

Star Circle Square

“We can’t do it in here,” Lorraine protested. “These are not exactly child-friendly surroundings.”

Ruth raised her eyebrows and looked round the laboratory to see it with an outsider’s eyes. It was small and cramped, full of workstations with untidy desks and computers with scientific in-joke wallpaper. There were numerous nameless machines, plenty of wires, whiteboards on the walls showing recordings of subject-testing or brain-scans, and heaps of plastic lever-arch files. Everything was white or grey or black. The three people who worked there full-time were currently all standing in front of a screen, noisily debating gaze direction and involuntary blinking. It was just a lab. Lorraine could see Ruth saw nothing wrong with it, so she added smoothly: “She could well get distracted by everything that’s going on in here,” and knew she had won. Ruth didn’t mind frightening an eight-year-old, but she didn’t want her distracted.

They were the first controlled sessions they had ever done on some-one as young as Surah - Surah, not Sarah, as the serious child was careful to tell every-one she met – and Lorraine was the only one concerned that they were going to treat her like an adult in miniature. The child’s mother had been their first choice for the tests, but that had not worked out too happily and the child was something of a consolation prize. Better than nothing, but disappointing.

“Well, what about one of the seminar rooms?” Without waiting for an answer Ruth walked out of the lab and down the corridor, and picked on a room a few doors down. It had too many chairs and a central table spread with the work belonging to some-one who had found a quiet little bolt-hole to use as their own since their rented office-space consisted of too-small labs, too many seminar rooms and not enough offices, with the result that any available space had been colonised by those in need of desk space. With its dark pink walls, plum carpet underfoot and muted wall lighting it was immeasurably more welcoming than the lab.

Ruth called out for George the lab technician, and waited impatiently until he had tracked her down. “Clear this lot out, will you? Leave a few chairs, get rid of the rest, and bring in the trolley-bed from the lab, OK? I need it done for this afternoon.”

George’s expression showed exactly what he thought about her order, but he knew better than to complain. He already had plenty to do and clearing the room was going to take more than an odd half hour or so, but Ruth tended to believe her projects should have priority over those of every-one else and was more than ready to argue the point. And she always seemed to win.

“OK?” Ruth repeated.

“OK,” he muttered, avoiding eye contact. “Who’s going to tell whoever this lot belongs to that they need to move it?”

“D’you who it is, Lorraine?”

“I’ll find out for you,” she said. She would find out, and she would tell Ruth, but she still knew she would end up passing on the bad news herself.

“And we need to get the monitors in here – have we got a spare trolley? – and some-one will have to mend those blinds as we’ll need them down for the session. And I suppose we better have a jug of water in here – or would fruit juice be better? What do children drink?” She looked round the room. “Oh, and we better have a blanket in case she gets cold. And I’ll need a small table for the laptop – will we need any extensions leads?”

“George and I can sort it all out,” Lorraine said. “Don’t worry about it.”

But Ruth always worried about everything not under her immediate control, and she checked up on their progress three times during the day, and insisted on final approval before the session began. George muttered darkly and Lorraine calmly smoothed out the wrinkles and by four o’clock the seminar room had been transformed into a suitable testing room for a

child. By then the sun had moved round the building and was streaming in through the great plate windows and turning the dropped blinds a brilliant yellow, and Ruth was wondering out-loud if it would be better to do the testing in a room on the other side of the block.

“If you would prefer that,” Lorraine said, unperturbed. “Of course, we would have to put off the session until tomorrow afternoon.”

Ruth looked at the glowing blinds shutting out the brilliant summer’s day. “Do you think with the lights out?”

“We can always turn the bed round.”

George rolled his eyes, but at least turning the bed round was better than starting again from scratch on the other side of the building, so they wheeled the trolley out into the corridor, spun it round, and pushed it back in, and Ruth was finally satisfied.

“Then I’ll go and get her,” she said.

She collected Surah from the reception area at the front of the building, where Surah sat, still dressed in her school uniform. She was ignoring both her homework and a comic the receptionist had bought for her and was keeping track of every-one walking through the area, intent on watching to see if any would come in her direction.

“Hello, Surah,” Ruth greeted. “Ready for that session we told you about?”

The girl nodded, and carefully closed her notebook and tucked it away in her bag. Her hand hovered over the comic, but decided it probably wasn’t hers to keep, and left it on the table. They walked back to the seminar room in silence since Ruth, who found it difficult enough making small-talk with their adult testees, had nothing to say to an eight-year-old. And she was a quiet, watchful little eight-year-old at that, which had surprised Ruth after the flamboyance – and latterly the hysterics – of her mother. Lorraine said she probably needed some time to settle down, but so far she had been staying in the guest apartments with her court-appointed guardian for nine days and was still as quiet as she had been on the day of her arrival.

Lorraine greeted Surah at the door and asked her about her day at school. While she took Surah’s coat and bag and got her onto the bed and attached the monitor net to her head and the leads to her chest she asked about what she had had for lunch, what her favourite food was, what homework she had to do, and what TV she was going to watch that evening, just as if talking to children was simple.

Ruth wheeled her chair closer to the bed. “D’you remember us talking about remote-viewing – the proper name for what your mother calls ‘spirit-walking’ – and how we were interested in studying it? And how we wanted to investigate your capabilities - see what you could do? Well, that’s what we’re going to be doing this afternoon. Lorraine has told you about all the other people we have tested already, yes? We just want to see what you can do. This is not an examination like those you have at school - you cannot fail this test. It’s just to see what you can do. And don’t be frightened if you can’t do it, or if it’s too difficult for you, or if you get too tired. Just tell us. We won’t be angry. OK? Does that make sense? Do you have any questions?”

“Is my mother here?” Surah asked.

“I’m afraid she couldn’t make it today, Surah,” Lorraine said, touching her arm. “But we’ll stay here in the room with you. We won’t leave you alone.”

“When I’ve done this test, will I go back home with my mother again?” Surah asked, looking from Lorraine to Ruth.

“Oh, honey. You know your mother is ill, don’t you?” Lorraine answered. “She’s in a special hospital at the moment, and you won’t be able to live with her until she’s completely well again.”

“Will I live here until then?”

“You’ll be here for a while,” Lorraine said. “And then maybe we’ll find you somewhere much better, as the apartments here are for the people taking part in our tests.”

“So I will stay here as long as you test me?”

“Well, yes. It will be like a holiday for you, until your mother is well again. Then you can live with her, of course.”

Ruth stirred, keen to get back to the test, and Surah quickly looked back to her. Ruth had already noted how the girl always kept her eyes on whoever was in the room with her, and usually on whoever was moving. “Do you have any questions about the *test*?” she asked pointedly.

Surah shook her head.

“OK, then,” Ruth said. “Are you ready to start?”

She nodded.

“Today we will only do one test with you. Nothing difficult at all. This first test is just to see how far away you can remote-view. It’s just like the tests you did for us at school, with Mr Cotton - you remember doing them? - but we’re going to try you at a different distance, just to see how you do. Don’t worry if you find it harder than the tests you did before – we are asking you to go much further than you did last time. Many people - many adults - find it hard at first, so simply do your best, that’s all we ask Now, if you walked out of this room, and turned left, you would be in a long corridor with a window at the end of it. When you are ready we would like you to try to remote-view that end wall, the one with the window. We have put something on that wall, under the window, and we would like you to tell us what it is. If you can.”

Surah blinked. “The corridor?”

“Out of this door, turn left. Right at the very end, under the window. Just do your best for us Now, close your eyes, and relax your body ... and whenever you are ready, try to see that end wall for us.”

Ruth watched the computer screen recording brain activity, and saw very little alteration.

“Whenever you are ready,” she encouraged.

“I’m there,” Surah said.

“Good,” Ruth replied with careful neutrality, and checked the screen again. “Now, can you tell me what you can see there? On the wall, below the window.”

“A piece of paper.”

“Good. Can you tell me what shape the paper is?”

“Square.”

“Good. Take your time, but can you tell me what’s on the piece of paper?”

“Nine squares, with different things drawn in them.”

“Can you see the squares clearly, or are they fuzzy, or out of focus?”

Surah paused. “I don’t think they are fuzzy.”

“Good. Now, we would like you to tell us what the different symbols – the shapes – in the squares are. We will do it row by row, starting with the top line. Any time you can’t work out what the symbol is, just tell us. If it takes you a while to see the shape, don’t worry. Take as long as you need. And whenever you get too tired to continue, tell us. We won’t be angry. Just do your best.” Ruth changed screens on her laptop. To one side was a nine-square grid marked out with the symbols on the test card, and beside it was an empty grid where she could enter Surah’s readings. “Are you ready?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Then we will start on the top row. The first square, the one on the left. Can you tell me what symbol is printed in it?”

“A triangle.”

“Good,” Ruth said. The left-hand grid showed a star. “And now the middle square on the top line. What is that?”

“A thick line.”

“Good.” Ruth’s grid had an open circle. “And the last square on that line?”

“A star.”

“Good,” Ruth said, entering another non-matching symbol. “We will try the middle line now, starting from the left again. Remember, you can take as long as you like identifying the symbols. We’re not in any hurry. Just take as much time as you like So what is the symbol in the first square on the second line?”

“Another thick line.”

Ruth had an upward pointing arrow. “Surah, can you tell me which way the line points? Is it horizontal – does it go from left to right, or is it from top to bottom?”

“Top to bottom.”

“Have another look at that symbol. Is it still just a line, or do you think it could be something else?”

There was a silent delay. “A rectangle?” Surah hazarded.

“Good,” Ruth said automatically. “Now let’s move on to the middle square on that line. The square right in the middle of the grid.”

“A cross.”

“Good.” For the first time they had a complete match. “And now the last square on that line. The right-hand square.”

“A circle.”

“Let’s have another look at that one as well. Can you tell me if it is a solid black circle, or a black ring with a white centre?”

“It’s got a white centre.”

“Good.” Ruth had a black circle.

“You are doing very well, Surah,” Lorraine encouraged.

“How are you feeling, Surah? Do you want to try the last line? Remember, you can take as long as you like identifying the symbols.”

“Or if you are feeling tired, we don’t need to do it at all,” Lorraine added.

“I’m OK,” Surah replied.

“Do you want a short break?” Ruth asked.

“I’m OK.”

“Then let’s go straight on. The last line. You’re nearly done.... Let’s start with the first square on that line. Ready?”

“A fat line. It goes from top to bottom, and has a white centre.”

“Good,” Ruth said. Another non-match. “And now the middle square on the bottom line? What symbol can you see there? Take your time looking at it.”

Surah took all of ten seconds instead of her usual five. “An arrow.”

“Good.” Another mismatch. “And now the last square. This will be the very last one for this afternoon, so after this you can have a rest. What’s the symbol in the last square?”

“A black square.”

“Good.” One final failure.

“And that’s all you need to do today,” Lorraine said cheerfully. “That wasn’t so bad, was it? Did you enjoy that?”

Surah nodded.

“So, if you’re happy to, we will do another test tomorrow. Perhaps two or three of them. They will be like this one, nothing too difficult, but they will help us tell all about your skills. And then we’ll start again on Monday next week. Some of the tests will be repeats, and some of them will be new ones. Do you think you’ll enjoy that?”

“Uh-huh.”

“And this Sunday we’ll see if your mother is well enough to see you, and we can go and visit her in the hospital,” Lorraine added. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

Surah nodded again.

Lorraine stood up. “And now let’s get these things off you.” She carefully removed the cap of electrodes from Surah’s head and the individual ones from her chest, and wiped away the gel residue, chatting to Surah as she did so. When she had finished Surah started to sit up.

“You just lie there for a while, honey,” Lorraine said, touching her gently on the shoulder. “You have a short rest, and I’ll come back in five minutes to take you up to the apartment. Surah obediently settled back down. “Good girl. Are you warm enough? Do you want a blanket?”

Surah shook her head.

“So how did she do?” Lorraine asked when she was back in the lab with Ruth.

Ruth shook her head. “One match and three comparables.”

“Oh dear.”

“She’s not making it up totally. She certainly knows the symbols we use – though I suppose Terry used the same set with her?” Lorraine nodded. “So she might remember them from that. But it could be that she can do the distance, just not the detail.” Ruth opened up the laptop and turned it to show Lorraine the screen. “See how her one match was right in the centre, and two of her comparables were on the same line?” They stared at the trio of shapes: line, cross, circle.

“So maybe she can focus in the centre, but finds the edges difficult?”

“We’ll have to wait and see what happens on the repeats,” Ruth said. “Or it could be that as she’s young, her skills come and go. Didn’t Terry say her first test was bad, but she got better?”

Lorraine shook her head. “She didn’t score anything on her first test, but Terry said she wasn’t even trying. She answered immediately without any effort at concentration and of course the nil result was suspect in itself.”

“So what changed?”

“He said he took a risk, and lied to her. He sat her down and said we knew that she could remote-view perfectly well, and that lying to people was wrong and that she should do the tests properly. He said she seemed extremely embarrassed to have been caught out, and after that her tests were better.”

“Then maybe we need another little talk with her,” Ruth replied frowning. “She was very fast with her answers.”

“Let’s try the repeats first.”

Ruth turned the laptop so she could see the screen again. “What do you think the chances are that the doctors will let us try testing her mother again?” she asked, trying to sound casual.

“Very low,” Lorraine said, and saw the expression on Ruth’s face. “Very, *very* low,” she added.

“But we know she has abilities. She’s the one we should be testing.”

“And her daughter’s the one we’ve got.”

“Who may or may not have any significant abilities.”

“Let’s see how she does on the repeats,” Lorraine said patiently.

Ruth snorted. “We should be testing the mother.”

Lorraine returned to the seminar room and escorted Surah up to the accommodation quarters and handed her over to her guardian. Ruth sat in the lab and wrote up her observations on the test and had just finished a carefully worded explanation of why they should be allowed to test the mother who had proven remote-viewing abilities when Lorraine came back to the lab to pack up for the day.

Ruth looked up as she came back in, checked her watch in surprise, and closed up her laptop. "See you in the morning," she said.

"Good night."

Ruth walked down the corridor towards her office, frowning when she caught sight of the test square still stuck to the wall under the window. It had been a disappointing test, and she wondered whether the next test should be something a lot simpler. A single image, perhaps. Put in the next door room, not the end of the corridor. It would soon be time to start applying for the next round of research grants and they needed some at least hopeful results to back up their request for yet more money. Something that suggested it was worth continuing with the project. She turned the corner. And yet their work had not been totally useless: Surah's mother showed there were people out there who could genuinely remote-view. Unless she really had been using party tricks all the time, of course, as she claimed. They really *really* needed to test her so they had their own proof, and not rely on second-hand reports. One way or the other they had to get the doctors to change their minds about allowing access to her.

She came to a halt, and then walked backwards four steps to the corridor's corner and pulled the test square off the wall. Triangle, horizontal line, star. That was the top line, but it wasn't as she remembered it. She hurriedly looked through the papers she had stacked on top of her laptop and pulled out the print-out of the random square the computer had generated for the test. Star, open circle, square. She dumped the papers onto the window-sill and opened up the laptop, balancing it between sill and her thigh. She waited for it to start up, and then worked her way through the files and sub-files until she found the one for Surah Garter.

It confirmed what she already knew; the test square she had been working from had star, circle, square for its top line. She looked from the screen to the square in her hand, and after a moment's consideration, turned the paper through a quarter turn to the left. The new top line now read star, circle, square. George had stuck the test square on the wall with the wrong orientation.

She turned the paper square back to the way it had been stuck to the wall and compared it to the square on her lap-top she had filled in with Surah's answers.

Surah had got nine out of nine correct.

"Lorraine!" Ruth called urgently. "Lorraine!"

Lorraine stuck her head out of the lab door so Ruth gestured her forward. Ruth straightened up slightly and dislodged the papers from the window-sill onto the floor. She ignored them.

"This is how I found the square stuck on the wall," she said before Lorraine was half-way up the corridor. She flapped the square impatiently while Lorraine speeded up. "Look," she said, and held the square next to the screen.

Lorraine hastily compared the two. "Oh wow."

"Exactly," Ruth said in satisfaction.

"Think she can repeat it?"

"We'll find out tomorrow. Change her test to nine o'clock."

"She's got school tomorrow."

"This is more important than school," Ruth dismissed. "We can tell them she's sick."

"If you're sure."

"She got nine out of nine! We've never had that before. I'm *very* sure." She looked at the paper again. "Nine out of nine! Of course we'll have to see how she does tomorrow, and on the other repeats, and we need to try out some of the other tests as well, and I know we can't take anything for granted just yet, and this might turn out to be just a fluke but -" she suddenly broke into a wide, wide grin, "by God, Lorraine. I think we have one. I think we have a genuine remote-viewer."

And her eyes glowed in triumph, and not a little anticipation.