

Text 1

The setting sun gave a pink tinge, like watery blood, to the dark cumulous clouds that sat along the distant, shadowy mountains, creating an ominous volcanic effect.

At the gate, a grimy urchin looked up and waited. Her thin yellow dress, with its uneven hemline, gave no protection from the invading cool of twilight.

The square-jawed guard suddenly looked around. There she was, patiently waiting, as if she had been there forever. She looked up at him with timid, prayerful eyes. Her bare feet were shuffling uncomfortably on the sharp asphalt, still warm from the intense heat of the afternoon sun.

His first thought was that she had come begging for food—or warm clothing—but he had no idea where she could have come from. Almost as far as he could see to the east was the low, woody, blue-grey saltbush and dry spinifex grass barely covering the red, drifting sands. Somewhere out there was a single-track rail line crossing the continent.

“Please, sir, is this the Holt Tracking and Surveillance Station?” she asked tentatively but anxiously. “Please?”

The guard’s brow wrinkled. His mind raced. There was no sign at the gate.

“I have to see Dr Grant Foster,” the girl offered in a reedy voice. “It’s important, sir. Sir?”

The guard grudgingly gave her his attention, more mystified than apprehensive, still baffled as to how she had materialised at his guard post. He looked towards the darkening ranges. He briefly contemplated contacting his superior at base but speculated he could become the subject of silent ridicule if he reported one unidentified feral child as a potential threat.

An impatient red warning light blinked annoyingly on a low, barely visible monitor in the guardhouse. He gave it a cursory glance and then growled, in a slightly American accent, “What’cha want?”

She repeated her request.

It made no sense to the guard that a child could suddenly appear in the middle of the desert and request to see the base’s top anti-terrorism expert, Dr Foster. His identity had been kept very low key, even on the base.

He shook his head, unsure how to discourage the child and not feeling comfortable about sending her back alone into the desolate land without food or water.

Alan Horsfield