

"Hamsters have mum and dad", muttered Patty.

Kats glared at Patty, then turned again to Bert. The hamster had by this time found a pile of nuts in a small sack, and was busy filling his cheeks with them; so much that his pointy face had turned almost square. When Kats turned to him, he felt he should say something; but could not. So he munched instead.

Kats sighed. "All right, if you won't set me down, at least tell me where we are going. All I can see is the sky from here. Can I look over the edge? Will I see my house?"

"Hamsters have house", mumbled the echo, slightly muffled by the sound of crunching.

Since no one replied sensibly, the girl went boldly over to the rim of the saucer, balanced herself on a lump of half-chewed wood and peered through the glass. She could not see much, but she could make out that they were flying at considerable speed and that they had left the town far behind. She gasped, gulped.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked again, turning back to Haricot Bert. The hamster finished off the last of his nuts, cleaned his nose, looked around rather keenly for any remaining crumbs, then settled down for a chat. Behind him, Patty had put the saucer into RATTLE (Remote Automatic Turbo-Transportation Limosic Environment) and had retired to a huge pile of cotton wool, closed his eyes and was snoring.

"Well," said Bert so quietly that Kats had to strain her ears to hear. "Problem with grannies". He looked meaningfully at Kats with his bright black popping eyes.

Kats blinked. "Sorry?" she said, "What kind of problem?"

There came a mumble from inside the cocoon of cotton-wool: "Hamsters have problem".

Bert shuffled about a bit, cleaned his nose, worried with his teeth at the white stripe of fur on his back, before answering.

"Grannies think hamsters speak too quiet", he mumbled into his paws. He looked appealingly at Kats again, afraid that she might laugh.

She did. Kats hooted with laughter. Bert nervously found another nut in his cheeks and started gnawing. Patty poked his head out of the cotton wool and tutted, then fell asleep again.

"My granny is exactly the same," she said at last. "She always thinks I talk far too quietly."

Haricot Bert brightened up at this. His ears rotated wildly, his whiskers quivered. "So what to do?" he whispered.

Kats was about to tell him, when a thought suddenly occurred to her. She looked at him slyly.

"If I tell you, will you promise to take me back to my house and let me go? And never kidnap me again?"

Bert nodded glumly. "Promise", he mumbled. "No kidnap"

"Right then," said Kats, "The first thing you're going to do is to fly this machine back to town, and hover above my house. Then I will tell you almost everything you need to know. And then you'll set me down at the front door and only then will I tell you the very last thing you need to know".

"Hamsters have front door", muttered the cotton-wool proudly.

Bert yawned. "OK. But please excuse. Tired." He wandered about lethargically, filling his cheek-pouches with seeds and vegetables, and poked himself into the cotton-wool. As he did so, Patty Perkins stuck his head out, blinked and stretched all four paws. "Time get up?" he muttered to himself. Then, surprisingly suddenly, Patty darted across to the controls, unhooked the RATTLE, ran his pink little paws lightly over the controls. The saucer lurched, span round and headed back in the direction it had come from. Kats fell back into the nearest midden of sawdust and nuts, watching the clouds whirl past. When the motion had settled down, the girl stood up and looked out at the earth passing wildly underneath. It was fascinating.

"Look, there's a train going along there!" she shouted.

"Hamsters have train."

"And look at all those tiny cars! And those cows!"

"Hamsters have car. Hamsters have cow."

Kats scanned the horizons. Hamsters probably had horizons.

"Look!" she shouted again, "There's a man on a bicycle! I wonder if he can see us?"

"Hamsters have bicycle."

"And a little farmhouse."

"Hamsters have farmhouse", came the gloomy echo.

Just then, Bert emerged grumbling from the cotton-wool and went over to fill his cheeks with nuts, his broad back turned towards Kats. "Hamsters no have farmhouse", he said to himself.

Soon the edge of the town came in sight, and the saucer began to swoop low over the rooftops. Kats recognised some of the streets, her school, the trees.

"And there's the tree at the bottom of my garden!"

"Hamsters have garden".

"And what's that - do I see a fat bottom?" asked Kats softly.

"Hamsters have fat bottom"..

"And that looks just like a smelly foot," she said, eyes closed in happy expectation.

Yes! "Hamsters have smelly foot".

"Quiet, Patty Perkins!" whispered Bert, turning round. Patty looked over his shoulder, puzzled, then retired with a hot water bottle into his cotton-wool for a well-earned snooze. Bert yawned in sympathy and came over to the controls again.

"Good," he said. "Now over house." He parked the saucer in SNUFFL (Super Non-Upsettable Free Fall Limosis). "What is secret?"

"Well," said Kats, "The first thing you have to do is to make sure that you know what you're going to say. Then you turn to face your granny, and you say, very loudly: **Granny!**"

"Granny", repeated Bert in as loud a voice as he could muster - barely audible above Patty's snoring.

"*Louder*", encouraged Kats.

"*Granny!*" shouted Bert in tiny voice.

"*Still louder!*"

"*Granny!!*". It was close to a proper voice.

And one last time!

"**Granny!!!**" Bert was so loud, that Patty shot out of his cotton wool like a bullet from a gun, darted three times round the saucer muttering "Where where where?" and then sat bolt upright, his eyes bulging.

"Good," said Kats. "Then, once you've attracted her attention, you say quite loudly and clearly what it is you wanted to say, without stopping: something like: ***Can I have a biscuit, please, granny***"

Bert cleared his throat. "***Can I have a biscuit, granny!***" he bawled at the top of his scratchy voice.

("Hamsters have biscuits")

"Please! Don't forget the 'please'!!!"

"***Please!***"

Kats beamed. "That was very good, Bert. Now we'll try it all over again. I'll be a granny, you come and ask me for a biscuit."

Kats sat down on a smelly pile of cotton-wool, and pretended to doze. Bert fidgeted, then scurried up to her.

"Granny, want biscuit", he whispered.

Kats pretended to have heard nothing. In fact she had heard nothing, but had seen Bert's performance through the slits of her eyes.

Bert wrung his paws and chattered to himself.

"**Granny! Want biscuit!**" and then "Please."

Kats opened one eye fully. "What's that, dearie?"

Bert shuffled his paws and rubbed his nose fit to set it alight. "***Bert want biscuit, please, granny!***"

"Oh, very good, Bert!" shouted Kats, clapping at the performance. "Very good indeed! Now you know almost everything. So I want to get out, and then I'll tell you the last secret."

"Patty," bellowed Bert, "Shake a paw! We're going down!"

Patty, again startled from his slumbers, rocketed out and stood ready at the controls, his ears like satellite-dishes. "Hamsters have paw", he acknowledged to his pilot. A couple of buttons here, a lever there, and the saucer came down gently just outside Kats' front door. The roof swung up and everyone swarmed out.

"Last secret. Then make right size." said Bert in a respectably loud voice.

"Hamsters have secret. And size" Patty was feeling more confident again.

Kats stretched. Overhead, the front door was of gigantic proportions. It would be a bit bad if it suddenly opened and her little brother darted out and stood on them all. Could be the end of everything.

A little hastily, she told Bert the last thing he needed to know about quiet voices and grannies: "And on the day you remember to do all these things, your granny's hearing-aid will be turned up full blast and she will scold you for shouting."

Bert nodded sagely. This sounded true. Patty agreed: "Hamsters have hearing-aid"

Both hamsters trained their SNORES (Super-Nifty Object Re-Sizers) on Kats and gave her a double spray. Immediately, she shot up again to her proper height. Far down below, the hamsters gave her a smart salute and leaped back into their flying saucer. Then up and off into the blue skies.

"Hamsters have", she said to herself, and rang the doorbell.